Abstract

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This study begins at the moment in the 1990s when tweens, or 8-14 year old girls, coalesced into a recognized marketing demographic within popular discourse, and continues to trace the development of tween definitions through early 2005. Before tweens were important as a cultural group, they were important as an economic demographic. In fact, the group was created by marketers in an effort to sell more products to children. Many theorists believe that, within capitalist societies such as the United States, being recognized as a marketing demographic often translates into that group’s cultural recognition. This study traces the tween’s growing cultural acknowledgment.

Rather than examining the actual, lived experience of tweens, this study focuses on the discourse of the tween as presented by both popular culture and marketing texts. Together, these texts attempt to define a tween “ideal.” Throughout this study, I stress that an important part of this ideal is that tweens should be able to participate fully in the consumer economy. Within American culture, the tweens’ first purpose is to buy things. As tweens are indoctrinated into their roles as consumers, they are also brought into the more defined gender roles required of older girls, because embodying proper girlhood requires that tweens buy the correct array of products.

To examine the formation of tweens as a marketing and cultural demographic, this study uses a wide variety of popular culture texts, such as girls’ magazines, television shows, films, novels and the body manuals that tell girls about puberty and sex. Different chapters examine the history and development of tween-aimed cable television programming, the ideal tween as it is expressed through tween-aimed popular culture, some of the ways tweens learn to connect menarche with their entry into consumer culture, the Lolita myth’s connection to tween sexuality, and the commodification of Riot Grrrl rhetoric in the creation of Girl Power marketing schemes. Throughout, I note the ideal tween’s classed and raced position. In all, this study is intended to create a foundation for further studies of the tween.
This dissertation is dedicated to my sister, Amanda Austin Guthrie, for giving me the inspiration and the motivation to write about tweens. Thanks, Amanda!
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Introduction

In October 1999, a Newsweek cover story claimed to tell the “Truth about Tweens.” This article marks one of the first mentions of the tween in the mainstream press. Defining “tween” as children from the ages of 8 to 14, Newsweek introduced a whole new generational grouping to the American public. The mainstream finally recognized tweens for a couple of reasons: First, in 1999 there were roughly 27 million tween-agers in America, the largest this age group has been in twenty years (Kantrowitz “The Truth about Tweens”). Just as baby boomers received a lot of media attention simply because of the sheer size of their age group, so do the tweens. Second, and more importantly, the mainstream media began to pay attention to tweens because of their economic power. Business publications such as Brandweek and Strategy had been writing about the spending power of the tween demographic, and how to capture it, since about 1992. Before tweens were important culturally, they were important economically. Marketers invented and popularized the very term “tween,” meaning consumers who were between childhood and teenager-dom, turning what was just a group of children into a viable marketing demographic (Kantrowitz “The Truth about Tweens”). Barbara Kantrowitz, who wrote the Newsweek article, admits that one reason why tweens are important is their buying power, naming them “a retailer’s dream” (Kantrowitz “The Truth about Tweens”).

Just as the Newsweek article defined the age range of the tween demographic to a mainstream audience, it also defined much of the resulting discourse around tweens. To Kantrowitz, tweens are “a generation in fast forward, in a fearsome hurry to grow up.” One reason for this is that tweens are inherently in the middle, existing between the already well-defined arenas of children and teenagers. Further, tweens are primarily defined as girls. While boys are occasionally referred to as tweens, the overwhelming majority of tweens referred to in
the media are girls. Writing about Maja, a twelve-year-old girl, Kantrowitz states that “No longer a child, not yet a teen, she had officially morphed into a tween.” She quotes Maja, who admits that “When we're alone […] we get weird and crazy and still act like kids. But in public we act cool, like teenagers” (Kantrowitz “The Truth about Tweens”). Tweens are pressured to act older than they really are, but they still sometimes want to act like children. This puts stress on both tweens and their parents, because both struggle to determine appropriate behavior for an age group that is still hazily defined.

This study begins at the moment in the 1990s when tweens coalesced into a recognized marketing demographic within popular discourse, and continues to trace the development of tween definitions through early 2005. As Susan Douglas states in her book, *Where the Girls Are*, within late capitalist societies such as the United States, being recognized as a marketing demographic often equates to that group’s cultural recognition. Douglas sees potential in this recognition, because “once you’re a market – especially a really big market – you can change history” (24). At the same time, however, we must recognize that being marketed to during such an formational period of life also carries certain consequences.

In 2000, the Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) released the study *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time*. In this study, the GSRI introduces the concept of “age compression,” or the pressure that girls feel “to deal with typically ‘teenage’ issues years before they reach their teens” (5). Just as the girl Maja states in Kantrowitz’s *Newsweek* article, pre-teen girls feel pressure to act like teenagers. *Girls Speak Out* believes this pressure represents a generational change. Where girls of the same age were able to me more child-like in the past, today’s pre-teens cannot. As a part of this, the study asks, “how are [girls] coping *emotionally* with these dramatic changes? What do they want and need to ease the challenges of such compressed
development” (GSRI 5, emphasis in the original)? Part of the reason that age compression hits tweens so hard is that, while physical and cognitive development have accelerated in recent years, emotional development has not. This means that girls are dealing with adolescent bodies and situations with child-like resources (GSRI 6). Where 8-14 year old girls were traditionally considered children who were interested in toys and playing with their friends, and were able to extend their “tomboy” phase well into junior high, girls today (at least the girls represented in popular texts) are expected to worry about boys, makeup and their figures – much as their older sisters of earlier generations had done. This affects girls in significant ways. As Judith Halberstam states,

Female adolescence represents the crisis of coming of age as a girl in a male-dominated society. If adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage […] and an ascension to some version (however attenuated) of social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression. It is in the context of adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodeled into compliant forms of femininity. (6)

Where girls used to be exempt from such compliance until they reached their teen years, today’s girls are having to deal with traditional notions of femininity at younger and younger ages. Throughout this study, I will examine what effects this may have on girls’ identity formations.

What has been done?

Within youth studies, most work focuses on the experiences of teenagers – male teenagers, at that. Dick Hebdige has written some excellent work on the display and surveillance of (male) youth culture, particularly within the area of male subcultures and fashion. Joe Austin has followed Hebdige’s work, expanding into other ways (primarily urban, primarily male) subcultures form communities. One example of Austin’s work is his edited collection
Generations of Youth. While both offer useful insights into what it means to be an adolescent male within Western, capitalized nations, they offer little in the way of insight into girls’ lives.

Angela McRobbie and Jennie Garber noticed that “very little seems to have been written about the role of girls in youth cultural groupings” (McRobbie and Garber “Girls and Subcultures” 112). McRobbie and Garber ask, “How do we make sense of this invisibility? Are girls really not present in youth subcultures? Or is it something in the way this kind of research is carried out that renders them invisible?” (McRobbie and Garber 112). McRobbie and Garber ask for a new formation of youth studies that ceases to define girls as simply the girlfriends or hangers-on at the edges of subcultural groups of boys. They also ask for new methodologies that take into account girls’ role within domestic spaces and that seeks out the places where girls do meet together.

In her book with Mica Nava, Gender and Generation, McRobbie and Nava stress the need for youth studies “to move away form a preoccupation with youth as deviant, youth as spectacular, youth as a peculiarly and unproblematically male genus – involved in the culture of the street, playground and shop floor but absent from the domestic sphere and from personal and interpersonal relationships” (McRobbie and Nava ix). Much of the rest of McRobbie’s career has focused on repairing this knowledge gap, in the process forming much of the foundation of girl culture studies, and everyone who studies girl culture must acknowledge their debt to her work.

In my reading of tween-aimed popular culture, I use Angela McRobbie’s 1977 article “Jackie Magazine” as a model. In this article, McRobbie studies the teen magazine Jackie as “a system of messages, a signifying system and a bearer of a certain ideology, an ideology which deals with the construction of teenage femininity” (McRobbie “Jackie” 67). A large part of this construction involves “the way Jackie addresses girls as a grouping” (69). Grouping girls
together purely on the basis of age, Jackie “serves to obscure difference of, for example, class or race” (69). Because the readers of Jackie all fit within the same age group, then, the magazine creates the fiction that the girls live – or should live – similar lives. Further, grouping only by age serves to endow that age with “certain ideological meanings.” Within this ideology, “adolescence comes to be synonymous with Jackie’s definition of it” (69). McRobbie notes that Jackie’s definition of female adolescence is a terribly narrow and traditional one that “allows few opportunities for other feminine modes, other kinds of adolescence” (McRobbie “Jackie” 69). Jackie’s readers, then, are forced to confront this definition, and take into account where their own lives do and do not live up to it.

At the same time, however, McRobbie refuses to ascribe to the notion that teenaged girls are simply duped or tricked into buying into mainstream notions of adolescent girlhood. McRobbie notes that this idea relies upon the idea of teenaged gullibility, and resists asking questions about why girls enjoy the consumption of commodities that define their lives so narrowly within traditional femininity (73). Also, McRobbie stresses the constructed “naturalness” of teenage magazines’ place within girls’ lives. She states that,

One of the most immediate and outstanding features of Jackie as it is displayed on the bookstalls, newspaper stands and counters, up and down the country, is its ability to look ‘natural.’ It takes its place easily within that whole range of women’s magazines which rarely change their format and which (despite new arrivals which quickly achieve this solidness if they are to succeed) always seem to have been there. Its existence is taken for granted. Yet this front obscures the ‘artificiality’ of the magazine, its ‘product-ness’ and its existence as a commodity (McRobbie “Jackie” 78).
Teen girl magazines are a “natural” part of life for girls. They are not products or commodities in girls’ lives, then, but accessories. As part and parcel of this naturalness, “the same information is given out year in, year out, so that […] it becomes part of the general currency of female knowledge” (McRobbie Jackie 107).

Of course, this information is rarely, if ever, straightforward. Instead, magazines – even individual titles like Jackie – offer “a web of conflicting directives” (McRobbie “Jackie” 105). The one constant within this web is that a girl “does not and cannot measure up to the ideal standard expected of her. Recognizing this, she must set about doing something about it as best she can through the use of cosmetics available to her as commodities on the open market. She must embark on a course of self-improvement” (McRobbie “Jackie” 105). At the same time, however, magazines stress that girls must never admit the effort that they spend on their bodies, pretending instead that her appearance is completely natural and effortless (McRobbie “Jackie” 105).

Within this article, McRobbie offers girl studies scholars questions to ask and methods to use that trace the lives of girls in contemporary culture. Although most of her work focuses on teenaged girls, her methods transition well to tweens for a couple of reasons. First, because tweens are being pressured to act more like teenagers than like children, McRobbie’s methods of studying popular culture aimed at girls and finding girls where they gather works well for tweens. Second, McRobbie’s focus on the domestic sphere, where girls are found more often than their male counterparts, works especially well for tweens because they have not yet earned their drivers’ licenses and may or may not be allowed to take public transportation (where it is available) by themselves. Because they are less mobile than their older sisters, tweens are often
found in their homes and the homes of their friends, spaces that McRobbie explicitly marked as a site of study.

Another work that traces the way girls use popular culture is Susan Douglas’ book, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. Douglas’ work is particularly valuable because of the way she theorizes about mass media. Douglas reclaims popular culture aimed at girls, refusing to dismiss it out of hand because its content is not completely liberatory.

Writing about popular culture from the 1960s, she states, “Much of what we watched was porous, allowing us to accept and rebel against what we saw and how it was presented” (Douglas 9, emphasis in original). She states that this led to girls and women feeling a certain sense of “cultural schizophrenia:”

To explain this schizophrenia, we must reject the notion that popular culture for girls and women didn’t matter, or that it consisted of only retrograde images. American women today are a bundle of contradictions because much of the media imagery we grew up with was itself filled with mixed messages about what women should and should not do, what women could and could not be. This was true in the 1960s, and it is true today (Douglas 9).

In other words, just as popular culture urges girls and women to accept the patriarchy, it also teaches us how to become rebellious. “The truth is that growing up female with the mass media helped make me a feminist, and it helped make millions of other women feminists too, whether they take on that label or not” (Douglas 7). Douglas’ work reminds us of the necessarily contradictory nature of mass media, and that girls are not merely duped by it. Finally, she stresses that popular culture aimed at girls, which is so often viewed as “silly” or “fluffy,” is important.
Another excellent study that focuses on girl culture is Dawn Curie’s *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and their Readers*, an ethnographic study of the way girls read magazines. In her study, Curie asks groups of girls to examine both the articles and advertisements in magazines in order to determine how girls read magazines. Further, Curie examines why girls enjoy reading them. Curie extends McRobbie’s notion of the “naturalness” of girls’ magazines in girls’ lives, stating that magazines offer what girls take to be “useful information” about their lives (141). Rather than simply offering pleasure or diversion, then, girls’ magazines offer solid information on “how to be a girl.” As girls age or become more experienced, they choose magazines based on which titles offer information suitable to their situations. For example, girls will probably not read *Cosmopolitan*, a woman’s magazine, until they are ready for the steady stream of information the magazine offers about sex. Curie also connects the messages girls read in magazines to the economic interests of magazine publishers and advertisers. Like McRobbie, Curie finds that magazines give girls the message that their bodies hold certain inherent problems that must be solved through the purchase of a specific array of products. Certain patriarchal messages about femininity are published, in other words, because they are economically beneficial to multi-national corporations.

Ilana Nash’s dissertation, *America’s Kid Sister: Teenage Girls in Popular Culture, 1930-1965* is a particularly good jumping-off point for me, because she traces the solidification of the definition of the teenage girl within popular culture from 1930-1965. While I am examining the formation of a younger group during a more contemporary time frame, I believe I can use her work as a framework because it provides a solid example of how such work can be done.

Other studies of media include Charlotte Brunsdon’s collection of *Feminist Television Criticism*, which forms one basis through which to examine television shows, but does not
discuss any children’s programming. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance’s edited collection *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* examines some of the ways that girls have been represented on film. Because of their basis in a specific medium, however, neither collection traces possible connections between media, as I attempt to do in this study.

Since much of my study will focus on the body, I turn to a trio of texts that do an excellent job of describing the ways societal expectations are inscribed in the bodies and minds of women. Perhaps the most famous of these three is Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight*. Unfortunately, any discussion of girls going through puberty must also recognize the pressure girls and women feel to conform to culture’s notion of acceptable body types, and this book is a valuable resource. However, Bordo’s work focuses on adult women, and while medical texts have focused on tween aged girls, cultural theorists of eating disorders have not. Katie Conboy’s *Writing on the Body* is an excellent collection, but does not specifically examine the body of the girl going through puberty. Finally, Emily Martin’s *The Woman in the Body*, one of the few books that explicitly examines puberty as a culturally determined site, does an excellent job of examining the ways women’s bodies have been covered over by the discourse of the factory, causing women to view their bodies as sites of production – baby factories – and menstruation as sites of “failed production.” Strangely, this rhetoric holds true in many body manuals written for tween aged girls. Why should this be true, particularly in an era that fears the reproductive potential of its children?

Two theorists who will also be very important for my work will be Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* examines the use of the abject, or that category which is neither subject nor object, and which is ejected from society as dirty or worthless. Kristeva contends that the abject is used to mark the barriers of what society finds acceptable,
and is used particularly to keep the power of the female body in line. The aspect of the abject that I am particularly interested revolves around its use in connection with menstruation. Kristeva believes that menstrual blood has the potential to break down social barriers in frightening (to the patriarchal status quo) ways because of its connection to reproductive functions. The power to reproduce – and the ability to not reproduce – are frightening, and must be controlled. Abjection performs this controlling function by threatening women who do not hide their menstrual symptoms correctly with being rejected by society. Kristeva points to the threat of abjection as proof of the real power of the feminine. Were menstruation less powerful, it would not need to be controlled so completely.

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* introduced the theory of gender construction. According to Butler, there is no stable, natural embodiment of gender. Instead, gender is created through a sustained performance, or set of gendered acts (136). The “script” by which people stage these performances is written by the culture in which we live, and the performance is not optional. Indeed, Butler stresses that there are often severe consequences for failing to perform gender correctly (139). Part of performing gender correctly – as McRobbie would agree – includes erasing the act of performing itself. In other words, people must perform gender so well that gender itself seems natural or inevitable (140). Ironically, however, the perfect (or perfectly correct) performance of gender can never be completely achieved, because “gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized […] gender norms are finally phantasmic, impossible to embody” (Butler 141). Together, Kristeva and Butler’s ideas help me examine the ways that the marketing revolution around tween-aged girls has changed the way tweens are supposed to perform being girls.
A Brief History of Tween Texts

As Ilana Nash has demonstrated in her dissertation, the teenager has been a familiar character within popular culture since the 1930s. From the 1930s to the late 1980s, images of the teenager have changed with the times, with images of 8-12 year olds being relegated, usually, to the annoying younger sibling. With the production and success of shows such as DeGrassi Junior High (1987-1992) and Saved by the Bell (1989-1993), more and more shows centering on and catering to young adolescents began to air. The junior high milieu had been discovered. While some shows feature male protagonists (Zak from Saved by the Bell and the brothers Pete from The Adventures of Pete and Pete (1993-1996) are examples), studios began to realize that, while male teen heartthrobs were certainly marketable, identifiable girl characters have a better chance of capturing loyal girl audiences. Thus, shows like Clarissa Explains it All (1991-1994), Sabrina the Teenage Witch (1996-2003) and Lizzie Maguire (2001-2003) began to define the tween marketplace.¹ More and more, the tween is defined as female. As part of this, the press coronate a new “tween queen” every few months, but a “tween king” has yet to emerge. Within popular discourse, then, being a tween is generally equated with being a girl.

While the tween television revolution began on NBC with Saved by the Bell,² the bulk of tween-aimed shows are on the basic cable channels Nickelodeon, Noggin (a Nickelodeon subsidiary – both are owned by Viacom, which also owns MTV) and Disney Channel. Thus, much of tween culture presupposes its audience has membership in an economic class capable of

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¹ Tweenaged male protagonists still exist on shows such as Malcolm in the Middle (2000-) and Even Stevens (2001-2003), but the market is primarily dominated by the girls.

² The show that became Saved by the Bell actually began on the Disney Channel as Good Morning, Miss Bliss, a vehicle for Haylie Mills. After 13 episodes, the show was transferred to NBC, Mills left and the name was changed. It was after this point that the show reached its greatest popularity, and the original Disney episodes were re-run on NBC.
affording cable. This class membership is mirrored within the shows’ narratives, with most of the television families living in upper-middle class comfort. Because of this, tween protagonists can participate fully, and effortlessly, in the consumer activities that supposedly define their generation.

With the notable exception of Kids (1995) and Thirteen (2003) (which, while they depict some tween aged characters, are not aimed at a young audience), most tween films star actors who have already achieved fame on television, and the films – while they often offer what Ilana Nash has termed the “chrysalis moment” of a girl’s first love – maintain the television shows’ largely innocent outlook on sexuality. Such films include Drive Me Crazy (1999, starring Melissa Joan Hart), What a Girl Wants (2003, starring Amanda Bynes) and The Lizzie Maguire Movie (2003, starring “tween queen” Hilary Duff).

Tween literature follows along many of the same lines as television and film, and often crosses over into them. (The Princess Diaries (2001), Harry Potter (2001, 2002) and Harriet the Spy (1996) are prominent examples of book series that have been made into movies.) While so-called “young adult” literature has been popular for quite some time, and while I will not delve into the history of this genre in its entirety, I will examine some of the tween literature produced since the mid 1990s, focusing primarily on novels that became films. Though Harriet the Spy is a much older book, it was not made into a film until the period I examine, and is an excellent example of the ways popular culture aimed at tween girls has changed. Written in 1964, this book focuses on Harriet’s adventures as she spies on her friends and neighbors. Harriet actively avoids anything that smacks of being grown up, such as wearing dresses, dance lessons and dating. Books written for the same age group today focus on just such “grown up” ideas.

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3 Selected Disney shows, such as Kim Possible and The Proud Family, also air in re-runs on ABC’s Saturday morning line-up. To remain absolutely up-to-date with their favorite shows, however, viewers must have cable.
Tween-aimed novels mirror many of the tropes offered in television and film, such as the largely competent girl protagonist and her group of friends, but do differ in important ways. For example, Mia, the protagonist of *The Princess Diaries* (2000), is presented as a much less politically active person in the Disney film version of her book. Because the financial investment in films is much larger than the investment in books, the risks are proportionately greater. Film protagonists may be less political than their counterparts in books to be less offensive to a wider audience.

While films and television shows aimed at the tween audience (pretend to be) largely innocent of sexual matters, the tween music scene, particularly as embodied by female pop stars, feigns no such lack of knowledge. Indeed, this music markets itself simultaneously to tween girls and older men, walking the fine line between expressing the growing sexuality of young girls and performing a sexual tease for adults. This is performed through the pop stars’ costuming, choreography and image. Where television characters are carefully crafted as identifiable, friendly role models, the personas offered by tween pop stars (Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, etc) are noticeably more rarified. These girls’ (for they are marketed as girls, at least in the beginning) ultra fit, ultra sexualized body types are much harder for the audience to attain than the body types depicted on television. As television star Hilary Duff transitions into the pop music world, her insistently virginal image intact, she is creating something of a backlash against Spears and her imitators by proving that tweens don’t necessarily require sex to sell CDs to pre-teens.

Pop stars like Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears are marketed directly at the tween market, with shows like *TRL* (MTV’s *Total Request Live* (1998-)) airing just as children get home from school in the Eastern and Central time zones. Fan magazines like *Bop* and *Tiger Beat*
include stories, pictorials and pull-out posters of the pop stars, as do girls’ magazines like Seventeen, CosmoGirl and YM. At the same time, Britney and Christina both pose suggestively for Rolling Stone and Maxim, cementing their appeal to an adult, male market. Spears has proved particularly adept at this dance. As a Rolling Stone CD review states about Britney, “Never has a female star courted the preteen and trench-coat crowds so simultaneously and shamelessly” (Walters “Britney”). Both Rolling Stone and the girls’ magazines help foster this image.

The one type of text that I will examine that is not specifically aimed at tween aged girls are books written for the parents of tweens. 1995’s Reviving Ophelia, by Mary Pipher, discusses the problems encountered by junior high aged girls, and started a mini publishing revolution for authors and parents who were concerned about their daughters. A search on a library or commercial bookstore site reveals an almost overwhelming amount of books about tween-aged girls that have been published since Ophelia’s release. As a whole, this genre claims to solve the “mystery” of why girls supposedly lose confidence during their late elementary school and junior high years, and theorizes that it is this loss of confidence that leads girls into problems as diverse as eating disorders, young pregnancy, abusive relationships and a loss of interest in math and science.

Mirroring these texts in many ways are the body manuals written for girls, since they seek to help girls avoid the pitfalls discovered in the books written for parents. Body manuals are books, written for girls and their parents, that try to give out correct, comforting information about girls’ bodies. Dealing with issues like puberty, eating disorders, and skin and hair care, body manuals present themselves as texts that help girls develop their self esteem.
Methods

First, it is important to note that this study does not examine the lives of actual tweens. Instead, it examines the discourse of the tween as presented by both popular culture and marketing texts. I define “popular culture” as those elements of mainstream culture that seek to entertain, whether through television, film, music or literature, and I define “marketing” as those elements of mainstream culture that seek to advertise to people with the intention of making people spend money in certain ways. Obviously, these two strands of popular culture are deeply intertwined. Most popular culture is either supported by advertising, such as network television programs, or actually is advertising in disguise, such as the so-called “advertorial” articles in magazines or product placement in films. Popular culture that is not supported by or filled with advertisements must still sell itself to as wide an audience as possible. Because of the nature of our late capitalist culture, most cultural products are produced with the end of making a profit in mind. Popular culture is created by large, multi-national corporations, and although artists (actors, directors, set designers, etc.) are involved in the creation process, the end product must still make enough money to justify its existence and support the company that made it.

Simultaneously, most advertising attempts to be entertaining to retain the attention of its audience.

As a marketing demographic, tweens comprise a set of buying behaviors prized for both their economic impact and their potential for long-term loyalty (a long held truth of the advertising industry being that, the younger a consumer is brought into the fold of a particular brand or type of brand, the more likely they will be to stay with that brand). I examine the ways these economic pressures help shape tween identity. As Dawn Curie states in her ethnographic study *Girl Talk*, “Our participation in beauty rituals is an economic as well as cultural
phenomenon because it engages us in commodity consumption. As a consequence, gendered identities cannot be studied apart from the huge ‘culture industry’ that provides many of our everyday understandings of ‘gender’” (5). Tweens have been identified and defined by marketers as a valuable demographic, and this affects the ways that tweens seek to define their identities beyond their role as consumers. As younger girls are brought into roles as consumers, then, they are also brought into the more defined gender roles of their older sisters. To be a woman is to consume a certain constellation of gendered products, and vice versa. While the consumer practices of older women have been studied, and the practices of teenagers are beginning to be studied, the practices of children have not.

The primary methodology I use throughout this work is a feminist cultural textual analysis of popular culture and marketing texts. I will discuss the specific types of texts I use below. Here, I will state that I read a wide variety of texts to gain a broad overview of the discourse swirling around the new category of the tween. Just as tweens are, by definition, in a place of flux between childhood and adolescence, so the discourse of the tween is in a state of becoming defined. Right now, we are witnessing the solidification of the definition of the tween into an understandable, somewhat predictable life stage. While studies have been done looking back at the formation of children and teenagers as discrete, ideologically defined groups, this is perhaps the first time the cultural studies framework has been in place to perform this type of study during the group’s formation. It is important to note at this point that I am not comparing and contrasting the development of the tween with the development of the teenager. While that would no doubt be an interesting historical study, instead I am attempting to take this moment in time and examine the formation of the tween as it happens. While the definition of the tween will
change over time, this study examines something of how and why the demographic has been formed in the first place.

I use popular culture and marketing texts to examine how this process of formation has attempted to define the tween, using McRobbie and Curie’s method of viewing popular culture products as ideological texts that have effects in girls’ actual lives. While I separate the discourse of the tween from individual tweens’ identities, the two do affect each other. Tweens are not completely vulnerable or open to the definition of their lives being presented to them by popular culture and marketing, but they are involved in a particularly intense period of self-definition or identity formation, which might make them more vulnerable than other age groups to being influenced. Marketers prize the tween demographic for just this reason: because they believe that if they can influence identity formation, they will have made a customer for life. Even if tweens can resist individual attempts of definition from the outside, the sheer number of times tweens are hailed by consumer culture, the very volume of pressure put upon them to define themselves as consumers, must have some effects.

This study uses a wide variety of media, all of which operate by their own conventions. While these conventions need to be recognized, and the discreteness of each media acknowledged, it is equally useful to examine the ways in which these media all revolve around image and representation. In this age of cultural representations, or what Guy Debord terms “the Society of the Spectacle,” it is perhaps becoming just as important to examine the ways that the ideologies based around representations are used by all media, and how the same (conflicting) ideas are conveyed by all as it is to study how each medium works with images. In other words, we can read the ways groups are commonly represented across media boundaries as symptoms or indications of how these groups are defined by the culture at large. Also, I examine a wide
variety of media sources to make my reading of the discourse of the tween more well-rounded. Were certain ideas confined only to certain television shows or books, I would not be able to draw any broad conclusions about how tweens are defined. When these ideas can be found in multiple locations, however, it is rather safe to conclude that the ideas are an expression of how mainstream culture prefers to represent tweens. Because of this, I have made the attempt to cast a wide net, reading a large number of texts to gain a generalized, foundational idea of how tweens are represented.

Finally, I selected several different types of texts to generate this foundation. First, I use texts aimed directly at the tween market. There are several magazines aimed at the tween market. Often, confusingly, such magazines contain the word “teen” in their titles. Examples include TeenPeople, Teen Vogue, YM and Cosmogirl. The difference between teen magazines and tween magazines is perhaps the most amorphous boundary between tween and teen texts. I use the magazines as tween texts, however, because they do not contain anything parents would find inappropriate for their daughters to read. These magazines offer fashion advice, celebrity news and columns about exercise and doing well in school. They generally advise girls to wait before having sex, or to at least talk to their parents or a trusted adult first.

Books aimed at tweens fit into the “young adult” category, and are generally marketed as “14 and younger” books on their covers. The protagonists of the books are girls who are inevitably clever, well-spoken and privileged. Examples include Meg Cabot’s Princess Diaries series. One important exception to this rule are the Harry Potter books. Though the series centers around Harry, his best friend Hermione fits easily into the tween heroine role. Like tween magazines, tween books can be separated from those marketed to teens because they generally avoid putting their protagonists into sexual situations.
Television shows aimed at tweens generally air on the afternoons and weekends on both broadcast and cable networks. However, the most popular shows, such as *Lizzie McGuire* and *That’s So Raven*, are produced and originally air on basic cable networks such as Nickelodeon and Disney Channel. The female protagonists of these shows share most characteristics with their literary counterparts, though (since it is a visual medium) they may be more attractive. Tween-aimed films often star actors familiar from tween-aimed television shows. Rated PG, because G is for younger children and PG-13 is just out of their reach, these films always feature a tween protagonist. Older teens and parents, while present, fade into the background. Some films, like the *Princess Diaries* and *Harry Potter* series, are adapted from already-popular books.

Tween-aimed television shows and films differ from teen-aimed texts in important ways. First, when there is a school setting, it is usually junior high rather than high school. If the protagonist is older than her tween audience, as Princess Mia is in the *Princess Diaries*, the differences from teen texts is thematic. For example, Mia never talks about – and certainly never has – sex, and only talks about dating and marriage in a generalized way. There is no drinking, no cursing and no substance abuse. In the *Princess Diaries II*, when Mia has a pajama party to celebrate her twenty-first birthday, the party activities are all things 8 year old girls would be comfortable with at their own birthday parties. Rather than celebrating her twenty-first birthday with her first legal alcoholic drink, Mia sings songs with her grandmere (Julie Andrews) and plays games with little girls. Compare this to the teen-aimed *American Pie* movies. In this series, the characters are obsessed with sex, throw boozy parties and use rated-R language. While the characters are portrayed as still in need of parental supervision and guidance (as evidenced by the wonderfully humorous Eugene Levy, who plays the protagonist’s father), the guidance provided is of a frank sexual nature that would be completely out of place in a tween-aimed text.
Even on television, where the language used in the American Pie movies would not be allowed, the differences between teen-aimed texts and tween-aimed texts is evident. While Lizzie McGuire prepares for her first date, the characters on Dawson’s Creek or The O.C. struggle with their own, and their parents’, sexual relationships. Some characters question their sexual identities, some characters die and some characters go to jail. None of these would happen in tween-aimed shows. This is not to say that some non-tweens watch tween-aimed entertainment, or that some tweens watch media created for teens or adults. Of course this happens. However, that is beyond the scope of this study. I am not performing an audience analysis of tween-aimed texts, but a reading of the tween as presented by these texts. In other words, I am searching for these texts’ preferred readings to determine how they define the tween.

The actors who star in tween-aimed television shows and films may or may not be tween-aged themselves. However, I argue that, since they are in texts specifically marketed to tweens, the actors who habitually star in tween texts also engage in the formation of discourse around the definition of tweens. Because of this, tween celebrities, whether they be tween-aged or not, are held to a tween-appropriate code of conduct. While teenaged actors from The O.C., such as Micha Barton, can party in public and not fear for their careers, the teenaged Lindsay Lohan, who appears almost exclusively in tween-aimed films, cannot. Because of their status as tween celebrities, actors like Lohan and Hilary Duff must maintain child-friendly reputations, through viewpoints and actions that their tween-aged fans could repeat without getting into too much trouble. In fact, one of the ways celebrities try to “age-up” their careers is through scandalous behavior. Simultaneous with the release of her more “mature” album, In the Zone, former tween favorite Britney Spears posed semi-nude on the covers of Rolling Stone and Esquire. To be
taken seriously by teenagers and adults, tween stars must often be rejected – or must reject – their tween fan base.

Because of the ways magazines like Rolling Stone also help define tween celebrities, and thus help define the tween, I also study entertainment magazines and newspapers aimed at teens and (primarily) adults. Examples include People, the aforementioned Rolling Stone and Entertainment Weekly. Although tweens may not read these texts themselves, the way these texts cover tween entertainment and celebrities influences both how the culture at large and tween-aimed media define tweens. As tween-aimed media has become more popular, magazines and newspapers aimed at adults have written a great deal about tweens in general and tween celebrities in particular. This is a resource that cannot be ignored, because these articles give so much information about how adults actively work to produce tween identities.

Finally, I examine Mary Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia and Peggy Orenstein’s School Girls. These two books were both addressed to the parents of tween-aged girls, who bought the books in droves. Both books examine the so-called “confidence gap,” or loss of self-esteem, that occurs to girls during their tween years. These books stand in contrast to other popular representations of tweens, which are resolutely perky and upbeat, and also ponder the connections between mass culture and the confidence gap they discover.

It is important to call attention to the raced and classed nature of tween definitions. While there are tweens of color represented within popular culture, such as Raven on the Disney Channel show That’s So Raven and Penny Proud on the Disney cartoon Proud Family, tweens are still overwhelmingly depicted as white. Furthermore, tweens are even more overwhelmingly depicted as economically privileged. Because the tween group was created first and foremost as a marketing demographic, it is hardwired into the definition of tween-dom that tweens must have
enough money to participate fully in the consumer economy. To be a tween, in other words, is to be able to buy the correct consumer products. Girls who cannot fail as tweens.

Chapter Breakdown

In the first chapter, “Tween Marketing, Lifestyle Brands and Consumer Citizenship,” I offer something of a corporate history of the current trend in tween culture. This corporate history has two parts. First, I examine how and why marketers began to point to tweens as a viable and valuable demographic. Next, I chart the rise of cable in children’s programming. Specifically, I examine the dominance of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel in the world of tween programming, and how they came to dominate the tween market. Disney and Nickelodeon came to dominate the tween market to the point that both became “lifestyle brands” for the tween demographic. A lifestyle brand is formed by a constellation of consumer products that can conceivably cover every area of a person’s life. For example, Disney produces television shows, films, CDs, home videos, clothing, books, room décor, lunch boxes, school supplies, toys, and any number of other objects. A child can own nothing but Disney products – her whole lifestyle can be defined by Disney. Nickelodeon offers their customers the same thing.

As part of this examination, I argue that Disney and Nickelodeon could not have become so dominant in the tween market if they were not large, multi-national, vertically integrated corporations. Because they can control every aspect of the production and marketing of their products, Disney and Nickelodeon can make certain that their products all fall into a tightly controlled corporate identity. This identity, or “brand,” contains a specific message that is used to convince tweens to purchase their products. Disney and Nickelodeon have been so successful in this mission that tween celebrities, particularly Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, have worked hard to brand themselves and their marykateandashley brand of consumer products. For both
celebrities and multi-national corporations, branding and vertical integration serves to take the risk out of producing popular culture texts for a notoriously fickle tween audience.

Finally, in Chapter One I question the notion of consumer citizenship; the idea that, since children are left out of traditional citizenship they can find empowerment in the consumer arena. I argue that, where traditional citizenship offers people protections and responsibilities, consumer citizenship only offers people things to buy. In the end, consumer citizenship, especially as it has been theorized by scholars such as Sarah Banet-Wiesner, does not offer the empowering alternatives for children that we need to discover.

The second chapter, “What is the Tween Ideal?” examines the popularity of tween girl protagonists and the common tropes of tween representation. Within shows and films featuring girl protagonists, the main characters, while immature and often in need of parental advice, are always smart (though not a “brain”), sensible (though prone to making mistakes) and have a good group of friends (though they are usually represented as something of an “outsider” at school – they are rarely “in” with the popular crowd). These girls are the leaders of their packs; their friends look to them for guidance. Together, these traits help the girls walk the fine line between role model and identifiable “friend.” Girls can aspire to become like these characters, while feeling that the characters’ excellence is more or less attainable. At the same time, these characters are generally non-threatening to parents – or the status quo in general.

While tween protagonists are always attractive, in that they are relatively thin, have good skin and hair and have standard features, they are always presented as “less pretty” than the popular girls at their schools. These girls always dream about the most popular boy at school (they are universally heterosexual), but when they date him he usually disappoints. Tween girl protagonists always have a best friend who is a boy, and who probably will become a (more
satisfying) love interest. They also have a best friend who is a girl, with whom they rarely
compete for the attentions of boys. Thus, while the tween is more or less adept at the “girly girl”
culture of makeup and magazines, she also fits in as “one of the guys.”

As I have mentioned above, tweens are most commonly depicted in middle to upper-
middle class settings. Also, most tweens are depicted within complete nuclear family settings.
These settings always include at least one sibling, usually depicted as a) smarter than the
protagonist and b) very, very annoying. Extended family members are rarely included, perhaps
reflecting a culture where family members live far away from each other.

Contemporary tweens are depicted within more multi-cultural settings than their generic
forbears. Beginning with Saved by the Bell, casts were carefully constructed to include actors
from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Current shows continue this trend, but this
does not mean that they are complete racial utopias. For example, while shows with African-
American protagonists, such as The Proud Family and That’s So Raven, both include a white girl
as the main character’s best friend, shows like Lizzie McGuire that have a white protagonist do
not feel the need to give the main character a non-white friend. Do white audiences need a white
character with which to identify? Why don’t audiences of color receive the same regard? Also,
most of the girls of color who act in these shows (as well as the actors who play their family
members) tend to conform to white standards of beauty.\footnote{For example, Kyla Pratt, the voice
of protagonist Penny Proud on The Proud Family, voices a character whose skin is much lighter
than her own. In another example, much of the press surrounding the success of Disney Channel’s
newest hit, That’s So Raven has focused on Raven’s recent weight loss.}

Finally, Chapter Two also examines how tween celebrities – who may or may not be
tween-aged – are defined in interviews and articles about them in the mainstream press. I argue
that these representations form part of the definition of the tween.
Chapter Three, “The Process of Becoming a Woman’s Body: Menstruation and the Containment of Femininity,” addresses body politics directly, examining depictions of puberty and menses, or the onset of menstruation, in books, magazines, and television shows. This chapter also focuses on the body manuals girls are given by their families (or find themselves in school and public libraries) to read. A major theme within this chapter is an examination of the ways girls’ pubescent bodies are “disciplined” into becoming socially acceptable female bodies. In this process, girls train their bodies to move away from the “unruliness” of the body of childhood, and towards the more constrained body of womanhood. Although this process cannot be completed in the tween years – if, indeed, this process ever is complete – this process begins in earnest during the tween years. To perform this analysis, I use Butler’s theories about the performance of gender, Emily Martin’s work on the factory metaphor of the body and Kristeva’s notions of the abject.

An important part of this chapter is an examination of the ways in which a girl’s entry into puberty is equated with her entry into a new realm of consumer culture. Tellingly, advertisements form the primary site where girls read about menstruation in most girls’ magazines. Again, to become a “woman” is to become a consumer, since part of the process of rendering menstruation socially acceptable involves buying the proper “feminine hygiene” products. In this, body manuals and magazines are united in purpose.

Chapter Four, “Lolita and Tween Sexuality,” remains with the politics of the body, but shifts the focus to tween girls’ sexuality. As I have stated above, these girls’ sexuality is at once suppressed and fixed upon by popular culture, forming the paradoxical nature of tween sexuality. While tweens are not supposed to act upon their sexual feelings, they are supposed to begin training themselves (by learning how to make their bodies attractive and practicing social
interactions) to enter into the (hetero)sexual economy of adults. Much of the popular culture aimed at tweens forms part of this training process. Ultra-sexualized images of women (and, to a much lesser extent, men) are directly sold to children in a manner that mirrors the paradox of tween sexuality since the sexual content of these images is at once intensely focused upon and denied. Examples of this phenomenon include the careers of Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, though these methods have been used in these ways since the rise of the Spice Girls.

The main part of this chapter includes an examination of the Lolita, a figure named for the book by Nabokov. An examination of Lolita is important because the careers of Spears and Aguilera have played upon this image – at once innocent and knowing, sexualized and young – during the course of their careers. Both Spears and Aguilera are viewed as sexually attractive because of – not despite – their relative youth and claims of innocence. At the same time, some tween stars are made into Lolita figures despite the wholesomeness of their images. Examples of this are the many “countdown clocks” on the internet that count down the days until the Olsen twins turn 18 (and can thus legally have sex with adult men). These clocks are not only sponsored by lonely perverts, but are on officially sponsored corporate sites, like the “Lex and Terry in the Morning” site, a nationally syndicated radio program. Whether a girl presents herself as a Lolita or not, she may be perceived as one.

Finally, Chapter Five, “Riot Grrrl, Girl Power and Commodification,” examines the concepts of both Riot Grrrl and Girl Power, and the ways these tenets are used in tween popular culture. While Girl Power is a descendant of Riot Grrrl made over for younger girls, the content of Girl Power has also been emptied of most of its radical political potential. Where Riot Grrrl

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5 While this site, http://www.lexandterry.com, does host the “Olsen Twins Jailbait Countdown Clock,” it also hosts “Drunk Bitch Fridays” and asks women “What can you hold under your boobs?” Therefore, the way the Olsen twins are treated by such sites falls into a general pattern of disrespect for all women and girls. I will add, though, that I have had to stop telling friends and relatives that I “study little girls” because I’ve often been told that the phrase “sounds dirty.”
avoids participation in corporate culture, Girl Power is comfortably bought and sold to mass audiences. Where Riot Grrrl confronts mainstream America with aggressive demands for systemic change, Girl Power coordinates nicely with acceptable images of the independent, spunky girl who will someday grow up and fit in with society. Finally, where the (unwilling) postergirl of Riot Grrrl was Bikini Kill’s Kathleen Hanna (who urged her listeners to “reject psychic death”), the original postergirls of Girl Power were the Spice Girls (who told listeners that “all you need is positivity”). While both philosophies present ideal images of girls who are smart and independent, the politics behind those images are very different.

As part of my examination of Girl Power, I examine Mary Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia and Peggy Orenstein’s School Girls. These texts came out right after the peak of Riot Grrrl, and legitimized many of the claims Riot Grrrl made for the problems girls faced in society. I argue that, while Pipher and Orenstein were attempting to identify and solve the loss of self-esteem that tween-aged girls often face, in the end they may have only make media giants realize that texts for and about tweens can make a lot of money.

Conclusion

Although I study a wide variety of texts, my methodological framework for all of them remains basically the same: How do these texts define the tween, and what effects might this definition have? I believe that the ages of 8-14 are particularly important in a girl’s life because of all of the changes that occur during this stage. Also, I often feel that feminist research on the lives of adult women is written with the intention of fixing problems that already exist. While I am grateful that this work has been done, and I value its liberatory potential, I have often wondered why no one studied the lives of younger girls to discover how these problems could, perhaps, be avoided in the first place. I hope that my study can be a step in that direction.
Chapter One – Tween Marketing, Lifestyle Brands and Consumer Citizenship

“Is there a ‘heart’ of the kids’ market? Is there one segment of the youth market that wields more influence and power than the others? We think it is the tween” (Siegel et al x).

How do marketers define tweens? Advertisers and entertainment executives are homing in on the tween market like never before, which means they need to define the demographic more precisely. Where there used to be one child demographic, of 2-11 year olds, there are now three: 2-5 years old, 6-11 years old, and 9-14 years old (Sandler 46). Tweens are generally 8-14 years old, more or less spanning two different child demographics. Dave Siegel, author of the tween demographic manual1 The Great Tween Buying Machine, explains this divide as that of “emerging younger and older transitioning tweens, with the divide at about age 11” (Siegel, et al 3).

Teenagers have been the target of advertisements and other forms of marketing “since the word teenager was coined by Madison Avenue in 1941” (Quart xii). Tweens have only been recognized as a group by marketers for around 15 years. During this time, “Television warfare over children’s eyeballs and network brand recognition is currently fiercer than it has ever been before” (Sandler 46). Why are tweens only now being recognized as a demographic and why are they being marketed to so aggressively? In this chapter I examine how and why tweens became an important demographic, particularly to the entertainment industry. A large part of the emergence of this demographic occurred with the rise of cable television. The dominance of Disney Channel and Nickelodeon in the cable market is particularly important, because these are the first two corporations to actively focus on the tween demographic. Disney and Nickelodeon’s early dominance in the tween market, and their ability to control both the production and distribution of their products, allowed them to become what many call “lifestyle brands,” or

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1 I define “demographic manual” as a book that attempts to define a particular demographic, why that demographic is important, then examines the most effective way to advertise to that demographic.
brands that purport to offer customers a particular identity. Some scholars see this as an empowering move for tweens, or a way for tweens to have more agency within the identity formation process. However, I disagree. Unless tweens are educated about media literacy and responsible consumerism, lifestyle brands merely exploit their identity formation, co-opting the process for corporate profit margins.

It is important to examine the tween demographic early on in this study because I believe that the identity of the “tween” has been largely created by advertisers and entertainment executives. Girls go through many changes in the ages of 8-14, and the relative maturity levels of girls of the same age differ greatly. Some girls embrace the identity of “child” throughout the age range, while others eagerly identify as “pre-teen” or strain to embody teenager-like behaviors and modes of dress. While marketers admit the difficulties of defining such a disparate group, they still attempt to consolidate tweens into a definable whole. To do this, the diversity of tween experiences are flattened out and only a narrow range of tween lives are validated as “normal” or “mainstream.” While I will examine these ideas throughout my study, this chapter will focus on some of the motivations and methods behind the formation of tweens into a narrow demographic.

Marketers give two primary reasons for focusing on the tween market. The first is that companies need to cultivate future customers, and that the tween years are the best place to start doing so. Martin Lindstrom, author of the demographic manual Brand Child, states that “At the age of nine or even 14, the world is still a place to be explored and experienced, and this is just as true of brands as it is of any other facet of life. This is why it is so important for brands to establish a relationship at this age rather than later on in life, when views are more established and inertia takes hold” (Lindstrom 55). This is true for products children use, like clothing and
soft drinks, as well as products children are too young (or too cash-strapped) to use, like designer clothes and cars. Lindstrom emphasizes that,

> Tween marketing is just as much about building a solid base for the future as it is about creating an ongoing dialogue with an audience that will, in a few years, become their major source of revenue. Many products aiming to create brand loyalty among the young might not have a huge market at the moment among tweens. But they should be laying the foundations of a relationship that could possibly last forever (14).

Lindstrom notes that many companies should focus at least some advertising towards tweens, even if they are too young to use the product. By the time they are old enough to use the product, Lindstrom claims, these ads could have already instilled some brand recognition or loyalty. He repeats the often stated truism amongst marketers that a customer made in childhood is made for life.

If the companies that target tweens as a future market make a product suitable for tweens to buy right now, it is an added bonus. While estimates about tweens’ spending vary, and while they will not have as much to spend as adults do, all of the numbers suggest that collectively, the tween market still spends a great deal of money. Linstrom claims that tweens directly spend $150 Billion a year worldwide (2), while Siegel has them directly controlling something around $10 billion in the US (Siegel et al 29). The other, more immediate, reason tweens are such a cultivated demographic is that they are thought to control a great deal of their families’ spending habits. Alissa Quart, the author of *Branded*, believes that “Tweendom’s increasing market value is the result of a lattice of social change involving the kids’ parents as well as the marketers’ aggressive targeting” (70). Quart believes that many overworked parents buy their tweens material possessions – or allow them to influence the family’s spending at large – because
parents are guilty about not spending enough time with them. Whether this is true or not, marketing studies have found that tweens control or influence the spending of a great deal of money. Worldwide, tweens control about $150 billion of what their parents spend (Lindstrom 2), $74 billion of which is spent within the US (Siegel et al 29-30). Within the tween market, parents are called the “gatekeepers,” because they have the money, and the tweens are called either “naggers” or “influences,” because they influence what the parents buy. As Radio Disney’s brand manager crowed, 55 percent of the station’s listening occurs in cars when mom and kid are together: “You get the gatekeeper and the ‘nagger’ together” (Quart 4). Within the tween market, this is the optimum marketing opportunity, because the decision-maker (the child) and the source of funds (the parent) are together. Lindstrom gleefully concurs, stating that,

Tweens are old enough to have formed clear brand preferences and young enough to be dependent on their parents. They form a perfect target group because of their ability to directly influence their parents’ spending. In fact, our study has revealed that a substantial number of brands purchased by parents are so influenced by tweens that in some cases they can be characterized as the primary decision makers. This despite the fact that they may never use the product! (14).

All of this marketing by adults towards children has fundamentally changed what it means to grow up in the US (and other first world nations). Primary among this is the notion that advertisements no longer address parents as the primary guiding force behind purchases large and small, but instead address the tween. Marketers view this both as a shift in familial power and, it seems, a grand opportunity. Adults have grown out of the need to define themselves through material possessions (or they have already defined themselves through a particular
constellation of possessions, and are unlikely to change), whereas tweens are still searching to 
define their identity. Marketers are only too happy to sell one to them.

Lest we begin to believe that such ideas are only in the heads of academics who “read too 
much into things,” let me turn to Martin Lindstrom’s manual for marketing to tweens, titled The 
Great Tween Buying Machine. Within this manual, Lindstrom breaks down the four different 
“types” of tweens and teaches advertisers to whom they should target their ads. The first group, 
which he calls the “Edges,” are “independent” and “rebellious.” They are “anti-fashion and 
supposedly anti-brand. However, they often identify with brands that reflect their rebellious 
behavior” (Lindstrom 15). These may include punks and what my cohort in high school called 
“alterna-teens.”

Lindstrom calls the second group “Pursuaders” or “Influencers.” These are the leaders, 
the ones whose choices are emulated by other tweens, and the ones that marketers should target 
the most because “their influence is invaluable to any product” (Lindstrom 16). Lindstrom points 
out that Influencers are style conscious, and spend a lot of time trying to look cool. Further, they 
are easier to market to because they are more “mainstream” than the Edges (16). Where the 
Edges at least perceive themselves as anti-brand, and try to resist the brand’s clarion call, the 
Pursuaders involve themselves within the branding process, willing to participate within the 
system of commodities to maintain their status as “cool.”

The third and fourth groups are somewhat different from the first two. Where the first 
two groups lead, the last two follow. Group three includes the “Followers.” Followers represent 
“the mainstream and forms the bulk of today’s tweens. They listen to the Pursuaders but also 
have an ear open to the Fringes. They’re never the first to try anything. They’re followers rather 
than leaders. Their self-esteem does not run terribly high and they don’t consider themselves
“cool” (Lindstrom 16). Most of today’s tweens are classified by marketers as children with low self-esteem who are willing to follow others to be accepted. While this might be true, the fact that marketers want to use this lack of self-esteem to sell products is, to say the least, alarming.

Finally, Lindstrom lists the “Reflexives,” who try “to increase popularity and acceptance among their peers, often without much success. Reflexives are an out-group. They rarely pick up fashion trends and almost never go out. Like Followers, Reflexives are distinctly followers who lack self-esteem, don’t have many friends, but seek social acceptance” (Lindstrom 16). The geeks and nerds, as always, are left out in the cold. What I find particularly interesting about Lindstrom’s construction of tween hierarchies is that marketers are supposed to only really target the Pursuaders. Everyone else is simply along for the ride, waiting for the influence of the cool kids to trickle down into their consumer behaviors.

The idea of the tween did not exist before it was created by marketing. Thus, marketing molds mainstream tween identities, both making and reinforcing the idea of what it means to be a tween in America. This is different from molding the identities of every tween-aged girl. Rather, molding the tween identity as a whole creates a baseline, or mainstream ideal for individual tweens to aspire to or avoid as they may. Regardless of whether individual girls embody the mainstream idea of “tween-ness,” they cannot avoid learning what tween-ness entails. The message has been received, and becomes part of the “common sense” knowledge of growing up in a mass media saturated world.

Two companies who have performed major elements of this change are Disney and Viacom, the parent company of Nickelodeon and MTV. Both companies have learned, to their profit, how to enter the imaginations of children, and both have led the tween marketing revolution. To lay the groundwork of how Disney and Nickelodeon helped create, and then
capture, the tween market, I offer mini-corporate histories of Disney and Nickelodeon. Neither Disney nor Nickelodeon could have come to dominate the tween market as they have without the emergence of new media like cable television and VHS and DVD recordings. Also, neither company could have become as ubiquitous within the children’s market as they have without being part of large, vertically integrated multi-national corporations who can control virtually every type of media a child can see and every product a child will use. While I will get into this more below, it is important to note here that it is possible for every product a child uses in her daily life to be made by Disney, and increasingly, Nickelodeon. This includes every item of clothing or decoration on her body, everything decorating her room, all of her school supplies, all of her toys, all of her movies and CDs, all of her books … the list goes on and on. While this does not generally occur – tweens will usually own several different brands – the fact that this is possible points to the breadth of what these companies have to offer.

This breadth has allowed Disney and Nickelodeon to become lifestyle brands for children. Lifestyle brands are groups of objects or “commodities that embrace a particular lifestyle, attitude, or experience” (Sandler 45). Disney and Nickelodeon are among the first powerful lifestyle brands a child will encounter. While parents believe that the message behind these brands is safe – and while such content may well be appropriate and worthy – at the same time, children are being introduced into the world of commodities, and taught how to become a consumer. It is important to investigate what such an introduction means. How do lifestyle brands affect what it means to be a tween girl today?
Corporate History -- Disney

Talking about Disney is almost like talking about your own childhood – or the childhood you have idealized. Disney corporate historian Joe Flower mentions that “This is what is impressive about the name ‘Disney’: no one is neutral” (3). Flower is hardly neutral himself, stating that “For me to write about Eisner and Disney, […] would not be like any other story. It would be an opening into innocence, into the child within” (2). Love Disney or hate it, nearly every American (and again, nearly everyone within first world nations) knows about Disney and what they stand for. Though I will get into branding later, it is safe to mention here that Disney is the “brander” par excellence: if you know about Disney, you know what it “stands for”: quality family entertainment and the “Magic Kingdom” of Mickey and his friends. Disney transmits this brand via many fronts: Disney movies, Disney Channel, ABC’s Saturday morning line up, Radio Disney (currently broadcast in 55 cities, plus on the web), Disney theme parks, Disney websites and licensing of the Disney characters. While the Disney Company has had a firm place within the childhood of Americans for about fifty years, Disney did not become as ubiquitous a force until it began to explore the use of new media. I will focus primarily on the formation of Disney Channel (and the Disney Channel shows aired on ABC) because this was the first place where Disney really began to focus on the tween market.

Disney has a long history on television. In 1953, ABC invested in Disneyland in exchange for a weekly Disney series on their network (Flower 17). ABC paid the then “exorbitant” sum of fifty thousand dollars an episode for the prestige of airing Disney

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2 For a more complete corporate history of Disney, see David Smith and Steven B. Clark’s Disney: the First 100 Years. For more information about how Eisner became the chairman of Disney, see John Taylor’s Storming the Magic Kingdom or Bob Thomas’ Building a Company: Roy O Disney and the Creation of an Entertainment Empire.

3 Disney refers to its cable channel as “Disney Channel,” without the “The.” While the “The” used to be there, it was dropped sometime around when Disney introduced “ToonDisney,” another cable channel. Perhaps the lack of a “The” reminds us that other Disney Channels exist, or perhaps the “The” was dropped to further “brand” the channel. NBC and ABC have no “The,” for example. At any rate, my lack of a “The” is purely intentional, though I will not omit the “The” when other authors include it.
productions every week, and in return Disney was able to advertise their movies and upcoming theme park to millions of people every week (TV Tome “Wonderful World of Disney”). The shows, originally titled Disneyland and later run under other titles such as The Wonderful World of Disney, ran for 34 seasons, the longest running non-news prime time show on network television (TV Tome “Wonderful World of Disney”). The network show was important to Disney because it allowed the studio to reinforce its image as a producer of family-friendly entertainment by airing original programming and re-runs of theatrical releases. During the introductory and concluding remarks by Walt Disney (and in the most recent episodes, Michael Eisner), the Disney Company as a whole was advertised. Viewers got to know Disney – or “Uncle Walt,” as he was often known – and other Disney creative staff. Entire episodes of the show featured the wonders of Disneyland. Today, we would call such episodes “infomercials.” During the commercial breaks, Disney films and theme parks were advertised. In all, the network show functions as a seamless, and inexpensive, marketing campaign for all things Disney. People do not have to buy a movie ticket to receive this message, but instead can receive it for free in the comfort of their own homes.

In 1977, Disney executive Jim Jimirro suggested that Disney expand their empire with the start up of a cable channel. At this time, only about 1.2 million Americans had cable, but Jimirro believed that the market would greatly expand. Also, at that time the cost of starting a cable channel was, as he put it, “about 50 cents.” However, Disney’s board decided against this because they were putting all of their resources into building EPCOT center in Florida (Flower 87). Finally, in 1982 – the same year EPCOT opened – Jimirro was given permission to start

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Disney Channel. Waiting five years meant that the cable audience was quite a bit larger, but start-up costs were higher, too. Estimates of what Disney put into the cable channel in the first year range from $28 (Grover 137) to $100 million (Flower 94). The formation of Disney Channel had repercussions to the whole company. Disney took its Sunday evening show off of CBS (where it then aired), and refused to sell any of its movies or television shows to broadcast television or other cable channels. “The idea was to give the Disney Channel as good a chance to make it as we could. We were worried that people wouldn’t want to buy Disney shows if they could get them for free [elsewhere]” (Ron Miller, qtd in Grover 137). At this point, Disney was also refusing to put its best known films on video, because they were “afraid to do anything that might upset theater owners that showed Disney films” (Flower 87). Theatrical re-releases of “classic” Disney films were important to the company because these re-releases always did well and the money made from them was (minus minor marketing costs) pure profit. Disney feared cutting into these profits by making their films available either free on television or on home video, because if someone could watch the movie over and over again at home, why buy a ticket to see it in a theater? Rather than helping Disney’s bottom line, though, these measures lost the company money and, more importantly, eroded the all-important Disney “brand.” In canceling the weekly network show, Disney denied itself its weekly exposure to a mass television audience. Even when ratings were not great, millions of people still watched the Disney programming, and the Disney brand was constantly reinforced to them. Getting rid of the network show, in effect, canceled one of the most successful marketing campaigns in history, and was a costly mistake.

To combat this, and to help company-wide paralysis in general – in 1984, Michael Eisner and Frank Wells were brought in as chairman and president, respectively. While Wells was
brought in to corral the company’s business and financial affairs, Eisner was brought in because he was a “story man” who had been in the television and film industry his entire professional career (Flower 5). Early in his career, Eisner ran children’s programming at ABC. It was he who created Saturday morning shows around the Jackson 5 and the Osmond Brothers, and he who created the “Afterschool Specials” (Flower 44). It was thought that Eisner would know how to rebuild Disney as a brand because he understood children’s programming. Eisner’s goal for Disney was to turn it “into a global entertainment conglomerate of unprecedented size and breadth” (Flower 199), and he succeeded.

Exactly when Disney Channel became profitable is something of a dispute, but most accounts put the channel’s turn-around somewhere around 1985. At this point, the channel had 2.5 million subscribers (Flower 182). However, the channel had a high rate of “churn,” or subscriber turnover. Disney lost about 80 percent of its subscribers every year, while the industry’s average was 60 percent (Grover 138). To combat this, the channel began to air more original programming and fewer re-runs from the 1950s and 1960s (Flower 182). One of the shows the Disney Channel started to maintain viewership was a new version of the Mickey Mouse Club. “Unlike its squeaky-clean predecessor, this Mickey Mouse Club show featured rap songs, break dancing and sexy teenage girls” (Grover 139). As has been widely reported, some of the children who starred on this version of the MMC grew up to become Justin Timberlake, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera. At about the same time, Eisner authorized more of Disney’s films to be sold on home video. These sales, combined with Disney Channel’s success, raised Disney’s profits from its entertainment sector from $2.2 million to $33.6 million (Flower

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5 Perhaps the ancestors of contemporary tween programming.
6 At this point, Disney Channel was a “premium” channel that subscribers had to pay an extra fee to access (like HBO today). Today, most cable systems include Disney in its “basic cable” package, which means you get the channel just for subscribing to cable.
182). At about this time, Disney realized that the more types of media it could control, the higher its profit margins would be. By 1989, Disney Channel had been the fastest growing cable channel for 5 years, and had 5 million subscribers (Flower 228).

Disney had also learned the lesson about network television. To constantly reinforce its brand image, Disney needed to be in people’s homes every week on television. One of the first things Eisner did as chairman was to re-instate a Sunday night Disney program. In 1986, The Disney Sunday Night Movie began on ABC, airing re-runs of theatrical releases as well as original programming. Like the original run of Disneyland, Eisner often introduced program segments from Disneyworld. Most importantly, the program itself often features Disneyworld, and Disney theme parks are the biggest advertiser in the show. In 1995, Disney announced that it was going to buy Capital Cities/ABC for $19 billion. “The deal is the largest media merger in history to that point and the second largest sum of money ever paid for a U.S. company” (“Who Owns What: Disney”). The purchase of ABC and its cable affiliates (including ESPN and, later, ABC Family) expanded the possibilities for Disney to reinforce its brand image greatly.

In 1999, Disney moved into radio with Radio Disney (“Who Owns What: Disney”). During this time, Disney also purchased companies that published books and magazines, began a record label (Buena Vista Records), bought the Anaheim Angels baseball team and the Mighty Ducks hockey team, and built theme parks in Europe and Japan. Now, Disney can reach customers through any media available, and is one of the largest media conglomerates in the world.

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7 It will be interesting to see how Disney’s Sunday night show progresses now that Eisner has been disgraced and has announced his imminent departure from Disney. The company no longer wants Eisner to be its “face,” and he no longer introduces segments of the show.

8 Disney’s cable networks also advertise the theme parks. ESPN (which ABC owned before it was bought by Disney) sometimes airs programming from Disneyworld instead of from it’s Connecticut studios.
Corporate History – Nickelodeon

As Heather Hendershot notes, “In just twenty years, Nickelodeon has established itself as a powerful competitor for Disney’s audience” (1). To get a sense of just how well Nickelodeon has done, Hendershot gives this example:

In 1998 Disney terminated its contract with Burger King, ending an arrangement that for ten years had well served both companies. One would think this would be a big loss for Burger King. Undaunted, though, the fast-food chain quickly signed a contract with children’s television producer Nickelodeon, and soon thereafter sales of Burger King’s Rugrats wristwatches exceeded the volume of previous promotional tie-ins for both The Lion King and Pocahontas. [...] That Nickelodeon was able to take over when Disney jumped ship is a testament to the company’s strength in the children’s media marketplace (1).

Nickelodeon’s goal for the past fifteen years or so has been to compete with Disney, and it has succeeded. In many ways, Nickelodeon’s history both mirrors and reacts against that of Disney’s. Nickelodeon, or “Nick,” as it is affectionately known, first aired April 1, 1979 (Pecora 15). In the beginning, Nick offered cheap children’s programming that was so inoffensive that others labeled it “green vegetable programming.” This actually served Nick well for a while, though, because “Nickelodeon was more than just a venue for children’s entertainment; it has also served as a Pied Piper bringing cable into the community and the home by way of the children” (Pecora 15). Channels like Nick and Disney spread fairly quickly because, in the early cable marketplace, cities could be persuaded to buy cable franchises because they offered “public
service programming” for children that the networks did not provide (Pecora 18).9 At this point in time, network television (other than PBS) did not offer much in the way of educational children’s television. Throughout its history, Nick has insisted that they bring what they believe is the highest quality entertainment for children. “Highest quality” is defined, in part, by a lack of violence, educational content, the celebration of diversity and gender parity. However, as Cy Schneider, a former advertising executive who was brought in to head the channel in 1980, states,

Nickelodeon, for all its lofty aims and subsequent broadcasting awards, was and is, a product born of the demands of the marketplace. Very little quality television for children existed. We believed that there was a small market for it, and we could fill that void. Beyond that, our customers, the cable operator universe, wanted it, needed it, and would pay for it (Pecora 16).

Part of the reason Nick offers such high quality programming, then, is that it will sell. While the channel does have good intentions behind its programming, nothing survives within today’s media unless it makes money. While Nick began as a channel that did not run advertisements, by 1984, Nickelodeon had commercials, which gave it the profit margin required to develop and air original programming (Pecora 23). However, the channel has refused to accept ads from toy companies from the beginning (Simensky 105). This has affected Nick’s programming in several ways.

In 1991, Nick decided to expand its original programming to include animated series. They decided to go against the current trend of toy-based shows (such as He-Man, Transformers or Strawberry Shortcake) and create character-based shows. As Simensky, a former executive in charge of animation at Nickelodeon, notes, “Rather than being driven by toy companies and

9 Nickelodeon and Disney Channel helped my own parents justify the price of cable when I was a small child.
marketing concerns and finding (at best) short-term success, animated shows for kid audiences can succeed in a much greater way when driven by creative forces” (Simensky 105). Further, and more importantly for this study, the network decided to make these cartoons for the tween market rather than for younger children because they saw a gap in the programming available. These shows, which included *Rugrats*, *Doug* and *Ren and Stimpy*, were so successful that Simensky believes they “most likely influenced [Ted] Turner’s decision to start up his Cartoon Network” (Simensky 105). The success of these shows allowed Nick to expand its original programming to include more shows aimed at tweens and also extend into international markets. By 2001, Nick could reach 300 million children worldwide, and over 75 percent of the US audience (Pecora 16). By the next year, “Nickelodeon had become the number-one rated broadcast or cable network for kids aged two to eleven and the number one rated cable network in total viewers” (Sandler 52). During this year, Nickelodeon also had the highest “percentage of up-front advertising sales in the children’s market” (Seiter and Mayer 132). Nickelodeon’s strong ratings continue. In January of 2005, Nickelodeon had nine out of the top fifteen rated basic cable programs, including the second, third and fourth highest rated shows. These shows average about three million viewers each, a huge audience for basic cable.

Nickelodeon’s and Disney’s success as cable networks was part of cable’s overall success in pulling in children as viewers. By 1992, “Cable networks now had 51 percent of the two-to-eleven year old audience, and broadcast television no longer dominated the market” (Pecora 19). Broadcast networks no longer controlled most children’s viewing habits. They tuned into cable channels instead. This shift in power was noticeable by the Fall of 2002, when “Saturday morning programming on all three networks was controlled by cable: ABC was part of the Disney family [and showed programs originally aired on Disney Channel]; NBC had
arrangements for programming from the Discovery Channel; and CBS was owned by Viacom and used Nickelodeon programming” (Pecora 19-20). The success of cable networks aimed at children, and of programs aimed at tweens specifically, brought to marketers’ attention the strength of the tween demographic (Pecora 24). Without the success of the shows aimed at tweens, the demographic itself would not have been created. What began as an under-served age group ended up as an identity.

**Vertical Integration**

Neither Disney nor Nickelodeon could have the hold over the tween market that they do if they were not both huge, multi-national corporations that could tightly control all areas of production and distribution. These companies have such control because they have assiduously sought vertical integration. Within vertical integration, companies combine every method of product distribution under one corporate umbrella (Flower 211). Flower pinpoints the beginning of the current drive for vertical integration to the 1980s and 1990s. Under vertical integration, “studios had multiple markets, multiple media, into which they could sell their creations – theaters, television, cable networks, home videos, computer games, books, toys, and myriad other forms of merchandising based on their characters” (Flower 158). The company that developed the best version of vertical integration was the company most likely to succeed. Disney is so successful because it controls its revenue streams – movies, television, parks and merchandise – so completely. This means the company can control quality, marketing and the flow of money (Flowers 20). Today, Viacom (Nickelodeon’s parent company) is now the “second largest media conglomerate” in the world (Pecora 35). Therefore, like Disney,

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10 The number of cable networks for children is exploding. Disney has one spin-off network, ToonDisney, while Nickelodeon has Noggin (aka The N), Nick Games and Sports, and Nick Toons. The Discovery Channel has spun off Discovery Kids. There are also channels that offer “family entertainment,” which, while not specifically child directed, is considered “safe” for children to watch. Such networks include ABC Family (owned by Disney), Pax and the Hallmark Channel.
“Viacom’s corporate holdings translate into the ability to control all points in the promotion, production, and distribution process including television, film, the internet, and print” (Pecora 35). Other companies look to Disney and Viacom as paradigms of how to be successful in today’s world market.

When vertical integration is working well, executives call it “synergy.” Flower gives an example of synergy when he writes about why Disney has tried to create successful new characters to add to the Disney pantheon. Flower writes,

Eisner [doesn’t] want to make anything he could sell only once. […] If he put old cartoons on television, yes, they could make money from advertisers with minimal expense. But if they put new cartoons on television, they could make money from advertisers. And they could sell dolls of the new characters. And endorsements. And games. And books. And rides at the parks. In fact, the whole business cycle could be repeated with every new character they created. It would be more expensive to create new characters, but in the long run it would be more profitable, because Disney knew how to do it, and the Disney name had the trust of children and parents alike (150).

This is exactly what both Nickelodeon and Disney have done with their new television shows and films. Whenever Disney creates anything, under Eisner, they do so with synergy in mind. In 1985, Disney “merged its television, cable, video and theatrical film divisions into a ‘filmed entertainment’ unit. No studio had ever done that. The aim was to allow directors and writers to move more easily among media, and to search for synergies between film and television” (Flower 184). Over at Nickelodeon, president Geraldine Laybourne wanted Nick to be “the Disney of the 1990s” (Jenkins 149), so she began to look for ways to copy Disney’s success. One reason she was so successful at this is that she duplicated Disney’s methods of distribution. The
idea that Nickelodeon “can be marketed and experienced anywhere, anytime, anyplace, lies at the core of synergy” (Sandler 56). Disney and Nickelodeon are everywhere at every time – even children without cable cannot escape their products – and this ubiquity lies at the heart of their corporate strategy.

One reason why vertical integration and synergy are so important to multi-national corporations is that owning multiple distribution sites lessen the possibility of failure (Flower 212). It is especially important to manage risk within Disney and Nickelodeon “because of the high rate of failure in the capricious youth market” (Pecora 40). Each site of distribution allows for higher profits (Flower 212). An example of this is Viacom’s purchase of both Paramount Pictures and Blockbuster Video in 1994. Using Paramount, Viacom released cheap (for Hollywood) pictures under the Nickelodeon banner, starting with the movie Harriet the Spy. Whether these films did well at the box office or not, Viacom could make money off of the films through Blockbuster Video (Pecora 38). This type of vertical integration allows media corporations to gain further profit off of even less beloved films and television shows. As Flower states, “The new outlets for movies also reduced the risk of producing films by giving movies a shelf-life, a second chance to build a following. A movie that did so-so at the box office could (and surprisingly often does) do very well in video, or on cable, or in spin-off CDs and music videos” (212).

Because of this, vertical integration makes studios’ libraries of old films, television shows, and characters worth more. “No one in Hollywood had firmer control of their old films than Disney, and few could compete with the sales value of the Disney classics” (Flower 212). By creating and owning so many original shows and cartoons, Nickelodeon also has a library (albeit a much smaller one than Disney) to exploit. These libraries can be re-packaged whenever
a new medium, such as the DVD, is developed. They can also be re-run endlessly on television. Using products in this way is called “re-purposing” (Sandler 56). Another example of re-purposing is when shows originally produced for Disney or Nickelodeon are also shown on broadcast networks as part of their Saturday morning lineups. Re-purposing makes sense for studios because programs from their own channels cost Disney and Nickelodeon nothing to re-broadcast, and they serve as advertisements for their cable networks and other products. This in turn boosts both advertising rates for the cable channels and the rates cable companies will pay for the rights to air those channels. Flower believes that this use of vertical integration changes the face of Hollywood, because “Hollywood, which has always been America’s twentieth-century equivalent of a gold rush, began to look more like a manufacturer of a commodity. The way to play the game was to get out as much product as possible, packaged as many ways as possible, spreading the risk and increasing the chance of profit” (Flower 212-213). As part of this, “merchandising, product licensing, and international revenue [are] all a part of the return on the investment” in children’s media (Pecora 37).

Another reason why vertical integration is so successful is that it is a “free” way to cross-promote the company’s products, perhaps some of the cheapest advertising possible. One example of this is that Disney’s television stations “provide the company direct access to audiences to which it could sell its vast array of other products, from movies to theme parks” (Flower 235). Because of this, television is Disney’s “greatest ally for both marketing and financing” (Flower 16). Disney Channel is a big part of Disney’s cross-promotion efforts. By the late 80s, Disney Channel was firmly entrenched within “Eisner’s goal of cross-promotion for other company ventures. Kids watching Winnie-the-Pooh or Mickey Mouse cartoons became a target market for Disney toys. Showing episodes of The Mickey Mouse Club, which had been
filmed at the Disney-MGM Studios Theme Park, enticed 14-year-olds into pressuring their parents to take them to Orlando” (Grover 140). Nickelodeon was not far behind. Like Disney, Nickelodeon could not have perfected their position as a lifestyle brand outside of the Viacom media conglomerate. As part of Viacom, Nickelodeon has access to many avenues of distribution and a whole “array of consumer products managed by its subsidiary holdings” (Sandler 55). As a part of this, Nickelodeon can take advantage of “coordinated synergies” which cross-promote the brand among a variety of Viacom holdings. For example, a Nickelodeon show can also air on CBS, another Viacom property. A Paramount movie can air on Nickelodeon and/or CBS, or be rented at Blockbuster. Nickelodeon’s general manager, Cyma Zarghami, admits that brand solidity and recognition needs to be worked on constantly. If companies do not perform this work, other brands “creep up on you. And then you can’t throw enough money at it to get that position back” (Sander 55). In 1990, Nickelodeon built a television studio/theme park in Orlando, Florida.  

At one point, “85 percent of Nickelodeon’s programming was produced there, and tourists served (and continue to serve) as audience, game-show participants, and research subjects. The studio is reported to be the largest children’s program production studio, and by 1994 more than a thousand hours of new programming had been taped at the studio” (Pecora 27-8). Every show filmed at the studio has a short announcement at the end, stating that the show was “filmed live at Nickelodeon Studios in Orlando, Florida.” Such announcements serve as thousands of commercials for the studio – what kid wouldn’t want the chance to participate in a show like Double Dare or All That?

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11 Perhaps Nickelodeon was trying to capitalize on visitors coming to Orlando for Disneyworld.  
12 Double Dare is a very messy game show, and All That is a Saturday Night Live clone for kids.
Branding

One of the most important ramifications of vertical integration is that it makes it possible for corporations to “brand” their products, something Disney and Nickelodeon lead the tween market in doing. What is branding, though, and why is it an important marketing tool? “To attract what is now a more discriminating and selective viewer and to compete in this crowded media arena, cable networks and their corporate parents have reconfigured their channels as brands, commodities that embrace a particular lifestyle, attitude, or experience. Children, in particular, have been one of the prime recipients of this branded mediascape” (Sandler 45). Branding works so well in children’s media because of its “predictability – children, parents and advertisers know what to expect when they tune [in]” (Pecora 29). Within brands, companies’ products become part of a “well-defined, prepackaged, indefinitely repeatable experience” (Flower 21). Nickelodeon and Disney are not “about” any one show or set of shows, then, but are about a particular “idea” or “experience.” One does not merely watch Disney Channel or Nick. One “lives” them. Nickelodeon and Disney introduce children to the concept of lifestyle brands – or a brand that claims to define a person’s identity.

Both No Logo author Naomi Klein and Kevin Sandler note that branding is only possible within the mega corporation. Klein notes that, “A true branded loop cannot be created overnight, which is why the process usually begins with the simplest form of brand extension, a giant merger” (Klein 146). She uses Viacom’s purchase of Blockbuster and Paramount, mentioned above, as her example (Klein 148). Sandler agrees, noting that “Not until the network took advantage of the opportunities afforded by being a subsidiary of a media conglomerate did Nickelodeon become an international brand phenomenon” (Sandler 51). Disney and Viacom can only brand their products because they have so many avenues through which to distribute them.
Klein states that “As two sides of the same project, synergy and branding are both about creating cross-promotional brand-based experiences that combine buying with elements of media, entertainment and professional sports to create an integrated branded loop. Disney [has] always known this – now everyone else is learning it too” (Klein 146).

Brands take a material product and imbue it with an emotional or cultural meaning. When consumers buy a brand, they do not so much buy the actual object as they buy that object’s cultural meaning. Mark Gobe, author of the (somewhat activist) marketing manual Citizen Brand, uses the term “emotional branding” instead of lifestyle brands, but the terms can be interchanged. Gobe defines emotional branding as “the idea that, beyond a product’s offering its functional benefits, people today are keenly interested in buying an emotional experience” (xv, emphasis in the original). He believes that people are searching for true emotional experiences, or their true selves, and brands can help define such experiences (Gobe xxv). He also believes that “People love ‘good’ brands,” which Gobe more or less defines as a product that makes and maintains an emotional promise to the consumer (xx). He writes that “a truly ‘good’ brand can even represent the qualities we seek most in friends and family – qualities like warmth, familiarity, and trust” (Gobe xx). Finally, within successful emotional branding “brands do not belong to corporations but to people – and this is even more the case with brands that have managed to capture people’s hearts and become truly ‘emotional’ brands, because the strong bond they have built with people create a true sense of ‘ownership’ (Gobe xx-xxi). A good example of this is the sense of love and ownership many people have for Disney. As Flower states, “no other American company carries the mix of expectations that Disney does, or has been able to carve itself such a strange, deep-setting hook of myth, magic, and values. No corporation is ‘about’ something in so full and personal a way as Disney is” (4). When Disney
releases a film or television show that does not fit into the audience’s conception of what Disney should stand for, the reaction is truly emotional. To this audience, Disney does not release mere products, but pieces that help define their – or their children’s – childhoods.

Naomi Klein agrees with Gobe in that branding tries to create an “emotional connection” or “lifestyle” for consumers (Klein 20-22). However, she disagrees with Gobe that people can find their true selves with the help of brands. Where Gobe sees the relationship between brand and consumer as a mutually satisfying one, Klein sees something darker. She states,

Quite simply, every company with a powerful brand is attempting to develop a relationship with consumers that resonates so completely with their sense of self that they will aspire, or at least consent, to be serfs under these feudal brandlords. This explains why marketing talk of pitch and product has been usurped so completely by the more intimate discourse of ‘meaning’ and ‘relationship building’ – brand-based companies are no longer interested in a consumer fling. They want to move in together (Klein 149).

Klein believes that tweens are one of the largest targets of lifestyle brands, and locates the beginning of the youth marketing revolution in the recession of the late 80s and early 90s. During the recession, brands that targeted baby-boomers were abandoned in favor of cheaper generics, while brands that catered to the youth market remained strong. “Their parents may have gone bargain-basement, but kids, it turned out, were still willing to pay up to fit in” (Klein 68). Once they realized this, companies advertised their brands to tweens as never before.

Disney has created and maintained perhaps one of the most successful lifestyle brands in American history. An early believer in branding, Walt Disney realized that “Money alone is not enough to drive a company. A company has to be about something” (Flower 263). Disney is “all that makes life precious: a sense of wonder, of adventure, of striving for greatness, of the genius
of creativity” (Flower 263). Like all lifestyle brands, Disney is “about how to live (Flower 263). Heady stuff, indeed; but this is the stuff of which brands are made. Flower may buy into Disney’s brand message a bit too enthusiastically, but he is correct. Disney tells us what childhood is, or what it should be. Whether we believe in Disney’s brand message, we all know what that message is – and we can repeat it. Even if we react or rebel against that message, we demonstrate that we have learned it. Flower believes that, as the world has begun to seem less predictable, people believe in the Disney brand even more because it represents the stability and “innocence” that we crave (263).

Like Disney, “Nickelodeon’s impact […] far exceeds its status as a successful operator in the children’s media marketplace. Nick is also an important cultural phenomenon” (Hendershot 2). Hendershot continues by comparing Nickelodeon’s brand with Disney’s. Like Disney, Nickelodeon is trusted by parents because “Nickelodeon shows won’t inspire kids to kick and punch each other. They are more likely to hinge on interpersonal relationships than on good versus evil morality tales, and they don’t show a world in which only white boys have brains” (2). Hendershot believes that the Nick brand works so well because it manages to satisfy both children and adults. For children, Nick offers “the fun they want by gently violating adult ideas of propriety, and it satisfies adults by conforming to their vision of ‘quality’ children’s programming” (Hendershot 3). Finally, Hendershot gives an example of just how successful Nickelodeon’s brand has become. Rather than selling ads to go with particular shows at particular times, advertisers buy ad time for the channel in general. “Companies buy ad time to be associated not with a particular show but rather with Nickelodeon itself” (Hendershot 185). Every Nick show fits in with the message, or brand.
Nickelodeon worked hard to establish this brand, determined to change its original image as a channel that offered “green vegetable” programming that adults liked because it was “good for” children. In January of 1985, about the same time the channel was bought by Viacom, Nickelodeon unveiled its new brand of “kids’ television with an attitude” (Pecora 23). By the late 1980s, the brand solidified. Linda Simensky, a former animation executive at Nickelodeon, describes the brand in this way. It is a philosophy which could be summed up as ‘Us versus Them.’ The basic idea was that kids lived in a grown-up world, and that it was tough to be a kid when you had to follow all the grown-up rules. Either you were part of the rules, or you could be part of ‘us,’ referring to kids, or in this case, Nickelodeon. The ‘us’ believed that kids should be free to play around, have fun, and stand up for themselves. Nickelodeon positioned itself as understanding kids, being for kids, giving them what they wanted to see, and giving them a place where they could be kids (89).

Tellingly, Simensky continues by stating that “The executives at Nickelodeon used a fair amount of focus group research to determine this philosophy. […] This research would inform every aspect of Nickelodeon’s approach to programming and production” (89). Part of Nickelodeon’s branding efforts, then, includes meticulous research for determining the most effective ways to make children identify with their products, and to identify themselves as “Nick kids.”

Nickelodeon has gone a step further than simply branding the network as a whole. Instead, the channel has perfected the art of branding different times of day and week to different age and interest groups. Not only does this simplify things for its audience – it is now this time of week, therefore I can expect to see this type of programming (if not this specific program) – it also simplifies matters for advertisers since they know what audience is being targeted (Pecora
29). By 1993, Nickelodeon had a specific block of programming branded for tweens. Called “Snick,” it airs Saturday nights (Pecora 32). Nickelodeon later added Sunday evenings to its tween block, and called the programming TEENick. This brought new advertisers, such as Coca-Cola and Sega, to the network (Pecora 37).

Where Simensky defines the Nick brand as “us versus them,” Kevin Sandler defines it as “prosocial.” He writes, “Promoting specific prosocial elements as diversity, nonviolent action, appropriate levels of humor, and guidelines for success – all without ever talking down to kids – characterizes the brand attitude of Nickelodeon” (Sandler 45). Sandler believes that Nickelodeon is successful because it couches these prosocial ideas within a sense of fun. Nickelodeon’s brand seems to promote solid, liberal values that most would want their children to learn. Because of this, Sandler believes that Nickelodeon’s use of branding is “less unscrupulous” than it could be (55). As part of this “prosocial” mission, in 1999, Nickelodeon launched a spin-off network. During mornings, the network is called “Noggin” and airs programs for small children. In the evenings and in prime-time, the network changes its name to “The N” and it airs tween-specific shows. While both Noggin and The N share Nick’s brand, they also are differentiated by focusing on shows that are “fun, empowering, and educational” (Sandler 62). In other words, The N’s shows are more educational or “message” oriented. Such shows include Degrassi: the Next Generation, A Walk in Your Shoes and re-runs of My So-Called Life. Again, executives at Nickelodeon used market research and focus groups to create this network. Duncan Hood, a Nickelodeon executive, talked about this research to Sandler, stating

What tweens tell us in their research is that their NO.1 challenge outside of class is who they are and where they are going. For them, life can be ridiculously embarrassing. What you wear is embarrassing. Your parents are embarrassing. You are embarrassing. You’re
not very comfortable asking questions. We like to be the destination that helps them. It’s our educational mission (Sandler 67).

Researching, and then directly addressing, the awkwardness of the tween experience creates an uncomfortable tension in the relationship of Nickelodeon to its viewers. On the one hand, the studio’s mission to help tweens understand that all tweens are embarrassed by themselves and their bodies at some point, and to ameliorate that embarrassment, is laudable. At best, tweens can see their experiences echoed by the characters in their favorite shows, and be empowered by the sense of community generated by the tween identity. On the other, making the awkwardness of tween life a main marketing point of contact can serve to only emphasize and reify the worst parts of pre-teen and early teen existence. At worst, Nickelodeon echoes the marketing mantra that tweens’ bodies and minds are somehow wrong and buying consumer products is the only conduit to social acceptance.

**Branding People**

In many ways, celebrities are also the products of large, multi-national corporations, and they are branded in much the same ways that I described above. Samantha Ettus, who styles herself as an expert on celebrity brands, states that, “Just like Pepsi and Kodak, celebrities need to consider their brands” (“Some Advice”). Ettus defines the brands embodied by celebrities as “people brands,” or “those celebrities who are leaders in their field, with added qualities of talent and charisma” (“Some Advice”). Just like large corporations, celebrities’ “greatest asset” is their “personal brand,” and celebrities must do what they can to both reach their brand potential and avoid risk (Ettus “Some Advice”). Celebrities minimize risk in much the same way as corporations – by maintaining their brand’s “message” or “meaning,” and by branching out into as many different media as possible to maximize profit potential. Celebrity brands can either be
controlled by the celebrities themselves, the studio they work for, or a mixture of both, and just as products aimed at tweens are branded as never before, so too are their celebrities.

After missing out on the success of Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera – who both worked for Disney as young children – Disney has taken more care to control every aspect of their teen celebrities’ careers. Disney can enact this control because they own so many different types of media distribution. Because of this, Disney stars can, and do, have simultaneous careers in television, film and music – all of it owned by Disney. Importantly, this means that celebrities’ different products can cross-promote each other synergistically, with the brand message of that one person (and their studio) at their core. Tween celebrities are lifestyle brands in and of themselves. Now, when girls want to be “just like” their favorite celebrities, they can buy a whole array of branded products to aid them in this project. For example, in 2003 alone, Disney’s Hilary Duff was featured in the last season of her Disney Channel show, Lizzie Maguire, in the Lizzie Maguire Movie, the film Cheaper by the Dozen and the CD Metamorphosis. “Commercial” breaks during the Lizzie Maguire show featured the films prominently, and between programs Disney aired the music videos from Metamorphosis. At Target stores nationwide, girls can buy clothes, accessories, linens and beauty products produced under the “Hilary Duff’s Stuff” brand. At each turn, Duff’s different products each advertised each other, and in turn advertised Disney. This is synergy at its most blatant. Disney is using much the same template with both Raven (whom you may remember as Raven-Simone from The

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13 This is really nothing new for Disney, because most of what I will describe also holds true for past Disney stars like Annette Funicello.
14 This is not the full extent of Duff’s work released by Disney: ABC also had a special celebrating Duff’s 16th birthday, Duff is featured on The Lizzie Maguire Movie’s soundtrack, and the Christmas disc Santa Claus Lane. Duff is also the face behind a line of clothing and cosmetics – she is literally a brand. As we will see, this is not unusual for tween stars.
15 While Disney Channel does not advertise for outside products, it does have commercial breaks. Within these breaks, Disney products – such as other Disney Channel programs or Disney movies – are advertised. This way, Disney’s brand message is never broken or contradicted by outside sources, and parents are falsely reassured that their children are not watching commercials. Nickelodeon’s The N uses the same format.
Cosby Show, and who now stars on Disney’s That’s So Raven) and Lindsey Lohan (star of
Freaky Friday and Mean Girls). Nickelodeon has done much the same with its stable of female
stars, with Amanda Bynes (star of The Amanda Show and the film What a Girl Wants) having
the most success.

Disney and Nickelodeon are not the only means to create tween star brands. Using the
success of lifestyle brands as their template, celebrities like Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen – with
the help of their lawyer, Robert Thorne – have created their own media empire, and branded
themselves in the process. Through their company, Dualstar, the Olsen twins have had full
control over their careers (at least on paper) since they were 7 years old. Their mission to brand
themselves has been so successful that authors speak of the girls’ “brand potential” (Ettus “Some
Advice”). When the twins turned eighteen, a huge amount of journalistic ink was spilled
speculating about the effects this momentous event would have on their brand. Speaking like this
makes sense, in a way, because the Olsens do not simply have acting careers. Indeed, the Olsen’s
film and television work forms only a fraction of their empire. While their direct-to-video films,
which the girls have made since they were about 5 years old, have made an estimated $500
million dollars, their other branded products, sold under the mary-kateandashley brand and
including clothing, make-up, accessories and books, made about $800 - $900 million in 2002
alone (Chihara “Two Teens”, CBS News “Rich Girls”). In all, the twins’ names are on some 52
categories of “entertainment, fashion, and lifestyle” that make up their brand (CBS News “Rich
Girls”). It’s no wonder the twins are treated like a brand, then, because they are one.

Journalists and marketers point out the ways tween stars have become brands, and
wonder what will happen to these mini media empires as girls grow older. Will the celebrities be
able to “age-up” along with their audiences? Once their fame is gone, will girls still want to buy
their products? What few have asked, is what the implications are to the audience. What does it mean for girls when their so-called “role models” have branded themselves? Will this drive to brand the self be replicated, in some form, by the girls themselves? Is this what happens when girls buy their favorite celebrities’ products?

Consumers Citizenship

One of the conclusions that many have drawn is that children are somehow empowered by their newfound demographic status. As Geraldine Laybourne, former president of Nickelodeon, states: “Nick empowers kids by saying to them, ‘You’re important – important enough to have a network of your own’” (Banet-Weisner 222). In her article “We Pledge Allegiance to Kids: Nickelodeon and Citizenship,” Banet-Weisner continues the idea, stating, “Indeed, it is clear that in the current cultural climate, visibility (whether on television, music, or other media outlets) does equal power – especially for children. In other words, being recognized as a ‘demographic’ indicates a certain kind of power” (222). Central to this is the idea that people can become empowered by what they consume (an idea corporations are only too happy to have us believe).

Scholars and marketers alike call this idea “consumer citizenship.” Under this, “Corporations and brands, not unlike politicians, are elected every day by people. Consumers vote with their wallets” (Gobe xx). Banet-Weisner sets forth what she means by consumer citizenship, and how it exists in a tension with political citizenship. It is worth exploring these concepts more deeply because I believe they infiltrate both how brands are marketed and why people buy into them.16 Within her article, Banet-Weisner places consumer and political citizenship on a continuum of political empowerment, with “a commitment to liberal ideals of individual agency” on one end, and “on the other end, as a kind of ‘market patriotism; or

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16 Please forgive the obvious pun.
consumer freedom” (Banet-Weisner 210). Although they exist together on the continuum, civil citizenship and consumer citizenship exist in a tension with each other (Banet-Weisner 210). While Banet-Weisner admits that civil citizenship is important, she clearly seems to favor the “empowerment” offered through consumer citizenship, stating that

Consumer citizenship situates politics and agency not within an idealized public sphere, but rather within ideologies of consumer choices. In the last few decades, the notion that commercial media are not simply low culture without redeeming value, but are rather an important cultural site in which adults negotiate and struggle over meanings of identity (including the identity of citizenship), has been largely accepted, even while the extent and nature of the commercial media’s influence is continually debated (210).

While there is a lot to agree with in this statement, particularly the notion that the commercial media are to be taken seriously, I disagree with the way Banet-Weisner has collapsed the notions of consumption and meaning-making, and further equates meaning-making with agency. The two are different in important ways. Consumption may or may not include the process of making meaning, and making meaning may or may not include the process of consumption. Further, her placement of political (or civil) citizenship within some sort of demeaned “idealized public sphere” strikes me as rather cynical – she seems to dismiss the possibilities of political citizenship out of hand. While Banet-Weisner plays lip-service to political citizenship, she seems to dismiss it in favor of consumer citizenship throughout the rest of her argument.

Banet-Weisner ties her argument to Nickelodeon and the way the channel is marketed to children by stating that “within the Nickelodeon universe, these two definitions of citizenship intermix and represent a broader tension in recent debates framing discussions of children, media and citizenship” (211). Banet-Weisner asks, “Is the child an innocent victim of the corporate
giants of mass media, or is the child an active citizen, involved in the negotiation and struggle over meaning in a productive, identity-making manner? Or […] are these two positions not oppositional, but rather in constant tension and conversation with each other in the construction of citizenship?” (212). Obviously, Banet-Weisner is trying to find a way to avoid the argument that children are “cultural dupes” who are ruled by the media. While I find this purpose admirable, many of Banet-Weisner’s conclusions are suspect.

How does Banet-Weisner connect consumerism to citizenship? She states, “Consumption habits code individuals as members of particular communities, and grant individuals a kind of power that accompanies such membership. Thus, citizenship is increasingly defined within consumer culture – indeed, as a process of consumption itself” (Banet-Weisner 223). Within Nickelodeon’s brand, the channel’s “claim to be a network ‘just for kids’ is one of the ways in which it acknowledges the connection between political subjectivity and consumer identity; it is not simply a place defined exclusively for kids; it also capitalizes on the enormous commercial potential of its child audience” (Banet-Weisner 223). Rather than defining this as the targeting or exploitation of a demographic, Banet-Weisner defines this as empowerment. How does this translate into citizenship? Banet-Weisner answers that “to be a ‘sovereign consumer’ is to be a citizen” (225). Using ideas from Nestor Garcia Canclini’s Consumers and Citizens, Banet-Weisner argues that

Our sense of social belonging, a crucial element of meaningful citizenship, is steeped in our consumption habits and routines, and that it thus makes sense to theorize citizenship and consumption as crucially connected practices. Indeed, legitimating only a traditional definition of political participation (such as voting or the rational debate of ‘ideas’) as a
necessary condition for citizenship misses a whole range of experiences that comprise national belonging (225).

We form part of our identities through what we consume – perhaps largely through the efforts of conglomerates to brand their products – but does this constitute a legitimate part of citizenship? Banet-Weisner continues by defining citizenship as “a sense of belonging” and asks that we redefine belonging by our participation in “communities of consumers, such as youth and rock music, or children and Nickelodeon” (225-6). Banet-Weisner further ties children to consumer citizenship because “not only are traditional definitions of political participation limited for most people, but an emphasis on voting and rational debate necessarily excludes children from the category of citizenship” (225). She believes this makes consumption even more important an arena for the empowerment of children (Banet-Weisner 230).

One of the main problems I have with Banet-Weisner’s article is the way she uses Canclini. Within Nestor Garcia Canclini’s book, titled Consumers and Citizens, Canclini attempts to re-define the notion of citizenship within globalization. Under globalization, nationalist identities have lost meaning under the growing power of multi-national corporations, and one of Canclini’s goals is to examine the ways the tensions between globalization and traditional citizenship have created new forms of identities. As a part of this, one of Canclini’s goals is to “deconstruct” the notion that consumer behavior is “irrational” (Canclini 20, 38). Groups of people buy particular objects for specific reasons. When we, as a society, “select goods and appropriate them, we define what we consider publicly valuable” (Canclini 20). We buy things because we believe they are important. Under this era of branding, we are also saying that the particular values given to particular products are also important. Because of this, consumption can serve as an arena of agreed-upon meaning amidst postmodern “heterogeneity”
As I stated above, we all know what Disney “means.” Further, “to consume is to participate in an arena of competing claims for what society produces and the ways of using it” (Canclini 39). Because of this, consumers must be careful about what they buy, because “Everyday cultural consumption marks a fundamental change in the conditions for the practice of a new type of civic responsibility” (Canclini 45). This is how consumption becomes a political act, how we “vote with our wallets.” For this to work, though, people need the right to equally access goods (Canclini 46). As Canclini states, for true consumer citizenship to work, we need to make sure that all parties have “equal access to the resources brought by globalization” (21). In other words, Canclini wants both the free distribution of goods and a populace with the ability – the money – to buy them. Canclini recognizes that, under consumer citizenship, the poor are necessarily disenfranchised.

Under Banet-Weisner’s conception of the way consumer citizenship works, then, children buy particular products to gain membership into certain groups. For example, my junior high school (and now my sister’s) is divided up, at least in part, by the students’ musical tastes. The kids who listen to punk all hang out together, separate from the students who like country, or hip-hop, or pop. While I agree with Banet-Weisner that this occurs, I do not share her conclusion that this is necessarily empowering. Under Canclini’s use of the term consumer citizenship, groups of people develop a shared identity by agreeing on what the society finds important. For example, groups may decide to purchase products produced by indigenous groups because, although these products might cost more, they provide a shared sense of ethnic identity. In this way, consumerism becomes important. Another example of this type of consumer behavior is provided by the Consumer Citizenship Network, an activist group who encourages people to buy responsibly. On their website, the group defines consumer citizenship as
when the individual, in his/her role as a consumer, actively participates in developing and improving society by considering ethical issues, diversity of perspectives, global processes and future conditions. It involves taking responsibility on a global as well as regional, national and local scale when securing one’s own personal needs and well-being (Consumer Citizenship Network).

This definition of consumer citizenship agrees with Canclini’s definition in that consumers help society decide how to use the available resources. The Consumer Citizenship Network believes that individuals should only consume products produced using sustainable methods that are good for the environment. In this way, the Network makes the act of consumption empowering. Banet-Weisner makes no such case, in her article, for how consuming is an empowering act for tweens. While I believe that consumption can be – and should be – an empowering act for tweens, I certainly do not believe that, as Banet-Weisner implies, consuming is always empowering.

Even if this were so, I still do not believe that consumer-citizenship can be equated with traditional civic citizenship. First, I do not believe that political citizenship is simply defined by a sense of belonging but also by sets of interlocking rights and obligations. In her book, Future Girl, Anita Harris uses T.H. Marshall’s tripartite definition of civil citizenship, which includes social rights, including the right to economic security; civil rights, or “individual entitlements to free thought, choice of faith;” and political rights, or the ability “to vote and stand for elections” (Harris 64). While children cannot yet participate in civil citizenship by voting or running for office, they are given the right to economic security and free thought.17 Harris further defines civil citizenship as the “individual’s place in the community, and the relationship he or she has with the state. The state protects the rights of its citizens and in doing so enables them to

17 Of course, these rights are not always upheld. This is another debate for another time.
participate equally and actively in the community” (64). In exchange for state protection and rights, all the state asks is that individuals give up “personal self-rule” (Harris 64), or what Rousseau terms a person’s “natural liberty and unlimited right to everything that tempts him and that he [sic] can acquire” (27). Under consumer citizenship, money (which in many cases translates into power) is traded for goods and services. The two different types of citizenship certainly do not seem to offer the same types of trades. As Harris states, “The freedoms and choices of the market are not a meaningful substitute for an economically secure life trajectory, and consumer power is not the same as citizenship rights for which states are legally and morally accountable” (70). While trading for goods and services in and of themselves is not a bad thing, it cannot be equated with or replace the trade made within political citizenship.

Finally, even if one grants that citizenship is based on a sense of belonging, and that consumer citizenship is based on the belonging bought alongside certain products, the idea of consumer citizenship is still problematic. Banet-Weisner believes that political citizenship is too idealized, and that it leaves children too dependent on the adults around them allowing them the rights of citizenship. How is consumer citizenship any different? Consumer citizenship is explicitly tied to the ability to consume. This ability is determined by wealth. Because children cannot secure a livelihood, which would generate their own wealth, children are denied citizenship “by circumstances beyond their control” (Harris 66). Just as in civil citizenship, then, tweens’ consumer citizenship is dependent on the wealth of their parents or guardians. What happens to children from poor families, or those whose families do not believe in the levels of consumption deemed necessary for belonging by today’s society? What happens to their sense of belonging? Isn’t this merely a new level of disenfranchisement? Finally, what types of
protections does consumer citizenship offer? Banet-Weisner does not recommend any solutions to these problems.

Banet-Weisner is not alone in believing in consumer citizenship. Indeed, marketers have seized upon the idea, and have disseminated it as much as possible. However, these marketers eject the notion of buying responsibly, and retain the notion that tweens can buy their identity alongside their shoes. Lindstrom, the author of a manual on how to market to tweens, states that brands have become an integral part of the way tweens define themselves. It’s the way they express who they are at home, at school, at parties and even on the Net. Tweens are the most brand-conscious generation yet. Our numbers reveal that it is far more important to wear the right label than it is to wear the right clothes. It is largely through their choice of brands that tweens distinguish themselves from one another (13).

Choice is an important word within this construction of citizenship, because it is largely through the choice of consumer goods that many believe children can become empowered. Banet-Weisner compares the freedom of choice offered in the consumer arena with that of the political arena, stating that “Freedom of choice is still a relevant social category, but situated within consumer culture this kind of freedom encompasses more than simply private, political choices within the public sphere. It also indicates the freedom to choose one particular commodity over others, or the choice to belong to a specific community of consumers” (Banet-Weisner 230). While political choice is “still relevant,” then, it is also “simply private” while consumer choice is wider because it offers not only the choice of goods but also communities built around the consumption of goods. “While consumer choice has become an important way for young women to express themselves, it is only a small minority of young women who have the disposable income to become consumer citizens” (Harris 91). In other words, most girls do not have the
cash required to become a full “citizen” of the consumer sphere. Harris agrees that “Civil rights have been reconstructed as choices, freedoms, and powers of consumption” (88), she does not view this as empowering. Instead, Harris believes that consumer citizenship narrows the empowering possibilities for girls because “The civic activities of participating in community life, claiming space in the neighborhood, conducting local business, and socializing are replaced by consumer practices. The only ways that young women can effectively exercise their civic entitlements to leisure and enjoyment of their communities is by shopping” (122).

In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein offers a devastating critique of the consumer freedom of choice at the heart of Banet-Weisner’s argument. She states that, “despite the embrace of polyethnic imagery, market-driven globalization doesn’t want diversity; quite the opposite. It’s enemies are national habits, local brands and distinctive regional tastes. Fewer interests control ever more of the landscape” (Klein 129). Klein continues by stating that

This assault on choice is taking place on several different fronts at once. It is happening structurally, with mergers, buyouts and corporate synergies. It is happening locally, with a handful of superbrands using their huge cash reserves to force out small and independent businesses. And it is happening on the legal front, with entertainment and consumer-goods companies using libel and trademark suits to hound anyone who puts an unwanted spin on a pop-cultural product. And so we live in a double world: carnival on the surface, consolidation underneath, where it counts (Klein 130).

Under this system, the question for consumers becomes not what we each want to do, but how best can conglomerates “steer you into the synergized maze of where I want you to go today?” (Klein 129). The so-called lifestyle brands discussed above are actively hostile towards “marketplace diversity” (Klein 159). One example of this are the stores made expressly for the
sale of lifestyle brands, constructed so that these brands can avoid being on racks or shelves next to their competitors. Such stores include the Disney stores, the Gap and Nike outlets (Klein 150). As Klein states, “The moment when all the synergy wheels are turning in unison and all’s right in the corporate universe is the very moment when consumer choice is at its most rigidly controlled and consumer power is at its feeblest” (Klein 160). The lack of consumer choice inhibits even politically active versions of consumer empowerment, such as that espoused by the Consumer Citizenship Network. While this type of consumer empowerment is certainly not impossible, it takes more work to accomplish than Banet-Weisner is willing to admit.

I agree with Banet-Weisner’s claim that “Consumption habits need to be combined with political action to elevate the status of consumers to that of citizens” (233). However, she does not delineate how this process is supposed to occur. Such a process needs to be outlined for the empowerment envisioned by Banet-Weisner for tweens within the marketplace to occur. Without this type of education, the “real capacity to have a voice, to participate, and to make social change is reinvented as the ability to make personal choices about consumer products” to the benefit of large corporations (Harris 89), and all possibility of empowerment is lost. This empowerment is needed because tweens are brought into the consumer economy younger than ever before, and this makes them vulnerable. Alissa Quart, author of *Branded*, states that “raised by a commodity culture from the cradle, [tweens] dependably fragile self-images and their need to belong to groups are perfect qualities for advertisers to exploit” (Quart xii). Within the current consumer climate, tweens “suffer more than any other sector of society for this wall-to-wall selling. They are at least as anxious as their parents about having enough money and maintaining their social class, a fear that they have been taught is at best allayed by more branded gear” (Quart xiii).
As Quart says, “all this marketing would be fine – just the way the shilling game is played at this late date – if it didn’t deeply affect [tweens] themselves. The personae, self-images, ambitions, and values of young people in the United States have been seriously distorted by the commercial frenzy surrounding them” (13). To combat this, tweens need to be given tools to both recognize and, if not defeat, at least ameliorate, the effects of marketing. Gobe’s marketing manual suggests that corporations need to be a part of the solution if they are to survive. He writes that “Corporations today must be built on trust and ethics with a real dedication to being part of human solutions around the world. I believe quite simply that these are the corporations that will survive” (Gobe xvii). If corporations do not make themselves a part of the solution, Gobe believes that anti-consumerism (along with a fractured environment and worldwide economic “mayhem”) could destroy them. Gobe defines anti-consumerism as the idea, which has been growing in popularity, that consumerism and brands are ‘bad’ because large corporations are controlling the world through globalization, the perception that people are powerless against omnipotent, soulless corporations who routinely abuse both the environment and the rights of the people. This anti-consumerism philosophy of resentment […] has clearly touched a nerve with the public (Gobe xix-xx, emphasis in the original).

Rather than seeing a sincere movement toward anti-consumerism, Gobe believes that people would be more satisfied with corporations if they were more socially responsible and held the level of emotional commitment with their consumers that they expect their consumers to have with them (Gobe xix-xx). Because people are emotionally involved with the brands that they buy, in other words, more is expected of them. This means that brands must now “become
Citizen Brands. It is the expectation. And, furthermore, if that expectation is not met, expect havoc” (Gobe xxxiv).

Klein agrees that something must be done to repair the uneven relationship between consumer and brand. While she agrees with much of what Gobe has to say, she stresses that solutions must rise above the level of mere corporate philanthropy, which she sees as nothing more than a new way to advertise (Klein 34). While Klein is emphatically anti-brand, she concedes that “There is little point, at this stage in our sponsored history, in pining for either a mythic brand-free past or some utopian commercial-free future” (39). While we cannot seek the end of all brands, we can seek to sever connections made by corporate marketing machines between empowerment and blind consumerism that are being made to today’s tweens. We have to ask ourselves, “how does it feel to have your culture ‘sold out’ now, as you are living it?” (Klein 65), and find ways to give tweens some aspect of their identity that has not been sold to them. Further, we can educate tweens about the marketing process – make them aware of the fact that they are being pressured to create their identities solely within the consumer sphere, and give them the tools necessary to resist this. Finally, we must resist marketers’ claims that consumer citizenship is, in and of itself, empowering. Consumer citizenship cannot work as a stand-alone strategy for empowerment not only because it replaces civil rights with consumer choice, but also because of whom it abandons. Consumer citizenship expressly disenfranchises the poor, and any theory of citizenship that disregards entire classes of people must be labeled unworkable. Even for those who can participate within consumer citizenship, it must be acknowledged that one should not have to buy one’s identity.
Chapter Two – What is the tween ideal?

“In some ways, it’s easy to craft an image of ideal girlhood. Almost everyone agrees that little Missy should be sweet and spunky and pretty” (Dunn “Sisters” 86).

Who, or what, is the ideal tween? Often referred to in the press as the “tween queen,” the ideal tween defined in popular culture, while she differs somewhat from text to text, does hold certain stable characteristics. In this chapter, I examine these characteristics as they are presented in a variety of different texts, including both media texts directed at the tween audience and magazine and newspaper articles that discuss these texts and the celebrities in them.

As I stated in Chapter One, children’s television programming is dominated by cable networks, predominantly Nickelodeon and Disney. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I want to focus on the most widely available texts, figuring that such texts would be the most influential. Therefore, I will use only television shows aired on the networks, mainstream films and mainstream print and internet publications. This does not contradict my argument from Chapter One, however, because all of the Saturday morning television shows – the most prominent block of children’s programming currently running on the major networks – are produced by cable networks. As of the Fall of 2004, NBC runs Scout’s Safari and Strange Days at Blake Holsey High, programs produced by the Discovery Kids channel; CBS airs Hey Arnold, All Grown Up and The Brothers Garcia, shows from Nickelodeon; and ABC shows That’s So Raven, Lizzie McGuire, The Proud Family and Kim Possible, programs originally aired on Disney Channel.¹

¹ By the spring, 2005 season, this lineup had changed somewhat. ABC airs much the same schedule. NBC has replaced Scout’s Safari, for the time being, with Darcy’s Wild Life, a show about the child of a Hollywood star who moves to the country. It appears that NBC will rotate seasons of Scout with Darcy. CBS seems to have abandoned its tween line-up in favor of shows that appeal to children under 8 years of age. While they are still produced under Nickelodeon, they air under the “Nick Jr.” banner created for children aged 2-8. Also, Nickelodeon does not seem to have any episodes of The Brothers Garcia in production. The show is no longer listed on their website. According to the TV Tome website, the show has been cancelled (http://www.tvtome.com/BrothersGarcia/) For the most part, I will focus on the shows listed above.
More specifically, in this chapter I first offer a transition from chapter one by examining some of the corporate rationale for creating tween protagonists. Many of these rationales have a progressive or activist stance. Next, I focus on those television shows and films that depict and are aimed at tweens. I also examine print and internet articles (from both the adult and tween press) that discuss both tween media texts and the tween-aimed celebrities in them. Together, fictional texts depicting tweens and articles about tween-aimed celebrities work together to reinforce the message of who a tween queen should be. Although tween-aimed celebrities are usually older than their audience, the age differential actually aids the formation of the tween ideal. A large part of being a tween involves trying to develop a more “grown-up” sense of identity, and tweens are encouraged by advertisers and magazine articles to view tween-aimed celebrities as role models. The idealized celebrities’ images become aspirational to tweens.

Within the context of this study, it is important to examine the ideal tween image presented within popular culture because this image informs both the production of texts and tween girls’ identities. Perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this study, the image of the ideal tween is sold to girls so intently by advertisers because a large part of that image includes the idea that the ideal tween is a girl who consumes. Tweens are constantly informed that, to fit the ideal, they must participate to the fullest extent in the consumer economy. Consumption informs every part of the ideal. Just as chapter one laid out the corporate basis behind the production of the tween ideal, future chapters will examine the relationship between the tween ideal and the (actual) tween body. To understand these, we must first understand some of the contents of that ideal.

In this chapter, I use Susan Douglas’ *Where the Girls Are* as a guideline for how to view media texts aimed at girls. While Douglas admits that most media texts are not specifically
written to empower girls, she stresses that this does not make empowerment impossible. In fact, Douglas states that “The truth is that growing up female with the mass media helped make me a feminist, and it helped make millions of other women feminists, too, whether they take on that label or not” (7). To find out where and how possible empowerment can arise, Douglas urges us to “go where the girls are” (10), or to examine texts popular with girls. Douglas recognizes that mass media texts, because they try to appeal to as wide a group as possible, can never have completely stable meanings.

At the same time, we also cannot believe that the girlhood presented by the media is that of the “real world,” because the media does not represent the real world. As Douglas states, “The news, sitcoms, or ads are not reflections of the world; they are very careful, deliberate constructions. […] They are more like fun-house mirrors that distort and warp ‘reality’ by exaggerating and magnifying some features of American life and values while collapsing, ignoring, and demonizing others” (16). The tween queen, then, is no mirror image of contemporary girlhood, but rather a selective representation of how girlhood could (or in some cases, should) be. Usually, these images depict the tween ideal adults want to see, because, “like children’s literature, children’s TV is designed by adults to fulfill their conceptions of what childhood should be” (Hendershot 183). However, these representations become important because “we’re hardly born complete, and our parents, as they will quickly attest, rarely got the last word, or even the first. Little kids have all these cracks and crevices in their puttylike psychological edifices, and one relentless dispenser of psychic Spackle is the mass media. They help fill in those holes marked ‘What does it mean to be a girl?’ or ‘What is an American?’ or ‘What is happiness?’” (Douglas 13). Media representations help us define who we are. More
specifically, these representations help us define what is, and is not, acceptable to society. As Jeanine Basinger states in her book, *A Woman’s View*,

The woman herself in the woman’s film, whether she is a stereotype or not, is a surrogate for the woman in the audience. She lives through all kinds of plot shenanigans, representing female strength and enacting female anger and disappointment, and she also accomplishes one other important thing: she shows women what will work for them in the man’s world and what will not work for them. Her experiences form a rule book of acceptable behavior for women, a kind of social survival kit (55).

While the films and television shows that feature the tween ideal are different in many ways from the “women’s pictures” that Basinger studies, they do share certain commonalities. In all of these, women and girls who are “good sports” who do what it takes to get along (55), and all help their audiences decide how best to behave.

**Why are there now more tween girl protagonists?**

Traditionally, most commercial children’s television focuses on programming for boys rather than girls. This was intentional, because as Elle Seiter and Vicki Mayer state in their article “Diversifying Representation in Children’s TV,” boys buy more toys than girls and are therefore considered to be “worth more money” by advertisers. “Girls buy more books and advertisers don’t sell books on television,” so girls are largely ignored (Seiter and Mayer 124). Because of this conventional wisdom, combined with the idea that, while girls will watch shows for boys, boys would not watch shows for girls, “many aspects of children’s toy and media worlds have remained unchanged since the 1950s” (Seiter and Mayer 121). Unfortunately, “gender stereotyping, and the symbolic annihilation of girl characters, has proven to be one of the most durable features of children’s media” (Seiter and Mayer 121). Beginning in the 1990s,
though, cable network Nickelodeon started producing more shows with “intelligent, adventurous, and physically daring” tween-aged girl protagonists, “without losing the audience of boys” (Seiter and Mayer 121). How and why did this happen?

First, Nickelodeon had always refused to air commercials for violent toys or action figures, products that formed the nucleus of most children’s television advertising – as well as the driving force behind most of the creative decisions for commercial children’s television. For example, products like G.I. Joe or He-Man action figures were not merely toys, but shows (or infomercials) in their own right. By refusing to advertise such products, Nickelodeon was free from having to air the cartoons that depicted them. In the words of Seiter and Mayer, “by turning down commercials based on weapons and action figures early on, [Nickelodeon] saved itself from the kind of enslavement to the ratings for boys six to eleven that dominates other programmers” (Seiter and Mayer 131).

Also, “Nickelodeon’s ranks were full of smart women, who had a high degree of feminist consciousness” (Seiter and Mayer 121). These women consciously sought to create girl-friendly television shows and (later) movies. Seiter and Mayer speculate that there were so many women within children’s television programming because “kids’ programming is considered less prestigious than other types of programming” (121). Be that as it may, the women at Nickelodeon, including Nickelodeon’s head Geraldine Laybourne (who is now the chief of programming for Viacom), all saw a golden opportunity to create more girl-friendly programming. Throughout its history, Nickelodeon had been careful to uphold the quality of it’s programming. In her article “‘You Dumb Babies!’ How Raising the Rugrats Children Became as Difficult as the Real Thing,” Mimi Swartz notes that part of this included taking “pains to avoid scenes that could be construed as dangerous to children” as well as addressing “the issue of
children’s self-esteem – it didn’t like characters calling each other ‘dumb’ or ‘stupid’” (Swartz 115). For Laybourne and others, this mission naturally included the idea of gender equality (Swartz 115). Beginning in 1989 with the show Clarrissa Explains it All, Nickelodeon has been a leader in producing shows with girl protagonists. Once the success of these shows became evident to other networks, they, too, adopted the idea of girl leads.

What is the ideal tween like?

The ideal tween is economically well-off

Economically, tweens depicted in the media fall into a few different categories, though all of the categories are economically well-off. Some texts depict protagonists who begin poor (or the Hollywood equivalent thereof) and, through the machinations of the story, end up rich. Usually, the girls in these stories achieve wealth through the unlikely event of becoming royalty. The best examples of this are Mia Thermopolis (Anne Hathaway) from Disney’s The Princess Diaries (2001) and Daphne (Amanda Bynes) from What a Girl Wants (2003). In The Princess Diaries, Mia learns that her father, whom she has never met and who has recently died, was actually the Crown Prince of the fictional country Genovia. With his death, Mia becomes the heir to the crown and must take “princess lessons” from her grandmother, Clarisse Renaldi (Julie Andrews). If she accepts the crown, Mia gains a lot of responsibility, but she also gains the lifestyle of the super-rich. If she turns down the crown, she does not have to deal with the strictures of royal living, but she also must return to the lifestyle offered by her artist single mother. The film, directed by Gary Marshall, and often compared to Marshall’s 1990 hit Pretty Woman, places a great deal of importance on the perks offered by money. Even though Mia and her mother are not supposed to have a great deal of money, Mia is able to attend an exclusive private school. Further, before his death her father gives her expensive gifts – such as a Faberge  

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2 See, for example, LaSalle “Princess Diaries”
music box – for her birthday. While Mia is presented as socially awkward, she is accustomed to privilege, and most of her awkwardness is overcome with a (rather painful) makeover.

The economic trajectory presented in *What a Girl Wants* is roughly similar. At the beginning of the story, Daphne lives with her mother, Libby (Kelly Preston), who plays in a wedding band. Daphne waits tables at the same weddings to make money – she is a working-class teen. When she discovers that her father is an English lord, she runs away to the U.K. to find him. The movie does not tell us how Daphne can afford a last-minute plane ticket to London from the U.S., or how she plans to support herself once she is in England. Instead, she simply has enough money to do as she wishes. Over the course of the film, Daphne learns to fit in upper-crust society, while her mother and father rekindle their relationship. By the end of the film, Daphne is able to abandon her job as a waiter to dance with her father at a wedding.

In both of these films, the girls’ economic rise is enmeshed in the larger, fairy-tale like narrative whereby they become royalty. Rather than emphasizing the importance of hard work, in the traditional “bootstraps” or Horatio Alger myths that boys are encouraged to emulate, girls are offered stories where economic gain is based on miraculous, unknown family connections. This is made particularly clear in *What a Girl Wants*. While Daphne gains economic security from her family, her boyfriend, Ian (Oliver James), must work several jobs to support himself and his dream of playing in a rock band. Because these girls are too young to marry into money, as traditional fairy tales would have them do, they receive it through other family connections. In the end, the message remains. Boys work for their money, girls get it through social or familial connections.

Most families in tween-oriented texts fall somewhere into the indefinable middle or upper-middle class. What this means is that, unless some life-lesson is being taught, money is
rarely remarked upon. These families live in large, comfortable houses, and the main tween characters are able to participate fully in the consumer economy. Usually, it is made explicit that the family is solvent because the parents work hard. In *Freaky Friday* (2003), single mother Tess Coleman (Jamie Lee Curtis) is a well-known psychologist, and *Kim Possible*’s parents are a brain surgeon and a rocket scientist. *Mean Girls*’ (2004) Cady Heron’s (Lindsay Lohan) parents are both world-traveling biologists. In a similar vein, Scout’s mother and stepfather in *Scout’s Safari* own and operate a game preserve in South Africa, and her father is a photojournalist. Even though these parents work in rather glamorous occupations, all of these parents are actually depicted as working – and working hard.

In texts depicting minority families, the parents have somewhat less glamorous occupations, but they are still described as working hard. This could point both to the growing success of the minority middle class and the need for non-white families to work harder than whites to achieve the middle-class lifestyle. African American Penny Proud’s father in *The Proud Family* owns a business that makes snack foods, and is constantly trying to develop better (and better selling) products. The Mexican American parents in *The Brothers Garcia* are constantly described as hard working on the show and on Nickelodeon’s website. For example, Sonia Garcia owns her own salon. Finally, in another show with African-American main characters, *That’s So Raven*, Raven’s mother is a substitute teacher and her father is a chef. Throughout, the parents’ occupations are a source of pride to the family.

In all of these, the parents have important jobs that, while they sometimes mean that the parents do not have as much time as they could wish for their children, connect hard work to their financial situation. While it should be argued that hard work does not always equal success, these texts at least gesture towards where the families’ money comes from. Other texts,
however, give the viewer no clue as to how the family supports its lifestyle, or the clues offered make little sense. Lizzie McGuire’s father’s occupation is something of a mystery, and her mother is a homemaker. Josie from Strange Days at Blake Holsey High is being raised by a single mother with a deliberately mysterious occupation. In the X-Files-like show, Josie’s mother performs work that she is not allowed to discuss and that requires her to travel extensively, meaning that Josie must be enrolled in boarding school. In the Spy Kids (2001) series (admittedly, a series full of fantasy), the Cortez family lives in a mansion on a cliff, drive big cars, and enjoy James Bond-like spy gadgets on their adventures. Harriet the Spy’s (1996) family makes enough money to pay Ole Golly (Rosie O’Donnell) to be Harriet’s (Michelle Trachtenberg) live-in governess, but the viewer is never told what Harriet’s parents do for a living.

Regardless of how the family is supported, the protagonists in these texts are rarely, if ever, shown working. They are not required to perform chores to earn their allowance, and they are rarely told that a consumer item is too expensive. Instead, they are allowed to purchase at will. Their parents work so that their children can live the lifestyle they desire. When the girls do work, as Daphne does in What a Girl Wants, the end goal is to become too privileged to work. For instance, baby-sitting jobs are one-time affairs to buy the rare object that exceeds the girls’ allowances, and summer jobs don’t last. At the same time, however, the protagonists do expect to work eventually. Some, like Mia from The Princess Diaries, who wants to become an activist, and Anna from Freaky Friday, who wants to be a rock star, have ambitions of their own. Others, even if they have no idea of what they expect to do “When They Grow Up,” are preparing for their futures. Many of the mothers in these texts work, and many work in jobs atypical for women, such as brain surgeon, game warden or spy. All of the girls get along with their mothers

3 See, for example Lizzie McGuire “Working Girl”
(barring the occasional spat), and look at their parents as role models. When the mother’s occupation becomes a problem in the family, as it does in *Freaky Friday*, the mother is not forced to give up her job, as she would have in a more traditional text. Instead, Tess (the mother) and Anna (the daughter) come to mutually value the work that the other does. Tess realizes that Anna’s rock star dreams are plausible, while Anna understands the rewards Tess gains from her psychology practice. In the end, neither is forced to give up her dream for the other.

Tween idleness is temporary, but important; for as I stated in chapter one, the demographic importance of tweens rests in their ability to spend money. Tweens exist as a demographic to consume. They are not expected to work like older teenagers sometimes must. Theoretically, tweens are less busy with school work than their (hopefully) college bound older siblings. Many tweens are not yet old enough to date. Therefore, tweens have the free time to spend at the mall or the multi-plex. Marketers need a large part of the tween ideal to include this free time for shopping and consuming media texts. At the same time, tween-aimed texts need to depict older teenagers and parents as hard working individuals. Once a tween gets older, she will be expected to work to earn the money necessary to remain a consumer citizen. While tweens *must* be idle, older teens and adults *must* work.

**The Tween Ideal is smart and talented**

When tween protagonists do grow up and start working, their shows imply, they will do well because all are intelligent and talented. As Eggar states, “Starting with *Clueless* in 1995, and given impetus by the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, today’s protagonists are smart, in-control girls” (Eggar “Lindsay Lohan”). Disney’s website describes Kim Possible as “your basic average high school girl here to save the world. Tokyo on a school night? No big! Super villains beware … Kim Possible can do anything!” (Disney “Kim Possible”). Indeed, Kim
Possible is rarely less than completely competent and confident. On those few occasions when she does doubt herself, Possible always prevails by the end of the episode. Calling Kim Possible “basic” and “average” could encourage Kim’s audience to identify with her bravery. Of course, viewers are also encouraged to identify with Possible’s spending habits. The website continues, “She can save the world, do her homework, and update her wardrobe – and that’s just on a school night!” (Disney “Kim Possible”).

Discovery Kids’ website describes Josie from Strange Days at Blake Holsey High (SDBHH) as “fascinated by science, relativity and why things are the way they are. […] Solving scientific problems, unraveling complex equations, it all comes so easy to her” (Discovery Kids “BHH”). Through her deductive abilities and scientific acumen, Josie becomes the leader of the science club. While everyone helps solve the mysteries that abound at Blake Holsey High, they look to Josie (and to their favorite teacher, Professor Z), to lead them. Josie and her best friend Corrine both love science and do not feel out of place in that predominantly male field. They are also not afraid to compete with the boys for the best grades.

Raven and Scout (of their respective eponymous shows) both have more esoteric talents. Raven sees brief snatches of the future through psychic visions, and Scout has a special talent with animals. Part of the driving force of both shows is that each girl is trying to master her new skill. While Raven can see the future, what she sees is misleading and she often misinterprets her visions. In the episode “Mother Dearest,” for example, Raven has a vision of her classmates applauding her after she confronts a mean teacher. While Raven does receive applause for her actions, she also gets detention and a parent/teacher conference. Throughout, the lesson Raven needs to learn is to read all of a situation before she acts on it, rather than acting rashly. Scout has a special ability to make animals trust her, but she needs to learn more about what animals need.
In “Potions,” Scout wants to give an animal with cancer aggressive treatments, and does not understand that the pain of the treatments outweighs any potential gain. By the end of the episode, the animal dies, and Scout learns that there are limits to what she (whether through veterinary medicine or traditional Zulu methods) can do. As her step-father tells her, “dying is a part of life.” In another episode, titled “Know it All,” Scout trusts that her talent will help keep a dangerous animal in line. Instead, the animal escapes and injures her mother, and Scout learns that her talent must be combined with common sense. In both of these shows, the narrative demonstrates that talents do not emerge fully-formed, but need to be practiced. Again, these shows show the value of work. The fact that these characters are so smart and talented is important. True protagonists, these characters have qualities tween girls want to emulate. Rather than having to look up to boy characters, these protagonists offer girls something of their own.

**The ideal tween is not popular**

Another important aspect of the ideal tween is that, while she has a solid group of friends, she is never the most popular girl at her school. Her lack of popularity serves a variety of purposes. First, tween protagonists are always defined as good, and a common shortcut in this definition is to contrast the protagonist to a more popular, meaner, girl. In such texts, mean girls gain popularity through fear and intimidation. Sometimes, the struggle for popularity is used to make the political point that girls need to stop wasting their time and energy fighting each other, as Tina Fey tries to do in *Mean Girls*. Finally, tween protagonists cannot be the most popular girl at school because they must be unfailingly “normal.”

One of the easiest ways to define a character quickly is to delineate what she is not. In other words, by contrasting the protagonist to an antagonist, or Other, the story is given both dramatic momentum and the audience can learn about what kind of girl is desirable as a role
model and what kind of girl is not. Basinger calls this duality “a brilliant device for telling a woman that she ought to conform to the roles society approves for her at the same time as it allowed her the freedom to see and possibly identify, however temporarily, with a female character who did not conform or follow the rules” (83). While the protagonist is explicitly good and the antagonist explicitly bad, the audience can still enjoy watching the antagonist. In most cases, the antagonist gets to have – and demonstrate that she is having – so much fun being bad.

By the end, though, the bad girl always loses.

**Kim Possible** best defines this idea. Kim Possible is a teenaged cheerleader/secret agent who travels the world defeating evil geniuses. Living in a world largely devoid of other girls (save her largely absent mother), Kim has three female antagonists: DNAmy, Adrena-Lynn and Shego. DNAmy is a “wicked bio-geneticist and really big mini-plush-animal fan” who is overweight, has bad hair and skin, glasses and “gap-teeth” (Disney “Kim Possible”). Adrena-Lynn is a “faux-heroic” stuntwoman who tries to use fake stunts to out-do Kim. While she is as beautiful as Kim, she is not as physically capable, so she must rely on trickery. Finally, Shego, the sidekick of evil mad scientist Drakken, is Kim’s physical and meta-physical opposite – she is almost Kim’s evil twin. The two look nearly identical, but where Kim is white and red headed, Shego has green skin, black hair and dark makeup. Where Kim is pleasant and nice, Shego is evil. She’s “good at being bad” (Disney “Kim Possible”). Finally, and most importantly for the fashion conscious Kim, Shego wears a “really outdated jumpsuit,” and can shoot out green rays from her hands. As the website states, “Sure, green rays are ‘in’ now, but what about next season?” (Disney “Kim Possible”). In a world where being unfashionable is a sin, Shego, DNAmy and Adrena-Lynn (who is into the “too trendy” extreme sports) are willing transgressors. All three are evil because of their plans for world domination and because of the
ways they differ from Kim Possible. Kim wants to save the world, stay pretty and be a cheerleader. Her antagonists want to dominate the world, don’t care if they’re fashionable, and would rather spread fear than cheer. They represent what the extremely powerful Kim would be capable of if she refused to follow society’s strictures, and Kim is rewarded for bowing to those strictures. Kim Possible does not need to spend a great deal of time assuring the audience of Kim’s goodness because of the ways they contrast her to those who are bad. Importantly, part of Kim’s “goodness” is defined through her fashion sense. She knows how to consume properly – what to buy and how much to buy – and the characters that do not know this are inevitably defined as evil.

When the protagonist is unpopular, as she usually is, it is never because of some personal failing (like being uninteresting, stupid, or – perhaps worse – fat). Instead, the fault is usually placed on the popular girls, while, as Basinger states, the audience is allowed the pleasure of briefly identifying with the excesses of the popular crowd. As Disney’s official Lizzie McGuire website states, “She’s got style, personality, & everyone but the cheerleaders like her. So why isn’t she popular? She has no idea!” (Disney “Lizzie McGuire”). The same holds true on most other Disney produced shows of this type, including That’s So Raven, The Proud Family, and the Disney film The Princess Diaries. In all of these narratives, the protagonist is teased, threatened, and otherwise oppressed by the popular girls. These girls are inevitably richer, supposedly prettier, and date the boys the protagonists want for themselves. Also, those in authority generally turn a blind eye to their outrageously bad behavior.

In the television shows, these antagonistic relationships are rarely allowed resolution. The girls circle around each other; sometimes the protagonist wins, sometimes she loses. Since this is children’s television, an inevitable “lesson” is taught. In the films, the protagonist and antagonist
can have one of two resolutions: either they settle their differences and become friends, or the antagonist is punished for her behavior and the protagonist reigns supreme. Basinger states that “the fact that these films restore order and ultimately endorse the status quo just made the release [of watching and perhaps identifying with the antagonist] all the more attractive and pleasurable” (105). Lizzie (the eponymous protagonist) and her much more popular rival, Kate (Ashlie Brillault), fought throughout the television show *Lizzie McGuire*. Where Lizzie is sweet to the point of blandness – unfailingly upbeat and loyal, but never really much fun – Kate, while mean and thus “wrong,” is also allowed to speak her mind and confront those who bother her. Watching her can be far more enjoyable than watching Lizzie. While the two never resolve their relationship on the television show, they bond over the course of the *Lizzie McGuire Movie* and become friends. The story reveals that the pair were friends in elementary school, but Kate “dumped” Lizzie in middle school to become more popular. Once the friends make up, Kate is recovered as a “good girl.” Where once Kate complained incessantly and declined to eat anything with carbohydrates in it, by the end of the film she is smiling and sharing a plate of pasta with her ex-boyfriend. *The Princess Diaries* offers the opposite resolution: Mia’s tormenter, Lana (Mandy Moore), gets her comeuppance when a fed-up Mia takes her ice cream cone and smears it on the blouse of Lana’s cheerleading uniform, while the classmates around them chant “Lana got coned.” The obvious sexual connotations of this scene aside, the film makes it clear that Lana has been punished for her actions. She will no longer be the most popular girl at school, because how can a mere cheerleader compete with a princess? No matter their conclusion, these types of narratives fall neatly into the stereotype that women cannot work together because they are always competing, whether it be over popularity, boys, or other status symbols. Instead of discouraging girls from competing, these narratives actually encourage the
competition by awarding the protagonist whatever prize (be it a boy, or a grade, or the adulation of her peers) for which they fought. The girl who is nicest takes all.

Fictional protagonists are not the only ones oppressed by their peers in school. The actors tweens idolize claim the same experience. In most cases, the press reports these cases for two reasons: either to make the actor seem “just like” her fans (which I will discuss in more detail below), or to teach a valuable lesson of some sort. The second tack is more often found in publications aimed at girls. In a Twist article devoted to “Celebs’ Mean Girls Experiences,” different female entertainers talk about the ways the popular kids at their schools teased and demeaned them, and how they overcame that treatment. The three main lessons of the article, which are typed in bold letters, are that these celebrities “ Didn’t change for anyone,” they “Focused on what they loved” and they “Became better people” (Anonymous “Celebs”’ 29). In other words, they stayed true to themselves, focused on their goals, and now that they are really (really) famous, they retain the understanding of what it is like to be the underdog. Finally, the article offers the comforting advice that “in a little while” they will be out of school and “ it won’t matter” who picked on them (Anonymous “Celebs”’ 30). In all of this, the celebrities were awarded fame and fortune, and their tormenters were not, because the actors followed society’s rules by working hard and being good people, the same reason the girls they play on screen win. Since this advice comes from celebrities, people who obviously overcame their less-than-perfect social standing in school, it reinforces the idea that, if tweens will only try to remain good, they too can win out in the end.

Tina Fey, who based the film Mean Girls on Rosalind Wiseman’s best selling book, Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence, tries to confront the idea that girls must fight each other to get
ahead. She does so to emphasize the point that girls are held back from realizing their goals when they compete with each other. In an interview, she states, “I had a certain obligation to make sure that the underlying message of the movie would be in keeping with Rosalind’s book. The message is that girls are often their own worst enemy, and if they could learn to lay off each other, things would be a lot easier” (Eggar “Lindsay Lohan”). The bulk of the film depicts Cady’s (Lindsay Lohan) efforts to negotiate the “wilds” of high school (high school is compared throughout to the animal world, with *Wild Kingdom*-esque narration), and her effort to join, and then defeat, the “Plastics,” the most popular clique of girls in school. Critics compared the film to *Heathers* (1989), a high school satire where the protagonists murdered the popular kids so that the rest of the school could get along. Like *Heathers*, the most popular girl in school is meted out a potentially fatal punishment when she is suddenly hit by a bus. Unlike *Heathers*, though, she does not die. Instead, her accident convinces the others that the school that cliques are more harm than good, and by the end the students live in a utopian dream where cliques have been replaced with equality. Although Cady and the Plastics do compete throughout the bulk of the film, the film demonstrates that such competition is ultimately beneficial to no one. By trying to bring down the Plastics, Cady becomes one, and to regain her “true” identity as a good person, she must stop engaging in popularity contests. In the end, the prize offered at the beginning of the film – popularity – is abandoned in favor of a more empowering, and egalitarian, model of high school. The feminist message of this film stresses that girls should stop competing with each other for unimportant goals like popularity and boyfriends, and instead work together to meet more important life goals like becoming educated.

The stereotype that girls must compete with each other is not confined to fictional texts. The press covering the actors in these texts often tries to identify them as rivals. Often, this is

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4 See, for example, Peter Travers’ review in the April, 2004 issue of *Rolling Stone*. 
done to individualize tween celebrities in a Coke vs. Pepsi-esque marketing technique. In fictional texts, the protagonist and antagonist are usually divided into good/bad, winner/loser categories. This model cannot always function in the press surrounding tween celebrities, because to do so might damage the career of the one categorized as “antagonist.” Since many of these actors work for the same companies, the press must find a way to present a model where girls still fight, and where they are presented as different, but where one girl is no more or less good than the other. The most famous current rivalry in this mode is Hilary Duff vs. Lindsay Lohan. Both Lohan and Duff frequently work for Disney, and both appeal to the same general audience in the same type of texts. Therefore, the press surrounding their rivalry cannot vilify one girl or the other. At the same time, it is interesting to note how the press presents this feud in ways that de-professionalize and infantilize tween-aimed celebrities.

Every article about or interview with either Duff or Lohan mention the supposed spat at least once. Even Salon got into the fracas, writing that the feud was like “Davis and Crawford on training wheels” (Farah “The Fix”), and Time magazine made sure to ask Duff questions about it (Winters “Q&A”). The adult media is so taken with the feud that when Lohan hosted Saturday Night Live, she posed as Duff in a skit. Both stars insist that the media has blown their disagreements out of proportion. Lohan told Seventeen that “I don’t hate [Duff]. We’re friends with the same people” (Rosenberg 125). The same article states that the press is “constantly looking for rivalries that’ll make eye-catching headlines” (Rosenberg 123). According to the press, the rivalry between the two arose because Lohan and Duff both dated pop singer Aaron Carter at the same time (Haberman “Freaky Friday,” Anonymous “Battle” 15). Rather than focusing on the way Duff and Lohan compete for parts, then, most articles focus almost exclusively on the more traditional “catfight” aspects of the story, such as their disagreements
over Aaron Carter. If the articles were to discuss Duff and Lohan’s professional rivalry, they would be seen as girls who work, and who are focused on their careers. By focusing on their dating lives, though, the articles remove emphasis from the Duff and Lohan as actors and presents them instead as beings whose only ambition is to get – and keep – the most desirable boyfriend. Such stories have become so commonplace that a *Chicago Sun-Times* article about tween celebrities includes a careful chart listing each tween queen’s name, age, recent project and “arch nemesis” (Kim “What Girls Want”). Interestingly, while the adult media frames Duff and Lohan’s feud as a fight over a boy, the tween media is willing to view the rivalry as a professional one. The teen gossip magazine, *Twist*, states that “the massive rift between the girls stems from their intense level of competition” for jobs (Anonymous “Battle” 16). *Seventeen* magazine speculates that these stories might be believable because “these stars may not be striving to get the best grades or to date the hottest guy at school, but they are vying for the best parts” (Rosenberg 125). While publications aimed at adults cannot situate these girls as professionals, publications aimed at the two actors’ audience can. Perhaps adult publications are more uncomfortable with the idea that child and teenaged stars work – especially given the messy life trajectories of many former child stars. Tween-aimed publications may be more comfortable with the idea of young girls working because it makes tweens’ own aspirations of stardom focus on the amount of hard work required to realize one’s dreams.

As I stated above, though, the press must not label either girl as more bad or less good that the other. Therefore, the articles about the rivalry are careful to mention how “nice” each girl actually is. Lohan has been quoted as saying that she took the part in *Mean Girls* because she “wanted to play the mean girl just to do something different, but I don’t want my audience to think I’m actually mean” (Rosenberg 122). Duff has been quoted in much of her press stating
how important it is for her to be “nice” to her fans at all times (Berger 122), and has self
identified as a “good girl” in interviews (Winters “Q&A”). In this way, the two actors are
individualized from each other in an exciting way, and neither has her potential box office hurt.

Although the tween ideal is not popular, neither is she a loner. All tween protagonists
have a core group of “best friends” who help them get through middle (or high) school existence.
These groups always have certain aspects in common with each other. Following the template of
_I Love Lucy_, the tween protagonists’ best girlfriends are always at least slightly less smart
and/or attractive than the main characters. This is not by accident, since, like the antagonists, the
best friends can serve as the foils that help define the protagonists as ideals. As Disney’s website
describes Raven’s best friend Chelsea, she “may not always get what Raven’s saying” because
she is not as smart as Raven (“That’s So Raven”). In fact, Chelsea is quite the flake, and Raven
must constantly explain situations to her. Penny Proud’s best friend Zoey is described as “She’s
so completely the opposite of cool, that there’s something cool about her!” (Disney “Proud
Family”), and her appearance – skinny, with braces and thick glasses – reinforces her lack of
cool. Penny’s other friend, Dijonay, is much heavier than either Penny or Zoey, and her boy-
craziness is portrayed as making her even more unattractive. In both cases, the gangly Penny
looks better by comparison. Finally, while Lizzie McGuire’s best friend, Miranda, is not
habitually called less attractive than her friend, she does worry about her appearance more than
Lizzie does. In one episode, titled “Inner Beauty,” Miranda goes so far as to develop the
beginnings of an eating disorder because she fears she is fat. Of course, Lizzie and her mother
talk Miranda into eating by the end of the episode, and her self-image is repaired.

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5 Common lore holds that the actress playing Ethyl was contractually obliged to look older and heavier than Lucy
The ideal tween fits into a certain type of racial diversity

Tellingly, in shows where the protagonist is not white, she has at least one white friend. These are not minor characters, but the protagonists’ best friends: Penny Proud has Zoey and Raven has Chelsea. This could be because producers do not believe that white audiences will be able to identify with a non-white character. At the same time, however, if minority audiences want to watch, for example, Lizzie McGuire or Kim Possible, they are forced to identify with their all white casts. Traditionally, network aired television shows and films with white protagonists tended to only include a white characters as the protagonist’s friends, or to shuffle people of color to very minor characters. The shows aired on Saturday Morning television follow this trend. Lizzie McGuire’s friends are white, as are Darcy’s in the new show on CBS, Darcy’s Wild Life.

Also, while Disney should be applauded for presenting African-American protagonists as positive role models, and for trying to maintain some form of racial parity in their shows aimed at tweens (Lizzie McGuire’s counterpart is That’s So Raven and the animated Kim Possible’s counterpart is Proud Family), it must be pointed out that Disney can be found guilty of trying to “white wash” their African-American characters. The official Disney website for That’s So Raven states that “Raven is a typical teenager who just happens to be psychic” (Disney “That’s So Raven”), echoing the common assertion that someone is a typical person who “just happens to be black.” The choice of words cannot be coincidental. Raven’s psychic powers, then, are being equated with her race. This is particularly interesting because within the show, Raven has to conceal her powers. In Where the Girls Are, Susan Douglas writes about Raven’s generic precursors: I Dream of Jeannie and Bewitched. In these shows, the women with powers, Samantha and Jeannie, also had to conceal their abilities. Douglas states that their magical

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6 There are no tween films with a non-white protagonist.
powers represented “the potentially monstrous and grotesque,” consequences of woman’s sexual power. When the women concealed this power, this represented “the containment of the threat posed by unleashed female sexuality” (Douglas 126). Rather than being primarily tied to her sexuality, Raven’s powers are connected to her race. As Douglas writes, the only appropriate place for Samantha and Jeannie to use their powers was within the domestic sphere (126). So, too, must Raven keep her abilities from everyone but her closest friends and family. To the outside world, Raven “just happens” to be black. It is fine for African-American protagonists to be on Disney, as long as they are not too black.

Even if race need not be hidden in this narrative, it is still trivialized. Patti Miller of Children Now states that “race, in this rhetoric, is a ‘difference’ on par with having a singer mother, or living in an apartment, or being gifted with a special talent. Circumstantial and personality traits are equated with racial and ethnic differences” (Seiter and Mayer 126). Kevin Sandler, author of “A Kid’s Gotta Do what a Kid’s Gotta Do: Branding the Nickelodeon Experience,” calls such depictions of race “cartoon tokenism” that rarely acknowledge “cultural or ethnic differences in their story lines, instead relying on a merely perfunctory idea of diversity” (Sandler 47). Nickelodeon and Disney’s effort to depict more racially diverse families is important, particularly in this era of “increasing numbers of Anglo main characters, even on situation comedies” which causes tweens to “favor those few genres of television programming where diversity is commonplace but content is often inappropriate for children, namely, wrestling, reality programs, and news programming, which tends toward especially threatening images of children of color and girls as victims of crime” (Seiter and Mayer 133). At the same time, however, we must acknowledge that “market-based globalization still primarily serves the needs and concerns of a handful of enormous and powerful profit-driven corporations” (Sandler
64). This means that, while the actors in tween aimed shows are becoming more diverse, the story lines may not be. Executives at Nickelodeon admit as much, insisting that “the interesting thing about these shows is that race isn’t the major issue” (Seiter and Mayer 125). While it is important to depict “kids of different backgrounds learning from, and interacting with, one another” (Seiter and Mayer 125), one need not “whitewash” race to do so.

Two important exceptions to these racial rules are Strange Days at Blake Holsey High (SDBHH) and Scout’s Safari. Both are produced by Discovery Kids, a subsidiary of the Discovery Channel, and have explicitly educational objectives.\(^7\) SDBHH is set at an American boarding school where strange occurrences are commonplace. The Science Club, led by Professor Z, investigates these occurrences and tries to find scientific explanations. The show’s protagonist, Josie, is white, and her roommate, Corrine, is African-American. While the two began as rivals (since Corrine was not accustomed to competing academically, and saw Josie as a threat), they end up as friends. Scout’s Safari is set in post-Apartheid South Africa. Part of the show’s educational agenda teaches about the wildlife of sub-Saharan Africa. Another important objective is to show the effects of Apartheid and demonstrate the importance of multicultural communities (Margaret “Scout’s Safari”). Scout is a white New Yorker who is accustomed to the cultural mix of New York City, but she is not used to being in a racial minority, as she is in South Africa. While the show does not explicitly address this, it does address the ways her world view often clashes with that of her friend Bongani, who is Zulu. For instance, Bongani invites Scout to a traditional Zulu wedding, where Scout repeatedly, and unknowingly, offends his relatives (“My Big Fat Zulu Wedding”). Just as Scout is learning about African cultures, Bongani is the first member of his tribe to adopt Western ways. This makes him Scout’s “mirror

\(^7\) Another important exception is Degrassi: The Next Generation, a show that also aims to educate about social issues. Produced with help from the Canadian government, it airs in the U.S. only on Nickelodeon’s the-N. Therefore, I could not include it in this chapter.
image, in a way” (Discovery Kids “Scout”), and teaches that the “taken for granted” parts of a person’s culture are not always so to others. Scout witnesses the effects of Apartheid first hand when she visits her friend Nandi’s house. While Nandi had led Scout and Bongani to believe that she is rich, she is actually quite poor. As the episode’s teaser says, when Scout finds this out, she begins to understand the truth about the “South African Dream,” and the effects of institutionalized racism (“The Lie”). Of all the shows examined in this chapter, only Scout’s Safari demonstrates the need for racial equity while avoiding a “colorblind” point of view. Scout and Bongani have different racial and cultural backgrounds that lead them to hold different points of view, but they do not believe that “different” means “better” or “worse.”

The ideal tween has both male and female friends

More often than not, tween protagonists’ groups of friends are made up of at least one boy and one girl. Lizzie McGuire has Miranda and Gordo, Raven has Eddie and Chelsea and Penny Proud has Dijonay, Sticky (a boy) and Zoey. These shows may include male friends for a couple of reasons. First, it is a common trope in children’s programming that, while girls will watch shows made for boys, boys will not watch shows made for girls (Seiter and Mayer 121). Perhaps the producers thought to get around this by including a few male characters to give boys someone with whom to identify. This model was created by Nickelodeon’s first tween-aimed show, Clarissa Explains it All. As Nickelodeon executive Cyma Zarghami explains, “Clarissa was our first big success with girl protagonists. She ran from 1989 to about 1991. She was so successful, though, because her issues were not specific to girls but to all kids: school, friends, and homework. Her best friend was a boy, too” (Seiter and Mayer 125).

Second, male best friends often act to reign in the excessiveness of the female protagonists. Disney’s website for Lizzie McGuire states this explicitly, saying Gordo: “Wise
beyond his years, Gordo is the voice of reason in the best friend trio!” (Disney “Lizzie McGuire”). On a similar note, Raven and Chelsea’s comic escapades in That’s So Raven are often compared to those of Lucy and Ethyl in I Love Lucy, and their friend Eddie must, like Ricky, try to make the girls act more realistically when they “drag him into one of their crazy schemes” (Disney “That’s So Raven”). Even though girls are the main characters of these shows, then, their male friends are often shown as smarter and more realistic. As usual, girls are flighty and unstable. Although the ideal tween must be smart and capable, her intelligence or common sense may need to be limited, in the eyes of executives, to make boys identify with her.

On the other hand, these limitations on tween protagonists may exist to make male televisions executives feel more secure. As one male television executive said, “It’s popular now to have strong female characters. But you have to go to the other side too and ask are we emasculating our male characters? […] You have to be aware of the p.c. police now” (Seiter and Mayer 123-4). Why must tween girls lose strength to make boys less “emasculated?” Under binary conceptions of gender (where male is the opposite of female), male strength needs to be balanced out by female weakness. When tween girls are made consistently less sensible than their male counterparts, rather than allowing both genders to occasionally act silly, binary constructions of gender are reinforced – to the detriment of girls.

Finally, male characters can be used as potential romantic partners. Although they never date within the show, Lizzie and Gordo kiss at the end of the Lizzie McGuire Movie. Even within the show, Gordo expresses disapproval of Lizzie’s crushes (particularly Ethan, the boyfriend of rival Kate). Sticky, on Proud Family is described as “the coolest, and the smoothest” (Disney “Proud Family”). While Penny’s friend Dijonay is the one typically “throwing herself” at Sticky (Disney “Proud Family”), the show demonstrates their unsuitability

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8 See, for example, Cesar G. Soriano’s article titled “Raves for Raven.”
for each other, and show that Sticky and Penny get along much better. The romantic possibilities
remain. Finally, on Scout’s Safari, Scout and her friend Bongani feel quite comfortable together
until a poll at school names them the “cutest couple” (“Rumors”). While they do not see
themselves as a couple, others do. All of these relationships, even if they are never
“consummated” by having the couple actually date, maintain the tween protagonists’
heterosexuality. Because romantic tension exists between Lizzie and Gordo, or Penny and
Bongani, their heterosexuality is confirmed, whether they act upon it or not. I will discuss more
about the compulsory heterosexuality of the tween ideal below.

The Ideal tween is pretty, but not beautiful

Another common feature of the tween ideal is that, while she is certainly pretty, she is not
beautiful or glamorous, and above all, she is a “girly girl.” Again, this is probably because the
ideal is supposed to be someone with whom the audience can identify. Again, this was first
established by early Nickelodeon shows. Cyma Zarghami, the Senior Vice President of
Programming at Nickelodeon explains that “we pay more attention to [an actor’s] attitude than
the physical aspects. We want someone who could be a kid’s friend, not someone more pretty or
popular. […] Those factors influence the way we cast” (Seiter and Mayer 125). This holds true
not only for the characters in the shows and films, but the actors who play them. Rolling Stone’s
Lancee Dunn describes Mary-Kate Olsen as “The perfect California girl, she looks even better
after a day at the beach: gold-flecked skin, shiny blond hair, as fresh and organic as the
strawberries she nibbles on” (Dunn “Sisters” 86), while Robin Eggar says that Lindsay Lohan’s
“Irish heritage has given her an understated beauty” (Eggar “Lindsay Lohan”). Lohan expresses
doubt about her looks, though, stating that “I hate my freckles, I hate my red hair and I always
think I’m overweight when I see myself on screen” (qtd in O’Toole “Linday Lohan”). Journalists
believe young actors cannot be too beautiful because “Girls are a fickle audience who can turn at any time” (Eggar “Lindsay Lohan”). To combat this fickleness, Lohan can be pretty, but it must be “in a way other girls can handle,” a way that “doesn’t set them into a fury” (Eggar “Lindsay Lohan”). Again, the press perpetuates the stereotype that girls must compete with each other, or that a girl who is prettier than them will set them into a jealous fury. In another article about Lohan, Maureen Maher quotes Jane Buckingham, the president of Youth Intelligence, which predicts youth trends, who states that “fans also want their stars to be a little flawed, just like them. […] They don’t want them to be the prettiest girl out there. They want them to be someone they can sort of feel a little bit closer to’” (“Lindsay Lohan”).

Further, the ideal tween must be a “girly-girl.” There are no tomboys within the tween universe, such as the characters Jodie Foster and Tatum O’Neal played in their youths. Instead, tweens must learn to care about clothes and make-up – and the shopping through which they are acquired. Disney heroines Lizzie McGuire and Raven are never less than perfectly dressed and made-up, unless it is for comic effect, and action heroine Kim Possible longs for items designed by the fictional fashion label “Banana Club.” This is further emphasized during the opening credits for The Lizzie McGuire Movie, where Lizzie searches frantically in her closet for the perfect outfit to wear to her junior high graduation. (Of course, this is to no avail, since rival Lana recognizes the outfit Lizzie wears and accuses her of being an “outfit repeater.” Lizzie replies that the only thing worse than an outfit repeater is an “outfit repeater noticer.” While it is important to be fashionable, it is more important to be nice.) In fact, Lizzie McGuire was so well-dressed that there are websites devoted to telling fans where they can buy outfits just like hers (see, for example, the Lizzie McGuire page on the TV Tome website9). In the show’s second season, the tween store Limited Too signed a contract with Disney to dress the show’s

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9 http://www.tvtome.com/tvtome/servlet/ShowMainServlet/showid-1229
young female cast members, and offer the same clothes in their stores. That way, fans would not have to search for Lizzie’s pretty outfits; they could find them all in one location (Anonymous “Disney, Limited Too”). The trope of searching through the closet for an outfit is a common one in tween entertainment, seen in both the opening credits to the television show Sabrina the Teenage Witch (1996-2003) and in several scenes in the movie Clueless (1995). In these shows, it is always made clear that the protagonists worry so much about their appearance because that is simply what girls do. Tween stars continue the girly-girl imperative. When Hilary Duff was on The Late Show with David Letterman on July 14, 2004, she mentioned how much she loved shopping for make-up, and both Duff’s line at Target and the Olsen twins’ line at Wal-Mart include make-up and hair care accessories.

The most important reason for the disappearance of the tomboy is that girly-girls consume more. Tomboys do not require as many outfits, accessories, makeup or shoes. Since the main objective for marketing to tweens is to get them to spend money, their fictional counterparts (and thus their role models) should set the right example by buying as much as possible. Sometimes this marketing objective is made explicit, as it was with Limited Too’s ties to Lizzie McGuire, or in the pages of teen magazines, where everything a young star wears is carefully labeled and mentioned in the magazine’s “where to buy” section in the back. Other times, the marketing message is made more subtly, such as when an entire episode revolves around the protagonist’s need to buy something specific, or simply in the fact that the protagonist is always so carefully dressed.

The ideal tween should be normal

The ideal tween, then, is just like a normal girl, only more so. She is probably richer, owns more stuff, and is prettier. All of this is wrapped in the discourse of normality. The same
holds true for tween celebrities. Of course, tween celebrities cannot live normal lives. Their press, however, insists that they do. Lindsay Lohan, the Olsen Twins and Hilary Duff are the stars who most often insist upon their normal lives. A typical statement about Lohan reads, “While her [Lohan’s] life may seem much different from yours, Lindsay confesses to Seventeen about what living in Hollywood is really like – and the truth is, it’s not all that different from navigating the halls of high school” (Rosenberg 123). Lohan is “a fairly typical teenage girl” who is “remarkably levelheaded,” “immensely likeable and unactressy” (O’Toole “Linday Lohan”). Another article about Lohan remarks on the same qualities, describing her as “thankfully as unpretentious and unaffected as your average teenager [and] refreshingly unspoilt and free of any showbiz-madam mannerisms” (Driscoll “Teen Queen”). Lesley O’Toole gushingly reports that Lohan’s maturity and level-headedness stems not from her career in Hollywood, but from being the oldest of five children (“Lindsay Lohan”). Lohan is normal because she has not allowed Hollywood to affect her. Further, reporters admire her because she does not insist upon identifying herself as a professional actor. Rather than learning maturity through her work, she learned it through babysitting her younger siblings, something with which many girls can identify. Were Lohan to emphasize that she grew up because she had to make five am calls to the set, she would be less normal, and thus less identifiable, to her audience.

Many of the statements made about Lindsay Lohan are echoed in those made about her supposed rival, Hilary Duff. Seventeen’s Michael Wirth writes that “Hilary Duff certainly seems to be living a fairy-tale life. But […] the story of how Hilary went from a normal girl in Houston, Texas to a superstar has more to do with her tight-knit family than the wave of a magic wand” (Wirth 157). When Duff auditioned for the role that made her famous, Lizzie McGuire, she says “There were 200 blonde girls exactly like me” who also wanted the role (Wirth 158). Luckily,
the producers liked Duff’s “quirky personal style” and gave her the role. Duff states, “I kept wearing all these crazy outfits to the auditions. I identified with Lizzie. Lizzie McGuire was me – I was awkward, kind of clumsy” (Wirth 158). Duff insists, then, that she is nothing special. There are hundreds of girls out there who are “just like her.” Indeed, Duff only got the role that made her famous through her ability to shop and put together a “crazy outfit,” rather than her abilities as an actress. Duff is aware of her image, but still insists on her normality. In an interview, the journalist interviewing her comments upon Duff’s maturity. Duff replies "I'm a professional and you're a professional, and we're having an intelligent conversation. But if you were 16, I wouldn't sound anything like this. I would sound like a normal 16-year-old kid" (Anonymous “Hilary Duff”). She tells PBS Kids that “I’m a totally normal kid. […] When I come home I have to take the trash out and feed my dog and make my bed. Then I want to hang out with my friends and shop and I’m really just totally normal” (Anonymous “Hilary Duff”).

Even though the Olsen twins are constantly referred to as two of the richest and most powerful young stars in Hollywood, the press incessantly calls their lives normal. In the Rolling Stone article “The Sisters of Perpetual Abstinence,” Dunn writes that the sisters “do not seem hardened by the world. They show no angry edge, no indefinable hurt. In fact, what is striking is how blessedly ordinary they seem” (86). Normality, then, is the lack of “edge” or “hurt.” Tweens should be happy. Unlike Lohan and Duff, though, the Olsens openly admit that they must work hard to maintain their normality – for the twins, being normal is so important to them that they are willing to make what Dunn describes as “sacrifices of an almost surreal nature. Last Spring, Oprah wanted to book them, but they had to turn her down to study for their SATs” (Dunn “Sisters” 88). Other authors note the twin’s ordinariness. Libby Copeland believes that the twins’
popularity rests on the fact that, “if they are glamorous, they are also accessible. If they are rich, they are also humble. If they arrive beautiful of the red carpet, don’t forget we saw them before they were potty trained. And frankly, they were kind of funny-looking” (Copeland “Olsen Twins”). An article from People magazine titled “So Young, So Rich” that details the lives of rich youngsters quotes the twins’ lawyer and business partner, Robert Thorne, who says that the Olsens were raised “not to be impressed with themselves. They live really normal lives” (Anonymous 52). Another article stresses that, once she gets to college, Mary-Kate hopes the professors treat her like everyone else, because she wants to “fit in” with the normal college experience (Bernard 98). To maintain this sense of normalcy, the twins try to avoid revealing personal details of their lives to the press, since these details would inevitably mar their image as ordinary girls. The example Dunn gives of this is their interview with Connie Chung, in which Chung asked the twins if they were virgins (88). The twins were offended by the question, and refused to answer. Dunn also asserts that the twins “cringe when their bank accounts are mentioned and claim not to know how much they are worth” (Dunn “Sisters” 88). This is perhaps the smartest aspect of the twins’ image-building effort, since it is the twin’s money that most separates them from their fans. With the announcement that Mary-Kate is being treated for an eating disorder, keeping the details of their lives to themselves became that much harder. While many of the press reports speculated that the pressures from Mary-Kate’s career caused the eating disorder (Tauber “Mary-Kate” 58), statements from her sister, Ashley, maintain just the opposite. In People, Ashley states that Mary-Kate’s problem “has nothing to do with working hard or being successful. This is an issue that a girl down the street can have. It’s an issue a lot of people deal with” (Anonymous “Scoop”). Rather than blaming Mary-Kate’s anorexia on the

10 The press has never (to my knowledge) asked a male star on par with the Olsens, such as Frankie Muniz or Chad-Michael Murray, about their virginity.
pressures of fame, then, her family would prefer to blame it on the simple fact that she is a girl. Unfortunately, this is all too believable.

At one point in her article about the Olsen twins, Dunn admits that the twins’ normality is an “illusion” (“Sisters” 88). The twins, and their colleagues, cannot live normal lives by the very nature of their jobs. They cannot regularly attend school because they have to work, they are more accustomed to photo shoots than babysitting and they make millions of dollars. Tween celebrities must present images of normality, though, to keep their fans. They are not adults, and so they cannot be seen to enjoy the adult trappings of celebrity, such as parties and glamour, and they cannot be perceived as “workers” because of their youth. As I stated above, an important part of the job of tween-aimed celebrities entails reinforcing that image of tweens as non-working consumers. Instead, they must remain “fresh” and approachable, and pretend to live lives identical to those of their fans – only better. Even Britney Spears, who is trying to appeal to an older fan base, admits that “Right now I feel like a little bit of normalcy” (qtd in Baer 135). Because she does appeal to a slightly older group than the others, though, Spears is also able to ask, “But what is normal, you know? What’s normal to you is not normal to me. The thing for me right now is just making things normal for me” (qtd in Baer 135). While Spears does crave a normal life, she does not mean that she wants the life a fan of hers enjoys. Instead, she wants whatever is normal for a twenty-something pop diva.

**The ideal tween is a “good girl”**

Within common media texts, there are two kinds of girls: good girls and bad girls. Good girls are in control of their behavior, and bad girls are not. When they are actors, good girls control both their behavior and the formation of their image. They know how the entertainment industry works and how they are supposed to “play the game.” Unlike the innocent ingénues of
an earlier era, today’s tween queens are honored for their self-awareness and, to a certain extent, their cynicism about Hollywood. Two prominent examples of media dubbed good girls are Lindsay Lohan and the Olsen twins, while the media’s current favorite bad girl is Britney Spears.

Lohan is a good girl because she’s in control. As she tells the *London Times*’ O’Toole, Lohan is glad that she is more mature than her friends “because my friends are still going through that ‘needing to go to parties and get really drunk’ phase. I’d rather be the designated driver and be in control of where I’m going and what I’m doing” (“Lindsay Lohan”). One reason Lohan would rather be in control is that she knows the lack thereof would damage her career. *Seventeen*’s Rosenberg states that “It takes a lot of discipline for Lindsay to be so careful about her image, but she obviously thinks it’s necessary” (125). Rosenberg continues by quoting Lohan, who states that

I’ve been in the Disney company for a while, but they get very protective of our relationship. It’s kind of like Old Hollywood – they kind of guide your career. So it’s hard to see the […] other girls who can go out and get away with things. For me, it’s a bit different, because I have a younger fan base. I don’t want to have a drink and have someone whip out a camera phone and Disney getting it. It’s not worth it! I don’t want to risk my career for a night of having fun (125).

Lohan knows how Hollywood works. She knows that her studio, Disney, is more conservative than many others, and that means she must be more careful than many of her peers. At the same time, she realizes the benefits from her relationship with Disney. As she states, this relationship is like “Old Hollywood.” Disney demands more from her than other studios, but they also protect her and keep her working. Lohan admits that “Anything you do, good or bad, people are going to thrive on that and try to take you down. And it’s scary, at 17, to have so many responsibilities
that you have to watch everything you do” (Maher “Lindsay Lohan”). As journalist Rob Driscoll puts it, Lindsay is “clued-up enough to realize that stardom is a transient affair” and she is doing what it takes to prolong her career (“Teen Queen”).

The press surrounding the Olsen twins’ career focuses on more than just the girls’ control of their behavior in public, expanding to include their control of their billion dollar business ventures. *Rolling Stone* breathlessly reports that their lawyer and business partner, Robert Thorne’s, contract “states that there’s no venture he can undertake without the girls’ rubber stamp.” Thorne is quoted saying “They can mandate and veto, but I can do neither” (Dunn “Sisters” 90). The twins’ 18th birthday on June 13, 2004 not only marked the date that the twins were “legal” in all 50 states, but also the date when they were legally in control of their company, Dualstar Entertainment and their multi-million dollar fortune. When asked if they feel powerful, Ashley answers “I mean, we definitely do everything for our company. In that sense, we feel powerful” (Moriarty “Rich Girls”). Lest she be seen as too powerful, though, she quickly adds, “But you go home, and no. You have kids running around the house. We have our little sister, our big brother. And a dog” (Moriarty “Rich Girls”).

Of course, more of the twins’ press centers around the way they control their behavior. A family friend is quoted in *People* as saying the twins “are very good examples of how people should be who achieve that kind of success” (Anonymous “So Young” 52). Like Lohan, the Olsens are aware of the image they project, and the ways that image affects their career. Mary-Kate states that they “have to take into consideration the people who want to watch us […] and we’re still going to keep those little kids happy” (Dunn “Sisters” 86). Also like Lohan, the Olsens must maintain a higher standard of behavior than their peers because of their corporate ties. One of the twins’ biggest revenue streams comes from their deal with Wal-Mart, which sells
Mary-Kate and Ashley brand products. Because of this relationship, the twins are not allowed to “show their midriffs in public” (Dunn “Sisters” 90). As Ashley admits, “It’s out for us.” However, she quickly adds that “But I just don’t like showing my body like that. It’s just not me. Honestly, what you see is what you get with us. It’s not like, ‘Oh, I wish I was wearing a miniskirt to this premiere, but I can’t.’ I would kill myself if I was in a miniskirt” (Dunn “Sisters” 90). Not only must the twins carefully control their behavior to conform to Wal-Mart’s conservative politics, they must also seem as if they like it.

As the Olsens have gotten older, the press has been more persistent in examining their personal lives for possible faults (Tauber 110). The twins are aware of this, stating, “People’s perceptions of us are bound to change as we get older, but that’s nothing new – public perception of us has been changing since we were babies” (Ashley Olsen qtd in Bernard 98). The twins are never seen smoking or drinking in public, and refuse to admit anything about their sex lives (or lack thereof). At the same time, they are equally careful to avoid offending those who do. When asked about smoking, Mary-Kate states “We don’t, but I’m not one to judge” (Dunn “Sisters” 90). When asked in another article about whether they drink, Ashley says “Listen we’re not perfect. I’m not saying we don’t drink. All I’m saying is we’re making the right decisions for us” (Tauber “Two Cool” 109). She says almost exactly the same thing about sex, telling her interviewer “It’s personal, and I hope everyone’s making the right decisions for themselves” (Tauber “Two Cool” 110). Indeed, Mary-Kate and Ashley are so careful in their interviews that they rarely say anything of any substance. Like politicians, they have mastered the ability of speaking without saying anything at all.

As I stated above, the biggest challenge to the twins’ image is the admission that Mary-Kate has entered treatment for an eating disorder. Seen as a possible loss of control on Mary-
Kate’s part, most of the press centered around, not whether or how the actor could recover, but on the effect this will have on her career and business. A typical statement reads “The admission [of Mary-Kate’s eating disorder] struck a sad and troubled note for Mary-Kate, who along with Ashley has turned their image as positive, clean-scrubbed role models into a business empire that grossed $1 billion in sales last year” (Tauber “Mary-Kate” 55). For young female stars, control is something hard-won and easily lost. Strangely, the closer a girl gets to adulthood, the more out of control she is perceived to be. This could be because, as girls grow up, they become women, and women are seen (in the words of Kathleen Rowe) as inherently unruly. The unruliness of the adolescent female body is something I will discuss more in detail in a later chapter.

Britney Spears is the press’ favorite example of the girl who, as she became more womanly, also became more and more out of control. People’s Jill Smolowe describes Spears as “the pop world’s most unpredictable princess” (52), while Seventeen describes her as “America’s sweetheart – until she started ‘acting up’” (Baer 132). During the time period of this study, Spears has been seen drinking in clubs, has posed nearly nude on the covers of Rolling Stone and Esquire, has gotten married in Las Vegas (and stayed married for about two days), injured her knee dancing and is now married to an unemployed dancer. While some of this seems innocuous enough – Spears is, after all, of drinking age, and she cannot consciously avoid knee injuries – the press inevitably decides that it means Spears is not acting like she should. Spears’ greatest sin is not that she does not act properly, but that she does not know what the proper actions are. As People magazine grouses, Spears and her advisors “are amateurs” who “think they know the game, but they don’t” (Smolowe 53). Her lack of control, then, is expressly tied to her lack of guidance from a multi-national corporation – the type of guidance Duff, Lohan, and the Olsens have. Further, Spears does not “care what people think, not any
more” (Smolowe 55). Spears admits this in another People interview, stating “This is my life and I don’t care what people think” (Gold 56). Where Lohan and the Olsens keep their fans’ opinions about them close to their hearts, Spears “doesn’t care.” Seventeen tries to reclaim Spears for the “good girl” category by having her reassert her control over herself and her image. Spears states, “I don’t condone the behavior that I’ve had over the past year. I don’t think there’s an excuse. I just think sometimes you have wild spells, and you learn from that. But the things I did weren’t very cool. I just wanted to put that out there” (Baer 135). With her statement of contrition, Spears may be able to reclaim her good girl status.

The ideal tween is heterosexual, but not too sexualized

Simultaneously, tween queens cannot demonstrate an excess of control. Instead, they have to show enough control to keep their images intact. Stars can misbehave, in other words, they just cannot get caught. As Douglas states,

The big-breasted, out-of-control sluts on one end of the continuum and the tight-lipped ice maidens on the other served as monoliths to be rejected, while the ones in the middle, caught in the crosscurrents of discourses about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ girls, were the ones meant to be recognized as authentic […]. In other words, young girls were socialized as viewers to identify with ambivalence itself (Douglas 74).

Tweens must be sexualized, then. They are not allowed to be asexual – whether or not they are ready, they must express their sexuality in some way, but they must not be too sexualized, and they must also express their sexuality only through heterosexual relationships. This is a tightrope walk, indeed. Basinger adds that the point “is not really represented by whether or not the woman character can be labeled ‘virgin’ or ‘whore,’ but whether or not she is behaving by a larger set of rules for women. A virgin can be bad if she poisons men, and a whore can be good
if she has a heart of gold” (55). Girls are allowed to be sexualized, in these texts, as long as that sexuality is available to men (if only in a fantasy capacity), and as long as the girl presents herself as “nice.” If she uses her sexuality against men (or, worse, without men in mind at all\textsuperscript{11}), or if she seems not to control herself, then the girl is labeled “bad.”

In interviews, Lohan carefully states that she wants a boyfriend. Rather than couching the need for a relationship in sexual terms, though, Lohan puts it in behavioral terms. She states, “I think the best thing for someone my age, the thing that I need right now, just to keep me grounded, is a boyfriend. […] Just because going out a lot gives people the wrong impression about you, and if you have a boyfriend you have a reason to stay home a lot, and you have someone to talk to” (Rosenberg 125). For Lohan, then, a boyfriend would serve two purposes: he would give her a reason to stay home and avoid getting bad press, and he would “keep her grounded.” Just as male friends (and potential boyfriends) in tween texts keep tween protagonists in line, so too do tween celebrities’ boyfriends, apparently. Boyfriends, then, are agents of control in a girl’s life. Indeed, one of the reasons the press gives for why Britney has gone “bad” is her lack of a “good” boyfriend. \textit{People} magazine states that, “In her passage from teenybop phenom to tarty pop diva, Spears has often seemed wildly out of control, particularly since her March 2002 public split with [Justin] Timberlake” (Smolowe 54). When Spears lost Timberlake as a boyfriend, she also lost him as an agent of control.

Both Lohan and the Olsens walk the fine line required of the good girl, and the press contrasts them favorably with “bad girls” like Britney Spears. Lohan states that she is “afraid to have a sex scene! That’s weird. […] To lose my virginity in a film now, I couldn’t go back from that” (Driscoll “Teen Queen”). The press surrounding the Olsens demonstrates many of the

\textsuperscript{11} Of course, a little faux-lesbianism is fine as long as it is aimed at a male audience. I will discuss this more in a later chapter. Until then, think of the rather suggestive ways the Olsen twins are posed together, and you will know what I am talking about.
same ideas. While articles about them admit that “the duo is notoriously modest” (Dunn “Sisters” 90), their press is also careful to state that “they both have boyfriends” (Tauber 109). While journalist Amy Diluna admits that the Olsens “have officially entered the final frontier of post-adolescent stardom by tapping into their sexuality,” she also states that “While Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera made media waves by cropping their tops and hiking up their skirts, the Olsen twins planned a quiet and squeaky-clean ascent to stardom” (Diluna “Twins”). The Olsens have begun to present themselves as sexual beings, but in a “squeaky clean” way. Diluna is not the only journalist to compare Spears and the Olsens. CNN’s Kendra Howe writes, “Parents view Mary-Kate and Ashley as wholesome role models for their children to admire. Of course, I can’t blame anyone for wanting their daughters to emulate girls who once sang the lyrics, ‘I love love and I hate hate…’ rather than worship a former Mouseketeer who growls, ‘Let’s turn this dance floor into our own nasty world’” (“Commentary”). For many, Britney crosses the ever finer line between appropriately and inappropriately sexy.

**The ideal tween can care about political issues, but not too much**

Many tween-aimed movies have been adapted from popular tween novels. These adaptations, which include *The Princess Diaries* and *Harry Potter Series* as well as *Harriet the Spy*, are interesting to examine because, often, the political content of the text changes in the transition from novel to film. Usually, the effect of this change makes tween protagonists less – not more – politically aware and active. The best example of this phenomenon is *The Princess Diaries*. The film version of the *Princess Diaries* differs greatly from Meg Cabot’s novel, on which it is based, in several important ways. First, in the novel Mia’s father has always been involved in her life, while in the movie Mia’s father, whom she has never met, dies suddenly and makes Mia the heir to the throne of Genovia. In the book, Mia becomes heir when it is revealed
that her father cannot have any more children because of a bout of testicular cancer (Cabot 30). Second, in the novel, Mia’s father pays her for taking “princess lessons” from her grandmother by donating one hundred dollars a lesson to Greenpeace, where Mia hopes to work after she graduates from high school (Cabot 117). When Mia’s grandmother asks her to do something Mia finds particularly distasteful, her father gets her to go along by offering to give more money to Greenpeace. Mia and her mother are both politically active (“Mom’s been depressed ever since her last boyfriend turned out to be a Republican” (Cabot 22).) and identify as feminists. While in the film Mia’s parents are divorced, in the book they never married because Mia’s mother does not want to participate in the patriarchal institution of marriage. As Mia states, “My mom says that’s because at the time she rejected the bourgeois mores of a society that didn’t even accept women as equals to men and refused to recognize her rights as an individual” (Cabot 31). Mia’s environment encourages this type of thinking, in the book. Her private high school Albert Einstein High, throws “Cultural Diversity Dances” (Cabot 21), and her grandmother thinks that Marxist theory is an important part of Mia’s “princess lessons” (Cabot 176).

In the film, most of Mia’s political ideals are stripped away from her and given to her best friend, Lilly Moscovitz. Rather than being presented as smart and involved, however, the film makes Lilly into something of a nag. Lilly constantly belittles Mia for her lack of political conventions in the film, until Mia gets angry and threatens to stop being friends with her. The object of Mia’s affections, Lilly’s brother Michael, also admonishes his sister for being overbearing to Mia, sending out the notion that boys do not like politically active girls. Lilly and Mia have much the same fight in the book, but Lilly is angry at Mia for not supporting her

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12 Ironically for a book that was turned into a Disney movie, Mia mentions the “misogynistic undertones” of Disney musicals on page 38.
13 Lilly is more political than Mia in the book, as well. Mia doesn’t tell Lilly she is a princess at first because “She’s always said that when sovereignty is vested in a single person whose right to rule is hereditary, the principles of social equality and respect for the individual within a community are irrevocably lost” (Cabot 47). However, Mia is also very political in the book, and the two often argue over ideology.
boycott of a local deli, and Lilly’s brother Michael refuses to take sides in the fight. Instead, he
remains friends with both girls. Where the book values Mia’s engagement, the film values her
hard-earned fashion sense.

The movie sequel to *The Princess Diaries*, *The Princess Diaries 2, Royal Engagement* departs even further from the political content and plotline of Cabot’s novels. In the sequel, Mia discovers that she must marry before her twenty-first birthday or lose the throne of Genovia.\(^\text{14}\) While men (such as Mia’s father) are not required to marry to rule Genovia, women are. While the film questions this somewhat, in the end Mia submits to the law and sets about trying to find a suitable husband. For a while, Mia is engaged to an English nobleman she admires but does not love. The dramatic thrust of the movie never truly examines the injustice of Mia’s situation, but instead asks whether Mia can marry without being in love. In typical Hollywood fashion, though, Mia falls in love with her rival to the throne, Nicholas Devereaux (Chris Pine) and the two marry. While the sequel is an enjoyable enough G-rated romantic comedy, it veers sharply from Cabot’s original characterization for Mia and her family. Also, the idea of Mia having to marry to attain, or keep, power differs sharply from her outlook of marriage as a “subjugation and obfuscation of the female identity” in the second *Princess Diaries* novel, *Princess in the Spotlight* (32).

Tween-aimed celebrities are also expected to have very little interest in politics, especially in this post-9/11 era where any celebrity’s political views are apt to be mocked. One example from the more adult-oriented media occurred in 2003, when members of the Dixie Chicks claimed to be “ashamed” that they came from the same state as President George W. Bush. After this was reported in the press, many country stations refused to air the Chicks’ songs because the group was “unpatriotic” (Anonymous “Dixie Chicks”). Other celebrities, particularly

\(^{14}\) The six books (so far) in the series have only taken Mia to her sophomore year in high school.
younger women, learned quickly not to express their political views if they went against the administration. A few months after the Chick’s statement, Britney Spears told CNN’s Tucker Carlson that "Honestly, I think we should just trust our president in every decision that he makes and we should just support that," (Anonymous “Britney”). This footage was later used as a joke in Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11. While people made fun of Spears for her statement, her sales were not hurt the way the Dixie Chicks’ were. The Olsen twins have been pros at avoiding saying anything offensive for many years, as the statements I quoted in the paragraphs above attest. Because tweens are not expected – or really wanted – to be very political, neither are their celebrities. Were tweens to become too politicized, they might not participate as eagerly in the consumer economy. Tweens might not be so willing to buy products created through sweatshop labor and sold at anti-union shops like Wal-Mart. They might not appreciate the message conveyed in thong underwear printed with sexually alluring phrases (figure one), or be as willing to purchase CDs with lyrics like “hit me baby, one more time.” Advertisers and producers have a vested interest in keeping tweens a-political.

**Conclusion**

As I mentioned in the introduction, Susan Douglas states that participating in popular culture helped her become a feminist. Although she admits that “the mass media are hardly a girl’s best friend” (Douglas 11), she also emphasizes that all texts are necessarily mixed, with both potentially positive and negative aspects. Douglas believes that this mixture causes a type of “cultural schizophrenia.” She writes, “American women today are a bundle of contradictions because much of the media imagery we grew up with was itself filled with mixed messages

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15 In December, 2004, the Olsens pledged that they would not allow their products to be made in sweatshop conditions. However, they have made no statements regarding Wal-Mart’s labor practices (Grossberg “No Sweat”).
16 Retailer Abercrombie and Fitch marketed child-sized thongs to tweens that had “wink wink” and “eye candy” printed on them (Anonymous “Abercrombie”).
17 This is quoted from Britney Spears’ song of the same title.
about what women should and should not do, what women could and could not be. This was true in the 1960s, and it is true today” (9). Although this can – and does – lead to a great deal of confusion, it also makes popular culture “porous,” which allows “us to accept and rebel against” it (Douglas 9). As Douglas states, “the point here is that we love and hate the media, at exactly the same time, in no small part because the media, simultaneously, love and hate women” (Douglas 12). The ability to perceive the holes in popular culture can lead to the ability to perceive the false nature of the gender roles presented within popular culture. Tween queens must carefully present themselves as nice (but not boring), pretty (but not too pretty) and heterosexual (but not too sexy). But she must also be intelligent, talented and ambitious. Like Kim Possible, she can save the world … but only if she also knows how to wear lip gloss and color coordinate. SDBHH’s Josie can be the leader of her science club, but only if she pines for fellow club member (and wrestling champ) Vaughn. Scout can learn about Apartheid, but only if she, rather than the Zulu Bongani, is the protagonist. Mass media representations of girls have progressed since the 1960s: girls no longer have to pretend to be less smart and talented than the boys around them, for example. At the same time, though, girls are more sexualized than ever before. Is this the trade-off girls must make to become more powerful? This, and related questions, will be examined more in depth in a later chapter.
Chapter Three
The Process of Becoming a Woman’s Body: Menarche and the Containment of Femininity

“I don’t know, it feels yucky – the period, the tampons, it should be secret” (Jenny, quoted in Ponton 35).

This study has already examined the ideal girl presented in tween-aimed popular culture, and some of the forces behind the creation of the tween demographic. Tweens, as I stated before, are one of the most heavily targeted demographics today. When does this all begin? I believe that one important locus of tween marketing occurs at menarche. This chapter, and the next, examine the intimate ways marketing and popular culture intersect with tweens’ bodies. While the next chapter discusses the ways tweens’ sexual identities are shaped by advertising and popular culture, this chapter examines how menarche is made into a largely negative event to create a direct correlation between the “problem” of the menstruating body and the “solution” of disposable menstrual products.

Most girls begin puberty somewhere between the ages of eight and twelve, going through the most significant mandatory body change of their lives until menopause. Puberty is, for both sexes, confusing. On the one hand, it presages the freedoms of adulthood. On the other, one’s formerly relied upon and taken for granted body begins to change in sometimes alarming ways, with the appearance of strange hair and body fluids. Also, the sexual maturity at which puberty points is confusing at best. For girls, the main milestones during puberty include growing new body hair, getting breasts, and menarche, or the beginning of menstruation. No body event in a girl’s (or a woman’s) life is more ambivalently coded than menarche, which most girls reach between the ages of 8-14. Tied to both the filth of bodily waste and the possibility of motherhood, menstruation has powerful social connotations that lead to its virtual erasure from “polite” discourse. Well before most girls begin to menstruate, they learn how to hide its effects,

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1 I say “mandatory” body change because, of course, not all will experience pregnancy.
usually through consuming an array of products. The ways girls are taught about their menstrual cycles point, in important ways, to cultural attitudes about menstruation and the (potentially) reproductive female body.

When menstruation or menarche are acknowledged openly, it is usually done for one reason: containment. Perhaps the most memorable mention of menarche in popular culture occurs in the film adaptation of *Carrie* (1976). In this, the title character’s decent into madness and psychic murder begins with her first period. Puberty exerts such a powerful change on Carrie’s body that she gains the power of telekinesis, or the ability to move objects with her mind. She uses this power to kill everyone who has ever teased or belittled her (virtually everyone she knows) before killing herself and her mother. Menarche turns Carrie into a powerful force that cannot be controlled, lending slightly more urgency than usual to the common parental question, “What has happened to our sweet little girl?” Had Carrie been better contained, she could not have caused the havoc and carnage she did. Less memorable, because less gory, advertisements for feminine hygiene products stress their ability to hide menstrual blood to the point where the blood itself is erased in favor of a mysterious blue liquid. In these ads, the actual mechanics of menstruation are never addressed, saving vulnerable men and children from the knowledge of what, exactly, menstrual products do. The two-billion dollar-a-year feminine hygiene industry (Brumberg 30) offers items for sale that “protect.” From what? Why do we need so much protection from menstruation, and who, exactly, is being protected? Where does the danger lie? In this chapter, I address the ways girls are taught to contain the potential dangers of menstruation and argue that hiding the realities of menstruation forms part of girls’ larger project of learning to shape their bodies into the “contained” or “classical” body of normative femininity. The two types of texts upon which I will rely are girls’ magazines

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2 Pads and, less frequently, tampons soak up this blue liquid to demonstrate their effectiveness.
(such as Cosmogirl, Teen People and ELLEgirl) and body guides. I define a “body guide” as an instructional manual written by adults for young girls that explains basic body anatomy, body maintenance and answers general questions about puberty. The magazines and body guides, “as knowledge rather than simply pleasurable representations, engage readers in the construction of Self as becoming an adult woman” (Currie 141). Because of this, such texts become what Dawn Currie, author of Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and their Readers, calls “intersections” in gender construction. She writes, “As recent gender theorists note, identities can never be contained in any one moment or place, although they can be made to appear at […] ‘certain intersections.’ As constructs, gendered identities are constantly being re-enacted through practices that express a continual process of becoming as well as being” (4). The discourse around menarche and menstruation forms one point at which the gendered identity of tween girls can be examined. I agree with Currie that “feminism has paid insufficient attention to the experiences and desires of young women” (8), and this study hopes to rectify that lack of attention by focusing on this undertheorized part of young female experience.

Many feminist scholars, such as Judith Butler, have theorized femininity as a “performance” or “masquerade.” According to Butler gender is a verb, not a noun. In other words, one does gender. Gender is performed, or done, by a person as a collection of “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires” that “create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core” (Butler 136). In the end, the illusion of a stable gendered identity is important because it regulates “sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler 136). When we begin to question the naturalness of gender, then, we also begin to question the naturalness of heterosexuality. To maintain heterosexuality’s hegemony, then, we must police gender.
Once we begin to realize the performative nature of gender, we must also begin to recognize that there is, in fact, no “natural” body. As Butler states, “that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler 136). Rather than being “passive and prior to discourse,” the body is “itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex” (Butler 129). How can there be a natural, discourse free body when it is the body itself that must enact so much of the performance of gender? Indeed, gender is placed onto bodies from the very beginning.

One of the most common misreadings of Butler holds that, since gender is performative, people are free to pick and choose the performance they wish to give – people enact masculinity or femininity only because they want to, not because they must. Butler explicitly states, however, that “as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” for those who fail to perform, or fail to perform correctly (Butler 139). Those who fail risk the far reaching and negative punishments meted out by a homophobic society. As Butler scholar Sara Salih states, “If gender is a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being,’ a verb rather than a noun, it is not an action that is done by a volitional agent who is free to select her/his gender ‘styles’. […] Instead, the subject is ‘done’ by gender; it is the effect rather than the cause of a discourse which is always there first” (91).

Part of performing gender correctly includes erasing the performance, and mainstream society does this so successfully that the “cultural fiction” of binary genders “is obscured by the credibility of those productions” (Butler 140). In the end, the punishments that follow hard upon our refusal or inability to perform gender correctly “compels” our insistence in gender’s “necessity and naturalness” (Butler 140). Even still, though, no one can perform gender
completely correctly because “gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized […]
gender norms are finally phantasmic, impossible to embody” (Butler 141).

To believe that the costume or act of femininity is somehow optional, then, does an
injustice to Butler’s ideas. Even though femininity has been revealed as a highly changeable and
historically specific act, it is still an act that every girl and woman must perform to some extent.
In this, our specific historical moment, normative femininity is both culturally and economically
constructed. “Our participation in beauty rituals is an economic as well as cultural phenomenon
because it engages us in commodity consumption. As a consequence, gendered identities cannot
be studied apart from the huge ‘culture industry’ that provides many of our everyday
understandings of ‘gender’” (Currie 5). As a materialist feminist, Currie would have us examine
the economic forces at work in everyday life, and how these forces shape identity. Currie is
interested in “how the existence of multibillion-dollar industries promoting fashion and beauty
links young women’s desires to cultural representations of femininity” (7-8). Much recent work
focusing on beauty and fashion has ignored the economics at hand and has chosen, instead, to
focus on the act of consumption as a pleasurable and possibly resistant site. While Currie agrees
that consumption can be pleasurable, she finds that most of the work that finds resistance in
consumption too grounded in the pleasures of adult researchers (7). In other words, we are
women who have been trained how to read “against the grain” and find resistance within the
masquerade – not pre-teen girls who are too busy learning the rules of normative femininity to
enact them ironically.4 Throughout, Currie emphasizes the fact that girls and adult women read

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3 Although I use the term “normative femininity” throughout, I want to stress that normative femininity need not be understood as a monolithic term. Perhaps one of the primary characteristics of living in a hegemonic society is that we are offered the illusion of choice. Because of this, “normative femininity” can encompass a number of different modes of behavior, appearance and lifestyle, and changes frequently. Normative femininity is quite different now than it was thirty or forty years ago, for instance. That said, I believe it is not going too far to point out that all types of normative femininity share a few basic tenets that every woman, whether she follows them or not, knows about.

4 This is not to say that girls do not resist normative femininity. They just do so differently than adult women do.
magazines differently. Even for the researcher who wears her red lipstick ironically,\(^5\) Currie notes that,

> However pleasurable, magazine reading cannot be seen as ‘innocent’ of power relations, separated from the ideological function of commercial media in women’s lives. From their inception, women’s magazines have posited female subjectivity as a ‘problem,’ and themselves as the answer, offering their female readers a guide to living, a means of understanding their experiences as women. However, as a result of their claim to represent rather than direct or influence women, magazines reproduce those very contradictions and paradoxes that they ostensibly resolve (68).

The paradox to which Currie refers is that magazines offer women and girls “independence” and “pleasure” while also stressing the need to contain their bodies into socially acceptable packages, making the “problem” that they claim to solve unsolvable. In the end, I argue, body guides can do much the same thing. Most readers either do not notice or are not bothered by such contradictions, though, because, as Currie argues, “they resonate with the contradictory experiences of lived femininity in a patriarchal culture” (67). Remembering that, despite our training and vigilance, we researchers get caught up within the power relations of women’s magazines reminds us to be careful not to construct the type of reading of popular culture that creates a “dichotomy between ideological and scientific representations, hence between ‘false’ and ‘true’ knowledge.” Such readings “imply that only academic feminists can see through the veil of patriarchal ideology, creating a new form of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Currie 80). In other words, “we” (academic feminists) are just as vulnerable to popular culture as “they” (young girls) are, and we would do well to remember this.

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\(^5\) This is a group I occasionally count myself amongst.
Currie would have us read girls’ magazines as ideological texts, but (as she states above) she wants us to define “ideology” in a specific way. She defines the feminist concept of ideology as

the way in which ideas, beliefs and systems of meaning serve to sustain relations of domination. To view images as ideological is not only to expose them as stereotypical constructions, but to also draw attention to the interests that they serve by restricting and fixing the meanings of social life. Reference to the ideological nature of women’s magazine images links their existence and their effects to patriarchal economic interests (Currie 57).

The main ideological thrust of girls’ magazines (and, to some extent, body guides) defines the female body as a signifier which must be “invested with characteristics which are culturally read as ‘feminine’” To do this, women must perform “body work” because “not all, or any, female body is deemed, a priori, as signaling the aesthetic requirements of ‘femininity’” (Currie 16). It is tempting to look at such body work, and the texts that introduce and enforce it, as either oppressive or pleasurable. Currie would have us get beyond such simple binaries, though, and look instead at the significance of how and why such texts work (Currie 66).

Finally, it is important to remember that much of the discourse that teaches girls about their menstrual cycles has a very specific economic and classed base. All of the ways mainstream society teaches girls to contain their menstrual cycles assume that girls can afford to purchase disposable menstrual products, that they have a stable enough place of residence to keep their bodies acceptably clean and that they have parents or guardians attentive enough to help them with the process of puberty. Further, this line of thought assumes that girls come from cultural backgrounds that deal with menstruation in very specific ways. Girls who cannot meet
any of these requirements – due to lack of money, home, guidance or culture – perforce fail this process before they can begin.

**Useful Information**

How and why do these texts work, then? Currie notes the “widespread assumption that young girls enjoy teen magazines. As a consequence, many readers first received their now-favourite magazine as a gift subscription, typically from an older female relative” (148). My grandmother (who had only cancelled my subscription to *Highlights* a couple of years earlier) gave me a subscription to *Seventeen* for my birthday one year. At around the same time, my best friend’s mother gave her a subscription to *YM*. We traded the magazines back and forth and read them religiously for a year or so, until we both discovered the forbidden pleasures of *Cosmopolitan*, which talked *a lot* more about sex. The tamer pleasures of *YM* and *Seventeen* were forgotten. Currie found this experience fairly typical for the girls in her study, who viewed the magazines in a sort of “age chain” or “age gradient.” Girls read certain magazines for a while, then outgrow them and move on to other magazines. At the same time, girls avoid magazines that they think are “too old” for them. They do this because they are “drawn to the text in search of ‘useful’ information about themselves, their relationships with boys, and the day-to-day problems of being a teenager. The two most important qualities of favoured texts are that they address the reader as a teenage girl, and that they deal with ‘real life’ situations and relations” (Currie 166). Outgrown magazines would only discuss issues that the girl had figured out, in other words, and magazines that were “too old” would include issues that the girl was not yet ready to handle.

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6 My parents were horrified by the subscription and refused to allow it in the house. I read it at my grandparents’ house instead.
7 *YM* used to stand for “Young Miss,” then for “Young and Modern.” Now, it stands for “Your Magazine.” Ah, the versatility of an acronym.
8 Adolescent magazines tend to be heterosexist. Although a few magazines do include sympathetic articles about young lesbians, nearly all relationship advice focuses on heterosexual couples.
Around the same time I got my subscription to Seventeen, my grandmother also got me a body guide, which I think was titled Looking Good!, that covered basic hygiene and fashion. Basically, the book told me how to avoid body odor, why and how to stay thin and what “color family” I should wear. My best friend got a guide from her mother about why she should avoid sex until marriage. After we had both figured out our color families (which I now forget) and had gotten thoroughly embarrassed (but intrigued) by the (no) sex book, we headed to the library to be intimidated by Our Bodies, Ourselves. Not finding anything else written for girls our age, we happily returned to getting information – and misinformation – about our bodies from friends and magazines. Since then, though, many more books have been published for pre-teen girls, and (if the covers of these books are to be believed) the books sell quite well.

Psychoanalyst Lynn Ponton, who works primarily with adolescents, stresses that girls “are hungry for knowledge about their periods. It is not easy to obtain. Several [girls she has interviewed] have described reading the small-print ads in the Tampax box, searching for information, any information” (32). When any information (or misinformation) is offered, girls seize upon it. The bits of information available in magazines, and the more detailed discussions offered in body guides, then, become very important to girls. Ponton states that one reason for this general lack of information is because “Clearly there are long-standing cultural taboos that prevent open discussion about menstruation, and they are transmitted to girls quite early, long before they have their first period.” (33). Ponton further finds that “The lack of response from the culture only further silences the girls and helps to maintain the taboo” (33).
Menstrual Products in Body Guides and Magazines

Both body guides and girls’ magazines include information on menstrual products. Body guides present this information primarily in an instructional manner, while most of the information in magazines comes from advertisements. In the end, though, both present menarche as a girl’s entry into the consumption of disposable menstrual products for the purpose of concealing her period. By focusing almost exclusively on disposable tampons and pads, in other words, these books and magazines teach girls that the only way to be considered “clean” and “acceptable” during their periods is to buy commercially available, non-reusable menstrual products. As Joan Jacobs Brumberg states in her book *The Body Project*, we have a “distinctly American menstrual experience that stresses personal hygiene over information about adult womanhood or female sexuality” (Brumberg 30). Brumberg sees important consequences stemming from the commercialization of menstruation. From “the moment when they begin to menstruate, American girls and their mothers typically think first about their external body – what shows and what doesn’t – rather than about the emotional and social meaning of the maturational process” (Brumberg 29). This “contributes to the way in which adolescent girls make the body into an intense project requiring careful scrutiny and constant personal control” (Brumberg 30). Rather than seeing menstruation as an emotional or social event, then, American girls are taught to view menarche as an external hygienic crisis. Because of this, girls learn that the *only* parts of their bodies that they need to worry about are those seen on the outside. As Brumberg states, contemporary adolescents’ fears about their bodies have helped “turn menstrual blood into gold” (49), and because of this, the sanitary products industry must maintain and encourage those fears to maintain their profit margins. The fears about keeping one’s body
acceptable despite menstruation permeate society, and are replicated and transmitted through magazine articles and advertisements, and, to a degree, in body guides.

**Advertisements:**

Magazine advertisements offer girls conflicting information about their bodies. Currie begins her study of girls’ magazines by examining the way advertisements work as “a vehicle for the socialization of young women into a lifelong habit of consumption” by “exacerbate[ing] feelings of anxiety about physical appearance and suggest[ing] that increased consumption is the remedy” (78). I would add that most of the products offered in these ads work to contain the female body, which includes hiding the menstrual cycle. Currie studies advertisements, in part, because she believes that, “as a genre advertising texts have the potential to draw attention to [gender’s] constructedness” (124). She also argues that the presence of “advertorials,” or articles written by the magazines’ writers that are actually paid advertisements for specific products, allows us to view the magazines “in their entirety as advertisements” (Currie 77). Therefore, even in articles like “agony columns” (which I will discuss more below), the mention of menstrual products can be viewed as advertisements.

The girls in Currie’s study only stopped to read the ads that they enjoyed, and they enjoyed the ads that they felt had some relation to their own present or future lives (129). Also, the girls rejected the ads that they found unrealistic or contradictory to their own lived experience (Currie 130). Further, Currie states that “images that could be decoded as expressions of romantic heterosexuality were rejected by few girls” (Currie 132). In the end, Currie found that “the reality negotiated by these readers associates ideological femininity with the world of commodities in such a way that this association appears ‘natural’ or makes sense: this association does not hold if ambiguous or atypical imagery is used” (Currie 135). If the ad has made its
connection to the reader, then, the girl accepts as natural or given that the “problem” of how to embody normative femininity is answered, at least in part, by the product offered. When this happens, Currie says, girls believe that the ad makes a truth claim. “As a truth claim, the meanings available in commercial texts are no longer simply ‘resources,’ in the way many writers imply. Rather, many of the commercial meanings in this study have become incorporated into girls’ ‘knowledge’ about the world of adult femininity” (Currie 135). This is one of the ways that girls read differently from adult women. Beyond offering fun and pleasure, magazines offer “meaning about life and the social roles of women” (Currie 141). The ads, and the advertorials that push many of the same products, tell girls, “This is how you perform adult femininity. This is how you fit in as a woman.”

Girls are not simply “duped” by the advertisements, though. Instead, Currie’s study “illustrates the importance of treating texts as processes rather than as static objects of analysis” (Currie 140). Within this process, girls did “not distinguish reality from fantasy prior to reading: these readers drew distinctions as they read, within the text” (Currie 141, emphasis in original). Within this process, girls accept and reject advertisements based on the criteria of their own life experiences (Can I relate to this? Have I ever done something like this?) and by comparing the ads to each other (This ad is weird, this one makes more sense, therefore I believe the second ad more than the first.).

Advertisements for menstrual products and body guides’ information about menstrual products both stress that disposable products offer freedom of movement and the protection from/concealment of menstrual blood. In all of these, the “problem” that femininity presents is a girl’s need to get on with her normal life despite the fact that she is on her period (an event that is

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9 This could be because of the structure of Currie’s study, where she asked girls if they liked particular ads, then if they liked one ad more than the others. Therefore, I do not want to put too much stress on this particular aspect of her study. I include it, though, because it does point to the process of meaning making.
always placed outside of “normal” life), and the solution offered is the concealment of the effects of the period (either menstrual blood or cramps) by the product offered. As I stated above, the subject of menstruation is one considered taboo in contemporary society – it is impolite to discuss it in public. One way to get around this restriction is to discuss the subject “academically” (Ponton 33). Because of this, “advertising depicts menstruation as a ‘hygienic crisis’ that is best managed by an ‘effective security system,’ affording peace of mind – i.e., protection from soiling, odor, and embarrassment” (40). Advertisements cannot, or will not, discuss the physical sensations or cultural meanings of menstruation, so instead they discuss the need for protection against it.

Since advertisements for products that collect and conceal menstrual blood will not explicitly mention their products’ purpose, because the need for concealment extends into the advertisements themselves, ads must invent other advantages the right menstrual product can deliver. Apparently, heterosexual love is one such advantage. One ad for Always pads shows an anime-style cartoon of two girls at a dance looking at a (completely oblivious) boy. The text reads, “Spring dance. And you have your period. The good news is, your hormones make you feel more attracted to the caring, sensitive types. So there’s no better time to check him out! And with Always, leaks won’t hold you back. Always Thin Ultra with Gel Core absorbs better than the next leading ultra by locking liquid away. Now, how about that cutie over there?” (ELLEgirl February/March 137, figure one) The purported advantage of the pad becomes, then, a girl’s freedom from worrying that the sudden appearance of menstrual blood will make a cute boy dislike her.

Another Always advertisement shows a cartoon (also drawn in the currently popular anime style) of a team of girls about to score a goal in a soccer game. The text reads, “Exercise,

[10 What?]
like soccer, can relieve period symptoms and reduce cramps. What better reason is there to get moving! And leaks? What about ‘em? Always Thin Ultra wings are twice as long for better side protection against leaks than other ultras. So, you can sweat your workout, not your protection” (Twist April 27, Cosmogirl May 129, figure two). Again, no specific mention of menstrual blood is made, and the ad does not show the how product is used. Instead, it shows the supposed effect of wearing the pad – scoring a goal in a soccer game without worrying about blood leaking. Obviously, I am not trying to imply that we should be comfortable enough with our menstrual blood to want to show it publicly.\footnote{A movement called “menstrual anarchy” believes in doing just this.} I am trying to point out, however, that these ads exacerbate our cultural phobia of menstrual blood to the point where the ads avoid even mentioning it. They euphemistically refer, instead, to “leaks” and “liquid.” Leaks from where? What type of liquid? And why do they avoid the color red so assiduously?

Menstrual products that have nothing to do with blood and tissue collection have less of a problem with the color red, though they continue to emphasize the ways they help girls conceal their periods. Advertisements never actually depict women experiencing adverse effects of menstruation, such as cramps or nausea. Instead, “menstruating women are depicted as functioning at optimal activity level and uncomplaining, which means girls and women who do experience discomfort may believe that their reactions are unusual” (Ponton 40). To avoid being “unusual,” then, girls will purchase products that promise this “normality.” ThermaCare, a brand of disposable heating pads girls and women wear over their lower abdomen to help with cramps, ran two ads in the magazines in this study. Both emphasize the freedom of movement and “normalcy” the product offers. The first ad shows a tennis court with two women’s bathroom signs superimposed over it. On one, the “woman” symbol, dressed for tennis, has large red lightening bolts and the red word “cramps!” coming out of her abdomen. The other sign also has
a woman symbol dressed for tennis on it, but this symbol is wearing a ThermaCare pad and swinging her tennis racquet (Teen People May 93, Cosmogirl May 133, figure three). The second ThermaCare ad makes its point more directly. The whole page is a red field, with “Guys get to live without cramps. Now we can, too” written over it in white. Below this, in smaller letters, it says “Slim, snug, comfy. The only one who knows you’re wearing it is you” (Twist April 99, Cosmogirl April 107, figure four). It is interesting that all of these ads include some fairly standard “girl-power” messages: it is good for girls to be athletically involved, and it is unfair for girls to have disadvantages that boys do not have. They also reinforce, though, the “naturalness” and desirability of concealing all evidence of periods (no one knows you are wearing it). Girls want to get rid of cramps not only to be more active, according to these ads, but also to avoid having to make excuses for missing activities, or worse, admitting in public that they are on their periods. Luckily, these products can provide the “normalcy” girls so desire.

Both Always advertisements mention a website, www.beinggirl.com. This website is also mentioned as a further resource by a couple of the body guides as an information resource. Curious, I went to the website to see what information it offered to girls. At the main page, the site asks girls to log in as a “younger teen” or “older teen.” I logged in as a “younger teen” for the purposes of this paper, though I have little doubt that girls probably log in as both at different times to see how the site differs. Owned by the company that produces both Always pads and Tampax tampons, the site looks like it may be trying to compete with magazines for girls’ attentions by including articles about boys, fashion, friendships and craft projects, with themselves as the only sponsor. From this site, I ordered a “learning kit” that included eight

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12 See, for example, Madaras My Body 109.
13 This site may warrant more in-depth study in the future, but the site is not yet developed enough to exist as a very interesting web destination.
junior tampons, eight panty shields and an instruction booklet. Using a question and answer format common in body guides and magazines, the instruction booklet advertises Always and Tampax products as items that protect and conceal. Answering a question about the purpose of pantyliners, the booklet suggests using them daily “to help keep themselves feeling clean and fresh because they help absorb any natural discharge on the days between your periods and help prevent it from staining your underwear” as well as using them in conjunction with tampons during their periods (Tampax “Products” 2). The female body, as far as Tampax is concerned, needs to be contained every day, not just when menstrual blood is present. When talking about tampons, the booklet uses the language of freedom and choice, saying “because tampons are worn inside your body, you can move freely, wear whatever you want, and do whatever you want” (Tampax “Products” 11). The booklet also states baldly that “tampons are the only suitable form of menstrual protection for swimmers” (Tampax “Products” 18). Together, magazines and “learner’s kits” leave girls with the notion that commercially available disposable menstrual products are their only “suitable” choices. Other products may be available, but they do not guarantee the level of cultural acceptance inherent in Always products. Entering womanhood, according to these sources, requires consuming certain, specific constellations of products to be acceptable. Advertisements are only one place girls get this message; it is constantly reinforced through the text of magazines and body guides.

Magazines promote the use of disposable menstrual products through the inclusion of advertisements. Body guides promote the use of disposable products by demonstrating how to use them, and not demonstrating how to use non-disposable methods. In her body guide, titled

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14 The learner’s kit cost $3.00. When I was twelve, these kits were free.
15 This, even though some non-disposable methods like The Keeper work underwater, and that Jukes mentions a rather elaborate ritual that makes pads work well enough for swimmers (Growing Up 58).
16 It would be interesting to find a study of brand loyalty with menstrual products. I am sure it is quite high.
**Growing Up: It’s a Girl Thing**, Mavis Jukes introduces pads by saying that they are designed to stay on “when we walk, run, play sports, climb on the monkey bars, and generally go about our daily lives” (46). Several guides introduce tampons as a method that many women prefer because they are not as noticeable as pads, and go on to remark that tampons take practice to learn how to use, but that the practice is worth the effort (Blackstone and Guest 75. Gravelle 47, Jukes *Growing Up* 55). Valorie Lee Schaefer’s *The Care and Keeping of You*, published under the non-fiction arm of the wildly popular *American Girl* collection and perhaps the most popular body guide available today, states bluntly that “Deciding which ‘feminine hygiene’ products to use can seem overwhelming at first, but your choices are actually pretty simple: *pads* or *tampons*” (Schaefer 72). Along with being the most popular body guide, *The Care and Keeping of You* is also the most conservative of the guides included in this study (which may account for its popularity). According to this guide, *only* disposable methods are acceptable. Echoing the advice offered in the Tampax-owned website beinggirl.com, Schafer advises girls to wear panty liners along with tampons, and states that “It’s a good idea to wear a panty liner for a day or two even after you *think* your period is over” (Schaefer 74). Advice like this connects menstrual products with girls’ everyday lives, serving to normalize the products into something that girls buy as a matter of course.

**Embarrassing Stories**

Another way magazines and body guides reinforce this message is through the use of embarrassing stories. The authors of body guides and magazines recall embarrassing moments to stress their commonality with their readers, thus making their texts more “trustworthy,” and use this trust to remind readers that their bodies require constant vigilance.

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17 The cover proudly proclaims “over one million copies sold!”
In the guide Girl Stuff, authors Margaret Blackstone and Elissa Guest begin their book with a list of what they call “cringe words,” or words that they found utterly embarrassing as pre-teens. They also include how they defined these words when younger: “Menstruation: Sounded like a fatal disease. [...] Puberty: Something wet and slimy, a creepy alien blob. [...] ‘That Time of the Month’: (sic) As if suddenly you had changed” (Blackstone and Guest 1). In her guide, It’s a Girl Thing, Mavis Jukes includes the story of a friend of hers whose falsies fell out of her bathing suit top in a public pool (8). Finally, almost every guide includes stories of girls’ clothing getting stained with menstrual blood in public.

Magazines also include embarrassing moments in what are commonly called “agony columns.” Rather than including moments experienced by the writers, though, they include moments submitted by “regular” girls, who are supposed to be identical to the magazines’ readers. A common monthly feature in both girls’ and women’s magazines, such columns connect the reader to the text through common experiences. When we read these columns as younger girls, my friends and I knew the events described could happen to us – the shock of recognition occurred. With names like “how (sic) Embarrassing!” (Twist), “Ouch!” (Cosmogirl) and “Busted!” (Teen People), the columns also stress that the anecdotes included are all embarrassing because the girls in them broke some social code – their speech or bodies exceeded the bonds of social decorum. The stories told include saying the wrong thing in public (Twist 16), clothes or accessories coming off in public (Twist 17, Teen People May 98), offending the boyfriend’s family (Twist 16-7, Cosmogirl April 34) or – presented as the most embarrassing – accidentally releasing or acknowledging bodily waste in public (including gas, urine, bowel movements and menstrual blood) (Twist 16-7, Cosmogirl April 34, Teen People May 31). These
anecdotes stress the need for girls to surveil their actions and bodies to make sure they are socially acceptable. “Watch out,” these anecdotes say, “or this could happen to you.”

Ponton points out that, because of cultural taboos surrounding menstruation, “little sharing of information with friends seems to take place after the initiation of menstruation, although at later points friends share stories about symptoms and negative attitudes” (Ponton 41). When relaying the negative effects of menstruation, then, the cultural silence around menstruation is lessened. While these negative effects are certainly real and must be dealt with, nowhere within magazines did I find any discussion of the positive effects of menstruation, such as feeling proud or powerful, or even the general sense of well-being some girls and women experience while they are premenstrual. It seems that, as long as girls are complaining about menstruation – one of the most important markers of becoming biologically female – they are allowed to discuss it. Positive statements about menstruation, however, are still suspect. This could contribute to the fact that, while “many girls are extremely positive about the anticipation of their menses,” girls feel far less positive about their periods once they arrive (Ponton 40). Brumberg argues that girls discuss menstruation in this way because they are using the only language available to them. While she admits that “these stories of embarrassing personal moments were honest and funny,” she also notes that “they all focused on issues of personal hygiene because that is the language we use in America for talking about such things” (Brumberg 52). Girls do not share their inner feelings about menstruation, whether they be positive or negative, because they do not know how.

Embarrassing stories ring true because, even though the products recommended in body guides and magazines “protect” girls and their clothes from menstrual blood, this protection is not as perfect as we could wish. In her guide called Growing Up: It’s a Girl Thing, Jukes states
that, “many girls and women choose not to wear their best underwear during a period” because of leaks (50), and all of the books suggest that it might be a good idea to keep a dark sweater around to tie around the waist if blood gets onto a girl’s clothes. Girls learn that hiding their menstrual blood is so important that they must keep backup methods on hand at all times. They must do so because they live within institutions that will not change to accommodate their needs. In her book, The Woman in the Body, Emily Martin writes that “the woman trying to sneak a tampon from the classroom into the bathroom” is “being asked to do the impossible: conceal and control their bodily functions in institutions whose organization of time and space take little cognizance of them” (94). Girls are embarrassed when they bring attention to their menstrual cycles in public because most public institutions – institutions that have been created by and for the bodies of men (boys) – will not admit that the bodies of women (girls) exist. If they did, for example, girls would not have to justify to their teachers why they need unscheduled bathroom breaks. Most girls do not recognize this, though, because it has been presented to them as normal (Martin 99).

**Menstruation and Filth: Kristeva**

Self surveillance becomes especially important for the body because, with the onset of puberty, girls’ bodies become associated with (or soon will be associated with) reproductive functions. One of society’s jobs is to control the reproductive functions of young women, as witnessed by the public outcry over teenaged mothers. Anita Harris locates this anxiety in economics. Girls today are expected to achieve both “labor market accomplishments and a glamorous consumer lifestyle,” and both of these “are premised on the idea of an unencumbered individual who can devote herself to full-time paid work. An intrinsic element of the can-do

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18 See, for example, Blackstone and Guest 73 and Shaefer 80.
19 We rarely hear about teenaged fathers.
experience is thus the delaying of motherhood” (Harris 23). Because of this, “The families of you women who are high-achieving […] tend to be committed to the regulation of their daughters’ sexuality” (Harris 23). Girls who delay motherhood contribute economically through the purchase of consumer goods. Girls who do not are warned that they will inevitably become economic drains, stereotypical “welfare mothers” whom society only devalues.

Beyond their sexualized meanings, female bodies with the power to reproduce also have the potential to break down social codes in frightening ways. Julia Kristeva, in The Powers of Horror, describes this potential. She calls the logical extreme of this potential the “abject,” or that which is neither subject nor object. She writes, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). Our objections to showing or mentioning anything related to menstruation in public goes beyond the physical dirtiness of menstrual blood. We only call menstrual blood filthy because it threatens abjection, and people are urged by society to hide and devalue it. But not all “filth” is equivalent, though. As Kristeva says, “Filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin” (69). Girls are urged to hide their bodies’ excremental functions for the same reason that boys are, but they hide their menstrual and reproductive functions for far different reasons:

Polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, […] have any polluting value. Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within
the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationships between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference (Kristeva 71).

Menstruation threatens to upset both the boundaries between internal and external (what was once inside of my body is outside of it – and I am ok) and self and other (the potential to have a life within the female body which then moves outside of the female body and into its own subjectivity). Once these boundaries of identity are threatened, no boundary is safe because all have been marked as permeable. To prevent this from happening, we reject that which threatens the boundary. As Butler states, “the boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness” (Butler 133). We put such tremendous energy into maintaining these boundaries because “What constitutes through division the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control” (Butler 133).

Girls hide their menstrual cycles to reinforce the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine and, in so doing, patriarchal hegemony (Kristeva 70). Menstrual blood is disgusting because of its tie to the feminine, which is socially devalued in favor of the masculine, and because of its potential power to disrupt. To make up for this, girls are supposed to hide the (disgusting) fact that they menstruate. This need for concealment goes beyond just hiding menstrual blood, however, and extends to everything connected – in any way – to menstruation. A significant part of this, to girls, is to hide any potential smell caused by menstrual blood. As Karen Gravelle’s body guide The Period Book repeatedly states, a girl needs to change her pad frequently “even if they aren’t in danger of soaking through,” to avoid the “obnoxious odor
announcing to everyone that they’re having their period!” (49, 52-3). As I stated above, advertisements point out the need to hide the cramps as a symptom of menstruation. The need to hide menstruation, together with the capitalist need for endless consumption, leads to the “natural” notion that cleanliness and social acceptability requires that women buy disposable menstrual products. Girls learn this early.

Further, it is considered rude to talk about menstruation in public, especially in front of the opposite sex. Boys and men (and many pre-menstrual girls) must be protected from knowledge about menstruation. Several of the embarrassing stories in magazines center around girls’ used feminine hygiene products being brought out into the open, thus “proving” that they were menstruating. In most of these cases, girls were embarrassed because their (potential) boyfriends were witnesses (Twist 16, Cosmogirl April 34). Further, many girls and women feel uncomfortable discussing menstruation even in all-female environments. Ponton quotes a female pediatrician who, in an all-female attended meeting about teaching children about menstruation, stated “It is only natural that girls feel embarrassed about their periods and want to hide it. It is embarrassing. We have all had ‘accidents.’ We don’t want that to happen to them, so we teach them how to avoid it. This is a medical problem. We should not be talking about feelings […] It is not meant to be shared. That is embarrassing” (36). Finally, girls must conceal even the menstrual products themselves. Tampax offers one tampon called “Tampax Compak.” The advertised benefit of this particular tampon is that it’s applicator is “discrete” and “fits into the palm of your hand” (Tampax). Another Tampax product, the “Tampax Pearl,” advertises that its wrapper will not make loud noises in the bathroom when opened (Tampax). Embarrassing anecdotes in magazines and advertisements for menstrual products support this uneasiness. Girls do not know why they hide everything to do with their menstrual cycle other than the fact that
they have been taught that it is “dirty.” Kristeva calls this the “mapping of the self’s clean and proper body” (72).

The Unruly Body: Rowe and Butler

Kathleen Rowe believes many taboos are tied to the female body because of the belief that its reproductive functions could become “unruly.” As she states, “The identification of women with reproduction has rarely worked to their advantage” (Rowe 34). The ability to reproduce is seen as powerful and potentially overwhelming and frightening. All too easily, women could realize this power and become what Rowe calls “unruly women” who create “disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men,” allowing their bodies to become “excessive or fat, suggesting (their) unwillingness or inability to control physical appetites” or speaking excessively and loudly (31). Rowe differentiates between this unruly, or “grotesque” body and the classical, or “bourgeois” body, writing that “Ideology holds that the ‘well-adjusted’ woman has what Helene Cixous has described as ‘divine composure.’ She is silent, static, invisible – ‘composed’ and ‘divinely’ apart from the hurly-burly of life, process, and social power” (Rowe 31). The “well-adjusted” woman must have the classical body which conceals the processes that the grotesque body revels in and reveals (Rowe 33). Rowe echoes Kristeva’s language about the borders of the internal and external when she states, “The grotesque body is above all the female body, the maternal body, which, through menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, participates uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of ‘becoming,’ of inside-out and outside-in, death-in-life and life-in-death” (34, emphasis in original). Finally, the unruly woman is “associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence” (Rowe 31). Where the classical, static body can be categorized instantly, the unruly, changeable body cannot.
Judith Butler takes Kristeva’s and Rowe’s arguments one step further, explaining that social groups reinforce the differences between the internal and external (which menstruation threatens) “through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness” (134). The menstrual blood that was once part of the girl now becomes something dirty and “gross,” something girls must deny was ever part of them. This denial happens for the purposes of social regulation and control. The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit (Butler 134-5).

Just as girls must deny that the menstrual blood was ever a part of them, they also learn to exclude people who cannot or will not function within society’s limits. The power of embarrassing stories in guides and magazines, then, is to remind girls that, if they cannot (or will not) control their bodies, they can be socially excluded. Further, it teaches girls that they must – to remain acceptable – exclude others deemed unacceptable. Girls are not only regulated by how they behave, but the behaviors they accept in others. This social control extends to every area of a girl’s life, including regulating her body, her actions and her sexuality, but, in many ways, it begins with menstruation.

**Menstruation and Ambivalence**

We do not only view menstruation as filth, however. Part of what makes the “filthiness” of menstruation necessary is its potential power to create life, a part of traditional femininity that

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20 This can also be seen in more extreme cases, where girls who have had babies somehow repress the knowledge that they have ever been pregnant.
has been as valorized as it has been feared. Both the magazines and the body guides included in this study at least make motions towards trying to end the traditional connection of menstruation and filth, but in the end, the body guides view menstruation ambivalently. In the introduction to her book, *The What’s Happening to My Body? Book for Girls*, Lynda Madaras tells parents that they need to examine their internalized ideas about the grossness of menstruation, so that they do not accidentally pass on these ideas to their children. She advises parents, especially mothers, to be honest about how they were brought up to think about their periods so that they do not confuse their daughters when they send out conflicting messages. Madaras writes,

> Even if we are conscious of [internalized uneasiness about menstruation] and decide that it is time that this deplorable situation was dealt with, the taboos and our cultural embarrassment about menstruation may still take their toll. Wanting our daughters to have a positive view of their natural bodily functions, particularly if we have suffered in this area, we summon up our courage and carefully rehearse the proper lines. Intent upon improving the script our mothers wrote for us, we boldly announce to our daughters:

> “Menstruation Is a Wonderful Part of Being a Woman, a Unique Ability of Which You Should Be Proud.” At the same time, none of us would think of hiding our toothbrushes under the sink or in the back corners of the bathroom cupboard, yet it is rare to find a box of sanitary napkins prominently displayed (xxiv).

Most of the body guides and magazines try to break the connection between menstruation and filth by stressing its normalcy, both by saying that every girl gets her period\(^{21}\) and that every girl’s body has its own, normal, timetable for menstrual events. Statements such as, “You may have your first period at any time between the ages of eight and seventeen, and whatever age you

\(^{21}\) These texts all define “girl” and “woman” as originally and biologically female, and “female” as a person who has the potential to bear children.
are, that’s what is normal for you” (Blackstone and Guest 69, 71) or “Each girl’s body develops according to her own special timetable. That means that each of us begins to menstruate when the time is right – for us” (Jukes Growing Up 43) are fairly common.

Authors try to comfort readers by reminding them that every girl has an individual timetable, and that their timetable may not match up with their friends’. Jukes states that she began her period much later than many of her friends, and that this “began to interfere with the image I had of myself as a leader. […] At that point in my life, I had already been taught by my older brother how to drive a Packard and fly a Piper Cub plane” (Girl Thing 11). She suggests that it is also normal that “girls who begin changes early sometimes feel ‘different’ from the other girls” (Jukes Growing Up 7), and stresses that this is not so. Ponton also notes that it is important to point out the large range of what constitutes “normality” to adolescents and pre-adolescents, because one overriding anxiety within adolescence is the fear that one is not “normal” (144).

Jukes repeatedly suggests that girls talk to a trusted friend or adult about how they feel about menstruation because, “sharing feelings with those we trust can be very comforting” (Jukes Growing Up 7). Jukes wants to end the silence around menstruation, and reminds her readers that “just because something’s private doesn’t mean it’s secret. It’s reassuring to talk and think and read about things to do with growing up” (Growing Up 4). Ponton believes that simply ending the silence around menstruation would help girls (and boys). She states that “potentially the introduction of this important topic to both boys and girls offers an opportunity to introduce positive elements and to erase secrecy, a process that has not yet happened” (Ponton 42). Ending this secrecy is important because “both silence and ‘taboos’ dim our understanding of the
important subject of menarche. The lack of light on this topic is reflected further in our overall understanding of the entire process of menstruation, not just the first step” (Ponton 43).

Both Ponton and Madaras also emphasize the importance of discussing a girl’s period with her father or other trusted male relative. Ponton states that

Fathers parenting daughters need to become knowledgeable about menstruation if they are not already. Divorced and alternative families have increased the possibility that Dad will be the only available adult in a girl’s life at this special time when it is important to be able to ‘share the news’ and feel that it will be warmly received. Sharing in this event with a daughter contributes to closeness for fathers and mothers alike (43).

Madaras agrees, urging her readers not to “write your dad off just because he’s a man. Guys know about these things, too” (Madaras What’s Happening? 164). Body guides attempt to increase girls’ knowledge about their own bodies, ending the silence and, hopefully, changing the negative attitudes many girls have about their bodies. As Jukes states, “It’s helpful to know what causes menstruation to begin, how it feels, and how pads and tampons are used. It’s reassuring to know in advance what to expect when you begin your first period” (Growing Up 44).

Body guides, then, try to reclaim menstruation by giving girls information about their reproductive anatomy and how menstruation works. All of the guides offer at least basic anatomical information, and some include extensive diagrams. In deference to their young readers, the authors include very basic anatomical statements that older readers take for granted, such as the fact that babies grow in a woman’s uterus and not in her stomach (Jukes Growing Up 35), before moving on to more detailed information. Jukes and Madaras both suggest that girls

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22 Part and parcel of Jukes’ normalization of menstruation, you will notice, includes normalizing the use of disposable menstrual products.
look at their “private parts” in a mirror (Jukes Growing Up 34, Madaras What’s Happening? 68).

Madaras includes an illustration of how to do this, a helpful addition since this is a somewhat awkward position (What’s Happening? 68). Madaras writes more extensively than the other guides about the positive aspects of female anatomy. She states,

There is nothing terrible or dirty about the vulva. Some people may feel uneasy because it is a sexual part of the body, and they’re uncomfortable with anything that has to do with sex. Other people think the genitals are dirty because the openings through which urine and feces leave our bodies are in this area. But our mouths usually have more germs than this area of our bodies (Madaras What’s Happening? 70).

She then goes on to suggest that, if a girl feels comfortable doing so, she should continue looking at herself in the mirror as she reads the chapter on external anatomy so that she can match up the illustrations to herself (Madaras What’s Happening? 70). Madaras also includes illustrations of many different shapes of vulvas (What’s Happening? 72). At the same time, though, Madaras feels the need to cushion this with, “If you don’t feel okay about touching or looking at your genitals, that’s fine. Just read these pages and look at the drawings. We don’t want you to do anything you don’t feel okay doing” (What’s Happening? 70). We do, after all, live in a society that encourages girls to feel ashamed of their bodies, and the writers of the guides must take this into account.

In contrast, the instruction booklet offered in the Tampax Learner’s Kit makes no effort to normalize female anatomy, because doing so does not help it sell menstrual products. The only illustration of the uterus and vagina in this booklet includes a tampon, naturalizing the tampon’s place in a woman’s body (Tampax 3, figure five). While the illustration of the vulva does not include a tampon string, it is simplified to the point where it is represented by a
concentric set of ovals (Tampax 4, figure six). Compare this picture to an illustration of the vulva from *The Period Book*. Although the illustration is cartoonish, it does offer girls more information about their anatomy – girls could match parts of their vulvas to the one represented in the picture (Gravelle 16, figure seven). Tampax does not need girls to know about their anatomy, other than where the tampon goes, to sell their product. For them, normalizing female anatomy to disconnect it from filth may actually harm their business, since it might make girls less likely to use their “discrete” method of menstrual control.

**Medical Metaphors of Menstruation: Martin**

Even though body guide authors include medical and anatomical information in their books to help empower girls, they need to be careful with the type of language they use to describe menstruation. No matter how much the authors may want to empower girls with this information, they can sabotage their goals through the words they use. In her book *The Woman in the Body*, Emily Martin performs an ethnographic study of American women’s attitudes about menstruation and menopause. She believes that, especially for upper- and middle-class women, attitudes about menstruation are formed by the medical information given in school and popular culture. In her book, Martin examines the language medical and biology textbooks use to describe menstruation. Both Martin and Ponton found that the model used to teach about menstruation uses medical language. Ponton states that “Audiovisual aids, which are used most frequently in school-based educational programs, often take a hygienic approach and do not stress individual, cultural or emotional meanings” (42). Brumberg adds that

The medicalization of menarche meant that, in the twentieth century, doctors shared with women the important job of socializing adolescent girls about their bodies. What physicians did not acknowledge, of course, was their own self-interest: by establishing
themselves as experts in the management of menarche and menstruation, they enlarged the constituency for their services and filled their waiting rooms with women of a wider age range than ever before (34).

As Brumberg points out, giving girls information about their bodies is a good thing. However, “we need to think about how girls learn about their bodies and whose interests inform the presentation of this critical information” (Brumberg 53). Under the model we currently use, it does not seem that the interests of girls are being well-served.

Martin further finds that most medical models of menstruation begin with the metaphor of the body as factory. In this metaphor, the body’s goal is to produce. For women, this goal includes the production of children (Martin 37). Because of this, the female reproductive system “is seen as organized for a single preeminent purpose: ‘transport’ of the egg along its journey from the ovary to the uterus and preparation of an appropriate place for the egg to grow if it is fertilized” (Martin 44). Medical books include statements such as, “Female reproductive functions can be divided into two major phases: first, preparation of the female body for conception and gestation, and second, the period of gestation itself” (Arthur Guyton, qtd. in Martin 44). With pregnancy as the only goal of a woman’s reproductive system, “it should be no surprise that when a fertilized egg does not implant, these texts describe the next event in very negative terms” (Martin 45). She continues,

The fall in blood progesterone and estrogen “deprives” the “highly developed endometrial lining of its hormonal support,” “constriction” of blood vessels leads to a “diminished” supply of oxygen and nutrients, and finally “disintegration starts, the entire lining begins to slough, and the menstrual flow begins.” Blood vessels in the endometrium “hemorrhage” and the menstrual flow “consists of this blood mixed with
endometrial debris.” The “loss” of hormonal stimulation causes “necrosis” (death of tissue) (Martin 45).

Martin believes these medical models are so formational because “medical culture has a powerful system of socialization which exacts conformity as the price of participation. It is also a cultural system whose ideas and practices pervade popular culture and in which, therefore, we all participate to some degree” (Martin 13). Ponton would add that medical language gives us the necessary distance to discuss potentially uncomfortable subjects (33). In so doing, our discomfort with the subject is preserved. Obviously, then, the medical model of “seeing menstruation as failed production contribute[s] to our negative view of it” (Martin 45).

Taking the metaphor of the factory to its logical conclusion, menstrual blood is a useless product, “unsalable, wasted, scrap” (Martin 46), or, as Butler and Kristeva would term it, shit. Menstruation becomes a (subconscious) monthly reminder of failure – no wonder some girls and women dread it! Martin further adds that, “perhaps one reason the negative image of failed production is attached to menstruation is precisely that women are in some sinister sense out of control when they menstruate. They are not reproducing, not continuing the species, not preparing to stay at home with the baby, not providing a safe, warm womb to nurture a man’s sperm” (47). Because of this, Martin finds it “plain that the negative power behind the image of failure to produce can be considerable when applied metaphorically to women’s bodies” (47).

Magazines rarely get into the mechanics of menstruation other than to recommend commercially available products, but body guides spend a great deal of time explaining menstruation to their readers. Although it is obvious that they are trying to describe menstruation in neutral or positive terms, they often fall into the failed production metaphor, an odd rhetorical device to use when writing for young girls. In Jukes’ book Growing Up: It’s a
Girl Thing, she talks about menstruation in fairly neutral terms. She writes, “About once a month an egg will pop out of an ovary, be caught and swept into a Fallopian tube, and will tumble down into her uterus. Since the egg will not be fertilized, the uterus will shed its lining … and this will happen month after month … and year after year until she grows into a woman” (Growing Up 43). In this, Jukes sees menstruation, not pregnancy, as the logical and hoped for conclusion of the reproductive cycle. Jukes also stresses that, “A girl’s reproductive system begins to work years before she is actually ready to be a mom” (Growing Up 32, emphasis in original). In her book for slightly older girls, called It’s a Girl Thing: How to Stay Healthy, Safe and in Charge, Jukes changes her language, though. She writes, “Once a girl goes through puberty, her uterus makes a special lining of bloody tissue every month to prepare for a possible pregnancy. […] If a woman or girl isn’t pregnant, the lining of her uterus isn’t needed to nourish an embryo, and the lining is released” (Jukes Girl Thing 15). She continues, “If the egg isn’t fertilized, it disintegrates when it reaches the uterus” (Jukes Girl Thing 17). In this selection, Jukes language conforms closely to the language mentioned by Martin. Margaret Blackstone and Elissa Haden Guest’s Girl Stuff: a Survival Guide to Growing Up follows much of the same pattern. They begin by mentioning that, “from when you are about eight or even younger, your body starts getting ready for the time you will be able to reproduce or have a baby” (Blackstone and Guest 61). Although Blackstone and Guest are careful to point out that “this does not mean there’s a rule that says you must have a baby one day; it only means that your body is getting ready should you decide to do so” (Blackstone and Guest 61), they follow with the odd suggestion that the girl “picture the inside of your body just prior to puberty as a darkened room” that is designed to hold a baby (Blackstone and Guest 61). Blackstone and Guest continue their mixed message throughout. They follow the factory metaphor by
mentioning that “when a girl ovulates (releases an egg), her uterus has been busy building up a thick lining of blood and tissue, which would become home to an egg if it were fertilized by a sperm. Most of the time the egg isn’t fertilized, so this rich nutrient-filled lining is not needed. So, the lining begins to break down and drip out of the vagina” (Blackstone and Guest 65). Then they follow by stating that, “menstruation is a cleansing process for your uterus” (Blackstone and Guest 65). The authors cannot decide if menstruation is the failure of the body to become pregnant or a routine “cleansing process.”

The Care and Keeping of You also views menstruation ambiguously. Unable to decide if “periods are a sign that your body is healthy and working properly” (Shaefer 70), or merely the result of a failure to become pregnant, the guide uses much of the language of the failed production model. Schafer writes that when young girls menstruate, their bodies are “preparing to do the grown-up work of having a baby someday. Every month your body practices for this by building a ‘nest,’ a place for a baby to grow inside your uterus. The nest is a lining of blood and other fluid that builds up on the uterus walls” (70). When a girl does not become pregnant, “the lining is shed and you have a period” (Schaefer 70).

Lynda Madaras, in her book My Body, Myself for Girls, provides the most neutral description of menstruation, though she still slips into the failed production metaphor at times. Madaras begins her discussion of menstruation by stating,

Of course, you’re not ready to be a parent yet and probably won’t be for some years. Even when you are ready, it’s unlikely that you’ll want to keep having children one right after the other. You won’t be trying to get pregnant each and every month! Nonetheless, the monthly cycle of changes that prepare your body for pregnancy is repeated over and
over again, month after month, throughout a woman’s reproductive years, so your body will be ready if and when you decide to have a baby (Body 74).

In this, then, Madaras describes menstruation as a process of preparation, but a process that does not necessarily have an end goal. Later, though, Madaras still manages to fall into the same trap mentioned by Martin. She writes,

Most of the time the woman’s ovum is not fertilized and she does not become pregnant.

So, about two weeks after ovulation, the newly grown portion of the uterine lining begins to break down. The tissues of the lining disintegrate, and pieces of the lining collect in the bottom of the uterus. This collection of blood and tissue is known as the menstrual flow, menstrual blood or menstrual discharge (Madaras Body 78).

Throughout, the body guides use words like “break down” and “disintegrate,” both negatively-charged terms that tend to equate menstruation with the failure to reproduce. According to Martin, the failed production metaphor reinforces both capitalism (via the need to produce constantly) and the patriarchy (via the need to control women’s bodies). Otherwise, the metaphor would not have such power in a society where most women strive to avoid pregnancy most of the time. Because of this, Brumberg stresses the need to question the type of information given to girls about their bodies. She writes that “the long-term consequences of demystifying the process of menstruation, however, are not entirely benign. On the one hand, American girls are more knowledgeable about their bodies. […] Unfortunately, though, more information does not always translate into a real understanding of one’s own body” (Brumberg 52-53). Instead of giving girls information about their bodies, we give them information about the relationship of hygiene and consumerism.
To compete with this model, Martin would like us to think of the menstrual cycle as just that: a cycle of events whose purpose is to induce menstruation. The language introducing such a perspective could read like this:

A drop in the formerly high levels of progesterone and estrogen creates the appropriate environment for reducing the excess layers of endometrial tissue. Constriction of capillary blood vessels causes a lower level of oxygen and nutrients and paves the way for a vigorous production of menstrual fluids. As a part of the renewal of the remaining endometrium, the capillaries begin to reopen, contributing some blood and serous fluid to the volume of endometrial material already beginning to flow (Martin 52).

Rather than looking at pregnancy as the hoped-for goal of the cycle, and menstruation as something that thwarts that goal, then, we could write about menstruation as the usually hoped-for goal and pregnancy as something that may block menstruation from occurring. It would seem more logical for body guides aimed at pre-teen girls to write about menstruation in this way rather than using the failed production metaphor, especially because all of the authors agree that their readers should avoid pregnancy until they are “grown up.” Their use of the failed production metaphor, then, serves to reflect society’s ambivalence towards the reproductive potential of young girls. While society fears the “menace” that is teen pregnancy, it also fears a potentially reproductive female who chooses, whether by being celibate or through the use of birth control, to opt out of the production of offspring.
Disconnecting Menstruation from Filth: Non-disposable Products

The separation from menstruation and constant consumption of disposable products is another way to separate menstruation from filth. Madaras introduces her discussion of menstrual products by calling them “menstrual protection products,” and then making the parenthetical joke, “(Makes it sound like your period is going to attack you, doesn’t it?)” (What’s Happening? 166). She discusses all of the mainstream products mentioned in the other sources, but continues with a discussion of less wasteful alternatives. Madaras first brings up the commercially available Glad Rags, white cotton cloth pads that are worn and then washed and reused. She writes, “A small but growing number of women are using cloth pads. They feel it’s a matter of personal responsibility for the environment. They also argue that cloth pads are a healthier choice for women. Some of the companies selling these pads make them of organic cotton” (Madaras What’s Happening? 173). When talking about how to clean these rags and how to use them in school (where girls would have to carry around used rags until they could bring them home), Madaras downplays the dirty nature of menstrual blood, writing about it as something that every girl produces, and something that no girl should be embarrassed about (What’s Happening? 173). Madaras also teaches girls how to use The Keeper, a flexible cup that fits just below the cervix to collect blood internally. According to Madaras, the manufacturer of The Keeper says their product lasts for up to ten years (What’s Happening? 185). Although Madaras still talks about disposable products, she does try to get girls thinking about the ecological costs of using disposable methods and offers less wasteful alternatives. By refusing to focus entirely on disposable solutions to the “problem” of menstruation, Madaras tries to lessen the “dirty” or “disgusting” connotation of menstrual blood.

23 Other guides discuss the use of alternate methods of catching menstrual flow, but only for emergencies. See Jukes Growing Up 51, 67 for examples.
**You’re Still a Kid…**

The connection of menstrual blood with filth, failure and loss of boundaries, of course, is not our only source of anxiety about menstruation. Children and adults both worry because the onset of menstruation means that, at least physically, girls have reached sexual maturity. Girls and adults share the same fears about menstruation: that it means that girls will have to start acting like grown-up women. Authors address both fears. Schafer tells her readers that “there’s a lot more to being an adult than getting your period and growing breasts” (81). Blackstone and Guest state, “When you start your period, will everything change? No. Will some things change? Yes. You’ll have new things to pay attention to. But the sooner you say, ‘Hey, this is my period and that’s the way it’s going to be,’ the better for you” (82). Madaras quotes a fifteen-year-old girl named Janelle, who said, “I was afraid I was going to have to be all grown up and wear high heels all the time instead of being a tomboy and climbing trees, but, really, it turned out that I did just the same things I always did” (*What’s Happening?* 59). Jukes makes the most extensive statements on this subject, repeating throughout her book that puberty does not mean girls achieve instant womanhood. She begins her introduction with “No matter when a girl begins to go through puberty, she will still be a kid. Having breasts and hair in private places and having a period won’t change that. She will not be a woman for a very, *very* long time. She will not be expected to act like a grownup and will not be treated like one” (*Growing Up* vi). She ends with a statement echoing the one from her introduction, that

Beginning to have periods is a big step toward becoming an adult woman, but only so far as the body is concerned. When a girl starts her period, someone might tell her, ‘You’re a woman now!’ But she isn’t really. And she won’t be for a long time. A girl stays a kid the
whole way through puberty and past it. […] She’ll still be a kid, entitled to the love, care and protection of the adults around her (Jukes Growing Up 69).

Clearly, these authors worry – and assume their readers also worry – about connecting the onset of menstruation with immediate entry into adulthood, and for good reason.

One way to disconnect menses from being completely “grown up” and also make girls feel more positive about their menstrual cycles could be to turn menarche into a rite of passage. By producing packages such as the learner’s kit, Tampax hopes to make buying their first box of tampons into a commercial rite of passage for girls, one that solidifies the relationship between menstruation, filth and consumption. Obviously, then, not all rites of passage are made equal.

What’s Happening to My Body? and Girl Stuff also suggest that girls make their first period into a rite of passage, but these rites take a far different form. Blackstone and Guest do not give girls a specific form for their rite of passage to take, but they do state that some girls enjoy celebrating “with their families and friends when they get their periods for the first time” (82). These authors feel the need to add, though, that “on the other hand, you may feel very private about it and decide you don’t want to tell anyone but your mother or father” (Blackstone and Guest 83). Madaras is more insistent that the onset of menstruation deserves a celebration. She writes that, in India, girls get a party where they wear a crown, sit on a type of throne and receive gifts. While she doubts that most parents would go along with this, she suggests that girls “invent a special moonlight ceremony, have a slumber party with all your female friends, or be given a ring or special gift to be passed on to the next generation. It could be anything” (Madaras What’s Happening? 165). Her rite of passage focuses less on becoming a consumer and more on making a girl’s first period a celebratory experience. Ponton believes that menstrual rites of passage are important, not only to make girls feel more positive about starting their periods, but also about
themselves in general. She states, “I believe that younger teens feel betrayed by [the] lack of attention, even neglect, for their developmental milestones, and have slowly but surely developed their own initiation rites. Among these, the onset of sexual activity is the most obvious” (Ponton 42). When society does not sanction rites of passage for children, then, they develop their own. These rites may not be healthy or desirable.

**Conclusion**

Menstruation’s connection with filth and shame is perpetuated through our culture’s continued silence about it. At the moment, menstruation is almost completely erased in television shows and films aimed at tweens. Unfortunately, one can certainly not imagine *Lizzie McGuire* or *Raven* discussing their protagonists’ entry into womanhood. One of the few representations of menarche occurs on *Degrassi: The Next Generation* when Emma, one of the show’s main characters, gets her first period at school. I will give a rather lengthy synopsis of this episode because I believe it offers a positive – and better – *useful* representation of menstruation for tweens. The episode, titled “Coming of Age,” begins rather humorously by depicting Emma’s pre-menstrual mood swings. Emma only learns that she has started her period when she stains her skirt at school. When Emma expresses her dismay, her best friend, Manny, tries to cheer her up by stating that “We should celebrate!” The two girls make it to the restroom, but are not certain how to deal with Emma’s bloody clothes. Emma cannot go home to change because she has a presentation in the next class, which makes her complain that “I am so not ready for this.” Paige, a popular older girl who is usually mean to Emma and Manny, helps Emma by lending her a pad and telling her to get clean clothes out of the school’s lost and found. She also

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24 In another episode of *Degrassi*, called “Weird Science,” the show dealt with puberty issues for boys, including spontaneous erections at school.
reassures Emma that getting her period does not mean that Emma has to act like the ultra-feminine Paige.

Unfortunately, the clothes from the lost and found are rather ridiculous. Back in class, some boys notice the change of clothes and make fun of her, accusing her of “peeing her pants.” Rather than becoming embarrassed, Emma retorts that “No, I just started my period, something that happens with fifty percent of the population!” At this statement, the boys get embarrassed and stop making fun of her. One boy, Sean, looks impressed. Her courage makes Emma attractive to him, and soon the couple is dating. Interestingly, this is also the episode where Emma first names herself a feminist, and the show connects her feminism with her ultimate acceptance of her period.

While Emma is at first embarrassed by her period, she refuses to remain so. Through the support of the other girls at her school, Emma learns how to deal with and even celebrate her changing body. Even though she is “not ready for this” and even expresses distaste at the thought of “growing boobs,” by the end of the episode she learns to claim her period publicly rather than shamefully hiding it, as girls are usually coerced into doing. Not only does this public claim not make her unacceptable to her peers, it also makes her more attractive to the boy she desires. Rather than depicting the period as something with the potential to scare boys away, then, *Degrassi* says that, if girls express themselves with confidence, boys will actually find them more attractive.

As Currie states, “For cultural studies to be truly critical, it must show how the ideology of commercial culture is constitutive of everyday relations, including gendered relations of domination and subordination” (142). Women’s everyday, naturalized practice of concealing menstruation begins even before our cycles start, and continues throughout our fertile years.
Girls learn mixed messages about menstruation from their families and friends, from body guides and magazines, and practice these attitudes by both “protecting” themselves and others from their periods with menstrual products and (perhaps) celebrating their periods as wonderful, natural events. Learning to contain periods in acceptable ways through consuming disposable products becomes one early, important step in teaching girls how to contain their entire bodies through the practice of consumption, and conform, to some extent, to the “classical” body ideal. In other words, the way we feel about menstruation is one of the foundations of the way we feel about our bodies in general. Interrogating this learning process can begin the process of changing the messages girls internalize about their bodies. Before we can help girls (and women) feel better about their bodies as a whole, we need to help them find more constructive ways to think about menstruation. One important way to do this would be to follow the example offered in *Degrassi* by talking more openly about menarche and menstruation in the media. Another text that could help girls talk more openly about their bodies is Judy Blume’s classic book, *Are You there, God? It’s Me, Margaret*. Even this text has come under fire, however, as evidenced by its place on the American Library Association’s “100 Most Frequently Challenged Books, 1990-2000” (ALA). The list includes the books that the public most commonly wants to ban from public libraries, and points to the fact that many adults – both parents and non-parents – simply do not want children to learn about their own (and other children’s) bodies. Ponton also suggests interviewing older girls and asking them what, and by what methods, they wished they had learned about their periods. The girls that she interviewed emphasized the need for emotional support and assurance that menstruation was normal and healthy, not bad, frightening, and embarrassing. They stressed the importance of

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25 Blume has 5 books on the list, with *Are You there, God?* At #62. Interestingly, Linda Madaras’ *What’s Happening to My Body? Book for Girls* is #40 and her companion book for boys is #61.
educating girls about the pragmatic aspects of tampons and hygiene, but underscored that hearing about the subjective experience, ‘how it actually felt,’ from women who had gone through it, would have made a tremendous difference, while downplaying the biological aspects and the link between menstruation and self-definition as a woman (Ponton 41).

While body guides do a fairly good job of providing information about the biological aspects of a girl’s period, more needs to be done to teach girls about “how it actually feels.” Girls need to learn how to pay attention to and then describe the internal changes brought about by her period. What does her period mean to her, personally? How has her identity changed because of her period? What does it mean to grow up? Who does she want to become? A large part of this is the simple opening of the dialogue about menstruation within “polite” society. Only when girls – and boys – can talk comfortably about their bodies can we begin to change how those bodies are viewed. Right now, “the sanitary products industry dominates the experience of sexual maturation in America” (Brumberg 53), making hygienic discourse the only acceptable model for girls to use when conceptualizing their bodies. Because of this, “the postwar sanitary products industry paved the way for the commercialization of other areas of the body, such as skin, hair, and breasts – all of great concern to developing girls” (Brumberg 54). Not only do girls learn to look to consumerism to solve the problem of their bodies, they also learn that their bodies are, themselves, commodified objects. By explicitly connecting a girl’s period only to its external effects, and ignoring any internal, cultural, or spiritual effects, girls learn that only the way her outside looks is important. As Blumberg states, “In a world where the female body is sexualized so early and the stakes are so high, it now seems obvious that it is not enough to teach
girls how to be clean and dainty” (55). The stakes involved in the way a girl conceptualizes and talks about her period are much higher than merely being “open” about one’s own body.
Chapter Four – *Lolita* and Tween Sexuality

“People can refer to a six or to a twenty-six-year-old as ‘the Lolita type,’ and everyone understands what is meant. In a child, it suggests a feminine coquettishness and a hint of sensuality well beyond one’s years. In a grown woman, it hints at a childish coyness, and immaturity of both character and appearance” (Sinclair 5).

Lolita hangs like a pall over every tween girl’s sexuality. Even people who have never read Nabokov’s classic novel know what a “Lolita” is. Lolita is the sexually knowing, and sexually available child. More specifically, her sexuality is offered up to older men. Elizabeth Patnoe, author of “Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed,” traced the meaning of the name Lolita over time. In the 1960s, Lolita was still defined as simply a girl’s name. By the 90s, however, “Lolita” meant “a seductive adolescent girl” (Patnoe “Lolita”), an example, surely, of Ellen Pifer’s claim that “a culture’s literary treatment of the child […] informs its literal conduct” (Pifer 1). In other words, the Lolita myth has become one of the the dominant paradigms of preadolescent and young adolescent sexuality.

In this chapter, I consider the Lolita myth through an examination of mainstream and scholarly readings of Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Throughout, I argue that the mainstream reading of Lolita as a sexual predator has little to do with the character created by Nabokov. I also detail some of the more popular Lolita figures presented in tween media, such as Britney Spears and the Olsen twins. Next, I examine the phenomenon of age compression, where younger and younger children are being forced to act in older and older ways. Finally, I examine the relationship between children’s human rights and adults’ insistence that children remain asexual, and how this plays into the persistence of the Lolita myth in American popular culture.

Just as the previous chapter focused on the intimate ways marketing and popular culture were tied to girls’ experiences of their bodies during puberty, this chapter focuses on the intersections between tween girls’ sexuality and the Lolita myth. Any discussion of the tween girl in contemporary American society has to at least gesture towards pre-adolescent and young
adolescent girl sexuality, especially given the fact that girls are depicted in ever more sexualized ways by the mainstream media. As never before, sex is being used to sell products to children, and this marketing technique may be teaching children to view themselves as sexual objects.

In her study of sexualized images of young girls in advertising, Debra Merskin writes that, “simultaneously repulsive and fascinating, mediated portrayals of young girls as inviting and willing participants in their own sexual exploitation have fueled many a male fantasy. Sexualized images of girls are not only found between the covers of books,” but are present throughout Western culture (Merskin 119). Producing such images of young girls “appropriates them for male consumption” (Merskin 120). In media aimed at tweens, the music world offers Britney Spears, whose explicitly Lolita-esque image has fueled record sales. In other media, tween celebrities such as the Olsen twins, Hilary Duff and Lindsay Lohan are seen as Lolitas whether they claim the label or not. Even the covers of tween magazines tout the need for “sexy” hairstyles or back-to-school outfits; a move which many interpret as girls turning themselves into Lolita clones.

Debra Merskin reminds us that while “sexuality is an essential component of adolescent curiosity,” it is also “a time of conflicting demands – she should appeal to boys, but not too much; appear vampish, but be virginal. While her ‘parts’ – breasts, hips – are developing, she is also learning what those parts do, are expected to do, and what behaviors accompany becoming feminine in American society” (Merskin 125). Because of this, “on the inside, she might be shy, innocent, and insecure. […] The self she shows to the world might be seductively posed, use seductive language, and her appearance might be suggestive” (Merskin 125). When girls act assured about their sexuality in this way, they may merely be trying to satisfy society’s demands on them on the outside, while trying to figure things out internally. Because of this, though tween
expressions of sexuality cannot be viewed immediately as actual sexual invitation, mainstream conceptions of tween sexuality prefers to see them that way. In this way, any girl who expresses herself sexually is seen as a Lolita. Further, popular culture offers girls no models of healthy, age-appropriate sexual expressions.

How did this version of Lolita come to dominate the pre-adolescent sexuality of girls? As Elizabeth Patnoe asks, “Why didn’t the Lolita myth evolve in a way that more accurately reflects Nabokov’s Lolita? Why isn’t the definition of ‘Lolita’ ‘a molested adolescent girl’ instead of a ‘seductive’ one?” (Patnoe “Lolita”). How can we remove Lolita from tween sexuality? What might it look like then? When studying the Lolita myth and its effects – and indeed, when studying pre-adolescent and adolescent sexuality in general – it is important to remember that sexuality is an important part of every stage of life. We should not expect children to be asexual, or label all tween sexuality as inherently “bad” or pathological. Instead, we should ask questions such as: To whom (if anyone) is a girl’s sexuality aimed? How does expressing her sexuality in this way benefit or harm this girl? In what ways can a girl express her sexuality so as to have healthy and fulfilling sexual relationships, now or in the future?

**Common Reading of Lolita**

Even before its first publication, Nabokov’s *Lolita* generated controversy. First published in France in 1955 (and banned the next year by the French government) because no American publisher wanted to be connected to the novel’s potentially “obscene” subject matter, *Lolita* was not published in the United States until 1958. Once published in the US, *Lolita* became the fastest selling book since *Gone with the Wind* (Edmunds “Lolita”). Jeff Edmunds, author of “*Lolita: Complex, Often Tricky, and ‘a Hard Sell,’” believes that not much of the American public actually finished the novel when it was first published (or, as he puts it, “only the most
fanatical Philistine, intent on ferreting out every incidence of filth, was likely to read it to the end”), which may partially explain the popular conception of Lolita (“Lolita”). However, he believes that the two film adaptations of the novel, in 1962 and 1997, were hugely influential because “even the laziest prude can sit through a film” (Edmunds “Lolita”). The novel follows Humbert Humbert, an adult, European man who moves in with the American Dolores Haze and her twelve-year-old daughter, Dolly. Humbert becomes infatuated with Dolly, whom he renames Lolita, and marries Dolores to remain near her daughter. Just as Dolores discovers Humbert’s pedophilic attraction to her daughter, she is hit by a car and dies. At this point, Humbert takes Lolita away from her hometown and on a series of extended road trips across America. During this road trip, Humbert is either seduced by Lolita or coerces Lolita into having a sexual relationship with him (this is the subject of much of the debate I will detail below). After being in a sexual relationship with Humbert for about a year, Lolita runs away with Clare Quilty, another sexual predator. Years later, an increasingly broken and obsessed Humbert finds a worn and pregnant Lolita, and is so disturbed by her state that he finds and kills Quilty, whom he blames for Lolita because he cannot (or will not) blame himself. Lolita dies in childbirth, and Humbert is arrested for the murder of Quilty.

As I stated above, there is debate about whether Lolita seduced and destroyed Humbert or if Humbert molested and destroyed Lolita. The popular reading of Lolita usually believes the former, and it is this reading that has informed the Lolita myth within mainstream American culture. Ellen Pifer argues in her book Demon or Doll that “Like the goddess Athena, who sprang fully formed from Zeus’ brow, Lolita is a mythical being. A figment of Humbert’s dreaming mind, the fantasized nymphet can claim no earthly genealogy or surname” (Pifer 67). The Lolita that Humbert wanted, the Lolita he pretended he had, only ever existed in his mind.
In the same way, “instead of embracing the muted, violated Lolita, our misogynistic culture created and reified a violating Lolita” that holds little resemblance to the girl from Nabokov’s novel (Patnoe “Lolita”).

Throughout the novel, Humbert offers justifications for his molestation of Lolita. He begins with the famous statement that, “Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’” (Nabokov 18). He continues with,

Between these age limits, are all girl-children nymphets? Of course not. Otherwise, we who are in the know, we lone voyagers, we nympholepts would have long gone insane. Neither are good looks any criterion; and vulgarity, or at least what a given community terms so, does not necessarily impair certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm that separates the nymphet from such coevals of hers are incomparably more dependent on the special world of synchronous phenomena than on that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes (Nabokov 18-19).

In Humbert’s mind, the nymphet is reserved for the enjoyment of older men – in many cases, much older men. Only with this separation of age and experience can the nymphet’s charms be perceived with “perverse delight” (Nabokov 19). What attracts Humbert to nymphets in general, and Lolita in particular, is her “twofold nature,” or

this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures, from the blurry pinkness of adolescent maidservants in the Old Country (smelling of crushed daisies and
sweat); and from the very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels; and then again, all this gets mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and mud, through the dirt and death (Nabokov 46).

Childhood itself, then, is part of what excites Humbert sexually; the very act of Lolita acting her age mixed with what Humbert perceives to be the “musk and mud” of contemporary popular culture and Lolita’s own pre-adolescent sexuality.¹

Humbert names the nymphet “the little deadly demon among the wholesome children” (Nabokov 19). According to Humbert, it is not his fault if he is attracted to Lolita. Indeed, it is the fault of the girl herself, for being “unwholesome” and “demonic.” Humbert repeats this when he assures his reader that he “had the utmost respect for ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability, and under no circumstances would he have interfered with the innocence of a child, if there was the least risk of a row” (Nabokov 21-22, emphasis mine). At the same time, however, Humbert must admit that the other children do not single out the nymphet as somehow “wrong,” and the nymphet herself is “unconscious herself of her fantastic power” (Nabokov 19). Finally, Humbert asserts on several occasions that “I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever” (Nabokov 67), trying to convince the reader that he acted out of love rather than self interest or pathology.

Perhaps Nabokov writes too skillfully, because the popular reading of Lolita believes Humbert’s justifications. “In the popular mind the name Lolita has come to signify the cynical sophistication and sexual precocity, bordering on lewdness, of American – and Americanized – youth” (Pifer 65). Literary critics as famous as Leslie Fiedler believe that “It is the naïve child, the female, the American who corrupts the sophisticated adult, the male, the European.” (Fiedler

¹ As I will discuss below, Humbert uses the “taint” of Lolita’s (age-appropriate, non-pathological) sexuality as an excuse to force his (adult, pathological) sexuality upon her.
326-327). Because of this, *Lolita* becomes the story of a man destroyed by his love for a young girl, and not that of a young girl destroyed by a pedophile.

This reading of *Lolita* has infected the way popular culture depicts girls’ sexuality. Because of this reading of *Lolita*, Marianne Sinclair can make connections between the novel and actual girls, asserting that “In a sense, Lolita too was a pathological case: at twelve, she was ready to accept the advances of a middle-aged male. It is also true that a lot of very young girls are prepared, like their older sisters, to accept and even encourage the advances of older men in a position of power” (Sinclair 9). Sinclair defines the Lolita in much the same way as Humbert, writing that “The true nymphet [remains] primarily American – blue jeaned, gum chewing and naïve. She was not sexually innocent, but innocent in terms of her age and culture (or lack of it). She was cute rather than beautiful. Beauty is a term for adult women, and she did not warrant that status.” Sinclair compares the nymphet to Barbie, who “exemplified the American dream of femininity: slick, long-legged, smooth, platinum-haired and eternally young” (Sinclair 105).

Sinclair’s study of young actresses in Hollywood from the silent era up to the 1970s, *Hollywood Lolitas*, demonstrates the ambivalence surrounding the Lolita myth. Sinclair studies the ways in which young actresses have been sexualized, both on-screen and off, by the roles they have played and their celebrity lifestyles. Sinclair is unsure whom to blame for these actresses. Indeed, Sinclair is unsure about what constitutes blameworthy behavior, since she condemns both actresses such as Tuesday Weld and Linda Blair, who had sexual relationships with much older men and drug problems as teenagers, and Haylie Mills, who went so far as to join the Hare Krishnas to avoid having a sexualized image. At different points Sinclair blames the girls’ mothers (10) and the girls themselves (125). At one point she even mirrors Humbert’s language

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2 I am certainly not the first to find Fiedler’s reading of *Lolita* alarming. See also Pifer 69 and Phyllis Roth’s *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov* 13.
about nymphets, calling the girls “the devil’s daughters” who “have grown more daemonic as the years have passed” (Sinclair 125). While Sinclair continues with “In a sense, Lolita is always something of a devil’s child,” she must, like Humbert, admit that this is often “against [Lolita’s] will. She lures, however innocently, grown men into forbidden paths. […] She is Lilith, the forbidden fruit, doubly forbidden because unripe, and once tasted she can poison a whole existence” (Sinclair 125). Even though it is often not her fault, the Lolita “poisons” men’s lives – which makes it her fault. Lolita cannot escape blame.

This popular reading of Lolita was strengthened by Stanly Kubrick’s 1962 film based on the novel. As Leonard J. Leff states in his study of Hollywood censorship, The Dame in the Kimono, before the 1960s, “more than popular literature, the movies had promoted an image of children as innocents” (Leff 223). When Kubrick was trying to find a studio to produce his version of Nabokov’s novel, however, he presented studios with the idea that “the picture would concern a no-good fifteen-year-old and the older man whose life she ruined” (Leff 227). In a later interview, Kubrick was asked what he would change about the film. He answered, “If I could do the film over again, […] I would have stressed the erotic component of [Humbert and Lolita’s] relationship with the same weight Nabokov did. But that is the only major area where I believe the film is susceptible to valid criticism” (Leff 245). Kubrick saw no problem with his reading of Lolita.

Further reinforcement was given to the Lolita myth in 1992 when the media started calling Amy Fisher the “Long Island Lolita.” In 1992, after an affair with the 36 year old Joey Buttafuoco, 17 year old Fisher tried to kill Buttafuoco’s wife, Mary Jo, by shooting her in the head. Although Buttafuoco and Fisher had been in a sexual relationship for over a year, Buttafuoco had allegedly persuaded Fisher to become a prostitute, and may or may not have
suggested to Fisher that she kill his wife so that they could be together (Crime Library “Amy Fisher”), Fisher took the brunt of the blame. *Newsweek*’s T. Matthews asserted that “Once in love with Amy [Fisher], Joey [Buttafuoco] was never the same” (Mathews 65). The same article described Fisher, stating that “Amy had a walk-on-the-wild-side allure. She rinsed a cunning violet into her auburn hair and wore cutoff jeans that fit her like white on rice” (Mathews 65). To Matthews, then, even Fisher’s hair color was calculatedly diabolical. *Time* magazine’s TV reviewer Richard Corliss goes so far as to state that “everything Amy Fisher touches turns to trash” in a review of the three TV movies made about her (Corliss 47).

On Christmas Day, 1996, six-year-old JonBenet Ramsey was found murdered in her Boulder, Colorado home. The media focused attention on the case not only because of JonBenet’s youth, but also because of her participation in child beauty pageants. In these pageants, JonBenet was often dressed up to resemble a much older girl, complete with glitzy costumes and heavy makeup (figures 1 and 2). The combination of JonBenet’s youth and the adult signifiers used in her pageant costumes created a titillating picture, and led to the speculation that her mother, father, or both had molested and killed her. As of this writing, JonBenet’s killer has not been found, and many still suspect the parents.

Stephen Singular, author of the book *Presumed Guilty: an Investigation into the JonBenet Ramsey Case, the Media, and the Culture of Pornography* connects JonBenet’s murder to the larger culture of child pornography and sexual exploitation. Referring to JonBenet’s participation in beauty pageants, he states that “she was a marketable commodity so she was going to be exploited for someone's gain” (Bellamy “Interview”). One review of the book points to Singular’s “nuanced attention to an unsettling aspect of the case that he considers overlooked yet central: the gray area in which the mainstreamed commodification of children’s sexuality
collides with the abuse of child pornography” (Anonymous “Kirkus Reviews”). The review continues, stating that “JonBenet was merely one of many little girls leeringly displayed as things of beauty by the pageant industry, whose evil twin is the underground of child porn producers and collectors, hugely expanded because of the Internet” (Anonymous “Kirkus Reviews”). Singular finds the way that girls are presented in beauty pageants and in child pornography to be frighteningly similar, and points to the “extreme denial” of our society in regard to the mainstreaming of the sexual exploitation of children (Bellamy “Interview”).

Although the media hesitates to name the murdered JonBenet a Lolita, she belongs to that club. JonBenet represents both the far edges of the Lolita in terms of age and in terms of the harsh exploitations Lolitas experience. The mainstream reading of Lolita, as traced through the novel, the film and stories like Amy Fisher’s and JonBenet Ramsey’s, teaches girls that they must be sexual for the edification of older men, but that if girls are somehow harmed because of this, it is their own fault. Girls learn that they must be sexual, but that they will be punished for it. I will return to these ideas below. First, I want to trace some of the ways the Lolita myth has permeated tween popular culture.

**Tween celebrities as Lolita figures**

The tween celebrity most intimately connected to the Lolita figure is Britney Spears. Because of her fame, and the ways the media – particularly the well-known music magazine, Rolling Stone – has helped shape this image, I will present a rather extended study of Spears. Britney Spears best typifies the embodiment of the new tween celebrity pantheon. Her records and other memorabilia are purchased primarily by girls from the ages of 8-12, and rarely a month goes by that some mention of Spears is not made in teen magazines. To this audience, Spears has been marketed as the “girl-next-door” who performs songs about young love and
understands the problems they are going through because she went through them herself not too
long ago. Of course, tweens are not the only audience Spears attracts. She is also marketed to
older men as the ultimate sexual fantasy: young, athletic, pretty and exhibitionistic. Perhaps
nowhere is this facet of Spears’ image more apparent than in *Rolling Stone*. From January 20,
1999 to October 3, 2003, *Rolling Stone* mentions Spears, in some way, about one hundred times,
among them six cover stories and two “special features.” A search of *Rolling Stone*’s website,
www.rollingstone.com, gets over eight hundred hits, or instances where she is mentioned on the
site.

One reason for *Rolling Stone*’s obsession with Spears is, obviously, her sex appeal –
because sex sells. *Rolling Stone* fits somewhere between men’s magazines and entertainment
magazines, both markets currently dominated by the so-called “laddie mags.” Laddie mags
started as a British phenomenon, but they quickly crossed the Atlantic to the US. In a *Chicago
Sun-Times* article, Mike Thomas describes this genre of magazine as “low-brow, non-porn
men’s mags … [with a] precisely plotted, well laid-out blend of sex, beer, toys and humor”
(Thomas “Taking on Playboy”). *Maxim*, the magazine that perfected this template, arrived in
the US in 1999 after its successful launch in England and quickly overtook most other men’s
magazines in newsstand sales and subscriptions (Anonymous “Maxim Online Media Kit”). In
1999, *Maxim*’s average circulation was around 1.4 million. By 2002, their circulation had grown
to 2.5 million. During that time, *Rolling Stone*’s circulation stagnated at around 1.25 million
(Anonymous “Magazine Fact Sheet”). Needless to say, in *Maxim*’s formula of “cold beer and
hot babes,” *Rolling Stone* saw a winner. The magazine had always put a few women on their
covers, usually in sexualized poses, but they began to do so more often and more overtly than
ever before – and it sold. *Rolling Stone* took these new trends so seriously that, by July of 2002,
they hired Ed Needham, the former editor of “laddie mag” FHM. Among Needham’s first actions was to decrease the political content of the magazine while increasing entertainment content (Anonymous “Cover”). At the same time, other men’s magazines, including Playboy, Esquire and GQ, also changed their formats to better compete with Maxim and its like (Thomas “Taking on Playboy”). Spears’ first cover on Rolling Stone in 1999 became a part of this trend, but in a very particular way.

In a Rolling Stone review of Spears’ third album, Britney, the reviewer states, “Never has a female star courted the preteen and trench-coat crowds so simultaneously and shamelessly” (Walters “Britney”). Cherion Studios, where she recorded her first album, is called “the Lolita-pop doll house” that transformed her into “a growling jailbait dynamo” (Walters “Baby”). I argue that Rolling Stone, along with Spears’ own marketing machine, has been a guiding force behind her pseudo-pedophilic image. To discuss this, I pay special attention to Spears’ cover stories in the magazine, looking at both the text of the articles and the photographs that accompany them. Together, the text and photographs invoke the popular reading of Lolita, the highly sexualized young girl looking for the older man to help her “grow up.” At the same time, the issue of who, exactly, controls Spears’ image becomes important for how that image can be read. Through the course of Spears’ six cover stories, the overarching narrative that I find is that of the young girl growing up, gaining more control of her sexuality and her career, and thus (for Rolling Stone) becoming less attractive.

Let’s face it: Rolling Stone is not interested in Spears because of her talent. In reviews of her three albums, she has never received more than 3.5 out of 5 stars. The reviews and cover stories pay very little attention to her music, preferring instead to linger on her appearance and personal life. When they do talk about her music, they do so mostly to point out her “vocal
limitations” (Walters “Britney”). Nearly all of the major articles about Spears in *Rolling Stone* begin by describing her body – the real point of interest. Spears’ first cover story, titled “Inside the Heart, Mind (and Bedroom) of a Teen Dream” begins

> Britney Spears extends a honeyed thigh across the length of the sofa. […] Her blond-streaked hair is piled high, exposing two little diamond earrings on each ear lobe; her face is fully made-up, down to carefully applied lip liner. The baby phat logo of Spears’ pink t-shirt is distended by her ample chest, and her silky white shorts – with dark blue piping – sling snugly to her hips. She cocks her head and smiles receptively (Daly 62).

Rockrgrrl’s Carla DeSantis believes that this description speaks of Spears “as if she were a menu item at KFC” (5), and it does simultaneously objectify and commodify the singer. Of course, author Stephen Daly immediately backs down from his description – the girl he describes is only seventeen, so he couldn’t mean it that way. He writes, “But hold on. It’s not like that.” The reader has fallen into a trap. “Admittedly, that trap is carefully baited by a debut video that shows the seventeen-year-old singer cavorting around like the naughtiest of schoolgirls. But, as Spears points out, nothing is actually revealed” (Daly 62). Thus begins the dance: is she or is she not trying to turn you (the implied male reader) on? The accompanying photographs would certainly seem to suggest yes. Each photograph in this series mingles signifiers of childhood and sexuality, using one to heighten the other. The male gaze that Laura Mulvey pointed out so well for us in “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” dominates these photos – they are meant for the gaze and gratification of men.³ On the cover, Spears reclines in bed, wearing hot pants and a push up bra, talking on the phone and cradling a stuffed animal in her arm (figure 3). In another photograph, she stands in what is supposed to be her bedroom. She wears short-shorts and yet

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³ It could also be argued that these images gratify lesbians, but since *Rolling Stone* is not well known for its gay-friendliness, I will continue to invoke the implied male reader throughout.
another bra, heels and an unbuttoned sweater. She leans suggestively back onto a chest that is covered with dolls and other childhood keepsakes (figure 4). In a third photo, she stands in front of a chain-link fence, wearing a vaguely cheerleader-like outfit and striking a pose worthy of Marilyn Monroe. At her heel-clad feet rest a schoolgirl’s backpack and binder, while behind her scream her fans, mostly comprised of pre-teen girls and high school aged boys (figure 5). In perhaps the most written-about image, Spears stands with her back to the camera looking over her shoulder and holding up a small girl’s bike. She wears white shorts with the word “Baby” written on the backside in sequins (figure 6). In all of these, Spears’ attractiveness is emphasized by the childlike props placed around her and the way these props clash with the sexual maturity of the way she poses her body.

Meanwhile, the article’s text tells a different story. Daly interviews Spears at home with her mother, who chaperones as she folds laundry. Spears describes how she changed the lyrics to one of the songs on her first record because she thought they were too “sexual.” She talks about her commitment to her family and the Baptist faith, and how that takes precedence over even her career (Daly 65). The author himself seems a bit confused about the space between the sexy image Spears presents and the regular girl she claims to actually be. He states,

The very first low, aching ‘Ooh bay-by bay-by” that Britney Spears whispered into the public’s ear strongly suggested that this wasn’t your average seventeen-year-old. It’s still hard to equate those salacious syllables with the basketball-playing, churchgoing schoolkid who would travel an hour to shop at her nearest Abercrombie and Fitch (Daly 65).

Rather than imparting a sense of confusion, however, the article as a whole – text and pictures – makes the difference between Spears’ age and her image pleasing.
For the author, the issue of how much control Spears wields becomes important. He asks, “Is Spears bubblegum jailbait, jaded crossover diva or malleable Stepford teen? Who knows?” (Daly 65). In the end, he seems to lean more towards “malleable Stepford teen,” describing how Spears “screamed off the production line” at her record label (Daly 65). While Spears tries to assert herself by listing some of the decisions she has made about her career, the author clearly sees her as an object produced and marketed by others. Therefore, she may not fully understand her image, and may be going along with her handlers because she is such a “nice girl” who does what she is told. This is a girl who does not control her sexuality, which, oddly enough, may make her all the more attractive to readers. Her very perceived passivity plays into the fantasy.

In Spears’ second cover story, “The Girl Can’t Help It,” by Chris Mundi, the ambiguity of Spears’ image increases. On the cover, Spears wears a leather bustier decorated with stars and stripes, leather pants, and stands in front of an American flag. The caption reads, “Britney Wants You!” (figure 7). Inside the magazine, however, Spears seems to be trying to step back from her sexualized image. Although the article begins with “It’s only natural that, when you arrive to meet her, she is wearing pajamas in the middle of the afternoon,” he then continues by calling Spears her “the nation’s prom queen” and stating,

Britney Spears is a teenager. She is wide-eyed and sweet. She has crushes on a movie star or two, a penchant for romance novels and a Yorkshire terrier named Baby. She also has a 350-pound bodyguard named Robert, a tour bus with a fully functional tanning bed and well over a million dollars tucked away for a rainy day (Mundi 48).

Rather than focusing on the dichotomy between Spears as schoolgirl and Spears as sex kitten, then, Mundi begins by focusing on the difference between Spears as a young girl and Spears as a professional performer. He writes about how Spears deals with the stress of her job by writing in
her prayer journal and relying on friends and family (48). Mundi tells Spears that he finds her more child-like than he expected, then asks if that offends her. Spears answers no, because “it makes me feel good when people realize I’m just a kid, because people expect so much out of me right now” (Mundi 48).

Mundi broaches the subject of sex by stating, “These days, Britney’s been thinking a lot about sex. This is probably because, these days, a lot of people have been thinking about Britney Spears in a sexual way. Perhaps it is the perpetually bare midriff. […] Whatever the reason, a trend has developed” (Mundi 49). He describes Spears as uncomfortable with her sexualized image, writing that “Spears claims that she never meant her public persona to be sexual” (Mundi 49). Mundi replies that he doesn’t believe her, and offers her first *Rolling Stone* cover as evidence. Spears counters that, when she models for photographs or performs in her videos, she is merely playing a part. She states, “It’s like on TV when you see Jennifer Love Hewitt or Sarah Michelle Gellar kill someone, do you think that means they go out and do that? Of course not” (Mundi 49). She says that “I’ve been finding that there are a lot of older guys in the audience lately” and states that this bothers her (Mundi 48). She continues later that “I don’t want to be part of someone’s Lolita thing. It kind of freaks me out” (Mundi 50).

The pictures that go along with the article support this step back. Aside from the cover, they depict Spears in more-or-less age appropriate ways. One shows Spears, laughing, dressed as a fairy with wings (figure 8). Other pages have family photos of a younger Spears or shots of her winning awards. However, Mundi deliberately undermines this message through the peculiar way he writes the article. Rather than writing “I ask Britney,” he writes “You ask Britney.” This makes the reader feel as if he were in the room speaking with Spears, and erases Mundi’s role as interviewer. This false intimacy brings the reader into Spears’ bedroom, where the interview
takes place, and is supposed to give the illusion that the reader is having a one-on-one chat with the pajama-clad pop star. Although the article seems to serve as a disavowal of Spears’ sexualization at first, in the end this false intimacy only serves to sexualize her more.

Jenny Eliscu’s “Britney Talks Back,” Spears’ third cover story, is more interested in Spears’ work than any of the other articles. Subtitled “Don’t Treat Me Like a Little Girl,” the article emphasizes that Spears is growing up and gaining control of her career and image. The first cover story written by a woman, it is also the first to show Spears performing onstage. Unlike the other articles, which begin by describing Spears, this article describes her new house, which is “cozy without being dowdy, but mostly it’s just very grown up” (Eliscu 58). She continues by stating that,

Britney has alternated between doe-eyed ingénue and midriff-baring sexpot. She’s the quintessential girl-next-door – the one with the bashful ‘Who, me?’ smile who never lets on that she knows you think she’s hot. She has looked at adolescence from both sides now, and as she becomes a bona-fide grown-up in the coming years, that provocative image won’t be available to her anymore. For now, though, Britney and her image are one and the same – she is as much of a delightful contradiction as she seems (Eliscu 58). This is the first article to mention that Spears is getting too old to pull off her sexy little girl image, something the magazine will repeat and reinforce from this point. By collapsing the difference between Spears and her image, essentially making the image “authentically Britney” rather than something manufactured, Eliscu may be trying to give Spears back the control of her sexuality that earlier articles denied her. She describes Spears’ outfit in sexualized language, from her “inky-blue jeans that ride low enough on her hips that her aquamarine thong peaks out teasingly” to her “green ringer t-shirt (that) stretches tightly across the chest whose endowment
has caused such controversy” (Eliscu 58), but the mention is brief and, taken in the context with the rest of this article, seems less leering than Rolling Stone’s previous descriptions of her body. Eliscu also spends an unprecedented amount of time discussing Spears’ work. She spends over a third of the article discussing the meaning of Spears’ lyrics and her work ethic. Eliscu reveals that Spears has written “many” of the songs on her new album (Britney), is learning to play the guitar and hopes to learn to produce someday (Eliscu 61). Spears states, “If you want to know how I feel, you look at this album. It’s like a whole diary for me” (Eliscu 61). In other words, by asserting her control over her work, Spears attempts to gain some of the authenticity that would, in Rolling Stone’s eyes, make her a “serious artist,” and that has been denied to her as a pop or “bubblegum” star. Finally, Eliscu states that Spears is eager to cut the “apron strings” of the “handlers watching over her career who occasionally treat her condescendingly” (61). Spears states, “I know they mean well, but I don’t like people treating me like a little girl” (62).

Where Eliscu would like to close the distance between Spears and her image, Spears herself would like to broaden it, while maintaining that she, and not her record company, produces the image. Talking about the revealing costumes she wears onstage and in videos, she says, “I like, when I’m onstage, to be an entertainer. When kids are younger and have a recital once a year, that’s their time to go onstage and put on their little costume and do their thing. And that’s what it’s like for me” (Eliscu 62). Spears also does not like that people have placed the virtue of little girls in her hands. She continues, saying that “Just because I’m young doesn’t mean I can’t be sexy. […] I don’t like being a role model. I’m not perfect. I’m human” (Eliscu 62). In all, the Eliscu article tries to depict Spears as a woman increasingly in charge of her own career and sexual image.
Where the article quotes Spears as saying that she does not want to be treated like a little girl so that she can control her work, the cover of the magazine (figure 9) presents a different meaning. Standing in a camouflage printed bikini with a jean jacket over it, Spears seems to be saying that “not being treated like a little girl” entails, as the lyrics to her song “I’m a Slave 4 U” state, that men should “forget (her) name and age” when looking at her. Instead of growing up for the purpose of being taken seriously, here Spears is growing up for the purpose of being taken sexually.

Perhaps the most famous series of photographs is taken from the next cover story, titled “Britney Takes Charge.” Written by Mim Udovitch, the article basically repeats previous articles, strengthening Spears’ Rolling Stone image. Spears states that “onstage is the place to express what you may not be in real life,” once again making the case that she should not be equated with her sexy image (Udovitch 86). Spears also repeats that she is not a role model for young girls, and adds that, “I think it’s a beautiful thing to be sexy, and I think women should be proud of their bodies. And if I wanna show my belly in a video of show a little bit of cleavage, I just don’t see anything wrong with that” (Udovitch 88). The pictures with this story certainly support her claim. On the cover, Spears sits on a deck, her breasts nearly escaping from a bustier. Next to her is the incongruous message, “Britney Takes Charge” (figure 10). In another image, Spears stands in a forest in a transparent white “baby doll” dress. Under the dress she wears a white bra and nearly see-through boy short underwear (figure 11). She wears the same outfit in another picture, sitting on a swing with one leg up on the swing’s seat (figure 12). In this photo, the pattern in her dress emphasizes her nipple. Again, the clash of meanings between the baby doll dress – a signifier of childhood – and the way Spears poses only serves to make her
look more sexual. Throughout, one wonders, of what is Spears taking charge? The photos verge on soft core, or glamour, porn. Is this the effect of her control? Or is this the price?

The next cover story, part of a larger article on the state of women in rock, presents a “fully grown” Britney Spears. The cover depicts Spears with Shakira and Mary J. Blige, putting her into context with other adult women in pop (figure 13). The uncredited article begins in much the same way as her second cover story, with her asking “Do you mind if I put on my pajamas?” (Anonymous “Britney”). With her pajamas, Spears has been brought full circle. Spears wants to take some time off for herself, to rest and escape the bindings of celebrity. She states that she wants “to be able to fuckin’ pump my own gas,” her first obscenity the magazine has recorded (Anonymous “Britney”). In all, Spears is presented as a tired woman who needs to retreat and rethink her career. As the review of her album *Britney* states, “Britney labors the obvious: Spears is one month away from entering her twenties and clearly needs to grow up if she’s going to bring her fans along. Her Lolita shtick is nearly past its expiration date” (Walters “Britney”). This presents Spears as a woman in control of her career, but one who had better change her tactics to survive. Beginning with her album *In the Zone*, Spears attempted to break away from her tween audience in favor of more mature listeners. After this point, *Rolling Stone* presents Spears in a more grown up – but still sexualized – manner. Her Lolita period had ended.

Finally, Spears’ last cover story, titled “Sometimes it’s Hard to be a Woman,” both serves to repeat earlier stories and re-emphasize the point that Britney must change her image to survive. Beginning with a description of Spears’ kiss with Madonna on the MTV Video Music Awards, author Mark Binelli covers the international sensation created by the kiss. He asks “Do people still care about the music? Or is she becoming more famous for stunts like this?” (Binelli
Spears asserts that, of course, the music is what counts for her, but Binelli remains unconvinced, stating that Spears album *Britney* only sold four million copies. The rest of the interview covers Spears’ breakup with longtime boyfriend Justin Timberlake, her post-breakup public misbehavior, and her new album, *In the Zone*. Although Binelli does allow Spears the space to describe her new album, he only does so to point out how little she knows about it. When Binelli asks Spears about her favorite song on the new album, she answers “I like the Moby song.” When Binelli presses her for the title, she cannot supply it, answering “‘Um.’ Pause. ‘Morning? Morning. I think it’s called. No, All Morning. Yeah.’” Binelli then supplies that “Actually, the song is, at present, titled ‘Early Morning’” (71). Though Spears would prefer to emphasize her music, Binelli does not allow her the luxury. Instead, he writes more about Spears’ breakup with Timberlake and her supposed affair with Fred Durst. When he does write about her music, it is to poke fun at Spears. Allowing Spears to speak too much, or too knowledgably, about her career in music, would make her too powerful. Better for Binelli that he talk instead about her tabloid-esque behavior.

The photographs that accompany the article serve to back up Binelli’s article. On the cover, Spears poses topless, with her breasts pressed against a wall (figure 14). Her sequined trimmed underwear echo the “Baby” boyshorts from her first cover story. Inside, Spears comes closest to a porn-like pose yet, clutching an unbuttoned man’s oxford shirt around her breasts, and beginning to pull down her panties (figure 15). The further Spears gets from her Lolita image, the more overtly sexualized she becomes.

Why does Spears’ sexualized, Lolita-invoking image matter? Because of her double-sided image, many scholars and parents have come out against Spears, saying that she presents herself too sexually for the consumption of young children, particularly the young girls to whom
she has been primarily marketed throughout most of her career. *Marketing to Women* quotes a psychologist who states that “young girls don’t have the psychological equipment to decode Spears vampy behavior and suggestive lyrics, which coexist with her ‘schoolgirl’ image” (Anonymous “Pop” 8). Since girls cannot tell the difference between the two and are “in the process of developing their sense of self,” the argument goes, they will inevitably try to sexualize their *own* roles as schoolgirls (Anonymous “Pop” 8). Vanessa McMullin and Rebecca Boone, in *Off Our Backs*, both worry about the impact of Spears’ lyrics on young girls. McMullin writes that the song “I’m a Slave 4 U” “impresses upon young women of what (sic) appropriate behavior towards men should be: controlled slaves to men’s sexual prowess” (50), while Boone writes that “The lyrics to Spears’ songs are frighteningly submissive, not particularly smart, and unlikely to inspire anything beyond sales of hair ornaments and shock-your-mama halter tops” (48). Carly DeSantis, from *Rockrgrrl* magazine, states, “This growing Lolita trend represents a backlash against last year’s (1998) giddy Spice Girls’ ‘Girl Power’ mantra* and sends a clear message that your value as a female is directly proportionate to your fuckability quotient. Oh, and the younger you are, the better” (DeSantis 5).

Others have been less worried about Spears, preferring to blame the problem on society in general rather than the pop star in particular. Lara Naaman states that, “To give Spears some credit, she has grown up in a culture where sex sells. A provocative outfit is more a business decision than a sexual statement and she knows it” (64). Naaman’s statement brings up an interesting point. Does it matter how much control Spears exerts over the creation of her image? Does this change how that image is read? Boone seems to think that Spears’ level of control is very important. She writes that her own girlhood idol, Madonna, shocked parents with her sexuality, too, “but, for better or worse, Madonna wrote her own songs and determined her own

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4 I will discuss the Spice Girls in the next chapter.
direction” (Boone 48). For Boone, Spears’ lack of control makes her sexualized image disempowering for young girls.

In a few short years, Spears has gone from “girl-next-door” to young vixen to tired old(er) woman. Because her popularity, at least within the pages of *Rolling Stone*, rests on a Lolita-fueled fantasy image, her twenties represent a perilous point in her career. In other words, Spears was sexy because she as young and presented herself as forbidden fruit. Once she was fully “legal,” where’s the fun in that? Also, as she has gotten older the articles have presented Spears as more and more in control of her sexuality and her career – and that might be the problem. Since part of Spears’ sexual charge lay in her youth, it must also lay in her lack of dominance. Part and parcel of the fantasy of Britney Spears is the fact that she is less powerful than the reader who desires her. She looks knowing, but it’s all an act. Her body is that of a woman, but her mind is a little girl’s. The more she insists she is in control, the less desirable she becomes to *Rolling Stone*.

While she may want to distance herself as a person from her sexy image, Spears’ image – the only part of Spears that the public can really know – is definitely sexualized. For example, Gregory Dark, who directed one of Spears’ videos, has also directed pornographic films. Dark deliberately tried to bring that aesthetic to Spears’ videos, describing in an interview “the lure of jail bait” (Merskin 121). Perhaps the tween star who could be the most closely compared to Spears is fellow pop star Christina Aguilera. Aguilera has also been on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, including one cover that was art directed by Dark (Merskin 122). Aguilera has worked hard to refuse the Lolita label, however, by creating an image influenced by fetish and bondage wear. Where Spears is comfortable dressing like a not-so-innocent school girl, Aguilera dresses like a dominatrix. Costuming herself in this way downplays Aguilera’s youth rather than using it
for sexual titillation. Aguilera’s image is still sexy, but in a way that puts her, rather than anyone else, in control. While their ages are close, then, the two singers’ images have borne little relation to each other. Interestingly, on her tour in support of her CD *In the Zone*, Spears wore costumes closer to Aguilera’s. Perhaps since, as *Rolling Stone* has so often pointed out, Spears is too old to be Lolita any more, she is attempting to follow Aguilera’s lead in crafting a more grown-up, and yet still sexy, image.

As I stated above, part of the appeal of Spears’ sexualized image lay in her attempts to separate herself from it. Her repeated denials that she was too sexual, or that she “didn’t want to be a part of someone’s Lolita thing” only heightened her sexualization. For the Lolita image to work, a girl needs to be unaware, and thus not in control of, her sexual power. At the very least, she must pretend this lack of awareness. The more a tween celebrity insists that she is not trying to be sexy – or, at the very least, is not trying to appeal to older men sexually – the more attractive she becomes. This has been the case as long as the Lolita image has existed. One early example of a child star painted with the Lolita brush was Haylie Mills. Mills’ movies were standard Disney fare, with no hint of sexuality in them. Yet, as Sinclair states, “something in [Mills] must have appealed not only to the kiddies and to the clucking mamas in the audience, but also to the Dirty Old Men lurking within some respectable and other not-so-respectable males” (Sinclair 120). Although Mills did nothing to appeal to those Dirty Old Men, “something” in her – something that was *her* fault – made those men desire her.

Today, two of Haylie Mills’ most popular contemporary equivalents are Lindsay Lohan and the Olsen twins. Both Lohan and the Olsens specialize in kid-friendly films; Lohan for Disney and the Olsens for their own company, Dualstar Entertainment. Not surprisingly, all have been on the cover of *Rolling Stone* right around their eighteenth birthdays. Also, all have been at
the center of the obsessive, sexualized attention of the mainstream press and internet communities.

According to CBS News, “What the Olsens are selling is a clean, wholesome image that appeals not just to young consumers, but also their parents” (“Rich Girls”). Kendra Howe of CNN concurs, stating that “Parents view Mary-Kate and Ashley as wholesome role models for their children to admire. Of course, I can’t blame anyone for wanting their daughters to emulate girls who once sang the lyrics, ‘I love love and I hate hate…’ rather than worship a former Mouseketeer [Britney Spears] who growls, ‘Let’s turn this dance floor into our own nasty world’” (Howe “Commentary”). Further, the twins themselves work hard to separate themselves from fellow tween celebrity Spears stating that, while Britney Spears can do what she wants, they won’t use her methods to remain famous (CBS News “Rich Girls”). While Howe and CBS – and the Olsens – want to separate the twins from Spears, other media outlets insist on making the Olsen’s image as sexualized as the pop star’s. Wholesomeness, in this case, is an invitation to sexualize.

Two authors who note the twins’ Lolita-esque appeal are Jancee Dunn of Rolling Stone and Libby Copeland of the Washington Post. Dunn locates the twins’ appeal in the “aura of tantalizing mystery around them” and their innocence (Dunn “Sisters” 86). According to Dunn, the twins are unspoiled. They “do not seem hardened by the world. They show no angry edge, no indefinable hurt” (Dunn “Sisters” 86). Dunn takes the metaphor of freshness to an almost literal extreme, stating that Mary-Kate is “the perfect California girl, she looks even better after a day at the beach: gold-flecked skin, shiny blond hair, as fresh and organic as the strawberries she nibbles on” (Dunn “Sisters” 86). Another part of the twins’ lack of being spoiled comes because of “how blessedly ordinary they seem” (Dunn “Sisters” 86). For instance, although the twins are
the multi-millionaire owners of Dualstar Entertainment, and have been the producers of their movies since the age of six, according to Dunn “they cringe when their bank accounts are mentioned and claim not to know how much they are worth” (Dunn “Sisters” 88). With this statement, Dunn invalidates the twins’ image as savvy businesswomen, as well as the power they gain with that image. This is important, because as the owners (and since their eighteenth birthday) CEOs of a multi-billion dollar business, the Olsens hold the kind of power that would be intimidating in grown women. As young as they are, holding this power makes the twins exponentially more frightening. Sexualizing the twins, especially within a Lolita fantasy, removes this potential. It moves them away from the category of “businesswomen” and safely into that of “sexy little girls.”

Stating that the Olsens “contain the innocence of children and the sultriness of sexpots,” Copeland finds the twins’ attraction lies, like Spears’, in the mix of child-like and sexual aspects. She states that the twins’ attraction rests upon youth and a virginal image, suggesting an uncorrupted innocence, and the opportunity to be corrupted. This is the basis of barely-legal porn, and of the popularity of Britney Spears back when she was an avowed virgin dancing in a Catholic schoolgirl uniform. The Olsens have about them a coyness, a closed-mouth smile and a hooded stare that suggests they don’t know much, but they have an idea. Their constant touching of each other seems seductive, but unintentionally so. The fact that they grew up in front of the camera only underscores their youth (Copeland “Olsen Twins”).

The fact that “they don’t know much” and are “unintentionally” seductive, then, makes them seduce all the more, only strengthening the paradoxical notion that, the less a girl wants to attract, the more sexualized she becomes.
Copeland further asserts that “The Olsens’ brand is predicated on a sense of intimacy, the notion that what you see on-screen is what you’d get if they really did invite you to their sleepover party. The girls are the brand and the brand is the girls. Movies are just excuses for the girls to be themselves” (Copeland “Olsen Twins”). By collapsing the difference between the twins’ real and on-screen selves, Copeland insists on this “intimacy” and denies their talent as actors. This is not uncommon, even amongst writers who do not see them sexually. Like Spears, the press as a whole does not view the twins as terribly talented. While an assessment of the Olsens’ acting talent is purely subjective, viewing them as untalented certainly supports the view of the twins as disempowered, passively sexual beings.

Going further than Dunn, Copeland also locates a large part of the twins’ attraction in their very status as twins. She states that “the word ‘twins’ has a special ring in certain male circles, representing the royal flush of sexual conquests” (Copeland “Olsen Twins”). Because the incestuous fantasy of being in bed with both twins at once even exists, the phrase “Olsen twins” sounds “very young or very pornographic” (Copeland “Olsen Twins”). An accident of birth, then, made the Olsens the object of many men’s sexual obsession. Altogether, Copeland sees the twins as “the perfect metaphor for our divided world. The twins are a fantasy if you’re a 6-year-old girl and perhaps they’re a fantasy if you’re a 50-year-old man” (Copeland, “Olsen Twins”), because six year-old girls want to be the Olsens, while fifty-year-old men want to sexually possess them. Copeland quotes a marketing executive who states that divided appeal is the twins’ “magic,” because it allows them (and their products) to “span such a broad range of demographics” (Copeland “Olsen Twins”).

The sexual attention focused on the Olsens has taken some odd turns. Men who were waiting for Mary-Kate and Ashley to become “legal” (turn eighteen and be legal to have sex with
adult men in every state) started online “countdown clocks” that counted the years, months, days, hours and seconds until the twins’ eighteenth birthday on June 11, 2004. The most famous countdown clock was on the website for Lex and Terry. Syndicated radio “shock-jocks” Lex and Terry used the twins’ coming of age as a running joke for four years, and posted a countdown clock on their website for three (Godwin “Jailbait No More”). These clocks were not just posted by secret pedophiles, then, but by well-known entertainers. Lusting after the Olsen twins became a commonplace joke, a socially acceptable way to admit to a predilection for very young girls.5

When asked about the clocks, the twins acted casually, saying things like “Oh, boys will be boys” (CBS News “Rich Girls”), or that the clocks “come with the territory of being a girl” (Godwin “Jailbait No More”). Even Saturday Night Live got into the act. When the twins hosted the finale of the show’s 2003-2004 season, Mary-Kate signed off by yelling “Remember, we’re legal in four weeks!” However, one can imagine that the countdown did more damage than the Olsens are willing to admit in public. Even taking the above statements at face value, it is disturbing to think that the twins could believe such behavior is normal. Also, Mary-Kate’s decision right after her eighteenth birthday in June 2004 to seek treatment for an eating disorder clearly demonstrates that the twins’ celebrity has not been as easily handled by the girls as their image portrays. While it would be perhaps too pat to speculate that all this sexualized attention played a direct role in Mary-Kate’s problems, the fact that countless numbers of much older men have publicly objectified her body since she was thirteen could not have played a positive role in her body image. Psychiatrist Lynn Ponton believes that one of the roots of eating disorders in girls is that girls – and their parents – are frightened of their newly sexualized bodies and sexual

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5 Comedian Conan O’Brien mocked the sexual objectification of girl celebrities by bringing out a birthday cake and celebrating wildly whenever a girl celebrity turned 18 – and then doing the same thing for Prince William.
desires (Ponton 13). Starving the body into a semblance of pre-adolescence is one way to avoid these fears. In her foundational study of eating disorders, *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo also connects eating disorders with sexual abuse (48) and “the avoidance of any sexual encounter” (148). More important for Bordo, however, is the connection between eating disorders and what Bordo terms “the control axis” (149). Within this, the anorectic identifies herself with “mind (or will), ideals of spiritual perfection, fantasies of absolute control” (Bordo 151). Since Mary-Kate Olsen has been denied the control of her image and sexuality from a very young age, perhaps she felt the need to control the one thing she could – her body.

The Olsen twins are not alone in being the young targets of sexual attention. *Rolling Stone* is also interested in Lindsay Lohan. The August, 2004 issue of *Rolling Stone* has an article about Lindsay Lohan by Mark Binelli. The article itself is titled “Confessions of a Teenaged Drama Queen,” and the caption of Lohan’s picture on the issue’s cover reads “Hot, Ready and Legal!” Binelli begins the article with the statement that “Lohan fields questions about her breasts in most interviews” (60). Inevitably, the questions are about whether Lohan’s breasts are real. Gladly helping his readers, Binelli surreptitiously inspects Lohan’s breasts during a hug, and pronounces them genuine (60). Because of the media’s obsession with Lohan’s breasts, “These days, if Lohan wears a low-cut dress and makes the mistake of, say, bending over slightly to step out of a vehicle, enlarged photographs of her cleavage will be analyzed as meticulously as the Zapruder film”6 (Binelli 60-62). Why have the press and people on the internet paid so much sexualized attention to Lohan’s body since she was fifteen, and why is this acceptable behavior?

Noting that it is “socially acceptable to note that the redheaded child actress [is] hot,” Binelli speculates about the origins of Lohan’s position as “a favorite object of scrutiny for the paparazzi and the online pervert community alike” (Binelli 60). Like other Lolita figures, Lohan

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6 The Zapruder film captured the assassination of President Kennedy.
displays a mixture of signifiers: while she “looks older than eighteen, she pretty much acts her age, constantly fidgeting with her hair and occasionally blurring out giggly non sequiters” (Binelli 62). However, Binelli decides that her true attraction lays in the fact that, “in real life [Lohan] has been willing to talk shit about rival teen star Hilary Duff and didn’t hide the fact that she liked to party” (Binelli 60). Further, “Lohan is also what’s technically known as a ‘bad girl.’ She has already dated a rock star (well, not exactly rock – it was Aaron Carter), but what really makes Lohan bad is the fact that she goes out to nightclubs in Manhattan and Los Angeles and occasionally dances on tables” (Binelli 62). While dating bubblegum star Aaron Carter (something fellow tween star Hilary Duff also did) does not really make Lohan a bad girl, the fact that she goes out with her friends certainly does, to Binelli. By accusing Lohan of dancing on tables, Binelli calls to mind the image of a stripper or other type of “loose woman.”

However, for Binelli this is not the true sin. Instead, Lohan qualifies as a “bad girl” because she lacks class. At one point, he describes Lohan’s look as “the type of girl who will ask me to buy her cigarettes or order her a strawberry daiquiri. My first thought is: We should be in a mall food court” (Binelli 62). Binelli also mentions Lohan’s “too intense fake tan.” (62). Like Humbert, then, Binelli admits his attraction to Lohan, and he justifies his attraction by blaming Lohan for being “bad.” Binelli’s definition of “badness,” though, is less tied up with what Lohan has or has not done sexually than it is with Lohan’s failure to perform class properly. Because Lohan does not fulfill Binelli’s definition of a classy young lady, it is perfectly acceptable for him to objectify her.

Psychiatrist Lynn Ponton compares the connection Binelli makes between being low-class and being a “bad girl” with the way the term “slut” is used in contemporary American society. Stating that the term slut “and its implications [are] as common as water” (17), Ponton
then goes on to explain that “Sluts are perceived as inherently worthy of condemnation. [A girls’] emerging breasts and hips, and the fact that she liked her body and was developing an interest in boys, brought on a painful censorship – you are low-class” (Ponton 23, emphasis in the original). The term slut is used to reinforce the sexual double standard, where “girls’ sexuality should be hidden. Girls themselves should be passive, and even the appearance of breasts can be seen as too aggressive, requiring public sanction” (Ponton 23). Calling girls words like “slut,” “bad girl,” or “low-class” is one way to keep their sexuality in check – to curb the girl’s love of her own body, what it looks like and what it can do.

Tellingly, when Binelli tries to ask Lohan about her status as a sex symbol to older men, it becomes obvious that Binelli and Lohan define the term “sex symbol” in different ways. Binelli asks her, “What do you think about the way that girls in pop culture today – like Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera and now you – have to make this shift from child star to sex symbol?” (Binelli 64). At this point, Binelli seems to be at least gesturing towards the notion that it might not be a good thing that so many girl celebrities have been turned into sex symbols. However, he never questions Lohan’s status as sex symbol, while Lohan does. She answers Binelli, saying “You mean growing up in public? It’s weird. But it’s something that has to happen” (Binelli 64). When Binelli presses, her, insisting that Lohan is a sex symbol and asking her what she thinks about that, Lohan insists that “I don’t think of myself as a sex symbol. It’s weird that people call me that” (Binelli 64). Where Binelli can define young girls like Lohan, Spears and Aguilera as “sex symbols,” Lohan herself can or will not. Lohan states that “I look up to sex symbols: Madonna, Marilyn Monroe;” (Binelli 64) defining “sex symbol” as a grown woman, something she certainly does not consider herself to be.
**Lolita and Age Compression**

When it becomes more socially acceptable to sexually objectify tween idols, particularly within the mold of the Lolita, tweens themselves can become more objectified. This is because, when it becomes more socially acceptable to objectify young celebrities, it also becomes acceptable to objectify their more every day counterparts. Also, when it becomes natural to tweens to see their favorite celebrities as sexually objectified beings, and specifically as beings whose sexuality is expressly being offered up to older adult men, they can also see themselves in this way. Popular culture that participates in the Lolita myth not only gets tweens accustomed to thinking of themselves as, not sexualized, but sexually objectified, beings, but it also makes tweens vulnerable to the advances of would-be Humberts.

As Ponton states, the “media have a long-standing history of using adolescent sexuality to attract audiences and sell products” (Ponton 5). In her article “Reviving Lolita? A Media Literacy Examination of Sexual Portrayals of Girls in Fashion Advertising,” Debra Merskin uses “accumulation theory” to predict the effects of sexual objectification of young girls in the mass media. Within accumulation theory, one predicts that, if the same messages of sexual objectification are consistently presented in several mass media forms, the effects of that message build up and have strong, long-term outcomes. In this case, “the accumulation process normalizes looking at images of and thinking about preadolescent and adolescent girls and adult women as sexually available” (Merskin 120). Not only do adult men think of tween girls as sexually attractive and available, but the girls themselves are trained to think of themselves as such. According to a survey quoted in Alison Quarts’s *Branded*, “By eleven, tweens no longer consider themselves children […] and they use such words as ‘sexy’ and ‘trendy’ to describe themselves” (Quart 74). The survey further found that tweens aspire to look and act older. Quart
believes that marketing has accelerated a child’s natural desire to grow up. She interviews a girl, who states that “I was a kid till seventh grade, but my mom was a kid till she was in eleventh grade. Marketing turns kids into adults” (Quart 194). The Girl Scout Research Institute’s study, “Teens Before Their Time” calls this phenomenon age or developmental compression. Today, girls are maturing physically (getting taller and going through puberty) and cognitively (acquiring critical thinking skills and information about the world) sooner than girls from previous generations. However, the rate of emotional maturation, which includes “social and psychological development, as well as an understanding of family, peers, gender, sexual identity and the self” has remained constant (GSRI 6). Because girls look and can express themselves like older girls, they are expected to act more like teenagers than like children. This age compression, or rushing through the developmental period immediately before and after puberty, causes girls to become anxious and confused, because they cannot really understand what is being demanded of them (GSRI 19). Parents are anxious, as well, and one strategy they use to alleviate this anxiety is to encourage girls to take up traditional gender roles.

One reason to be worried about age compression is that “Studies show that girls who adopt a strong feminine role (with traits of sociability, empathy, and greater passivity) do not feel as good about themselves as girls who are more androgynous and show a combination of male traits (independence, aggression, and assertiveness) and female traits” (Ponton 24). It is important to note that, in this case, Ponton is discussing the emotional components of traditional masculinity and femininity. The androgyny she promotes, then has little to do with rejecting “girlyness” or outward markers of femininity. Instead, Ponton wants children (both boys and girls) to be emotionally androgynous and reject the traditionally feminine and masculine behaviors that leave them open to being abused. Ponton believes that while gender roles for
adults have changed substantially since the 1960s and 1970s, gender roles for children have remained rather static. Because of age compression, gender roles are being enforced more strictly at younger ages. Ponton believes that “The earlier onset of puberty for all children is putting pressure on teens to act like adults before they are emotionally or cognitively ready. Pressure to take on a strongly defined gender role early is strong” (Ponton 24). Why is this so? While the media is partially at fault, Ponton also finds that “expecting and enforcing strong gender roles for children and young teens offers a sense of security to adults” (Ponton 25). Enforcing such rigid gender roles and identities at such a young age stunts a child’s sexual identity, because “exploring options becomes nearly impossible in such a rigid environment. If adolescents question, they do so in private, hiding their activities and protecting themselves” (Ponton 25). Although Ponton writes primarily about older adolescents, I believe her conclusions are equally true of tweens. Forcing girls into stereotypical femininity at such a young age damages their sexual selves, teaching them from a young age that expressing themselves sexually – in any way – makes them a “slut” who deserves to be sexually abused. At the same time, it can lead girls into participating in sexual experiences that they are not ready to have.

The media and the fears of adults work together, then, to force young girls to act older than they are ready to act. Part of this pressure includes the notion that girls should act sexually available at ever-younger ages. Indeed, the media offers up intentionally sexual images of girls, forming a systematic message teaching girls that they are, or should be, sexualized. As Merskin notes, Abercrombie & Fitch offered underwear in girls’ sizes that had the words “eye candy” and “wink wink” printed on them (119, figure 15). At one point, Limited Too, a popular girls’ clothing store, offered underwear with cherries on them, a reference to the popular phrase “popping the cherry,” meaning to have sex with a virgin. Currently, they offer a t-shirt that says
“Daddy’s Girl” (figure 16). While that phrase in and of itself is not offensive, in a culture that sees all little girls as potential Lolitas, “Daddy’s Girl” takes on a sexualized connotation. Like Merskin, I am concerned about the “fetishization of young girls’ innocence” (120), or taking otherwise innocent phrases and images and making them into fetish objects for the gratification of adult men. Ultimately, Merskin finds that the accumulated message from the mass media to girls is that “they should always be sexually available, always have sex on their minds, be willing to be dominated and even sexually aggressed against, and they will be gazed on as sexual objects” (Merskin 120). Naming sexualized images of girls in the mass media socially acceptable “kiddie porn,” Merskin ultimately worries that these images “have the potential to contribute to the ongoing and increasing problem of child sexual abuse” (Merskin 127) because they naturalize the process of placing young girls within adult sexual frameworks. Further, the fact that such images are acceptable teaches children that adults condone the sexual objectification of little girls (Merskin 127). When girls are sexually abused, then, they could believe that all adults condone the actions of their abuser.

In Lolita, Humbert himself recognized the ways Lolita was affected by the mass media around her. He states, “She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster” (Nabokov 150). Lolita was the ideal consumer because, in her innocence, she believed the promises the advertisements, movie magazines and films made to her. One of the promises made is that grown up women are sophisticated, an art that makes women happy and that girls had better begin practicing as soon as possible. As Pifer states, “Lolita’s brand of naïveté – which leaves her more vulnerable, in some ways, than a child who lacks her pretense of knowing sophistication – poignantly attests to the intrusive power of the media” (77). Because Lolita has learned about life mostly through the fictional media of film
and advertisements, “she has no idea that adult experience transcends the Hollywood gestures and ritual movie kiss she has learned to imitate,” and so has no concept of the type of sexual relationship Humbert wants to have with her. All Lolita knows is that Humbert is movie star handsome, and he uses the gestures of romance to win her trust. She knows these gestures from popular culture entertainments and advertisements, whose “false cheer and empty promises exert a hypnotic influence on her trustful and dreamy nature” (Pifer 77). Lolita’s mother offers no competing claim about adult reality because she is just as hypnotized as her daughter. Therefore, she gives her daughter no defense against Humbert’s charms. Together, both were easy targets for men like Humbert, because their naïve belief in the reality offered by advertisements and romance stories makes them “as susceptible to the claims of the billboard as to Humbert’s ploys” (Pifer 77).

**Any hint of sexuality = bad**

As I have stated above, part of the debate around *Lolita* is the extent to which she seduced Humbert in their first sexual encounter. Humbert describes Lolita as the aggressor, leading some to blame Lolita for the ensuing sexual relationship. Humbert narrates, stating that

> Suffice it to say that not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl whom modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth had utterly and hopelessly depraved. She saw the stark act merely as part of a youngster’s furtive world, unknown to adults. What adults did for purposes of procreation was no business of hers. My life was handled by little Lo in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with me. While eager to impress me with the world of tough kids, she was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between a kid’s life and mine (Nabokov 135-136).

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7 I will examine the question of Lolita’s pre-Humbert virginity below.
Before this, Dolly admits to Humbert that she and a boy at camp, Charlie, had participated in some form of sexual play together. This, together with whatever type of sexual play she may or may not have had with fellow girls, forms what Humbert terms “campfire racket,” and is part of his justification for having sex with her. Padnoe questions whether Dolly’s sexual experience had ever included full sexual intercourse (“Lolita”). As Humbert states, Lolita “was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies,” which could include the chasms between Lolita and Humbert’s sexual knowledge and experience or Humbert’s sheer anatomical size. In the end, Padnoe stresses that “whether Lolita has had intercourse with Charlie or not, Lolita gives Humbert no clear indication that she wants to have it with him” (“Lolita”). Even if she did offer to have sex with Humbert, this does not relieve him for responsibility for the act. As a twelve-year-old girl who was completely under Humbert’s power physically, fiscally and mentally, Lolita did not have the wherewithal to truly consent to Humbert’s sexual advances. Moreover, Humbert skillfully placed Lolita within this situation, making her no less than a sexual slave.

As Pifer states, “Only in the most literal, and puritanical, sense can twelve-year-old Dolly be said to have seduced middle-aged Humbert” (76). The mainstream reading of Lolita, which views Lolita as a sexual predator, evinces “a mutual inflexibility, an all-or-nothing construction of the child’s image: allow the child to tumble from the pedestal of bland (sexless) purity, and evil or corruption (or its modern equivalent, psychopathology) rushes in to fill the void” (Pifer 70). In other words, a child who expresses her sexual nature – or even has a sexual nature to express – must be perverse or pathological. Pifer quotes James Kincaid, who states that the “child is either free of any whiff of sexuality or is, somehow, saturated with it” (Pifer 70). Further, girlhood sexuality is equated with a “devilish power” designed to trap grown men in perversion (Sinclair 125).
As Katherine O’Donovan states in the forward to Of Innocence and Autonomy: Children, Sex and Human Rights, “The concept of childhood is constructed by adults” (xi). A part of this construction includes the fact that thinking about children as sexual beings makes adults more than a little uncomfortable (O’Donovan x). Because of this, “adult constructions of childhood preclude acknowledgement that sexuality is part of the personality throughout the lifecycle, including the period of childhood” (O’Donovan x). Eric Heinze, author of “The Universal Child,” believes that this view of childhood has persisted since the Victorian era, and “casts childhood as a period of innocence and sexual ignorance” (18). Children are denied any sexual identity, making the distinction between the child and the adult “a distinction between sexlessness and sexuality” (Heinze 18). To be a child, then is to be “an ‘un-sexualized’ person who is vulnerable, weak and innocent,” according to Christine Piper, author of “Historical Constructions of Childhood Innocence” (Piper 27). Within this model, sexuality “pollutes childhood innocence, shoving children into the realm of adults before they are able to cope” (Heinze 18). We protect children from sexual knowledge at all costs, then, because of the harm it would do to their innocence.

However, “what begins as a seemingly benign concern for the welfare of children and the belief in their innate purity has the potential to be transformed into stringent policies that have the effect of negatively interfering in children’s lives” (Heinze 15). One policy that has emerged from this view is that children, to remain worthy of legal protection and human rights, must remain asexual. As Piper states, “There is a sense in which the price paid by children over the last 150 years for the presumed benefits of child welfare legislation and provision has been their ‘de-sexing’” (Piper 40). When children express their sexual nature, even in age-appropriate ways, they are deemed no longer deserving of protection, because “being sexualized undermines
‘merit’” (Piper 28). As an example, the Progressive reported the story of a Judge Durke G. Thompson in Maryland, who claimed that an eleven-year-old girl was partially to blame for her molestation by a twenty-three-year-old man. Judge Thompson stated that the case was “not unique” because it “dealt with the ‘age old problem … of how to deal with pubescent and even pre-pubescent women and older men … I don’t think [the victim] is free of fault,’ the judge said. ‘I think the old adage that it takes two to tango is true here’” (Progressive 11). Because the judge viewed the girl as a sexualized being, he decided she did not deserve the protection the law offers against molestation. Further, the judge’s view plays into the notion that any form of female sexuality is dangerous and therefore punishable. As Patnoe states,

These mythical machineries of evil Lolita narratives perpetuate a misogyny that imposes developmentally abnormal sexuality on some females and simultaneouslypunishes all females for any sexuality. By imposing this sexual responsibility and fault on females, they deem us unnatural, evil for having any sexuality, and if we are young, doubly deviant, however developmentally appropriate our sexuality is (“Lolita”).

Girls are punished twice for expressing their sexuality, then; first, for being children, and second, for being female. Often, girls punish themselves. In Lolita, Dolly herself believes that she is “bad” for her sexual experiences at camp. Because she has been initiated into sexuality, even though it was with a boy her own age, Dolly may have believed that she “deserved” her treatment at the hands of Humbert and Quilty. This view robbed Dolly of a sense of her own sexual rights.

Paradoxically, society’s insistence on childhood innocence leads to the formation of pedophilic constructions like the Lolita myth. Because “childhood innocence is a state which can be corrupted […] by sexual knowledge,” childhood itself becomes eroticized (Piper 32).
Innocence becomes fetishized, along with the children who are supposed to possess it. The more asexual children must be, the more sexually titillating the idea of sexualizing children becomes. By denying children their native sexuality, then, children become more – not less – vulnerable to sexual predators. This seems to hold true in Nabokov’s novel for Lolita.

As I stated above, one of the most common mainstream readings of *Lolita*, and certainly the reading that has most readily crossed into the mainstream, is that of Lolita as “a jaded, supremely knowing twelve-year-old who has lost all claim to innocence long before Humbert comes on the scene” (Pifer 67). Certainly the common definition of childhood sexuality as pathological plays into this reading. What such readings fail to notice is Nabokov’s insistence throughout the novel that Lolita is not the seducer but the raped, not the aggressor but the victim of Humbert’s advances. When readers believe Humbert’s rationalizations of his treatment of Lolita, they “fail to note how flimsy, indeed how tragically futile, a defense it proves against Humbert’s violation of both her childhood and her body” (Pifer 67). Such rationalizations smack of the arguments made by other pedophiles, who often argue that children can be mature and desirous enough to initiate sex with adult men. As Mica Nava notes, “ironically, the principal spokespeople on behalf of cross-generational sex have been adult men, not boys or girls, and […] until recently the argument was posed in terms of the rights of men to have sex with children rather than the rights of children to have sex with adults” (Nava “Drawing”103). Indeed, the image of a sexually predatory and voracious Lolita who seduces Humbert and brings him to his ruin “is not the novel’s Lolita, the Lolita who tries to call her mother from the inn, who scratches Humbert, who cries every night, and who finally escapes” (Patnoe “Lolita”). Throughout the book, Lolita acts less like a wily seductress and more like an abused child.
Unlike Kubrick’s 1962 film adaptation of Lolita, Adrian Lynne’s 1997 film at least gestures towards this.

Within the mainstream reading of Lolita, Lolita the little girl is erased in favor of Lolita the sexual object. Indeed, this erasure is one way Humbert can justify and continue his actions. For Humbert, “To possess his nymphet, Humbert must first eclipse the child; only when she has been, as he says ‘safely solipsized’ – subjugated, in other words, to the dreamer’s private world of imagination – is sexual bliss assured” (Pifer 68). This turns Lolita into a non-person for Humbert, someone who has been “molded to fulfill a role in a destructive fantasy” (Patnoe “Lolita”) rather than someone who is actively participating as a partner in a sexual relationship. The erasure of Lolita’s being by Humbert is so complete that he even renames her. While most people call her by her preferred name, “Dolly,” Humbert insists on calling her by the more exotic “Lolita.” (Padnoe “Lolita). Pifer agrees with Padnoe, stating that “The identity of Dolores, or Dolly as she is known at school, is largely a matter of indifference to ardent Humbert; only sporadically does he glimpse, through the ‘rosy, gold-dusted’ haze of his desire for the nymphet, the poignant image of the child” (Pifer 67). Every time the Lolita myth is invoked within mainstream culture, be it to describe a tween celebrity or an adult woman using the signifiers of childhood in sexualized ways, the erasure of Dolly is reified.

Every time we erase Dolly in favor of Lolita, we also risk forgetting that the fantasy Lolita supposedly represents is, “in one way or another, a very real nightmare for countless children” (Patnoe “Lolita”). Pifer also reminds us that Lolita can be compared to the stories of other children abused by their guardians, stating that “Lolita is, without doubt, Nabokov’s most extensive exploration of the child’s betrayal by a world of adults” (Pifer 75-76). To Nabokov, ruining Dolly’s childhood “constitutes nothing less […] than a crime against the cosmos” (Pifer
86). Even Marianne Sinclair, who is at best ambivalent about Dolly/Lolita as a sexual figure,\textsuperscript{8} states that “At twelve or thirteen, she remains the victim and the man the criminal: Nabokov insisted on this fact throughout *Lolita*” (Sinclair 140). In fact, she states that the Lolita myth represents “a case of arrested development, not in the girl but in the man” (Sinclair 7).

**Conclusion**

Girls must be allowed healthy sexual identities to avoid becoming victimized as Lolitas. The question, then, becomes one of what exactly constitutes children’s sexual identity and how such an identity may be expressed. Such a question is difficult at best and controversial at worst, since “even in the world of adult sexuality, questions about how sex should be regulated and how the incidents and consequences of sexual activity – sexual health care, contraception, abortion – should be managed, have faced dramatic challenges in recent years. Where children are concerned, these controversies reach their peak” (Heinze 18-19). I will not offer specific instances of how childhood sexuality should be expressed, because I believe that such expressions are culturally constructed, and so cannot be expressed universally. I agree with Heinze, who states that constructionism “views sexuality as culturally acquired: what is sexual in one context may not be so in another: an experience becomes sexual by application of socially learned meanings” (Heinze 18). Because of this, it is important to realize that what may seem like a sexually inviting or knowing child may not be, when the child’s cultural context is taken into account. In other words, girls who dress in what others consider “sexual” ways (midriff-baring shirts, miniskirts, etc) are most likely not trying to be sexually inviting. Instead, they may just be dressing in what is considered by their peers to be a fashionable way. Such girls may not

\textsuperscript{8} Sinclair alternates between blaming Lolita’s bad reputation on Lolita herself, the fact that Lolita had “too much mommy” and not enough father (140) and Humbert himself. Sinclair is a transitional figure between critics who blame only Lolita and critics who blame only Humbert, and so represents the ambivalent way the mainstream views Lolita figures.
be trying to be “sexy,” then, but merely “cute” or “trendy.” Ponton stresses the notion that “developmentally appropriate behaviors on the part of girls are often perceived as sexual. Smiles can be seen as seductive, a certain walk as provocative, a phone call as manipulative. Even the biologically determined appearance of breast buds can be viewed as willfully sexy” (Ponton 17). Even when a girl does consider herself “sexy,” rarely is she attempting to attract the advances of a much older man. Instead, she is most likely trying to attract the attentions of her own peer group. Girls who do view themselves as “sexy,” or sexual beings, must no longer be automatically punished or pathologized. Before we can help girls have healthy sexual identities – a necessary precursor to women having healthy adult sexual identities – we must allow girls to have sexual identities in the first place. By allowing girls to have a multiplicity of healthy sexual identities, we can strengthen their protections against pedophiles and allow them to have sexually gratifying experiences later in life.

The first part of allowing such identities to exist is to abandon the developmentally teleological view of childhood, which views childhood as merely a time of preparation for adulthood, and “condemns children to a perpetual twilight zone in which their conduct can never be understood as anything other than developmentally adaptive, hence correct, or developmentally defective, hence incorrect” (Heinze 17). As Heinze stresses, “Childhood is not incomplete adulthood. It is a set of experiences neither more nor less internally coherent than those of adults” (Heinze 17). Because of this, we cannot compare the actions of a child and the actions of an adult and call both sexual in the same way. To use the example of clothing given above, a girl and a grown woman can wear similar outfits with completely different intentions.
Where the grown woman may connect her outfit with a conscious sexual intention, the girl may not.  

Second, we must surrender our fear of sexual children. As a society, we are addicted to the notion of children as weak, asexual victims because the idea of children as “autonomous people with a sufficient level of understanding to exercise rights” is “threatening to adults and particularly so when they include the possibility of sexual independence” (Pifer 40). As Ponton states, “Interestingly, adult perceptions of pubescent ‘sexiness’ often reveal more about the adult than the child. That is, there is always a lot of projection of the adults’ own desires and fantasies onto adolescents” (23). Pre-adolescent and adolescent sexuality must have a place of its own, outside the realm of adult fantasy and fear, but within the realm of adult support and understanding. Nava compares the constructed place of children within the family with that of women, stating that “children in advanced capitalist and patriarchal societies are oppressed within the family; they are financially dependent and have no right of political or sexual expression” (“Drawing” 99). Because of this, we need to recognize that the “constructed quality of sexuality and gender suggest that childhood is neither naturally asexual, nor naturally gendered” (Heinze 18). Insisting upon children as asexual beings reifies not only ideas about the sexual powerlessness of children, but also of women, so resisting one idea helps us resist the other.

Nabokov himself never insists on the idea of girls as asexual “angels” (Pifer 76). Indeed, “that innocence should not be equated with sexless simplicity – a point that Fiedler and others patently ignore – is recognized even by scurrilous Humbert” (Pifer 76). It is important to keep in mind, though, that there is no one model for “correct” or “proper” childhood sexuality. What is considered healthy shifts with the specific circumstances of the children’s lives. As Heinze

\[\text{\textsuperscript{9} Of course, even when women do wear clothing for an explicitly sexual reason, they are not asking to be raped.}\]
stresses, the universal notion of “childhood is undermined by children, who, in so doing, do not destroy it, but reaffirm their own childhood. There is indeed a universal child, but that child can never be known. The multiplicity of childhoods does not guide us progressively towards the eternal, Platonic idea of the Child; the concept of the Child, however, can guide us towards the multiplicity of childhoods” (Heinze 15). We must, then, learn not only to accept the idea of a healthy childhood sexuality, but a multitude of healthy sexualities. I will discuss how we can begin reaching towards this in the conclusion of this study.
Chapter Five
Riot Grrrl, Girl Power and Commodification

“We are angry at a culture that tells us Girl=Dumb, Girl=Bad, Girl=Weak” Riot Grrrl Manifesto
“Girl Power is when you wear high heels and think on your feet” “Girl Power” by the Spice Girls

In 1994, Mary Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia and Peggy Orenstein’s School Girls hit parents, educators – and girls themselves – like a bolt of lightening. For girls, the books validated many of their experiences. Parents and educators received plausible explanations for why girls seemed to lose their self confidence in early adolescence. The issues tween aged girls face suddenly commanded center stage, and these issues were not always pretty. Some of the problems Ophelia and School Girls focused upon include tween aged girls’ loss of self-esteem, sexual harassment, eating disorders and other self destructive behavior girls enact. Publishers (and hopefully the authors) made a lot of money, and a new genre was born. The success of these two works also proved that girl culture was a viable commodity.

Mary Pipher and Peggy Orenstein were not the first women to try to start a public conversation about the lives of girls. In 1991, a group of young women banded together in the Washington state and Washington D.C. areas, determined to start a “girl riot.” Harnessing the energy of a political riot and putting the growl back into grrrls’ voices, Riot Grrrl demanded “Revolution Girl-Style Now!” Riot Grrrl combined the energy of punk rock and direct feminist action, and offered girls the opportunity to participate in bands, zines, conventions and encounter groups. In all of these arenas, girls and young women could discuss the hidden (as far as mass media was concerned) lives of girls. Further, Riot Grrrl demanded that mainstream culture take girls seriously.

By the mid 1990s, mainstream culture did begin to take girls seriously – as consumers – and Girl Power was born. The mainstream had noticed that girls had economic clout, as
evidenced by Pipher and Orenstein’s success, and the overwhelming success of films like *Titanic*. James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997) made over $600 million, mostly because adolescent girls kept going to see it again and again (Durham 25). Suddenly, people realized that girl-friendly, girl-targeting, and pro-girl media texts were profitable: Girl Power sold. Girl Power combines some of the pro-girl rhetoric of both Riot Grrrl and Pipher and Orenstein’s books, but instead of inciting girls to political action, and giving them the tools necessary for that action, Girl Power offers girls “empowerment” through shopping. While Girl Power does contain progressive elements, including taking girls’ issues seriously and allowing girls to be the heroes of the story, more often than not such elements’ political force is blunted. Rather than giving girls the tools to make their lives better, in other words, they are told to head to the mall.

In this chapter, I first examine Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia* and Peggy Orenstein’s *School Girls*. These books brought the issues tween girls face to the forefront of mainstream American society for the first time. Parents, educators and girls themselves have embraced these books, and other authors have copied Pipher and Orenstein hoping to duplicate their success; creating a mini-genre of “girl problem” books. Because of this, the two books form the contemporary foundation upon which popular conceptions of girl culture must be built. Next, I give a short history of Riot Grrrl, and examine some of its political tenets and methods. After that, I demonstrate the ways the mainstream took Riot Grrrl and turned it into Girl Power. Where Kathleen Hanna and her band Bikini Kill became the (often unwilling) symbols of Riot Grrrl, the Spice Girls (Sporty, Scary, Baby, Ginger and Posh Spice) willingly took up the mantle of ambassadors of Girl Power. While I try to avoid engaging in the (fruitless and girl-debasing) debate of which band is more authentic musically, or which band has “better” fans, I do ask to what ends each band – and each political viewpoint – asks for their fans’ allegiance. Finally, I
examine the consequences of the commodification of the political ideals of Orenstein, Pipher and Riot Grrrl. While commodification is not, in and of itself, a bad thing, offering consumerism alone as a mode of empowerment cannot work to effect any type of positive change.

I place my discussion of Reviving Ophelia and School Girls together with my examination of Riot Grrrl because, although authors Pipher and Orenstein may look quite different from Riot Grrrls, all attempt to bring the same message to mainstream American society: girls are not doing as well as we want to believe. Where Riot Grrrls use music, the alternative press and other independently produced forms of media to release their ideas, Pipher and Orenstein use Ballentine and Doubleday, two mainstream publishing houses. Still, all emphasize the fact that girls begin to lose their self confidence in their tween years, theorize about why this occurs, and point to possible solutions.

I also include an examination of Girl Power in this chapter because I believe that Girl Power represents the commodification and de-politicization of the ideas offered by both Pipher and Orenstein and Riot Grrrl. While Girl Power seems to change very little of the message of Riot Grrrl, the changes serve to turn a message of participation and political action into one of consumerism and cuteness. At this moment in time, one cannot discuss Riot Grrrl without taking into account the ways the mass media transmogrified it into Girl Power. I do not discount Girl Power completely, because any form of culture that makes girls into strong, believable protagonists cannot be rejected out of hand. Girl Power definitely has its positive attributes. However, these attributes are often overshadowed by Girl Power’s insistence on replacing political action with mere consumerism.¹

I placed my discussion of these texts within the last chapter of this study for two reasons. First, I believe my examination of Pipher and Orenstein’s works, together with the messages of

¹ For my analysis of whether consumerism can be political action, please refer back to Chapter One.
Riot Grrrl, points out some of the effects girls feel from living with an often anti-girl mass culture, something I have been attempting to do throughout. The ways Girl Power stripped much of the political content that message serves as a needed lesson of the way hegemony resists change. Second, the solutions offered by Pipher, Orenstein and Riot Grrrl point towards the conclusion of this study. While each offers different solutions, together they do offer ideas on how to keep girls from having to go through the loss of identity they describe.

**Reviving Ophelia**

Mary Pipher, a clinical psychologist, published *Reviving Ophelia* in 1994 in an effort to bring attention to our “girl-poisoning” culture. By locating the source of girls’ problems in contemporary culture, Pipher tries to avoid the common psychological tropes of pathologizing either individual girls or their families.² Pipher writes that “most parents want their daughters to develop into healthy, interesting people. They are hindered in their efforts by the dangerous culture in which we live, by the messages that our culture sends young women and by our ethic that to grow up one must break from parents, even loving parents” (Pipher 81). Further, she stresses that “My clients are not different from girls who are not seen in therapy” (Pipher 21). The problems she writes about are not limited to girls who need therapy, but girls whose parents and teachers believe are “normal” or “healthy.” Finally, rather than focusing on individual solutions, she proposes that we change our culture as a whole to bring up healthier girls. Until that happens, Pipher offers girls and their families strategies to cope within a society that is not made for them.

As Pipher states, “Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go

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² The girl problem genre as a whole does not avoid pathologizing individual girls as successfully. Unfortunately, however, an examination of the entire genre cannot be made within the scope of this chapter.
down in droves” (19). For some reason, in other words, young adolescent girls lose their self-esteem, or the sense that they are worthy and valuable human beings. This loss of self-esteem further causes girls to lose their sense of identity. Pipher argues that tween-aged girls’ identities are split into “true” and “false” selves. Girls hide their “true” selves to gain social acceptance (Pipher 22). According to Pipher, false selves are built around the acceptance of others, while true, or “authentic” selves are concerned with self acceptance. Authentic selves feel and express all emotions honestly, and are healthier than false selves (Pipher 37). Girls do not perform this split of their own accord, but because of “enormous cultural pressure.” Pipher locates the source of this pressure in popular culture and girls’ popular culture saturated peer group. (38). Just as Judith Butler believes people can be punished for performing gender incorrectly, Pipher believes that girls who refuse to create a false, pleasing self “risk abandonment from their peers” (Pipher 38). For Pipher, then, denying one’s “authentic,” potentially less-pleasing self in favor of a less demanding, more pleasing false self is part of performing girlhood correctly, and the failure to do so can make girls into social outcasts. Therefore, there is much at stake when girls “become who they are supposed to be” in public (Pipher 38). Pipher says that strong girls – who maintain their authentic selves – are often isolated in adolescence because of their refusal to conform, and that the girls who are happiest in adolescence are not necessarily doing the best. Instead, they are simply the best at pretending to be ok (Pipher 266). In other words, girls who are outcasts in junior high may actually stand a better chance later in life than those who are popular, because popular girls learn the lesson that only the denial of self is rewarded by society.

The need – the requirement – for girls to create these false selves to be accepted tells girls that their authentic selves are not socially valued. If girls were to express their true feelings or desires, no one would like them. This leads to girls’ ultimate loss of self-esteem, and can lead to
an array of self-destructive behaviors such as self-mutilation, eating disorders and unsafe sexual practices. As Pipher states, “All (adolescent girls) are pressured to sacrifice their wholeness in order to be loved” (73). Pipher uses the metaphor of the hurricane to explain the problems of adolescence. She writes that "No girls escape the hurricane. The winds are simply too overpowering” (Pipher 280). While “the resisters and fighters survive, when it's storming, it feels like it will never end” (Pipher 280).

Again, Pipher locates the source of the pressure girls feel to abandon their true selves in mainstream Western culture. She writes that her undergraduate work in anthropology “has always played a role in my work with people. I was taught to understand people within the context of their culture. I learned to ask, 'What is the culture expecting of them? What is their script?’” (Pipher 249). The script that she discovers for girls involves them pleasing others before they please themselves, being good but not too good, being interested in boys but not a slut, and not demanding too much for themselves. In other words, girls are still being taught that they do not matter. She stresses that “In my experience, behaviors that arise independently and spontaneously in large numbers of people often suggest enormous cultural processes at work” (Pipher 158). The loss of self-esteem, eating disorders and self-mutilation are all symptoms of these cultural processes at work in the lives of girls. In the end, then, the girls themselves are not sick. Instead they are doing the best they can in the face of a sick culture.

While this is happening, both society and mainstream psychology constantly urge girls to break away from their families in order to form “healthy” identities. Because of this, “Parents are not the primary influence on adolescent girls. Instead girls are heavily influenced by their friends, whose ideas come from the mass media” (Pipher 82). Neither their peers nor the media are equipped with the skills – or the desire – to help raise adolescent girls. Girls are encouraged

3 Pipher includes piercing and tattooing among self-destructive behaviors, something I dispute.
specifically to break away from their mothers, or the people with the most potential to help their daughters get through their adolescence because they have had to go through it themselves.

“Daughters are socialized to have a tremendous fear of becoming like their mothers.... And yet to hate one's mother is to hate oneself” (Pipher 103). In the guise of helping girls, then, mainstream psychology and psychiatry does more harm to girls than good. If girls could stay close to their families during adolescence, Pipher argues, the process of getting through it would be much easier.

Pipher charges mainstream psychology for creating this mindset, writing that “Much of the writing in our field views families as a primary source of pathology and pain” (250). Pipher traces psychology’s aversion to families to Freud (251). The very language of psychology and psychotherapy supports this view: “words about distance are positive (independence, individuation and autonomy), whereas words about closeness are negative (dependency and enmeshment)” (Pipher 250). Pipher willingly acknowledges that dysfunctional and/or abusive families certainly exist (252). However, the sheer number of damaged girls outweighs the number of directly abusive families, and “rather than blame each family for the unhappiness of its daughters, we need to examine what it is in our culture that destroys the happiness of so many teenage girls” (Pipher 252). Once we identify the source of this destruction, we can change society. Until then, though, we must do the “emergency rescue work” of helping girls survive in a misogynist culture (253).

While Pipher locates a sickness in Western society, she finds the center of this pathology in the mass media. She calls mass culture “girl-poisoning [...] junk culture,” listing music, television, films and advertising as the locus of the culture that “limits girls' development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized” (Pipher 12-13). Pipher believes
that girls are not prepared to process the messages mass culture sends, which makes them
“become overwhelmed and symptomatic” in the ways described above (Pipher 13). She further
calls mass media “a sleazy, dangerous tinsel town with lots of liquor stores and few protected
spaces” (Pipher 27). Indeed, Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood is the only positive example of the mass
media that Pipher lists (285). Within this town, “women have been sexualized and objectified,
their bodies marketed to sell tractors and toothpaste” (Pipher 27). Increasingly, girls are being
asked to place themselves in these objectified roles, which can lead to girls being forced to deal
with sexual issues before they are prepared.

The two main sexual issues that girls must face are the “old issue of coming to terms with
their own sexuality, defining a sexual self, making sexual choices and learning to enjoy sex” and
“the dangers girls face of being sexually assaulted” (Pipher 205). Schools and parents are not
educating girls to face either issue adequately. While “girls receive two kinds of sex education
in their schools: one in the classroom and the other in the halls,” neither is sufficient (Pipher
206). Pipher does not believe that tween-aged girls are old enough for “sexual experiences
beyond kissing and hand holding,” but believes they do need to be prepared for when they are
(208). Part of this involves encouraging girls “to be the sexual subjects of their own lives, not
the objects of others” (Pipher 210). In other words, girls need to learn how to desire and satisfy
those desires instead of only seeing themselves as objects of desire who satisfy others. Further,
Pipher argues that we have “emergency treatment” for girls who have been sexually assaulted,
but “we also need a preventative program. We need to work together to build a sexual culture
that is sensible, decent and joyful” (Pipher 231). Later, she continues by stating that “there is
something eerie about teaching our daughters how to fight off rapists and kidnappers. We need
classes that teach men not to rape and hurt women. We need workshops that teach men what
some of them don't learn: how to be gentle and loving” (Pipher 283). Rather than focusing exclusively on girls, then, Pipher would have us examine the way all children are raised to devalue girls, and enact strategies to change this. We already give girls safety lessons in how to avoid being raped, and emergency treatment and counseling for those who are raped. However, we need to give boys lessons in how to not become rapists, and educate them throughout their lives in how to value and treat girls and women. Finally, we need to help girls examine the roles women play in mass media, to teach them that their natural place is not as sexual objects (Pipher 42).

Pipher offers some advice to girls and their parents. First, she writes that, “fortunately, adolescence is time-limited. By late high school most girls are stronger and the winds are dying down” (Pipher 24). However, scars can remain. Her goals as a psychologist is to increase clients’ “authenticity, openness to experience, competence, flexible thinking and realistic appraisal of their environment” (Pipher 250). She wants to help girls “learn to recognize the forces that shape them and make conscious choices about what they will and won't endure.... This therapy helps girls become whole adults in a culture that encourages them to become forever the object of another's gaze. It means teaching a new form of self-defense” (Pipher 253). As a part of this, “the most important question for every client is 'Who are you?'” (Pipher 254). Pipher states that parents and educators should not be as interested in directing the answer to that question as they are in using the question as a guideline, or process whereby the girl locates her “true core of self” (Pipher 254).

At the same time, the main responsibility for creating healthy girls should not rest on the backs of the girls themselves. Instead, large-scale societal change must occur. Part of this must include a restructuring of the school system to make it a place where more girls can be safe,
taken seriously, and given opportunities to excel (Pipher 290). Also, the definition of “manhood” needs to change to become less destructive to girls and women. As part of this redefinition, manhood needs to allow “women equality and men pride. Our culture desperately needs new ways to teach boys to be men. Via the media and advertising, we are teaching our sons all the wrong lessons” (Pipher 290). Until we can perform this societal change – and this will take a long time – Pipher states that we need to “help families understand some of their daughters' behavior as a reaction to a misogynistic culture and its manifestations at home, with friends, in school and in the larger community. We work together to assess the impact of the culture on the life of each family and to develop plans for damage control. It's emergency rescue work” (Pipher 253).

School Girls

Peggy Orenstein published School Girls in the same year Pipher published Reviving Ophelia. Where Pipher’s study is based upon the patients she sees in her psychology practice, Orenstein’s work is based both on the American Association of University Women’s (AAUW) report “Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America,” which dealt with gender inequities in the public school system, and on her own ethnographic work in public schools. Over the course of the 1992-1993 school year, Orenstein interviewed over 150 girls in two schools. One of the schools, Weston, was suburban and predominantly white, while the other, Audubon, was urban and mostly African-American and Latino (xxi). Where Pipher focuses on predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle-class girls, Orenstein is careful to capture a wide spectrum of racial, ethnic and economic situations because of the important roles they play in girls’ lives (xxii).

Like Pipher, Orenstein locates a precipitous drop in girls’ self-esteem in junior high. Unlike Pipher, she explicitly ties this drop to girls’ academic performances. Orenstein writes
that, “for a girl, the passage into adolescence is not just marked by menarche or a few new
curves. It is marked by a loss of confidence in herself and her abilities, especially in math and
science. It is marked by a scathingly critical attitude toward her body and a blossoming sense of
personal inadequacy” (Orenstein xvi). Further, “by sixth grade, it is clear that both girls and
boys have learned to equate maleness with opportunity and femininity with constraint”
(Orenstein xiv). Within her work, Orenstein discovered that, as a general rule, African-
American girls have the best sense of self-esteem (though this does not always extend to their
view of themselves as students), then white girls, then Latinas (Orenstein xvii, 159-160).
Although she insists that race plays an important role in girls’ lives, she notes that the loss of
self-esteem occurs regardless of racial identity.

Defending her use of the much-maligned term, Orenstein explains what is at stake when
girls lose their self esteem: “Girls with healthy self-esteem have an appropriate sense of their
potential, their competence, and their innate value as individuals. They feel a sense of
entitlement: license to take up space in the world, a right to be heard and to express the full
spectrum of human emotions” (Orenstein xix). Girls without self-esteem do not. Such girls will
be “at a deficit” throughout life because they will be “less able to fulfill their potential, less
willing to take on challenges, less willing to defy tradition in their career choices, which means
sacrificing economic equity.... They will be less prepared to weather the storms of adult life,
more likely to become depressed, hopeless, and self-destructive” (Orenstein xxviii). Self-
estee, then, goes beyond mere affirmations of “I’m ok, you’re ok.” It tells a girl she deserves to
live, and live well.

How do girls learn the lesson of their own worthlessness? Orenstein admits that few of
the girls she interviewed were ever overtly told that they were worth less than boys, and “yet all,
on some level, had learned this lesson anyway" (Orenstein xxviii). Following the AAUW’s report, Orenstein blames the “hidden curriculum” present in schools. She defines the hidden curriculum as “the unstated lessons that students learn in school: it is the running subtext through which teachers communicate behavioral norms and individual status in the school culture, the process of socialization that cues children into their place in the hierarchy of larger society” (Orenstein 5). Within this hierarchy, boys are taken seriously as students worthy of attention, and girls are not. Boys should strive to achieve, and girls should not. Boys can demand to be educated, girls cannot. This means that girls are called on to answer questions less than boys. Also, boys who raise their hands – or demand their teachers’ attention in more noisy ways – are smart, while girls who do the same thing are characterized by teachers as either “know-it-alls” or disruptive. Further, boys are given more one-on-one assistance from teachers than their female counterparts.

Teachers often communicate these norms unconsciously, without meaning to, but the effect on girls is enormous. It makes girls less willing to speak out in class, something that goes beyond some “mere stylistic difference” between girls and boys where girls are quiet and boys are loud. Instead, “speaking out in class – and being acknowledged for it – is a constant reinforcement of a student's right to be heard, to take academic risks” (Orenstein 12). This happens most often in the core academic classes. In classes that offer less in the way of learning, girls are allowed their equality (Orenstein 145). Girls are taught that they cannot – or should not – speak in class. Often, this causes girls to “opt out” of their own education: “Her disengagement is actually an academic strike, an expression of anger, a statement of hopelessness” (Orenstein 81). As evidence of this, Orenstein offers a description of the way white and Latina girls typically sit in the classroom: “she crosses her legs, folds her arms across
her chest, and hunches forward toward her desk, seeming to shrink into herself” (Orenstein 7).

In the more urban school she visited, Audubon, Orenstein noticed that African-American girls tried to speak up as often as the boys in their class, but were “most frequently rebuffed, so they actually receive far less attention” (Orenstein 180). When African-American girls did do well at Audubon, the price they paid was almost total lack of social engagement. Both teachers and students believe that friends hinder them from academic goals – and boyfriends could make them impossible (Orenstein 236). To convince teachers that they were serious about their education, African-American girls had to sacrifice their social lives. In a culture that sees all African-American girls as potential teenaged mothers, teachers may refuse to take African-American girls with boyfriends seriously because of their risk of getting pregnant. In both schools, not only do teachers and boys keep girls from excelling academically; indeed, the girls police themselves, calling any girl who seemed too interested in academics a “schoolgirl.” Being called a schoolgirl is the social kiss of death, and something most of the girls Orenstein interviewed strive to avoid.

Within the culture at Weston, “there is only one label worse than 'schoolgirl’” and that is “slut.” The slut “is not merely a girl who 'does it,' but any girl who – through her clothes, her makeup, her hairstyle, or her speech – seems as if she might” (Orenstein 51). Girls must not only not “do it,” she must also avoid any appearance of having done it or wanting to do it. Because of this, girls learn to equate sexual desire – indeed any type of desire – as shameful, as something they should not have (Orenstein 55). Current forms of sex education do nothing to help this, since most sex education reinforces negative attitudes about sex (Orenstein 57). Under our current form of sexual education, sex is a bad thing that only bad people have – until they get married and sex magically becomes virtuous because of its procreative possibilities. Within this
form of fractured logic, “'Bad' boys exert power, 'bad' girls succumb. 'Bad' boys strike out, 'bad' girls get struck” (Orenstein 210). Desire itself becomes suspect, in any form. Because of this, girls learn that the question should not be “whether they desire (a notion they quickly suppress) but whether or not someone would desire them” (Orenstein 63). While girls cannot desire, they must become desirable. Middle class white and Latina girls learn this lesson the best (Orenstein 116). This lies at the core of girls’ obsession with their appearances. Just like Pipher asserts, Orenstein stresses that girls are not taught to value their inner selves. Instead, they are only taught to value their outer appearances, and whether those appearances are sexually attractive to others.

Orenstein connects eating disorders to these rules against desire. At white, affluent Weston, “'fat' represents falling as much as 'slut': either label, the girls believe, will render them social outcasts, will obliterate them” (Orenstein 96). The girls believe that “If they have sex, they believe they will become only sex. If they are fat, they believe they will become only fat” (96). To avoid this, girls obliterate the part of their identity that desires and deny themselves the pleasures of food; “they learn to guard against their lust for food just as they learn to contain other 'inappropriate' desires, including the desire to speak, to act out, to be heard. Such wholesale denial of hunger may be a logical end result of women's being told they should not need or want anything” (Orenstein 96). As a logical extension of this, girls find “the words 'anorexic' and 'bulimic' a comfort rather than a threat. After all, as long as, through the magic of those words, a girl can safely be classified as too thin, she can't possibly be too fat” (Orenstein 98). The wholesale denial of desire keeps girls from having healthy identities or healthy bodies. Girls learn early that it is better to punish themselves or let others abuse them than to want anything.
Like Pipher, Orenstein suggests both individual and social changes to help girls. Unlike Pipher, she offers specific advice. First, she urges parents and educators to “look carefully at what we tell them, often unconsciously, often subtly, about their worth relative to boys’. We must look at what girls value about themselves – the ‘areas of importance’ by which they measure their self-esteem – as well as the potential sources of strength and competence that, too often, they learn to devalue” (Orenstein xxix). While “there is no single magic formula that will help girls retain their self-esteem” (Orenstein 245), she outlines several suggestions for changing the educational system, such as gender-fair classrooms and schools where women's and people of colors’ accomplishments are emphasized; sexism and harassment is noticed, taken seriously and punished; and where boys are made a part of the process of changing sexism as much as girls (Orenstein 245-274). As a part of this, she suggests that schools use Peggy McIntosh’s five-phase model for teaching history:

1. Womanless and All-White History

2. Teachers notice that there are no white women or people of color in the curriculum, and they cast about for a few exceptional achievers to sprinkle in.

3. The politics of the curriculum are unmasked and the focus is on issues: sexism, racism, classism, and victimization.

4. The daily lives of women and minority men are themselves considered worthwhile subjects of intellectual inquiry. (Orenstein 258-59).

While this model was developed for history classes, it can work across the humanities curriculum. This model both honors the place of women and people of color within the curriculum, and gives students the tools to recognize and fight structural discrimination such as racism and sexism. Students who are taught under such models will hopefully be less likely to
perpetuate or tolerate structural discrimination themselves. Until girls are taken seriously within
the education system, girls will never realize their potential.

Both Pipher and Orenstein locate girls’ loss of self-esteem in their tween years. Both
place the blame for this on our patriarchal society, which Pipher primarily locates within popular
culture, and Orenstein in our school system. While I do not agree with Pipher’s reading of
popular culture as completely disempowering of girls – there is more to value in the mass media
than just Mr. Rogers – it is important to acknowledge popular culture’s part in the de-valuing of
girls. Like Pipher and Orenstein, the girls and young women who participated in Riot Grrrl
demanded that mainstream culture take girls more seriously.

**Riot Grrrl**

Before Pipher and Orenstein, the emergence of Riot Grrrl helped legitimize public
attention on the lives of girls that went beyond sweet and perky stereotypes. The girls and young
women in the Riot Grrrl movement tries to force the mainstream press to recognize that
American and British girls’ lives are imperfect and painful, and that the imperfection is caused
by the patriarchal society in which we live. Emerging out of the male dominated punk scene in
much the same way that the second wave feminists emerged from the civil rights and new left
movements of the 1960s, girls who participated in Riot Grrrl were comfortable both with
expressing their anger and with a D.I.Y. (do it yourself) feminist political ethic (which I will
discuss more below).

As Cassandra Smith insists, “one of the defining characteristics of riot grrrl is that it
resists easy definition. The term represents a strategy or a mindset” rather than a specific identity

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4 Riot Grrrl has been a predominantly North American and UK phenomenon, though chapters have sprung up in
Russia and other European countries. (See Emancipunx from Poland: [http://emancypunx.webpark.pl/riot_grrrl.htm](http://emancypunx.webpark.pl/riot_grrrl.htm),
Interestingly, Riot Grrrl has remained far more active in Europe than it has in North America.)
(Cassandra Smith “Riot Grrrls: Girl-Pop-Punk-Explosion”). The girls involved in Riot Grrrl actively resist the formation of a monolithic identity for their group, maintaining what the members of Riot Grrrl band Bikini Kill called a “Jigsaw Youth” mentality (figures one and two). As the song “Jigsaw Youth” emphatically states, “We know there's not one way, one light, one stupid truth/ Don't fit your definitions/ Don't need your demands/ Not into win lose reality/ Won't fit in with your plan.” Like a jigsaw puzzle, each girl has her own unique identity or “shape,” but together the girls form a coherent political movement. At the same time, as the song sates, Riot Grrrl wants to avoid falling into the trap where there’s “one stupid truth,” or only one politically acceptable method or way of thinking. The band Bratmobile echoes this statement when they complain “You're taking one thing that one girl does/ And making it represent all of us” in the song “Do You Like Me Like That?” Throughout, one major tenet of RiotGrrrl remains that the movement is something a girl participates in, not just an identity that can be assumed or bought.

Stories differ about who exactly coined the term “Riot Grrrl,”5 but all accounts agree that the name emerged in 1991. The term “riot” was used to capture the strength and energy needed for political change, while “grrrl” both reclaimed the word “girl” from its pejorative connotations and added a new and improved edge of anger: many authors have commented on “grrrl”’s growl (Schilt “Ironic” 6, Rosenberg and Garofalo 809). The Riot Grrrls “may be the first generation of feminists to identify their anger so early and to use it” (Chideya 84), as evidenced by song titles like Bikini Kill’s “R.I.P. (rest in pissed-offed-ness)” and “Bitch Theme” and “Fuck Yr Fans” by Bratmobile. As I will discuss below, mainstream media outlets had trouble accepting girl anger. Girls are nice and sweet. Grrrls are nice and angry (figure three). Another part of the “taking back” of the word girl meant exploding girl stereotypes, dressing in aggressive or provocative

5 The name has been attributed to Toby Vail and Kathleen Hanna (of Bikini Kill), or to Alison Wolfe (of Bratmobile) and Jean Smith (of Mecca Normal).
ways that included both the signifiers of punk (mohawks, spikes, ripped clothes) and femininity (baby doll dresses, mod 60s wear) in ironic ways (figures four and five). Again, the mainstream press was not sure how to understand such “strange” representations of girl-hood.

Riot Grrrl is overtly political, a movement for girls that, “at a time in their lives when girls are taught to be silent, Riot Grrrl demands that they scream” (Rosenberg and Garofalo 810). As the lyrics to Bikini Kill’s “Double Dare Ya” state, “We’re Bikini Kill and We Want Revolution Girl-Style Now!” While Riot Grrrl asks girls to take the traditionally masculine privilege of being aggressive, angry and confrontational, it also offers girls “a community and emotional support” (Rosenberg and Garofalo 810). Girls are encouraged to stop competing with each other. The lyrics of Bikini Kill’s “Rebel Girl” confronts this issue. The song starts with lyrics typical to songs where girls compete for the affection of a boy or for social status: “That girl thinks she's the queen of the neighborhood/ She's got the hottest trike in town/That girl she holds her head up so high.” At first, it seems that the girl in the song will be punished for her pride, for thinking she’s the “queen of the neighborhood.” However, the lyrics take an immediate turn when Kathleen Hanna states that “I think I wanna be her best friend.” Not only does Hanna not want to punish this girl for her pride, she values her for it – she wants to get to know this girl better. Hanna’s praise of the girl continues in the chorus, singing “Rebel Girl, Rebel Girl/ Rebel Girl you are the queen of my world/ Rebel Girl, Rebel Girl/ I think I wanna take you home/I wanna try on your clothes.” Throughout the chorus, Hanna praises the Rebel Girl, ending with the ambiguous statement that she wants to take the Rebel Girl home – usually a euphemism for having sex – and she also wants to try on the girl’s clothes. Not only is Hanna interested in this girl sexually, then, but she is also interesting in assuming the parts of the girl’s identity that she admires; she wants to become more political, too, by metaphorically trying on the Rebel Girl’s
clothes. Next, Hanna gets to the heart of why she admires the Rebel Girl, singing “When she walks, the revolutions coming/ In her hips, there's revolution/ When she talks, I hear the revolution/ In her kiss, I taste the revolution.” These lyrics take many of the same bodily attributes – a girl’s walk, her hips, her kiss – that are usually sexualized, and ties them directly to the Rebel Girl’s political ideals. Hanna loves this girl not for her looks, but for her actions. The song continues by defending the Rebel Girl to others: “That girl thinks she's the queen of the neighborhood/ I got news for you, she IS!/ They say she's a slut, but I know/ She is my best friend.” The song affirms that the Rebel Girl has a right to her pride, and tosses aside the label “slut” as unimportant to her identity as Hanna’s best friend. Hanna ends the song with a plea to the Rebel Girl: “I really like you, I really love you/ I really wanna be your best friend/ Love you like a sister always/ Soul sister, blood sister/ Please be my rebel girl.” Throughout, the song expresses the importance of girl friendships and leaves open the possibility for romantic love between girls. The Rebel Girl is valuable because she is willing to go outside of stereotypical femininity. She is willing to work towards a better world for girls, and Hanna loves her for her convictions instead of her appearance, and defends her friend against everyone who cannot realize that.

Perhaps the most famous expression of Riot Grrrl politics can be found in the “Riot Grrrl Manifesto” (aka “Because”) by Kathleen Hanna. In this, Hanna writes statements like:

BECAUSE we recognize fantasies of Instant Macho Gun Revolution as impractical lies meant to keep us simply dreaming instead of becoming our dreams AND THUS seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things. […]

BECAUSE we are interested in creating non-heirarchical ways of being AND making
music, friends, and scenes based on communication + understanding, instead of competition + good/bad categorizations.

BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, antisemitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives.

BECAUSE we see fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds as integral to this process. (Qtd in http://riotgrrrl europe.net/kathleen.html. For the full text, see Appendix One)

Like other schools of feminism, then, Riot Grrrl seeks to combine awareness of structural oppression with “supporting girl scenes.” An integral part of Riot Grrrl is that it “strongly encourages girls to come together and support one another” (Riordan 288). What makes Riot Grrrl unique, though, is its use of methods specific to punk. The movement started out of the urge to carve out some space for girls within the punk rock scenes in Washington state and Washington D.C. – “to break through the stereotype of women crooning sensitive ballads on acoustic guitars and to replace it with a full-on, electric-guitar, punk-rock onslaught, with women belting out lyrics that reflected whatever they had to say. The musical aspect of riot grrrl encouraged uninhibited female self-expression and creativity, and demanded that women be taken more seriously as artists.” (Experience Music Project “Riot Grrrl Retrospective”). Ms. Magazine states that Riot Grrrl is “an underground railroad away from the shallow cultural biosphere you've been trapped in, a network of girls around the country who, like [Kathleen]

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6 There is no standardized way to write Riot Grrrl. Riotgrrrl, riotgrrrl, riot grrl and riot grrrl are equally acceptable. Throughout, I will maintain the spelling each author uses. Also, it is difficult to decide whether to speak of Riot Grrrl in the present or past tenses. Most mainstream accounts of Riot Grrrl believe that the movement ended in the mid-1990s. However, since there are some active Riot Grrrls around, I will use the present tense throughout.
Hanna says in her lyrics, are tired of boys being in charge” (Siegler “Kathleen Hanna”). Not only do Riot Grrrls fight for the space to perform in angry, “unfeminine” ways, they also fight for the right to perform at all.

Because they resist a standardized identity, almost “anyone can become a riot grrrl (or boi)⁷ by using the name to start their own band or fanzine” (Cassandra Smith “Riot Grrrls”). This distinguishes it from other subcultures built around particular music scenes because “you are it, you are not just a fan of it. For this reason the term is fluid and open to re-definition in the same way that the identities of its members are” (Cassandra Smith “Riot Grrrls” ). Riot Grrrl is something one does, rather than something someone merely is. The D.I.Y. ethic Riot Grrrl took from punk, together with their feminist principles meant that Grrrls were determined to control the means of production. D.I.Y., or “Do It Yourself,” demands that punks release their message – be it through music or writing – without using large media conglomerates. D.I.Y. means that punks start their own record labels and publishing houses, because they believe that dealing with corporations leads to “selling out.” Selling out occurs when an artist becomes more interested in the money such corporations can provide rather than their own political aims. Riot Grrrl adopted D.I.Y. because it allows them to step outside of the capitalist, male-dominated media and create their own messages (Cassandra Smith “Riot Grrrls”). Since mainstream media outlets would not release music by angry, political girls, Riot Grrrls created their own record labels or used existing independent punk labels. Taking control of the means of production “gave women the opportunity to maintain control over their work, while learning valuable skills they could then pass on to other young women.” (Experience Music Project “Riot Grrrl Retrospective”). As a part of this, “Young women were not only encouraged to play rock instruments (it was not

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⁷ “Boi” can be defined in several ways: as a masculine-identified heterosexual or lesbian girl or woman, as a female to male transsexual, as a feminine-identified biological boy or man, or as a feminist-identified biological boy or man, etc.
unusual for a band to play their first show the same week — or even the same day — that they first picked up their instruments), they also were encouraged to produce shows, become DJs, start record labels, publish fanzines, design posters, organize protests” (Experience Music Project “Riot Grrrl Retrospective”).

Fanzines, or zines, became one important location for Riot Grrrl participation and political activism (figure six). The words “Fanzine,” “zine,” and “zine,” come from the word “magazine.” Fanzines and zines are self-published booklets that are usually either hand-written or made on a word processor or typewriter, then photocopied by the girl herself and either sold or given away. Fanzines are published to raise awareness of a girl’s favorite bands, and usually include record and performance reviews, interviews with band members, song lyrics and art inspired by bands’ music. Fanzines can focus on one band, a couple of bands, or an entire genre of music. Zines can cover many of the same topics as a fanzine, but may also include political articles, poetry, reviews of other media such as books, television shows, or films, and personal, diary-like essays. If a girl is too shy or poor to get an instrument and join a band, she could write and publish her own zine from home. “An important function of the zine was to empower the writer herself, and a tradition of deeply personal writing sprang up from this. Feminist debate, music reviews and riot grrrl publicity were also essential elements” (Cassandra Smith “Riot Grrrls”). Writing about their experiences gives Grrrls a voice, and reading other Grrrls’ zines lets them know they are not alone. Writing also helps girls articulate and develop their political views, and could give girls the confidence to voice these views in public. I will return to zines as a possible political strategy in the conclusion of this study.

Riot Grrrl “puts forth a radical message without sugar coating it” (Riordan 287). It insists

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8 My separation of fanzines and zines is somewhat artificial, since the boundaries between the two are fluid. One issue of a zine might edge more into fandom, while another might be more personal or political.
on rejecting mainstream, patriarchal society and attempts to create a new, more girl friendly culture. It is just these radical messages that “inspire young women to take action against patriarchal capitalist institutions that may constrain them” (Riordan 297), and disturbed the mainstream media who were unused to hearing girls say things like “I'm so sorry if I'm alienating some of you/ Your whole fucking culture alienates me/ I cannot scream from pain down here on my knees/ I'm so sorry that I think!” (Bikini Kill “White Boy”). Although Riot Grrrl received a great deal of coverage in the mainstream media in the early 1990s, most of it was “misinformed, antagonistic, or banal” (Schilt “Ironic” 9). One reason for this is Riot Grrrl’s rejection of traditional femininity, including the often aggressive and confrontational performances of Riot Grrrl bands. When mainstream journalists did not understand the purpose or meaning behind individual performances, they wrote “negative and condescending articles about Riot Grrrl” as a whole (Schilt “Ironic” 8). Journalists refused to respect the Grrrls in the movement, preferring instead to write sensationalistic stories about “weird” girls. This caused Riot Grrrls to turn their back on the mainstream press. Cassandra Smith reports that “things came to head when, in spite of promising to protect the girl's privacy, a journalist from U.S.A. Today published a girl’s name along with details of how she had been sexually abused as a child, this being information which she had disclosed at a ‘92 workshop. From then on a media blackout was enforced” (“Riot Grrrls”). Grrrls enforced this blackout throughout the movement. Bands would not grant interviews and Grrrls would not talk to journalists about their zines or other projects.

Unfortunately, the plan backfired. In the absence of real information, mainstream journalists started creating stories out of whole cloth (Schilt “Ironic” 9). Indeed, some speculate that the media blackout led to the end of Riot Grrrl as a national movement, stating that “To some extent, the media split the movement into factions: those who would talk to the media and
those who wouldn't. This in turn led to a slow dissolution of the riot grrrl scene. By 1993, few riot grrrls were talking to the media; by 1994, many of the original bands were breaking up.” (Experience Music Project “Riot Grrrl Retrospective”). Bratmobile folded under the pressure so spectacularly that they broke up on stage (Wikipedia “Riot Grrrl”). The intense scrutiny of the mainstream media, coupled with the often mocking tone most articles employed, meant that Riot Grrrl was never really taken seriously by the mainstream as a political movement. Bikini Kill’s Tobi Vail states that “The whole conversation became one of identity instead of one about activism or music or culture” (qtd in Experience Music Project “Riot Grrrl Retrospective”). In other words, the mainstream media pushed Riot Grrrl into the very box they struggled to avoid. While Riot Grrrl is not dead, it is also no longer as active as it was in 1991-1994, and many of the group’s (media appointed) “leaders” no longer self-identify as Riot Grrrls.

One of the enduring criticisms of Riot Grrrl is that, as a movement, it is overwhelmingly white, young and middle to upper-middle class. While in the US most members of Riot Grrrl have grown up with at least some measure of economic privilege (Rosenberg and Garofalo 811), in the UK bands like Huggy Bear have broken through class barriers, allowing working class girls a voice (Experience Music Project “Riot Grrrl Retrospective”). Although these are valid criticisms, this does not mean that Riot Grrrl’s methods or political stance are useless. Though the movement was overwhelmingly white and middle class, their methods do not require this to be the case. In the conclusion of this study, I will discuss ways that girls of color and working class or poor girls can adapt these methods for their own use.

In the transition from Riot Grrrl to Girl Power, Riot Grrrl’s history of economic privilege was not addressed at all. While Girl Power does gesture towards racial inclusion, to fully participate in Girl Power requires economic assets that working class or poor girls simply do not
have. While the methods used by Riot Grrrl can be adapted to include girls without money, Girl Power’s insistence on consumption as a replacement for empowerment completely leaves economically underprivileged girls out in the cold.

**Transition into Girl Power**

As Riot Grrrl faded from the national spotlight, it was replaced by Girl Power, a pro-girl rhetoric with which the mainstream media was more comfortable. While both Riot Grrrl and Girl Power privilege the central position of girls in media texts, “Riot Grrrl promoted a very different type of feminism from the one being popularized by media and articulated as girl power” (Riordan 279). Where “Riot Grrrl messages are overtly political” (Riordan 286), Girl Power messages need not be, including instead vaguely pro-girl ideas. Girl Power is also more comfortable with traditional femininity than Riot Grrrl. While many of the messages Girl Power has to offer are politically progressive and should not be rejected out of hand, neither does it present to girls the possibilities offered by Riot Grrrl. In her article, “"A Little Too Ironic": The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians,” Kristen Schilt writes about female musicians who are marketed as part of Girl Power, stating that while Girl Power musicians seemed as angry as their Riot Grrrl counterparts, “they were carefully constructed as non-threatening and their form of female empowerment was something to buy in CD format rather than something to actively produce” (Schilt “Ironic” 11). This is the main difference between Riot Grrrl and Girl Power. Pushing aside the largely cosmetic or aesthetic differences of dress and musical taste aside, what one is left with is the idea that while Riot Grrrl gave girls something to do, Girl Power gives girls something to buy.
Girl Power

As I have stated throughout, the (fleeting) success of Riot Grrrl and the more enduring success of Pipher and Orenstein’s books proved that pro-girl texts sold well. Since the mid-1990s, girl-centric texts have become more and more popular within the mainstream media. As Meenakshi Durham states in her article “The Girling of America,” the motivation behind creating most of these texts was almost purely financial (25). Most media corporations do not work with the goal of empowering anyone, least of all girls. Instead, they work with the goal of turning a profit. Whether the texts produced empower anyone is the least of their worries. At the same time, the effects of Girl Power texts “have been multiple and complex” (Durham 25). While they recognize the profit motive behind these texts, “girl-oriented genres” have still earned praise from critics and scholars (Durham 24). Girl Power texts do allow girls a stable, honored place within mainstream society. No longer are girls relegated to the place of silly hanger on or annoying younger sister, but are the protagonists and heroes. Because of Girl Power, “the figure of the girl heroine has emerged as a 21st century icon” (Durham 25). Any study of Girl Power must acknowledge its place as a deeply mixed discourse that is at once empowers girls and inscribes that power within narrow channels that may or may not lead to social change.

The ambiguous nature of Girl Power can be demonstrated in its use of traditional femininity. “Girlpower ⁹ can be seen either as subverting or parodying traditional models of femininity, or as reinscribing them” (Taylor 187), and it is not always easy to decide which is happening. Like Riot Grrrl, Girl Power can, and does, use femininity in subversive ways. For example, the popular Girl Power text Buffy the Vampire Slayer features the protagonist Buffy,

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⁹ Just like Riot Grrrl, there is no universally accepted spelling of Girl Power. Girlpower, girl power and girlpower are all equally acceptable, and I will keep the spelling of each author intact.
who is stronger than any (human) man, slays vampires and demons and wears pretty pink
dresses and lip gloss. Within Buffy’s world, only girls can be chosen as slayers. This naturalizes
the connection between girls and physical power, turning the feminine/passive, masculine/active
idea on its head. As Buffy herself states in the episode “Faith, Hope, and Trick,” she wants to
concentrate on school and “saving the world from evil demons. You know, girlie stuff?” Buffy
is the strongest character in her universe, mentally and physically, and both she and the show’s
mythology tie this directly to her gender. Girl Power insists on girl’s bodies as “active and
robust,” and there is “no question that this represents a politically progressive formulation”
(Durham 26).

At the same time, however, Girl Power says you can be anything, as long as that
anything looks traditionally feminine (Taylor 194). This occurs because Girl Power relies too
heavily on feminine attractiveness as a “form of capital” (Taylor 193). It can be argued that
Buffy is so popular because of her physical attractiveness, and that she would not be allowed to
be a hero were she less pretty. As Durham states, “It is impossible to consider these new girl
icons without an acute awareness of their physical presences and the strategic deployment of
their bodies as focal points” (Durham 25). Even when Buffy has been through a tough fight, she
looks pretty. The actor playing Buffy, Sarah Michelle Gellar, also lost weight over the course of
the show. As Buffy became more powerful, saving the world more often than some of us get
haircuts, her appearance became more frail looking. Girls are taught this lesson, that
“empowerment comes in the way one dresses, looks, and uses her sexuality for a heterosexual
male gaze to get what she wants” (Riordan 290). Ugly girls are not allowed to be powerful,
which means that girls who want power must constantly monitor their bodies. This is no
different from traditional constructions of femininity. Though the kinds of power offered to girls
has changed, the methods of obtaining it have not. Taylor paraphrases Laura Mulvey when she
writes that, within Girl Power, a girl’s “to-be-looked-at-ness remains unchallenged,” and
“appearing is privileged over speaking” (190). In all, within Girl Power bodies “contain a
contradictory mixture of forms that simultaneously challenge and reassert dominant
constructions of gender, race, and class” (Durham 26).

**Spice Girls**

The first, and perhaps greatest (in terms of money made and countries “conquered”) example of Girl Power were the Spice Girls (figure seven). The Spice Girl’s first album,
“Spice,” sold 18 million copies worldwide and hit number 1 in 30 countries (Schoemer 90). 10
million albums were sold within the first 5 months of its 1996 release, making $165 million for
Virgin records (Douglas “Girls” 22). Combined with their other CDs, the Spice Girls have sold
50 million CDs worldwide (Lemish 17). This success represents a great deal of economic
power, proved that girls had a lot of money to spend on CDs and merchandise, and led to the
success of teen pop divas like Britney Spears.

The Spice Girls’ success rested on savvy marketing strategies. Using the Beatles (and
later boy bands) as their example, each of the five Spice Girls represented a different type of
“girl,” honoring different types of (mainstream) femininity and giving fans the opportunity to
pick a favorite Spice Girl to emulate: Posh liked designer clothes and luxury; Baby was sweet,
young and nonthreatening; Scary (the only non-white member) was funny and aggressive;
Sporty was athletic; and Ginger was the sexiest (figure 8). This is one reason why, in their
article “I’ll Never Be Your Woman,” Barbazon and Evans compare the Spice Girls to the
Village People: They “do for feminism what the Village People did for gay politics: they grant a
spirit, power and humour to the performance of difference” (Barbazon and Evans “I’ll Never Be
Your Woman”). Each Spice Girl had a distinct, easily marketed identity that fans could embrace. While these identities made the Spice Girls easier to sell to fans, they also honored the different faces of femininity.

Critics, both within feminist and mainstream media circles, still don’t quite know how to take the Spice Girls. Like Girl Power itself, the Spice Girls are a mix of empowering pro-girl rhetoric, old fashioned femininity and blatant consumerism. Susan Douglas defines the question of the Spice Girls best when she asks,

Are they a group of no-talent, flash-in-the-pan bimbos whose success comes primarily from a highly calculated and cynical marketing strategy that has fused bubble-gum music with a pseudo-feminist message? Or are they a refreshing fusion of politics and music that debunks antiquated stereotypes about feminism and helps empower young girls as they enter the treacherous process of discovering their sexuality? (Douglas “Girls” 22).

A lot of ink has been spilled debating the question of whether or not the Spice Girls are talented, and comparing their pop music to Riot Grrrl’s punk. Critics and academics usually do this to disparage the Spice Girls as silly or vacuous. Rather than do this, I prefer to cast the question of the Spice Girls’ talent or musical authenticity aside in favor of other questions. Calling the Spice Girls untalented or inauthentic merely serves to strengthen the phallocentric rock canon, and by extension the implication that their girl fan base is stupid or “duped” by popular culture. As Driscoll states, a more important question involves “considering the modes of identification necessarily deployed when girls buy the Spice Girls raises the very real imaginary relations people sustain with commodities in their lives, and the significance of identification as a relation to power” (Driscoll “Girl Culture”). In other words, why did girls like the Spice Girls? What needs did they fulfill? Why did their mix of feminism and pop sell so well?
As Taylor states, “The importance of the media as a cultural space through which feminism is accessed cannot be overestimated” (Taylor 183). The Spice Girls formed one such place through which girls could access feminist ideas through the mass media. The Spice Girls refused to be subservient. “While their videos and slogans may seem vapid, they present a clear pedagogical function, teaching women to be affirmative” (Barbazon and Evans “I’ll Never Be Your Woman”). In their videos, the Spice Girls are funny, athletic and aggressive. They refuse to be “passive, romantic, nurturing or monogamous” (Barbazon and Evans “I’ll Never Be Your Woman”). Like Riot Grrrl, the Spice Girls emphasize the importance of friendship and support between girls. The lyrics to their first hit single, “Wannabe,” tells a prospective boyfriend that “If you wanna be my lover/ You gotta get with my friends/ Make it last forever/ Friendship never ends.” If a man wants to date one of the Spice Girls, he has to pass her friend’s inspection. Further, he has to understand that, while romantic relationships come and go, a girl’s friends last forever: he is temporary, while girlfriends are permanent. The Spice Girls encourage their fans to speak. One of the slogans they promote is “Silence is golden but shouting is fun” (Barbazon and Evans “I’ll Never Be Your Woman”). Their mini-manifesto, called “Girl Power is…” states things like “Girl Power is when you help a guy with his bag” or “You know you can do it and nothing’s going to stop you” (qtd in Lemish 21). As Barbazon and Evans state, “Five women who are strong, assertive, political, independent and pro-friendship are not detrimental to the cause of feminism” (Barbazon and Evans “I’ll Never Be Your Woman”). Finally, critics speculate that girls who listened to the Spice Girls when they were younger may be more receptive than other girls to the more overtly political messages offered by Riot Grrrl (Douglas “Girls” 23). No examination of the Spice Girls can ignore these positive elements.

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10 See the full text of “Girl Power is…” in the appendix.
Naturally, though, no examination can only point out the positive elements of the Spice Girls’ popularity. Like all things in Girl Power, the Spice Girls represent a double edged sword, and not all critics are fans. Most of the criticisms against the Spice Girls, like most of the positive elements, can also be said about Girl Power as a whole. First, while the Spice Girls celebrate traditional girl culture, they also do not question it, or “the fact that girls do not freely choose to enjoy these things” (Riordan 292). Not all girls are interested in makeup and clothes and boys, but they must pretend to be at least marginally interested to be socially acceptable. As Riordan states in her article “Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls,” the Spice Girls “offer no critique of the status quo, and they offer no alternative activities for girls to participate in; they offer a celebration of what girls already do rather than encourage girls to seek power through direct economic and political means” (291). Riot Grrrls “often question the boundaries or definitions of such ‘girl space,’ while the Spice Girls seem more amenable to the sometimes limited range of spaces popularly allowed to girls” (Driscoll “Girl Culture”). “Girl Power is…” states, Girl Power is when “You wear high heels and think on your feet” (qtd in Lemish 21), and the song “We’re the Spice Girls” states “We know how we got this far/ Strength and courage in a Wonderbra!” All of the Spice Girls were traditionally attractive, and all surrounded themselves with the markers of femininity. While Sporty Spice was a tomboy, for example, she was also thin and pretty, and always wore trendy matching tracksuits. She never looked as if she had just participated in an actual sporting event – unlike members of Riot Grrrl bands, Sporty Spice did not sweat in public. By working within the dominant ideology of femininity, they “reinforce and sustain it” (Lemish 18).

Part of this includes the ways the Spice Girls use their sexuality. As the name of their band states, they are “girls.” While this does allow their young fans to identify with them, not
everyone thinks this is a good idea. Kim Gordon, the bass player in the art/punk band Sonic Youth states that the Spice Girls are “masquerading as little girls. It’s repulsive” (qtd in Schoemer 90). As I stated in the previous chapter, any woman can be presented as a Lolita figure. By acting younger than they are, and dressing and acting in overtly sexualized ways, the Spice Girls were, like Britney Spears, attempting to appeal to both little girls and men. While the Girl Power ethic appealed to girls in their audience, their scanty costumes turned on the men. Appealing to both groups made their fan base twice as large, but it also undercut their Girl Power message. In the end, the only message learned could be that acting sexy was the only way to gain wide acceptance.

Also, the Spice Girls’ image insisted on having it both ways, or “on being sex objects while simultaneously critiquing patriarchal ways of looking at and thinking about young women” (Douglas “Girls” 23). While this seems like a good thing on its face, the Spice Girls’ critique of girls’ and women’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” never progressed beyond statements about how Wonderbras and high heels made girls feel powerful. Because of this, it merely replicates what girls are going through today. Susan Douglas writes that “Girls today are being urged, simultaneously, to be independent, assertive and achievement oriented, yet also demure, attractive, soft-spoken, fifteen pounds underweight and deferential to men. They are told that if they aren’t sexy, they are nothing, but that their sexuality is dangerous to them and threatening to much of the rest of society” (Douglas “Girls” 23). While the Spice Girls’ popularity can be based on the fact that they do understand, and replicate this – something that girls appreciate and need – the fact that the Spice Girls do not offer girls any alternatives can end up reifying the fact that today’s girls need to be all things to all people rather than, as Pipher says, their “authentic selves.”
Further, the Spice Girls are the “most evident example of the commodification of girl power” (Riordan 290). Beyond selling millions of CDs, “the Spice Girls have the most commercial cake, attaching their name to everything from Pepsi and potato chips to backpacks and lollipops” (Schoemer 90). The Spice Girls attached their names and likenesses to every type of merchandise a girl could want, from candy to coloring books, alarm clocks to school supplies, t-shirts to plastic dishes. The most famous Spice Girls merchandise was their fashion dolls. Each Spice Girl had her own doll (which were the same size as Barbies), and each doll had her own clothes and accessories (figure nine). The companies that worked with the Spice Girls to produce merchandise openly acknowledged their motives. In the press release for the joint venture between the Spice Girls and Fetish cosmetics, Fetish’s vice president of marketing Nicholas Longano states that Fetish’s “teen audience is inspired by movies and music,” and the Spice Girls have “the same attitude, the same ‘girl power’ sensibility, that makes the tie-in feel credible to us” (qtd in Stanley 9). Girl Power, then, becomes nothing more than a clever marketing gimmick. Beyond their physical attractiveness, beyond their musical talent (or lack thereof), this is the major problem with the Spice Girls and Girl Power in general: they take a political message and use it as a marketing tool. “The Spice Girls celebrate and encourage young women to no longer passively consume but to actively consume makeup and clothing and to no longer be passive objects of the male gaze but to actively construct themselves for the male gaze” (Riordan 291). I will return to this throughout the rest of this chapter.

Other Girl Power Texts

While the Spice Girls’ popularity has waned, Girl Power remains a strong element within mainstream popular culture, and exhibits many of the same characteristics of the Spice Girls’ popularity. In fact, the texts I examined in Chapter Two all fall under the rubric of Girl Power.
Tween stars such as Hilary Duff and Lindsay Lohan are said to demonstrate Girl Power, if only economically. (For example, Duff received $2 million for her latest film, A Cinderella Story (Stroup “Girl Power”).) Television shows such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Dark Angel, and Veronica Mars all feature strong girl hero protagonists, and Lizzie McGuire, That’s So Raven, and Strange Days at Blake Holsey High both feature girls as the central characters. As Durham states, “It seems clear that the Buffies […] of contemporary pop culture have shifted girl-oriented media in some significant way” (25). This is a good thing. Girls need and deserve to see strong girl protagonists on television and in movies:

The fact that the girls are young shifts the discourse in progressive directions away from conceptions of adolescent girls as inarticulate, passive, ineffectual, and inconsequential toward a recognition of girls as viable, even vital and substantial, members of society. The focus on girls marks a turning point where femaleness is no longer devalued in public discourse; rather, it is valorized and applauded (Durham 27).

At the same time, so do grown women. “One negative consequence of commodified girl power is the symbolic annihilation of older women as leads on television shows” (Riordan 292). Girls are being valued at the expense of women – where are the forty year-old kung-fu masters, the fifty year old superheroines?

Also, “the indiscriminate exultation over the emergence of these girl heroines must be tempered by the problematics of their context: a globalized multiracial society, increasingly fragmented by class structures, in which discourses of sex and the body still play a constitutive role in adolescent girls’ identity formation” (Durham 25). Aside from Dark Angel’s multi-racial Jessica Alba and That’s So Raven’s African-American Raven, the girl protagonists from the list above are all white, and all of the girls are upper-middle-class and beautiful. The majority are
blonde. “To be a successful girl hero, to have the ability to transcend and challenge the limits of ordinary female existence, it is necessary to be White, and preferably blonde” (Durham 26-27). The overwhelming whiteness of Girl Power heroes pushes girls of color to the side. While there are more non-white protagonists than in earlier eras, these girls must still conform to white standards of beauty and behavior. Furthermore, these actors’ overwhelmingly traditional beauty pushes girls who are fat or nonconformist looking out of the spotlight. How does this help girls learn anything beside the notion that they must, at all costs, strive to fit standard beauty ideals? As Durham states, within Girl Power “only certain girls are positioned in media culture to warrant that applause; only girls whose bodies are marked in socially intelligible ways are visible or rendered valuable” (Durham 27).

There are important economic reasons behind this standard of beauty, because beauty, like sex, sells. Like every aspect of Girl Power, the way girl protagonists look has important economic implications. Girl Power icons Sarah Michelle Gellar (of Buffy the Vampire Slayer) sells Maybelline (figure ten), pop star Britney Spears sold Pepsi (figure eleven), and both Hilary Duff (figure twelve) and the Olsen twins have their own line of products (figure thirteen). Interestingly, none of the girls of color within the tween star pantheon, such as Raven, participates in these types of commercial endorsements. Certainly none have the merchandise lines that Duff and the Olsens do. For white stars, “much of the girls’ value as cultural symbols of modern girlhood is predicated on their ability to move millions of units of make-up, hair color, soda, and teen fashions” (Durham 28) Because of this, “their gender performances are thus key elements in the interdependent cycle of media profits, advertising, and girls’ purchasing power” (Durham 28). If these stars did not represent ideal beauties, they could not sell as much product. As Durham states, “if girl audiences were encouraged to take pleasure in some alternative body
type or gender performance, it might compromise the product sales that are the lifeblood of the media industries” because these ideals “represent dominant norms that are attainable through the consumption of the products they sell” (29). Girls must really believe that Maybelline can make them look like Gellar. If Gellar were not traditionally beautiful – if she were, say, twenty pounds overweight – she would not sell as much makeup. Girls do not need to buy products to look like themselves. They need to buy products to look like the unattainable ideal. In this way, Girl Power maintains the age-old beauty myth that insists that female bodies are incomplete, problematic things that can only be completed or solved through the purchase of an entire array of consumer goods.

**Girl Power as Marketing Ploy… Why does feminism sell?**

As I stated above, one of the most interesting questions surrounding Girl Power is that of why it works – why do girls, and (more importantly) their parents, buy it? As Karen Schoemer states in her *Newsweek* article “The Selling of Girl Power,” Girl Power is incredibly effective. One reason for this is that who would want “to speak out against Girl Power? It’s practically a betrayal of the female species” (Schoemer 90). However, the political content of Girl Power is underpowered at best (Schoemer 90). First and foremost, Girl Power “offers the privileged subject position of the consumer” (Taylor 182). For example, today’s teen magazines “keep girls reading by preaching a new gospel: Girl power goes to the mall” (Vanderkam “Teen”). Rachel Fudge expresses what Girl Power means when she states that

> 'Girl power’ as articulated in the mass media (and mass marketing) is often misrepresented as de facto feminism, when in fact it’s a diluted imitation of female empowerment. Indeed, for some people, it’s a way to bypass the complexities of feminism – it’s a lot easier to wear a ‘girls kick ass’ t-shirt than to learn how to defend
yourself physically. The problem with girl power is that all too often it relies on style over substance, baby tees over action. While girl power and the accompanying mania for girl culture has certainly helped spread pro-feminist, pro-female messages throughout the land, it also threatens to turn empowerment into yet another product (Fudge “Buffy” 18).

Or, to paraphrase Bitch magazine’s Rita Hao, Girl Power comprises little but the mainstream’s realization that “hey! Girls buy things!” (30). Most of the “empowerment strategies” offered by Girl Power are based on consumerism. Girls are supposed to feel empowered when they buy shoes or t-shirts with pro-girl slogans. As Kristen Schilt acknowledges, “Although these consumer slogans may be empowering for some, they do not encourage girls’ own creativity or input into empowerment strategies” (Schilt “I’ll Resist” 79). Again, while Riot Grrrl offered girls something to do, Girl Power can only offer something to buy.

Girls are not stupid or easily duped; it is not easy to make them buy products. According to Fortune Magazine’s Nina Munk, Girl Power’s dominant marketing strategy is to pretend girls are “running things, that they’re in charge” (Munk “Girl Power!”). She quotes Geraldine Laybourne, the head of Disney/ABC cable networks (and former head of Nickelodeon), who states that television programmers have to be clever in their marketing efforts, they have to make girls “feel like they’re in control” (Munk “Girl Power!”). The same holds true for selling clothes: Steve Kahn, the head of the popular tween clothes catalogue Delia’s, says that “Every 14-year-old girl today really believes she can become President, that she can run Exxon. Maybe she can, maybe she can’t. The point is that girl power is a state of mind that smart marketers are targeting” (Munk “Girl Power!”). People with something to sell are taking girls’ ambition, their very will to succeed in life, and using it to sell them consumer goods. They are trying to replace political power with consumer power by giving girls the illusion that they have control. Girls do
not buy consumer products because that is the only action available to them, in this myth. They buy things because girls want to; because they are in charge, and major media corporations are letting girls boss them around. This has the potential to leech all of the political potential out of Girl Power. Or, as Ellen Riordan says, “commodified pro-girl rhetoric has taken the feminist out of feminism” (280).

Girl Power is a strong reminder of the fact that, in hegemonic societies, revolutionary messages can be co-opted by the mainstream; “feminism can be accommodated without disrupting advertisers’ address to targeted feminine subjects” (Taylor 189). As Hao states, “this sort of pro-woman schlock isn’t even about feminism at all. It’s not like we’re all supposed to get together and think about the ways in which gender roles have created artificial barriers between people, or how sexism keeps us from reaching our goals. Oh, no – we’re supposed to race out to the mall and buy things” (Hao 30). Girl Power is used “not to empower girls but, rather, to encourage their dedicated consumption to pro-girl artifacts” (Riordan 291). When this happens, “empowerment has stopped at the individual level and, therefore, does not dramatically change the social conditions of women’s and girls’ lives” (Riordan 294). When feminist ideals become commodified, group empowerment becomes individual entitlement. No longer do we strive towards making things better for everyone, but instead we come to believe that we “deserve” great new shoes or a t-shirt that says “Girls Rule!” I agree with Rita Hao, who states, “That I have a problem with – because if feminism is about anything, it’s about the hidden power dynamics of entitlement” (Hao 30). Entitlement inevitably leaves people out. To participate in Girl Power, you have to have the economic resources. Those who cannot afford to pay for a whole variety of consumer goods have no Girl Power (Taylor 192, Hao 30). Because of this,
Girl Power need not be critiqued on whether its popular texts are as “good” or as “authentic” as those Riot Grrrl provides. Instead, it must be critiqued on who gets left out.

In the end, “the idea of girl power, although quite admirable, unfortunately became reified into tangible commodities bought and sold most notably by entertainment corporations” (Riordan 289). Riordan continues by stating that, to become as popular as it has, Girl Power has found it necessary to become “watered down so that it means something to everyone. Subsequently, this diluting effect allows for girl power to be articulated in a number of ways and appeal to the widest audience” (Riordan 290). What does Girl Power mean? It means whatever will sell the most product. The most disappointing part of this is that Girl Power does offer some exciting possibilities, and “it’s a shame to channel all that daring into clothes” (Vanderkam “Teen”). Girls need and “deserve real opportunities to explore untamed corners of the world, try new activities that test their physical limits and see how much they’re capable of – beyond the confines of the mall” (Vanderkam “Teen”). This forms the main difference between Riot Grrrl and Girl Power: where “Riot Grrrl offered ways to practice their feminism, by forming bands, making zines, or starting support groups,” Girl Power seems to “want girls to band together, but to do what? They offer very little in terms of guidance for the young girl who wants to achieve girl power” (Schilt “Ironic” 14). As Lemish says, Girl Power urges girls “to get out ‘there’ and do ‘it’ – yet, they never offer any suggestion of what kind of space it is that is ‘there’ and what ‘it’ constitutes. The promise of freedom exists – but no purpose for that freedom: A freedom to be where? To do what?” (26). Where Riot Grrrl relies upon girls to create their own culture, to take over the means of production, Girl Power demands that girls merely purchase, and leave the means of production in the same hands that told their mothers they were nothing more than silly little girls.
Conclusion

In the conclusion of their article, Barbazon and Evans call for “a fashionable, truly popular feminism,” and they locate the potential for such a feminism in Girl Power texts like the Spice Girls. They write that, “We need a politics that is intimidating as Mel B’s [Scary’s] slogans, as changeable as Geri’s [Ginger’s] frocks, as huggable as Emma [Baby], as fit and flexible as Mel C [Sporty] and as stylish as Victoria [Posh]” (Barbazon and Evans “I’ll Never Be Your Woman”). I truly believe in the potential for a popular feminism, but I also believe we shouldn’t have to have “pretty politics” to accomplish this. In other words, we should not have to avoid issues that make us uncomfortable to be accepted.

In the end, though, it doesn’t matter what adults think of Girl Power texts. “What matters is what they mean to their preteen fans” (Douglas “Girls” 23). Most adult readings of texts aimed at girls merely finds that the texts themselves are silly, and the girls who like them are easily tricked into liking things that are bad for them (Driscoll “Girl Culture”). In performing a study that respects girls, this is a claim that should be avoided, as should the debate over the authenticity of differing texts. As Driscoll states, “It seems to me incontrovertibly patronizing and ultimately pointless to assume that conformist girls like the Spice Girls while more radical (read more intelligent) ones like Bikini Kill” (“Girl Culture”). Douglas continues in this vein by stating that “While it’s easy as pie to hold a group like the Spice Girls in contempt, we should be wary when music embraced by preteen girls is ridiculed. These girls are telling us that they want a voice, that they want someone to take them seriously, that they want to be worldly wise and optimistic at the same time” (Douglas “Girls” 23). Lemish concurs with Douglas, stating that the popularity of Girl Power texts points to girls’ need for “appropriate role models, representing their own inner struggles with their place in a changing world of gender definitions” (Lemish
28). Girls are not stupid – they just do not always choose the cultural texts we would have them choose. Our job as academics is to try to figure out why. As Driscoll states, the very success of the Girl Power’s strategy of using feminism to sell product “warrants a great deal of consideration” (Driscoll “Girl Culture”).

To understand Girl Power, then, we must understand why feminism can so easily be incorporated into an advertisement or consumer product. As Lemish states, this is “in and of itself an interesting phenomenon” (Lemish 21). Within Girl Power, marketers are selling girls the illusion of power. Obviously, this taps into some need for girls to wield control. We also need to examine the hunger girls feel for role models and political outlet. This hunger is so strong that they will grasp at whatever is offered, even if the only things offered are mainstream consumer goods. Like Rita Hao, “I’m not saying that buying things is automatically anti-feminist” (Hao 30). If girls feel empowered by their “Girls Rule!” t-shirts, if the shirt makes it easier for the girl to make it through the day, then something right is happening. However, the t-shirt alone cannot teach the girl how to change her life for the better. There is no need for girls to live the lives described in Pipher and Orenstein’s books. There is also no need for girls’ only outlet to be the consumption of a few pro-girl products.
Conclusion

Other than their image as presented through marketing, there is little to no coherence within the eight to fourteen year-old tween demographic. A great deal changes in girls’ lives between the ages of eight and fourteen, and girls do not experience these changes at the same time. The themes that I have outlined in this study, then, may have more to do with the demographic ideal than the actual lived experiences of girls. Still, even if all I have outlined is the demographic ideal I believe this study is important because it is just this ideal that is being sold to girls and their parents every day. Before we can determine how being made into a marketing demographic affects girls’ lived experiences, we have to first find out how marketers are attempting to weave girls together into a coherent whole. This study is a first step in that process.

Two main themes have emerged over the course of this study: First, girls want some form of popular culture that addresses them specifically and that holds some form of “expression specific to them” (Driscoll “Girl Culture”). To satisfy this want, girls will consume and enjoy popular culture that, on its surface, can seem quite damaging to them. Second, the vast majority of the discourse about what it means to be a tween-aged girl in contemporary Western culture focuses almost exclusively on the outer symptoms of girlhood – what being a girl should look like, in other words. At the same time, the inner processes of girlhood, such as how girls process puberty emotionally, how girls form their value systems, or how girls form their identities, is virtually ignored. Because of this, girls (and boys) are taught that their internal worlds are not important, and that everything should be subsumed to their outer appearances.

Girl Power best exemplifies both the emphasis on outer appearances and the avoidance of girls’ actual inner selves. While Girl Power does include some progressive, girl-friendly ideas, as
a whole it takes girls’ need to assert themselves and transmutes that energy into the urge to purchase “pro-girl” products. As Dafna Lemish states in her article about the Spice Girls, “‘Girl Power’ is a myth which supports the subordination of females within patriarchal society: it offers the lie that ‘Girl Power’ constitutes liberating empowerment and thereby diverts any possibility of real resistance” (Lemish 26). According to Bitch Magazine’s Rita Hao, Girl Power is inherently hypocritical because it continues to tell girls and women that “we’re too fat/too dark/too loud/too aggressive,” and then offers the “retail therapy” of buying a t-shirt that says “girls rule!” to make us feel better (30).

Why does this matter? As both Mary Pipher and Peggy Orenstein stress in their books, during puberty, a child’s sense of identity, both physically and emotionally, changes. Because their identities are in flux, girls are unsure of themselves and could be more vulnerable to outside forces that seek to convince them of their lack of importance or worth. The enforcement of traditional gender norms is one way this occurs. As psychiatrist Lynn Ponton states, “While gender roles are changing dramatically in the workplace, they are being enforced more rigidly in the school yard. We can even see this visually in extreme physical stereotypes: thin, waiflike girls and exaggerated, hypermasculine boys, each struggling to identify their sexuality in a rapidly changing landscape” (3). Pipher agrees, stating that “Most parents worry about rigid sex-typing when their daughters are small.... That's okay, but the time to really worry is early adolescence. That's when the gender roles get set in cement, and that's when girls need tremendous support in resisting the cultural definitions of femininity” (Pipher 286). Puberty is both the point at which girls’ sense of identity and self-worth are at their shakiest and when traditional misogynist gender norms are insisted upon the most strongly.
This study has only begun to delve into these important areas, so obviously there are any number of ways one can continue to study tweens in the future. Throughout the rest of this conclusion, I will offer directions that such studies could take.

**Pleasure and Popular Culture**

First, it is important to delve into the realms of pleasure. Why do girls enjoy certain popular culture texts and not others? Catherine Driscoll believes that one method of doing so would include a comparison of the different fan bases of Riot Grrrl and Girl Power texts (“Girl Culture”). She suggests that investigating why each fan base becomes interested in their different sub-cultures, and what each group gains from their fandom, “would go a long way towards mapping the contemporary parameters of girl culture” (Driscoll “Girl Culture”). Such a study of would have to avoid, as I have attempted to avoid, questions of each text’s authenticity or worth. This does not mean that scholars would have to ignore the fact that much popular culture aimed at tweens does include dis-empowering ideas. Rather, maintaining the focus of each study away from questions of authenticity would keep the study from devolving into categorizing different texts as better or more worthy based on their content instead of questioning why girls enjoy a wide variety of content.

**Girl Scouts and the Inner Girl**

Next, it would be interesting to conduct a wide-ranging study of ways to shift the focus away from girls’ external looks to their internal selves. Such a study could examine how girls feel about themselves through an examination of texts made by girls or through ethnographic study. This type of study could also focus on movements or organizations that make girls focus on what their bodies can do instead of what their bodies look like. If the study were to take this tact, one possible location to examine could be the Girl Scouts. Historically, “two-thirds of
America’s professional women have been Girl Scouts” (Anonymous “Girl Scouts”). Unlike the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts have no rules against homosexuals or atheists within their organization, and they promoted authentic Girl Power before the term even existed. In its best troops, the Girl Scouts focus on teaching girls about joyful body movement, leadership skills, and self-esteem. Because each troop is headed by volunteers, each troop has a different focus and differing levels of quality. While the Girl Scout organization as a whole hopes to teach girls these values, individual troops may not. In fact, the divide between what the central organization believes and how that is expressed at the troop level could be a fertile area of interest for scholars.

The Girl Scouts also provide the opportunity for scholars to examine one level of participation parents have in girls’ lives. As I stated above, the Girl Scouts are run by adult volunteers, and they are having trouble recruiting adult leaders (Anonymous “Girl Scouts”). One reason for this is that being a troop leader requires a great deal of time and effort on the part of parents. Laura Vanderkam believes that, for parents and other adults, espousing a sense of Girl Power is simply easier and less time consuming. As she states, “too often, parents and other adults find it easier to let fashion fill the void” (Vanderkam “Teen”). Vanderkam continues by stating that “adults don’t want to make the commitment – to the Girl Scouts or other service programs. They plead that they have too little time, too little experience, anything. Driving girls to the mall for the latest fashions takes less effort than helping them carve their spots on the planet” (Vanderkam “Teen”). This is one of the most compelling reasons why Girl Power is such an effective marketing tool. It gives parents the peace of mind that they are teaching their daughters well – while leaving out the inconvenient teaching part.
Attitudes about Menstruation

Another fruitful area of study would include an ethnographic examination of girls’ and parents’ views of menarche and menstruation. How do parents teach their daughters about puberty and the changes in their daughters’ bodies? Do all parents teach their daughters, or do they expect the school system to tell their daughters about menstruation? How do these teaching methods affect girls’ views about their own bodies? I would suspect that some parents overwhelm their daughters with information, some say very little, and some tell their daughters nothing at all. I would also suspect that the contents of what parents tell their daughters cover a similar range, with some parents telling their daughters that menstruation is powerful and beautiful, some parents talking about menstruation as a neutral fact of life, and some saying that menstruation is a deeply private and socially taboo topic. It would be interesting to trace the connections and disconnections between what parents tell daughters and what daughters believe. Most likely, some girls who are told by their parents that menstruation is wonderful are still embarrassed about it, and some girls whose parents tell them that menstruation is dirty and disgusting still enjoy their bodies’ power.

Another fruitful area of study in this area are the films and other educational materials used by schools and other organizations such as the Girl Scouts, church groups, and sports teams. How many of these materials are made by non-profit (or for-profit) educational organizations, and how many are made by feminine hygiene product manufacturers? What are the differences in content, if any, between these two types of organizations’ educational materials? Do the materials made by manufacturers tend to advertise more for disposable menstrual products, or does this advertising exist across the board? Second, how are these materials presented? Are girls
and boys separated from each other? If so, why are they separated? If not, does this make boys less frightened or disgusted by menstruation? When I watched the “period movie” in grade school, and then when my sister watched the same movie fourteen years later, girls and boys were separated. We were told that the boys were going to watch the “boy movie” while we watched the “girl movie.” We were instructed not to talk to each other about our respected movies, but of course we all asked each other questions. Excited by our movie, we told the boys what we had learned and showed them the brochures and coupons we’d been given. Then we found out that the boys had gone outside to play basketball. There was no “boy movie.” How does this air of secrecy and sex separation affect children?

Finally, it would be productive to examine ways to switch the focus of menstruation from the outer, “hygienic” aspects to inner, emotional ones. First, how is this being attempted? Second, do such methods allow girls a healthier transition from a child’s body to a young woman’s? Do they give girls a better vocabulary to express themselves, and do girls actually use this vocabulary? Is this one potential step to take to avoid Pipher and Orenstein’s “confidence gap?”

**Giving Girls the Methods of Production**

Another area of study that would be programs and organizations that give girls power over the methods of production. In other words, it would be interesting to study girls who produce and publish their own writing, artwork, music and other forms of personal expression. Does their ability to do this help them retain a sense of their own self-worth – or at least weather the storm during the dark days that Pipher and Orenstein describe so well? One reason why these methods could work is their potential to separate out commodified Girl Power-stained feminist ideas from non-commercial third-wave feminism (Riordan 292). This could take girls
out of the mindset that their only power lies in their identity as consumers and put them into the mindset of producers of cultural texts. While many of the methods I will discuss below were popularized by Riot Grrrl, I believe that these methods can work without such sub-cultural ties. Not every girl is into punk music, and viable political expression needs to be found for the girls who would rather listen to pop, goth, hip-hop, or who belongs to any other culture-based identity group.

Zines are one area where girls can take over the means of production. Producing zines teaches girls many useful skills, such as writing, graphic design and layout. The process of writing also makes girls more analytical, because to write about something, girls need to think about and understand it. When they read other girls’ zines, they can become more aware of the commonality of their experiences, and feel less alone. Kristen Schilt compares zines to the consciousness raising groups of the 2nd wave, stating that zines allow girls “to recognize what they had previously thought of as personal problems are actually social problems shared by others” (Schilt “I’ll Resist” 86-87). Communities can be formed around common life experiences, or something as external as similar musical or film tastes. This can also lead, as it did within Riot Grrrl, to political action. Schilt lists zines as one safe space where girls can practice resistance. Further, this is a type of resistance that authors like Pipher and Orenstein might not notice within their studies because they are looking for “examples of outright rebellion” (“I’ll Resist” 72-73). Adults might not notice the resistance offered by zines simply because zines are a type of resistance girls can hide. This is part of what makes it safe, and Schilt calls this type of resistance c/overt because it “finds the balance” between covert and overt action (81). This is useful to girls because, all too often, “overt resisters are censured” (Schilt “I’ll Resist” 81). Girls are not passive because they want to be. They act passively because they are
avoiding punishment at the hands of authority figures. Producing zines gives girls the “time and support to build up to political action” (Schilt “I’ll Resist” 93). While girls cannot complain about a mean or sexist teacher at school without getting in trouble, she can write about that teacher in her zine. When girls cannot ask their parents about sexual matters, they can write about their sexual confusion.

Finally, producing zines teaches girls that, if they do not like the mass media texts being offered to them, they can make their own (Schilt, “I’ll Resist” 79). One good example of this is Bitch magazine, the widely distributed feminist magazine that started as a zine. Another example is the political magazine Clamor. “Zines subvert standard patriarchal mainstream media by critiquing society and the media without being censored and also give girls a safe space to say what they feel and believe” (Rosenberg and Garofalo 811). In this way, zines give girls the tools to empower themselves rather than relying on “market-driven strategies created by adults that often fall short of offering girls the tools to effect change in their own lives” (Schilt “I’ll Resist” 80). Because of this, academics need to pay attention to zines and other ways girls “develop their own strategies to navigate adolescence” (Schilt “I’ll Resist” 92). In this way, we can begin to “look at girls’ active involvement in creating new strategies, rather than casting them as passive Ophelias” (Schilt “I’ll Resist” 94).

Schilt admits that zine making is a predominantly middle-class activity because it requires some capital and a lot of time. “Most of the printing costs are absorbed by the editor, as are the costs of paper, layout, and distribution. Zines are also largely produced by White people, as they emerged from the predominantly White punk subculture” (Schilt “I’ll Resist” 75). However, this need not be the case. While zines do require some money to make, it is not a large amount.
One method of production that sidesteps the costs of paper zines are Internet-based weblogs, or blogs. Blogs contain much the same content as zines, with some added advantages. First, many companies such as Blogger, Xanga and Live Journal offer free or inexpensive web space and publishing tools to people who want their own blogs. (Often the costs are defrayed by on-screen advertisements. To avoid these ads, people have to either pay a fee directly to the publishing company or purchase their own web space and publishing tools, such as Moveable Type.) While the cost of buying paper and making copies has been eliminated online, computers and Internet access do cost money. However, there are ways girls can avoid these costs, such as getting teachers and principles to let them use school or library computers. Second, groups of blogs can be connected together, forming what are called web rings. Web rings can form around groups of friends or people with common interests. Girls can advertise their blogs on their friends’ sites, and advertise their friends’ sites in turn. Also, hypertext links offer girls the opportunity to link to external sites. This could allow girls to link to their favorite bands’ sites, advertise gatherings, link to news articles they find interesting, or find on-line evidence to support a point they are trying to make.

The production of both zines and blogs give girls new skill sets that will aid them throughout their lives. Both teach girls how to write. While blogs and zines are not always written in standard English (which I believe causes some scholars to reject them out of hand), they do give their authors the opportunity to learn how to express themselves to others and to examine their inner selves in order to create that expression.

Magazines like New Moon offer girls many of the same opportunities as zines or blogs, with the added opportunities of producing something “professional” with a potentially larger readership. Also, New Moon is produced under an explicitly feminist political ethic, introducing
both readers and writers to feminist ideas. New Moon advertises itself as “the magazine for every girl who wants her voice heard and her dreams taken seriously” (“New Moon”). Every issue is 48 pages long, and contains no advertisements. The entire magazine is written by and for tween-aged girls, and is edited by a “Girls Editorial Board” and an adult editorial staff (“New Moon”). Articles in the magazine attempt to reverse current cultural trends by focusing on the inner girl instead of the outer appearance of the girl. The magazine also offers free curriculum packets to schools, opportunities to earn badges to Girl Scout Troops, and a newsletter for parents called Daughters. In all, New Moon attempts to validate girls’ experiences while educating girls, their parents, and their teachers about how to work through those experiences in a feminist framework. Magazines of this type deserve scholarly attention because they are an interesting alternative to mainstream fashion magazines. These magazines have limited readerships – is this because most girls do not like these types of magazines, or simply because most girls have not heard of them?

Thus far, all of the methods of production that I have discussed have taken some form of written expression. Not all girls are able to, or enjoy, writing. Because of this, scholars should examine other ways girls can take control of their production. This could include music, art, or dance. Kristen Kidder’s thesis on girls within fan cultures is also an example of this type of study.

**Sex Education and Healthy Sexual Identities**

As I stated throughout Chapter Four, the Lolita myth is still one of the dominant lenses through which tween sexuality is viewed. This can have very deleterious effects on girls’ sexual identities. Scholars could examine current sex education programs to determine the usefulness of their content, and theorize about how parents and educators could help tweens construct healthy
sexual identities. Lynn Ponton believes that the first step in helping tweens to have healthy sexual identities is to “promote their learning to act in their own best interests” (Ponton 1). This is not as easy as it sounds, because “many falsely believe that American society is a sexually permissive culture. It is not” (Ponton 4). All of the controversy surrounding the sexual education of children should convince us of this point. The sexual rights of adult women were not codified until the Fourth World Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995 (Ponton 137), and the sexual rights of children – apart from the right to be free of sexual abuse – have yet to be fully codified.

A major part of the sexual rights of children must be the right to a good sexual education. As the battles over so-called “abstinence only” sexual education rage on, it becomes obvious that Americans cannot agree on what constitutes a “good” sexual education. Further, some believe that children should not receive any sexual education at all because of the damage it would do to their innocence. I listed the consequences of a stringent belief in childhood innocence in Chapter Four, so here I will simply state that these consequences – which far too often include the sexual abuse and exploitation of children – are rarely what the well-meaning parents and educators who so strongly believe in protecting childhood innocence intend. Two other factors in the lack of comprehensive sexual education are adults’ unwillingness to acknowledge that children have sexual identities, and the pervasive idea that “people deserve to be punished for sexual activity” (Ponton 212-213). As Ponton states, “HIV education especially, often provided in the context of traditional sexual education, carries with it a message that sexuality is both hurtful and should be punished” (Ponton 213). Throw in the fact that, as a society, we are generally too embarrassed to talk frankly about sex, and children’s sexual education falls into the morass of controversy that only serves to harm the children we would protect.
The body guides I used in Chapter Three and Four also include sections on sex and sexuality. Because many parents use these body guides as replacements for or supplements to their own “sex talks” with their children, and because the information given at schools is so often so misleading or incomplete, these body guides can become important sites for scholars to study how tweens learn about sex. For example, Mavis Jukes, author of *It’s a Girl Thing*, is aware of the fact that parents’ embarrassment is one of the reasons people buy her book. However, she states bluntly that parents need to get over their embarrassment so they can speak honestly about sex to their children (62-63). Blackstone and Guest readily acknowledge that children are also embarrassed, stating that, “for many kids, sex is the biggest cringe word of them all. If you think the whole idea of sex is gross, hilariously funny, unbelievable, or just plain weird, you’re not alone. Most of us have those feelings when we’re young” (124). However, they state that it is important for children to learn at least the basics about sex, and that “As you grow older you can take in more information, bit by bit” (Blackstone and Guest 124).

What, then, constitutes good sexual education? Ponton offers a model where we abandon the idea of sex as *sinful or dangerous* – paradigms that present sexuality in a purely negative light to children – and instead conceive of sex as a *risky* activity. Risky activities have the potential for good or bad outcomes, whereas dangerous activities can only end badly. Further, calling sex risky still acknowledges the potential pitfalls of sex, such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, while maintaining the value of healthy sexuality. Once sex is viewed as a risky activity, children and adolescents can then develop, with the help of parents and educators, good “risk-assessment skills.” These skills will enable children and adolescents to make healthy, positive choices (Ponton 4). To do this, adults must keep good channels of communication open with children (Ponton 1), abandoning their sense of sexual squeamishness in favor of their
children’s health and safety. Obviously, the great majority of tweens are not ready to actually have sex. However, a good sexual education begins preparing tweens well in advance of their sexual years.

Also, all tweens are affected by the sexual content of the media, and a good sexual education will address and attempt to correct this. Also, abstinence-only sex education only serves to reinforce children’s notion that popular culture is the most reliable place to get information about sex and sexuality. If their parents and educators will not help them, tweens will return to the media. Angela McRobbie sympathizes with girls who do this, stating that “adolescence for girls involves coming to grips with the demands of womanhood and with an emergent sensuality. […] Pop or commercial culture clearly has the advantage here because it at least confronts these issues. The school, in contrast, redefines sexuality as human biology” (McRobbie Culture 51). While parents and educators might feel more comfortable with this, because it relieves them of the burden of discussing potentially embarrassing or immoral issues with their children, “girls are left without any real source of support or advice and have to fall back on each other, and their ‘teen’ magazines” (McRobbie Culture 51). As psychiatrist Lynn Ponton states, the sexual lives tweens see in media texts “can create false sexual images, lives impossible” for the viewer to emulate (5) In the end, all children gain are the experience of “sexual images that leave them frustrated and desirous” (Ponton 5). Tweens (and teenagers) pay attention to these images because they are often the only sexual information they are receiving. Parents’ “reluctance to talk about sexual matters is combined with social taboos. […] Into this gap, television, movies, and music videos slide with dramatic stories that make it appear as if all teens are not only participating, but adept at sexual intercourse” (Ponton 144). Further, these images, and what tweens are being told by authority figures, often contradict each other. Ponton
calls this America’s “schizophrenic attitude” about pre-adult sexuality (212). Within this schizophrenia, tweens are exposed to constant images of young people “themselves being sexually exploited or practicing irresponsible sex” while, at the same time, they are being told that “they should not be participating in sexual intercourse at all” (Ponton 212). A good sexual education would acknowledge this fact to tweens, and ask them to examine why their own sexuality is being used against them to sell products and raise the ratings on television shows. This might enable tweens to separate their personal sexuality from the sexuality depicted in popular culture.

Finally, a good sexual education would go beyond teaching about the proper use of birth control, and would introduce children to the concept of what makes a good sexual partner and what each person in a relationship’s sexual rights contain. As Ponton states, “Parents and many sexual education programs focus on the issue […] about whether any planning for protection from pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease has taken place – at the expense of [other questions]. For example, if you can’t tell your partner no, even at the last minute, then your choices are limited by those of your partner” (Ponton 145). The most complete knowledge about birth control, while a valuable asset, does not replace the need to teach children (boys and girls) about how to be a supportive, non-abusive partner in a relationship, as well as how to spot an abusive partner and escape that relationship.

Before a girl can be educated about sex, she has to be reassured that sex is not embarrassing or dirty. Some of the body guides included in this study do take pains to take the stigma away from sex and sexual education. Madras’ What’s Happening to My Body? Book stresses that, while feeling private about one’s own sexuality is fine, feeling guilty or dirty about it is not (230-231). She states that “Kids may feel ashamed or guilty about their sexuality [which
she defines as everything from their changing body to actual sex] even though they haven’t done anything harmful” (Madras What’s Happening 234). Madras locates the origin of this guilt in the adults around them, their religion or their culture, calls the guilt old-fashioned, and reassures her readers that they need not feel guilty. As a part of the process of taking the guilt and stigma away from sexuality, in Madras’ other body guide, My Body, My Self discusses the use of sexual words as insults. She states that “Chances are, nobody’s ever called you a dumb elbow, and we doubt that you’ve ever lost your temper and called someone a stupid foot” (Madras My Body 68). She suggests that her readers think about why we use slang words for private parts to insult each other, and refuse to use sexual words in such negative ways.

Beyond the study of what constitutes a good sexual education, scholars must examine what is, in fact, being included in sexual education curricula at schools. Many states, such as Texas, will only fund abstinence-only sex education. Under this curriculum, students are not taught about the proper way to use birth control or avoid sexually transmitted diseases. Instead, they are taught that only abstinence until marriage will protect them. Why have such potentially damaging messages taken over within many public schools? As Angela McRobbie states,

The work of the school is not merely to reproduce skills, knowledge and abilities. If is also to inculcate values and ideals which are related to, and part of, the dominant ideology. Although these are, to all extents and purposes, invisible – that is, they are buried within the material practices of the school – nonetheless they do provide the school and the whole educational edifice with its rationale (McRobbie “Culture” 53).

Because of this, any study of abstinence-only sex education would need to study first, the forces at work behind their adoption; second, the actual amount of information and mis-information in
such programs; and third, the effects these programs have on tween sexual identities and pregnancy and disease rates.

“Girl Problem” Genre

Finally, it would be productive to study the “girl problem” genre of non-fiction literature. Begun by Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia* and Orenstein’s *School Girls*, the girl problem genre has grown by leaps and bounds in the past ten years. Titles include Rosalind Wiseman’s *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, Rachel Simmons’ *Odd Girl Out*, Cheryl Dellasega’s *Girl Wars*, and Erika V. Shearin Karres’ *Mean Chicks, Cliques and Dirty Tricks*, to name a few. As a whole, these books are hugely popular and influential. The 2004 Lindsay Lohan movie *Mean Girls* was based on Wiseman’s *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, for example. Harcourt Trade Publishers, who publishes Simmons’ *Odd Girl Out*, also publishes a teacher’s guide for use in the classroom. While Pipher and Orenstein’s books seek to find the origin of girls’ problems in a patriarchal, and thus anti-girl, culture, many of the other titles seem to end up pathologizing girls themselves. A study of this genre would include the question of whether girls are pathologized within these books. It would also examine how the authors of these books establish their authority (for example, how many authors are educators, psychologists or psychiatrists? How many have little to no daily contact with tween-aged girls?). Finally, a study could get into questions of why the genre has succeeded so well. What gap do these books fill, for girls, parents, and educators?

In this study, I have begun to study the implications of the creation of the tween marketing demographic. I examined the history and development of tween-aimed cable television programming, the ideal tween as it is expressed through tween-aimed popular culture, some of the ways tweens learn to connect the onset of menstruation with consumer culture, the Lolita myth and its connection to tween sexuality and how Girl Power is used to turn pro-girl
rhetoric into a marketing device. As this conclusion shows, there are any number of directions the study of tweens can take. Because tweens are a group created for the express purpose of marketing, however, I believe that any further study of tweens must include a focus on who stands to profit from tween culture.
Chapter Three Figures

Figure 1
Figure Two
YOUR LIFESTYLE. UNCRAMPED.

ThermaCare air-activated
Menstrual Patches give you 8 hours of
heat to relax cramping muscles, increasing
circulation to help push the pain out.

Now that's love.

ThermaCare

WRAP YOURSELF IN RELIEF

Figure Three
GUYS GET TO LIVE WITHOUT CRAMPS.
NOW WE CAN, TOO.

MENSTRUAL CRAMP RELIEF IN ONE 8-HOUR HEAT PATCH.
SLIM, SNUG, COMFY. THE ONLY ONE WHO KNOWS YOU'RE WEARING IT IS YOU.

thermacare.com

Figure Four
Your body and your period

Your body works in an amazing way. Every month it goes through a complex cycle — known as the menstrual cycle — designed to make it possible for you to have a baby. The menstrual cycle takes place in the female reproductive system, which is illustrated at right. Every month, except for months when a woman is pregnant, the lining of the uterus is shed. It leaves your body through your vagina as a reddish fluid — this is your period.

Tampons and your cycle

Like pads, tampons absorb the fluid that leaves your uterus. Pads absorb your flow after it leaves your body, while tampons absorb your flow inside your vagina before it leaves your body. Tampons are made of soft, absorbent material compressed into small cylindrical shapes, and are placed inside the vagina, a flattened muscular tube inside the body. A tampon does not stop or block the flow; it just soaks up the fluid inside your body. Tampons also can help you feel clean, since the flow does not come in contact with the skin and air on the outside of your body, as it does when you use a pad. Because tampons absorb the flow internally, the risk of odor is almost gone.

Figure Five

Body Basics

Take a look at the Body Basics picture to see exactly where the tampon goes. Notice how your body has three different openings.

Vaginal Opening
(where menstrual flow comes from)
INSERT TAMPLYON HERE

Urethra
(where urine leaves your body)

Anus
(where solid waste leaves your body)

Tampons do not need to be changed every time you go to the bathroom because you have 3 different body openings and the tampon is inserted in the vaginal opening. Simply move the removal string out of the way to keep it clean.

Figure Six
Figure Seven

The Period Book

- Pubic hair
- Mons
- Inner Lips
- Outer Lips
- Clitoris
- Urethra
- Vaginal opening
- Anus
Chapter Four Figures

Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 7

Figure 8
Figure 9

Figure 10
Figure 13

Figure 14
Figure 15

Figure 16
Figure 17
Chapter Five Figures

Figure One – Bikini Kill

Figure Two – Bikini Kill “The C.D. Version of the First Two Records”
(From a scan of my own CD)
Figure Three – “No More Nice Girl”  
(From http://emancypunx.webpark.pl/riot_grrrl.htm)

Figure Four – One Riot Grrrl Look
Figure Five – Another Riot Grrrl Look
(From http://emanecypunx.webpark.pl/riot_grrrl.htm)

Figure Six – “Jigsaw” Zine cover
(From http://badreputation.blig.ig.com.br/imagens/bikini_kill_pic1.jpg)
Figure Seven – Spice Girls (From L to R: Sporty, Posh, Ginger, Baby and Scary)  
(From http://www.elentarix.demon.co.uk/shoujo/spice/SpiceGirls-spice012.jpg)

Figure Eight – Spice Girls (from L to R: Ginger, Baby, Scary, Sporty and Posh)  
(From http://link.mania.tripod.com/wallpaper/spice_girls.JPG)
Figure Nine -- Spice Girls Dolls

Figure Ten – Sarah Michelle Gellar in Maybelline Advertisement
(from http://www.smugfan.com/smgpg/pics/maybelline_fullad.jpg)
Figure Eleven – “And you thought a Pepsi looked good next to a cheeseburger” Britney Spears and Pepsi
(From http://www.united-star-pictures.ch/USHoliday2001/sites/USA028.htm)

Figure Twelve – Stuff by Hilary Duff
(From http://groups.msn.com/HilaryDuff/coolpicturesofhilaryduff.msnw?action=ShowPhoto&PhotoID=5898)
Figure Thirteen – Logo of Mary-Kate and Ashley Brand
(From http://marykateandashley.com/usa/)
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Appendix One

Kathleen Hanna's Riot Grrrl Manifesto

BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways.

BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other.

BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own moanings.

BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo.

BECAUSE we recognize fantasies of Instant Macho Gun Revolution as impractical lies meant to keep us simply dreaming instead of becoming our dreams AND THUS seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things.

BECAUSE we want and need to encourage and be encouraged in the face of all our own insecurities, in the face of beergutboyrock that tells us we can't play our instruments, in the face of "authorities" who say our bands/zines/etc are the worst in the US and

BECAUSE we don't wanna assimilate to someone else's (boy) standards of what is or isn't.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to falter under claims that we are reactionary "reverse sexists" AND NOT THE TRUEPUNKROCKSOULCRUSADERS THAT WE KNOW we really are.

BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock "you can do anything" idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.

BECAUSE we are interested in creating non-heirarchical ways of being AND making music, friends, and scenes based on communication + understanding, instead of competition + good/bad categorizations.

BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives.

BECAUSE we see fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds as integral to this process.

BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits of being cool according to traditional standards.

BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl=Dumb, Girl=Bad, Girl=Weak.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousism and self defeating girlytype behaviors.
BECAUSE I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real.

From http://riotgrrrleurope.net/kathleen.html

“Girl Power” (from official Spice Girls book)

Girl power is when…

- You help a guy with his bag
- You and your mates reply to wolf whistles by shouting ‘get your arse out’
- You wear high heels and think on your feet
- You know you can do it and nothing’s going to stop you
- You don’t wait around for him to call
- You stick with your mates and they stick with you
- You’re loud and proud even when you’re broken out in spots
- You believe in yourself and control your own life (qtd in Lemish 21)