NOBODY DOES IT BETTER:
HOW CECILY VON ZIEGESAR'S CONTROVERSIAL NOVEL SERIES "GOSSIP GIRL"
SPAWNED THE POPULAR GENRE OF TEEN CHICK LIT

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ABSTRACT

An amalgamation of two overlooked and often dismissed genres (young adult fiction and chick lit), the burgeoning popular fiction genre of teen chick lit has yet to be defined and discussed in critical detail. The popularity of teen chick lit novels amongst their target audience is undeniable as book sales of the archetypal series, Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl*, exceed 4.5 billion copies as of 2007. Clearly, the novels resonate with teen readers in ways yet unknown to those outside the Millennial generation, to whom these novels are targeted. Using John Cawelti’s theories of conventions, inventions, and formula, a genre analysis of teen chick lit genre was completed to decipher the particular elements that differentiate teen chick lit from other genres such as traditional young adult literature. Since the genre is also culturally important, a brief examination of the sociological implications of the novels and the ways in which the novels reflect the changing social mores of the Millennial readers is included. This initial analysis of the genre answers the question what is this genre and what makes it unique from traditional literature aimed at young adult females? Through a close reading of the texts of the series, I contend that the author Cecily von Ziegesar helped to create a new literary genre by using conventions found in other forms of literature in a unique way; that is, by incorporating borrowed conventions (such as explicit sex) from other genres and placing them into a genre that has been historically censored against such conventions, von Ziegesar transformed the “conventions” into “inventions,” to use Cawelti’s terms. Through repetition of these “inventions” in the following volumes of the series, the “inventions” became “conventions” and a new genre was created to contain these conventions.
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INTRODUCTION

Although most formulaic genres have been met with initial contempt, perhaps no genre has been so negatively received by critics and scholars as the recent women’s literary genre chick lit. The commercially successful genre features “fallible, funny heroines” (Mabry 193) striving to attain the life they desire despite the social restraints often assigned to the female gender. Chick lit novels “give contemporary women [a] voice and allow them to express desires that may lie outside of the ‘happily ever after’ marriage to Prince Charming” (Mabry 192) by asserting that a woman can simultaneously indulge in career and romantic aspirations guilt-free.

Introduced in 1996 with the British novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, chick lit still maintains an extremely negative connotation with scholars and critics. An amalgamation of romance novels and traditional literature, chick lit faces criticism from many traditional novelists, literary scholars, and feminist writers, among others. Most often, the genre and its works are dismissed as “fluff” or, in feminist author Dorris Lessing’s words, “instantly forgettable” (“Bainbridge” 1). The genre is also attacked by critics who believe that the novels diminish the efforts of the feminist movement since the main characters appear to be “helpless girls, drunken, [and] worrying about their weight” (“Bainbridge” 1). However, to simply cast off the novels as “unfeminist” requires an extremely narrow definition of feminism, one that doesn’t recognize the importance of female accomplishment and solidarity.

The fact that chick lit is a cultural phenomenon is hardly debatable. In 2004, chick lit novels produced more than $1.4 billion in revenue, a sales figure that has only increased with the plethora of chick lit sub-genres (such as “church lit,” “mommy lit,” and “Latino lit”) and best-selling novels made into blockbuster movies (Lewis 20). Since almost all of the novels are written by women, chick lit has opened the door for many women who were unable to break into
the often male dominated world of publishing. Clearly, the opportunities it has given women of various ages, socio-economic status, and ethnicities demonstrate its contribution to the feminist platform. In addition, chick lit novels are embraced by female readers who recognize themselves in the characters. Like the Conscious Raising Groups of the Second Wave Feminist movement, chick lit novels spark a discourse that examines the difficulties contemporary women face as they try to live up to society’s standards and the accomplishments of the previous generation of women (Whelehan 5-9). True female solidarity is achieved through candid confessions about the pressures of being female and the inevitable failures that arise in the quest for perfection. To say that these novels are “fluff” or “forgettable” is to say that the lives of contemporary women and their everyday concerns are insignificant, a dismissal that eerily echoes the patriarchal assertions that women of the First Feminist Movement challenged.

Recognizing the cultural significance of the genre, a handful of scholars have recently begun analyzing the genre and its works critically. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, editors of the critical anthology, *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, argue that “a serious consideration of chick lit [highlights] many of the issues facing contemporary women…issues of race and class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self-image” (2-3). Imelda Whelehan in her critical work, *The Feminist Bestseller*, recognizes the importance of novels that “facilitate a shift in the way contemporary women’s lives [are] discussed and described” (4). She contends that chick lit novels are not only useful for the insights they reveal about contemporary culture but also for the way they discuss modern notions of feminism since the chick lit “heroines often seem to be wrestling with a nascent feminist consciousness set against their quest for The One” (Whelehan 5). Slowly and cautiously, modern scholars are following in
the footsteps of Henry Nash Smith and Janice Radway and seriously analyzing popular genre fiction.

Although the scholarship of chick lit is gradually becoming a lucrative area of study, burgeoning sub-genres have yet to be analyzed critically. One of the immensely popular sub-genres of chick lit that has received little to no critical attention is teen chick lit (chick lit novels targeted to tweens and teens). This oversight is not surprising since young adult literature (with a few exceptions, of course) hasn’t been the focus of an extensive amount of critical work. Since the books are written for “immature” tweens and teens, many scholars and critics don’t believe that the genre contains enough substance to be a valuable source of study. With the emergence of the *Gossip Girl* series by Cecily Von Ziegesar in 2002, the already undefined and overlooked genre of young adult literature was further complicated. The new series and its followers (*The A-List, The It Girl, and The Clique*) were aimed at the same age group as the other young adult books, however the format, content, tone, and themes were drastically different. The novels, which are much closer in content and form to chick lit novels than traditional young adult novels, were marketed as teen chick lit novels, a sub-genre of chick lit and a new component to young adult fiction.

The amalgamation of two overlooked and controversial genres (chick lit and young adult literature) results in an area of study that few scholars want to risk entering. In the academic field of publishing, only a handful of essays about teen chick lit are available. Most of the essays consist of little to no critical analysis, but rather condemn the genre for its vulgar nature. In one of the only critical essays on the genre, “Chick Lit Jr.: More Than Glitz and Glamour for Teens and Tweens” (found in Ferriss and Young’s anthology), author Joanna Webb Johnson attempts to explain and defend the genre; however, her lack of knowledge about the unique conventions
of the genre result in a misguided, although well-written, essay on current young adult literature novels targeted at teen girls. Teen chick lit novels are unique because they are products of the chick lit genre and therefore are closer in theme to adult novels. Just because a pastel-covered book is targeted toward teenage girls and mentions fashionable items does not mean that it is an example of teen chick lit. Johnson must have realized this because in an endnote she states that, “Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl* novels often stray beyond the boundaries of traditional young adult (YA) themes and topics. Her books tend to read like adult mass-market paperbacks with YA characters” (157). Since Johnson clearly understands that the *Gossip Girl* novels are unique and a departure from traditional YA literature, it is disconcerting that she did not use this knowledge to conclude that the *Gossip Girl* novels were the epitome of teen chick lit, not the “exception to the rule [of what Johnson dubs Chick Lit Jr.]” (Johnson 157). Obviously, the specifics of the genre’s elements are nebulous and a comprehensive genre study must be accomplished.

Defining the specific elements that distinguish teen chick lit from traditional and modern female-centered YA literature will (hopefully) result in a more concrete understanding of the genre and its components and will lay the foundation for critical work that will examine the cultural implications of the genre. The popularity of the best-selling *Gossip Girl* series is unquestionable: the series has sold over 4.5 million copies with the latest installments debuting at number one on the New York Times children’s best-seller list (Levin “Young”). Also, the series has inspired a television show of the same name on the youth-dominated network the CW. “Gossip Girl,” which closely follows the plots of the novels, aired on September 19, 2007 and quickly became one of the network’s top five shows among teen girls, the most-watched new show for all teenagers, and the biggest episode seller on iTunes (Levin “Viewers”). Statistics
alone are evidence that the series is culturally significant for the Millennials, (the preferred title given to the generation of individuals born between 1982 and 2000, as endorsed by generational sociologists and authors, Neil Howe and William Strauss). Through an understanding of the elements of the genre, the popularity of the series will be better understood. This, in turn, will highlight the ideology of the Millennial generation and will assess the ideological shifts among various generations. The first step in this process, and my intention for this paper, is to complete a genre analysis that chronicles the evolution of the teen chick lit genre and determines the specific genre components using Caweltian theories of formulaic literature.

Using John Cawelti’s theories of conventions, inventions, and formula, I will analyze the burgeoning teen chick lit genre to decipher the particular elements that differentiate teen chick lit from other genres such as traditional young adult literature. Since little to no academic analysis of this genre exists, it is crucial to deconstruct the archetypal teen chick lit series *Gossip Girl* in order to understand the genre from a literary standpoint. Since the genre is also culturally important, I will briefly examine the sociological implications of the novels and determine whether the genre is affecting, changing, or reflecting the social mores of the Millennial (Howe and Strauss 2000) readers to whom these novels are targeted. More examination of the cultural implications of the novels will no doubt be necessary; however, an initial analysis of the genre requires answers to the question what is this genre and what makes it unique from traditional literature aimed at young adult females? Through a close reading of the texts of the series, I contend that the author Cecily von Ziegesar helped to create a new literary genre by using conventions found in other forms of literature in a unique way; that is, by incorporating borrowed conventions (such as explicit sex) from other genres and placing them into a genre that has been historically censored against such conventions, von Ziegesar transformed the
“conventions” into “inventions,” to use Cawelti’s terms. Through repetition of these “inventions” in the following volumes of the series, the “inventions” became “conventions” and a new genre was created to contain these conventions.

Formulaic genre novels are often ignored in scholarly writings because many scholars don’t regard such novels as “worthy” of serious academic study. The predictability of the novels (from the characterization to the setting to the plot) and the emphasis on entertainment rather than insight diminish the novels’ value in the eyes of many scholars. Those who follow Matthew Arnold’s elitist assumption that culture is “the best which has been thought and said” (Storey 6) are offended by suggestions to study popular literature. Arnoldian scholars such as Dwight MacDonald berate popular culture, or “Masscult,” as “a parody of High Culture…[that] doesn’t even have the theoretical possibility of being good,” regarding products of popular culture as “anti-art” (Hinds 9). Ironically, in an academic field that strives to challenge the social hierarchy, scholars create a literary hierarchy that blatantly lauds one type of genre over another. Arnoldian scholars prefer to study “classic” canonic literature that demonstrates “a pursuit of total perfection” (Storey 6) rather than popular literature that reflects the ideology of the people. Scholars who shun popular literature seem quick to forget that Dickens and Shakespeare were both “popular” authors of their time (Ashley 3).

Many modern scholars have challenged the elitist approach to cultural studies and have contributed significant works that validate the study of popular literature, particularly the study of formulaic literature. Scholars such as Henry Nash Smith, Glenwood Irons, and Janice Radway have given credence to the formulaic genres of the western dime novel, the detective novel, and the romance novel, respectively, through their influential works. Perhaps the scholar with the most comprehensive commitment to the study of formulaic genres is John G. Cawelti.
Although he has focused mainly on mystery, adventure, and romance genres, Cawelti’s theories about popular literature, particularly the notions of inventions, conventions, and formula, are detailed and astute and therefore can be applied to almost all formulaic genres. Due to the scholarly works of Nash Smith, Irons, Radway, Cawelti, and other popular literature academics, genres that had been previously met with contention and skepticism by scholars are now considered significant areas of study, specifically for scholars interested in understanding the ways in which cultural ideologies are presented to the masses and the manner in which these messages are perceived.

As a member of the Millennial generation to whom the teen chick lit novels are targeted and a Gossip Girl reader who began reading the novels when they were first published, I am able to offer insight about the novels from two different, but equally significant, viewpoints: as a member of the target audience and a scholar. My individual connection with the novels serves as a personal ethnography that gives credence to declarations about the novels’ ability to resonate with teenage girls. Likewise, assertions about the novels’ reflection of Millennial teenage culture and the desires of the generation are supported not only by book sales, but also by a personal recognition of how the Gossip Girl novels accurately portray a fragment of Millennial teenage culture.

Since no critical work has been completed (thus far) on teen chick lit, I am embarking on a pioneering work in the scholarly field of popular literature. Influenced by the genre analyses of Vladimir Propp, Henry Nash Smith, and John Cawelti (among others), I organize my study in a similar fashion, separating the components of the novels into smaller categories that, when combined, serve to define the genre and distinguish it from pre-existing genres. Diverging from previous genre analyses, I focus on eleven volumes of the same series to illustrate how
repetition, consistency, and emulation can set the foundation for a new genre. The popularity of the novels, the “copycat” series that succeeded *Gossip Girl*, and the hit television show inspired by the series prove that these novels resonate with teens, indicating that insight about teenage culture (specifically that of the current generation) can be achieved by studying teen chick lit. Unfamiliarity about the burgeoning genre and its popularity among teenagers is most likely the reason for the absence of scholarly analysis on the subject. However, by defining and revealing the potential cultural implications of the genre, I will create a foundation for future scholarly work on the subject of teen chick lit.
ANALYSIS

CHICK LIT: ORIGINS

Ironically, the term “chick lit” was coined by one of the feminist authors who so vehemently abhors the genre. In 1995, Chick Lit: Post-feminist Fiction, an anthology initiated by author Cris Mazza, was published, introducing the public to a buzzword that was intended (by Mazza) to be “obviously sardonic” (18). Mazza claims she invented the term “not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype” (18). Mazza’s intention for the anthology was to introduce to new generations the changing state of feminism: one that isn’t epitomized by anger or a false sense of certainty, but rather one that acknowledges the struggles, confusion, and mistakes that real women encounter in their identity quest (Mazza 18-20). Mazza proudly describes the stories in the anthology as, “courageous and playful; frank and wry; honest, intelligent, sophisticated, libidinous, unapologetic, and overwhelmingly emancipated” (18). The characters of post-feminist fiction are (according to Mazza and colleague Pamela Caughie), “confident, independent, even outrageous women taking responsibility for who they are, or as women who have unconsciously internalized and are acting out the encoded gender norms of society” (Caughie qtd in Mazza 21). Interestingly, Mazza argues that her definition of chick lit is drastically different from the current use of the term, which she claims describes “books flaunting pink, aqua, and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long-legged women wearing stiletto heels” (18).

Perhaps Mazza’s condemnation of the genre would change if she actually read the novels instead of judging their content based on their outward appearances. After all, the archetypal chick lit heroine, Bridget Jones, (a far cry from a long-legged beauty in stilettos), embodies all of
the characteristics that Mazza attributes to post-feminist characters. Likewise, Helen Fielding (the author of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*) was praised by reviewers and audiences alike for writing an honest, playful novel that featured an imperfect main character navigating challenges inherent in one’s quest for self-actualization. Similarly, Andrea, the main character in Lauren Weisberger’s *The Devil Wears Prada*, is a perfect example of Caughie’s definition of a post-feminist character since Andrea witnesses the ways in which media messages sent by the fashion and beauty world can negatively affect a woman’s self-image and condone stereotypical gender roles that hinder women’s career ambitions. Andrea’s rejection of the image-obsessed magazine world in favor of a less lucrative but more fulfilling career serves to warn the readers about their own internalization of negative media messages. Although Cris Mazza begs to differ, her initial definition of chick lit is consistent with the current novels published in the genre.

As previously mentioned, Helen Fielding’s breakthrough novel, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, (which was based on Jane Austen’s acknowledged classic *Pride and Prejudice* [Fielding with Time.com]) is considered to be the first example of the chick lit genre (Ferriss and Young 4). Its conversational diary format, which chronicles in a humorous tone the everyday events of an unabashedly flawed main character, is a refreshing change from elite literature that often strives to give psychological insight on a serious or dramatic subject. Women of Generation X embraced Bridget Jones as a heroine since she gave a voice to modern women struggling with the previously unmentioned pressures of trying to live up to society’s ideals of womanhood and failing in this mission. In a society where women are expected to “have it all,” (a career, a family, an adoring husband, and an active sex life), women who don’t live up to society’s notions of perfection are made to feel like failures. With the emergence of the chick lit genre,
however, women’s so called “imperfections” and “failings” were reconsidered and human frailties were judged to be more laudable than perceived flawlessness.

**CHICK LIT: PLOTS AND THEMES**

Although often dismissed as modern romance novels, the protagonists and plots of chick lit novels are actually quite different than traditional romance novels. In fact, perhaps the only definitive similarities between the two genres are that they are both written by women and targeted toward an almost exclusive female audience. In the Harlequin romance novel, “the love story is the central focus…where two people fall in love and must complete a quest or overcome some sort of obstacle before they finally marry” (Harzewski 37). The plots of chick lit novels contrast this genre convention because “the quest for self-definition and the balancing of work with social interaction is given equal or more attention than the relationship conflict” (Harzewski 37). The dramatic shift from “boy meets girl and lives happily ever after” plots to “girl meets boys with no tidy ending” reflects the changing social mores, offering a “more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals” (Ferriss and Young 3). New generations are challenging traditional notions of marriage, happiness, and romance, and novels need to reflect the ideology of the times. In chick lit novels, protagonists often subvert traditional notions of femininity by choosing serial dating, casual sexual affairs, and a successful career over a husband and a suburban life of domesticity. While the novels certainly don’t advocate a life without romance, the men in chick lit novels are accessories to an already established life rather than necessities that make life worth living. This ideological shift may contribute to the controversy surrounding the novels since challenging the patriarchal structure of society is always risky.
Originally targeted at Generation X women in their mid twenties and thirties, chick lit novels feature female protagonists “navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships” (Cabot). According to chick lit advocate Rebecca Vnuk, “The genre’s aim [is] eliciting a response of ‘I’m exactly like that’ or ‘That just happened to me!’...[and the genre] is distinguished by its humor—wisecracking characters or ridiculous situations, usually involving work or dating” (Vnuk 42). Similar to problem novels aimed at teenagers, this type of women’s fiction fulfills a young woman’s need to be reassured that she is not the only female having difficulties attaining the standards of perfection set forth by society: successful career, loving marriage, desirable body, etc. The characters’ youth and the specific, age-related conflicts that the characters face can alienate women outside the life circumstances of the characters (mainly older women or women financially and romantically secure), resulting in a narrow and specific demographic audience. In recent years, publishers recognized this oversight and began creating chick lit branches such as mommy lit, ethnic lit, and hen lit (chick lit for women over the age of fifty) to appeal to women who couldn’t identify with the traditional Caucasian twenty something chick lit character.

Chick lit is written mainly for entertainment since the novels’ fun, witty, and light tone allows readers to escape pondering the serious questions of existence, a theme that traditional novels often attempt to tackle. Instead, chick lit novels remind the reader more of her best friend’s diary or a juicy gossip column, so the novels are usually conversational in nature, with authors using wisecracks rather than philosophical musings to express their opinions. Overall, metaphors and imagery are absent. If included, they are often cliché or crude. Using contemporary vernacular, the novels are peppered with slang and obscenities, reflecting the language of modern generations.
One of the main differences between mainstream women’s fiction (fiction written by women that follows more traditional literary conventions) and chick lit is the tone of the novels. Appropriate for light-hearted fiction, chick lit novels have a sexy, funny, and sharp tone. The humorous tone of chick lit novels often stems from the characters’ flaws and the character’s willingness to let the reader see her flaws (Lewis 20). The foibles of the chick lit characters tend to spawn recognition in the readers; that is, they see themselves or their friends in the characters. Character failings in mainstream women’s fiction often follow the Aristotelian literary tradition of viewing the flaws as tragic flaws, as something to invoke pathos in readers, rather than empathy (“Poetics”). Using defects to portray tragedy or drama, the authors of traditional women’s fiction focus on internal dialogue and struggle. Chick lit authors, on the other hand, create situations in which the character’s faults are highlighted in an external action, making it easy for the reader to see the comedy in the situation. In a society where imperfections are airbrushed, surgically removed, or suppressed with prescription drugs, it is refreshing and almost therapeutic for women readers to relate to female characters who don’t hide their flaws, no matter how trivial or seemingly superficial. By adoring the far-from-perfect characters, female readers of chick lit are able to view themselves, and their own foibles, in a more-positive light.

CHICK LIT: FASHION AND COMMODITY FETISHISM

Characteristic to this genre is the prominence of Pop Culture references. Authors rely on referring to what is trendy (shoes, designers, drinks, and city nightlife hotspots) to detail their narrative. Feeding off of contemporary society’s obsession with materialism and celebrity status, chick lit authors create an anomaly by giving their characters possessions that would only belong to an elite society. Taking a clue from Candace Bushnell’s immensely popular novel "Sex and the
City, (which became a television phenomena), authors adorn their characters in numerous pairs of $700 designer shoes while endowing them with an income that would never support these luxuries. These incongruities can irritate older, more practical readers while appealing to young fashionistas.

The abundant references to high designer fashions and luxury items that are so appealing to young readers are often attacked by literary critics who question whether the novels in the genre are exalting the ostentatious behavior of a “degrading and obsessive consumer culture” (Ferriss and Young 11). In a capitalist society, individual worth is intertwined with consumption; that is, the number of valuable items a person consumes (with “valuable” being dictated by society) directly affects his/her power and social status in society. Social relations and means of production lose importance because it is the commodity, not the producers or the process, that symbolizes wealth in society (Marx “Capital”). This ideological construction, referred to as “commodity fetishism” by Karl Marx, is exemplified in most chick lit novels in which certain items of luxury possess almost human-like qualities for the female characters. For example, Sex and the City’s main character, Carrie Bradshaw, talks to her Manolo Blahnik high heels (perhaps the quintessential luxury item), and even refers to them on her answering machine as if they were another apartment inhabitant (“I’m not here but my shoes are so leave them a message”).

Designer name-dropping serves not only to fetishize the commodities, but also to reiterate to the audience the centrality of material items to a person’s identity formation. Fashion and beauty trends often serve as cultural markers that signify the ideology of an individual, a group, or a nation as a whole (Davis 3-18). In our image-laden contemporary society, outward appearance, specifically dress, serves to convey a person’s identity. The “signs” of dress are so
well “read” in contemporary society that certain material items immediately signify notions of
class and taste. In the past, the type of garment (i.e. blue jeans) served as a cultural signifier
whereas today, the brand name is the “sign” (i.e. Rock and Republic blue jeans). Modern
generations are, for the most part, extremely well versed in the connotations evoked by certain
brand names that a simple mention of a designer label can reveal personality traits about the
character that would normally take paragraphs to explain. Fashion theorist Elizabeth Wilson
argues convincingly that, “dress…fulfils a number of social, aesthetic and psychological
functions; indeed, it knots them together, and can express all simultaneously” (3). Since dress
can so easily “speak” for its wearer, consumers realize that dress can both reveal to the world an
already established identity or represent a persona the wearer wishes he/she exemplified. This
concept dates back to at least the nineteenth century where “dress was one aspect of social
mobility” (Wilson 122). Chick lit novels, perhaps taking a hint from popular makeover
television shows, embrace this ideology and use fashion purchases as critical elements in the
characters’ identity quests. Sophia Kinsella’s *Shopaholic* books exemplify this notion most
clearly since the main character’s “recognizable, distinctive, coveted high-end brands…project
an image of luxury and status to others and create a feeling of inner satisfaction and self-worth”
(Van Slooten 227). Chick lit authors reasonably assume that their readers are as fashionably
conscious as their characters and that they too use fashion and consumption as markers of
identity.

Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard’s work on commodities suggests that consumers don’t
inherently believe that fashion and commodities are directly related to identity, but are rather
taught by society that this connection exists (“System of Objects”). In Baudrillard’s argument,
advertising campaigns encourage consumers that, in a sense, “you are what you buy” and
therefore, citizens learn that they must consume goods that reflect and project their personalities. According to Baudrillard, advertising is a “useless and unnecessary universe [that] contributes nothing to production or to the direct practical application of things, yet plays an integral part in the system of objects…because it tells us what it is that we consume through objects” (164-5). Capitalist society uses advertising mechanisms to “condition” individuals to believe that consumerism is crucial to the success of the individual as well as the society as a whole. Likewise, the syntax of advertising creates a system of objects in which “objects work as categories of objects which, in the most tyrannical fashion, define categories of people—they police social meaning, and the significations they engender are rigidly controlled” (Baudrillard 191). The concept of categorizing is significant to the chick lit genre because of the multiple levels of categorizing present in the novels: the categorization of the characters based on their consumption choices (i.e. the “prepster” who wears Lacoste polo shirts and Brooks Brothers khaki pants versus the “trendsetter” who embraces fashion risks and a fluctuating personal style), the classification of the fictional characters versus the readers (who most likely cannot afford the style choices and lifestyle activities of the characters), and the readers who are labeled “chick lit readers” in (supposed) opposition to “literary readers” (both of which denote different socially constructed personality characteristics).

Baudrillard’s theories on consumption and advertising are particularly interesting in regards to chick lit novels not only because most chick lit novels rely on the theme of consumption as a means of categorizing individuals, but also because the plethora of commodity references in chick lit novels is in itself a very explicit form of advertising. The references to specific brands of high fashion items accomplish the advertising world’s primary goal of creating brand loyalty, a “conditioned reflex of manipulated emotions” (Baudrillard 192). Some critics
are so repulsed by the product placement evident in the novels that they consider the novels cheap, but effective, forms of advertising rather than literary pieces. Chick lit critic Jessica Lyn Van Slooten empathizes with this opinion but suggests that the novels can provide shopping (and commodity) obsessed readers with a fantasy of indulgence without the real-life consequences. She argues that the novels are themselves forms of conspicuous consumption that “provide the temporary illusion of decadently and stylishly ‘having it all’” (Van Slooten 220). While this consumer fantasy may be harmless to adult women who have the life experience to understand the consequences of luxury indulgence and the unfulfilling results of a constructed identity, the encouragement of conspicuous consumption might have more negative effects on young adults.

**TEEN CHICK LIT: BASICS**

Product placement and the connection between commodities and identity are not confined to the adult chick lit genre. Indeed, these concepts, along with other adult-themed material, are blatantly evident in the chick lit branch of teen chick lit. Following the guidelines of chick lit, teen chick lit is characterized by female characters navigating challenges specific to their generation, which are decidedly different from problems encountered by Generation Xers. Rather than concentrating on career letdowns and “husband hunting,” novels for Millennial females “usually revolve around a girl’s angst-ridden but witty foray into womanhood, battling the perils of cool boys who might or might not like them, uncool parents, and other peer and academic pressures” (Alderdice 24). Targeting the wide range of age groups in the Millennial generation, this genre currently includes series for middle school and high school girls.

Consistent with dilemmas described by real-life girls attending middle school (Machoian 2006), series targeted at this audience, such as *The Clique*, focus on the challenges of self-esteem
fluctuations, body image pressures, first romantic relationships, and, most notably, the cut-throat world of “popularity” and the cruel lengths that adolescent girls will go to achieve or maintain envied social status. Although the novels are often set at school, the social world is far more important than the academic atmosphere, and characters are more likely to worry about who will be their date for the school dance rather than how they will score on the history test they didn’t study for.

Series centering on the lives of high school girls depict problems similar to those faced by middle schoolers, albeit at a more mature level. Sex replaces make-out sessions, alcohol and drug use is common, and choosing the right college is the only academic thought in the characters’ minds. However, just as real-life girls find it hard to escape body image issues and the pressures of a social hierarchy, the characters in the high school series are still grappling with these challenges. Schemes to gain popularity, such as spreading vicious rumors and pursuing another girl’s boyfriend, are as prevalent in high school series, such as *Gossip Girl*, *The A-List* and *It Girl*, as they are in middle school series. Again, the tactics are often more mature, as are the readers, who are able to see the humor in the characters’ actions. Older readers are more likely to consider teen chick lit novels “guilty pleasures,” rather than handbooks on how to behave.

Far from being morally instructive, teen chick lit novels portray reality as teens experience it, rather than how parents portray it to serve as a cautionary lecture to their children. In the world of teen chick lit, characters use obscenities as adjectives, get high before class, drink excessively at weekend parties, and have sex with their boyfriends (or random one night stands), all while maintaining a good GPA. Some adults are shocked, and even horrified, at the lack of consequences for the characters’ actions since they feel that these books are teaching their
daughters that pregnancy, STDs, and jail time rarely occur (Keenan 7). Teens, on the other hand, find the teen chick lit novels’ “lack of moralism about teen sex and drugs” (Nussbaum 40) refreshing since their reality (the reality they hide from their parents) equates with the literary reality.

Teens have always appreciated novels that candidly represent teenage life. Judy Blume, in response to her extremely popular yet controversial novel *Forever*, which was published in 1975 and centered around a sexually active teen, explained that she wanted to write a novel where a teenager had sex without suffering any consequences. Current YA authors such as Cecily von Ziegesar, successful due to her popular teen chick lit series *Gossip Girl*, are following in Blume’s footsteps and teens are responding to the new genre in much the same way their predecessors did to *Forever*. Von Ziegesar herself explained that, “I always resented books that tried to teach a lesson, where the characters are too good” (Nussbaum 40). Von Ziegesar said that, as a mother, she wishes she could say that dire consequences occur when you “have sex, do drugs, and have an eating disorder. But the truth is, my friends and I dabbled in all of those things. And we all went to good colleges and grew up fine. And that’s the honest thing to say” (Nussbaum 40). Teen girls’ appreciation of this honesty is evidenced by the fact that the *Gossip Girl* novels have sold more than 4.5 million copies since first arriving on the literary scene in 2002 (Alderdice 24).

**Gossip Girl: Basics**

The *Gossip Girl* series is modeled after the author’s own experience at a prestigious private school. The characters in the addictive series are “hard-drinking, bulimic, love-starved poor little rich kids” (Roback 91) whose outrageous behavior is documented on a website by an
anonymous gossip-loving character. “Gossip Girl,” as she is known on the website, is a tease and reports gossip in a biting tone readers can’t help but adore. When creating her characters, Von Ziegesar developed


Raw language and a far-from-conventional structure strongly contrast with the literature teens are required to read for school. The novels always begin with a mock web page, informing new readers of what has happened in earlier novels and hinting at what drama is to come via a “sightings” column. Gossip Girl, or GG, reports on the clandestine activities of the characters in a tabloid-esque manner, making sure to only refer to the characters by the first letter of their name. This structure immediately creates a world that teens know and love: the secretive and rumor-filled world of Internet communication, where nicknames or abbreviations are used instead of actual names. Short chapters, consisting of only a few pages, document a snippet of a specific character’s day, allowing the reader to get into his or her thoughts without much introduction. The pace of the dialogue matches the clipped jargon of the target market and the timeless universal appeal of gossip, written in a frank tone, makes the novels readable and easily digestible.

So far, eleven Gossip Girl novels have been published (plus a prequel that was inspired by the new television show of the same name), gaining more popularity with every new volume. Series books are popular with teens since “They are like a familiar brand-name purchase: you read a book because you know what you will find, and yet you enjoy getting this particular version” (Aronson 58). Educators believe that Gossip Girl’s instant success and immediate
addiction, as compared to other series books, is “linked to the success of television shows that celebrate high-end consumerism. The girls who are reading *Gossip Girl* are staying up and watching *Sex and the City*” (Bellafante 1). As evidenced by immense popularity and success, teens love to watch television shows and movies depicting “rich girls behaving badly” (such as MTV’s breakout show, the 2004 “reality-drama” *Laguna Beach*, its spin-off *The Hills*, and the 2004 smash hit movie, *Mean Girls*), so it is logical that they would enjoy reading about these types of characters as well. Appropriately dubbed by *Teen People* as “*Sex and the City* for the younger set,” *Gossip Girl* follows Candace Bushnell’s lead by depicting “normal” characters (teens rather than 30-something single women) living in a not-so-normal world of luxury and couture.

Comparable to a compilation of diary entries rather than a traditional novel, the *Gossip Girl* books don’t usually follow the conventions of rising action, climax, and falling action. Instead, the novels focus on the backstabbing and catty nature of the characters (particularly the venomous actions of Blair, whose “queen bee” status is threatened by the mysterious return of Serena, her “perfect” former best friend, who abruptly transferred to a boarding school the year before) and the love triangle dilemmas, specifically that of Blair, Serena, and Nate (Blair’s boyfriend, who lost his virginity to Serena when he and Blair were on a “break”). Traditional literary themes, such as jealousy, loyalty, greed, and love, are developed in the *Gossip Girl* books through characters and situations that teen readers can identify with. The associative nature of the novels allows teens “to picture these books in a way that they cannot picture *Of Mice and Men*” (Bellafante 1). Identifiable characters whom readers “love to hate,” language and situations that mimic teens’ vernacular and lifestyle, and the cynical omniscient narrator
describing the ruthless behavior of her characters combine to make *Gossip Girl* “frothy but fun” novels that resonate with teens (Roback 181).

**JOHN CAWELTI: THEORIES**

Since these novels are such a departure from traditional young adult fiction, critics, librarians, and scholars alike are unsure as to what elements differentiate teen chick lit novels from other novels and how this formulaic genre is constructed. As mentioned previously, John G. Cawelti’s work on formulaic genres is perhaps most useful for this mission since his definitive notions of conventions, inventions, and formula clearly negotiate how formulaic genres are created and categorized. Cawelti’s concepts are particularly appropriate for the teen chick lit genre because the novels in the genre align themselves with Cawelti’s principle arguments.

Although Cawelti has revised his arguments several times to reflect the evolving work of scholarship, his main principles of formula, convention, and invention are consistently stressed as important tools in the analysis of formulaic genres. According to Cawelti, a formula is a “way in which specific cultural themes and stereotypes become embodied in more universal story archetypes” (“Adventure” 6). The idea of formula is often considered to be solely a facet of formulaic genres, but Cawelti insists that formulas are features of all types of literature (“Reconsidered” 132). Within a genre (which is defined as “a structural pattern which embodies a universal life pattern or myth in the materials of language” [“Concept” 72]), formulas are the patterns that are probable to the genre and line of action and therefore recognizable to the reader as appropriate (“Reconsidered” 133). With this definition of formula, it is reasonable to
acknowledge that formulas exist in all literature while still noting that formulaic genres may be the best formats to critically analyze this process.

The formula, then, is the set of rules for the novel that becomes materialized with the addition of conventions and inventions. Conventions are “elements which are known to both the creator and his[her] audience beforehand—they consist of things like favorite plots, stereotyped characters, accepted ideas, commonly known metaphors, and other linguistic devices” (“Concept” 71). Conventions then, are the elements of a novel that are expected and, in a way, differentiate one genre from the next. Readers use the notion of conventions in their choice of novels; that is, they gravitate toward books they assume will interest them and this “interest” may very well be the familiarity of certain conventions. Despite the importance of conventions, readers (and publishers) would quickly tire of novels if authors simply employed common conventions. The individualization of novels derives from the use of inventions or “elements which are uniquely imagined by the creator such as new kinds of characters, ideas, or linguistic forms” (71). Inventions can distinguish one novel from another, even if they are both in the same genre and apply the same type of formula. A balance between the two is of utmost importance since a novel comprised of too many conventions would be deemed banal while a novel overloaded with inventions could seem disjointed and unstructured. When executed correctly, “conventions help maintain a culture’s stability while inventions help it respond to changing circumstances and provide new information about the world” (71). Since inventions are relevant to the culture and time period in which a novel is written, authors can create inventions that reflect the changing social mores and, in doing so, alter the formula, thereby creating a new genre of fiction (“Reconsidered” 134). It is this process of reconfiguration and creation that Cecily von Ziegesar effectively implemented in her young adult series, *Gossip Girl*. 
Von Ziegesar, in tune with the values, desires, and behaviors of young adults in the Millennial generation, wrote a novel that reflected this generation, thereby creating a novel that did not include many of the conventions of traditional young adult literature. By borrowing conventions from other genres, specifically the adult literature genre of chick lit, and adding other inventions, von Ziegesar dramatically altered the young adult formula. Since the *Gossip Girl* novels are a reflection of the Millennial generation, they do not follow the young adult literature convention of presenting a censored world that adult authors (and parents) deem appropriate for teenagers. The *Gossip Girl* novels’ so-called “vulgarity” alienated the novels from the young adult literature genre. The novels weren’t appropriate for the adult literature genre either because of the young age of the characters and the high-school related dilemmas. Therefore, the novels spawned a new genre that was tailor-made to encompass the new formula, conventions, and inventions of the *Gossip Girl* series (and subsequent imitations *The A-List* and *It Girl* series) and the popular genre of teen chick lit was born.

**Gossip Girl: Tone, Format, and Language**

Characterized by a series of conventions and inventions, the unique format of the *Gossip Girl* novels help to distinguish the novels as a unique genre rather than radical forms of young adult literature. In a general sense, the style of the novels is consistent with most formulaic literature since the *Gossip Girl* novels follow the format that Cawelti attributes to formulaic literature: that which is “generally characterized by a simple and emotionally charged style that encourages immediate involvement in a character’s actions without much sense of complex irony or psychological subtlety” (“Adventure” 19). In *Gossip Girl*, the narrator, an anonymous teen, uses colloquial language and a sarcastic tone to describe the lives of young teens living in a
privileged world where drinking, drugs, and sex are permissible and tensions between teenage friends are explosive. The style is “simple” because it is familiar to teenagers. Unlike traditional young adult literature (or any other form of literature for that matter), the books are clearly written in (modern) teenage vernacular: any phrase or word that is spoken among teens can be written and nothing that could be construed as vulgar by adults is off-limits. For example, expletives are rampant, such as: “Kiss that, assholes” (“Gossip” 52); “Whoa, that’s fucked up” (79); “Serena was fucking everywhere” (127); and many exclamations of “Shit!” (131). The intention is not to shock the audience; it is quite the opposite. If teen chick lit authors did not use words such as “fuck” or “fucking” as adjectives, the intended audience would have been shocked that the language was not authentic. By not censoring the vernacular of teens, von Ziegesar clearly created an invention, one that teen readers find refreshing and realistic and parents find horrifying (if they even realize that the novels contain such vocabulary). Readers of teen chick lit expect to read novels that reflect their lifestyle, and colloquial language, crude phrases, and seemingly taboo subjects are part of their everyday life. The authenticity of language quickly became a convention of teen chick lit since later installments of the Gossip Girl novels and “spin-off” series (such as It Girl) contain just as many expletives and examples of teenage slang as the initial volume of the series.

Although the humorous and sarcastic tone of the Gossip Girl novels isn’t as much of an invention as the language of the series, the vehicle for the tone is a departure from traditional literature. Once again reflecting the lifestyle of the Millennials, von Ziegesar uses technology, specifically a blogger, in place of a traditional third person narrator. The blogger (named Gossip Girl) is the narrator of the series who chronicles the daily lives of the characters on her mock web page. Using screen names, teens in the Gossip Girl world write to the anonymous blogger
and she answers their questions, revealing secrets about the main characters. Caustic remarks are abundant and the blogger doesn’t even attempt to be tactful. For example, the blogger gossips: “Isabel and Kati are going to have a little trouble fitting into those cute dresses they picked up at Bendel’s if they keep stopping in at the 3 Guys Coffee Shop for hot chocolate and French fries every day” (“Gossip” 38). Later, the blogger creates a rumor about Serena:

A girl bearing a striking resemblance to Serena [was seen] coming out of an STD clinic on the Lower East Side. She was wearing a thick black wig and big sunglasses. Some disguise. And very late last night, Serena was seen leaning out of her bedroom window…looking a little lost. Well, don’t jump, sweetie, things are starting to get good. (“Gossip” 38)

The tone and language of the *Gossip Girl* novels combine to create a writing style that teens can relate to, offering a sense of identification that Cawelti considers crucial to the success of formulaic literature: “all stories involve some kind of identification, for, unless we are able to relate our feelings and experiences to those of the characters in fiction, much of the emotional effect will be lost” (“Adventure” 18). If the same story was written in adult language and in a less modern form, it is doubtful that the novels would have been so successful. What makes the *Gossip Girl* novels (and teen chick lit novels in general) so appealing to readers is the identification they elicit. The familiarity of language and technology creates novels that teens believe reflects their lives, not the lives of the author or, worse yet, their parents.

The writing style employed by authors of teen chick lit can be considered a genre formula since, by Caweltian definition, “formulas work by reflecting values and assumptions shared by a community of readers within a culture” (“Reconsidered” 134). Young readers respond to the conversational language epitomized by the writing style of teen chick lit because it is unpretentious and familiar. Von Ziegesar uses crude phrases such as “our shit still stinks” (“Gossip” 3), to distinguish her novel (and the genre to which it belongs) from traditional literature. This, in turn, reflects the community of readers specific to the teen chick lit genre
since those outside the culture would most likely find the style confusing, vulgar, or offensive. For members of the teen culture, however, this type of language makes them feel as if they are reading a friend’s blog or diary, thereby making the reader feel more connected to the story and the characters. In *Gossip Girl*, readers almost feel as if they are part of the action since the narrator constantly addresses the reader with phrases such as “Doesn’t it feel good to be bad?” (37) and “You know you love me” (82).

Staying in sync with the formats of blogs or gossip columns, the chapters of the *Gossip Girl* novels are short and usually focus on a snippet of one character’s day. Therefore, the entire novel doesn’t usually span more than a few weeks, making it easier for writers to turn their pilot novels into sequels that usually start right where the previous novel left off (whether it be in the middle of a party, the beginning of a school day, etc). These snippets can often be mistaken for disjointed narrative as they do not always interconnect and the loose ends rarely tie up. (If they were, then the “trailing off” technique wouldn’t occur and the books wouldn’t as easily leave readers hanging on the edge of their seats for the newest edition.) However, this genre invention (perhaps borrowed from other mediums such as television shows or movies with intended sequels) significantly adds to the appeal of the novels as commercial items to be marketed. In addition to promoting products within the novel’s text, the novels themselves are commodities to be marketed and sold to consumers. Therefore, they must advertise themselves and the “trailing off” element entices readers to buy the next volume while at the same time remaining consistent to the novels’ gossip theme. For example, in the first installment of the *Gossip Girl* series, the narrator teases the reader about what might happen next for the characters, asking questions on her blog such as: “Will Blair stay with Nate?” and “Will Serena really make a movie?” (201). Signing off with, “until next time” (201), the author uses the narrator as a tool to promote her
next novel and, judging from the novels’ sales figures and the numerous volumes, the invention is quite effective.

Abiding by the “snippets” trend, one of the tactics that is used in later *Gossip Girl* novels is to chronicle a single night and follow the characters as they each experience their own dramas. The author teases the reader by describing the events of one of the character’s nights, then abruptly leaving that character to move onto the next. This plot tactic is very effective because it mimics real life in the sense that multiple incidents are occurring at the same time. Not only is this tactic entertaining and effective in creating suspense, but it is also exciting for younger readers to experience since they can multi-task so efficiently (Kroft par.11), thus following the narrative without confusion. This element isn’t a new literary invention since the mystery genre often retells the same incident through the eyes of various characters to complicate the answer of “whodunit.” Likewise, novels belonging to both classic and popular literature genres have often incorporated the voices of many characters to aid in the telling of the story (such as Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Barbara Kingsolver’s *Poisonwood Bible*). However, the convention is somewhat unfamiliar to the young adult literature genre, at least in the sense that the characters don’t always “finish” telling their side of the story in one installment. Also, some characters aren’t allotted a chance to tell their story; instead, their “side” is concealed in rumors from various characters, with the reader awarded the opportunity to decide for himself/herself what really happened. This writing element distinguishes *Gossip Girl* novels from other young adult and teen chick lit novels and achieves two goals that Cawelti deems as necessary for formulaic literature: the fulfillment of the “ideal potentials inherent in the genre…” and the accomplishment of a unique individual expression or effect” (“Adventure” 7). Von Ziegesar
embraced the convention of multiple characters’ perspectives and made it her own, differentiating herself from those who came before her.

The rumors readers “hear” from other characters in the novel are useful not only for the entertaining, unique twist they add to the novel, but also as a means of making the reader feel more involved in the novels’ action. In general, the novels are mostly written in dialogue, allowing various characters to comment on the same event or person. The readers are able to distinguish the truth from the lies by hearing all angles of the story with the inclusion of blog updates and characters’ confessional thoughts, known only to the reader. Dialogue works well for teen chick lit novels because it perpetuates the feeling that the reader is eavesdropping on teenagers gossiping about one another. Also, younger generations have been trained to multitask (Kroft par.11), so following a conversation, or a series of overlapping conversations, is perhaps easier for teen readers than adult readers to understand. Finally, the dialogue is a writing technique conducive to informal, crass language, such as this scene where the characters are gossiping about Serena, the beautiful blonde who mysteriously returned to NYC after a stint at a prestigious prep school:

“A thousand bucks says she got kicked out,” Chuck told them. “And doesn’t she look fucked? I think she’s been thoroughly fucked. Maybe she had some sort of prostitution ring going on up there. The Merry Madam of Hanover Academy,” he added, laughing at his own stupid joke.

“I think she looks kind of spaced out, too,” Kati said. “Maybe she’s on heroin.”

“Or some prescription drug,” Isabel said. “You know, like, Valium or Prozac. Maybe she’s gone totally nuts.”

“She could’ve been making her own E,” Kati agreed. “She was always good at science.”

“I heard she joined some kind of cult,” Chuck offered.

(“Gossip” 21)

The dialogue of raw language and dramatic rumors exemplified in this scene illustrates another genre invention. Perhaps inspired by the mystery genre, von Ziegesar challenges Gossip Girl readers to decide for themselves which rumor they will believe. Similar to the mystery genre,
the characters themselves aren’t always truthful in dialogue, making the inclusion of inner thoughts even more important.

As evidenced in the excerpt above, trash-talking peers and starting vicious rumors are elements that add to the allure of *Gossip Girl* and other teen chick lit novels. While some critics claim that much of the dialogue is mean-spirited, the inclusion of caustic gossip clearly accomplishes a goal that Cawelti contends is crucial to the success of formulaic literature. Cawelti argues that, “formula stories seem to be one way in which the individuals in a culture act out certain unconscious or repressed needs, or express in an overt and symbolic fashion certain latent motives which they must give expression to, but cannot face openly” (“Concept” 74). For teenagers facing the ridicule and harsh judgment so common in today’s high school experience (as evidenced from the findings in the study “Hostile Hallways” by the American Association of University Women), the characters’ unrestrained comments might be a fulfillment of their repressed desires. It is human nature to gossip and since most teens have probably experienced verbal attacks from their peers at some point, the characters’ ability to verbalize anger and resentment symbolizes the readers’ own restrained emotions. This element simultaneously maintains the novels’ features of escapism and personal connection for the reading audience. In addition, the focus on gossiping and rumors echoes the folkloristic origins of storytelling because, as cultural theorist Walter Benjamin notes, “the story he [the storyteller] tells is not only his experience but the experience of others as discovered by hearsay” (Benjamin 53). Von Ziegesar’s invention honors the original means of storytelling while offering readers an emotional release.

Since maintaining a façade is critical in the shallow gossiping world of the characters, it is difficult for a reader to judge a character based on his or her actions or words. Therefore, it is
important for the narrator to bluntly state the personality traits and motivations of the characters in the novel. Paradoxically, characters are described in terms of stereotyped connotations and blatant statements about a character’s personality. Alongside descriptions of the characters’ clothing and outer appearance are details about their personality such as when the narrator describes Nate:

Nate was the only son of a Navy captain and a French society hostess. His father was a master sailor and extremely handsome, but a little lacking in the hugs department. His mother was the complete opposite, always fawning over Nate and prone to emotional fits…Poor Nate was always on the verge of saying how he really felt, but he didn’t want to make a scene or say something he might regret later. Instead, he kept quiet and let other people steer the boat, while he laid back and enjoyed the steady rocking of the waves. (“Gossip” 20)

In elite literature, authors strive to reveal their characters’ motivations and personalities through actions or thoughts, rather than having the narrator blatantly state these characteristics. Therefore, stating the characters’ motivations is a clear departure and arguably, an invention for the genre. Cawelti might consider this tactic a production of the genre’s formula since the formula “can serve as a sort of shorthand for speeding up the communication between writer and reader” (“Reconsidered” 134). Since readers expect that they will have to negotiate the truths behind the rumors, they don’t mind being told explicitly what the characters are like. The outright statements about the characters’ personalities give the readers the background or, in Cawelti’s language, the “shorthand” needed to comprehend the rest of the novel’s plot lines.

In addition to blatantly stating the characters’ personality traits to express tone and character traits, teen chick lit authors (following the archetypal model set by von Ziegesar) employ the tactic of using an excess of adverbs, a writing choice unsanctioned and strongly discouraged by “serious” writers and elegant writing style guidebooks (King 124-128; Williams 120). In Gossip Girl, one of the ways the reader knows how a character is truly feeling is through the adverbs and adjectives that accompany the dialogue. On a single page of Gossip
Girl, the characters “said quietly,” “snapped,” “said, exasperated,” “said furiously,” “said with…power” and “shrugged” (“Gossip” 35). Although this might be viewed as excessive by some readers (particularly those most familiar with elite literature), this invention is another form of “shorthand,” important for the readers’ enjoyment and involvement in the action. Also, in novels where gossip, treachery, and betrayal permeate the characters’ actions and dialogue, resulting in a false exterior that can easily mask the characters’ true feelings, readers must be told (by an unbiased narrator) how the characters react to a particular situation.

Even though readers may be told explicitly how a character feels, the characters’ “full” stories aren’t usually revealed. Consistent with real-life drama, situations described in the Gossip Girl novels are not always neat and tidy; that is, the reader doesn’t always know the backstory of every person or incident or the exact details of relationships or breakups. In the main volumes of Gossip Girl (not including the prequel, which was released after the series had ended) the reader doesn’t know how Blair and Nate started dating, or what exactly caused Serena to leave NYC (or come back, for that matter), or the dynamics of Serena and Blair’s friendship before Serena left NYC. All readers need to know is what is happening currently, and the lack of details isn’t disruptive to the narrative as a whole, which may be due to the addition of intimate details that aren’t plot or character driven. For example, the characters are explicit about their sexual encounters and (just as teens [and adults] recount their sexual or romantic escapades to their friends) the reader knows the dirty little secrets about the characters. Gossip Girl’s narrator, in one of her blogs, intimately confesses that she saw Blair buying condoms at Zitomer Pharmacy. Lifestyles Extra-Long Super-Ribbed! What I want to know is how she knew what size to get. I guess they’ve done everything but. Afterwards, Blair made a beeline…to the J. Sisters salon for her first Brazilian bikini wax. Ouch. But believe me, it’s worth it. (“Gossip” 82)
The inclusion of intimate details that make readers feel as though they are listening to a friend or older sister reveal secrets, is a genre invention that compensates for the lack of “backstory” details about characters and incidents. In this way, the novels and characters are at once mysterious and transparent.

**Gossip Girl: Setting**

Von Ziegesar (and other teen chick lit authors) succeed in giving teens everything they want to read about and nothing they don’t in terms of content as well as format. From the first page of the first novel of the series, *Gossip Girl*, von Ziegesar sets the ground rules for the genre of her archetypal novel, specifically in terms of setting and character. Cawelti argues that successful authors of formulaic literature create “an imaginary world that is just sufficiently far from our ordinary reality to make us less inclined to apply our ordinary standards of plausibility and probability to it” (“Adventure” 20). Borrowing from the fantasy genre, von Ziegesar places her characters in a world that appears to be similar to the world of the readers, however differs from the readers’ reality in terms of customs, actions, and behaviors. In *Gossip Girl*, the characters’ “unlimited access to money” (“Gossip” 1) allows them access to outrageously decadent parties (such as the *Kiss on the Lips* party where authentic Kate Spade bags are given away as party favors to unimpressed guests [“Gossip” 59]), fabulous vacations (private yacht rides to tropical islands [“Nobody” 43], crazy parties in the Hamptons [“Nobody” 216], and a weekend getaway in Paris [“Nobody” 230]), and the most exquisite clothing and accessories (the characters would never even dream of wearing anything other than couture [“All” 1]). The fantastical elements of the world created by von Ziegesar add to the novel’s appeal since readers enjoy being transported to an unfamiliar world, particularly one permeated by luxuries only
available to celebrities. This “fantastical” world does not abide by the rules and boundaries of the real world, thereby creating scenarios the characters can engage in without fear of consequences. Unlike the fantasy genre convention, von Ziegesar’s world (Upper East Side of New York City) actually exists, although the world is confined to the New York elite, making the setting both familiar and distant for the readers. This choice of setting brilliantly accomplishes Cawelti’s expectations for formulaic literature while creating an atmosphere naturally conducive to the scenarios often found in *Gossip Girl* and other teen chick lit novel, such as parties gone wrong, girls fighting over boyfriends, and drunken escapades.

Von Ziegesar’s choice of setting (a world paradoxically familiar and fantastical) isn’t an invention in itself (the fantasy genre utilizes this element quite frequently), however the placement of this type of setting within the young adult literature genre transforms this (fantasy) convention into an invention. This is not to suggest that the *Gossip Girl* novels were the first young adult novels to create a familiar yet unfamiliar world, but most of the YA novels that employ this tactic still confine their characters to a set of limitations. For example, the closest and most recent example of a familiar yet fantastical setting in a YA novel is the *Harry Potter* series since the characters’ world is modeled after modern society with the addition of magic. The dramatic difference between the *Harry Potter* world and the *Gossip Girl* world is that the characters in *Harry Potter* are still expected to abide by real-life rules or risk punishment from the government (the Ministry of Magic), their teachers (detention, expulsion, etc.), and their parents (who demonstrate their authority over their children even while they are away at school through lecture-giving letters called “Howlers”). Setting a YA novel in a world so similar to modern society yet free from consequences was an invention for the YA genre since, prior to the
emergence of teen chick lit, authors, publishers, and book-buying parents wanted to censor messages sent to teenagers and teach them that actions have consequences.

In *Gossip Girl*, the narrator blatantly states that the characters have “unlimited access to money and booze and whatever else we want, and our parents are rarely home” (“Gossip” 3), immediately creating an insular world for the characters. Further acknowledging that the characters are beyond the limitations of society, the narrator states that, “as long as [the characters] maintained their grades and their looks and didn’t embarrass themselves or the family by puking in public, pissing their pants, or ranting in the streets…you were all right” (6) and free to do “whatever they wanted” (6). Even though the characters are the same age as the intended readers (16 to 17 years old), the fact that the characters are the “belles of the ball, the princesses and princes of New York’s Upper East Side” (“Nobody” 1) immediately places them in a world unfamiliar to the readers. Unlike most teenagers in America, the characters’ parents vacation on private yachts, leaving their sons and daughters alone in private penthouses with access to immeasurable finances. The main characters (Blair Waldorf, Serena van der Woodsen, Nate Archibald, and Chuck Bass) remind readers of celebrities they admire, since they live the life of extreme luxury, however the teen chick lit characters are more accessible to readers since they too are high-school attending, boy-obsessed teenagers like themselves.

Teen chick lit authors, such as von Ziegesar, rarely acquiesce to their readership’s parents’ desire for censorship and even diminish the value of parental opinions in the fictional lives of their characters. The characters’ parents are largely invisible and the few references to parents serve to remind the reader of their absence and to suggest the ineffectiveness of adults. The emphasis on independence and a lack of parental control or fear of authority serve to create an insular world that allows the characters to engage in questionable activities (such as drinking...
to excess, sleeping around, and abusing drugs) without the fear of consequences. Also, the lack of parental control assigns a sophisticated level of independence to the teenage characters. For most teenagers, the need for independence and the unwillingness of parents to grant it is a major source of conflict. Novels such as *Gossip Girl*, where the teenage characters aren’t controlled by their parents and still manage to maintain good grades and stay clear of any *real* trouble, give credence to their teenage audience by acknowledging their maturity.

Lack of parental guidance is a genre convention found quite frequently in the folktale genre. Vladmir Propp, in his influential and comprehensive genre study of folktales, asserted that one of the many folktale functions is a hero’s leave of absence from the safety of home (Propp 1927). This absence forces the hero to embark on a solo quest, free from the security (and control) of parents. Fairy tales and similar children’s tales follow this convention, allowing children to imagine a world where they must fend for themselves, both an exciting and frightening concept. In most commercial novels for young adults, parents are major characters since many of the central conflicts of the novels focus on parent-teen relationships. For example, in the immensely popular young adult series *The Babysitters Club* (1986-2000), the main character, Kristy, must negotiate her father’s absence, her mother’s remarriage, and her new relationship with her stepfather. Likewise, two other characters, Mary Anne and Stacey, are constantly at odds with their overbearing parents. Teen chick lit novels drastically depart from the young adult genre conventions of parental relationships as a central conflict since not only are the parents largely absent from the lines of action, but the parents and the characters are fairly ambivalent about the lack of involvement. Neither the parents nor the teenagers seem to desire close relationships, a notion that echoes reality according to psychologist and author Dr. Mary Pipher. In *Reviving Ophelia*, her groundbreaking work on adolescent females, Pipher asserts that
American teens are “expected to distance from parents just at the time when they most need their support...[instead], they befriend their peers...who share a common language and set of customs [and] often embrace the junk values of mass culture” (Pipher 23). This “universal experience” often causes parents, who feel isolated from their daughters, to mimic the actions of their daughters and relinquish any remaining connection (Pipher 23-34). The parental isolation in the *Gossip Girl* novels reflects not only developmental reality, but also serves to reiterate the independent nature of the characters since, “in America, we define adulthood as a moving away from families into broader culture” (Pipher 24). Therefore, the characters are asserting their independence and entrance into adulthood while demonstrating a realistic teenage rite of passage.

While readers may not be able to relate to the elite city lifestyle of the characters or the lack of parental control, the authors do attempt to create a setting that the readers can imagine themselves inhabiting. Instead of painting a setting permeated with minute, specific details that prohibit the reader from imagining his/her own interpretation of the setting, teen chick lit authors describe the setting in vague, general explanations. In *Gossip Girl*, the narrator simply names the setting, New York’s Upper East Side, and describes the houses of the characters using common images. Distancing the setting allows readers to project their own house, or a friend’s house, in place of one of the character’s. For example, Blair’s house is “full of antiques and artwork that would have impressed anyone who knew anything about artwork. In the center of the dining room table was an enormous silver bowl full of white orchids, pussy willows, and chestnut tree branches” (“Gossip” 7). The unoriginal description of the home allows readers to imagine their own home as the setting, since it is probable that their own home would include artwork and flower arrangements. Since the strength of chick lit novels (and of course, teen
chick lit novels) is the ability to elicit responses of familiarity from the readers, the vagueness of
the setting allows readers to fill in details using their own knowledge or experience, thus making
them feel more connected to the novel. By maintaining both the vagueness of the setting and the
familiarity of high-school life, readers can project their own experience into the novel, thus
connecting with the novel in a personal manner.

A lack of details about the novels’ setting isn’t exactly an invention, but it is a departure
from current expectations of “good writing” in which vivid imagery, romantic descriptive
language, and complicated similes and metaphors are championed. In fact, the vague details
could be considered today as a sign of bad writing. However, it is important to note that at one
time, a lack of details was a convention. In 19th century British novels (such as Jane Austen’s
*Pride and Prejudice* and George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*), minor characters’ names and specific
towns weren’t named; instead, the character was Mr. M— and the town —shire. This vagueness
assured that the readers didn’t associate any personal, preconceived notions about a name or
town to the novel. Also, the name of the character or the town wasn’t vital to the action of the
plot and therefore wasn’t named. For teen chick lit authors, the exact details of the setting aren’t
nearly as important as the emotional connection the novel creates between the characters and the
readers. In a way, this element is both an invention and a convention since von Ziegesar’s use of
nebulous details is both traditional and modern.

**Gossip Girl: Characters**

Although the novels’ setting is ambiguous, the characters’ values, personalities, and
motives are clearly established. Rather than create complicated characters striving to evolve and
develop, the stars of teen chick lit novels are stock and stereotypical. Although the characters
aren’t necessarily divided by “type” as are the characters in early young adult novels (such as “tomboy,” “the girlie girl,” and “the shy one” in Babysitter’s Club), the characters in teen chick lit novels are stock in so far as they are beautiful, selfish, and flawed. In Gossip Girl, Blair is a beautiful brunette who is prone to bitchiness; Serena is hailed as the “perfect blonde bombshell” although she is extremely self-centered; Nate is the hot preppy guy that every girl wants to have and every guy wants to emulate; Chuck is the sleazy wingman whose family’s influence in the city makes him seem tolerable in the eyes of his peers; Jenny is the wannabe, who is younger than Blair and Serena but desperately wants to be part of the “in crowd”; Dan is the dramatic hippie poet who doesn’t have a firm grip on his place in the world; Vanessa is the cynical goth chick who identifies as a radical; and Isabel and Kati are sidekicks whose sole purpose is to create more drama for the main characters. The narrator describes the characters as a group saying, “we’re all smart, we’ve inherited classic good looks, we wear fantastic clothes, and we know how to party” (“Gossip” 3).

Despite critics’ condemnation of the flat, stereotypical characters, this type of characterization bolsters the novels’ aim of entertainment, since, according to Cawelti, “the use of stereotyped characters reflecting the audience’s conventional views of life and society aids the purpose of escapism” (“Adventure” 19). Von Ziegesar’s “over the top” characters become slight caricatures, adding to the appealing escapist aspect of formulaic literature. However, for teenagers, stereotypes and stock characterization are not as far removed from their everyday lives as they are for adults. In the hierarchy of high school, teens judge their peers based on appearance, music preference, mental and physical abilities and “label” them accordingly (Pipher 67-71). Therefore, it’s appropriate for a novel targeted at teens to incorporate stereotypical labels since without them the novel would lose some of the authenticity so appreciated by teen
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readers. Cawelti contends that the uncomplicated characterization is necessary in formulaic genres since, “many works fail rather badly because they develop characters and situations that are too complex for the formulaic structure they are a part of, without becoming sufficiently individualized to support a nonformulaic structure of their own” (“Adventure” 12). Von Ziegesar’s stock characters are consistent with the formulas of the novel and the genre expectations.

Even though the characters are flat they are far from perfect, creating a sense of humanity for the characters. Each character has a major character flaw: Blair has bulimia, binging and purging when she is anxious or upset; Serena toys with the emotions of her male and female peers, caring little about others’ feelings as long as she doesn’t get hurt; Nate is addicted to marijuana; Chuck is slimy and his tactics with women border on sexual harassment; Jenny is willing to sacrifice everything to fit in; Dan chain smokes; and Vanessa cheats on her boyfriend(s). The characters’ flaws further serve to create a connection between the reader and the novel, however instead of eliciting familiar emotions, the characters’ flaws remind the reader that money and status don’t necessarily result in a picture-perfect life. The characterization simultaneously humanizes the characters while distancing them from the reader in a comforting way; that is, the readers (who most likely fantasize about the elite lifestyle instead of live in it) “love to hate” the characters and perhaps don’t feel as inadequate about the lack of luxury in their lives since it clearly doesn’t fix common vices, such as selfishness or addiction.

Although the flaws serve to humanize the cast of von Ziegesar’s novel, the characters’ ambivalence toward their foibles maintains the humorous tone and lack of complexity. Cawelti warns that, “if a character becomes too complexly human he may cast a shattering and disruptive light on the other elements of the formula” (“Adventure” 12). To prevent this “disruptive light,”
von Ziegesar, inspired by the chick lit convention of highlighting flaws, created the invention of characters flaunting their flaws. None of the characters ever acknowledge the seriousness of their flaws or attempt to overcome their vices. Nate is the only character who attends rehab (a light slap on the wrist for getting caught buying pot from a dealer), although the “punishment” hardly serves as a warning to readers since the rehab center is “luxurious” and “trendy.” Also, although Nate attends therapy sessions, he never seriously attempts to overcome his drug addiction since he gets high after every group meeting and has sex with a fellow drug addict (“Because” 141-43). Despite the obvious social and financial advantages of the characters, the narrator focuses on the characters’ vices, rather than their virtues. In classic novels, the character flaws would be vehicles for tragedy or self-discovery, but in novels written to entertain the candid, confident, Millennial generation (Howe and Strauss 41-46), the flaws are honest character quirks. Von Ziegesar has been criticized for “glamorizing” drug and alcohol abuse, casual sex affairs, vanity, and eating disorders (Wolf 2006), but for the author (and the intended audience) the character vices, and more importantly, the way the characters embrace their vices, reflect the everyday concerns of a new generation, one whose self-proclaimed “specialness” outweighs the pressure to apologize for imperfection (Howe and Strauss 2000).

Throughout the eleven *Gossip Girl* novels, none of the characters change, want to change, or are even expected to change their bad habits, noting that, “we aren’t always the nicest people in the world, but we make up for it in looks and taste” (“You” 1). With this consistency, von Ziegesar’s genre invention evolved into a convention for the teen chick lit genre. In order for teen chick lit readers to easily transition from one teen chick lit series to another, the characters in the series should be somewhat similar so the readers know what to expect. Likewise, within a series, the readers want to return to the characters they love (and the ones they
love to hate) without being caught off guard by a character who has suddenly decided to “reinvent” herself. Cawelti proposes that consistent characterization is crucial for the success of a formulaic novel because “audiences find satisfaction and a basic emotional security in a familiar form” (“Adventure” 9). Judging from the similar characters in teen chick lit novels that mimic the archetypal Gossip Girl, such as The A-List and It Girl (both of which focus on rich, beautiful, selfish, and flawed characters), the authors heeded Cawelti’s suggestion. Clearly, the teen chick lit authors understand that, “the audience’s past experience with a formula gives it a sense of what to expect in new individual examples, thereby increasing its capacity for understanding and enjoying the details of a work” (“Adventure” 9). Therefore, through repetition and replication, flat, stock characters transformed from von Ziegesar’s invention to a teen chick lit convention.

**Gossip Girl: The Love Triangle**

Devoted teen chick lit readers are not only aware of the types of characters they will “meet” in these formulaic novels, but also the types of formulas they will encounter. One such formula is the obstacle of a third party in the quest for love. One of the central formulas in the Gossip Girl series (and other teen chick lit novels) is the high-tension love triangle. As evidenced by history and literature, themes of love triangles and lovers’ betrayal are both dramatic and entertaining. Therefore, in a “frothy but fun” (Roback 181) novel, it is fitting that love triangles and other lovers’ disputes are present in the narrative. In Gossip Girl, the main love triangle (there are several) is the tension between best friends Blair and Serena and Nate, the boy they both love. Dramatic tension is high when, three quarters of the way through the first
novel, Nate confesses to his girlfriend Blair that he lost his virginity to Serena a few months prior, a classic example of dramatic irony.

Although clearly this element is not an invention but rather a convention of most novels that focus on the highs and lows of romantic conquests, von Ziegesar’s love triangle has a modern twist that resonates with readers. The newly coined concept of “frenemies” (friends that pretend to like each other but actually are enemies on most occasions [Sex and the City 2000]) is exhibited to the fullest in the Gossip Girl novels since both Serena and Blair employ vengeful plots and slanderous language to remain the “girl on top.” Also, the forceful, expletive-filled language used by the enraged characters echoes the teenage slang so familiar to the target audience. For example, when Blair learns of Serena’s betrayal, she throws a fit and begins her plans for sabotaging Serena:

“I knew it!” [Blair] shouted [at Nate]. “Who hasn’t had sex with Serena? That nasty, slutty bitch!”

“I’m sorry, Blair. But it wasn’t like, planned or anything…”

“Get the fuck out of here, Nate. I can’t even look at you. You’re pathetic.”

…Of course Serena could wear lip gloss with ugly names, and tights with holes in them, and dirty old shoes, and never cut her hair, and still get the boy…Blair’s head [filled with] the new movie she was working on. The movie in which the fabulous Serena van der Woodsen was run over by a bus with her stupid picture plastered to the side of it and was horribly maimed.

(“Gossip” 138-9)

Although not all teen chick lit novels center around a love triangle, per se, they all focus on relationships between the sexes, how those relationships affect their lives and the relationships they have with their friends, and the lengths that males and females will go to get what they want (sexually and romantically). Wrapped up in this relationship-centered world is the concept of selfishness and disloyalty. For tumultuous male-female relationships to greatly impact the bonds between friends, the characters must be portrayed as selfish and disloyal (or else they would
think about others before acting, thus decreasing dramatic tensions). Even before Blair finds out about Nate and Serena, she is resentful of Serena’s return because, with Serena around, Blair is no longer “the prettiest, the smartest, the hippest, most happening girl in the room” (“Gossip” 22). If the characters valued friendship or loyalty, the histrionics surrounding a love triangle could never occur. These characteristics are conducive to the “frenemy” relationship, relating the love triangle convention to a new generation of readers.

Von Ziegesar’s invention of the “frenemy” love triangle is overly dramatic, adding to the humor and entertainment value, yet still familiar to young readers. After all, teenage hysterics surrounding friend betrayal and male attention are extremely prevalent in the drama of high school. Von Ziegesar’s depiction of the “frenemy” love triangle invention fulfils Cawelti’s assertion that, in formulaic literature, “certain stories fulfill man’s needs for enjoyment and escape…but in order for these patterns to work, they must be embodied in figures, settings, and situations that have appropriate meanings for the culture which produces them” (“Adventure” 6). The overdramatic vengeance of the characters adds entertainment while the serious (but not overly serious) consideration of teenage relationship troubles reflects the struggles teenagers face.

**Gossip Girl: Sex**

Another obvious departure from traditional young adult literature novels concerning the love triangle is the addition of sex. Traditionally, authors and publishers censored teenage promiscuity to avoid the attacks from critics and parents arguing that the novels were vulgar. Indeed, von Ziegesar’s novels have been widely criticized for depicting casual sex affairs without repercussions. Critic and author Naomi Wolf castigates the Gossip Girl novels, arguing
that the abundant sex in the novels “is not the frank sexual exploration found in a Judy Blume novel, but teenage sexuality via Juicy Couture, blasé and entirely commodified” (Wolf 2006). Wolf’s critiques seem a little overdramatic and outdated; after all, the target audience for *Forever* was far more sexually naïve than the Millennial generation. Today, many teens and young adults are fully enveloped in the “hookup culture,” either participating in it themselves or observing the actions of their classmates (Stepp 2007). Any doubt that the current generation is more sexually aware (and active) at an earlier age than previous generations can be overturned by reading the plethora of news stories, sociology studies, and teen magazine articles about the prevalence of teenage sex. Today, sex isn’t taboo for teens and college students; instead, it is exciting and fun and literature aimed at this population should reflect the teenage lifestyle in order to be successful.

Von Ziegesar’s characters are between the ages of 15 and 18 and all are educated about sex. A few of the characters are still virgins but all discuss sex with their friends and think about their first time experience (or next time for the non-virgins). Teen chick lit novels are more conservative than adult literature when it comes to describing actual sex scenes, but dialogue and inner thoughts about sex are rampant in these novels. The plethora of sexual innuendos and jokes may offend parents, but readers can appreciate the honest approach. Teen chick lit novels’ endorsement of sex is refreshing for teen readers since, in real-life, they are constantly being lectured about the dangers of sexual activities. Readers acknowledge that the novels aren’t trying to “preach” to them about the way they live their lives, but rather are reflecting real-life experiences. As much as parents and authority figures don’t want to believe that their teens are engaging in sexual activities, writers must remember that they are creating fiction about teens for teens; therefore, they cannot disregard the reality of a teenager’s sex life.
In *Gossip Girl*, sexual insinuations and the sanctioning of promiscuous sex begin on the first page with a reference to having sex in a parent’s bed. The attitude toward sanctioning promiscuous sex is illustrated when Blair’s stepfather casually asks her boyfriend (Nate), “You sleep with her yet?” (“Gossip” 7). Blair constantly thinks about sex, since she hasn’t actually had it yet. Comments such as, “Blair wanted to scream and jump on top of him, but she resisted” (9) and “I’m about to have sex with Nate” (14) permeate the novel. Blair doesn’t actually have sex until the sixth *Gossip Girl* novel, so the sexual tension between the two characters is a persistent dramatic element throughout the novels. The only sex scene described in the first *Gossip Girl* novel is a flashback of Nate and Serena’s sexual experience. It is clear that, in the developing stage of the teen chick lit genre, the author might not have felt comfortable describing sex explicitly since the scene is vague and clichés are abundant: “They both had sex for the first time. It was awkward and painful and exciting and fun, and so sweet they forgot to be embarrassed. It was exactly the way you’d want your first time to be, and they had no regrets” (27). The vagueness of this scene isn’t as problematic as the utopian images surrounding sex since most teens’ first time isn’t as picturesque and perfect, as Dr. Mary Pipher discovered in her comprehensive study of teenage girls. Pipher affirms in *Reviving Ophelia* that early sexual experiences often elicit negative reactions such as “sadness and anger at rejection, pain over bad reputations…and the cynicism of girls who have had every conceivable sexual experience except a good one” (208). Von Ziegesar might have agreed that a utopian first sexual experience is unrealistic since, with every new volume of the series, the sex scenes become a little more graphic and a little less perfect: one of the characters is caught on film engaging in sexual activities in the middle of the park and Nate is sexually active with a drug addict. Every sexual encounter Nate has with the drug addict seems to lead to a rescue: most of their sexual
encounters occur at a rehab center and Nate even takes care of her when she has an overdose after sex.

Despite von Ziegesar’s accounts of far from perfect sexual liaisons of the supporting characters, when “the couple” (Blair and Nate) finally have sex, their experience is positive, perhaps suggesting that sexual encounters are more meaningful and satisfying when the teens have thought about their actions and waited until they were ready. The encounter spans three pages (as opposed to one paragraph in the first novel when describing Nate and Serena’s sex scene) and almost every part of the experience is described: taking off each other’s clothing, putting on a condom, positioning, and climaxing. Far from pornographic, the scene is tasteful because, although it is descriptive, much of the scene is characterized by allusions that might be missed by sexually inexperienced readers. For example, the author describes Blair’s climax ambiguously: “…all she had to do was close her eyes and wrap her arms around him, arch her back a little, and feel it happening. Tada!” (“You’re” 224). The sexually experienced reader understands what “arching her back” and “tada” indicates, although a more innocent reader might miss this allusion.

Sex as a major theme and action is a convention of romance novels, but von Ziegesar modernizes this convention for the young adult audience, transforming the convention into an invention. Although the characters are constantly daydreaming about steamy sexual encounters, the descriptions aren’t overtly explicit. The actual sex scenes themselves are peppered with innuendos and brief exclamations (such as “Yes,” “Oh,” and “Tada”), preventing the scenes from appearing pornographic. Von Ziegesar’s inclusion of sex scenes reflects the changing social mores of the “sex sells” culture. This element is an example of a genre formula because, according to Cawelti, “formula is cultural—it represents the way in which a culture has
embodied mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations in narrative form” (“Concept” 72). In today’s society, sex isn’t taboo; in fact, it is almost a cultural obsession. However, few cultural mediums depict “authentic” sexual encounters but rather prefer to showcase perfect, overly zealous examples of sex. Therefore, sex is given almost mythic status in modern American culture with books, movies, and television shows all revealing tactics to achieve the archetypal fantasy. Von Ziegesar’s examples certainly embody the teenage fantasy of sex since all of the characters have blissful sexual experiences free from awkwardness or social and physical consequences. Although the utopian images of sex may be unrealistic, they are positive in nature since they champion female sexuality by offering readers situations in which female sexuality isn’t intrinsically linked to guilt, punishment, or embarrassment.

**GOSSIP GIRL: DRUGS AND ALCOHOL**

Sex isn’t the only “forbidden” action that characters in teen chick lit novels readily engage in; drug and alcohol use is just as prevalent, if not more so. In an early scene in the first installment of *Gossip Girl*, all of the characters (parents and underage teens alike) are excessively drinking, depicting another permissible action in teen chick lit. The narrator explains that the characters come from “the kind of families for whom drinking was as commonplace as blowing your nose” and that “their parents believed in the quasi-European idea that the more access kids have to alcohol, the less likely they are to abuse it” (“Gossip” 6). The characters always seem to be drinking: Blair “swig[s] her mother’s fine vintage scotch from the crystal tumbler in her hand” on the third page; Serena downs two glasses of whiskey in a matter of minutes; and characters drink copiously at house parties and bar scenes many times in the narrative. Despite the abundance of alcohol use, scenes where the characters are drunk to excess
are few; the availability and the familiarity of alcohol diminishes its taboo, thereby eliminating
the over zealous drunken activities so common in teens and young adults. Likewise, drug abuse
is casually mentioned and portrayed without the shock value it connotes in real-life. Nate
“enjoys a joint on the steps of the Met” (4) and he’s often “too baked to deal with [reality]” (79).
For teen readers, the forbidden world of drinking and drugs is exciting and, most likely, not as
unfamiliar as parents would like to believe.

Von Ziegesar’s casual and ambivalent portrayal of drug and alcohol abuse is an ingenious
invention that accomplishes two contradictory tasks. On the one hand, the characters’ easy
access to drugs and alcohol can either serve as another element of fantasy and escapism for
readers personally unfamiliar with this lifestyle or, for more “experienced” readers, the
references to drugs and alcohol can strengthen the connection between the reader and the novel.
On the other hand, the characters’ casual attitude toward drugs and alcohol can diminish the
enticing appeal of drinking and smoking. Although critics and parents contest that the novels
glamorize and support drinking and drug use, theories on counterculture actions suggest that
when dominant ideology commodifies “radical” actions or styles, thus making them appear
banal, the enticement element diminishes, in part because the action or style loses its “shock
value” (Hebdige 1979). Since part of the enticement of an action is the unfamiliarity of it and
the “forbidden” nature attached to it, reading about casual drinking and drug use may actually
decrease teens’ excitement about drinking and drug use, since they have been taught (by teen
chick lit books) that drinking is “no big deal.” Of course, the critics’ arguments that the Gossip
Girl novels normalize drinking and drug use is valid, so the novels may also be sanctioning and
promoting underage drinking.
In addition to contradictory messages about sex and substance use, teen chick lit novels also send complex messages about outward appearance. Following the trends set by chick lit, teen chick lit novels focus on the external nature of the characters rather than the internal nature. Outer appearance, clothing, and accessories are more indicative of characters’ personalities than their inner psyche. The characters have all “inherited classic good looks” and “wear fantastic clothes” (“Gossip” 1). The notion of “classic” good looks is determined to be very specific since all of the main characters are white, tall, thin, and tanned from their vacations to exotic islands. Combined with the ideal that good looks are inherited, the novels make a very clear connection between race, class, and beauty. This concept is most obviously materialized in the character of Serena who embodies modern American society’s ideals of beauty. She is described as “perfect” because she is “tall, blond, thin, and super-poised…[and] gifted with the kind of coolness that you can’t acquire by buying the right handbag or the right pair of jeans. She was the girl every boy wants and every girl wants to be” (“Gossip” 17). Throughout the series, Serena’s beauty is the catalyst for a wide range of desirable and coveted opportunities: she is a commercial and runway model, the inspiration for a best-selling couture perfume, a rock-star’s girlfriend, and an actress in a major blockbuster. It is clear that embodying societal ideals of female beauty is necessary to achieve the elite, “celebrity” status so valued in current society.

The notion of beauty as essential in success is made even more damaging with the seemingly intrinsic connection between beauty, class, and race. Since good looks are “inherited” and, as evidenced from the quote above, not able to be bought, beauty is allotted to only those in the elite class. The novel indicates that the characters are not rich because they are beautiful, but rather beautiful because they are rich. When describing Blair, the thin 5’4 gorgeous brunette, the
narrator notes that, “she wasn’t the best-dressed or the skinniest or the tallest girl in the room, but she seemed to sparkle a bit more brightly than the rest of them. And she knew it” (“You” 8). Since thinness and style often equate with beauty in our current culture, the audience must then infer that the characteristic that sets her apart from other beautiful women is her position on the social hierarchy. She and her friends are members of the elite class and they, not the reading audience, have had their “names at the top of the guest list at every exclusive restaurant, club, and hotel in Manhattan since the day [they] were born…the entire island is and always has been theirs” (“Nothing” 1). The unattainable standards of beauty and wealth serve to remind readers of their inferior status to the characters and, subsequently, to the elite class in their real-life existence.

Even within the novel, the distinctions between elite class and the lower class are clearly established, usually through choices in style and dress. The narrator pointedly notes the differences between the elite class and the “Other” in her mocking descriptions of the less fortunate characters. For example, when describing Cryrus Rose, Blair’s stepfather whose “new money” is deemed utterly unsophisticated by the narrator and other characters, his “ordinary” cologne indicates his lower class status:

“I smell Old Spice,” Mrs. Coates whispered to Mrs. Archibald. “Do you think he’s actually wearing Old Spice?”

That would be the male equivalent of wearing Impulse body spray, which everyone knows is the female equivalent of nasty. (“Gossip” 11-12)

Similarly, later in the novel when describing Dan (the lower income character who resides in Brooklyn rather than the trendy Upper East Side), the narrator compares the tuxedo he rented from a rental store with the Armani tux he considered buying at Barneys: “He would walk over and suavely offer to buy Serena a drink. Too bad the only thing suave about him was his outfit.
Even it was only half as suave as it could have been if he’d kept the Armani from Barneys” (177). In a few simple sentences, the reader comprehends how the other characters view him and how they (as readers) should view him and others like him. The mocking tone the narrator uses and the numerous dismissive comments she directs toward non-couture styles reinforce the superior value of the upper class. The novels suggest that not only can a person’s style indicate his/her social standing, but also that his/her worth as a person is intrinsically connected with what he/she wears. Here, von Ziegesar’s utilization of Marx’s concept of the value of commodities as replacing the value of individuals or social relationships is overtly apparent.

Von Ziegesar’s invention of highlighting the connection between class and beauty is an example of enforcing the Marxist notion of false consciousness; that is, examples in dominant culture depict class hierarchy as natural and intrinsic in the hopes to eliminate class rebellion (Marx and Engels). In direct relation is cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony as the vehicle for maintaining the state in a capitalistic society. Gramsci argues that the dominant society maintains control over the subcultures not through violence or coercion, but ideologically. Products and productions of capitalist society present the ideals of the bourgeoisie as “common sense” to the masses, who then accept the values as their own, thus allowing the dominant society to dictate the beliefs of the mass culture without resistance (Gramsci 1971). While von Ziegesar may not have consciously intended to contribute to the control of the hegemonic state, her novels’ clear delineation of class structure and the emphasis on exclusion (the audience cannot gain access to this elite group simply through consumption) serves to reiterate the “natural” connection between class, beauty, wealth, and power.

Von Ziegesar’s novels reinforce the social hierarchy in terms of race as well as class because the novel’s main characters are all white. If von Ziegesar had created all white
characters, her novels would have been labeled as blatantly racist. To avoid this critique, two “supplementary” characters are African American, each one a close friend to the main characters (Blair and Nate). The inclusion of two black characters is a tactic employed by the media sphere (such as television and movies) in an attempt to eradicate any notions of prejudice or inequality in reference to the main characters and the novel in general. After all, if the characters are friends with black characters, then “clearly” the novel isn’t suggesting that whites are superior to blacks. However, media that marginalize black characters under the guise of equality and friendship actually reinforce traditional notions of social hierarchy.

Pop culture theorist Robin Wood, in his study of popular teen movies, argues that by befriending a person of color, the white character reveals his/her lack of prejudice and “generosity.” In this way, the movies and novels appear to be promoting racial acceptance. However, the black character is confined to the role of supportive friend and never (at least in the films Wood critiques and in the Gossip Girl novels) a possible love interest, implying that “blacks and other ethnic groups are just great, we’ve got nothing against them, but of course we couldn’t possibly be attracted to them” (Wood 320). Wood’s analysis (and his sarcastic tone), emphasize how certain ideological standpoints are presented, and more importantly accepted, as common sense. According to Gramsci and Wood, audience members wouldn’t think twice about the lead character’s romantic choice. Rather, they would perceive it to be a personal (not political) choice, one that was not traced to racial prejudice, since the authors have already established the character as “non-racist” by having him/her befriend an “Other.” Thus, the audience accepts the idea of racial prejudice without realizing that the dominant society constructed the ideology to appear as “common sense” in order to maintain control over the masses (Gramsci 1971). By creating white main characters and assigning unimportant,
supplementary roles to black characters, von Ziegesar enforces the (racist) ideological viewpoint that whites are the dominant race.

Von Ziegesar’s ability to reinforce ideological notions central to the preservation of hegemonic control in a non-threatening entertaining medium results in an unquestioning reception of these messages by the reading audience. Since readers aren’t expecting to read a novel with socio-political intentions, the messages about race and class are unknowingly ingested. Cawelti notes that readers appreciate formulaic literature for its escapism and entertainment value since they understand that, “its purpose is not to make me confront motives and experiences in myself that I might prefer to ignore but to take me out of myself by confirming an idealized self-image” (“Adventure” 18). Since formulaic novels present this “idealized self-image,” the “hidden” presence of cultural messages is even more disturbing.

Although the formulaic genre appears to be an unlikely medium for transmitting messages about race and class, cultural theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno disagree, contending that the “lighthearted” tone of the novels makes them a perfect vehicle for reinforcing cultural ideologies. The theorists assert that, contrary to its accepted purpose, entertainment does not serve as an escape from the harsh realities of life, but rather an escape from the last thought of resistance. Horkheimer and Adorno propose that dominant culture uses entertainment as a means of distracting subordinate cultures from engaging in political and social upheaval. Specifically, the theorists focus on the concept of “fate” as a vehicle for complacency. They argue that popular media forms create a cultural myth implying that those people who succeed in life and gain entrance to the elite social class are similar to “normal” people in talent and intellect, however “fate” has smiled upon the lucky. In this way, people are meant to believe that human agency has little to do with personal success. Therefore, subordinate people don’t
resist the social hierarchy but rather continue living their lives, acquiescing to the concept that some people are “destined” to attain the highest positions on the social ladder, by luck of inheritance (being born into the right family, like the Gossip Girl characters) or fate.

**Gossip Girl: The Body**

Issues of race and class aren’t the only elements in Gossip Girl that should be subjected to theoretical analysis; the body as depicted in the novels is also a source of complex ideological themes. In many ways, the novels stress the significance of the body in relation to the self, specifically the ways in which the body is more important than the soul it contains. The covers of the Gossip Girl novels actualize this concept since all eleven novels feature splices of a woman’s body: shoulders, legs, waist, torso, etc. None of the novels’ covers reveals anything above the woman’s nose, a Gossip Girl invention that has translated to other teen chick lit covers. Since the cover model is “faceless,” the emphasis on the female body is overtly apparent. However, despite the all-female cover, the novel’s emphasis on the body is equal among both female and male characters, arguably subverting the ideology that women, not men, are consistently reduced to sexual objects. While the women are expected to be thin and “leggy,” the men are rewarded for having “washboard abs” and muscular arms. Both sexes exemplify the ideal body image as illustrated in popular culture media. Also, although the novel describes the characters’ hair, smile, and body shape, most of the references to the body are vague, preferring to describe the characters as “gorgeous” and “perfect” rather than specifying their dress or bra size. The sole exception to this is the character of Jenny, who is characterized by her 34 D breast size (“Gossip” 42). Interestingly, her large breasts attract the attention of “it
boy” Nate (“You” 70), thereby allowing her entrance into the A-List crowd ruled by Serena and Blair.

The emphasis on Jenny’s breasts can be viewed as a demeaning depiction of women that reduces them to sex objects and reiterates traditional notions of femininity. Since teen chick lit novels are often characterized by their similarity to advertisements, sociologist Jean Kilbourne’s theories about women and advertising are particularly useful in deciphering the implications of the emphasis on Jenny’s breast size. Firstly, Kilbourne’s summary of the majority of advertisements is akin to many of the conventions of teen chick lit novels, since both create “a mythical, mostly white world in which people are rarely ugly, overweight, poor, struggling or disabled, either physically or mentally [where] people talk only about products” (1). Arguably, the emphasis on Jenny’s breast size is a further example of how society reduces females to body parts, thus making the objectification of women acceptable and, even more frightening, “normal” (Kilbourne 1). Additionally, the fact that Jenny’s breast size, not her personality, attracted Nate’s attention reiterates to readers that in order to attract men (which women learn from society is the “ultimate goal”), the body is the most important feature. Specifically, the “ideal” body as expressed in the *Gossip Girl* novels is white, thin, and well endowed.

Despite the conservative (and, arguably, damaging) messages about the body as expressed through the characterization of Jenny, the novel also portrays the body as a site of contestation. In Foucauldian form, the novel presents the body as a site of tension between the productive and the subjected (Foucault 549). According to Foucault, the body can be acted upon by others and controlled while simultaneously remaining a powerful force for the self (“Discipline and Punish” 1975). Perhaps the best example of this theory in regards to the *Gossip Girl* novels is Blair’s bulimia. Blair’s desperation to remain thin is a reflection of the
overpowering influence that society’s ideal of beauty has on the female body. In a sense, popular culture’s obsession with thinness dominates Blair’s body, superseding Blair’s power over her body. On the other hand, the method that Blair chooses to remain thin (forcing herself to vomit) exhibits Blair’s power in creating violence against her own body. This self-inflicted yet socially motivated form of torture transforms Blair’s body into a site of empathy for readers. This concept echoes Foucault’s theory of how a convict’s tortured body evokes sympathy and admiration from onlookers who, prior to witnessing the public torture, abhorred the convict (“Discipline and Punish” 1975). In addition, Blair’s body (and the convict’s body, in Foucault’s example) materializes the intangible conflict between the control of mass society and individual free will (“Discipline and Punish” 1975). The body, then, is a site of differences where two discourses (the body as overpowered and the body as maintaining power) reside.

Another portrayal of the body as a site of tension is actualized through the character of Vanessa. Although Vanessa understands the pressures to be overtly feminine, she resists these cultural implications and exhibits her subversive nature by shaving her head (“It Had” 51). The act acknowledges the expectations of society while simultaneously subverting traditional notions of femininity. The most shocking example of the subversive power of the body is the body part Serena modeled for an avant-garde photo shoot. The picture, which is plastered on New York city buses, isn’t a picture of “traditional” female body parts. The characters question what the body part actually is, since it “looked like the dark pit at the center of a peach” (“Gossip” 127). Confirming many readers’ suspicions, the author revealed that the picture was of Serena’s anus. The juxtaposition between the body parts featured on the cover of the novels and the body part featured in the photo shoot reveal the author’s intention of subverting traditional notions of beauty and femininity. The anus is hardly a characteristically feminine body part and rarely
considered beautiful. If Von Ziegesar had wanted to portray traditional notions of femininity, she would have chosen to accentuate a body part specific to the female body (such as breasts or vagina). By highlighting an unconventional and clearly controversial body part (since even in this edgy novel the body part is never specifically identified), Von Ziegesar provides Serena with ownership over her entire body. The positive reactions to the photo serve to reinforce Serena’s overall beauty and confidence in her sexuality and body; even her anus can look beautiful and refined. Von Ziegesar’s invention of paradoxically reinforcing and subverting traditional notions of the female body reiterates the theory of the body as a site of differences and reflects the conflicting ideologies present in modern society.

Cecily von Ziegesar’s novel inventions would have remained inventions had she not repeated them in the series’ eleven novels. Likewise, these inventions could have been construed as series conventions (instead of genre conventions) if the A-List series (by Zoey Dean), The Clique series (by Lisi Harrison), and the Gossip Girl spin-off series, It Girl (created by von Ziegesar but ghostwritten) had not replicated the inventions displayed in the original Gossip Girl series and earned similar commercial success. The repetition of the narrative and style elements and the replication of such inventions transformed the inventions into conventions, achieving the creation of a new fiction genre. The formation of a new literary genre is indeed dependent on the repetition of the inventions since, as Cawelti argues, “the pleasure and effectiveness of an individual formulaic work depends on its intensification of a familiar experience…creating its own world with which we become familiar by repetition” (“Adventure” 10). The first installment of the Gossip Girl series was viewed as a departure from young adult literature that did not become the archetype of the literary genre teen chick lit until the repetition and
replication of von Ziegesar’s inventions, thus transforming the inventions into conventions, established the novel as a groundbreaking work in the cultivation of a new literary genre.

**CONCLUSION**

Now that a fundamental analysis of the genre has been established by deciphering the ways in which von Ziegesar transformed borrowed conventions into novel inventions that were then imitated by similar authors, thus confirming conventions for a new literary genre, the next step is to determine the cultural implications of the genre. Since the genre is so new, a full depiction of the cultural implications is probably not feasible at this time. Likewise, cultural scholars with specific areas of concentration will no doubt enhance the study of the genre exponentially. Until then, however, I will offer two contrasting theories on the cultural implications of the genre: one positive and the other negative.

The rapid success of the teen chick lit genre and the dramatic differences between novels in this genre as compared to “elite” novels for young adults makes this topic especially interesting for Popular Culture scholars, although the genre is too new for the academic world to have produced any critical inquiry of it. Therefore, it is useful to analyze teen chick lit through the lenses of those scholars who focused their studies on similar topics. Janice Radway’s analysis of romance readers and Dick Hebdige’s work on subcultures are particularly pertinent because both “subgroups” share similarities with teen chick lit readers.

Janice Radway, in her influential ethnographic study of female romance readers, suggests that the *act* of reading romance novels is akin to a “political” act. When these women, who are mostly defined by their roles as wives and mothers, sit down and pick up a romance novel, they are signaling to their families that, while they are reading, the women aren’t “mothers” or
“wives,” but independent women free from constraining gender roles. The act of “taking time for herself” is a woman’s assertion of her identity as an individual and not just as an extension of someone else (i.e. “Bob’s wife” or “Suzy’s mother”). By picking up the novel, the women temporarily “shed” their identity as mothers and wives and the respective responsibilities (Radway 1987).

The act of reading could be construed as an act of defiance; that is, the women “defy” patriarchal society by denying their socially constructed gender roles and “indulging” in a “selfish” action (if only for a short duration). Reading romance novels, then, becomes a way for these women to separate themselves from the dominant ideology. Teen chick lit readers also separate themselves from the dominant culture through their choice of reading material. The novels in this genre, much like the romance genre, visually signify their identity as separate from “traditional” women’s fiction. The covers are bright and usually adorned with a spliced photograph (showing only a pair of legs, a mouth, or a lower back) of a thin and fashionable teenage girl. The titles are trendy and catchy and often include words such as “drama,” “gossip,” and “diva.”

By their distinct covers and titles, teen chick lit novels are easily identifiable, making the reader easily identifiable as a certain “type.” Therefore, a teen chick lit reader is asserting her association with a specific “subculture”: the teenage, trendy, morally suspect subculture. (Clearly, the teenage population is not a subculture in the traditional sense of the word; however, teen culture has always embraced counterculture aspects of rebellion against authorities and an ideological viewpoint in opposition to mainstream values [Clarke et al. 14]. Also, the teenage culture’s “hidden” activities are similar to the notion of radicalness inherent in traditional subcultures [Brake 1-29]. Therefore, the use of the term is appropriate, as long as one embraces
the minor alterations of the term’s definition.) Dick Hebdige, in his analysis of British youth subcultures, articulates that “subcultures represent ‘noise’: interference in the orderly sequence” and contends that “subcultures express forbidden contents in forbidden forms” (Hebdige 153). The teen chick lit genre exemplifies this definition of subculture since the novels represent the “uncouth reality” of teenage life in a form traditionally reserved for promoting socially sanctioned actions. By reading teen chick lit (or similarly, romance) novels, a teenage girl (or adult woman) is declaring her separation from the dominant culture and her association with a subculture.

Since romance novels often carry the stigma of “literary trash,” the “defiant” actions of the women in Radway’s study are even more pronounced. Not only are the women serving themselves rather than their husband or children, but they are “indulging” in a pastime that isn’t socially sanctioned (such as reading “good literature” or knitting). Romance readers commit the same “social sin” as teen chick lit readers who choose to read “morally suspect” novels rather than “classic” or “academic” literature. Perhaps what makes the romance and chick lit genres even more disdainful is the fact that the novels and authors in these genres don’t make any claims of literary genius. Formulas and ghostwriters permeate both genres, suggesting that writing literature isn’t an “art,” but rather a commodity to be manufactured. This in turn challenges the societal structure since literature is often represented as part of the Arnoldian concept of elite culture. The fact that this “immoral” literature is consumed by women and teenage girls further challenges the societal structure since the ideology of these novels may not reflect patriarchal values. Therefore, the hegemonic control of the dominant culture is threatened by the subcultures that these literary genres attract.
Faced with potentially threatening subcultures, the dominant culture employs tactics to regain hegemonic control. Hebdige argues that the dominant culture regains hegemonic control by incorporating the subcultures into dominant society in two ways: in the form of commodity or in ideological form. Incorporating the subcultures into dominant culture eliminates the “marginality” of the subcultures and thus extinguishes the subculture “threat.” To regain control through commodity, the dominant culture mass produces the fashion trends or styles of the subculture, diminishing the “shock value.” The styles that were once radical become commonplace and therefore non-threatening. If a style or trend cannot be commodified, the dominant culture can regain hegemonic control in the form of ideology; that is, the subculture is depicted as the trivialized “Other” by the media. Characterizing the subculture as “meaningless” or “silly” serves the dominant ideology because it reinforces mass culture’s power over the harmless “Other” (Hebdige 154-158).

The subcultures of romance readers and teen chick lit readers are not exempt from the controlling tactics Hebdige describes. The dominant culture, perhaps threatened by novels that explicitly describe the fulfillment of female sexual desires, clearly employed “ideological” tactical forms to “trivialize” the romance novel genre. Labeling the genre as “trashy,” “vulgar,” and “vile,” the dominant culture was perhaps able to dissuade female readers from “indulging” in romance novels. Apparently, women who assert their sexuality and profess their sexual desires are threatening to the patriarchal society and must be silenced. By discrediting the genre and thus, the readers, mass culture gained control over the subculture.

The dominant culture tries to use the same ideological tactics with the teen chick lit genre: articles in newspapers aimed at parents caution against buying teens these “filthy” novels (Wolf; Treneman 4; Shrieves), librarians are advised not to stock the books or recommend them
to young teens (Alderice 25), and booksellers argued for the option to label the books with “warning” stickers so as to avoid potential conflict from angry parents (Horn 34). However, these ideological tactics only backfired with the younger generation, who are innately drawn to anything even remotely “forbidden.” Discrediting the genre only made teens flock to the novels more and teens (unlike romance readers) display their “immoral” novels proudly. Caught in a hegemonic struggle it was losing, the dominant culture switched tactics and is currently trying to commodify teen chick lit by turning the novels into a successful network television show that has been altered to more closely fit the patriarchal standards of society.

Perhaps stemming from her own preconceived notions of romance novels (and romance readers), Radway (possibly inadvertently) reinforces the ideology of mass culture when she discredits the women’s “political” actions, arguing that romance novels reinforce patriarchal beliefs and therefore the women readers who crave these novels are actually lauding patriarchy. Radway argues that since these novels provide readers with feelings of “nurturance” and “protection,” and end with the “woman getting the man,” they serve in direct opposition to feminism. Ien Ang addresses Radway’s oversimplification, saying that, “the distribution of identities [in Radway’s study] is clearcut: Radway, the researcher, is a feminist and not a romance fan; the Smithton women, the researched, are romance readers and not feminists” (Ang 558). Likewise, Ang accurately classifies Radway’s work as a “mode of persuasion” since Radway seems to contend that “‘Real’ social change can only be brought about…if romance readers would stop reading romances and become feminist activists instead” (Ang 558). Labeling romance novels as “reinforcing patriarchy” ultimately serves the same (debilitating) purpose as describing the novels as “trashy” and “vile.”
Although teen chick lit novels don’t seem to reinforce patriarchy, a scholar such as Radway who is looking for evidence that the novels reinforce patriarchy could, in a hypothetical analysis of the teen genre, argue that these novels reinforce conformity and consumption. The female characters in teen chick lit novels (such as *Gossip Girl*) don’t obsess over whether or not they “get the guy,” nor do they appear to submit to male authority. In fact, males are more likely to be at the mercy of females rather than vice versa and female characters often choose their aspirations (acceptance into Yale, success as an actress, etc.) over their romantic relationships. However, the characters live in a world of wealth and consumption and know that certain material goods are essential for social success. Also, the characters (much like their real-life counterparts) engage in the struggle for social acceptance, often resorting to tactics such as backstabbing and spreading vicious rumors to maintain their status on the social ladder. Therefore, a scholar similar to Radway could argue that these novels aren’t serving as a doctrine for a radical subculture, but are rather reinforcing the dominant ideology of capitalism. The scholar might then suggest that although teens view reading teen chick lit novels as an “escape” from their real lives, the novels are just perpetuating and supporting ideals that readers should want to avoid.

However, the act of blatantly reading material that the dominant culture dismisses should not be ignored. Teen chick lit readers are making decisions that challenge the dominant nature of mass culture’s “morals” and “codes of ethics” for females. By choosing a novel that doesn’t shun female sexuality and female dominance, teen chick lit readers are rejecting patriarchal ideals and, perhaps even more importantly, rejecting the censorship of mass culture. Teen chick lit, then, can be seen as a way to subvert dominant ideology and its readers can be considered agents in the struggle for hegemony.
In opposition to the above theory is the assumption that the novels are not challenging the societal structure or reflecting the youth “subculture,” but rather creating and reinforcing an ideology that lauds capitalism, classism, hedonism, and racism and discourages human compassion and social relations. Perhaps the novels aren’t reflecting the teenage culture but rather the teenage culture is emulating the fictional world so revered in the novels. If this is true, the novels aren’t harmless forms of entertainment, but rather dangerous formats for breeding a generation consumed by capitalistic motivations. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser’s theories on the influence of popular culture on individuals are particularly useful when viewing teen chick lit novels as products of capitalism. In his arguments, he claims that a person’s desires, preferences, and beliefs are not his/her own, but are rather acquired through the process of “interpellation.” Through “ideological state apparatuses,” individuals are taught what social practices are acceptable. Capitalist society determines the dominant ideology and vehicles such as the media present this ideology to the masses. The populace then interprets the messages as their own beliefs, even though these values were constructed by the controlling society (Althusser 1971).

In accordance with Althusser is theorist Richard Dyer, whose arguments about stereotyping contend that the use of stereotyping (as found in the teen chick lit novels) is not a necessary characterization for the success of formulaic literature as Cawelti seems to suggest, but rather another tool in the battle of hegemonic control. Dyer suggests that dominant culture creates stereotypes in order to actively maintain hegemonic control through establishing normalcy. These stereotypes are hard to fight since they assume inborn and unalterable psychological characteristics of a given social group. When real people don’t correctly “fit” the stereotype, they are treated as inadequate and experience feelings of inferiority. Consequently,
these emotions reinforce the “legitimacy” of the ruling culture’s domination (Dyer 1984). Dyer argues that stereotypes function aesthetically in two ways: through icons and structure, both of which are materialized in *Gossip Girl* and other teen chick lit series. Therefore, the stereotypes aren’t serving as hyperbolic characterizations, but rather as standard models for readers to which readers should conform.

Using Althusser’s and Dyer’s theories of interpellation and stereotyping, respectively, the novels are not indicative of the culture, but rather the culture is indicative of the ideological messages purposely sent by the dominant powers and interpellated by the masses. This pseudo “brainwashing” technique is particularly disturbing when the intended audience is teenagers, who are not only easily molded, but also society’s future. If Althusser’s theory of interpellation and Dyer’s notions of stereotyping are valid, the books may be less “frothy and fun” and more potentially damaging than even the critics could have imagined. Only time (and more intense studies) will determine the true ramifications of the genre and the societal changes it may or may not evoke.

The genre has generally been negatively received by parents and critics and positively embraced by teen readers, an indication that is, in my opinion, more indicative of the timeless clashes of the generations than a foreboding of the genre’s role as a contributor to the downfall of society. For the Millennials, the *Gossip Girl* series (and others like it, such as *It Girl* and *A-List*) reflect both the day-to-day trials of modern teenage life and the fantasy of living the luxury lifestyle. Although the novels might appear to promote morally-dubious actions, I don’t believe that the novels are projecting ideological viewpoints that are unfamiliar to teenagers. The popularity of the novels indicates that the novels fulfill the generational need of an outlet for teen angst and rebellion. The novels’ somewhat explicit depiction of sexual acts reflects teens’ sexual
curiosities, the raw language is familiar while still maintaining the thrill of rebellion (since teens are probably discouraged against using expletives by parents and other authority figures), and the venomous actions of the characters allow readers to delight in the dramatic escapades of others without the fear of consequences. Considering the various outlets for teenage rebellion, indulging in “controversial” novels seems particularly tame in comparison. Current generations have always felt the need to rebel against the ideologies of the preceding generations and it appears that the Millennials have utilized both print and media mediums to enact this rebellion, a choice that surely reflects the amalgamation of tradition and invention.
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