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Feminist Editors and the New Girl Glossies: Fashionable Feminism or Just Another Sexist Rag?

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Abstract

Media critics and feminists have long criticized teen magazines for providing limited substance and promoting a traditional view of femininity. This article challenges this assumption by using a critical discourse analysis to examine the production of girl glossies. Through interviews with four New York teen magazine editors, I unpack some of the contradictions embedded in editors' identifying as feminists while creating a cultural product often deemed anti-feminist. My findings suggest that editors combine practical strategies with a distinctively "third wave ethic" to navigate between corporate and cultural expectations in order to integrate a popular feminism into the magazine content. This third wave ethos however, tends to yield a conception of feminism as primarily a celebration of individual agency, neglecting a larger analysis of structural barriers and power relations. While editors have some success in refocusing teen magazines as sites for individual empowerment, I argue that this is not enough to truly empower teen girls and to challenge inequalities on a societal scale.

Keywords: girls' studies, media, popular culture, third wave, post-feminism

Introduction

Traditional feminist academic analysis has theorized that feminism and popular culture are in opposition to one another, assuming that because we live in a patriarchal society and mainstream media outlets are primarily controlled by men, pop culture typically appeals to the "male gaze" and, more broadly, reflects the sexist nature of our society. Obviously, this has been viewed as problematic for women individually and for feminism as a collective movement. One such area of critique has been feminist research into teen magazines, which has primarily focused upon images of the female body and traditional gender socialization in both editorial content and advertising. Over the past 30 years, feminist scholars have shed light on the ways in which teen girls are unrealistically portrayed in mainstream girl magazines as a result of patriarchal notions of beauty, sexuality, and success (Kilbourne,1999; Wolf,1991; Faludi,1991, Currie, 1999). While this research has been incredibly valuable in highlighting the sexist nature of much mainstream teen media, it did not necessarily reveal the complexities embedded in contemporary girls' magazines and other forms of popular culture.

In response to this research, cultural studies feminists began to look at women's and teens' magazines from a new perspective by understanding them as women-centered texts that offer women pleasure and a chance to engage in utopian fantasies (Currie, 1999; Winship, 1991). Scholars began to understand the celebration of femininity found in the pages of women's magazines as a source of pleasure, escapism, and validation for their readers. Gill (2007) cites the early 1980s work of Tania Modleski (*Loving with a Vengeance)* and Janice Radway (*Reading the Romance*) as key early texts of this tradition. In this framing, readers become active cultural agents rather than merely passive absorbers of corporate culture. This reconceptualization complicated the idea of mainstream magazines as having a solely negative effect on women and opened the debate for a more complex discussion about the role of women's and teen magazines in the lives of women and girls (Gill, 2007).

This paper is situated within this continuing debate amongst feminist scholars. However, my goal is to shift the discussion away from debating the merits and drawbacks of teen magazines' content, toward examining the production of teen magazines and the connection between feminist politics and the politics of production – an important but

often overlooked factor in feminist research on media. Very few academic studies of popular magazines examine *who* is writing and editing the publications and how their work is shaped and contrained by cultural and economic factors (Jaques, 2004; Currie, 1999; Evans et al, 1991; Pierce, 1990; McRobbie, 1991).

My research addresses this gap by exploring connections between editorial processes and the final printed page, utilizing structured qualitative interviews with four New York-based magazine editors as my methodological approach. I was able to gain access to editors through my social connections while interning at several New York magazines in 2006. Editors were chosen based on their experience working at teen magazines and their availability for an interview. All of the editors are working, or have worked in the past, at mainstream teen publications based in New York City. Among them, they have worked in a number of positions, including Beauty Director, Beauty Assistant, Associate Editor, freelance writer, and Health and Beauty Editor. One of the interviews was conducted in person in New York, two were conducted over the phone, and one was conducted via email.

In what follows, I explore the following questions. Do any of the editors consider themselves feminists—and, if so, what does that label mean to them? What challenges do self-defined feminist editors encounter when working at a mainstream publication? How much agency and editorial freedom do they have within the corporate magazine environment? What strategies do they use to incorporate feminist content, as defined by the editors themselves, into the magazine? And finally, to what degree do the editors succeed in bringing a feminist perspective to their work and to the magazines they produce?

Literature Review

Throughout the 1990s, several cultural developments added new insight into the ongoing feminist debate about the potential benefits and harms of mainstream magazines aimed at women and girls. The advent of third wave feminism is often dated to Rebecca Walker's 1992 essay in *Ms*. called "Becoming the Third Wave," in which she located herself as part of a new, re-energized generation of feminists wanting a feminism which they felt spoke more to their own experiences (Lorber, 2005; Karlyn, 2003). The third

63 wave grew into a complex movement and there remains considerable confusion amongst
64 feminists and non-feminists alike about what specifically defines the third wave. Most
65 feminist theorists agree that the third wave prioritizes the entitlement of each individual
66 to define feminism for herself, which leads to an embracing of contradiction, conflict, and
67 messiness when it comes to agreeing on a specific third wave agenda (Dicker and
68 Piepmeier, 2003; Heywood and Drake, 1997; Henry, 2005). However, the engagement
69 with personal and political transformation and a focus on grassroots activism remain
70 essential parts of the movement (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003; Baumgardner and
71 Richards, 2000).
72 According to the commonly-used "wave" metaphor, the first wave of feminism
73 refers to the movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which revolved largely
74 around suffrage. The second wave refers to the late 1960s and 1970s (what is commonly
75 referred to as 'the feminist movement') and, as I've outlined above, the third wave refers
76 to the more individualistic feminist movement of the 1990s and beyond. As many
77 scholars have noted, however, there are serious problems with feminism's continual
78 usage of the wave metaphor (McRobbie, 2009; Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). Among
79 other things, this model incorrectly implies a straightforward, linear movement of a
80 singular "feminism", fails to recognize the complex inter-relatedness of different
81 feminisms, and ignores the many commonalities between feminists of different
82 generations (McRobbie, 2009; Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). While I have chosen to use
83 the "wave" model for the sake of simplicity when referring to different feminist points of
84 view loosely associated with different generations and historical periods, I do not wish to
85 suggest that the second and third waves of feminism are separate, conflicting groups of
86 women. Instead, I hope that my discussion will help distinguish a variety of feminist
87 perspectives and how they meet and depart from one another.
88 During the 1990's, third wave feminists adopted popular culture as a site not only
89 for feminist critique, but also for potential empowerment of women. Around this time
90 popular culture itself was becoming more girl-centered, with girls becoming the focus of
91 many pop culture products in music, television, and movies (Hopkins, 2002). This was
92 the era when the Spice Girls sold millions of albums with their fun "Girl Power"
93 message, and a slew of other powerful pop culture girl heroes like Xena Warrior Princess

and the PowerPuff Girls ruled the cable networks (Hopkins, 2002). This “mainstreaming” of girlhood has led some scholars to characterize much of the popular culture of this period as “girl culture” (Karlyn, 2003; Hopkins 2002). Some feminists began to ask whether teen magazines, along with other feminine-scripted items such as Barbie dolls, make-up, and fashion, could be sites for female empowerment and resistance to patriarchal notions of the feminine as weak (Karlyn, 2003).

Many feminist scholars see this explosion of mainstream girl culture as related to the development of third wave feminism (Karlyn, 2003; Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). The third wave had always celebrated femininity and girlhood, and the developing mainstream interest in “girl power” in the mid-1990s married easily with the third wave’s brand of “fun,” pop-culture-based feminism. “We call this intersection of culture and feminism ‘Girlie.’ Girlie says we’re not broken, and our desires aren’t simply booby traps set by patriarchy,” write Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in their third wave bible, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000: 136). “Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation – Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels – and says using them isn’t shorthand for ‘we’ve been duped’.” All of a sudden, objects and cultural artifacts once deemed sexist and derogatory toward women were being looked at with a fresh eye as mainstream girl culture and third wave feminism converged in the realm of popular culture.

But “girl culture” was not without its critiques, from both within and outside feminist communities. Many feminists viewed the third wave’s adoption of a pop culture centered celebration of girlhood and, as a result, its easy adaptation to the mainstream “girl power” phenomenon as selling out to capitalist commodification, politically void, and not useful for feminism as a social movement (Hains, 2004; Taft, 2004; McRobbie, 2009). Rebecca Hains (2004) argues that while “girl power” positively reflects a valuing of the girlish, it does not challenge or even subvert mainstream femininity. She also criticizes it for encouraging consumption rather than a do-it-yourself ethic, for emphasizing the personal in ways that seem apolitical, and for excluding girls whose bodies do not fit the thin, athletic mold. McRobbie (2009) points out that “girl power” has very limited capacity to make sense of the way that gender inequalities affect real-world social issues. She writes (2009:158), “it is not just a question of [girl power] being

125 inimical with recent directions in feminist theory, it is also ill-equipped to deal with war,
126 with militarism, with 'resurgent patriarchy,' with questions of cultural difference, with
127 race and ethnicity, and notably with the instrumentalisation of feminism on the global
128 political stage." Other social commentators criticize the "girl power" trend for its
129 hijacking and trivializing of feminism. For example, in a 1998 article for *Time*, journalist
130 Ginia Bellafante (1998:55) described today's "pseudo-feminism" as "stylish fluff" that
131 has made feminism "devolve into the silly."

132 At the same time though, feminists such as Jennifer Baumgardner see the
133 incorporation of some third wave ideas into the mainstream as a sign of progress. In a
134 December 2006 phone interview, Baumgardner said,

135 I think [third wave feminism and "girl power"are] on the same continuum,
136 it's just that one is more consciously political and understands how power
137 works and the other is more about being a consumer as opposed to having a
138 really active understanding of female power. But the more cheesy, watered
139 down representations of girl power don't offend me – I feel like they just
140 show how much feminism penetrates the culture at large.
141

142 The merits of 'girl power' and its connection to third wave feminism remain contentious
143 issues for many feminists. However, it is worth noting that girl culture played an
144 important role in refocusing pop culture toward teen girls, bringing ideas about personal
145 empowerment into the mainstream, and creating a public dialogue about feminism
146 (Driscoll, 1999).

147 Whatever its implications from a feminist point of view, this new focus on girls
148 meant that girls were now seen as a valuable demographic in the capitalist marketplace
149 (Karlyn, 2003). As a result, media companies scrambled to pump resources into their teen
150 titles, leading to a revival of the teen magazine market. For example, seventeen teen
151 magazines launched in 1998, in comparison to only five in 1990 (Min Online, 2006). The
152 staff at teen publications were also affected by this new cultural context, as women who
153 grew up with third wave feminist values within the "girl power" climate of the 90s began
154 entering the workforce, including taking up editorial positions at blossoming teen
155 magazines. Several of the editors I interviewed spoke of being very influenced by the
156 feminist pop culture of the 90s, including "angry girl music" of the Riot Grrrls and

publications such as *Sassy*. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that this influence may be one factor informing their current magazine work.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

I employ a critical discourse analysis to examine my interviews with the editors about their experiences and practices working in the mainstream magazine industry. Critical discourse analysis "provide[s] ways of challenging systems of knowledge and power by interrogating and contextualizing dominant discourses" (Carroll, 2004: 225). Commonly used in cultural studies and media studies, critical discourse analysis allows for an explicit focus on the power relations and ideology behind not only a text itself, but also the social context framing the text (Carroll, 2004). Thus, it is a useful tool to help place the editors' comments within their broader social, political, and economic context.

My analysis is also situated within an understanding of third wave feminism and the theory that informs it. Third wave theory tends to be racially and sexually inclusive, global, and ecological in perspective, with a strong emphasis on critical race theory, queer theory, and post-colonial theory (Karyn, 2003). Third wave feminists are "media-savvy" and will often take a postmodernist orientation towards popular culture (Heywood and Drake, 1997). Consequently, they claim the realm of pop culture as a natural site of identity-formation and empowerment, one that provides an assortment of images and narratives that can be used less as a means of representing reality, and more as "motifs" available for contesting, rewriting, and recoding (Karyn, 2003). In this sense, third wave theory resembles the cultural studies approach of the Birmingham School which, according to Suheyla Kirca, sees media texts as "central sites in which negotiation over gender takes place, and in which contradictory cultural representations of gender are accommodated, modified, reconstructed, and reproduced" (2001: 459). Thus, popular culture is understood as a field of both conflict and contestation (Hall, 1981, as cited in Kirca, 2001).

For example, during the 1990s, many third wave feminists began to criticize second wave feminists' supposed disdain for pop culture and instead began to reconceptualize pop culture from an ironic, media-savvy standpoint, embracing it as a site

for potential feminist resistance (Heywood and Drake, 1997). This strategy became a distinguishing feature of this "new" kind of feminism. Karlyn (2003: 10) writes,

> While retaining the critique of beauty culture and sexual abuse from the Second Wave, young women have complicated the older feminist critique of the male gaze as a weapon to put women in their place, and instead exploit the spotlight as a source of power and energy. Thus girls do not see a contradiction between female power and assertive sexuality. Girl Power icons can dress in provocative clothing while demonstrating fierce physical prowess (such as Buffy,the Vampire Slayer) or chant the virtues of female power and solidarity while wearing Wonder Bras (like the Spice Girls).

Karlyn (2003: 3-4) argues that if a feminist movement is to continue into the twenty-first century, older feminists must recognize the importance of popular culture in the lives of girls and reposition the feminist conversation on the terrain of popular culture "where young women today are refashioning feminism toward their own ends." Baumgardner also stresses the importance of pop culture for contemporary feminism, claiming,

> We're constantly engaging with pop culture and therefore feminists need to not opt out. Pop culture feminists of this generation have learned that pop culture is something good to indulge in, and that we can influence it. It's not just something to critique, it's something to create, and something to talk back to, and something to love, and something to zone out to. … Third wave feminists have a healthy relationship to pop culture and see it as a tool. And it is a tool – we are in a communications revolution right now and pop culture is a big part of that. It would be silly to say that politics can be the only area where our battles can be fought.

In *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers*, Currie (1999) characterizes ongoing feminist debates about women's and teen magazines as based on opposing views of power, or as Gill suggests in a related vein, as reflecting different emphases on "oppression versus pleasure" (2007: 195). On one side of the debate is the view that media, including magazines, continually produce a script of traditional femininity that helps to reproduce dominant gender ideologies and the patriarchal subordination of women (Tuchman, 1978; McRobbie, 1977; Williamson, 1978; Winship, 1978). For example, Gaye Tuchman's 1978 analysis of mainstream media concluded that women were being damaged by 'absence', 'trivialization', and 'condemnation' (as cited in Gill, 2007: 11). In this view, the texts are understood as problematic and in need of

thorough critique, and women's enjoyment of them is seen as women being "duped" into endorsing their own subordination.

On the other side is the more contemporary view that magazines provide a forum for the recognition and validation of women's pleasure and fantasies and, as Currie notes, are "not to be mistaken for reality" (1999: 53). According to this approach, readers remain in control of textual meanings and their consumption (Modleski, 1982; Geraghty, 1991). One of the earliest examples of this perspective was Tania Modleski's (1982) research on soap operas and romances, in which she argued that these texts are more than escapist fantasies, but rather offer women engagement with real problems in complex and contradictory ways, "offering temporary, magical, fantasy or symbolic solutions" (Gill, 2007: 14).

Neither perspective, however, takes into account the possibility of feminists negotiating the texts themselves by producing pop culture products (such as magazines) to create feminist meanings and resistance, which would acknowledge both pleasure and ideology as intimately related and offer a more complicated understanding of media reception (Gill, 2007). This new perspective also acknowledges the role of media production in meaning-making – in this case, who is producing the magazines? – as opposed to limiting one's analysis to textual meanings and audience reception. The ability to take on this different analytic perspective is not limited to the third wave; however, because of the third wave's engagement with popular culture, as well as its tendency to embrace a certain amount of contradiction and "messiness", it presents a potentially useful framework for editors to use to incorporate feminist content into their respective mainstream publications. Critical discourse analysis is a useful tool to analyze not only content but also the intentions and strategies of the editors who create the publication, in an attempt to better understand how third wave discourse influences both editorial processes and the final content in the magazine. I am not able to explore the way the texts are read and understood by readers themselves at this time.

Results and Discussion

My results suggest that self-defined feminist editors working at teen titles employ practical strategies informed by a distinctively "third wave ethic" to integrate elements of a popular feminism into their magazine content, despite corporate and cultural inhospitability to such content. This third wave ethos, however, produces content primarily concerned with making feminism a celebration of individual agency, while lacking political rigor and neglecting a larger analysis of structural barriers and power relations. While editors have some success in refocusing teen magazines as sites for individual empowerment, I argue that this is not enough to truly empower girls and to challenge inequalities on a societal scale.

The labeling issue: Are these editors feminists?

As Currie (1999) and Evans et al (1991) have shown, teen magazines often focus on fashion, beauty, and heterosexual romantic relationships. For this reason, it is tempting to assume that teen magazines are anti-feminist, and furthermore that the women who work at these magazines must be anti-feminist as well. I was thus surprised to discover, as I began my research, that all four of the editors I interviewed self-identified as feminists, and all noted that this identification was reflected in their writing and/or editing work. For example, an Associate Editor at *CosmoGIRL* claimed that, "I do consider myself a feminist, and I think that I just bring that to anything that I write."

Several of the editors mentioned that it was important for them to identify themselves as feminists in hopes of undermining prevalent stereotypes of feminists as militant, man-hating women. For example, another editor, a former Health and Beauty Editor at *Teen Vogue* said,

> I would say that I call myself a feminist because I think it's important to realize that the feminist movement is NOT over…I also think it's important to make people realize that feminists aren't the stereotypical man-haters. I'm into fashion – I've worked at many fashion magazines – and have a boyfriend and am pretty laid-back and easygoing, which is still, unfortunately, not what people think of when they think of feminists. So I hope calling myself a feminist makes them re-think.

In this sense, editors see themselves as helping to break down the stereotype that "real feminists" don't wear lipstick, and thus opening up the public perception of feminists.

287 While the editors used the term “feminist” to describe themselves, they were
288 vague about how this label specifically applied to their roles as magazine editors and the
289 stories they write and edit. Instead editors focused on the mainstream stereotypes of
290 feminists, primarily in terms of appearance (e.g., non-fashionable) and personality (e.g.,
291 uptight and angry), and positioned themselves as contradicting these stereotypes. While it
292 is indeed important to challenge these limiting stereotypes, some of the editors seemed to
293 emphasize the claiming of a feminist identity without addressing what political beliefs,
294 values, and commitments are involved in that identity—a question arguably more
295 important than whether a feminist wears fashionable clothes or not.
296 Dicker and Piepmeier (2003: 17) characterize this common lack of political rigor
297 as a “feminist free-for-all”, meaning that everything and everyone can fit under the
298 feminist umbrella regardless of what they actually think, do, or believe. As a result,
299 feminist politics become diluted in an attempt to complicate and broaden the general
300 understanding of feminism. This tendency has, unfortunately, characterized much third
301 wave writing and has muddied third wave conceptions of what a feminist is (Dicker and
302 Piepmeier, 2003). While the third wave has helped make feminism accessible to a broad
303 range of people who may have previously been uncomfortable with the term, it must not
304 empty feminism of its political content in favor of adopting a non-threatening style that
305 merely conforms to mainstream notions of beauty and femininity.
306 To highlight these complications around the definition and boundaries of
307 feminism, I will refer to the editors I interviewed as being self-identified feminists, rather
308 than attempting to say in some definitive way whether they are feminists or not.. Thus, I
309 hope to position the term “feminist” itself as up for critique and contestation.
310
311 **Successes and challenges: Trojan horses in Manhattan’s media landscape**
312 The editors have enjoyed some success in introducing feminist content into their
313 respective publications. All of them spoke enthusiastically about recent well-written
314 stories dealing with feminist issues. “I would say that teen magazines handle all the hot
315 button issues reasonably well, they try to be very responsible,” one editor maintained.
316 She noted that she has written on topics such as abortion, date rape, and dating violence
317 for teen publications. Other feminist content discussed by editors includes a story about

318 comprehensive sex education and teen activists who are trying to get it at their schools,
319 an expose on sorority life, and a profile of three pregnant teen girls and the choices they
320 made about their pregnancies.

321 Sexual health is a topic that most editors agree is covered reasonably well by teen
322 magazines. Editors mentioned stories on STD's, gynecological visits, birth control, and
323 HPV as recent examples of stories that made the health sections of teen publications
324 feminist in orientation. One argued, however, that while publications print sophisticated
325 sexual health pages, there are still very few articles written about sexuality itself.
326 "There's so much stuff written about STD's and all this stuff associated with sex," she
327 says, "but very little about sex itself, which I think is really confusing for teenagers. I see
328 very few magazines doing that [talking frankly about sex] because I think they're nervous
329 to say anything other than, you know, 'wait until you're in love – abstinence!'"

330 The topic of body image also drew a mix of opinions from editors. While most
331 agreed that positive body image stories are written – diet stories, for example, are banned
332 from most teen magazines -- a few had doubts about the stories hitting all the right issues.
333 For example, one editor wrote and edited many stories about body image for *Teen Vogue*,
334 dealing with issues such as competitive dieting, parents who judge their daughters'
335 bodies, and how girls of different ethnicities have different kinds of body image struggles
336 – issues, she maintained, that are important but often ignored. "Most magazines cover
337 [body image] ad nauseum, but I think they often do a bad job of it. They talk about
338 anorexia and bulimia, which are important problems, but most girls aren't anorexic or
339 bulimic – but they do have disordered eating that really affects their lives."

340 All of the editors were frank about the challenges of being feminists in the
341 mainstream magazine industry. The biggest challenge identified by editors is the
342 corporate culture that permeates an industry dominated by the mega-corporations of
343 Hearst, Advance (which owns all Condé Nast titles), Time Warner, and Meredith
344 Corporation. According to "The State of the News Media 2010," a report released by the
345 Project for Excellence in Journalism, these four companies together own close to three-
346 quarters of all American-published magazines (Project for Excellence in Journalism,
347 2010). The predominant concern amongst editors was the conservative nature of
348 advertisers, which affects all aspects of the production process – pitching, reporting,

writing, and editing stories. Several of the editors revealed that particular topics they want to write about, such as abortion and sex, just don't get approved by senior editors due to their "controversial" nature.

Another editor, who has held prominent posts such as Beauty Director at *Nylon* and Beauty Assistant at *Teen Vogue*, and who now works as a freelance contributor to several popular women's magazines, was forthcoming about the constraints under which editors must work. "It's hard to be a commercially successful magazine and have strong opinions because you want to appeal to such a broad audience and so many advertisers are very conservative, Midwestern companies with Christian values that just do not want to see certain content in the magazine," she said. Even planning for an article on the Equal Rights Amendment, a story idea that has been simmering in the *CosmoGIRL!* office for over a year, has been a delicate game of give and take, according to the *CosmoGIRL* editor. "The challenge is, how do we pitch it? How do we package it? Budgeting is a problem, in terms of getting the pages dedicated to it." This comment alludes to the integrated nature of advertising and magazine content. For example, an article on the ERA amendment will not attract advertising dollars like a beauty story might, presumably because many of the advertisers in teen magazines sell cosmetics and would much rather see their advertisements beside an article that complements what they're selling.

Intensifying corporate control of media has been well documented by media scholars over the past three decades (Bagdikian, 1983, 2004; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McChesney and Foster, 2003; McChesney, 2008). This increased corporate control not only means more media conglomeration, but also an increased presence of advertising in media industries. In fact, advertising dollars have become the primary source of revenue for many media industries, and media outlets that do not attract advertisers find themselves at a significant disadvantage in the marketplace (McChesney and Foster, 2003). This increased economic clout means that advertisers themselves are making editorial content demands and if media firms do not accommodate their wishes they are threatened with pulled advertising money. McChesney and Foster (2003: 4) argue,

> We are rapidly moving to a whole new paradigm for media and commercialism, where traditional borders are disintegrating and conventional standards are being replaced with something significantly different. It is more than the balance of power shifting between media firms and advertisers; it is about the marriage of editorial/entertainment and commercialism to such an extent that they are becoming indistinguishable.

Magazines are at particular risk when it comes to corporate control over editorial content, as magazines have historically been profitable for their owners, unlike news media outlets which have never been viewed as particularly profitable and have served more of a public service function. For example, one of Conde Nast's popular women's magazines, *Lucky*, is dictated entirely by advertising, from the design of editorial pages to editorial copy, which is always linked to specific products (McChesney and Foster, 2003). As a result of this close relationship between editorial departments and advertisers, media becomes more about selling goods and propping up capitalism than about solving social problems or promoting values like diversity, equality, community, and human development (McChesney and Foster, 2003). This problem can be clearly seen in editors' comments regarding advertising in their publications.

Corporate control reaches beyond merely the general topic of a proposed article. Once the original story idea is approved, editors are restrained in the type of language they can use, the illustrations that accompany their stories, and the number of pages devoted to a story. All of the editors agreed that printing the "f-word" – feminism – was a huge problem for mainstream publications. While editors are writing stories that deal with female empowerment, printing the word "feminism" or an open declaration of a feminist perspective remains taboo at all mainstream teen glossies. One editor explains,

> People don't understand the definition of feminism anymore. You're nervous to say it. I know at more corporate magazines you're nervous to print it, so it's hard. I wish we could say it more so that it becomes an ok word. But that's not the only word that's like that – vagina is another one, you never see that in magazines.

Editors also spoke of the standard teen magazine format as posing a challenge to their efforts to incorporate feminist pieces, as complex stories must be adapted to a very limited page space and word count. Other challenges include working with other departments to ensure the maintenance of a feminist tone, and making sure the piece's

original message is preserved after the editing process. One editor, who has never been on staff at a teen publication but has done freelance work for several mainstream teen and women's magazines, said that she occasionally struggles to tell "fascinating political stories" in a way that fits into the teen magazine mold. "You can't go in there and be like, 'I want you to run this story that really should be run in *The Nation* in your publication,'" she said. She also spoke of the financial challenges that freelance feminist writers experience when choosing what stories to tell, explaining,

> I can do a relationship story, and it would take a day to write and I would make a lot of money. If I did a reported story about a feminist issue that I care about it could take a month to write and pay the same amount of money, so I guess the challenge is still wanting to do those stories, given how much more of a struggle they are.

Editors spoke of the continuing challenges that they often face, having run stories deemed more "controversial," once the magazine hits the newsstand. For example, "Sister to Sister" is a regular *CosmoGIRL!* column in which an editor addresses a relevant social issue based on her own personal experience. The *CosmoGIRL* editor spoke of a "Sister to Sister" column she wrote for the September 2006 issue in which she discussed the September 11 terrorist attacks and how they affected her understanding of world politics, and encouraged girls to be more aware of international politics and social issues beyond US borders. She said she received several "very hateful" letters from readers in response to the article. "Most of the girls still live at home with their parents and they feel very passionately about things and they still align themselves with their parents in many ways," she admitted, adding "Middle America is still very conservative, it's red country."

Because teen magazines rely heavily on reader contributions (often readers are interviewed and their quotes featured in stories) comments and concerns from readers are taken seriously and often have an impact on future stories. At *Seventeen*, for example, all editors in the features department are given a daily synopsis of reader responses which have come in through snail mail, email, and the magazine's MySpace and Facebook pages. These comments are used to gauge readers' opinions, which in turn are used to determine future suitable stories. As a result, conservative readers and their parents can become roadblocks to future feminist content in the magazine.

Undercover strategies and the third wave ethic

My interviews suggest that editors have developed certain practical strategies to navigate and overcome the challenges of incorporating feminism into mainstream publications. Most of these strategies are based upon what I call a "third wave ethic," meaning that the tactics employed are related to some of the tenets of third wave feminism. I will briefly explain these connections in the course of discussing the editors' strategies, which fall under the three general themes of: (1) Integrate yourself, (2) Disguise feminism, and (3) Make feminism fun.

Several of the editors understood their participation in the mainstream media as one crucial strategy for getting more feminist content into the mainstream media. This participation was characterized as a "sneaky," under the radar infiltration. The former *Teen Vogue* editor said,

> I implement feminist ideals into my work by just being in the mainstream media. I think far too many feminists stick to alternative media. I love the alternative media but you're preaching to the converted. Being an editor at *Teen Vogue* and *The New York Times* – I have a much broader audience. And I think one of the keys is to take a job in the mainstream media and integrate yourself. Make other editors and writers like you. Then when you start pitching feminist content, they'll be more open to it. They already like you. They think you're smart. They trust you. That's how to get feminist content into the mainstream.... I'm glad I've had a mainstream career... I like being a Trojan horse.

This strategy differs somewhat from second wave feminist tactics, as some second wave feminists emphasized the importance of establishing separate feminist institutions away from the mainstream (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). An obvious example would be the launch of *Ms.* in 1972, a magazine with the overt agenda of advancing feminist goals and reporting on women's issues. In our interview, Baumgardner (who once worked at *Ms.*) explained that, in contrast, "the third wave is bringing feminism into other institutions... it's an integrating force." This strategy builds upon the third wave's interaction with mainstream institutions, including the media and the popular culture and entertainment industries.

481 However, this interaction must be examined with an eye to the structural context
482 of corporate capitalism within which it takes place. McRobbie (2009: 5) questions
483 whether individual women – even those who may be feminist-influenced graduates or
484 schooled in feminist thought – can actually maintain a commitment to feminist issues
485 within the confines of the corporate magazine world. She critiques her own past naiveté,
486 indicating that she "did not fully engage with the way in which the battle for circulation
487 figures could see an editor sacked for displeasing a company with a lucrative advertising
488 contract." She also notes that the critique of capitalism which had been a defining feature
489 of past socialist-feminist scholarship seems to have been replaced in contemporary
490 feminist thought with a desire not only to participate in corporate capitalism, but also to
491 believe that a feminist agenda can be incorporated within the current frameworks of
492 capitalism.

493 It appears as though the editors whom I interviewed subscribe to this latter belief,
494 while nonetheless acknowledging the limitations of the context within which they are
495 working. While this may be a valid position, it fails to incorporate a thorough analysis of
496 the power relations that govern capitalism. For example, how does one's participation in
497 the corporate magazine world affect one's position to critique it? Can true feminist
498 content even be created in an environment that survives on maintaining hierarchical
499 power relations based on class, gender, race, and more? Without a thorough analysis of
500 the constraints imposed by the capitalist media context, I question whether "integration"
501 can be a truly revolutionary strategy.

502 Given the concern expressed by all the editors about advertisers and corporate
503 influence on content, it is not surprising that several of them mentioned "disguising"
504 feminist content as a crucial strategy. This strategy includes tactics such as "couching"
505 feminism within less threatening topics, such as entertainment stories, and labeling
506 feminist content as something else. In this sense, a lot of attention is paid to language, in
507 particular to avoiding the "f-word." The former *NYLON* editor explains explains, "You
508 can do it [mention feminism] at *Teen Vogue* now and then, but you're not going to see
509 issue after issue talking about feminism openly. I think it's a struggle for a lot of editors
510 to find ways to get it in – but I think they do. It's so much about how you label it, if you
511 label it something different it's ok, usually."

512 The editor from *CosmoGIRL!* acknowledges that this is the strategy used at her
513 magazine. "I really do the feminist thing, but we don't throw the f-word out there at all,"
514 she said, "I think it's a scary word and I think it's a scary word for girls. Even for me
515 now, I hear the word, and it has so many connotations. We've actually had meetings
516 about this, about how we can strip the word of its bad rep." Instead, *CosmoGIRL!* editors
517 have decided to steer clear of the term and opt for less political terms such as
518 "empowerment." According to her it's part of a larger strategy to encourage girls to
519 empower themselves without making them call themselves feminists, despite the fact that
520 they're still engaging with feminist ideals. The strategy appeases advertisers and avoids
521 alienating girls who may be put off by the term, while still preserving editors' own beliefs
522 about the importance of feminist content.

523 The need to disguise feminism highlights the confusion about feminist identity in
524 particular, and about identity more generally, that the third wave continues to struggle
525 with (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). Some editors even suggested that the word
526 "feminism" may not be that important anymore. "It seems to be a term very much of an
527 era and so it feels dated sometimes to use the word feminist," one editor admitted. This
528 idea appears to play into the editors' presentation of feminist stories for adolescent girls,
529 who, editors acknowledge, may not have grown up with the term. "I've found that most
530 teenagers don't respond to it," one noted. "Part of that is because teenage girls have
531 experienced less sexism – they're doing better than boys in school, they are achieving
532 great things athletically, they are in charge of all kinds of extracurricular activities. They
533 haven't yet gotten out into the world where they may be better educated and have more
534 experience than their male co-worker, and yet making much less money."

535 In the September 2006 issue of *CosmoGIRL!,* the regular column "She's So
536 CosmoGirl" profiled Shaina Muñoz, a Hispanic girl who revealed that she often felt that
537 she didn't fit into her white, affluent, private high school. She decided that her classmates
538 could benefit from being educated on diversity issues and she wanted to help open up
539 discussion about issues such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic
540 status in her school. After she submitted a proposal for an elective diversity class to
541 school administrators, her course was approved and Muñoz was named co-instructor
542 along with several teachers. Muñoz's story emphasizes the pervasive narrative found in

543 the “She’s So CosmoGirl” column – the ability of an individual to get motivated, take
544 action, and make a difference. Other 2006 “She’s So CosmoGirl” profiles showcased
545 girls who have fought for freedom of speech, tackled gender bias in the technology
546 industry, and educated fellow students on their privacy rights, for example. These stories
547 all contain an individualist notion of activism within a larger celebration of individual
548 agency. The girls are touted as heroines with personal qualities and abilities that have
549 made them strong leaders, and the implication is that individual girls can make a
550 difference – a message that is empowering for readers because it suggests that this
551 success can be attained by any one of them.

552 This focus on individual agency as a driving force of activism highlights the third
553 wave ethic mentioned earlier. While feminist concerns such as diversity issues related to
554 race and class, consciousness raising, and the promotion of social change are all present
555 in the profile, these issues are not connected to a broader feminist agenda. Feminism is
556 not specifically mentioned (nor is any other organized, collective social movement) and
557 Muñoz does not describe herself as a feminist, despite clearly engaging in feminist work.

558 While the “disguising” strategy may seem effective or at least necessary, there is a
559 tension between editors’ own identification as feminists and their practice of avoiding the
560 f-word. While avoiding using the word “feminism” may work as a short-term tactic for
561 getting certain content into the magazine (such as the abovementioned activist profile), it
562 is problematic because it eradicates many of the important parts of feminism while
563 undermining the editors’ stated goal of challenging antifeminist stereotypes. The absence
564 of the word “feminism” implies that feminism is no longer needed. McRobbie (2009: 57)
565 argues that avoiding the word “feminism” has been central to “post-feminist” discourse in
566 popular culture, serving to instead promote a highly conservative form of “feminine
567 empowerment” which is depoliticized and “weighted towards capacity, success,
568 attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility, and participation.”

569 By substituting the word “empowerment” for “feminism,” the editors seem to
570 assume that these words have the same meaning, when this is in fact not the case:
571 “feminism” names a political critique and a collective movement, whereas
572 “empowerment” can name a merely individual condition. Unlike “feminism,” the word
573 “empowerment” has no political implications, and consequently, carries with it no

responsibility to critique structural inequalities like patriarchy or capitalism. In fact, the word "empowerment" easily supports capitalism because it privileges individual action and the individual's ability to change their own situation, rather than collective movement or change, as was central to feminist and socialist movements (McRobbie, 2009). Gill (2007) argues that this language of individualism is common in women's glossies and that the emphasis on personal solutions is at the expense of collective social and political struggle. Furthermore, avoiding the word "feminism" also does not encourage girls to become self-identified feminist women, which may only continue to perpetuate many of the stereotypes about feminists that are currently prevalent. Consequently, while this strategy may be the best possible option under the circumstances, the editors' optimism about this tactic reveals that long-term social changes may not be on the agenda of teen magazines. As a result I am doubtful that disguising feminism will do much to contribute to meaningful, long lasting, feminist changes.

All of the editors agreed on the importance of making feminism—whether so labelled or not--"fun" for readers. This theme kept re-emerging in their examples as one of the primary ways to successfully "sell" feminist content and ideals to teen girls. Making feminism fun included tactics such as using pop culture and celebrities in their pieces, integrating beauty and fashion tips in an empowering way, developing a "girlfriend tone" with readers, and incorporating humor into pieces. One editor mentioned that *Sassy,* a popular, now almost "cult" teen title that was cancelled in 1996, was a great example of how feminism can be married with lighter, trendier topics:

> The magazine wrote plenty of articles on why feminism was important, why the editors at the magazines were feminists. And yet, these stories ran in between fashion and beauty spreads. And this made feminism seem fun to teenage girls. Being a feminist didn't mean you didn't want to wear lipstick. And yet, *Sassy's* beauty coverage never made girls feel bad. There were no diet stories. There were no stories on why this season you had to have blonde hair. It made beauty fun. That's pretty feminist.

While she argues that *Sassy's* beauty coverage is an example of "fun feminism" she seems to be implying that non-dogmatic beauty coverage that provides readers with choice and consequently, "never made girls feel bad" for what they had or did not have

607 was liberating. This is indeed true to a certain extent. *Sassy* did offer up more than one
608 image of beauty to their readers, including images that contradicted dominant standards
609 of beauty. For example, *Sassy* ran beauty stories about dying your hair with Jell-o and
610 often poked fun at normative beauty standards by running features like "13 Reasons Not
611 To Diet" and "Our First Annual Junk Food Taste Off." But while the magazine was more
612 diverse than its teen magazine competitors at the time and tended to promote body
613 acceptance within its copy, it still showed only thin models and girls in its pages (Jesella
614 and Meltzer, 2007).

615 While *Sassy* may have provided more beauty options to individual girls, the above
616 editor's comment lacks a critical analysis of consumption practices, as well as ignoring a
617 large body of feminist research that has pointed to the harmful effects of the fashion and
618 beauty industries on women and teen girls. The past decade has seen consumption
619 increasingly being promoted in popular culture as a liberating, feminist pursuit, such as
620 on the popular television show *Sex and the City* (Gill, 2007). In other words, the ability to
621 "charge it" is presented as women's exercise of choice, power, independence, and
622 agency. This type of "empowerment" conforms to the capitalist marketplace, which
623 thrives on the consumption of goods, and is also used by advertisers to attract teen girl
624 consumers. Gill (2007) argues that the emergent discourse of girl power in teen
625 magazines is tied to consumption, and especially to the consumption of beauty products.
626 For example, Negra (2009:119) cites an ad for Nair Pretty, aimed at 10- to 15-year olds,
627 which "suggests that the depilatory is a stubble-free path to empowerment." Thus, girls'
628 agency is often presented as explicitly tied to buying things with the promise that these
629 goods will give them social power and independence (Gill, 2007). Instead of focusing on
630 the *real* ways girls can obtain power, for example through leadership, education, artistic
631 and athletic pursuits, the focus on consumption not only makes false promises to girls,
632 but pushes them into the cycle of continually pursuing goods to boost their self
633 confidence. Thus, even when articles do focus on topics beyond fashion and beauty, they
634 are often quickly undermined by the magazine's overall message of empowerment
635 through consumption, conveyed in both the editorial copy and the advertisements.

636 A large body of feminist work has documented the harmful effects of the beauty
637 industry on girls and women (Wolf, 1991; Bordo, 1993; Jeffreys, 2005; APA, 2007).

Research has also demonstrated that girls' readings of teen magazines center on images of "beauty", rather than on the articles, even those giving advice about fashion, hair, and make-up. Thus, girls are specifically concerned with the visual representations of the ideal female body found in teen magazines, typically defined by "clear skin, a slim build [and], developed bust" (Duke and Kreshel, 1998: 57). These images and their messages have been found to have a profoundly negative effect on girls. For example, a 2007 report by the American Psychological Association (APA) revealed that problematic models of femininity, including sexual objectification and a narrow and unrealistic standard of physical beauty, are very dangerous for girls. The results of continual exposure to such messages include diminished cognitive and emotional abilities, mental and physical health problems (including eating disorders, low self esteem, and depression), the inability to develop a healthy sexuality, and diminished self worth (APA, 2007). Increased rates of sexual harassment, sexual violence, and use of child pornography have also been linked to media objectification of women and girls (APA, 2007).

These critiques, however, were disregarded for the most part by editors, who assumed that simply by making beauty "fun" the potentially harmful effects of beauty pages would be negated. Gill (2007) maintains that this is simply not the case, arguing that regardless of how "fun" beauty is made, the notion that girls *should* be concerned about their appearances and that beauty regimes are an essential part of "being a girl" remains embedded in the prevalence of beauty pages in the magazines. Thus, girls find it very difficult to "opt out" of this constructed femininity, with their self-esteem becoming increasingly linked to how they perceive they look. Gill (2007: 188-189) writes,

> Against this backdrop of a powerful beauty mandate for girls, 'fun' does not seem to capture even remotely the complexity of girls' relationship to their own bodies. Rather, the discourse is part of the shift from objectification to subjectification in which more and more of the normative requirements of femininity must be presented as freely chosen and pleasurable, and internally motivated rather than imposed or influenced by wider culture.

669 Thus, by presenting beauty as a "fun choice" it appears that the problematic aspects of the
670 beauty industry have been removed, when in reality, the harm is merely being couched in
671 the language of celebrating choice, empowerment, and fun.
672
673 One editor talked about how *CosmoGIRL!* editors use pop culture references and
674 celebrities to make their regular "Project 2024" column more exciting. ("Project 2024" is
675 a question-and-answer interview with a leader who has achieved success in her field.
676 The column's overall goal is to get a CosmoGirl in the White House by the year 2024.)
677 "We try to sex it up a bit – and that's one of the challenges with feminism – making it
678 sexy, making it appealing," she said. For example, the June/July 2006 "Project 2024"
679 column profiles Christina Norman, who, as the president of MTV, occupies a position
680 that many teen girls would covet. But despite the fact that Norman is a black woman in
681 an industry notorious for its sexism and racism, the story contains no reference to such
682 issues or obstacles. Readers are instead offered tips on how to accomplish their goals and
683 break into the entertainment industry. Norman's advice is to "Speak up for yourself
684 because you are valid. Your needs are valid, what you want is valid, and what you give is
685 valid. You've got to find a way to use your voice to get what you need" (Landy, 2006:
686 123). Norman is put forward as a model, living proof that girls can get to the top through
687 hard work and dedication.
688 This type of discourse, consistent throughout the "Project 2024" profiles,
689 emphasizes the themes of the regular feature – to encourage girls to set goals, believe in
690 themselves, and strive for success in whatever they do. While these are positive
691 messages, a larger feminist framework is replaced by an individualistic, success-oriented
692 "pep talk" that escapes a heavy discussion about the real barriers, such as unequal pay,
693 that women still experience in the workplace. Instead, the columns draw on a fun,
694 fantasy-type "you go girl" narrative that points to the individual's ability to succeed in the
695 capitalist marketplace as the ultimate indicator of feminist empowerment.
696 This dynamic can be seen even more clearly in an editor's discussion of a 2024
697 interview with P.Diddy, whom she cites as one of the "super successful yet sexy at the
698 same time" people they want to cover in the column. While this editor did recognize that
699 sometimes tapping into the celebrity sensibility compromises the broader premise of the

700 piece, she clearly sees the marketing appeal of the “celebrity” approach as too powerful
701 to resist. The former *NYLON* editor concurred with this strategy. “I think the best way to
702 approach any political issue with that age group is through some kind of pop culture tie
703 in,” she said. “And I think stuff like that makes so much sense – to be able to relate to
704 teenagers on that level, and I don’t think there’s anything shallow about it or anything
705 wrong with it because that’s just what works.” With respect to the P.Diddy interview, the
706 *CosmoGIRL!* editor explained, “Granted, he’s a pimp, he’s P.Diddy. He’s a great role
707 model, but it’s not like he’s the best. But we’re hoping he can give us tricks to basically
708 doing it all and having it all and it’s a way to make the initiative seem uber-popular and
709 trendy.”

710 While the editors are right that there is nothing inherently wrong with using pop
711 culture and celebrities to popularize feminism in the magazines, the examples given do
712 not seem to include feminism at all. For example, P.Diddy, a music producer and hip hop
713 artist, has never identified as a feminist, nor would his work be considered feminist by
714 most people. Instead it appears as though P.Diddy is being celebrated as a “role model”
715 for his success in the mainstream entertainment industry, for “doing it all and having it
716 all.” In this sense it is again individualized success in the capitalist marketplace that is
717 being promoted as feminist empowerment to girls, with no social or structural critiques
718 attached. Furthermore, by characterizing P.Diddy as a “pimp,” *CosmoGIRL!* editors are
719 tapping into the cultural popularity of what Ariel Levy (2005) calls “raunch culture[1]”
720 while ignoring the overtly anti-feminist implications of the “pimp” image. So while
721 readers may have “fun” reading the P.Diddy feature in *CosmoGIRL!* this does not
722 necessarily mean that feminism is thereby advanced.

723 This obsession with making feminism fun is perhaps the most distinctively third
724 wave tactic that the editors employ. It draws on the third wave’s insistence that feminism
725 can and should be a fun force in women’s lives, as opposed to a heavy, political
726 responsibility that is more depressing than celebratory (Baumgardner and Richards,
727 2000). One editor reiterated this point when talking about teen magazines. She said, “The
728 main way [teen magazines] express values of the third wave is that they’re kind of fun
729 and this is a priority – not a ‘girls just wanna have fun’ thing – but this idea that women,

730 not only do they deserve human rights, but they also deserve joy, pleasure, things like
731 that."
732 Here she touches on one of the ongoing feminist debates about glossy teen and
733 women's magazines which was introduced earlier in this article – are they truly vehicles
734 for harmless and even liberatory pleasure, or are they merely reproducing oppressive
735 gender ideology? While it is impossible to definitively settle this debate here, it is worth
736 mentioning how this debate fits into the third wave perspective. From the editors'
737 comments it appears that the third wave emphasizes the pleasurable aspect of reading a
738 magazine and that such magazines can indeed be sources for a popular feminism. Earlier
739 I proposed that a third wave perspective could have the potential to acknowledge the
740 pleasurable aspect of teen magazines, while retaining an ideological critique needed to
741 advance social change. While this potential is indeed exciting, the comments from editors
742 reveal that the content of teen magazines has not yet reached this place, as their examples
743 had little to do with promoting social change, critiquing inequality, or even celebrating
744 the virtues of being a woman beyond the "fun" of wearing lipstick. While using pop
745 culture to make feminism exciting and fun is great, it seems as though the political
746 substance of feminism is at risk of being forgotten in an attempt to make the magazines'
747 content appealing and "fun."
748

749 **Contradictions**

750 The editors' discussion of their practical strategies revealed that it is a continual
751 task for them to navigate the contradictions of bringing a feminist perspective to
752 mainstream magazines—for example, the frequent instances where feminist content
753 directly collides with anti-feminist content. All of the editors recognized such
754 contradictions as problematic but ultimately accepted them as part of the meeting of
755 feminism and pop culture in a corporate environment. For example, one spoke of writing
756 an in-depth story about body image, only to see the story sandwiched between pictures of
757 Nicole Richie and Mischa Barton, women who, as the editor pointed out, "looked like
758 they had serious eating disorders, and yet, who the magazine was touting as beautiful."
759 Or, again, regarding *CosmoGIRL!*'s P.Diddy article, the editor recognized that "he's a
760 great role model but it's not like he's the best." She knows that P.Diddy's music, like

761 mainstream hip hop culture in general, is not exactly "feminist"; however, the magazine
762 accepts these tensions because it ultimately needs to balance what advertisers want, what
763 readers want, and what editors want. Again this illuminates the power that commercial
764 corporations have over the production of magazines (Gill, 2007).
765 Fashion and beauty spreads were the areas that editors appeared most concerned
766 about from a critical feminist perspective, although (as one argued when speaking about
767 *Sassy*) editors believe these sections of the magazines can be made more feminist by
768 keeping it fun and offering girls choices. But despite some recent efforts to use "real girl"
769 models and incorporate a diversity of body types into the editorial spreads, skinny models
770 continue to dominate advertising pages and editorial pieces, especially those about
771 celebrities. Editors appear to accept this as a "given," indicating a belief that they have
772 little power to change this aspect of the publication.
773 The contradictions played out in the pages of the magazine may be more
774 acceptable to the editors because they are strongly influenced by third wave feminist
775 ideas (Walker, 1995; Heywood and Drake, 1997; Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). While
776 feminism has always been complex, encompassing conflicting ideas about such topics as
777 pornography for example, the third wave has truly embraced this "messiness" as one of
778 its defining features. According to Dicker and Piepmeier (2003: 16), "the third wave
779 distinguishes itself from the second wave…through its emphasis on paradox, conflict,
780 multiplicity, and messiness." The editors seem to understand this, and as their interviews
781 suggest, they attempt to incorporate their understanding of a popular feminism into their
782 respective publications, without being too stymied by the contradictions involved in such
783 attempts. "We make sure to keep the 'feel good about yourself' message consistent and
784 try to encourage the girls, you know, 'don't buy into our fashion spreads or the whole
785 skinny model thing'," one editor said. "I believe in my heart though that, this publication
786 in particular, we are giving them some meat, we're feeding them positive messages. It
787 sometimes seems frivolous and it seems fun but underneath it all it's more serious."
788 As I have argued, while many of the topics editors discussed are indeed feminist
789 in nature, the issue of what constitutes a feminist message was often not articulated
790 clearly by the editors. For example, persons who have attained commercial success are
791 put forward as role models, with little attention paid to how they have achieved their

792 success, how their success affects others, or what obstacles they may have faced in doing
793 so. While the boundary and meaning of feminism is a larger theoretical problem that
794 third wave feminists must resolve, the unquestioning use of the term "empowerment" by
795 some of the editors may prevent them from undertaking a more critical analysis of their
796 content. This again points to the risk of "feminist free-for-all" wherein almost anything
797 can be claimed as "feminist" without the structural analysis or political rigor that
798 characterizes more traditional feminist critique.
799
800

801 # Conclusions

802
803 The previous discussion illuminates some of the tensions created when feminism
804 and pop culture merge in a corporate, mainstream space. All of the editors I interviewed
805 acknowledged and accepted these contradictions as part of their job and developed
806 specific, practical strategies to incorporate a popular feminism into their publications. I
807 classified these tactics as being indicative of a "third wave ethic," as many of the
808 strategies relied on the tenets of third wave feminism, such as making feminism fun.
809 However, this third wave ethic also influences the content of the magazine, such as in the
810 ways feminism is framed and sold to readers. Primarily, feminism is packaged as a fun
811 celebration of individual agency, with the assurance that choice, hard work, and
812 dedication will lead to success and an empowered, feminist life. To some degree, this can
813 be seen as a truly positive and liberating feminist message – girls can do anything, be
814 anything, and live the dynamic and fulfilling lives that weren't always an option for past
815 generations of women.
816 While an individualistic expression of feminism is not necessarily inherently
817 problematic, by itself it only offers girls a limited understanding of contemporary gender
818 relations. In other words, it is only half of the story that girls need to hear about
819 feminism. This is because the individualized feminism offered by editors overlooks
820 structural barriers such as sexism, racism and classism, important factors that continue to
821 shape the lives of girls. So while editors do rely on particular aspects of the third wave to
822 incorporate feminism into their content, they tend to "cherry pick" and do not incorporate

823 the structural analysis—the understanding of the barriers facing women as a group—that
824 must inform any effective feminism, no matter of what "wave" it is a part..
825 This structural analysis, although sometimes assumed by critics to be absent from
826 the third wave, is in fact the third wave's political backbone, existing alongside any
827 individualized expressions of feminism (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003; Baumgardner and
828 Richards, 2000). Dicker and Piepmeier (2003: 18) argue, "As many third wavers realize,
829 it's fine to engage with the world in a playful, individualistic way, but for that
830 engagement to be informed by feminism, it has to take into account the power relations
831 surrounding gender, race, class, and sexual orientation." One group that has done this is
832 the Third Wave Foundation, an organization of self-proclaimed third wavers who work
833 nationally in the United States through strategic grant making, leadership development,
834 and philanthropic advocacy to support equality initiatives for young women and
835 transgender youth, such as the 2009 Latina Health Summit and Young Women's
836 Collaborative. Because this political rigor is conspicuously absent from the feminism
837 found in teen magazines, I question whether feminism framed as "empowerment" and a
838 celebration of individual agency is adequate as a way to promote feminism to a diverse
839 population of girls reading teen magazines.
840 The individualized feminism presented in mainstream teen magazines may be
841 more easily accepted by corporate, mainstream publications because it reinforces larger
842 cultural narratives about hard work, success, and the "American Dream." In this sense,
843 editors appear to be surrendering some of their own independent perspectives by aligning
844 their feminism with a corporate capitalist ideology already accepted by mainstream
845 American society. Thus, their version of popular feminism lacks a critique of capitalism
846 and as a result, fails to incorporate important critiques that have been cornerstones of
847 feminist research, such as those of consumption and the beauty industry, in favor of
848 presenting topics in a playful, "fun" tone. This is problematic because important power
849 hierarchies never get addressed, and the feminism presented is merely stylistic and not
850 geared towards social change.
851 Ultimately, this discussion raises the question of whether individualized
852 feminism, as presented in teen publications, is good or bad for girls and for the future of
853 feminism. Similar debates have engulfed the third wave, as feminists wonder whether the

854 third wave's individualistic framework tends to pit the advancement of individual women
855 against social change for women as a group. While for some readers, exposure to
856 individualized feminism may be the initial step towards a broader understanding of
857 inequality and social change, this transition would depend on the independent critical
858 thought of readers in linking their own empowerment to that of girls and women as a
859 social group. To examine this possibility, further research would be needed regarding
860 how girls read and interpret third-wave-inspired feminist content in teen magazines.
861

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[1] Ariel Levy's 2005 book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, documents the increasing popularity of "raunch culture" in the mainstream. Levy characterizes "raunch culture" as an overt celebration of the sexuality of pornography (like *Playboy*) and porn culture (like "strippers" and "pimps") and the belief that young women's willing participation in such industries indicates they are liberated and empowered.