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Revisiting Girlhood: Defining a postmodern/popular feminist culture

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I dedicate this thesis to Shauna Pomerantz without whom I would not have completed this project. And to my parents for constantly supporting me through school.
And to my husband Ryan who has been my rock and research buddy.

Your support means the world.

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Abstract

It has been said that feminism is dead, but in fact feminism is alive in popular cultural forms that offer pleasure, style, fun and advice, as well as political messages that are internalized and continuously enacted in the lives of North American female youth. This thesis discusses popular feminism with respect to mainstream girls' cultural discourses in music and magazine reading. Specifically this thesis examines the importance of Madonna, Gwen Stefani, and the Spice Girls, in addition to the numerous girl magazines available on the market today, such as Seventeen and YM. Focusing on the issue of the feminine versus feminist polarity and its importance to girls' culture, this thesis attempts to demonstrate how popular feminism can be used as a mode of empowerment and illustrates the mode of consumption of popular feminist texts that frames female self-image, attitude, behaviour and speech. Through the employment of popular feminist theories and a discourse and semiotic analysis of musical lyrics, performance and style, in addition to magazine reading and advertisements, this thesis highlights the use of active media reading and being by girls to gain an understanding with regards to social positioning and postmodern political identity. More fundamentally, this thesis questions how popular feminism disables, questions and critiques popular ideologies in a patriarchal society.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The big lie perpetrated on Western society is the idea of women's inferiority, a lie so deeply ingrained in our social behaviour that merely to recognize it is to risk unraveling the entire fabric of civilization.

- Molly Haskell (1999), 288

I am a consumer of popular culture. I have watched music videos and read magazines throughout my tween and teen years. This thesis is an engagement with my own experiences as an avid consumer of media texts, but it is also an exploration of the power that those media texts have had on my feminist identity. In this thesis, I will use my own experiences as a jumping-off point for an analysis of popular feminism, or a kind of feminism that is readily available and consumable in mainstream media. I will focus specifically on music, music videos, pop stars, and magazines, all of which were aimed at and marketed specifically to girls like me. A girl like me is what might typically be described as mainstream. I am white, middle-class, and university educated. I am a graduate student and a marketing manager. I am a feminist, a Catholic, and the mother of two adopted animals. I love to shop. I enjoy wearing a beautiful pair of Gucci wedged heels and a little black dress. I am opinionated and passionate. I am strong and empowered by being a woman living in today's world. I have learned about feminism in school, but never felt particularly interested in its ideals or platform. But in reflecting on my consumption and enjoyment of popular culture, I have come to understand that I am a feminist, though one who has learned her politics from mainstream media rather than protest marches and collective action.

This thesis is an exploration of *my* feminism as it has been shaped by popular culture. I do not claim that this kind of feminism is the only kind or the best kind, just that it is my kind—and a form of politics that I have found to be particularly useful in my

everyday life and in my engagement with the complexity of my own identity. This kind of feminism has enabled me to understand femininity in relation to feminism. This kind of feminism feels right to me as a woman born during a certain time in history and into a certain life in North American society. I am a daughter of second wave feminism. I have benefited from the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. I have reaped the rewards of the political struggles that have come before me. I am lucky. But that does not mean that I am without politics.

It has been said that feminism is dead to today's generation of young women, what is often called Generation Y. As Ginia Bellafante's (1998) Time Magazine article entitled "Is Feminism Dead?" suggests, "You'll have better luck becoming a darling of feminist circles if you chronicle your adventures in cybersex than if you churn out a tome on the glass ceiling" (56). Bellafante believes that "feminism today is wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession" (56). While Bellafante might be angered by the change in feminism, it is by no means dead. While she might sarcastically be noting that "we would never have had Ginger Spice if we hadn't had Germaine Greer," the Spice Girls taught a lot of girls about feminism. While she may be hard-pressed to see any real accomplishments from second wave feminism, she does however note that the United States has Madeleine Albright crafting foreign policy, Jill Barad deciding which Barbie doll to produce, and Catherine MacKinnon pioneering "the field of sexual-harassment law" (Bellafante, 1998, 57). Feminism has made drastic advances over the generations, some of which may be taken for granted in a popular feminist era. But many of us girls recognize the battles other women have fought in our name. Popular feminism as evidenced through popular culture offers strategies for girls to be strong and self-

sufficient, to be whomever we wish, including the Prime Minister of Canada or the President of the United States of America. We see this in such popular feminist icons as Lisa Simpson when she envisions herself as the next president. Glass ceilings and cybersex are one in the same line in popular feminism. Both are empowering. To feel good about your ideas and yourself in general means that empowered, strong girls can break down those glass ceilings when it comes time to do so. So while feminism may be viewed by some as dead, I see it as changing and more various than ever before; not in a negative way, but in a way that is useful for my own politics and my own generation. Without popular feminism I may have never come to feminism at all.

What this thesis hopes to do is highlight the kind of feminism that my friends and I are engaged in. Feminism is not dead; but it is changing. In order to highlight my engagement with feminism and the changes that continue to occur, I will interweave my own personal experiences of engaging with particular popular cultural texts in ways that I see as feminist with a textual analysis of said texts. What have certain music videos, songs, and pop artists offered me in the way of feminist instruction? And what have I taken from them as a form of feminist politics? With these two questions in mind, I will show that while feminism is not the same as it was—at least not for me—it is not dead. It is alive and well in popular cultural forms that offer pleasure, style, fun, and advice, as well as political messages that I have internalized and continuously enact in my everyday life.

In order to pursue the questions I have outlined above, I will spend the rest of this introductory chapter outlining key terms, specifically popular feminism, femininity, girl power, mainstream culture, and my mainstream culture in particular. In chapter 2, I will

review the relevant literature on girls' engagement with popular culture. In chapter 3 I will outline my methodology as a combined analysis of popular texts and my own experiences engaging with those texts. In chapters 4 and 5, I will analyze the popular feminisms in music and music videos and magazines aimed at tween and teen girls. And in chapter 6, I will conclude by looking beyond my analysis to the bigger picture. What can popular culture teach girls about feminism? Given that popular feminism is the most readily consumed form of feminist politics in North American society, why not focus on its possible uses for girls today?

I next turn my attention to an explication of terms in order to contextualize what is to come and to give the reader a sense of where I am coming from as a feminist of a certain era and background.

Mainstream Popular Culture

Mainstream popular culture is the culture considered to be dominant in North American society. Mainstream culture reflects popular trends, popular ideologies, common ways of speaking, and so forth. Mainstream culture, or that which is considered to be “popular” by the masses, is often considered a degraded form of culture. It is also described as feminine (Huyssen, 1986). Huyssen (1986) notes that those forms of art or culture which are most devalued in society are deemed feminine. It was not until nascent socialism and the acknowledgement of the women’s liberation movement that women began to break down the gates of male-dominated “high culture” (Huyssen, 1986). As Huyssen (1986) contends,

It is indeed striking to observe how the political, psychological, and aesthetic discourses around the turn of the [20th century] consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high

culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities (47).

Mass culture was characterized as “low” and degraded in comparison to “high” culture. As Huyssen describes, mass culture, the culture industry or the consciousness industry, was also controlled by men, who were referred to as mind managers. Women were seen as emotional and passive and thus mass culture attributed similar characteristics to ensure a viable market. Traditionally, women completed the house work and remained inside the home to raise children and care for husbands. Due to this, soap operas were created out of this era in order to sell products, most specifically laundry detergents, and thus mass culture was associated with female activities. As Pomerantz (2008) notes, “the gendered division of labour positioned women as the principal consumers, not just for the home, but also for those ‘little luxuries’ that made the drudgery of their everyday lives palatable” (67). Postmodernism attempts to dismantle mass culture’s equation with the feminine by negotiating a space where certain forms of “high” art or culture have trickled down to mass culture and where art or culture once deemed “low” trickled up to high culture, such as avant-gardism and female art (Huyssen, 1986). The decline in this line of thinking appears to have coincided with the emergence of more women in the work force, the second wave women’s liberation movement and the fall of modernism (Huyssen, 1986). As Huyssen concludes, “the universalizing ascription of femininity to mass culture always depended on the very real exclusion of women from high culture and its institutions” (62). The mainstream culture to which I belong is still considered feminine because it is solely based on girls’ activity, but it is no longer considered a degraded form of popular culture because of its femininity. The girls belonging to a mainstream girls’

culture have benefited from the gains of second and third wave movements for which we have been afforded entrance into a male dominated society.

The mainstream can be considered the centre of society. Mainstream cultural producers and marketers create and display popular beliefs and values for people to think about and often share stories most important to the majority of people. Many scholars, such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) note that mainstream culture was created by the elites to keep the lower class people or women “under control”. As Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) have noted, mass culture is imposed from above. The elites aimed to maintain the status quo and the hierarchy in place based on socio-economic status. However, as I see it, and typically from a postmodernist perspective, mainstream culture is widely accepted by most people in western(ized) societies, and trickles through all classes. The social orders, as discussed below, have changed and thus mainstream culture is a postmodern phenomenon, now celebrated by many cultures and many types of people. The merging of “high” and “low” in mainstream culture and society at large has changed the way we view mainstream popular culture.

Mainstream popular culture has always been closely aligned with women’s wants and desires. Media call attention to fashion trends and popular ideologies to encourage women to purchase goods. Shopping is an important part of being a girl and in part we define our identities based on the things we own, and also on what our styles and attitudes say about who we are. Consuming popular culture means that girls’ belonging to my mainstream culture consumed popular television shows, listened to popular music and read popular girls’ magazines. Hall (1987) provides two definitions of “popular”. The first definition is “the things which are said to be ‘popular’ because masses of people

listen to them, buy them, read them, consume them, and seem to enjoy them to the full” (231). Secondly, “popular culture is all those things that ‘the people’ do or have done...the culture, mores, customs and folkways of ‘the people’” (Hall, 1987, 234). We supported, created and maintained the girl market. Millions of girls participate in mainstream culture geared towards girls’ identities and activities and because of this it is often associated with easy reproduction of mass consumed goods (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972). It has been said that the initial creation of standardized products was based in consumer demands and therefore was met with little resistance (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972). Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) note that “something is provided for all so that none may escape” the culture industries (73). As Hall determines, the popular is adopted by the majority of people, but these people, like me are not cultural dupes, but recognize elements, experiences and attitudes in popular culture reflective of them. Popular feminism addresses the many anxieties young girls face when they enter the workforce, high school, post-secondary education, relationships and so forth and by learning through media examples and personal experience, girls have a better grasp on feminism and how it works for them.

As Reser (2005) explains about mainstream culture, “the implications for vernacular rhetoric lie in the nuances and complexities that emerge as a result of the interactions between vernacular and official discourses” (217). Quoting from Brumberg, Winter (2004) explains that “today’s girl culture is driven largely by commercial forces outside the family and local community. Peers seem to supplant parents as a source of authority; anxiety has replaced innocence” (16). When discussing mainstream girls’ culture, Winter notes the cultural and social pressures that influence girls’ daily lives

place girls in a unique social position. What has been discovered and discussed in the literature reflects negative overtones and attempts to demonstrate how media use holds dire constraints for female youth, especially through the prevalence of ideological representations of femininity and conspicuous consumption of mass culture goods.

While it is important to know what mainstream culture is, it is more important, for this thesis project, to understand what my mainstream culture is, as it is my stories and experiences that are put on display as examples. Mainstream culture is the common form of popular culture for women like me, and ironically it is hardly mentioned in the literature. A girl like me is part of mainstream popular culture and its stories resonate with me at the same time as offering me a source of inspiration, feminism, pleasure, advice, and fun. Mainstream culture is a place where girls can take what they please, leave what they don't like and enjoy the popular trends and fads of the day. This is my culture, it my place to learn feminism and new ways of being a girl, a place where I can be actively engaged with other likeminded girls and also disengage from some of my daily troubles.

I am working from a time in my life that I found particularly important: the tween and teen years. While popular feminism is still relevant to me today, I did most of my soul searching, as one might call it, during my formative years. The years take place between 1994 and 2000. I was between the ages of 11 and 17. My favourite television show was *Beverly Hills, 90210*. My favourite magazines were *YM (Young Miss)* and *Seventeen*. My favourite pop idols were Gwen Stefani, Alanis Morissette, the Spice Girls, and Madonna. These artists, magazines, and popular television programs represent very different mainstream cultural trends, especially the musical artists I discuss. These

artists were represented unlike any other artist in mainstream culture and also very differently from each other, which is why I feel that it is important for me to write about them in this thesis. Gwen Stefani mixed styles of Riot Grrrl punk and Ska (a vigorous, bass-driven form of reggae popular with her band No Doubt); Alanis Morissette, a pop artist who was often classified as an “angry woman rocker,” worked from within a system that she deemed to be oppressive and sexist; the Spice Girls were what I would call a “girlie” band that was fun, loud, and relatable; and lastly Madonna spawned her own form of empowerment within the pop world, now frequently referred to as the “Madonna School of Feminism” (Bronstein, 2005). These were my idols. Each was unique and each had politics different from the others, but they all contributed to a popular feminist make up—one that is currently reflected by many women my age.

Popular Feminism

Popular feminists are “primarily young women in their late teens through early thirties who grew up enjoying rights and social transformations achieved by second wave feminists, but who see themselves as more inclusive and flexible in their approach to race, class, sexual orientation, and ideology” (Bronstein, 2005, 783). Popular feminists position themselves differently from their second wave mothers in terms of sexuality and aesthetics (Bronstein, 2005) which reduces the feminine versus feminist polarity. As can be argued, popular feminists who “don high-fashion clothing do so as a resistance against a repressive second wave code that stifles personal aesthetic expression” (Bronstein, 2005, 791). The *Examiner* stated “you can be a good feminist and still wear a Wonderbra” (Bronstein, 2005, 791). Popular feminism is my right to choose, to be whoever I want to be. Being a girl today does not mean I am limited to a domestic

lifestyle and a passive attitude. Feminists have battled many years to get to where we are now and while we still have a long way to go, the many achievements and consciousness raising tactics have been recognized and incorporated into our daily lives. It is my own feminist flavour and an attitude I exhibit every day. When I get up in the morning I put on a nice shirt and usually a pair of pants, slip on some stilettos and head off to work. At the first stop light I pull out my lipstick, pull down my visor and before the light turns green I have put on a nice shade of light pink lipstick and some lip gloss to make my lips smooth and shiny. And for what reason you might ask? It certainly isn't because I am going to work; it is because my personal style is my own. I enjoy dressing a particular way, but I also I enjoy being independent and strong willed. Popular feminists, such as myself "espouse a women's right to dress however she likes, to sleep with whomever she likes, and to define her activism as she pleases" (Bronstein 2005, 792).

Popular feminism is a hybrid movement taking many attitudes and approaches from the second and third waves, but at the same time, evading an all-encompassing definition for women by omitting a laundry list of collective goals. Gilley (2005) writes, "the second wave, which arose in the 1960s and 1970s as women involved in the civil rights struggle began to recognize their own oppression, has, as yet, no official ending date" (188). This is most likely the result of third wave as an extension of second wave, and popular feminism as an extension of the third wave. Third wave feminism has the theoretical underpinnings of the women's liberation movement. Girls found that in the 1980s and 1990s contemporary feminism was unnecessary because the second wave had achieved its one major goal, equality (Gilley, 2005). Third wavers and girls such as me grew up knowing about feminism from our mothers, grandmothers, and popular culture,

and we benefited from gains, such as access to sports, education and programs, entrance into post-secondary and graduate education, and reproductive health care (Gilley, 2005). Third wave feminism found itself celebrating contradiction, complexities, and individual choice stemming from the unpopular rigidity of the second wave (Gilley, 2005).

Popular feminism comes from widely divergent streams of thought stemming from second and third wave goals and achievements. As mentioned previously, I do not believe that feminism is dead, but that it has changed. As Gilley notes, popular feminism is based in popular culture and the experiences of young women in marginalized positions. We have gained much from our ancestors, but as Gilley describes, we have not gone far enough. We have won some battles, but there are many more to fight. Third wave feminism and to some extent popular feminism still limits its interests to the white, liberal, mainstream majority. However, popular feminism does lay claim to the openness of diversity and has made strident efforts to incorporate the often left behind women not identified by the second wave. These women are housewives, they are women of colour, they are working class, and they are without university educations. Popular feminism's basis in popular culture moves beyond academia. By making feminism accessible and incorporating its efforts into popular culture, women of all ages, races, and classes have access to a flavour of feminism not previously available during the 60s and 70s. The most interesting thing about popular feminism is that it is not a movement, like the second or third waves, but an approach, practice, and attitude that anyone can adopt and call their own. Due to this inclusivity, popular feminism is often critiqued for its lack of definition and its non-existent political agenda. Since third wave feminists include "reproductive rights, the gender wage gap, and rape and domestic violence" (Bronstein,

2005) into their political agenda, it is most common for these things to be addressed in feminist popular culture. In addition, from the second wave, we still see the struggles for equality being vocalized by popular artists and played out in popular television programs. Speeches about women's right to choose, domestic violence and assault, popular songs about independence and inner strength, and television actors standing up for the rights of AID's victims in Africa and dolphin killing in Japan, are all part of popular feminism. While I agree that popular feminism is based on the play of femininity and sexuality as power, I also define popular feminism as stemming from "angry women in rock."

I have been questioned frequently about my understanding of popular feminism and my answer always remains the same "I am not one type of feminist," I see myself crossing all the boundaries between second wave, third wave and popular feminism because each of these are incorporated in mainstream girls' culture today. Popular feminism for me is those texts deemed popular but they are also texts that include, discuss, or have attitudes reflecting feminist goals, such as discussions on domestic violence, sexual promiscuity, and pleasure. I feel popular feminism is a feminism that any woman can adopt; a girl does not have to be heterosexual to understand popular feminism, for example she can be bi or homosexual because each of these girls are addressed in mainstream girls' culture today through androgynous fashion models and dual marketing approaches and readings.

Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie's (2005) definition of an alternative girlhood works well with my understanding of popular feminism. "By alternative girlhood," Kelly et al., write, "we mean the range of ways that girls consciously position themselves against what they perceive as the mainstream in general and against conventional forms of

femininity in particular” (231). This definition works well for my definition of popular feminism in an active culture (discussed below as the activities and attitudes essential to the fabrication of multiple female cultures). By popular feminism versus femininity, I mean the range of ways that girls consciously position themselves within and against what they perceive as traditional, passive and feminine in general and against conventional forms of subordination and inferiority often shown in media and through social institutions such as the school. Popular feminists engage in a variety of activities that land them varying labels or the collection of various identities. Mainstream girls, recognizing their power through popular feminism, are often feminine and feminist. They are involved in a variety of mainstream activities, such as shopping, but also express an interest in writing, drawing, blogging and other alternative cultural activities deemed to be popular amongst today’s generation of youth, but would once have been restricted to them. Thus, popular feminism is a way of reading texts and a way of being in everyday life. Girls’ culture incorporates feminism into its most popular aspects, reading, music and doing femininity. Popular feminism is a way of reading and a way of being.

Popular feminism, in my perspective, stems from Madonna and “angry women rockers.” The Riot Grrrl network began this new trend of angry women from a misrepresented, underground status. The Riot Grrrl network aimed to remain underground and their avoidance of definition has not gone unnoticed. In the early to mid 90s, young women rockers incorporated the Riot Grrrl anthem in a media savvy way. Riot Grrrl’s response to the punk music industry was in accordance with the third wave and focused on the representations and ideologies of women presented in popular cultural

forms (Driscoll, 1999). The main goals of Riot Grrrl were to “encourage individual responses” (Leonard, 1997) and communication amongst girls (Schilt, 2003). One of the best Riot Grrrl philosophies was addressed by Schilt (2003),

BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock “you can do anything” idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours (6-7).

Working from this Riot Grrrl agenda, angry women in rock created a new battlefield from within the mainstream music industry. They were feminine and feminist. Their songs described sexual encounters (Madonna, Alanis Morissette), rape and molestation experiences (Fiona Apple), and gender inequalities and independence (Gwen Stefani). They sang their music and wrote their lyrics in an angry form similar to the growl in grrrl of the Riot Grrrl philosophies. Angry women’s feminist politics were made popular because young women accepted this new form of feminism played out and encouraged by popular culture. These women avoided the explicit use of the other “f” word, feminist, but made girls, like me, aware of feminist politics and a politics that we could adopt easily into our lifestyles.

While popular feminists may be hard-pressed to define goals, the personal is *still* political. Fixmer and Wood (2005) find that popular feminists embrace embodied politics. They say “bodily actions...aim to provoke change by exercising and resisting power in everyday life” (237). Fixmer and Wood identify three forms of embodied politics,

(1) Redefining identity by engaging the complexities of differences, ambiguities, and multiplicities in and between women, (2) building and working with coalitions to forge an inclusive solidarity, and (3) engaging

in personal acts of resistance in local sites where injustices occur (237-238).

By embracing various identities and fighting against a system that requires them to be one type of person, popular feminists, often categorized themselves differently from second and third wavers, such as bisexual, inter-racial, transgendered, androgynous, and “girlic” (Bronstein, 2005). In addition popular feminists also work from a pro-sex perspective that brings to light the enjoyment of contradiction, performance, and pleasure. By partaking in burlesque, vaudeville and strip shows, the popular feminist reclaims the power of sexual performance (Gilley, 2005). Ideas of pro-sex and sadomasochistic play mixed with femininity and a strongly embodied political agenda make popular feminism a postmodern phenomenon. The performance of many identities is extremely evident in Meredith Brooks’ (1997) music video for *Bitch*. She plays around with her hard and soft personas. Her position in the childhood bedroom plays with the notion of girlhood bedroom culture, but also with the sexual encounters that take place there. As she sings about her many identities, “I’m a bitch/ I’m a lover/ I’m a child/ I’m a mother/ I’m a sinner/ I’m a saint,” we see the changing images of Brooks floating around the floral papered room. In one scene we see three different characters making a triangle, symbolizing Brooks’ many identities and the power of recognizing how they mesh together to make her who she is. Not only does Brooks’ acknowledgment of her multifaceted identity help girls to understand their own identity and puberty, but it also demonstrates the contradictions that occur within the culture industries, such as hegemonic ideologies of femininity.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, it was evident that a new wave of female actors and musicians was gaining media attention. These women, such as Meredith Brooks and Alanis Morissette, were frequently angered by the music industry and their media exposure. For example, artists such as Morissette and Gwen Stefani fought within the system to be different, to entertain through feminist pedagogies and to create identities based on substance rather than image. Because of these changes in the music business a new generation of young women became aware of feminist motivations. While television was late to follow, these artists filled in the gap between an older generation of feminists who had been negatively portrayed in media texts and the younger generation of feminists who were becoming influenced by popular culture in the 1980s and later.

Television programs such as *Sex and the City* soon became popular amongst young female viewers, and by offering something for different types of woman, my friends and I became more aware of a popular feminist model. As Lazerfeld and Merton (1999) suggest, “the audience will perceive an issue of importance if the media calls attention to it” (11). This is what they called status-conferral. The media called negative attention to second wave goals, but as feminism slowly entered the mainstream through magazines such as *Ms.*, media outlets began vocalizing positive movement goals through young female actors and musicians. The women of *Sex and the City* teach women that it is okay to be sexy, independent, single and strong. Each woman had a different personality and style—Carrie was a writer constantly moving between romantic relationships, Samantha was an upper-middle class professional consistently in between the bed sheets, Miranda was a high profiled lawyer and single mother, and Charlotte, the art gallery curator, was a traditional girl always in search of her soul mate. Gerhard

such as No Doubt and the Spice Girls, artists who emphasized patriarchal restrictions and male/female inequalities, but I also grew up with a second wave mother. I don't have to choose which category I fit in to because these categories, defined mostly by academics, overlap in the mainstream.

Co-optation is a term used relatively frequently in discussions of feminist imagery. However, the term itself is rarely well-defined. To co-opt an oppositional movement, such as feminism, in the media, producers must diffuse, appropriate, and absorb "selected elements of those movements" (Meehan & Byars, 2004, 94).

Essentially, cooptation is a tactic used by media producers to neutralize or win the consent of a minority group by assimilating them into the established mainstream or popular culture. This has been noted especially with feminism and homosexuality. The dual marketing approach, coined by Clarke and discussed below, works as a form of cooptation in female youth cultures. The advertisements examined in chapter 5 do just that, they co-opt a view of lesbianism and bisexuality to win the consent and purchasing rights of a minority group often left out of mainstream advertising. This is, however, not necessarily noticed by those outside of the minority group and thus the majority is not threatened by the actions taken by media producers to incorporate this marginalized group of women.

Feminism is yet another co-opted minority in mainstream popular culture. As discussed throughout this thesis popular feminism is an attitude and approach to living, but also a way of reading. Feminism and its movement goals have been rejected by media producers, but when the other "f" word was re-created and restructured through the term "girl power" it became more popular to sell. The key word in that last statement

being “sell.” This works well into postfeminism and popular feminism especially. Second wave feminism was rejected and misrepresented by media moguls, thus only receiving negative publicity of the issues; but with the new girl order, including girl power, postfeminism, popular feminism, celebrity feminism, power feminism and victim feminism we see varying degrees of previous movement goals tied in with the new empowered woman and consumerism. Throughout the data chapters (chapters 4 and 5) we see how co-optation is utilized through Clarke’s dual marketing approach.

An examination of popular feminism is highly relevant at this particular point in history as feminism is now incorporated into mainstream popular culture as a product sold by the culture industries, such as fashion, television, music, and other forms of media. The bulk of research focusing on female youth as passive media consumers (McRobbie, 1977, Eisenstein Stumbar & Eisenstein, 1999, Mazzarella, 1999) is not only outdated, but coming to be seen as false. Effects research on girls’ culture often concludes that mainstream participants are influenced drastically by the ideologies presented (Mazzarella, 1999, Taft, 2004). Girls respond to images of beauty, such as believing they are overweight, thus researchers conclude that media encourage, for example eating disorders (Orenstein, 1994, Hendriks, 2002), dieting, body dissatisfaction, materialism, etc.—because I am not convinced by this research, I am attempting to incite new information on mainstream female youth cultures. By utilizing my own experiences, textual analysis, and the latest research on feminist mainstream culture, I expect to find a girls’ culture that celebrates complexities and contradictions. Fluid identities and the battling of stereotypical ideologies are tackled within popular discourses in an effort to create empowered young girls.

Femininity

Feminism and femininity are the two key words used to describe myself and my particular girls' culture. I have described how feminism fits into my picture and my world, but femininity is a term taken for granted. Femininity appears to need no definition, but in this case, however, a definition is an asset to understanding the complexities involved in the collapsing polarity. Feminism and femininity are often pitted against each other and usually for the worst. However, throughout this thesis I attempt to demonstrate that the two terms are in fact interrelated and can happily coexist amongst girls today.

Femininity, much like being a woman, has been denied equal opportunity within feminism and mainstream culture. This has already been made evident through my discussion on Huyssan. However, femininity is not just about the way a person looks, and I use the word person here because men and women are both described as feminine in today's day and age. It is not about having blonde hair and blue eyes, an elegant stature or small feet, there is a new femininity taking shape in the pages of magazines, on television and within academic discussions. As Taylor (2003) shows, the new femininity

...purports to be two specific ways: first that femininity, as opposed to being denigrated, is being celebrated by a global culture, and second, that women's gendered expression is characterized by a voluntarism which is both cause and effect of this new (commodified) femininity (182).

Commodification and consumption have always been and will most likely remain the main source of women's femininity and power, but the new femininity demonstrated through artists such as Madonna and Pink have given women the power to be happy and at ease with themselves.

Consumer culture has revamped their notion of the feminine, revalorized the characters seen on television and ultimately rearticulated through product an inner and outer beauty that women can accept. This means, that “women can now articulate an inner self from which they have been alienated” (Taylor, 2003, 185). With consumerism and materialism come many critiques. Hilary Radner points out that the new form of femininity works to contain feminism by “confining women’s agency to the construction of a particular feminine appearance via processes of consumption” (Taylor, 2003, 183). While this may be partially true a new avenue has appeared and can lead to new roads for women in culture and in the workplace. We have already seen vast changes over the years on the representations of women and femininity and feminism has been a leading contribution to an understanding of a new woman who can be feminine and feminist, strong and pretty, in control wearing a floral printed dress.

The floral printed dresses, the beaded accessories, the long blonde hair were all once signs of femininity at its worst; a place of passivity towards men, towards the workplace, towards consumerism. As Angela McRobbie has pointed out in many of her articles there was a struggle between femininity and feminism and strong female leads were more likely to pull towards feminism and disregard femininity. However, in recent year’s new research on feminism has surfaced and demonstrated a shift from the hostile negotiations of second-wave feminists towards “a notion of fashion culture as a site of pleasure, masquerade, resistance and self-representation” (Taylor, 2003, 186). As Taylor emphasizes,

The new femininity seeks to reclaim readily recognizable signifiers of femininity through assumptions of feminist progress, rendering the earlier ‘feminist’ strategy of de-feminization redundant. That is, the supposed

cultural acceptance of feminism makes the new, hyper-femininity both possible and desirable (190).

As shown here, being feminine and feminist is a desirable trait advertised between the covers of women's and girls' magazines, popular mainstream television programming and in everyday life. The passive girl will always exist, but this is no longer desirable in white-middle class culture.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism has been the most challenging word to define in this thesis. Postmodernism incorporates many opposites from modernism, but all are not relevant to this particular study. As Wood (2004) describes, postmodernism "is an intellectual and political movement that does its work through critical analysis" (289). Postmodern thought challenges the beliefs that the dominant social order is "natural and right" (Wood, 2004, 289). Wood suggests that "reality cannot be known or understood in a single, absolute way" (289). Susan Sontag's (1966) book describes postmodernism without actually calling it such, noting that "the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture seems less and less meaningful" (302). Unlike modernist thought, the blending or blurring of "high" and "low" culture is evidenced most clearly in popular culture. Postmodernists take this space seriously. As Wood explains, "Brahms may be a great composer, opera may be highly sophisticated, and Rembrandt may be a superb artist; yet rock music, fiddlers' conventions, and folk art also matter to people" (289). Wood's example describes some of the many tensions I face. In the summer of 2006 I traveled to Paris where I spent a day in the Louvre. I spent time strolling at Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, after which I returned to my hotel room to watch re-runs of my favourite

television show (at the time) *The O.C.* Both of these things interest me and neither stands above the other. While I cannot deny that we, as a society, place more cultural value on the *Mona Lisa* and rank culture goods into hierarchies, the sheer opportunities to do both embrace two sides of myself; the romantic girl playing out her fantasies through teen dramas and the cultured woman.

These tensions that I describe above are brought on by the collapsing of meta- and grand-narratives and our diverse experiences. We all have differing perspectives. How I read an article or an image will be different from the next person. Our experiences and previous readings of images shape our understanding of goodness, importance and beauty (Wood, 2004). “Art and architecture” suggest Wood, “were perhaps the harbingers of postmodernity, but they are not its only implications” (290). The way we think of cultural life and our identities is based in a “celebration of [the] disjointed” (Wood, 2004, 290). The self is unfixed and in constant flux. The same is true of popular culture and popular feminism. It evolves as society changes and is shaped by changes in local and global milieus, cultures, politics, views of women in society, gender based systems and so forth. Everything is open to change, re-presentation, and the subjective understanding of others.

Wood provides an example of one grand narrative in America. America is the land of freedom, equal rights and opportunities for all. Anyone can be successful and prosper in America as long as they “work hard.” From a feminist perspective, Wood challenges this modernist view by begging the following questions:

Why should a woman in a factory who earns 74 cents an hour believe this narrative when the man working beside her makes \$1.00 an hour? Why should a gay man believe this narrative when he is denied the right to

adopt a child but heterosexual men are not? Can we think the sexes truly have equality when, each day, four women in the United States are beaten to death by intimates (291)?

Wood notes social movements, such as those occurring in the 1950s and 1960s regarding civil rights and second wave feminism convinced people that grand narratives are not “true” or right for all people. Wood states, “rejecting the modernist ideas of universal truths and objective knowledge, postmodern theories aim to understand the specific ‘truths’ that structure life in particular social communities and contexts” (292). These plentiful “truths” mean that culture, and identity more specifically, are full of “contradictions, inconsistencies, omissions, and incoherence” (Wood, 2004, 292).

Postmodern thinkers, such as Lyotard and Baudrillard, reject the idea that identity and the self are stable and autonomous (Wood, 2004). The focus on popular feminism and how it is linked to identity is important, as I see identity as being in constant flux. Identity is often deemed to be static, in a modernist world—we are who we are and nothing can change that. However, every time I turn on the television, open a book, read a magazine, meet a new person, my identity evolves. While I may still be all the things I was yesterday, today I have learned something new, read something different, even discussed a hot topic. My opinions change daily which in turn changes the way I think and thus my identity at large. Postmodernism allows me to drop the capital “T” truth from identity and examine the numerous contradictions that make up who I am. I wear many hats.

Madonna is just one example of this postmodern posturing. Wood describes Madonna as embodying many identities, such as the traditional woman, the vamp, and the dominatrix, all of which can be found in her 1989 music video *Express Yourself*. So,

who is the “real” Madonna, Wood questions? There is no “real” self or identity, Wood argues, the question itself is misdirected. Wood notes that we are and wear “multiple masks, or subject positions, that we create, wear, and change as we find useful and possible in the ever-shifting contexts of cultural constraints, contexts, goals, and moods” (295).

Phaco and Wright (1999) suggest that, “postmodernism maps out the contemporary experience of the seismic crises in the foundations of Western modernity. New technologies in this age of ‘late’ capitalism have transformed our spatial and temporal view of the planet and reconceptualized identity and history” (85). For Lyotard (1999), one of the fathers of postmodernism, the collapsing of the grand- or meta-narratives is essential to the postmodern condition. The connection between feminism and postmodernism initially was not clear, however as Phaco and Wright suggest, “postmodernism has offered feminism ways in which to conceptualize its own ongoing dilemma: the desire to seek equality within the very institutions and discourses which feminists have attempted to challenge and dismantle” (89). Popular feminism focuses on what Gilley (2005) has termed the “Sex War” or gender oppositions from a pro-sex perspective. Popular feminists use embodied politics (Fixmer & Wood, 2005) and political activism to rebel against static and unitary molds of whom and what a woman/girl can be or be like. Postmodernism’s specialties in performance and play allow artists such as Madonna to be feminine, but genderless, such as a scene in *Express Yourself* when Madonna is sexy and alluring, but not human, as she plays the role of a cat. In addition, the many faces of Madonna in that particular music video, such as being a man and a woman, take away her sexuality or gender as she is neither male nor female.

Thus she is feminine, but genderless as she plays with drag and models the typical behaviours of both sexes, such as crotch grabs and sexual inferiority. Madonna also preaches individualism and freedom to oppressed beings in her *Papa Don't Preach* (1986) music video.

These varying identities performed by Madonna position her as a postmodern artist. Wood proclaims that,

A person may define himself as straight at one time, gay at another, and bisexual at a third time. A person may be raised Catholic, declare herself to be a Buddhist at age 20, a Taoist at 25, and an atheist at 36. A person who is born able-bodied may become disabled, and a person who has a disability may become nondisabled. Sex change operations make it possible for people to change their biological (if not chromosomal) sex, which has long been viewed as an absolutely fixed aspect of identity (300).

Reflecting on the terms I use to describe myself I find that some terms are disjointed, some highlighted, and some obscured depending on my thought process, who I am describing myself to, the situation I am engaged in, and so forth. For the purpose of this thesis I focus more specifically on the contradictions between second wave's feminist identity and popular feminism's understanding of femininity and feminist identity. Thus, I describe myself as both at the same time. I am at once feminine and feminist. I enact this identity daily, but I came to understand it through popular culture and the kinds of feminisms I found relevant to my past experiences and my everyday struggles as a girl and woman.

Girl Power

Girl power is one of the ways to describe popular feminist politics. Popular feminism and girl power have very similar definitions, but the latter attempts to reflect a

young generation of popular feminists. For example, the Spice Girls were most popular to tween girls and offered a type of feminism that utilized very specific movement goals that girls most likely faced on the playground and in the classroom. Because this thesis examines a time in my life (my tween and teen years) when the Spice Girls were popular, it is important for me to examine this genre of popular feminism as it has been useful to my creation of a feminist identity to date. I may not identify with the Spice Girls any longer, but their music and lyrics did provide a jumping-off point for me to understand my strengths and my place in mainstream popular girls' culture.

"Girl Power" is a highly debated term, but is often associated with the inception of Riot Grrrl and trickled down to mainstream girl bands such as the Spice Girls. Marnina Gonick (2006) suggests that Girl Power discourses "represent a social and cultural fascination with girls that is also an expression of the uncertainties, tensions, fears, and anxieties elicited by the rapid social, economic, and political changes taking place due to neoliberal policies" (4-5). Girl Power bands such as Bikini Kill and the Spice Girls, while very different in their style and politics, encouraged girls to topple boundaries of passivity and demonstrate themselves as active producers of knowledge by advocating equal rights, sisterhood, and the taking back of derogatory terms (Gonick, 2006, Driscoll, 1999, Chideya, 1993).

Banet-Weiser (2004) finds that "girl power powerfully demonstrates the contradictions or tensions that structure [popular] feminist politics, especially for young girls" (120). She also notes that popular feminists embrace "commercial media visibility and enthusiastically celebrate the power that comes with it" (121). Lemish (2003) sums up girl power with examples from the Spice Girls. She suggests that,

“Girl Power,” so it seems, refers to both physical and mental strength. Girls can help a guy with his bag, have painful tattoos as Geri [does], or do sit-ups like Mel C. But it is also standing up for your rights and dignity and having control over your life. “Girl Power” is also about freedom of expression and inner peace, about standing up for one’s opinions and beliefs (Lemish, 2003, 21).

As Ashby (2005) discovers, the language of girl power is “promoted as a boisterous, even aggressive, attitude toward gender politics” (129). Girl power is important to the collapsing of the feminine/feminist polarity as girl power artists, such as the Spice Girls, helped girls overcome fears of being secondary citizens and being able to stand up for themselves. Girl power was a more powerful term for young feminists who typically did not define themselves from a second wave standpoint.

Leach (2001) suggests, “the potential of girl power to function both as strategy of resistance to patriarchy and essentialism, and, ironically, as a financial entrapment (i.e. fitting punishment) of those (men) still subscribing to the values of patriarchy, is attractive to young female audiences” (148-149). Many of the issues girls face as tweens and teens are those that position them as secondary students. While they are encouraged from all angles to attend post-secondary education, male students are often positioned as superior intellectual beings in the classroom and physically superior on the playground. The Spice Girls placed politics within the educational institutions. They encouraged girls to speak up for themselves, to carry your guy’s bag, to ask boys on dates, to answer hard questions in class. These little changes to a girl’s life were courageously challenged because of such artists as the Spice Girls. For the girls in Lowe’s (2003) study

“Girl power” is code for a certain type of feminism—girl solidarity, self-sufficiency, and equality. They believe that they should defend each other and stick together, they want careers so they don’t have to “rely on some

guy,” and they expect girls and boys, women and men, to be treated equally in all situations (130).

As Lowe and I have both discovered, many girls seem to have acquired their feminist convictions from mainstream girls’ popular culture.

Driscoll (2002) poses this question: “if ‘GIRL’ indicates uncertain narratives about identity, development and social position, if girls are marginal to narratives about culture and yet central to them, does girl culture have to reflect those uncertainties and displacements” (235)? The answer is yes. It already does this by offering numerous “truths” and contradictions. Mainstream popular girls’ culture elaborates on the contradictions and complexities girls face daily and helps them to understand them from a postmodern, popular feminist perspective. The polarity between femininity and feminism is collapsing. We no longer need to equate femininity with popular culture and feminism with the women’s liberation movement as a girl’s identity and popular culture discourses meld these contradictions and show such dichotomies to be false.

In hopes of generating new ideas on the feminine/feminist polarity and the complexities of popular feminism and postmodern identity, I begin the story and analysis of my mainstream popular girl’s culture.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The idea that female youth are passive is a common theme in the literature of cultural studies and popular culture. For the most part, Angela McRobbie has led the research on girls' culture examining female youth interactions with both mainstream cultures and subcultures since the 1970s. McRobbie (1976) found that girls were marginally presented in literature and cultural texts and that they were frequently associated with the males in subcultural groupings and often acknowledged in terms of sexuality and attractiveness. Girls were presented as driven by beauty and coupledness and their participation in mainstream cultures relied on having the right clothes, make-up and hairstyles (McRobbie, 1976).

From its origin in the 1970s, the teenybopper phenomenon relied on the pop-music business and the commodification of girls' culture to make money by offering young female fans the opportunity to have their own culture outside of their male counterparts, older siblings, adolescents, and parents (McRobbie, 1976). McRobbie (1976) explains teenybopper culture as basing its legitimacy around male pop stars that rose up around the 1950s when pre-teen youth felt under-represented by the mainstream. McRobbie states:

Girls may be easy customers to please; they are happy to go along with the easiest, least aggressive, least rebellious and most manufactured kind of pop culture. This, however, is a much too simplistic way of accounting for what is in fact a much less passive (and much ridiculed) form of hero worship (22).

McRobbie justifies girls' culture noting that female youth are not allowed the same subcultural freedoms or the pleasures of public, late-night life, as their male counterparts for fear of attack, assault and abduction. Therefore, these new leisure pursuits allowed preteens to join a mainstream culture, which did not require them to be a certain kind of

“cool,” to spend a large sum of money or generally be out in public (McRobbie, 1976); hence the importance and significance of a girl culture available within the girls’ bedrooms. These new leisure pursuits provided by media producers fixated on magazine reading, radio listening, and television viewing. This led McRobbie (1976) to conclude that mainstream girls’ culture places the girl in the position of passive fan, while the active role is afforded to the male musician.

The place where girls are “socially conditioned” or “trained” through the consumption of popular culture is typically found within the girl’s bedroom. Bedroom culture has often been described as a place of containment rather than power, but as Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) note “the child’s bedroom is the one official place of some privacy—and a place where there can be at least some expression of individual taste” (113). The bedroom functions as a retreat from adult and boys’ culture and thus the girl can exert some power, however limited, to the arrangement of the environment (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) and the decoration of the room.

Popular Culture and Feminism

Most research still places female youth in positions of passivity and submission. However, in recent years it has become more common to emphasize the importance of activity taking place in girls’ culture. McRobbie (1996) argued that feminist content and a feminist mindset were inevitable in the production of girls’ cultural texts. Magazine staff writers, for example, “studied aspects of feminism or women’s issues as part of their education...They attempt to integrate at least aspects of these political or feminist discourses into their place of work” (McRobbie, 1996, 183). In addition, McRobbie (1999) found that the feminist versus femininity polarity was collapsing. The term

“popular feminism” was being used to describe how young women “can do feminism as a political movement while enjoying the rewards of its success in culture and everyday life” (McRobbie, 1999, 56). The feminist versus feminine polarity can be equated with the active/passive binary. This thesis expands the arguments of the collapsing polarities of feminism versus femininity and activity and passivity from the stance that these often defined categories are not binary oppositions, but are complex socio-political positions that intertwine and overlap at every stage in a girl’s life.

There are many contradictions within popular feminism as Megan Le Masurier (2007) found. She says “to be an oppositional movement and yet inside the mainstream was one of the many contradictions that could not be resolved by second-wave feminists” (191). Feminism as a topic and feminists as a group often lived outside the boundaries of the mainstream. Once feminism entered mainstream culture, it was difficult to define its characteristics. Second-wave feminists fought against media representations of them and other minority groups and it was, without question, a major challenge to understand their entrance into everyday lives. As Le Masurier noted “for the majority of feminists in the 1970s it was impossible to acknowledge that a *popular* kind of feminism was being made in the pages of some of the new mainstream young women’s magazines” (191, italics in original). As years have progressed, this has become a common theme throughout women’s cultural discourses. Even the most stereotypical and ideologically based magazines and television programs, such as *Days of Our Lives* and *Seventeen*, began to incorporate feminism. Soap operas were one of the most criticized forms of women’s television by feminists and media critics during the 1970s, but today their storylines incorporate feminist ideals.

Le Masurier focused specifically on magazines in her article “My Other My Self.” Quoting from Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* Le Masurier states, “women’s magazines were a primary force perpetuating the ‘problem with no name,’ the home of the mystique that women could ‘find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal lives’” (2007, 191). Magazines such as *Nova*, *POL*, *Cleo* and to a less extent *Cosmopolitan* in the 1970s shared the feminist intent of informing women about gender inequality and finding solutions to their lived injustices in personal and public domains (Le Masurier, 2007). As 1970s periodicals indicate, magazines were ideal in communicating feminist ideas (Le Masurier, 2007). However, magazines were still considered a degraded form of culture. Most women came to understand feminism through student politics and higher education that privileged middle and upper class white women.

Definitions of feminism are varied and are in constant flux. Because of this Joke Hermes (1995) found that gossip magazine readers held many repertoires. When engaging with the magazines, multiple meanings were interpreted and incorporated in reading practices, fantasies, and everyday life (Hermes, 1995). The works of McRobbie, Hermes and Freidan mark the importance of magazines in popular feminist culture. The incorporation of feminist ideals into magazine culture “is a movement from rejection and disavowal of the ‘ordinary’ female ready to a guarded acceptance that feminist meaning might be made out of and within contemporary women’s magazines,” says Le Masurier (193). In addition, she explains that “it also brings us to a strange twist in the tale, where instead of what seemed like *rapprochement* after decades of opposition between feminism and the women’s genres of popular culture, the stand-off looks as if it is now

being rearticulated” (191, italics in original). The emergence of popular feminism in girls’ popular culture discourses is precisely what this thesis stresses. It is not necessarily about being radical, but about accepting the challenge of being a girl who must fight for active positions in mainstream culture, but also incorporate a sense of self, however one wishes.

Second-wave feminism experienced a loss in support and appeal, both during and after the 1970s. Some of the reasons are stated by Le Masurier as:

Its blindness regarding class and ethnicity; its failure to acknowledge the appeal of romantic love and heterosexuality for ordinary (and feminist) women; its opposition to popular culture, especially women’s genres; its feminism vs. femininity polarization; and its investment in power structures of the academy (196-197).

Becoming popular in the mainstream did not mean that feminism had to lose its radical roots. Rather, we saw an adaptation of feminism through girl power politics, riot grrrl, popular feminism and postfeminism. This adaptation came in the form of co-opting certain movement goals, such as one’s right to choose, being independent and self-sufficient and leaving out the fried bras. Feminism was no longer the attainment of public figures and white middle class educated women; it was becoming the language of the everyday woman.

As McRobbie (1977) states during her research on the *Jackie* magazine, this mass culture or popular culture phenomenon is often described as cheap and superficial. *Cleo* magazine was the basis of Le Masurier’s article and she found more positive representations of women. Featured stories covered the importance of personal and social change, the politics of housework and the double shift, growing pressures to partner, marry and have children, sexual encounters and orgasm, female alcoholism and

drug abuse, abortion, contraception and STD's, and women's general health and childbirth (Le Masurier, 2007). In addition, the consciousness-raising *Cleo* magazine covered critical women's movement issues such as domestic violence, rape and women's refuges, education, and women in the workforce (Le Masurier, 2007).

Le Masurier quotes from Ita Buttrose's final editorial for *Cleo* magazine about International Women's Day: "The main aim is to promote equality between men and women, to ensure the full integration of women in the total development effect...recognition of the importance of the status of women [as] a major issue throughout the world" (202-203). Coming to understand feminism was a bumpy road; I did not identify as a feminist because I did not identify with collective action and the second wave. When I discussed my feminist ideas with others, I did not discuss them as feminist per se, but as my own form of politics. Because of this, I was also subconsciously feeling the need to apologize for my beliefs. Buttrose's editorial also states "women who are tagged housewives should not be made to feel they need to apologize for it...We must not criticize how women find their fulfillment" (Le Masurier, 2007, 203). New editor Pat Dasey wrote in 1976 after the departure of Buttrose "whether women wear dresses or like romance really has little to do with the issue" (Le Masurier, 2007, 204).

The statements by Buttrose and Dasey essentially sum up my ideas on the complexities between feminism/femininity and active/passive discourses in girls' culture. For the most part, feminism and femininity and activity and passivity have held oppositional poles with feminists, especially those labeled as radicals. But these terms are not in contradiction with each other. This thesis argues that it is possible for girls to

engage with both at the same time. A girl can show her own style of femininity and be a feminist. A girl can both produce forms of popular culture and be subjected to it. Inconsistent definitions of feminism, femininity, activity and passivity allow this to be possible and Le Masurier, McRobbie, Hermes and Freidan have made that point evident. Meaghan Morris (1988) raised the possibility that identifying with feminism meant a rejection of femininity. Creating an image of the “other” is common in all cultures and is a way to differentiate between cultures and nations. In Canada we tend to identify ourselves as NOT Americans. Being feminine during second-wave feminism meant you did not align yourself with feminist politics. In examining these ideas of othering and splitting, Le Masurier explains

If we accept that there were “feminists” within the period of the second wave who did not operate under the name of feminism, then linkages rather than disidentity might help connect the generations engaged in that broad feminist project of the fight against arbitrary gendered privilege (207).

Since the inception of second-wave feminism in the 1970s there have been various feminist successes. Policies have been created surrounding child care and welfare, equal pay for labour workers, the acceptance (or maybe tolerance) of homosexuals on television and so forth. And because of these successes it has become more promising to re-position feminism within the mainstream, argue Walby (2002) and McRobbie (2007).

Finding Identity

McRobbie’s (2007) article “Top Girls?” poses the question, “how do we account for the range of social, cultural and economic transformations which have brought forth a new category of young womanhood” (721)? She finds that the explosion of girls and

young women's discourses brings into effect a new process of gender re-stabilization. McRobbie situates meanings of girl and young women towards capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation. Films like *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Bend It Like Beckham* are some examples McRobbie provides in accordance with the new definitions of girlhood. "The dynamics of regulation and control are less about what young women ought not to do," McRobbie explains, but "more about what they can do" (721). With changing societal conditions young women are required to perform as "economically active female citizens" (McRobbie, 2007, 722). These new girls partaking in the performance of active femininity are subjects of "post-feminist, gender-aware biopolitical practices of governmentality" (McRobbie, 2007, 723).

The choices afforded to young women today mean they have the option to hold traditional values while at the same time actively participate in new gender regimes by choice rather than obligation. These new afforded choices are referred to by McRobbie as the new masquerade. She says,

This new masquerade refers to its own artifice, its adoption by women is done as a statement, the woman in masquerade is making a point that this is a freely chosen look. In addition the post-feminist masquerade is all the more effective on the grounds that it seems not to fear male retribution (723).

Success in education and the gaining of qualifications for the work and social world has assisted in creating visibility. Girls' newfound success and the attainment of visibility have led to social mobility and participation in the production of themselves, the workforce, political voices and so forth. In addition, McRobbie states that a new "sexual contract is the provision of entitlement to sexuality and control of fertility" (731).

Women are now viewed as pleasure-seekers and the overturning of the old sexual double standard means woman can transgress and deface patriarchal tropes. McRobbie provides examples of women participating in sexual encounters at holiday locations and licensed transgression associated with heavy drinking culture. In addition, McRobbie creates an image of the phallic girl who “bears the superficial marks of boldness, confidence, aggression and even transgression (in that it refuses the feminine deference of the post-feminist masquerade). The phallic girl seeks to emulate male behaviour as a post-feminist gesture” (McRobbie, 2007, 732-733). While these characteristics are termed superficial, her status as phallic girl is accepted.

Mainstream Culture and Feminism: Celebrity Feminism

The creation of identity is an active exploration of the self. Michelle Arrow (2007) describes her coming to feminism through popular culture, especially with the assistance of Helen Reddy’s *I Am Woman*. Arrow’s article constructs a cultural history of Helen Reddy’s *I Am Woman*, “to explore how popular culture produced and translated feminism for mass audiences” (214). She also examines the role *I Am Woman* played in feminist activism and an analysis of how the song helped women understand feminism from a non-“libbers” point of view. Like other authors mentioned here, Arrow notes feminism’s uneasiness with popular culture and the celebrity status of creators of feminist texts such as Helen Reddy, *Ms. Magazine* and feminist novelists Marilyn French, Erica Jong and Marge Piercy. Because these discourses spoke to mass audiences they “played a crucial role in the broader public acceptance of feminist ideals, presenting a less threatening accessible feminism to a broad audience” (Arrow, 2007, 215).

Arrow asked the following questions: “how was Reddy regarded as a ‘celebrity feminist’?; how and why did the song work as a public expression of feminism in the 1970s, and how did it function in feminist activism” (217)? While celebrity feminists came under attack frequently by other feminists, women like Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer, and Helen Reddy became the elected leaders of the Women’s Movement because they effectively communicated feminist ideals to mainstream audiences (Arrow, 2007). These women, often defined as “synthetic” celebrity feminists, were media savvy and feminine. They were able to “draw on existing representations of women but challenge aspects of these mediated gender stereotypes” (Arrow, 2007, 218-219). Their ability to be everyday women as well as feminists was inspiring to the suburban housewives and low-paid labour workers. They demonstrated the ability to be both feminine and feminist, both active and passive, at the same time, helping to accentuate the ability to be exactly who you are and who you want to be. This was made even more evident when Reddy insisted that you could believe in heterosexual marriage and be a feminist. Reddy is quoted as saying “what the whole women’s liberation thing boils down to for me, is having the freedom to be my own person, to be completely myself. And respect [my husband’s] right to be totally himself” (Arrow, 2007, 219). These two sentences by Reddy are basically what feminism means to me and I take Helen Reddy’s understanding of feminist politics and use it in my everyday life.

Music functions in several ways in social movements: it fosters a sense of belonging and group cohesiveness, enhances visibility, recruits for the cause, and presents the collective views on the movement or cause free from censorship in dominant culture (Arrow, 2007). Arrow uses the examples of music’s mobilization of young

Americans to protest for American Civil Rights, Vietnam War and other vital demonstrations. Popular songs, such as *I Am Woman* were accessible to various audiences in Western(ized) societies. As Arrow notes, it did not matter if one purchased the single: it was heard on radio stations, used in television programs and commercials, seen on television and performed at rallies. Popular songs are heard by more women (and men) and Reddy's simple feminist message transcended the boundaries of feminists and "ordinary" women (Arrow, 2007).

The women Arrow encountered during her research said singing the song was a celebration of womanhood in itself; it helped create female bonds and was used for political ends at rallies and on International Women's Day. The song made women feel good about themselves, they felt stronger and were able to do things they never thought possible. One woman even divorced her husband because she came to realize her relationship was not based on love but on her own passive security. In concluding her article, Arrow explains, "popular culture can alert use to new sites of political power, and places where change is enacted" (226). Arrow quotes from Reddy, "to make the assumption that people who don't belong to a political party or political organization are not part of the political process, is an elitist and uninformed position" (226). This quote sums up a part of the feminist movement that really neglected the importance of everyday women to feminist goals. Wearing a dress and make-up, and compromising with your significant other does not mean that you are not a feminist. This line of thought left many women out of the feminist movement.

Framing Feminism: Empowering Girls Through Powerful Feminist Characters

The Simpsons

Matthew Henry (2007), in his article titled “‘Don’t Ask me, I’m Just a Girl’: Feminism, Female Identity and *The Simpsons*,” examines “the show’s engagement with and influence upon highly politicized issues in contemporary American culture” (273), specifically exploring the representation of women and how the show demonstrates the politics of the feminist movement through the articulations of a feminist sensibility in Marge Simpson, Selma Bouvier (Marge’s sister), and Lisa Simpson. Henry explains “the understandings of feminism in popular culture are imbued with a great deal of confusion and contradiction” (273). He believes that women today live in a conflicted state, torn between traditional values and progressive concepts.

A 1994 *Ms. Magazine* article “The Many Faces of Feminism” claimed “Lisa wages a one-girl revolution against cartoonland patriarchy” (Henry, 2007, 292). Lisa is consistently strong throughout the long running series. Henry notes “Lisa has inherited the successes of first- and second-wave feminists and has grown up with a faith in true equality; she is a political activist, a vegetarian, a voice of reason, and an avowed feminist” (295). In addition, Lisa is positioned as the moral center for *The Simpsons* which gives her a privileged position to discuss gender and feminist ideals (Henry, 2007, 295).

In concluding, Henry claims, “*The Simpsons* offer its viewers an image of youthful idealism, can-do individualism, and grass-roots activism in the service of contesting prevailing ideologies and providing alternative ones” (297). Quoting from

Barry Hodge, “*The Simpsons* doesn’t constitute an ‘out-and-out’ feminist text, but one of a feminine culture asserting its values within and against patriarchy” (Henry, 2007, 292).

Sex and the City

Sex and the City is a highly debated mainstream text. Some researchers argue that it holds feminist ideals while others view it as a backlash and a dismantling of feminism. Rebecca Brasfield (2007) says, “Carrie, Miranda, Samantha, and Charlotte represent a continuum of women’s views and dilemmas when it comes to sex, love, and dating” (132). Brasfield’s article argues that “*Sex and the City* unequivocally demonstrates a distinct school of feminist theory that is most often associated with liberal feminist politics and hegemonic feminist agendas” (132). Like Henry, Brasfield believes popular feminism fights against definitions and has an ability to address interlocking oppositions, especially between second-wave feminism and popular feminism.

Brasfield’s research on *Sex and the City* found that the show provides “an excellent example of how hegemonic feminism, looks, how it thinks, and what it does” (132). Thompson’s (2002) image of the second-wave feminist is “white middle-class women unwilling to be treated like second-class citizens in the boardroom, in education, or in bed” (338). This definition defines well the goals of the second-wave feminist movement, but also the women characters in *Sex and the City*. Brasfield cautions that female presence on television does not equate to visibility or liberatory feminism; rather she recommends that “*Sex and the City*, with its mass-based popularity and appeal, projects powerful images to audiences. When we fail to critically read and reread media presentations, we run the risk of internalizing and reproducing our own oppression” (138). There are so many notions of feminism and so many different feminist groups

fighting for different causes, that it makes it more difficult to align yourself with feminism. But popular feminism allows audiences to engage safely and sometimes playfully with a broad range of topics important to feminists. While this may not send audience members into action it can pique curiosity in feminist ideas which, in an age of internet laden—at your finger tips—texts, interested audience members can easily seek out information quickly and through a variety of texts learn about feminist discourses important to them.

Popular- and Postfeminism: The “New Backlash”

Sheryl Vint (2007) examines what she calls the “new backlash” in television series, *Star Maidens* (1976) and blockbuster films, *The Stepford Wives* (2004) and *Bewitched* (2005). In her discussion of the above mentioned media texts, Vint comments on how they illuminate absurdities in patriarchal gender discourses and discriminations. She says “these films, like *Star Maidens*, deal with the fact of feminism and women’s equality and yet simultaneously undermine feminism through the denial of structural gender discriminations” (162). Vint and Fauldi explain that the old backlash was Hollywood’s way of telling tales of women’s independence as unhappy, but Vint defines the new backlash as a realization that,

It is unlikely that women en masse will be forced back into the home and exclusively domestic roles, yet still tries to distance women from feminism and convince them that their lives should be focused around the heterosexual family, even if greater independence and outside work are part of this vision (162).

In concluding her article, Vint recommends that to bridge the gap between second- and third-wave feminism, it is important to return to the third-wave to see pleasures in consuming a variety of identities. Vint says,

we need to struggle to reconcile our present world with the narratives that we have inherited, acknowledging the possible pleasure in texts such as *The Stepford Wives* and *Bewitched* while at the same time being suspicious of the consolations they offer, a seductive but deeply misleading vision of the world in which we need no longer be vigilant, as our battles are long since won (168).

Coexisting Within: Femininity and Feminism

Mitra C. Emad's (2006) article titled "Reading Wonder Woman's Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation" traces the mythologies of Wonder Woman historically and culturally. Emad argues that "Wonder Woman's body as a cultural artifact represents specific gendered nationalisms with meanings that delineate an uneasy, often oppositional, blending of the separate spheres of femininity and nation" (955). In examining gendered and sexualized representations of nation and power positions, Emad poses two questions: one, "what happens when nationalism is depicted as feminine?" and two, "how is female power reigned in, even as it resists a politics of 'separate spheres' in which feminist and physical/national power cannot coexist" (957)?

Wonder Woman primarily saved other women from imminent death and destruction. She empowered the rescued women and encouraged them to discover their physical and economic strengths (Emad, 2006). The moral of the comic is that "women can empower themselves, changing from 'weak girls' to economically and sexually independent women" (Emad, 2006, 962). Marston, the original creator of Wonder Woman, articulated in 1943:

Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world. What woman lacks is the dominance of self assertive power to put over and enforce her love desires. I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal, and feminine in every other way. (Emad, 2006, 981).

This classic image of Wonder Woman was commented on by renowned feminist and founder of *Ms. Magazine* Gloria Steinem, as a woman who saved her. She notes that most women in comic books are dependent on male heroes to rescue them and provide a sense of purpose (Emad, 2006). Wonder Woman, on the other hand, Steinem thought, was amazing because she came to her powers naturally, she perfected her strength, speed, and dexterity to empower woman to believe in their own powers (Emad, 2006).

Because the Wonder Woman myth has been re-written four times, Emad notes that the most powerful images and storylines for the comic took place during Marston's creative reign and during the 1990s, when "Wonder Woman's toned and muscular body, her determined expression, and her functional costume appealed to an increasing female readership, women in their 20s who themselves sought 'body projects' that aligned femininity with physical power" (974). Again, as with the authors above, this brings into play the oppositions between femininity and feminism and activity and passivity. Wonder Woman's body is a site for interplay, Emad notes, of the "culturally oppositional spheres of femininity vs. (masculine) nation, private sexuality vs. public politics/war, and relationships vs. action in battle" (979).

While Wonder Woman is praised for her femininity and feminist ideals, bondage is a common theme that runs through the entire *Wonder Woman* comic series, from inception to present day. Wonder Woman frequently struggles to break free of bonds (Emad, 2006). As Molly Rhodes (2000) and Emad argue the representations of bondage not only attempt to place Wonder Woman in a less powerful role, but also demonstrate her consistent breaking out of ropes and chains, characterizing her as a "classic

dominatrix” (Emad, 2006, 981). Wonder Woman’s heavy metal bracelets and her escapes from bondage present her as a strong female captive (Rhondes, 2000). As dangerous as Wonder Woman’s body is her straddling of a masculine realm often describes the feminine world of peace and justice, “echoes the discourses of danger surrounding the women’s movement in the 1970s” (Emad, 2006, 968).

Girl Power Politics

Marnina Gonick (2006) identifies two main discourses, “Girl Power” and *Reviving Ophelia* (book, 1994), and how these discourses have organized girls. She examines the relationship these discourses have to popular feminism and “what the coexistence of the two discourses might mean for girls’ subjectivities and how girls engage with the contradictory identificatory possibilities of the two discourses in negotiating their gendered, raced, classed, and sexed identities” (2). In “Between “Girl Power” and “*Reviving Ophelia*”: Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject,” Gonick investigates “Girl Power” and *Reviving Ophelia* and how these discourses position girls in light of neoliberal policy and practice. She is interested in emerging forms of femininity linked to cultural ideals, individuality, and agency and how these are reflective of neoliberal policy and practices of social, economic, and political changes. Gonick’s argument is that “Girl Power and *Reviving Ophelia* participate in the production of the neoliberal girl subject with the former representing the idealized form of the self-determining individual and the latter personifying an anxiety about those who are unsuccessful in producing themselves in this way” (2).

Gonick asks five questions regarding the non-unified subjectivities of girls:

What are the political consequences for the forms of subjectivities made available to girls through these discourses? How are these discourses raced and classed? Who do they interpellate and in what ways? How are different girls positioned differently within them? And how are they implicated in the process by which modern notions of personhood and individuality began to be understood as forms of identification culturally available to and socially desirable for girls? (3).

Girl Power and *Reviving Ophelia* are often termed contradictory discourses; however Gonick's study found connections between them. She notes that there is a shift in the economy from production to consumption and consumption frequently privileges the feminine. We live in a society that, I believe, privileges the purchases of goods over the production of those goods. Production is often associated with the factory worker, but the purchase of goods elevates a person's status over others by economic and social means. We privilege those people who drive Lexus' over Fords and Porsche's over Chevrolet's. The way we dress says something about who we are, the higher classed our fashion sense the more likely people view us as powerful, successful and in control. These people also tend to be higher paid individuals. We live in a society where the appearance of a presidential candidate holds more stake in an election than the platform on which they stand. A society, that while production is essential to the survival of our culture industries and our nation, favours the people who can afford to purchase those goods and services. Feminism would love to witness a classless society, but ultimately academic feminism is limited to the white, middle-class, liberal majority.

Gonick states "Both Girl Power and *Reviving Ophelia* discourses emphasize young female subjectivities as projects that can be shaped by the individual rather than within a social collectivity" (18). Gonick equates Girl Power with modern day feminism and as McRobbie (2004) has summarized

female achievement is predicated not on feminism, but on female individualism, on success which seems to be based on the invitation to young women by various governments that they might now consider themselves free to compete in education and in work as privileged subjects of the new meritocracy (7).

Gonick discusses two main sources of girl power during the 1990s. First, Gonick illuminates the importance of the Riot Grrrl movement. She notes that the Riot Grrrl's used Girl Power as "a strategy of reclaiming the word girl using it strategically to distance themselves from the adult patriarchal worlds of status, hierarchies, and standards" (7). Working under the slogan "Grrrls need guitars" the Riot Grrrl movement celebrated "the fierce and aggressive potential of girls as well as reconstitution of girl culture as a positive force embracing self-expression through fashion, attitude, and a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach to cultural production" (Gonick, 2006, 7).

With third wave's many definitions and constantly changing goals, it incorporates popular feminism and postfeminism. It also includes underground movements of young women who extended their belief in second wave, but recognized battles needing improvement or already passed. As is very similar with my thesis work and popular feminism, Riot Grrrl's short entrance into mainstream culture (through movies like *Ten Things I Hate About You*, 1999) encouraged young women, such as myself, to see themselves as active producers of "knowledge, and as verbal and expressive dissenters" (Gonick, 2006, 7). While Riot Grrrls exploited hegemonic discourses of rebellion as youthful, these girls also defaced their own bodies to call attention to political, feminist actions and words and were often seen as conveying political messages through DIY culture and Punk Rock (Gonick, 2006). On the complete opposite side of the spectrum, the Spice Girls evolved Girl Power through mainstream commercial culture. In their

lyrics the Spice Girls call for equal rights and advocate the power of sisterhood (Gonick, 2006).

Driscoll (1999) argues that Girl Power is not positioned as “either it is or it isn’t” feminism (186). Rather, she argues that Girl Power messages declared by pop icons like the Spice Girls affect the way girls view “feminism.” Riot Grrrls underground status and disassociation with mainstream media outlets confined DIY politics to marginalized groups of young women. The Spice Girls, however, generated channels of communication about feminism enabling the everyday girl (one who may not understand feminist politics) to see links between feminism and mainstream popular culture (Gonick, 2006). As is common amongst postfeminist and popular feminist researchers, some of the key ingredients to popular feminism are espoused by pop icons, such as Beyonce Knowles, Alanis Morissette, Merideth Brooks, Gwen Stefani, Pink, Madonna, etc. Common themes include, inner strength, authenticity, being true to oneself and individuality. While these themes are not common to a collective, they are important to every girl. The girls in Fritzsche (2004) and Budgeon’s (1998) utilize notions of popular feminism to create positive representations of ideal femininity and the rejection of behaviours that did not suit their individual vision. In addition, Reay’s (2001) study found that girls who aligned themselves with the Spice Girls or their particular style of popular feminism gained social power and the confidence to transgress gender regimes.

Popular cultural texts became an effective way to stress feminist ideals within and after the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s. Celebrity feminists spoke to mass audiences and their discourses played an important role in the public acceptance of feminist goals. The real emphasis was on balancing the feminine/feminist dichotomy.

By instilling feminist ideals in the everyday girl the celebrity feminist shreds the boundaries between passive and active, consumer and producer, and feminine and feminist. Reproducing choreography and loudly singing songs was one way my friends and I enacted a celebration of our female identity. We may not have recognized the potential for political ends through song and dance at the time, but we formed a female collective celebrating being girls. The age we were when listening to songs like *Bitch* makes it hard to determine the immediate effects of the songs consciousness-raising means, but today, we can look back and see that we gained some measure of feminist consciousness from such songs, helping us to create a sense of self-worth and self-determination. We are powerful in the decisions we make, the careers we have chosen and our overall demeanor. When I was younger I would let my brother walk all over me. Even though my brother and I were young and our fights centered around who ate the last Wagon Wheel (a popular kid's chocolate treat), I remember hitting a point when Alanis Morissette and Meredith Brooks were popular. Their lyrics and "angry rock" woman style empowered me to be stronger and to take control and eat that last Wagon Wheel without fear of retribution.

The femininity versus feminist polarity is collapsing alongside the active/passive binary. These oppositions are merging together as girls today benefit from the fights our mothers have battled. While this by no means demonstrates a postfeminist culture in particular, it does illustrate the strengths of popular feminism and its effects on young women. Many girls engage with feminist ideas through media texts and in their everyday lives, often without identifying or recognizing themselves as feminists. As Le Masurier (2007) discovered, "there has been a historical trajectory of women who engage with

feminism in this way, both throughout the period of the second wave and now” (195). The importance of celebrity feminists and female producers of knowledge and creative works purchased or viewed by girls is essential to the survival of the movement. Today’s girls come to feminism in their own way, not necessarily through political action or collective grouping as these are less evident, but through popular culture. Whether rejected or warmly welcomed, we cannot judge the way a girl finds female enlightenment. Recognizing that the way a person looks and sometimes behaves has little to do with feminism will help generate positive responses to popular feminism. Whether I enjoy spending time with my fiancée or wearing pretty dresses has little to do with my particular views on feminism. I would consider myself to be extremely feminine, but I am still a feminist. How do I negotiate these contradictions? I don’t. They are no longer two ends of the spectrum; I can remain feminine and keep my feminist attitude.

Chapter 3

Discourse and Semiotic Analysis: Ways of seeing, ways of knowing, ways of interpreting

The media have a huge influence on the way the world around us is defined and also on our definitions of ourselves.

– Susan Redman and Julie Taylor (2006, 159)

The aim of this thesis is to discuss how popular feminism is represented in the media and in turn how popular feminism resonates with female youth. This study attempts to answer two major questions: 1) what have certain music videos, songs and pop artists offered me in the way of feminist instructions?; and 2) what have I taken from these as a form of feminist politics?

The Method

Gathering magazines from friends, family and peers proved successful as I gathered a wide array of magazines aimed at young women, from beauty to tabloid to everything in between. Of the 62 magazines collected I specifically examined 13. These were issues of *CosmoGirl*, *Seventeen*, *YM*, *Elle Girl*, and *Cosmopolitan*. These particular magazines were chosen because they represent the most popular girl and young women magazines on the market today and during my youth. I examined 2 issues of *CosmoGirl* (December 2003/March 2007), two issues of *Seventeen* (December 2003/January, 2004), four issues of *YM* (September 2002/November 2003/December 2003/May 2004), two issues of *Elle Girl* (August 2004/April 2005), and two issues of *Cosmopolitan* (November 2004/April 2005). *Cosmopolitan* appears a little out of the ordinary in comparison to the vast majority of the magazines I selected and thus I must provide my reasons for choosing these two particular issues. These two issue of *Cosmopolitan* feature youth actress Sarah Michelle Gellar (former star of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and pop punk skater girl Avril Lavigne. These two women are important because they have

played strong women in music and television. Buffy destroyed vampires and Lavigne rocked her way to success through a genre typically dominated by male punk rockers.

While the study typically focuses on my understanding and coming to feminism through MuchMusic and teen magazines, the gathering of said material came from recent years. I was able to gather a variety of magazines from early 2000 and on, but as I have explained the personal years that I focus on are 1994 to 2000. While I have little in the way of magazines directly from this time I ambled through a number of magazines and chose ones not only directly relevant to my research, but most similar to my memories and experiences reading female mags with my friends. This is another reason I came to choose the above listed magazines. They all demonstrate my experiences with my friends and my coming to understand feminist politics through strong female youth.

In addition to collecting and examining female magazines, I also studied MuchMusic's very popular television program *MuchOnDemand (MOD)*. I taped *MOD* from January 15th, 2007 to April 9th, 2007, one episode weekly for a total of 13 episodes. These became less relevant as the project progressed but as will be evident in the next chapter, music videos and lyrics are important to the study of popular feminism and were important to my understanding of a popular feminist uprising of girl power in my tween and early teen years. Listening to the radio is all well and good if you can understand what lyrics mean or even hear what is being conveyed, but the visual element of MuchMusic brought the words to life. Music videos stressed the words and meaning of the song to the viewer. This method provided me with a better understanding of what artists like Gwen Stefani and Madonna were trying to convey through music and led me to a place of understanding and believing in a girl power movement. Without my

favourite MuchMusic program *MOD* I may have never come to feminism. Being a visual person the music videos were the main way that I understood what was being said in the lyrics and thus the strength of the song came through when I watched the televised versions of Madonna, No Doubt, the Spice Girls, Meredith Brooks and Alanis Morissette.

The personal years that I am examining, 1994 to 2000, were particularly life changing for me. I would consider these years to be my most formative outside of being a young child learning new things for the first time. During the years between 1994 and 2000 I came into contact, for the first time, with first kisses, peer pressure, embarrassing moments, self-consciousness, self-esteem issues, and much more. These experiences and changes are not solely mine but are fairly well-known and experienced by most girls living in the Western world. And thus, examining magazines and television programs significant to my youth, I am able to link my experiences with popular culture to a more general popular feminism incorporated into those media formats.

Magazines

In analyzing magazines I considered headlines, editors' letters and comments, girls' contributions, opinion articles, embarrassing moments, and descriptive news articles. Each of these were included because popular feminism is everywhere within girls' magazines. Each of these plays a particular role in the magazine and it is important to examine all forms of attraction to articles and reasons for writing in to magazines. As Redman and Taylor (2006) suggest, headlines should be included in textual analyses of magazines because "they are designed to attract the attention of readers and often summarize the content of the text that follows" (160). Articles written and submitted by everyday girls, embarrassing moments, and stories featuring extraordinary girl

achievements were included in the magazine study as they provided a rich source of data providing insights into the attitudes and beliefs of “average” mainstream feminist girls. The “average” girl is one who partakes in everyday mainstream activities such as shopping, reading teen magazines, watching popular television programs, such as *Beverly Hills, 90210*. The “average” girl is one who dresses in the current fashion trends shown throughout the teen magazines and in her favourite popular television shows. She often wears make-up, goes on dates, hangs out with friends, and generally, for the most part has a good home life. She will typically be white, middle-class and well educated.

Music Videos, Music Celebrities and Music Lyrics

Music videos, musical celebrities and music lyrics are all important to girls’ popular culture. In the process of analyzing the above, I considered lyrical lines (one line at a time), celebrity styles (hairstyle, makeup, clothing), movement and camera angles (submissive, passive, sexual, ideological), video locations (i.e. dark alleys), behaviour, attitude and mannerisms (air punches, air kicks, aggressive behaviour) and extras (those people surrounding the celebrity who are not doing the singing, such as backup dancers). Each of these elements was included because popular feminism is often associated with individualism and a female gaze. The style of the celebrity, their lyrics, and the music video all play an important role in how girls will understand the music lyrics. Visual images associated with lyrics can often change the way messages are read and also make lyrics appear more aggressive or feminist than they actually are. Each of these elements plays a role in how the artist and their music will be perceived and how their message will be received by their target audience.

Data Analysis

The analytical approach used for this thesis project is qualitative and focuses on textual analysis. Textual analysis is often used as an umbrella term for a variety of different methods analyzing text. Textual analysis is just one method to emerge from hermeneutics, “a tradition of humanist criticism of religious and literary texts” often deemed to have the “greatest cultural value” (Baran & Davis, 2003, 230). While hermeneutics was applied solely to high culture, or cultural texts deemed to have the highest value, in the late 20th and 21st centuries’ textual analysis focuses on many forms of culture, especially the study of media texts, such as music lyrics, television images, and advertising. Hermeneutics and the new form of textual analysis, Baran and Davis (2003) note, “share a common purpose: to criticize old and new cultural practices so that those most deserving of attention can be identified and explicated and the less deserving can be dismissed” (230). The flaw here is who decides what is “worthy” of study? I deem popular feminism to be worthy of study because I feel it has a particular influence on my daily life; however others, usually second wave feminists, may feel that popular feminism is part of a backlash era which should not be discussed or considered important.

Textual analysis is a method with many definitions. The many varieties summed up through textual analysis include discourse analysis, semiotic analysis, content analysis, conversation analysis, and schema analysis. Each focuses on text. The word “text” as I use it throughout this study means “all symbolic activities, written, oral, or nonverbal” (Wood, 2004, 335). Text includes more than just vocal conversation or visual words, text incorporates “images as well as material artifacts such as clothes, hairstyle, buildings, architectural plans, maps and so on” (Ali, 2004, 271). This definition of “text”

will be useful for understanding the next two data chapters as each of these inclusions is analyzed as a form of representation in music videos, musical artists, music lyrics, editors' letters, magazine articles, and magazine advertisements.

I draw upon ideas from semiotics and discourse analysis to complete my study of popular feminism in mainstream girls' culture magazines and music television programming. As Redman and Taylor (2006) describe, "Semiotics is the study of signs and the social production of meaning through sign systems" (160). Semiotics is a social constructionist theory and is concerned with theories of knowledge (Ali, 2004). There are two major elements to semiotic analysis. First, "an approach which grew out of linguistics and the work of Saussure (1960) and Barthes (1972)" and second, "a discursive approach developed from the work of Foucault" (Redman & Taylor, 2006, 159-160). Discourse analysis is neither a qualitative or quantitative research method. It is a way of questioning and enables the ontological and epistemological assumptions of popular feminism to surface. In other words, conducting a discourse analysis will reveal classifications distributed by media producers and ways to decode hidden relations of power.

Semiotics and discourse analysis are postmodern research methods consisting of my own interpretation of the text. As Rose (2001) points out, we live in a postmodern society where visuals are central. She says, "in postmodernity, it is often argued, the modern relation between seeing and true knowing has been broken" (Rose, 2001, 8). In discussing simulacrum, Rose comments on Baudrillard's work. She says,

Baudrillard argued that in postmodernity it was no longer possible to make a distinction between the real and the unreal; images had become detached

from any certain relation to a real world with the result that we now live in a scopic regime dominated by simulations (8).

Because of their basis in feminist research and postmodernity, semiotics and discourse analysis revealed themselves as the most relevant methods for studying popular feminism in mainstream girls' culture.

Semiotic Analysis

Suki Ali (2004) says that “ways of seeing are not neutral matters of biology, but are structured in various ways that create social differences” (266). Our ways of seeing play a major role in identity formation (Ali, 2004). We do not all see the same. We do not all read the same. My data chapters are an investigation of representation. Textual analyses and especially those conducted through the visual have many angles of study. One might consider investigating the site of production, audience consumption, participant reception analysis and representation (Ali, 2004). By focusing on representation I analyze the medium itself. I analyze the way objects and people are positioned on the page in advertisements and the way objects and people are dressed, or move in moving images. I examine the composition, the hidden dialogues (such as dual marketing approaches and connotative interpretations), and so on to come to an understanding of how popular feminism is represented within mainstream girls' culture and how it resonates within my everyday life. In concluding this study, the representation of popular feminism studied through semiotic analysis will help to explain how popular feminism might affect or be understood by girls participating in a girls' culture like my own.

Still images, music, and moving images “have made an enormous impact on public consciousness, recording and helping shape perception of key historical moments” (Ali, 2004, 268). This is why it is important to examine the representation of popular feminism in mainstream cultural products such as magazines. Helen Reddy’s song *I Am Woman* became a national anthem for the second wave, as discussed in chapter 2. The song made women feel powerful and gave them strength they never recognized they had. The song also represented women from all over the Western world, not just those people who participated in the second wave movement. The way women felt about this song is also based in interpretation. Semiotic analysis relies on personal interpretation and personal definitions of words and images and is “less concerned with objectivity and generalizability” (Ali, 2004, 272). As Slater (1998) has discussed, “semiotics is all theory and little method, providing a powerful framework for analysis and few practical guidelines for rigorously employing it” (238). Postmodern studies reject notions of objectivity and rigor and focus on subjectivity and analysis which makes using semiotic analysis a good feminist approach. Slater also points out that semiotics is essentially preoccupied with the process of interpretation, avoiding the claims to on objectivity often desired by content analysts. Interpretation is not fixed either. It is fluid based on how we change and learn. Modernists would argue that we read media messages the same way, the preferred way, but, this is rarely the case. This case has been made by Hall (1980) who argues that producers may encode messages with a preferred reading, but consumers decode those same messages in differing or unexpected ways based on social, political, economical and cultural experiences.

In order to conduct a successful semiotic analysis I asked myself four main questions about each image, music video, advertisement and magazine text. These questions came from an article called “Semiotics and Iconography” by Theo Van Leeuwen (2001). As Van Leeuwen (2001) discusses, the visual semiotics of Barthes asks two fundamental questions important to the study of representation and Hall’s discussion above on decoding. First, “what do images represent and how?” and second, “what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in images stand for?” (Van Leeuwen, 2001, 92). Two other questions are also important when analyzing texts: 1) “Who and what are the (kinds of) people, places and things depicted, and how do we recognize them as such?” and 2) “What ideas and values do we associate with these depicted people, places and things, and what is it that allows us to do so?” (Van Leeuwen, 2001, 92). Barthes’ (1972) visual semiotics examines the layering of meaning. The first layer is denotation, the people, places or things that are more straightforward. A car at the denotative layer is a car; it takes us from point A to point B. The second layer is connotation, the interpretive meaning of signs or sign systems. This layer questions, “What ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?” (Van Leeuwen, 2001, 94). As Van Leeuwen suggests, “in the age of post-modernism a conscious use of symbols and intertextual references seems to have become more acceptable again” (2001, 110). This is most evident in Madonna’s use of her name as a religious figure and her use of religious icons and symbols linked to her less than religious morals.

Semiotics, also referred to as semiology, offers analytical tools for interpreting or deciphering images and tracing the image’s message to a broader system of signs and/or

meanings (Rose, 2001). In order to gather meaning from an image, the researcher must examine the following: ideology, signs, referents, icons, symbols, layers of meaning (denotative, connotative), sub-layers of meaning (metonymic and synecdochal), codes, mythology, and ways of reading (dominant/preferred, negotiated, and oppositional). Rose (2001) states, “[s]emiologists depend on a definition of science that contrasts scientific knowledge with ideology” (70). With regards to representation, ideology is concerned with those messages reflecting notions of power and is “centrally concerned with the social effects of meaning” (Rose, 2001, 70). Baran and Davis quote Hall’s (1981) definition of ideology as “those images, concepts, and premises which provide frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of some aspect of social existence” (233). Magazines were common reading material for women to learn their place in society, to learn to be mothers and marketed towards for such products as cooking utensils and cleaning products. Today however, as will be discussed in chapter 5, this is no longer strictly the case. Magazines are important texts that help girls understand the importance of being strong individuals. The magazines I read during my tween and teen years taught me a lot about life and myself. Magazines like *Seventeen*, *YM* and *People* presented me with stories about the achievements of “average” youth like myself. I read inspirational stories written by other girls and about celebrities’ humanitarian adventures. These magazines addressed my concerns as a marginalized girl growing up in a new era designed to benefit from female empowerment, and the importance of pushing through the disadvantages of being a woman.

Signs, according to Saussure (1966) are the basic units of language and consist of two parts, the signifier and the signified. The signified is a concept or object and the signifier is the sound or image associated with said concept or object (Saussure, 1966). Rose explains that referents are “the actual object in the world to which the sign is related” (74). Iconic signs “represent the signified by...having a likeness to it” (Rose, 2001, 78) and symbolic signs represent other notions similar to the connotative layer of meaning (Rose, 2001). Metonymic sub-meanings are signs which are associated with something else, “which then represents that something else” (Rose, 2001, 82). Synecdochal connotative meanings are defined by Rose as a sign that “is either a part of something standing in for a whole, or a whole representing a part” (82). By examining the signs in music videos and magazines I can identify the various meanings and layers of meaning which come through in the text. I expect to find signs of popular feminism and also dual marketing approaches, such as Madonna’s monocle being a symbol of 1920s lesbianism.

Codes are a “set of conventionalized ways of making meaning that are specific to particular groups of people” (Rose, 2001, 88). For example, air kicks, aggressive behaviour, sexuality, control, etc. are codes of popular feminism. Mythology is closely linked to denotative and connotative layers of meaning. Myth is a “second-order semiological system” (Barthes, 1972, 123). Barthes (1972) describes, mythology as “a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is a historical science: it studies ideas-in-form” (112). Barthes (1972) says, “myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters [the] message” (117). Coding meaning and examining the myths presented in the texts I will better be

able to understand and explain the moments and images of popular feminist activities and how I read such activities.

In sum, the use of semiotics and visual materials assists in decoding and understanding popular feminist images from various perspectives. Based on my knowledge, previous experiences and living the life of a popular feminist in mainstream girls' culture, I feel that these signs are readily available to and aimed directly at me. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) found, magazines typically veered toward the younger audience. The 12 year old girl reading the magazine is happy to read about the life of a 16 year old and as Mitchell and Reid-Walsh point out there is a progression of magazine reading in the sense that tween girls might start out reading *Tiger Beat* and move their way up in reading to something more adult-like, such as *Glamour*. *Teen People* for example is aimed towards the 12 to 21 target market. Approximately 80 percent of their readership is female and 20 percent male (Unicef.org). The male readers are sometimes an anomaly when it comes to female youth magazines, but it has been stated that *Teen People* attempts to give a voice to marginalized groups, such as gay teens, racial minorities and disadvantaged youth (Unicef.org). While this might be the direct target market for *Teen People*, TMPA, the producer of *bliss*, *HOT*, *CosmoGirl*, and *mizz* are more interested in attracting whatever reader they can get. They do not offer an age rating for their magazines, but through audience research they have found that magazine readers buy the magazine based on the title of the articles on the cover page. The magazine is purchased because the individual identifies with the target audience rather than necessarily belonging to it. Therefore, they discovered that the older the topics the more they can essentially drag out of the youth market because younger girls are always

interested in advanced topics, such as those they have yet to experience, and the older individual will have a more direct relation to the article itself (tmap.org).

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis, explains Tonkiss (2004), “takes its place within a larger body of social and cultural research that is concerned with the production of meaning through talk and texts” (373). Discourse analysis has affinities with conversation analysis and semiotics as discussed above (Tonkiss, 2004). Discourse analysis relies strongly on language as a complex medium in “a domain in which people’s knowledge of the social world is actively shaped” (Tonkiss, 2004, 378). Because language is complex, Tonkiss explains that discourse analysis sees language as “constructing and organizing the terms in which we understand social reality” (2004, 378). Researchers utilizing discourse analysis are typically interested in complex language structures and texts as sites that form and reproduce social meanings and social identities (Tonkiss, 2004).

What is discourse? Tonkiss defines discourse as,

A single utterance or speech act (from a fragment of talk to a private conversation to a political speech) or to a systematic ordering of language involving certain rules, terminology and conventions (as in legal discourse). This second definition allows researchers to analyze how discourses *inscribe* specific ways of speaking and understanding (373) (*italics in original*).

In relation to the semiotic analysis of representation, discourse analysis also incorporates representation as a means of understanding how discourse is understood within a culture. Discourse or texts are a way of representing how knowledge is constructed about a particular topic, such as popular feminism. For Foucault discourse “does not refer simply to language or speech but to the way language works to organize fields of knowledge and

practice” (Tonkiss, 2004, 374). As Mills (2003) establishes, Foucault’s discourse “does not simply translate reality into language; rather discourse should be seen as a system which structures the way that we perceive reality” (55). Mills quotes from Foucault saying, “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality” (57). This is certainly the case for feminism. Second wave goals and feminists were negatively portrayed in mainstream discourses and the term feminist was associated with anti-sex, anti-marriage, anti-heterosexuality and so forth. By incorporating some goals into popular culture, they were made safe and playful. The power and danger once found in discourses of feminism has been made fun by producers of popular culture.

Semiotics alone cannot begin to define how representations of popular feminism have made its way into girls’ culture because it lacks the ability to explain the results of the analysis. The study must draw on other sources to explain assumptions or conclusions to the analysis, such as drawing on feminist social theories and earlier studies on popular feminism for popular or important discourses. As Rose (2001) states “all meanings are relational not only within the image but also in relation to other images and to broader dominant codes, referent systems and mythologies” (91). Semiotic analyses tend to focus on the image and thus, less attention is paid to the audience or reflexivity. Because chapter 6 focuses on popular feminism’s positive uses for girls’ today, it is important to move beyond semiotics to include discourse analysis. It is important to conduct a discourse analysis of popular feminist representations in popular culture in

order to see how these particular representations shape the ways girls, specifically, and institutions generally define and respond to popular feminist discourses in mainstream media. In order to understand the various and sometimes unexpected ways audience members decode messages I must take a discursive approach in addition to a semiotic one.

There are no strict rules for conducting a discourse analysis; as with semiotics it is based in interpretation. However, there are core themes and techniques to help me along the way. Tonkiss suggests that the analyst move through three stages: 1) selecting and approaching the data, 2) sorting, coding and analyzing the data, and 3) presenting and analyzing the data. My discourse analysis isn't primarily looking for the effects of popular feminism on girls in general as it is looking at the way popular feminism is constructed and represented within mainstream popular culture and the possible readings and attitudes that might be adopted because of positive popular feminist texts. Tonkiss recommends that researchers ask themselves the following five questions: 1) "what is the research about?" 2) "What are my data?" 3) "How will I select and gather the data?" 4) "How will I handle and analyze the data?" and 5) "How will I present my findings?" (376). The remainder of this section will outline my answers to these questions to give the reader a better understanding of how the following two chapters make certain claims and how I analyzed music lyrics and magazine articles.

I am looking at popular feminist identities, media representations of popular feminist issues and/or ideas and attitudes towards popular feminism within mainstream girls' culture. As described previously, I have collected data from a number of sources. These include popular girls' magazines, such as *Seventeen* and *YM*, MuchMusic's

popular show *MOD*, personal accounts and experiences from my own youth, and press reports and academic analyses. Discourse analysis does not encourage the researcher to examine a number of texts, but to examine texts that are relevant to the research topics, which is why these few magazines and musical lyrics were significant. As will become evident through reading the next two chapters, I have extracted the richest sources of data in relation to my life for analysis. As Tonkiss says, “it is usually more appropriate and more informative to be selective in relation to the data, extracting those sections that provide the richest source of analytical material” (377).

By first examining previous research on girl culture—particularly the common themes of passivity, bedroom culture, ideologies of femininity and representations of women in music—I was able to identify key themes for and against “typical” girl representations. Jumping off from third wave feminism and the most recent literature on popular feminism I identified key themes, discourses and arguments to look out for when analyzing the texts. Some examples include androgyny, transgenderism, homosexuality (or possible queer readings), female solidarity and friendships, empowering words of encouragement from girls to other girls, and the importance of financial and educational independence. I also looked for variations in the text, sometimes finding silences or how popular feminism was played out within texts and then reverted to traditional means of female culture when the magazine article or music video was completed. Identifying key themes, looking for variation and noticing silences were all recommendations made by Tonkiss. With regards to these recommendations, Tonkiss notes that “discourse analysis is an interpretive process that relies on close study of specific texts, and therefore does not lend itself to hard-and-fast ‘rules’ of method” (378). In addition, she says, “the

tactics that you adopt as an analyst come from engagement with the data themselves, rather than from any textbook approach” (Tonkiss, 2004, 378). Thus, I accepted her strategies and found them useful, but at the same time, these were not relevant in all circumstances.

Rather than attempting to offer a “true” or objective reading (both rejected by postmodernity) of the selected texts, in the following two chapters, I aim to provide an insightful, useful, and critical interpretation of popular feminism and its representations within mainstream girls’ culture in order to offer some ways for thinking about girls engagement with popular feminist discourses. Tonkiss describes that “a critical and open stance towards data and analysis may...be understood as part of a reflexive approach to social research” (380). In aiming to be reflexive in my research practices, I questioned my own assumptions, attempted to banish all preconceptions, and considered how the research might work to engage mainstream girls’ in a discourse different from previous generations.

My Personal Accounts

As O’Reilly-Scanlon and Dwyer (2005) suggest, “identity as the total concept of self is personal because it is a sense of ‘I-ness,’ but it is also social, for it includes ‘we-ness,’ or one’s collective identity” (80). In studying popular feminism in girls’ culture and to a major extent within my own culture I was looking to see how my friends and I built our feminist identities through the consumption of popular feminist texts. As O’Reilly-Scanlon and Dwyer discuss “this symbiotic relationship of what we remember, how we construct our memories, and how we *re-member and re-construct* our pasts can provide us with clues as to the formation of our identities” (2005, 82, italics in original). With these things in mind, I came to see that it is essential, as I am discussing and utilizing my own girls’ culture that I need to incorporate my girlhood memories

and experiences to better strengthen and deepen the understandings of popular feminism with girls' culture and how that may mold a girls identity.

I live the life of the “average” girl culture fanatic. I am—as I have described as the “average” mainstream girl—white, middle class and well educated. Because I live mainstream girls' culture everyday, who better to explain or examine a culture than those who live it personally? Being completely and wholly apart of mainstream girls' culture makes me, I believe, qualified enough to write about it by using some of my experiences in consuming popular culture to lend credence to my arguments. My experiences as a girl had left me questioning the impact my tween and teen years had on my identity as part feminist and part girly girl and thus I feel that this questioning of how I came to be is the basis of my research. The discussions of me and my personal accounts have generated and shaped my thesis arguments so in order to bring the project full circle I needed to incorporate some of my stories.

As a girl, I tend to focus my aesthetic efforts on those most popular on my favourite television programs and demonstrated through celebrity trends outlined in the magazines. While I do have my own comfortable style, most of my enjoyment in consuming media texts and girl culture activities comes from my active engagement with magazines, television and internet. My feminist mindset also comes from my engagement with media texts. Without these texts I may have not come to feminism at all and I never truly understood or identified with the second wave movement to the extent that other women, such as my mother and aunts have.

My personal accounts are minimal in size within this thesis, but they are a huge influence on how I am writing. I have taken the elements of my popular mainstream

girls' culture and my personal experiences with popular feminism to develop my main arguments. I use personal accounts throughout as examples of how certain texts, such as Madonna's music videos, affected my understanding of feminism and how I have come to find that the Madonna School of Feminism is particularly relevant to my everyday life. My experiences with popular culture are the reason for my thesis topic and thus they are important to incorporate along the way. Throughout the remainder of this thesis I will thread personal accounts of my life in the data chapters used as examples of how I came to understand feminism.

My goal is to speak for a more rounded girls' culture and to be able to make some distinct conclusions and assumptions of my own girl group and thus using a mixture of semiotic analysis, discourse analysis and memory work only seems too prevalent. While the tidbits of experiences and examples may appear unnuanced they are strategically placed and designed to elevate the importance of childhood and youthhood afterlife and the memories that serve my understanding of gender politics and identity in play. These examples helped me draw out conclusions of how reading feminism as a method and being a popular feminist come from positive media demonstrations and empowering female artists.

Chapter 4

Music Television, Music Lyrics, Music Celebrities: Popular feminism and female artists

Girls have often been positioned as passive consumers of music, but music actually opens up avenues for girls' feminist thinking and expression. I first came to feminism through popular music. You may be asking yourself how passivity functions in relation to popular feminism since the terms appear to be at odds with each other. Much like the issues taken up between popular culture and feminism by second wave feminists, girls have frequently been defined as passive: passive listeners, passive viewers, sexually passive, and so forth. Music, and rock music in particular, has been a site for these ideological and stereotypical representations of what girls can and cannot be. Passivity is associated with femininity and action with feminism; however, in my view of popular music, girls can be all of these things at once. There is no longer a division between passivity and the feminine and activity and the feminist. The idea of passivity is challenged by popular feminists. Girls question why they are presented as such, and thus become active in creating a new understanding of girlhood; as did the Riot Grrrl bands of the early 1990s.

Music and music television provides an opportunity for teenage girls to engage with popular music they find appealing to their tastes and artists who illustrate them as active participants and cultural producers. For me these artists were Madonna, the Spice Girls, Alanis Morissette, Gwen Stefani, Meredith Brooks, Sarah McLachlan and Fiona Apple.

MuchMusic and MTV subscribe to the top 100 and producers focus more time on the top 40. This selection entails everything considered mainstream and popular from rap artist 50 Cent to R&B musicians like Usher and "pop tarts" Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson. These stations play rock and alternative artists such as Nickelback and Marilyn

Manson and “angry women rockers” like Alanis Morissette and Meredith Brooks. When we often think of the mainstream we think of pop idols loved by tween girls, but my mainstream culture is much more than that. In fact, my mainstream culture incorporates many different subcultures all shown through music programming. So, while mainstream culture is often considered degraded, it is essentially made up of a variety of popular discourses and “sub” or “counter” cultures.

Youth cultures reference some form of musical appreciation and style, such as the Goths in Hodkinson’s work (1994), the riot grrrls of Shilt’s article (2003) and the mods and the punks described by McRobbie (1998). Musical choice dictates television viewing practices, dress, behaviour and speech. While there has been an overemphasis in the research on subcultural capital and the musical stylings of these subcultures, mainstream culture, too, has its roots in music. The musical tastes of adolescent teens and tweens who have adopted mainstream idols as authority figures are connected through television programming, especially MuchMusic in Canada and MTV in the United States and around the world. The construction of a youth culture is born from particular musical tastes and styles, such as the Goths in Paul Hodkinson’s (2004) work, the Gabbers in Gerrit van der Rijt (2000) and colleagues’ work on *The Music Factory* (TMF), and Frith and McRobbie’s (1978) bedroom culture.

In this chapter, I outline the ways music television programs and music, in general, reflect a postmodern, popular feminist perspective through notions of gender and sexuality, ideological notions of femininity, and feminist goals and ideals. I focus on the ways music television, videos and lyrics incorporate these ideas and how music television programming maintains and contributes to notions of identity, especially the one I created

for myself and the popular feminist group identity to which I belonged. Research has previously focused on these aspects, but what is unique or important is how viewers, such as myself, use models to negotiate agency, create identity, and understand sexual repertoires. The viewers I am describing here are not passive audience members who accept dominant ideologies, but are active audience participants partaking in a popular feminist phenomenon. We are able to play with popular discourses and decode messages through a diversity of means, especially with a popular feminist eye.

According to Hawkins and colleagues (2001), “‘active’ television viewing has meant (among other things) selective exposure to types of content, attention to that content, and several different kinds of other activities during viewing itself” (238). It has been found that individuals “actively seek out mass media experiences that can meet their cognitive, social, or emotional needs” (Hawkins, et al., 2001, 239). This is the goal of the magazines I discussed previously. The editors/writers produce stories of relevance to a particularly female audience. They do not expect that the person purchasing the magazine will have a direct experience or belong to a particular group, but will identify with the title on the cover page or be interested in its content. Therefore, as Hawkins et al. note, individuals are relatively aware of their needs and can be seen meeting their needs through mass produced texts and communication. As Srinivas (2002) has found—and similar to the way my girlfriends and I viewed television and read magazines—“interactions with others—known and unknown—as well as relationships with real-world settings and stars provide audience members with prisms through which they ‘see’ the film” (172). Active audiences are not silent in their viewing habits per se, they are vocal in their intentions to view/read and are vocal with others with similar interests to them

(Hawkins et al., 2001, Srinivas, 2002). My friends and I were very much like this. We were active audience members criticizing beauty ideologies, openly discussing and demonstrating girl power attitudes and just generally reading and viewing together.

In addition to the active audiences I outline the ways music television programs and music in general, reflect and adopt particular notions of friendship, gender, and sexuality, as part of creating a self and group identity. I focus on the ways music television, videos, and lyrics of my favourite artists incorporate these ideas from a popular feminist lens and how music television programming maintains and contributes to these notions. While research has previously focused on these aspects, what is unique or important is how viewers like me and my friends, use these angles to negotiate agency, maintain friendships, and create positive group and self identities.

Music television programming is a postmodern phenomenon and as such has qualities which are important to the study of community (imagined or otherwise) as well as deconstructing messages, subverting texts, and transgressing typical state norms. As Kaplan (1987) explains, “the very existence of different gazes and gender address on MTV, arising as they do from the specificities of the televisual apparatus...and from the cultural codes governing America today, is part of what makes MTV a postmodernist phenomenon” (89). Controlling the gaze and offering more than one gaze is evident when discussing Madonna’s 1989 music video *Express Yourself* (below). Kaplan continues on to note that music television channels refuse the presentation of one dominant, male, gender address. Rather, she notes that MTV “constructs several different kinds of gender address and modes of representing sexuality, several different positions for the spectator to take up in relation to sexual difference” (89). This means

that the popular feminist voice is played alongside the “cock-rocker’s” aggressive sexualized music videos. There is sometimes a genderless address to MTV and MuchMusic, which allows many voices and conflicting ideas to be presented. This idea of multiple “truths” or notions is a postmodern trait.

This chapter incorporates an understanding of popular feminist perspectives, such as how audience members respond to music television in complex ways, breaking boundaries between activity/passivity and feminine/feminist. This is demonstrated through the examination of a variety of music television texts from my youth to articulate the complexities within the shows my friends and I watched, such as *Total Request Live* (TRL) on MTV and *MuchOnDemand* (MOD) on MuchMusic. The analysis of musical texts and the use of my own girlhood experiences demonstrate active media consumption and how popular feminist artists changed my thinking.

Background: Representations of Girls

The passive female viewer is a common trope evidenced by scholars and media effects research, such as Mazzarella (1999), Dohnt and Tiggemann (2006), and Browne and Hamilton-Giaschritsis (2005). However, it is my personal belief that passively consuming is not an effective description of tween and teenage habits. Before the invention of music television, Frith and McRobbie (1978) examined musical stylings and lyrics in rock music pertaining most specifically to the demonstration and explicitness of sexuality. Rock’s sexual expression, these authors note, “draws on and articulates the psychological and physical tensions of adolescence, it accompanies the moment when boys and girls learn their repertoire of public sexual behaviour” (Frith & McRobbie, 1978, 371). Frith and McRobbie note that there are distinct limitations to females in the

rock music industry; males dominate the instrumentation and females lead in the vocal. Gottlieb and Wald (1994) commented that women were encouraged to sound more feminine by toning down their music, through the application of “softer sounds” and contributing to their image. Thus, women performers’ cosmetic production accentuated image above substance. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, feminist artists dispose of the importance of image over substance—or the utilization of image to a dramatic effect such as Stefani—and such artists are still recognized today for contributing to feminist movements, such as Helen Reddy, and for courageously changing the roles of females in rock music, such as Alanis Morissette.

In “cock rock,” male musicians’ lyrics describe or inflate sexual encounters and use double entendres and females are construed as either sexually aggressive or sexually repressed. Thus women are seen to be “possessive, after a husband, anti-freedom, the ultimate restriction” (Frith & McRobbie, 1978, 374). The teenybop idol sings songs of old romantic conventions, with an image based around the notion of the boy next door (Frith & McRobbie, 1978). Teenybop forms play “on notions of female sexuality as serious, diffuse, and employing total emotional commitment,” the absolute reverse of the traditional “cock rocker’s” phallic sexual expression of power and control (Frith & McRobbie, 1978, 375). Females are positioned as inert listeners while males are efficacious performers (Frith & McRobbie, 1978). Frith and McRobbie note that “girls are encouraged from all directions to interpret their sexuality in terms of romance, to give priority to notions of love, feeling, commitment, the moment of bliss” (378-379). Madonna, and in particular her 1989 music video *Express Yourself*, transgresses

traditional patriarchal notions, as discussed below, and has changed the way women view themselves sexually.

Bayton (1988) discovered through interviews with women musicians that most girls are encouraged to learn classical music appreciation and play such instruments as the piano or violin. Bayton found that women learning an instrument outside of their typical domain of classical music were alone in their learning process, where boys would come together and amble through records and stylings in peer groups.

Bayton too stressed the traditional masculine hyperbole of rock music. Due to this, there was a general lack of confidence amongst female band members, and this was seen in many aspects, including, but not limited to, song writing, using technical language, incorporating technical skills, learning new instruments, covering male songs, and inviting males into band practice (Bayton, 1988). Girls are labeled as being engulfed with finding a boyfriend and women who are married are essentially positioned as mother and partner (Bayton, 1988). The women interviewed by Bayton asserted that the creation and maintenance of the band was a friendship, above which the friendship elevated over the genesis of music.

In addition to the form and content of music that Frith and McRobbie and Bayton have discussed, Miles (1998) articulates the consumption of pop music. He says, quoting from Frith, “the music industry...fears an active audience, whose tastes can’t be predicated, whose use of music can’t be completely controlled” (114). Record companies have an extensive degree of control over the image of the artist they are promoting, Miles says, and “the video play[s] a particularly important role as a vehicle for presenting image above substance” (115). The image reflected for the artist can be found

representing the style for the musical listening and viewing population, such that fans of rap music wear baggy jeans and slanted caps (Miles, 1998). These images function as a vehicle for the creation and dissemination of identity, such that a group identity can be formulated amongst fans and an individual identity can be made for the artist (Miles, 1998).

Moving away from the passive consumer notion, Miles states “an individual can invest a wide variety of meanings in a piece of popular music” (116), and thus can actively decode images and content in differing ways from other listeners and viewers. The investment one brings to a piece of music, such as using the music as a source of relaxation or protest, can be seen to reinforce that individual’s identity as being a particular music fan (Miles, 1998). Madonna can be framed in varying social contexts, such as a pornographic pin-up for male consumers or an empowering female role model (Miles, 1998). Quoting from Longhurst, Miles says that decisions about an artist are made actively and as such “even what seems to be the most commodified products of the culture industry need to be examined in their social contexts of production and consumption before any judgments of value can begin to be made” (117). Thus, consuming music can be a complex and interactive process (Miles, 1998).

Speaking from yet another perspective, Driscoll (2002) notes that girl culture is a process of containment, and that this containment is often found in notions of bedroom culture, domestic life, and especially within a girl’s own body. Quoting from McRobbie’s work on *Jackie* magazine, Driscoll mentions that boys are established as occupying public space for leisure activities, while girls are positioned within the home (2002). Driscoll says “appearance in public spaces enables identification of youth culture

practices as active lifestyles, while youth culture operating in a domestic space appears constrained by a parent culture” (2002, 259). Driscoll does not necessarily view this space as passive or active, but describes the space as both at the same time. She says “bedroom culture can be a form of isolation from or resistance to family authority” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 261). Gottlieb and Wald note “not only do girls wield their bodies in performance, but they do so in such a way as to make their bodies highly visible: this visibility counteracts the (feelings of) erasure and invisibility produced by persistent degradation in a sexiest society” (268).

Commonly expressed in rap music videos, Andsager and Roe (2003) describe how males and females learn about sexuality through music video. They emphasize that males learn that women are easily swayed sexually and women learn that men only desire their physical attributes, thus reinforcing outdated sexual attitudes. In addition to this, Hall Hansen (1989) notes that these stereotypical sexual expectations of males and females arise from music videos’ constant reiteration of male-dominated sex role premises.

I have addressed a variety of representations of women in music lyrics and videos and the hegemonic myths that occupy the screen, however, other authors have persisted in media effects research, such as Dohnt and Tiggemann (2006), who believe that these music videos and media in general raise concerns about young girls’ body image satisfaction. They note that children as young as six are dissatisfied with their bodies and can interpret and contextualize images presented in the media. Dohnt and Tiggemann emphasize media and peers to be particularly important conveyors of socio-cultural messages. Supporting media effects research Hall Hansen found that exposure to a

popular sex-role stereotype in rock music videos significantly affected “appraisal, impressions and memory of a man and a woman engaging in sex-role stereotypic social interaction” (386). If girls are affected so drastically by what is presented in the media, the new popular feminist discourses should create stronger, more empowered young women. Listening to artists such as Alanis Morissette, Meredith Brooks, Pink, and Gwen Stefani changed the way my friends and I thought and acted. We had different views on our relationships with each other, our mothers and the boys we interacted with at school. The remainder of this chapter contributes to a wider understanding of active media consumption and the collapsing of feminine versus feminist polarities, moving away from common stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and identity, into the deconstruction of images that went on with my girlfriends and me during our formative years. Echoing specific texts that contributed to breaking of boundaries will assist in defining a mainstream girls’ culture full of complexities.

Looking closely at self-identity and music television, Bradford (2003) examined artists in terms of their feminist perspectives and the possible influences these artists had on audience members. She studied four solo artists—Britney Spears, Pink, Jennifer Lopez and Christina Aguilera—and four female groups—All Saints, 3LW, Destiny’s Child and TLC. Bradford was interested in the idea of “antiromance” in the song lyrics distributed by these artists, as well as the performance and textual strategies of the music videos. As emphasized in a number of the other annotations, Bradford too attempts to argue against the traditional view of female audience members as passive. She found three main themes that argued against representations of the fickle and romance-driven female viewer/listener. First, claiming for women a right to sexual pleasure, thus moving

away from what McRobbie found in her study of *Jackie* magazine where the readers were encouraged to see their sexual pleasure in terms of a romantic partnership. Second, music videos and lyrics featured a resistance to the power of romantic love for identity formation. In this case there is an emphasis on defining the personal self through oneself and not through that of a male partner. Third, the lyrics and music videos present the idea of autonomous selfhood and being an independent woman. Independence did not mean that the young woman could not have a romantic relationship, but that she should not be defined by that partner, that she should pay her own way, her own bills, buy her own shoes and clothes, and so forth, in order to find an equal ground on which she and her partner could stand together.

In the end, Bradford finds that music, both lyrics and video, are an expressive tool for female audiences who are frequently not given a public voice. The music helped them to create their own identity and the artists provided them with the right kind of feminist perspectives to move away from the traditional view of female passivity.

While Tait (2003) and Mazzarella (1999) demonstrate the traditional views of girls and their magazine cultures, others have begun to demonstrate that there are active outlets within mainstream girls' culture, where girls can work through contradictory and conflicting identities of being feminine and strong. Fritzsche (2004) notes that mimetic identities are just as prevalent and active as creating your own. Fritzsche uses interview material to discuss the question of "to what extent 'pop feminist' phenomena like the Spice Girls can be considered a source of empowerment for young women and girls" (156). Fritzsche calls attention to the creation of dance, dress and behaviour as a way for Spice Girls fans to find their own personal style, not mimic the band members. She sees

girls' culture as a mimetic culture, which is more than simple, passive reproduction, a culture that has creative potential. Fritzsche sees girls' culture and the space of girls' culture as a negotiation of social expectations and the passage from childhood to youth. It is an exploration and/or modification of different identities which shape together to help a girl better fashion her own personal identity. Fritzsche and her interview respondents saw the Spice Girls image as a toolbox in the creative development of individual goals (i.e. pursuing medical careers, behaving unorthodoxly and provocatively, etc.). The mimicking of the Spice Girls' identities and lyrics were seen as a playful approach to questions of self-representation, self-confidence, and heterosexuality. The Spice Girls were viewed as a source of empowerment emulating important female images of strength, self-confidence and success, telling listeners that they can be anything they want to be. The Spice Girls inform girls to "never compromise accept no substitute" in the song *My Strongest Suit*.

Fritzsche's findings of an active girl culture based on the fans of the Spice Girls, emphasizes the way in which I explore notions of third wave feminism. While some researchers may describe dance, dress and behaviour as mimicking another culture, that of the celebrity, others, such as Fritzsche and McRobbie, find this to be an exploration in the attainment of creating a personal self. The girls interviewed made up their own routines to Spice Girls songs and played along with the images presented by the Spice Girls, which is evident in my own research and is common amongst young female youth. While Fritzsche does note the problems with this, such as contributing to the belief that fans have more power than they actually have, she stays true to her idea that the Spice Girls phenomenon has helped contribute to popular feminism.

Postmodern Identity Discourses and Popular Feminism

Gender and sexuality are commonly linked by academic researchers when considering or analyzing music. Most scholars argue that music videos, content and lyrics are negative, degrading to women, stereotypical, ideological and harmful to viewers. However, in recent years (in addition to my years as a tween), expressions of transgression with regards to gender and sexuality have appeared. Feminist scholars examine these forms most often when it comes to music videos and popular artists, such as Madonna, Gwen Stefani and Macy Grey. Ward, Day and Epstein (2006) agree that media images of women are not universal or negative all the time. While sometimes this may occur, viewers do not consistently decode images and messages in dominant or preferred ways. In fact, Ward, Day and Epstein argue music television programming is a positive media form.

Images of sexual health and development have been expressed by Ward, Day and Epstein as a positive documentation of education in popular culture texts. Turning to the media for such sexual and health information allows the viewer to avoid embarrassing situations with friends and family especially when confidentiality is at stake. Music, television, and magazines, all assist in informing the user to understand their sexuality and development. Media allow the end user to feel safe and unashamed by presenting these issues as ordinary teen problems and/or fears. In fact, Ward, Day and Epstein found “60 percent of teens surveyed said that they learned how to say no to a sexual situation by watching television” (58). This statistic goes to show the positive impact television programming plays in the creation of identity and the opposing side of the media effects argument.

Song lyrics and video content frequently emphasize issues of race, politics, sex, and gender, such that audience members learn something about the world in which they live. For example, many rap artists incorporate the importance of safe sex, by exposing known STD's as dirty and shameful. Reading between the lines is essential in a postmodern musical form, such as music videos because it highlights the differing addresses and chisels away at the notion of a preferred reading. Recent political songs, such as *If Everyone Cared* by Nickelback, contribute to a wider understanding and acknowledgement of major socio-political issues of past and present, such as the War in Iraq and the creation of Amnesty International. Ward, Day and Epstein say "through exposure to positive, negative, and transitional characters (those in the process of changing their errant ways), audience members can acquire information about health issues, sexuality, and politics and model characters who are similar to themselves" (61).

Like Miles (1998), Ward, Day and Epstein believe media use is not passive. They note "media users select particular content from a growing array of options and construct media diets that speak to their individual needs, identities and experiences" (Ward, Day & Epstein, 2006, 62). Thus, the viewer of music television has consciously arrived at that program based on previous experiences, likes and dislikes, in my case my experience with friends and my love for mainstream commercial musicians like Madonna. Currently presented on MuchMusic are artists such as Beyonce, Fergie, Gwen Stefani, the Pussycat Dolls, Keshia Chante and many more. Some of these artists' lyrics incorporate feminist perspectives into their music, though they would not identify as feminists. Beyonce and Gwen Stefani in particular attempt to combat stereotypical definitions of women. In Beyonce's recent music video and number one hit song *Irreplaceable* an angry Beyonce

dumps her cheating boyfriend. She packed up all his belongings from her home, took back the car she purchased for him, even took the sweater off his back, positioning herself as independent, self-confident and able to care for herself. Beyonce is clearly the breadwinner in the relationship which also demonstrates women's ability to be successful without the assistance of men. All of these characteristics are positioned in the song as important ideals all girls should acquire when creating their identity.

Independence, assertiveness, self-confidence, and empowerment are common popular feminist themes in popular mainstream music videos currently featured on *MOD* and MuchMusic's *Countdown*. In examining mainstream commercial music through the popular feminist perspectives of McRobbie (2007) and Driscoll (2002), there is a re-exploration of traditional tropes previously presented in mainstream media and sometimes a lapse or adventure into issues of female taboo. While artists, such as Beyonce or the dance members of the Pussycat Dolls, may not identify themselves as feminists, they certainly hold and exhibit feminist ideas and goals in relation to gender and sexuality, while also offering the girl choice and diversity in domestic and sexual relations as expressed in McRobbie's (2004) article, "Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime." What is important to the study of popular feminism are the choices audience members make in the viewing, listening and reading processes. Deciding on popular feminist ideals and the media presentation of those goals is a personal choice. We can be feminine and feminist because both are presented in ways that can be positively adopted at the same time.

Gender and sexuality can be addressed in both a popular feminist and postmodernist perspective. For example, in Madonna's 1989 music video *Express*

Yourself, she appears as neither particularly male nor female. She can be found to manipulate her body into unnatural forms with triangular or coned shaped breast contraptions and masculine suit attire. The style of music allows for a more commercial pop appeal addressing both the popular feminist and the feminist. As Kaplan notes “the post-feminist ambiguous images are clearly the ones sponsors consider marketable, since they are not only most frequently cycled but also propagated in the ad texts that are interspersed among the video texts” (127). What popular feminist artists allow for is an exploration of the deconstruction of the feminine/feminist polarity that forms a more complex understanding of viewer responses. For example, the Spice Girls’ use of “Girl Power” could be attributed pop feminist characteristics. The break away from traditional *stereotypic* feminist politics as being accredited to lesbians and “prudes” allowed for a change in the understanding of feminism, such that Spice Girls music was able to maintain a positive female image through the revisiting of traditional feminine conceptions such as fitted clothing, high heels and makeup. These traditionally feminine attributes were frowned upon by feminists, almost as if you are either with us, meaning without makeup, nice clothing, or heels, or you are feminine and thus against us. Gwen Stefani is especially interesting as her previous rock musical stylings with No Doubt displayed an array of feminist models and today she has adopted a more feminine look, rather than her previous punk/ska tomboy appeal. Feminist attitude is still intact in her lyrics and performance.

Madonna

Madonna, the Spice Girls and Gwen Stefani are three differing musical icons contributing star power and celebrity relevance to popular and third wave feminism. My

girlfriends and I subscribed to what Bronstein (2005) calls the “Madonna School of Feminism” (791). Understanding this particular type of feminism was fundamental to the study of Madonna and pop artists transgressing patriarchal tropes in the late 1980s and 1990s. While Madonna sits amongst the hegemonic group in Hollywood society and physically embodies typical ideological feminine ideals, her style of dress, her lyrics, and her choreography suggest transgression of typical gender roles and a breach in social norms. Her choice to be feminine and feminist changes the typical understanding of movement feminism and offers an opportunity for more girls to subscribe to “Madonna’s School of Feminism.” One main point emphasized by scholars and the media is that Madonna challenges the orthodoxies of sexuality, the tropes of femininity, religion and the American way of life (O’Hagan, 1993). Madonna’s 1989 music video *Express Yourself* displays Madonna’s role as postmodern schizophrenic because she struggles to maintain and transgress capitalist ideology and changes between male, female and animal. Madonna works both within the frameworks laid out by society and outside dominant discourse. Madonna can be viewed in a variety of lights, she can be seen as transgressing patriarchal norms, deconstructing issues of bourgeois taste, persisting in erotic and feminist motivations, as well as breaking down the boundaries of the male gaze. Madonna’s lyrics and music videos offer the viewer an exception to the rule; notions of prejudice and racism evaporate where women dominate men and where homosexual fantasies are played out in a safe space. The safe space of the music television station made it easier for my friends and I to transgress, as we had access to television, CDs and radio.

The opening scene of Madonna's music video places her amongst a factory world where the working class males are situated. Madonna, as a public figure and Hollywood star is high class and it would be difficult to see her as anything but. High and low are leveled off within *Express Yourself* as Madonna interacts with her working class counterpart. She appears as the inciter to freedom for the oppressed males (Lloyd, 1993) while also being the inciter to freedom from hierarchy and social constraint. This debunking of social-hierarchy through a dichotomy of high and low skims the surface of Madonna's popular feminist images and postmodern perspectives.

In order to breach the social norms of hierarchy Madonna changes her image and her choreography to reflect her position as working class male and high class female. In a postmodern culture men dress as women and in the camp sensibility men act like woman (Harries, 2004) or in this case vice versa. Madonna is the traditional porno queen and illustrates lowbrow culture and morals. Madonna is first featured wearing a green couture dress with black stiletto heels. This first image establishes her as high class and embodying traditional ideological gender representations. While wearing this particular costume Madonna does not dance or appear to be transgressing. However, her next costume manipulates her perfect body to appear unnatural. She wears sexy lingerie that shapes her breasts as coned and pointed rather than round and supple. This then distorts her image as ideological and classy, replacing her high-class status with a more lowbrow sexuality. Madonna is then featured as masculine. The pinstriped suit with baggy trousers makes Madonna not only appear masculine, but also androgynous. "She adopts gestures associated with the male from muscle flexing to the famous mock phallus crotch grabbing" (Lloyd, 1993, 43) of Michael Jackson. Once this scene is over Madonna

remains in female costume for the remainder of the video, wearing a cat costume, a trench coat with leggings, or nothing at all.

Her music videos and books appeal to the simplistic and basic pleasures of mass culture, they are available to everyone and easy to understand. She attempts to enlist an emotional response to her postmodern and feminist perspectives and tries to make a call for action against the elite, patriarchal culture. Madonna's tastelessness challenges dominant social and gender norms and thus gives her transgressive power. Madonna is figured as grotesque and unruly not only in her music video but also in life. Marx (2001) and Gramsci (2001) have demonstrated that the elite or ruling class members of society control others by inscribing ideological depictions. These ideological standards are social constructions of beauty, right and wrong, social norms, sexual normalcy and so forth (Rowe, 2004). Fiske (1989) adds to this by acknowledging that "the grotesque, offensive, dirty" body that "refuses to be aestheticized" communicates resistance (97) and in the case of Madonna, she attempts to display just that.

Androgyny, cross-dressing and transvestism fall under the category of grotesque and vulgar contributing to Madonna's package as feminine, feminist and genderless. Her attempts at being a lot of different identities make Madonna a popular feminist role model for girls seeking to understand their changing bodies and how they are to learn to control their complex and sometimes contradictory identities. The use of transgression, androgyny and sexual performance empowers girls to be strong and vocal, as the title *Express Yourself* proclaims. Madonna, taking on the persona of both male and female within the video, undermines sex role expectations and appears as tasteless, unruly and grotesque according to current ideological standards of the 1980s and 1990s. Through

Hollywood's hegemonic status as tastemaker and cultural promoter, Madonna is manufactured as glamorous and is advertised as desirable, however through her unruly behaviour and grotesque depictions of male and female within her video, she achieves the opposite, a postmodern feminist questioning of the status quo.

While Madonna frequently epitomizes bourgeois glamour, her style of dress, especially the coned/triangular breasts, and masculine characteristics seem to negate Madonna's ideological normalcy and hierarchical status in society. As Harries notes, this grotesque realism encompasses the two gendered roles of male and female and how each relates to the lowbrow mentality of the grotesque body that attempts to transgress social norms. Madonna's rejection of bourgeois individualism within her music video places her amongst the ordinary world where its members strive for equality amongst the races and sexes. Rowe (2004) says "implicit in the unruly woman's heightened visibility is her potential to bring about a process Erving Goffman describes as breaking frame" (223). What Goffman is implying with regards to breaking frame is that social and cultural life are in "endless negotiation" in contextualizing meaning and behaviour (Rowe, 2004, 223). The meaning and interpretation of a social event can be dramatically modified depending on the frame and that frames are most vulnerable to those at the margins (Rowe, 2004). Therefore, the unruly woman, Madonna, benefits from "frame-busting" power (Rowe, 2004). Madonna is known for being a highly controversial musician, but within everyday life Madonna has the ability to make a spectacle of herself. The most recently talked about controversy arose from the Madonna and Britney Spears televised kiss in 2003. This kiss was not an isolated incident for Madonna, but was merely another

scratch on the bedpost in a series of controversies that have surrounded Madonna over the past two decades.

Madonna's transgressions of gender and social norms and her mode of performance, such as masturbating on stage appear as political and deviant. As Leung (1997) says, "the things for which [Madonna] is criticized—her blatant self-promotion, ambiguous loyalties, unpredictability, complicity with capitalism—are the very things which will achieve sexual equality more effectively than standard feminist dogma" (Leung, 1997). Madonna's refusal to behave appropriately offers a nihilistic view of the world. Her resistance against ideology can be seen through her use of black and leather, a most sadomasochistic look. Madonna's body is almost model perfect and the way she wears her clothing throughout *Express Yourself* offers this ideological perspective of femininity, but she uses this to her advantage and disrupts the ideology by wearing a coned brassiere, which then draws attention to her unconventional feminine constructs. As the many Madonna costumes and vulgar incidents demonstrate, she makes a spectacle of herself in order to transgress. Madonna's use of androgyny and black leather decentres notions of femininity, but also shows her feminine and feminist sides.

Differences such as homosexuality and bisexuality are played out in Madonna's music video as well. Sexuality distinctions habitually used in current mainstream culture, and especially during the 1980s AIDS epidemic, become stylized and brought to the forefront. Lloyd found "the signs are muddled and the freedom to choose one's sexuality or a role of victor or victim is extended by the infamous shot of Madonna chained to the bed" (Lloyd, 1993, 43). As part of the pinstripe suit, androgyny scene, Madonna sports a monocle. This accessory is not only a symbol of voyeuristic power but of 1920s

lesbianism (Lloyd, 1993). The video thus offers a safe place for homosexuals, bisexuals and heterosexuals to play out their fantasies and transcend social boundaries, such as appealing to one's pleasure of S&M as also evident through Madonna being chained to the bed.

Voyeurism is a popular theme within Madonna's videos. Privileging the female gaze over the male gaze could be viewed as a type of feminist postmodern resistance. Madonna plays with the stereotypes of the female body to transgress the male gaze. As Lloyd found, she presented her body as an overt object of desire in order to attract the survey of her body (Lloyd, 1993). Madonna is able to control the male gaze through the reappropriation of dominant stereotypes and she uses these common stereotypes to gain power to subvert the gaze. One way that the male gaze is subverted is the fact that the video is presented through the eyes of Madonna and not a male figure. This has been suggested as the "ultimate postmodern blurring of categories between male and female" by Lloyd (44).

Madonna can be interpreted as dismantling dominant patriarchal codes by circulating a feminist postmodern approach to music, and this is especially evident through her success as a female pop musician in the male dominated music business (Lloyd, 1993). As Lloyd also outlines, by commodifying herself Madonna was able to acquire sexual and economic power and she glowed empowerment. My friends and I admired Madonna's feminist mentality and personal empowerment. The empowerment Madonna provided me with has come to be very useful in overcoming the common myth of the 1960s and 1970s stereotypical "prude" feminist (Lloyd, 1993). *Express Yourself* maintained a feminist image while also speaking to the femininity and sexuality of

feminists. Madonna was able to control her sexuality to gain power over the male gaze. At one point, an image of speakers denotes that the workers are listening to her music and the main male figure stops to listen and appears almost at ease or surprised by what he is hearing. Feminists do not only fight for the rights of women, but they also struggle with class associations and prejudices, and Madonna attempts to correct or balance the differences between high and low and juxtaposes the image of the factory worker with the factory owner. The constant interchange of images with Madonna as either male or female holds the gaze through Madonna's eyes and makes it difficult for the male gaze to appear dominant, thus the female gaze overtakes the male.

Madonna's feminist lyrics and music videos led young men and women in Puerto Rico to question traditional gender systems, which was influential to what Lugo-Lugo (2001) labeled a teen and feminist uprising during the 1980s. This uprising was described as a battle against traditional family values, prejudices and gender systems (Lugo-Lugo, 2001). Madonna presented symbols of contradiction for viewers to question, especially in terms of the male/female dichotomy. Madonna removes male domination and replaces it with female alteration as seen through the reappropriation of Michael Jackson's famous phallic crotch grabbing. Basically, Madonna has the freedom to express herself through song and performance and the way she tows the line is almost revolutionary (Leung, 1997).

One way my friends and I utilized Madonna's music videos was to create an individual and group style. Her transgression of gender norms led us to become tomboys mixed with feminine attributes, much like Avril Lavigne is today. We would sometimes wear baggy pants or cords with tight t-shirts, boyish haircuts, and makeup. Other times

we would wear fitted jeans, baggy t-shirts, hair straightened and makeup complete. When we would get together for sleepovers we would make ourselves over to be like Madonna and wear our bra-tops and pajama bottoms singing loudly into our hair brushes. *Like a Virgin*, *Vogue*, and *Express Yourself* were our favourite music videos and each attempted to dismantle our typical understandings of girlhood. Madonna consistently questioned the good girl/bad girl, whore/virgin dichotomies which eventually led us to understand that most of us will be all of these things at once. Through an analysis of *Express Yourself* I have demonstrated that through Madonna's ideas of feminism, my friends and I appropriated the traditional ideals of femininity, sexiness, and beauty with more masculine coded attitudes of power and control. Another way that we defined ourselves through Madonna was against the notion of the female passive consumer. We did this through song and dance, dress, behaviour, and language. By avoiding what we thought would label us passive, we mixed femininity with a feminist attitude, and by practicing the politics Madonna offered we portrayed ourselves as strong and empowered to our male classmates and siblings.

While Madonna is a popular female musician and has been positively noted by feminists, there are a number of other researchers who feel that her sexual prowess and liberal morals barely rock the boat. Her antics have caused her to be labeled as the traditional "porno queen" and her form of feminism and empowerment for minorities has been given its own school of thought, known as the "Madonna School of Feminism." For me, Madonna was an idol. Her ability to command and control attention, her outspokenness, her look, and her overall attitude and demeanor made her a star in my eyes. When I was younger I didn't really see Madonna as an outright feminist because I

myself really didn't understand what a feminist was. I started listening to Madonna in the last 80s. I was a young child at the time but I clearly remember her music being played on my mother's favourite radio station CHUM FM. I was one of those children who could sing along with every song. I picked up the words quickly and after just one listen could recite the entire song and Madonna was one of the artists I sang most often.

All of this aside, Madonna's powers have not been received as positive alone. She has been bashed by many artists around her; she has been involved in controversy after controversy, from problematic and illegal adoption scandals to MTV televised kisses with Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera. bell hooks (1993) argues that Madonna's resistant and feminist demonstrations really only gave way to traditional dominance and submission and that her admission in her book *Sex* says that "she has a dick in her brain" places Madonna in the position of attempting to acquire the penis to prove she is a strong person and thus cannot move beyond male structures. This then limits her feminist motivations.

Much like bell hooks, Marilyn Manners (1999) believes the sex-power link demonstrated by Madonna and, for that matter, Rosanne Barr and Courtney Love, is not a unique phenomenon. Rather Manners notes that these women "were all part of a growing popular feminist discourse which was quite conscious of itself *as* discourse—aware of itself as both transgressive and yet always caught up in other, less 'liberating' networks" (28, italics in original). This feminist discourse led Bellafante to write Time magazine's controversial cover article, entitled, "Is Feminism Dead?" Bellafante attributed the death or decline of feminism to "frazzled, self-absorbed girls," like Ally McBeal, Bridget Jones and the Spice Girls (1998, 58). These "frazzled girls" that Bellafante describes are the

women that I took to in my youth and actually made me the feminist I am today, which I think is very interesting considering the criticisms charged against them. At the end of her article, Manners asks “Does the problem-with-feminism-these-days seem to emerge precisely when women take their sexuality quite seriously but also stop taking it so *seriously*—that is, when they represent it with irony or humor or—worse—parody? Is that the point at which ‘the cause seem[s] lost’?” (31). This, I am sure, could be agreed upon by many second wave feminists and media scholars, but the humour, irony, and even parody taught me a lot of female sexuality and its power, or as Manners terms it, the sex-power link. This is not to say, however, that only being exposed to this type of feminism would be less positive, but when it coincides with lyrical anger, aggressive behaviour, motivating female role models, International Women’s Day and so forth, the sex-power link is only one link in the chain of popular feminist discourse.

The Spice Girls

Ahh the Spice Girls. The often debated girl group that rocked the nation with their first debut single *Wannabe*. The feminine feminists Baby, Ginger, Posh, Scary and Sporty made up a girl group destined for criticism when they started chanting “Girl Power” during press interviews and concerts. With all the debate surrounding them, one thing was clear, they were infectious in creating hype about popular feminism and contributing to the identities girls formed from the toolbox provided to them. To this day girls perform Spice Girl personalities and songs. When I was searching You Tube for the original *Wannabe* video I came across hundreds of online imitations, for talent shows, for peer groups, parents and so forth. The hit single *Wannabe* was first aired in 1996 and hit an all time record breaker the same year. In fact, *Wannabe* was the best-selling debut

single of 1996 and the biggest-selling single by an all-female group of all time. They even surpassed some of the records held by the Beatles for *A Day in the Life*.

As Barbazon and Evans (1998) note, the Spice Girls “do for feminism what the Village People did for gay politics: they grant a spirit, power and humour to the performance of difference” (39). As the opening paragraph of the Spice Girls book reads,

Girl Power is when...
 You help a guy with his bag
 You and your mates reply to wolf whistles by shouting ‘get your arse out!’
 You wear high heels and think on your feet
 You know you can do it and nothing’s going to stop you
 You’re loud and proud even when you’ve broken out in spots
 You believe in yourself and control your own life (Lemish, 2003, 21).

As evidenced by this paragraph the Spice Girls understand and represent a girl who can be self-sufficient, feminine, strong, powerful and in control. They may not be as aggressively sexual as Madonna, but they do offer a new wave of feminism that reflects the Madonna School of thought. In *Understanding Popular Culture* Fiske (1989) describes Madonna’s image as one of independence and resistance. She purposefully deflects and controls the ideological binary oppositions of the virgin-whore dichotomy. Fiske sees this as one of Madonna’s empowering forces, saying “Madonna’s popularity is a complexity of power and resistance, of meaning and counter meaning, of pleasure and struggle for control” (113). Just as the Spice Girls utilize Madonna’s feminist goals and struggles to their own benefit, they most likely realized that young girls are not as fazed by Madonna’s antics as they have yet to discover such things as masturbation and sadomasochist play. Where Madonna is typically photographed during the late 80s and early 90s in her unnatural coned brassieres, the Spice girls were often photographed in their PJ’s exhibiting notions of bedroom culture but, as Lemish comments,

Many of the Spice Girls video-clips present them roaming the streets, taking mischievous rides (e.g. running away in a boat, stealing a bus) and exploring urban spaces in the dark. Such provocative behaviours, often associated with adolescent boys, pose clear challenges to the traditional private-public division associated with gender in general, and with adolescence in particular” (23).

The Spice Girls represent contradiction and play with it. They each perform or play a role or identity in the group, but in actuality they each exhibit a bit of each other. They play with the contradictions placed upon them by patriarchal males. Each girl exhibits moments of sexiness or the desire to be good at sports and often what a girl is one day is different from the next. My friends and I often blended images of pop idols such as wearing the tear-away pants of Mel C (Sporty Spice) with the feminine tank tops of Emma (Baby Spice) and even sometimes with the platform shoes of Geri (Ginger Spice).

The *Wannabe* music video appeared at a time when teen boy bands, such as the Backstreet Boys were worshipped by young female pop fans. With similar gusto as the teen boy bands of the 90s, the Spice Girls were an in-your-face girl group attempting to solicit change from conservative British rule. Their messages included empowerment and the importance of strong, loyal female friendships. This was never more evident than in their first music video and their *Spice World* movie.

The music video for *Wannabe* featured the five girls, as Lemish noted, in the urban spaces of Britain. The opening scene shows the girls running up to a car in the dark of the night and singing loudly to a couple with their children. Immediately following we see the destruction begin. The girls invade a fancy restaurant in the dark of the night down an alley way off a British street. The girls are all dressed differently, thus reflecting each individual character. Geri is dressed like a drag queen, Mel B’s hair is out

of control, Victoria looks sexy, Emma plays the baby or “girlie girl” and Mel C shows off her athletic abilities with back handsprings. The invasion of this fancy restaurant and their destructive behaviour is similar to the Punks of the 1970s—although playful and less threatening. During the one-shot video the girls encourage women of all ages to get up and dance—even those considered “prude.” The upper class ladies of the restaurant are up and dancing by the end of the music video in addition to demonstrating their appeal for female friendship and disapproval of patriarchal restrictions.

The lyrics and aggressive behaviour are a source of protest against a patriarchal society and music industry. Mel B kicks and punches the air, much like Gwen Stefani in her No Doubt years (discussed below). The girls are not provocatively dressed or provocatively dancing during the video. The lyrics imply female solidarity as essential and encouraged. As Ashby (2005) notes “the language of ‘girl power,’ as it was popularized by the Spice Girls, promoted a boisterous, even aggressive, attitude toward gender politics” (129). Leach (2001) says, “The potential of Girl Power to function both as a strategy of resistance to patriarchy and essentialism, and ironically, as a financial entrapment of those (men) still subscribing to the values of patriarchy, is attractive to a young female audience” (148-149). By using their constantly changing identities and their postmodern method of preaching, the Spice Girls defined what it was to be a girl living in a Western(ized) society. Their ability to recruit girls through such official website groups as the “Spice Cadets” demonstrated how important girl power politics was, and still is with the reunion of the Spice Girls world tour this year (2007-2008).

In the *Wannabe* music video the Spice Girls encourage girls to act in ways typical of male rock stars, such as kicking over tables and destroying private property in the

social club they invaded. The Spice Girls act in the place of all girls (Driscoll, 1999). Lyrical lines such as “If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends” and “if you want my future, forget my past” ensure girls that they can be sexual and not be punished for it. The song also encourages boys and men to forget about things that have happened before them because in the post second wave feminist world third wavers are sexually aggressive, sexually desired and sexually pleased. This demonstrates that the Spice Girls are assisting in the collapse between femininity and feminism. By being “girls” they are already referred to as a degraded gender in society and despite being constantly attacked by the media for being “inauthentic,” “fake,” and not politically motivated, they do however, provide the “everyday girl” with a way to understand her place in society as a powerhouse of beauty and intelligence. We are not obligated to be any type of person, we just choose the role, we choose the identities to adopt and which constantly remain in flux. I like to be feminine looking, but I am a feminist. Kicking over tables might not be my cup of tea, but talking about how I feel about something loudly and actively demonstrates my frustration, anger and passion for the subject.

Through song and dance the Spice Girls construct an image of girl power which can be easily adopted as a practice, approach and commodity by many girls. As Lemish notes, girl power “refers to both physical and mental strength” (21). Girls can look like any one of the Spice Girls, such as getting tattoos, working towards a well toned body, like Mel C, or helping a guy out with his school bag. The girls express freedom and inner peace (Lemish, 2003) and promote the importance of standing up for your beliefs and sharing your opinions loudly. The repeated phrase “I’ll tell you what I want, what I really, really want” says to girls that they know exactly what they want and that it is okay

for girls to also have the same feeling. As Lemish finds, “Control and independence seem to be crucial to the “Spice” construction” (21). She quotes from the Spice Girls book saying, “[Girl Power is] looking yourself in the mirror and saying, ‘this is me...I’m not going to be dominated by anyone, especially not men’. A free spirit, self acceptance and self-fulfillment are crucial characteristics of “Girl Power”” (Lemish, 2003, 21) and embodied politics.

The colliding of feminisms is one way to describe how femininity, third wave feminism and second wave feminism came to be one. Riot Grrrls’ use of derogatory terms and the feminine gave them power to control DIY punk culture. Riot Grrrls bashed the Spice Girls for being too sexy and exposing the contradictions of being feminine by singing about Girl Power. But isn’t this exactly where the collapsing of the feminine/feminist polarity occurs? While some girls may feel that they have just one identity, most of us, especially those of us who partake in mainstream girls’ culture hold many differing identities.

Gwen Stefani

Gwen Stefani is an important music icon to discuss. As feminist movements have evolved and changed, Stefani has reworked her music to reflect the current feminist times. Thus, I will discuss Stefani through a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) feminist and popular feminist perspective, examining her early years as lead singer of No Doubt and her more recent music videos as a solo artist. During her No Doubt years, Stefani transgressed typical gender norms through her use of clothing and body movements on stage and in music videos. Shugart and Waggoner (2005) note that Stefani’s style was a synthesis of masculine and feminine characteristics, such as appearing on stage in a bra top and baggy

pants, or attending award shows wearing a beautiful gown with combat boots (Shugart & Waggoner, 2005). As the authors note, Stefani breaks with conventional expectations of female sexuality, toying with the passive/active, object/subject, and feminine/feminist dichotomies (Shugart & Waggoner, 2005), similar to the complexities that feminist and popular feminist scholars emphasize. Through Shugart and Waggoner's examination of excess, they establish Stefani as cartoonish and bizarre because she embodies and utilizes ideas of spectacle through her style. This aesthetic excess could be defined by parody (Shugart & Waggoner, 2005) or satire. Shugart and Waggoner describe her presentation style as caricature noting her incorporation of bright colours and shiny fabrics. However, Stefani is clearly mixing styles to create her own, a frequent technique used by my friends and me when reading fashion magazines. Instead of replicating a style presented to us, we would frequently find other means to create our own style through the mixing and matching of a variety of styles currently on display in stores and through the media.

Stefani's image has changed slightly, but her use of excess has been regarded as spectacle and her aesthetic presentation has remained fairly similar through her No Doubt and solo years. For instance, Shugart and Waggoner emphasize her platinum blonde hair as being "plethoric" and the way she styles it, such as in a long braid or vintage spit bob curl, can be considered conspicuous and parodic. Her make-up consists of bright red lips and an extremely white skinned complexion, almost appearing as a ghost or albino. Shugart and Waggoner find the performances of Stefani to "bear a striking resemblance to drag, specifically with respect to men impersonating women—just as the critical potential of drag turns on the combination of parody and incongruity" (72). This notion of parody can be taken a step further. Stefani's style of dress, such as the bra tops with

baggy pants, not only tows the line of traditional conventions of female sexuality, but as Shugart and Waggoner examine, this musical icon has small breasts. Lacking this physical attribute of sexuality and pairing it with traditional female clothing (bra tops, bikini tops, etc.) and sexually provocative dancing, in more recent years and music videos, is arguably parodic and important to the exploitation of female sexuality. Her status as a musician and the money she earns can afford her implants, but she has not resorted to such lengths, meaning that she is comfortable with her small breasts and feels these are not an important asset to her career or sexuality as a woman.

Stylistically, like the previous artists, Stefani conventionally follows the female musical form of the time. During her No Doubt years her music was fairly aggressive and angry reflecting the third wave feminist movement and the mainstream commercial success of angry women in rock, such as Alanis Morissette and Meredith Brooks. Stefani's use of screams and yells is frequently described as a masculine characteristic of the male rock and roller, usually describing a form of pleasure associated with the male orgasm. These emblematic vocal customs were also characteristic of Riot Grrrl bands during the same period. Gottlieb and Wald (1994) describe the scream as:

A radically polysemous nonverbal articulation which can simultaneously and ambiguously evoke rage, terror, or pleasure and/or primal self-assertion. Screams work as linguistic signs having no particular referent outside of the context in which they are uttered; the scream can be read as a kind of jouissance, a female body language that evades the necessity to signify within male-dominated conventions and meanings" (261).

For example, during the performance of *I'm Just a Girl*, both in concert and in the music video, Stefani would scream the lyrics as she got more agitated with what she was presenting, as well as jumping, kicking and punching the air. Lyrically she described

very important feminist perspectives of the time. In the lyrics to *I'm Just a Girl* Stefani sarcastically describes her place in the world as being just a girl in need of protection from public life. She is angered by her inferiority in society and the way men are positioned as superior beings. In the first verse, Stefani sings:

Take this pink ribbon off my eyes
 I'm exposed
 And it's no big surprise
 Don't you think I know
 Exactly where I stand
 This world is forcing me
 To hold your hand
 'Cause I'm just a girl, little 'ol me
 Don't let me out of your sight
 I'm just a girl, all pretty and petite
 So don't let me have any rights.

She uses sarcasm, typical child-parent authority (holding hands) and “girlie” things (pink ribbon) to elevate her anger in the lyrics and in her vocals.

Currently, however, she conforms to the pop aesthetic of the popular feminist era, utilizing gender and sexuality as forms of control. Stylistically, she has conformed to the female pop vocal stylings of other popular mainstream musicians. She no longer screams her lyrics or uses anger as a motivator to emphasize feminist goals, instead Stefani focuses on popular feminist ideas of control, tradition and female taboo. Incorporating postmodern techniques of play, performance and deconstruction, Stefani subverts the male gaze and preaches girl power politics. In *Wind It Up* and *The Sweet Escape* Stefani emphasizes the importance of social dance and the reliance on female friendships as a way to break free of the dominating male world. *Wind It Up* is demonstrated as a female dance form, one that the boys cannot understand or replicate, which is why they are so fascinated with the way the girls move. In the last verse, she sings:

Keep goin' girl, it's your night
 Don't let him steal your light
 I know he thinks you're fine and stuff
 But does he know how to wind you up?

The lyrics demonstrate a focus on the self and the creation of a personal identity not formulated around traditional patriarchal notions of femininity. These ideas are also evident in *The Sweet Escape* when Stefani is broken out of the jail by her fellow girlfriends. This elevates the importance of female friendship over heterosexual relationships and the reliance on strong, loyal female friendships for support in time of need, thus allowing for two different forms of the gaze. First, the male gaze is subverted because she is not freed by the love of a good man, and second, she is rescued by two females who could be considered her lovers or read as a queer text. Lyrically, Stefani's *The Sweet Escape* conforms to the traditional tropes of femininity inasmuch as explorations of traditional female roles are stipulated by a popular feminist perspective.

The "Toolbox": Identity Creation

If we define lifestyle as the set of expressive behaviours through which an individual (or group) communicates his/her/its identity to others in society, music styles are an excellent means to assert one's tastes and to communicate with peers—to express both solidarity with a given group and rejection of others. In addition to asserting one's identity, popular music also enables one to construct such an identity.

-Gerrit van der Rijt, et al., 2000, 81

Rich and associates (1998) note that before the invention of music television, music captured the emotions of adolescents. The creation of one's self identity and the manufacturing of group distinctiveness are two varying ways of producing a form of identification. Musical associations and preferences have frequently been associated with the foundation of a group identity and thus lead to the making of a personal selfdom.

Van der Rijt and colleagues note three motivations for viewing music television programming, which can then be translated in the formation of identity: trend surveillance, social stimulus, and school of life (van der Rijt, d'Haenens, Jansen, de Vas, 2000, p. 82). Trend surveillance occurs when the viewer watches particular programming, especially music television, to gain a better understanding or sense of current musical crazes and their associated aesthetic styles. Social stimulus relates particularly to the development of a group identity and relating to above notions of community and friendship where watching music television is a social function experienced amongst peer groups. The school of life motivation attempts to assist the viewer in learning about oneself and others, thus contributing to a personal and group identity.

Hanna (1992) notes that “tastes in dance and music appear to be at the core of one’s personal and group identity” (Hanna, 1992, p. 188). Watching music television programming, such as *TRL* or *MOD*, transcribes into everyday social life beyond home viewing with peers. Quoting from Moffatt, Hanna says “In mainstream America white adolescent culture in the late twentieth century, one’s musical tastes were at the core of one’s personal identity, an expression of one’s essence—a free choice, like friendship” (188). Thus we see an elevation of activity over passivity as social dance provides a change from passive consuming of music to actively manipulating the body. Hanna notes that “social dancers often intentionally or unintentionally send messages of who they are, whom and what they desire, and what they want to defy” (192). Some social dancers could be perceived as trendsetters and in other cases, followers.

Crucial to the creation and maintenance of both the personal and group identity is the “look,” the hairstyles, the dress, the mannerisms and so forth. These “looks” are defined and marketed through the branding of a star persona or the image of a common icon in the mainstream popular culture front. During the late 80s and early 90s Madonna was the “look” my friends and I desired. We wore our hair in side ponytails held up with scrunchy hair ties. We liked the tie dye, hyper-colour, acid wash clothing and frequently mixed Madonna’s more feminine traits, such as the bra top, with her other childish, teenage, everyday girl side. Deciding on a “look” is an active process that goes on amongst the members of the group. Without the “look” group participants cannot be deciphered from other musical groups in public settings, such as the mall, or at school. As Kaplan (1987) explains, Madonna’s style could be read as resisting the “patriarchal feminine” by inmixing styles of a bordello queen and a bag lady, thus teenagers sporting a similar look could be viewed as resisting their mothers and the “normal” feminine. By choosing the looks of Madonna and Gwen Stefani we demonstrated a popular feminist sensibility with a postmodern look.

Identification with a particular group, such as mainstream culture, punk, rock, and so forth, can imply a sense of belonging as well as a sense of differentiation, such that “senses of shared identity are alliances formed out of oppositional stances” (Driscoll, 2002, 276). Consuming music videos and music in general produces a mode of self-production evident in groups (Driscoll, 2002). This idea was expressed by Fritzsche’s (2004) interview respondents and Taft’s (2004) exploration of girl power politics. The girls in Fritzsche study were almost identical to my friends and me growing up listening to the Spice Girls. Extremely important to the study of mainstream girls’ culture was an

emphasis on the Spice Girls' media image as being reflective of a toolbox. She notes that these girls were able to use the toolbox in "pursuing their own individual goals" (Fritzsche, 2004, 159). While we adapted our look and postmodern sensibility around Madonna and Gwen Stefani, we particularly liked the attitude of Girl Power, and the Spice Girls changed our image and group identities to a more feminine, but still popular feminist mode of display.

During social dance, the girls in Fritzsche's study tried on new personalities, as there was no lack of personality variation amongst the Spice Girls. Each Spice Girl represented a different personality, incorporating aspects of cuteness, shyness, sexiness, aggressiveness and self-confidence. Social dance with these girls, as with my friends and me, allowed us to explore differing ways that we could demonstrate our uniqueness and contribute to the building of our self-image and esteem. This helped us to create a more rounded identity based on personal preference rather than passive acceptance of dominant ideologies. Taft (2004), while not particularly fond of the Spice Girls, expands on ideas of personal choice and refers to it as a decision making process. She views the formation of identity as a canon of decision making that removes the girl from the solely passive consumer of girls' cultural commodities and into the position of active participant and cultural producer. She says "this emphasis on decision-making provides girls with a space to be active agents, thus challenging meanings of Girl Power that position girls only as passive consumers" (Taft, 2004, 76).

Through the exploration of a variety of musical video texts from my own girlhood experiences and a textual analysis of the popular feminist artists of my tween and teenage years, I have examined the importance of music television for the formation and

manufacturing of popular feminist identities. Pursuing ideas of postmodernism and popular feminism allowed for a deconstruction of images and ideas featured in past and present media texts in conjunction with a demonstration of complexities between emerging and conflicting identities. The popular feminist era has reflected the exploitation of gender and sexuality in music video, lyrics and images in a positive manner, allowing artists to play and transgress dominant ideologies in a safe, but empowering way.

It is evident that current artists such as Beyonce, Kelly Clarkson, and Avril Lavigne and my tween favourites Gwen Stefani, Alanis Morissette, Madonna and the Spice Girls offer empowering message to young females watching and listening to their music, but avoiding the feminist language and style previously attributed to Riot Grrrl bands and second wave feminists. These artists have presented content that could be deemed sexual at times, such as social dancing, provocative dress and inappropriate actions; however, the movement of bodies is designed for a girl to express herself to herself and her peer group in order to create personal and group identities. The controlling of the gaze establishes these main themes and the lyrics and images carry through with them into their adult lives, as it has with my friends and me.

Chapter 5

Girls' Magazines: Popular feminism and the power of reading

The construction and enjoyment of women who are feminine have battled stringent rules of second wave feminism and the code of substance over image. While this is not true in all cases, the feminine versus feminist polarity no longer needs to be the case. Feminism has made some peace with mainstream women's culture allowing for a collapse in the feminine/feminist polarity. Through the incorporation of women's movement goals into popular discourses, girls are aware of and living the freedoms won for them by second and third wavers. During the second wave "journalists frequently misrepresented and maligned feminists, portraying them as man-hating radicals out of touch with the concerns of average American women" (Bronstein, 2005, 783). These women, described as "angry," "militant," "loony," and "hateful," have changed the way girls view their position in society. The crossover between feminism and media outlets has allowed girls to come to feminism in piecemeal form, but to also be seen as "approachable," "open to differences," "media friendly," "smart," "spirited," "diverse," and "powerful" (Bronstein, 2005, 790).

Magazine media formats have aligned content with second and third wave feminism and ideological constructions of femininity and beauty to represent the new girl, a girl who, as Bronstein (2005) describes, is "smart" and "powerful". Artists and magazine writers acknowledge the new girl because they, as have I, have grown up in the face of second and third wave feminism. We recognize and appreciate the battles our ancestors have fought, but also recognize that many of those battles have been incorporated into government policies on such things as welfare and daycare. Much like postmodernists, popular feminists do not struggle with contradictions, but embrace them. We know that we have varying identities collected from a variety of sources, such as

guardians, social institutions and media. As Bronstein notes, popular feminists “reject the demand for logical consistency...associate[d] with second wave theory” (785) and modernism. Musical artists such as Madonna and Gwen Stefani toy with boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality, black and white, and male and female. In Madonna’s 1989 music video *Express Yourself*, for example, we see a young Madonna playing both the role of male and female voyeur and sexual object, as well as posing as both dominatrix and dominated. Between the covers of fashion and beauty magazines models are most sought after for being androgynous—the ability to speak to multiple sexes and sexual preferences. *America’s Next Top Model* reiterates the importance of being beautiful and ugly, sexy and sophisticated and those girls who demonstrate these characteristics are favoured.

In this chapter I outline my engagement with teenage girls’ magazines and how articles, advertisements and images reflect a popular feminist and sometimes postmodernist, perspective. I examine the type of words used to describe girls’ lives and their culture, the images that are prevalent in the magazines they read most often, and the celebrities presented as empowering female role models. I focus on how these notions help tween and teen girls understand their complex individual and group identities. Much of the research on girls’ magazines has focused on the individualist nature and fairy godmother narrative; however, my engagement with magazines has not been quite as structured. I learned much more from magazines than how to act appropriately around my date. I learned about feminist motivations for young people like myself, and how I could incorporate the importance of individuality, strength and power into my own personal identity.

What are you saying about teen magazines?

Magazine readers have often been described as passive consumers. Girls are assumed to accept dominant, ideological messages of beauty and heterosexuality to maintain the traditional tropes of a patriarchal society. As McRobbie (1977) finds during her research on *Jackie* magazine, this mass culture or popular culture phenomenon is often described as “Cheap, superficial, exploitative and debasing, mass culture reduces its audience to a mass of mindless morons” (70). McRobbie states that magazines and *Jackie* in particular attempt to win the consent of female youth in terms of femininity, leisure and consumption. Magazines provide readers with social contexts in which to identify and find their position in the world; one that frequently emphasizes the importance of romance and beauty above all things including friendship (McRobbie, 1977). Addressing this issue through the examination of *Jackie*, McRobbie states,

A happy ending means a happy couple; a sad one—a single girl. Having eliminated the possibility of strong supportive relationships between girls themselves, and between people of different ages, *Jackie* stories must elevate to dizzy heights the supremacy of the heterosexual romantic partnership (86).

The magazines also present girls’ sexuality as being dirty and unattractive, something not to be enjoyed or needed but to be experienced in terms of a romantic relationship with the opposite sex (McRobbie, 1977). Through magazines, girls are told to be pretty, unassertive and feminine, defined by emotions of jealousy, possessiveness and devotion (McRobbie, 1977). However, with the popular feminist generation now concretely formed in popular culture, we have witnessed a drastic change in magazine culture. While girls are still depicted as pretty and sexy, and the ideology of beauty still highly prevalent, the girl is supposed to be feminine, but also aggressive; she is to be sexy, but

powerful and in control; she is to wear lipstick, but also to actively produce culture; to wear stilettos, but also create her own path to success.

Magazines previous to the late 1980s reflect the individual and not the social, one where girls are not a collective, but are on their own to find a husband. The tone of the magazines is one of moral integrity and does not reflect actual reality; what is presented is a traditional image of post-war female culture. In order to create and maintain a traditional female role and/or image, McRobbie discovered that readers are encouraged to “consider beauty a full-time job demanding skill, patience and learning” (106).

McRobbie concludes her piece on *Jackie* by saying,

The *Jackie* girl is alone in her quest for love; she refers back to her female peers for advice, comfort and reassurance only when she needs to do so or when she has nothing better to do. Female solidarity, or even just female friendship, has no real existence in the magazine. To achieve self-respect, the girl has to escape the “bitchy”, “catty”, atmosphere of female company and find a boyfriend as quickly as possible (114).

The most important point to emphasize is that tweens and teens, not adults, read teen magazines. Tween girls are not necessarily interested in boys at this age and may feel safer examining and deconstructing male and female bodies presented in the magazines.

Depending on how one reads a magazine and interprets images, similar representations of women can still be found 22 years after McRobbie’s 1977 article. In her study of the commodification of Prom, Mazzearella (1999) discusses tactics used by magazine producers to feminize young girls. Mazzearella analyzed editorial and advertising content of two issues of four magazines focused around Prom or having lengthy prom additions/editions: *Seventeen*, *Teen*, *YM*, and *Your Prom*.

Mazzarella discovered that magazine articles attempt to provide “credible” or “expert” sources to convince readers that what is presented through the story is in the girl’s best interest. She found that females are told they have power and control; however this power and control comes from the purchase and utilization of commodities. This power and control is also limited to physical beautification (Mazzarella, 1999). The magazines examined played up ideas of uniqueness when in fact readers are provided a variety of images, identities and products to choose from (Mazzarella, 1999). The idea of choosing your products and applying a style or variety of looks the girl likes is a popular feminist motivation hidden within the discourse of femininity. Mazzarella explains how these ideas of power, control and beauty are translated into expressing individuality, but these are only pseudo-individualities. Overall, the prom-oriented magazines discussed by Mazzarella were shown to attempt to win consent to the dominant order by “promising the reader control, power, and individuality through the consumption of mass-produced commodities” (110).

Mazzarella’s ideas are relevant, but her analysis is flawed as she does not consider the popular feminist motivations of using commodities to political ends or the power of creating a girl group “look” or style as a meaningful performance of that group’s particular identity. Mazzarella paints a negative picture of girls’ culture and the magazines girls frequently read rather than viewing the culture from an alternative, more popular feminist position. Mazzarella stresses that girls’ culture is uniform, but there are a variety of girls’ cultures and each has differing views on feminism, beauty, commodities and mainstream culture. For example, the girls interviewed in Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie’s (2005) article considered themselves to be alternative skater

girls, but identified with popular mainstream cultural artists such as Avril Lavigne.

However, Mazzarella is useful for comparing the traditional view of magazine literature to the current more contemporary, third wave feminist theory.

Paraphrasing from Margaret Duffy and J. Michael Gotcher, Mazzarella says, “The only power available to young women is achieved through seduction, beauty, and fashion” (97). Mazzarella comments on the fact that these frequent ideologies have, in recent years, had negative effects on readers. For example, Hendriks (2002) discovered that one in every two women is dissatisfied with her body type. Hendriks conducted fashion magazine research and found that women overestimated their body sizes and especially disliked their cheeks, waist, hips and thighs. Ask my fiancé how he feels about himself and he too will say he’s “fat,” that his arms are too “flabby” and that his cheeks and eyes are always “puffy.” He does not read girls’ (or men’s magazines), so his image of himself is not directly related to what popular culture is telling him. What is the difference between a man and a woman? The culture and society in which we live places too much pressure and importance on the way people look and this is not just common to women and girls, but to boys and men of all ages. Even thin girls are dissatisfied with being too thin. We are never happy with the grades we get in school, the way our hair falls over our eyes, the car that constantly breaks down, the gifts we get for Christmas, or the way our neighbours don’t mow a little strip of lawn. We are, in general, an unsatisfied population. And media typically reiterate all the things wrong or flawed in our society and try to produce literature and often more products on how to make us feel “better.” We can’t control the homework that piles on our desks or the fights our parents have, but we can control the clothes we wear, the food we eat and the friends we keep.

Because of this, I feel, magazines focus on the things we can control to reduce our other anxieties. However this needs to be contextualized one step further. There are limitations to this line of thinking. Popular girls' culture is limited to the white, middle-class majority; a poor girl cannot necessarily choose the clothes she wants and a bullied girl cannot have the friends she needs. However, to some extent we all have options that are within our control. I use these examples because they are reflected most frequently within the magazines I read.

Magazines typically demonstrate the steps women can take to obtain self-beautification (Mazzarella, 1999). These "tips" are usually described by "experts" or "credible sources" leading the reader to believe these "tips" are for their own good, while hiding the main initiative of selling a product or service (Mazzarella, 1999). Becoming the best consumer is evident in these magazines, whereby the reader is supplied with the right brand-name products to purchase (Mazzarella, 1999). Power and control are represented within these magazines; however they are masked as a form of consumerism, which even then is limited to the improvement of physical attractiveness (Mazzarella, 1999). Sexiness is marketed as the teenage girl's real source of power, so while the girl must do everything, including dressing her date for the Prom, she must remain perfect and sexy in order to remain attractive to her male date (Mazzarella, 1999).

Flowing from the work of McRobbie, and in a similar conviction to Mazzarella, Tait (2003) discusses the use of magazines in the creation of the self. Examining magazines, Tait notes,

Girls are persuaded by the prime of being sexually "self-fulfilled," by the desire not to be considered abnormal by their peers, by concerns over venereal disease, by worries about being overlooked by men, and so on.

Each of these incitements plays a part in convincing young women, within the context of the magazines they read, to shape themselves in particular ways (84).

Each of these articles describes varying ideas of girls' mainstream culture. This makes it particularly difficult to narrow down how girls view culture when the researchers cannot agree on its importance and effects. However, over the years what has become evident is a change in girls' popular discourses. We have witnessed a change in how girls read magazines, watch television and listen to the radio. Media literacy courses taught in school and the battles won and lost by second and third wave feminists have led to a popular feminist generation subscribed to through media.

Girls! Girls! Girls! Creating collectivity and community through magazine activities

High school: a time of change, anxiety and the promise of new friendships. What we learn in high school is social power and a status hierarchy we never realized existed. We are constantly challenged by schoolwork, peers and authority figures. We learn that strength comes from within and is an essential ingredient to saving face and rising above catty girls spreading rumours. We learn through social networking and our ability to maintain a self-identity in the face of adversity. Popular culture teaches us how to survive junior high and secondary school.

Magazines taught us to survive the catty atmosphere of the junior high and high school scenes, but also to strive for success and to be strong. My friends and I wanted to be strong against the boys. We were always going to face rumours and become outcasts at some point from other girls in our classes, but the boys were our challenge. We wanted to show them that we can be just as good as them. They teased us when we lost to them, but it was always a great feeling when we broke down their egos. One day

during track practice none of my team members showed up for relay races, so my coach decided I would run with the boys. I was the anchor, the person who ran the last and longest leg of the track. This person is usually the strongest runner on the team and has the most breath control. I ran against Danny, a short little kid with a sprinter stance I had never seen before. Danny was the fastest runner from the boy's team; even with his short legs he was quick and he and I had never competed against each other before. We went to many track meets together and often cheered each other on, but it was time to show who was the best, and I was determined it was going to be me. We got the baton at the exact same moment and it was a race to the finish. I finished just a few milliseconds before Danny and it was an amazing feeling. While the girls were not there to witness my success, coach Wilson informed the girls that we had some real competition going around and that the boys were not happy about me, the girl on the team, beating them in the last leg.

“It’s a girl’s world, so get used to it” we would tell the boys. After the initial defeat on the red stone track, we started beating the boys in class games and sports activities, especially when the teacher would make the challenge boys against girls. We felt more confident because we had finally beaten the boys at something and our winning victory kept on rolling. We were always more motivated by these challenges because we always wanted to show up the boys. It was not until the Spice Girls became a popular culture phenomenon that we had a label to identify ourselves with. Girl Power was the name and Girl Power was our game.

Girls’ solidarity and strong supportive relationships amongst our group of friends was the only way that we would have been able to accomplish the challenges offered to

us by teachers and coaches. Despite what other researchers have found, girls are equally as strong as boys as long as they have the encouragement needed to take the challenge. In high school males were able to take a weight training gym class that was held in the weight room twice a week. My girlfriends and I wanted to take the same class, but they told us “no,” so we went to one of our favourite female coaches and asked how we could get some time in the weight room to prove that we deserved a course in weight training as well. While the boys were strengthening their muscles, the girls were forced to take a self-defense course, which was valuable in giving us more self-confidence. However, we learned from magazines and second wave feminism not to back down in our demands. We wanted time in the weight room and we were going to get it. Our demands were heard, but also not heard at the same time. The girls and I got responses like, “when you are strong like the men, you can go into the weight room.” While these comments only made us more determined, Mrs. Norman got us some time in the weight room during our regularly scheduled gym class. Sometimes we only had minutes to workout in there, but at least we had the chance to use the facility. Today, however, there is a full year weight training course for girls, as well as after school field hockey and softball for senior students at the secondary school I attended. It may have been our demands or just the changing of the times, but eventually we did get what we wanted all along thanks to Mrs. Norman.

We learned to stand up for ourselves by reading about others’ wins and losses at school, work and in the home. Magazine articles taught us how to be strong, to stand up for what we thought was right, to work hard with other girls to make our dreams a reality, and to recognize that we are not the only ones with problems or embarrassing stories.

We are not alone in our quest for identities, understanding our bodies, sexual compulsions, and even love.

I will never deny that magazines present young women as very sexy and erotic at times, and more times than not as materialistic shop-a-holics in order to sell goods and services. However each of these things only reiterates the collapsing of the feminine versus feminist polarity. Decoding messaging and images is not a static task; each girl will take what she wants or is looking for from the messages. The girls' culture I describe here and live to this day is mainstream—it is popular, and thus many participate in its ever-changing elements. Even if one does not consider herself mainstream, they usually align themselves with many popular values and ideals. While those values might frequently be blinded by fashion and beauty, it is important, as I have noted before, to set aside the commercial mentality and focus on the goals of a popular feminist practice. The inclusion of femininity and feminism into the pages of teen magazines not only assists in the collapsing of the feminine/feminist polarity, but also creates a space for girls to learn about feminism and maintain a community based on friendship, sharing and acting together as a collective of girls striving to improve their lives and the lives of others. As Le Masurier (2007) realized, popular women's magazines "shared a similar 'feminist' intent: to speak to women about gender inequality and to find a solution for the lived experience of injustice in their personal and public lives" (191).

Community is created through writing articles, emailing or mailing letters to the editor and contributing embarrassing moments to Trama-rama sections. Reading together, sharing together and being together help to create a community of like-minded individuals. We were not alone in our search for information, or in the experiences we

had; there were always others like us. Since university started I have spent less time with my old friends and have been forced to make new ones being away from home. I learned that celebrity tabloid magazines were extremely popular amongst university students and I moved in with a number of girls who collected and read together. It was great fun to share stories and two of the girls I lived with were women's studies majors which made reading articles and watching television commercials all the more interesting. In graduate school I finally met another person almost identical to me. A girl, who was fashionable, interested in beauty magazines and also well informed about feminist goals. It was a great time to do research on this topic since there were many influences empowering my research and giving me information and motivation to tell my stories.

The stories told and the advertisements presented in teen magazines are commonly found by researchers such as Mazzarella and McRobbie to focus on boys and coupledness rather than on girls and their friends. *YM* and *Seventeen* do feature articles on school girl crushes, how to attract a mate, and how to compromise in a relationship, but they also strive to exhibit the relationships girls have with mainstream culture, family, and friends. In addition, girls are also presented as power houses, in control and independent within their relationships, in academia and in sports, such as the Vivid Vixen break dance team discussed below. *YM* and *Seventeen* take the lead in creating a community for popular feminists and feature the most amount of content on popular feminist approaches and postmodern identities, such as celebrating contradictions, pro-choice/any choice advocacy, the reclamation of all things "girlie," pro-sex, and genderbending (Gilley, 2005).

Magazine	Number of issues examined	Number of Popular Feminist articles	Number of Popular Feminist Advertisements
<i>CosmoGirl</i>	2	14	13
<i>Seventeen</i>	3	13	11
<i>YM</i>	4	38	31
<i>ElleGirl</i>	2	10	13
<i>Cosmopolitan</i>	2	9	8

Table 1: Popular Feminisms in Teenage Girls' Magazines

Advertisements, such as the Caboodles ad (figure 4.1) in *YM*'s December 2003 issue reiterate the importance of popular feminism and demonstrate through illustration that it is important to have girlfriends and to be independent from male counterparts. The ad celebrates contradictions and shows a reclamation of things labeled "girly." The girls in the ad appear to be having a study/sleepover. Their interest in makeup and hair products/accessories would be considered "girly" but the new popular feminist is allowed to enjoy "girly" things and also celebrate contradictions of sexuality. Female solidarity and the queer eye offer readers more than a bedroom culture. Caboodles might be a carrying case for makeup and hair accessories, but girls like myself and my group of friends talked about many pressing issues facing us at home and at school while playing with each other's hair. Playing with each other's hair and touching each other's faces is a sign of intimacy. These acts are signs of sexual and erotic behaviour and thus allowing for a secondary reading of the image, such that the homosexual or bisexual girl feels represented in the advertisement. The ad is selling the Caboodles kit, but also an alternative lifestyle where the Caboodles kit not only holds makeup and hair accessories, but your fantasies and play toys too. To be feminine and feminist is probably the strongest power a girl can have; she can control the gaze, but have the ability to command a room with her intelligence. With numerous critiques of second wave's

rejection of housewives and other minority groups, to be included in the second wave club meant that members must reject many of their identities to live the aspirations of the entire collective.



Figure 4.1 (Caboodles Advertisement)

Popular feminism, on the other hand, allows girls to celebrate their girlhood and be strong, sophisticated and sexy. Popular feminism's attempt to include something for every girl makes it simpler for girls to pick and choose what attitudes, styles, and ideas they like and reject those they don't, which is very different from the women's liberation movement.

To be a popular feminist does not mean you have to deny your feelings for the greater cause, it means that you can actively participate, understand, spread the word, and feel empowered by your gender, in addition to having high school crushes and being feminine. For example, as I went about collecting the variety of magazines for this thesis from friends, classmates and students, I had the urge to take every quiz in each magazine. I did it for the fun of reading what someone else might think of my answers. It did not make me less feminist, but I did realize while I was reading the questions and answers that popular feminism is very prominent in the quiz sections too. Even some of my own answers would be considered "bad" or "wrong." The quizzes I took when attempting to prepare for this thesis offered an interesting perspective on popular feminism. For example, one quiz in *Seventeen* magazine (December 2003) had the respondent subtract points from their quiz results if their goal when going out was to attract boys. This I thought was particularly interesting as a lot of young women go out with their friends with the intention of meeting Mr. Right. While we had many girls' nights out on the town, we too went out hoping that we would meet someone interesting, possibly make a date for the next weekend, and maybe even fall in love.

When I was taking the quizzes in my youth and for this project I had similar thoughts. I realized I have always been a girlie feminist. I was critical of the questions I

read and stunned by the favoured answers. When I was younger I did not necessarily pay close attention to the details of the magazines. We tended to read over advertisements and often laughed off the answers to quizzes, since being a good friend and a strong girl were more important than walks on the beach. These imperfect, sometimes unsound, quizzes were considered top on the believability factor. Teenage girls' magazines offer "a socialization of social values, expectations, patterns and future goals" (Garcia, 1988, 150). Ostermann and Keller-Cohen (1998) notes that quizzes are one of the most important ways to socialize girls into acting in "appropriate" ways. Researchers, such as Garcia (1988) and Osterman and Keller-Cohen suggest that we put much faith in these often deemed "boy crazed" quizzes. Ostermann and Keller-Cohen note that quizzes are often regarded as "playful in their appearance, their ludic character disguises a heterosexist agenda to teach girls how to behave, an agenda whose ideological content has been seriously neglected" (533). In an effort to be a better girl (and to some extent to have fun) Ostermann and Keller-Cohen suggest that "quizzes create endlessly problematic situations for girls, leading the reader to wonder about her behaviour, to stimulate her wish to be tested and her wish to improve" (554). Foucault's understanding of discourse demonstrates that discourses of advice or therapy, in the form of quizzes, is the fundamental ingredient to social control (Ostermann & Keller-Cohen, 2003). Girls are encouraged to put thought into the answering of these quizzes so advertisers and "experts" can sell advice—advice which may lead to the purchase of products or the control of the "bad girl" (Ostermann & Keller-Cohen, 2003). By focusing attention on quizzes, girls learn to depend on the specialist, the advisor, the councilor to know what is

best for her, and therefore the quizzes set themselves up as the all-knowing mother figure to maintain control and authority of the girl (Ostermann & Keller-Cohen, 2003).

This, however, in my personal experience, is often incorrect. My friends and I utilized quizzes as an activity, something that we could take with each other, have laughs about and put aside never to consider again. That is, quiz questions and answers were not reflective of our relationships with each other or with boys. Instead we learned that we have many differing and sometimes conflicting identities and we tried to make sense of which was right for certain situations, even if only hypothetically. Today, girls' magazines are one of the most popular ways of dispensing popular feminist messages. What we did learn from quizzes was that independence and friendship were the keys to having fun in your youth. We did not really consider the importance of being a "good girl" or "bad girl;" this, I would imagine for most, was controlled by our guardians. By placing prominence on girls and not boys, teen magazines emphasized girls' contributions to each other. By hanging out with her girlfriends the reader was showing her power. By caring a little less about boys, a girl demonstrates her ability to be independent and self-supportive. We created a community, my friends and I, and we knew without question that other girls were doing the same things. Many studies, such as Fritzsche's (2004), found this to be true.

Magazines would not exist without readers and writers or without the contributions of creative female pieces and thus, magazines are a slave to our demands. We may not have had many demands, but we did want to feel connected to other readers through personal stories, art, and poems and we wanted uncensored access to the lives of our female companions. We had the ability and opportunity to write letters to the editor

and share our experiences with other girls around the country. While I did not do these things per se, there was an opportunity for me to write columns and share my personal stories with magazine readers, and the editors frequently solicited our assistance in maintaining the high standard of the magazines we liked to read. Instead my girlfriends and I created our own magazine, similar to a Riot Grrrl zine, we pulled out images from our favourite mags and wrote our own comments, often humorous, but sometimes very critical of the images we saw. We also wrote poems together and articles about our favourite bands. Sometimes we were cruel, to girls we thought looked like “sluts” or girls who we thought were anorexic, such as models like Kate Moss.

The soliciting of assistance from everyday girls is evident in the editor’s letters. For example, in the December 2003 issue of *Seventeen* the latest editor, Altossa Rubenstein, wrote to magazine readers,

Imagine if there was a magazine that was totally perfect for you. Yes, you! I know it’s a little corny to think of a magazine as being “perfect for you.” But it *is* possible. And your opinions will make all the difference....Anyway, see you next month, and if you get a second, write to me, okay? Consider it an investment in your magazine-viewing pleasure. I promise I’ll always listen.

Comments such as those made by Rubenstein were very common amongst the magazines I examined. The soliciting of girls’ opinions and topics were necessary to keep the culture alive and keep up with changing times. Because girls are always changing, their culture needs to adapt frequently. Those who dedicated their time to creating and maintaining the integrity and popularity of the magazines my friends and I read were of the utmost importance to us, as was the magazine’s success with advertisers. Our active

participation within a community of our peers helps sustain a very viable teenage market, in addition to empowering young girls.

Being Feminine and Feminist: The Power of Celebrity in Third Wave Popular Culture

Looking back at all the magazine issues I have collected over the past year, one thing that should be noted are the covers. The cover is usually given to a popular celebrity, such as Hilary Duff, or a group of celebrities, like the cast of *The OC*. For the most part the cover is given to a young female who exhibits an empowering female image, but also relates well to the population of readers. The November 2003 issue of *YM* features actress Amanda Bynes. Her movie and television roles have incorporated some of the more boundary breaking roles in films starring female actresses her age. Amanda Bynes has starred in such films as *She's the Man* and *Hairspray* as well as in the television sitcom *What I Like About You*. To be a celebrity during one's formative years and still to date and have such a "normal" life is an important role to carry. While many stars face train wreck disasters, such as Britney Spears over the 2006-2007 year, many young stars are on their best behaviour and supporting political activities and making contributions to popular feminism. For example, *Heroes* star Hayden Panettiere is fighting in Japan and evading arrest warrants to save the dolphins.

Of the magazines selected by my peers and students based on their contributions to my thesis research, ten of the covers featured strong female role models. For example, April's 2005 issue of *Elle Girl* featured the dark and twisted Christina Ricci, *Seventeen's* December 2003 issue featured musical sensation Pink, and *YM's* November 2003 issue featured Amanda Bynes. Other cover specials include pop sensation Hilary Duff and

mainstream punk rock skater girl Avril Lavigne. Each of these young women has made positive contributions to popular culture through music and/or television and film roles. These girls embody what it is to be feminine while also being strong and staying out of trouble. They are exceptional role models for young girls to look up to and demonstrate the contradictory identities of feminism and femininity.

December's 2003 edition of *Seventeen* featured a six page spread on Pink. That month readers had the opportunity to read about where Pink's lyrics originated and what inspired her. The article focused on how Pink is a great role model for girls because she is different. She does not care what others think of her or her music and it is evident in her style of performance and lyrics. Discussing her most recent CD *Try This*, Pink is quoted saying,

I love doing different things...I don't wake up and say "Okay, I'm going to try and be different today." But I just love it when people aren't afraid to stand up and do whatever the hell they want to. So I'm basically saying, "Get off your ass—*Try This*."

Inspiring words from an inspiring celebrity role model, such as Pink, help girls make powerful decisions. If all the discussion about modeling behaviour after favourite characters and idols is true (Bandura, 1977, Baran & Davis, 2001, Ostermann & Keller-Cohen, 2003), then the world will be a much better and stronger place if girls took after the many popular feminist role models evident in media texts today. Pink's words are powerful and have the ability to inspire readers to be themselves, to define who they are sexually and on their own terms. Her different, but fashionable style is one that readers can create for themselves. Pink's tattoo totting, Do-It-Yourself mentality shows she is in control of her life. She writes her own songs often critiquing world issues, such as her

latest song *Dear Mr. President* and takes a feminist approach to activism, the importance of female solidarity and critiques the often popular “stupid girls.” Pink is mainstream, but her style is very different from that of pop music artists like Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson, and her music stands alone as an all encompassing popular feminist discourse advocating independence, self-confidence and strength to define who you are. It appears here that I have drifted from discussing magazines, but music celebrities are featured monthly as they are important to a girl’s life. From the magazines, girls like me learn about how artists like Pink became who they are, what inspires them, what motivated them, and so forth. These articles offered me ways of being and suggested ways for me to achieve my hopes and dreams. In considering music and magazines, I felt that it was important to examine both at the same time because in the magazines girls learn about the personality behind the star, what makes them tick. When listening to their songs only part of their personality comes across. Readers can learn much more by utilizing both media to understand themselves and their popular feminist identities. Pink’s lyrics are often aggressive and loud, and her personality matches her music, but readers, also became knowledgeable about Pink’s ambitions with PETA for instance.

Also in the editorial spread on Pink readers learn she is passionate about animals. Pink is a supporter of animal rights organization PETA and sent a letter to *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour about making fur fashionable. Pink recalls writing something along the lines of,

I’m not asking you not to have people wear fur in your magazine anymore, because I know you get a lot of money from those designers. But if you want people to wear fur, then also run some anti-fur campaigns and let people decide which way to go. Don’t just shove fur down their throats. Be fair. Let both sides be heard (107).

Along similar lines, Prince William is a hunter and when Pink was invited to sing at his birthday, she declined saying, “I don’t like the fact that you shove spears up animal’s asses” (107). Her openness and what could be construed as vulgarity is not only feminist but postmodern. She rejects all that is feminine, the classy elegant appearance, the importance of proper language and innocent (stereotypical expectations of women in a patriarchal society), but remains feminine in her look. She explains that we could all use a little more education on matters that are important, she feels that we are not necessarily conscious of our feelings, but that maybe we are just ignorant and need some education. The passions for PETA run through Pink’s *Seventeen* exclusive and establishes her as a strong female role model. She encourages youth to stand up for their differences and to be self-confident in their decisions. How much more inspiring can a superstar get?

Feminist Categories: Individuality, Sexuality and Gender Transgression

Being female and being feminist are two identities that go hand in hand in today’s magazine industry. It was a little known fact that most magazine editors, producers and owners were men, but in today’s girls’ culture the majority of writers and editors are women. *Seventeen* magazine for example employs an all-female writing staff. Most of these women grew up in a second wave feminist era and their own morals and values are incorporated into their writing practices. Le Masurier (2007) says, “McRobbie (1996) argued that feminist content and attitude in magazines was almost inevitable, as the magazine staff had ‘studied aspects of feminism or women’s issues as part of their education... they attempt to integrate at least aspects of these political or feminist discourses into their place of work’” (192).

Female staff writers understand all the adventures and journeys we had and would meet in our girlhood years and were able to offer support when we were successful and when we failed. They addressed our problems with an air of expertise and this is empowering considering the high volume of literature dictating women's inferiority. The articles written by other girls empowered us as well. Many of the articles featured in the selections of magazines I chose to examine here are written by the average girl, for the average girl. Readers learn about topics such as contracting cancer from tanning beds or how everyday medications may kill us. There are suggestions for asking the right questions from your doctor, how to obtain birth control pills, how to get involved in local sports activities, and so forth. Girls really look out for other girls.

Popular feminism tends to focus on individuality and independence, being sexually aware and satisfied, like Madonna, and assuming multiple identities. Through magazines and the girls featured in them, girls are empowered to be stronger and to take on a male dominated world. Many stories featured exceptional girls; girls who break down the male/female barriers in sports or extracurricular activities; girls who strive for visibility and equality. *YM*'s December 2003 issue carries a particular article which I would consider a great motivator for girls to enter a male domain. *YM*'s monthly diary section featured a 20-year-old Seattle girl, Kasi Farrar and her amazing skills as a b-girl. She was featured with her break dancing crew, the Vivid Vixens, as they danced their way to the final moments of the Qween B Breakgirl Competition. This article demonstrates the abilities girls have to be equal to their male counterparts and it authorizes girls to try new things that were once deemed "boys only." Farrar and the

Vivid Vixens had not only competed against hundreds of other girls for the title of Qween B, but had previously won competitions against boys.

Magazine Silences

Transgression is not as blatant in magazine articles as it is in music videos and television programs.

However, the way we read and decode messages and images differs from girl to girl. Stuart Hall (2002) emphasizes the ability for viewers/readers to decode messages in dominant/preferred, negotiated or oppositional ways. Keeping this in mind, many of the



Figure 4.2 (Knockout Advertisement)

advertisements and articles portray a dual marketing approach. While many pages are devoted to heterosexual relationships, other pages could be read from another, more intriguing queer eye (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). Some examples include, but are not limited to, Knockout's ad (figure 4.2), where the women are leaning on each other in sexual ways, girls playfully wrestling other girls.

My personal favourite is an ad for Candies (figure 4.3) featuring singer/songwriter Kelly Clarkson and Playboy Playmate Jenny McCarthy in a bathtub. The expression on Clarkson's face potentially reads "I'm not against this little rendezvous, but I'm scared," while McCarthy's expression is one of lust as she peers over in Clarkson's direction, ready for some bubble bath fun.



Figure 4.3 (Candies Advertisement)

These postmodern sensibilities combined with a popular feminist flavour explain and elevate the contradictions girls face with creating identities. How does a girl decide which identity to choose? She doesn't, she incorporates as many identities from varying places as possible. I am loud and boisterous. I speak my mind no matter what and without concern for how I might be punished. I never do what I am told; just what I think is right for me. I back talk a lot when I am passionate about a subject. I defend people who I see as generally good and always stand up for other girls, especially when I witness an inferiority complex. I defend minorities from being discussed badly at work and in public. I am a feminist through and through and it was articles on people like Pink that made me this way. I am quiet when I feel I have nothing to say or when I am taking in others' opinions. I am feminine on a daily basis, but also get caught in my dad's old sweatpants and sweaters. I am independent and self-sufficient. I pay my own bills and walk to my own tune. I have supportive girlfriends I talk to daily because I am not defined by the marriage I soon will be entering into. I am a postmodern feminist girl living in a postfeminist postmodern world. This might seem confusing, but I reject the notion that there is one single truth, one single true identity that sums up who I am. I reject ideological femininity to some degrees and accept that I am still feminine in others. I don't see one way to act or one race or religion to follow. I believe in participating in sports activities previously deemed male and actively sustaining the culture in which I live. I believe that there is no right or wrong way to understand an image or a message and that misreading is just as important to the story as interpreting exactly what the author intended. We are complex insofar as we are never the same person. Identities are constantly in flux no matter what our age.

Girls learn to be all of these identities at once. Magazines teach girls that it is okay to have varying identities and struggle to make decisions because there is no right or wrong answer, no one “truth.” As school has taught me, if you argue your point well, you can never be wrong. By reading magazines we learned what feminist goals were important, such as world AIDS Day and International Women’s Day. We learn about the sexual double standard, our good schools to attend and how to break frame in our careers, such as becoming a scientist or engineer. Our understanding of these is important, but identity is not just about the things we believe in or the activities we do, it also includes the look we desire.

The Look

Utilizing a variety of different magazines to create a “look” that was popular and unique to my particular group of friends helped to create not only our individual identities, but also a group identity. We incorporated styles from Madonna and Gwen Stefani as well as from the “less trashy” (early years) Britney Spears. We even sometimes wore our sweatpants with platform shoes. Each locale has its own style often married to their mainstream girls’ culture. Different malls had different stores and thus carried various styles. We had access to plenty of stores in our local mall and we also were a quick subway ride and drive from Queen Street shopping in downtown Toronto. New girls coming into our school sometimes came from small towns and what they considered their mainstream girls’ style was much different from ours.

To get the style we wanted we often looked over magazine advertisements and relied solely on celebrity dress. We wanted to show our gender-bending techniques like Madonna, our cool attitude like Gwen Stefani and our feminine and sporty sides like the

Spice Girls. In addition, most of what is produced for girls' magazines is a so-called "average" girls' attire: t-shirts and jeans. We loved seeing artists in their natural habitat because we could use their attire and add in our own "average" girl style.

Van der Rijt (2000) and colleagues, as discussed in the previous chapter on music television, raised an interesting notion of motivations for viewing music television. It can be applied in much the same way to magazines. Trend surveillance, social stimulus and school life are all reasons why teens watched music television programs and magazines offer similar justifications. In order to keep up with an ever changing girl culture it is essential to keep up with a frequently changing look. While we did not adopt one sole look, the changing trends required us to constantly update our look in order to maintain our position in our mainstream girls' culture. A group identity is important to any group, it helped differentiate our group from other groups and establish our particular expertise or authority for one form of culture, and thus the "look" integrated hairstyles, clothing and attitudes. It was important for us to remain different from other girl groups and it said something about our personalities.

Deciding on a look is an active process that goes on amongst the members of the group. Without the look, group participants cannot be distinguished from other girl groups in public settings, such as the mall, or at school. Many think girl culture is a passive exploration of the self within a group and through the media, but in fact many girl groups are very different from others. I could always tell mine and my friends' style from other popular girls' culture fanatics. There were the girls who wore their backstreet boys T's to school, the girls who wore Burberry and any other expensive articles of clothing they could afford, and then there was us, the ones who took a variety of styles,

but did not care much about brand name fashions—just about demonstrating our values and attitudes through dress. We wanted to intentionally send the message that we did not care what others thought about us, that we were strong individuals with self-confidence, a desire for success and passionate about being friends and pleasing ourselves, not anyone else. We, of course, like everyone else had our boyfriends over the years, but we never let those relationships come between our friendships. We followed a popular feminist constitution if there ever was such a document.

Combining a postmodern popular feminist identity

The information that was provided to us through magazines was useful in creating our identity as a group of friends as well as helping us to better understand our culture, our bodies and our place as feminists in society. I picked up a *Seventeen* magazine in the grocery store one day when I was shopping with my mom. I was 13. I was browsing through it and my mom offered to buy it for me, even though she always hated me reading fashion mags because I was too young for them. I explained to her that my life was reflected in those magazines. I felt my questions were answered and I felt empowered knowing others had similar experiences to me and that maybe I would be prepared for future incidents. She disagreed as always, but little did she know that when I started reading that issue I came across a story of a young girl around my age who was raped on her way home from school. Her story was devastating and the details of her assault horrific. I cried for her. I felt connected to the piece, without ever thankfully experiencing her pain. The article advised of preventative measures, such as walking home from school in packs. This article changed my life. I stopped taking the alleys on my way home from school. I stopped being too proud to have my mom meet me at my

friend's house when it got dark out. I started becoming more aware of my surroundings when I was walking alone and I was prepared to hear that my friend was raped on her way home from school. This story helped me to understand what my friend must have gone through, how she could not face us, and how ashamed she felt. But we also gave her loving words of encouragement. Even though she reported her rape, the man was never caught. On average only one fifth of victims report being raped or sexually assaulted. With statistics such as those, it was great that we were able to convince her to tell her mother what had happened and face her fear of retribution. Women are becoming more active in society. Rather than being portrayed as passive, erotic and pretty, magazines are selling great celebrity stories and powerful motivational articles from a popular feminist perspective. Girls are encouraged from all directions to go to university, to be doctors and scientists; to be whatever they choose. *Seventeen* has a section on colleges, how to choose one, how to make new friends for study groups, and how to keep up with studying and school/life balance. While these articles might not be as convincing as Pink's passions, the magazines do focus on the importance of education and getting "kick-ass" careers in order to be self-sufficient.

Through textual analysis, an examination of a variety of magazines, and an exploration of my own girlhood memories/stories, I have examined the importance of magazine reading on the formation and manufacturing of popular feminist and postmodern identities. Examining ideas of popular feminism allowed for a deconstruction of images and ideas featured in popular female teenage magazines. The popular feminist era reflects the exploration of gender and sexuality in magazine reading

and writing in a positive, but sometimes moral manner, allowing girls to openly explore themselves and display their work in an empowering way.

It is evident that *Seventeen*, *YM*, and *Elle Girl* offer empowering messages and images to young female readers allowing them to have a place to actively vocalize their opinions and contribute to a wider girl community learning about life, love, and the whole thing. These magazines, while mostly based in stereotypical and ideological constructions of the middle-class, white, heterosexual American girl, also present images that can be read in varying ways, especially through a gay window or dual marketing approach and from a Canadian point of view. *Cosmopolitan*, on the other hand, was progressive. Because this magazine is directed toward an older audience there were a number of articles and letters focusing on power and sexuality. While much of the same topics were discussed and hegemonic ideologies of femininity are preferred, many articles had titles such as, “Seven Ways to Have a Great Organism.”

The varying styles offered on the pages of the mags give girls an opportunity to consciously make decisions about their personal look and the look of their mainstream girl group. They are encouraged from all angles to be themselves, to identify with whom they want and to be different. With the differing images and personalities being presented it is the incorporation of all these often contradictory and sometimes complex identities that make girls’ culture so interesting and invigorating to not only study, but to live. Some of my friends were shy, some aggressive, some plain and some fun, but together, just like the Spice Girls, we had many individual identities, many group identities, many laughs, many cries and strong supportive female friendships that have sustained decades.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Girls Today, Girls' Tomorrow

Popular culture has been one of my closest friends. It has provided me with information and learning experiences. I have been able to see myself reflected in popular discourses and texts, and popular culture has provided my friends and me with an opportunity to engage with each other and with our feminist identities. This thesis has shown my engagement with popular culture as an avid girl culture fanatic and consumer of girls' cultural texts. Throughout this thesis I have demonstrated an analysis of popular discourses and texts starting with my own life as a jumping-off point and a place for discussion and exploration of girls' culture. By doing this I have examined my own life as a popular feminist and the texts that have influenced my popular feminist identity with a discourse and semiotic analysis of those texts. I focused most specifically on magazines and popular music (music videos and music television) as I engaged with these media forms most frequently in my tween and teen years. These forms of popular culture were the most marketed toward girls like me. Again, a girl like me is what is typically referred to as mainstream. I follow the most popular trends, watch the most popular programming and listen to the top 40.

This thesis has been an exploration of popular feminism and my feminist identity and how it has been molded by popular culture. My kind of feminism is not the only kind by any means, but it is my feminism, and the politics that I have taken from mainstream popular texts have allowed me to understand my feminist identity in relation to mainstream culture and femininity. Popular feminism feels right to me as I have benefited from the battles won and lost by second wave feminists. I have reaped the rewards of previous political struggles of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but also understand that much more must be done. Just because I am lucky to

be a women living in North American society and born into a particular socio-economic class does not mean that I am without politics. Popular culture has come a long way from before the second wave movement and while we often take advantage of the fights our mothers have battled, popular culture too is not free from politics.

It has been said that feminism is dead; that we live in a postfeminist era. Just because girls like me may not identify with second wave ideals does not mean that feminism is dead. Before beginning this thesis I never really considered myself a feminist, but I recognized feminism as an important part of how I came to be in this world. Once I considered my values and my morals, I noticed that they had come a long way from passive engagement with popular culture. I learned a lot from the Spice Girls and Madonnas of the world. Critics claim that the Spice Girls and to a lesser extent Madonna lack a political edge, they toe the line of political outreach and consciousness-raising, only to ensure they sell more records. But as Gills and Munford (2004) suggest, “It is unrigorous to ignore the extent to which they provided positive role models for pre-teen girls” (173).

What this thesis did was highlight the kind of feminism my friends and I are engaged in. Feminism is ever-changing. By examining my own experiences with friends and popular culture I was able to provide a space and a place for inquiry. I wondered about my position in society as a popular feminist. By looking to the texts I engaged with most often, I found a number of important discourses and media texts to analyze as examples of my feminist consciousness. I asked myself the following questions: 1) What have certain music videos, songs, and pop artists offered me in the way of feminist instruction? and 2) What have I taken from them as a form of feminist politics? With

these two questions in mind I demonstrated that feminism is not dead; it is alive and well in popular cultural forms that offer pleasure, style, fun, and advice to mainstream girls like myself.

Popular culture offers numerous “truths” and contradictions for girls to understand themselves and their identities. Popular girls’ culture elaborates on the contradictions and complexities girls face every day and helps them to understand and contextualize their lives from a postmodern, popular feminist perspective. The debate between feminism and femininity is collapsing, and this has been made no more evident than in the discussions that have preceded this chapter. We do not need to equate femininity with a degraded form of mass culture and feminism as academic. A girl’s identity changes all the time. As we learn new things from friends, social institutions, family *and* media we learn that these once separate dichotomies—of feminism and femininity—co-exist within popular culture. Through the stories of my experiences and engagement with popular girls’ culture I generated new ideas on the feminine/feminist polarity and the complexities of popular culture and postmodern identity.

The interweaving of popular culture and feminism has been noted most recently by McRobbie (1996, 1999), Le Masurier (2007), Hermes (1995), and Walby (2002). McRobbie (1999) notes that popular feminism is being used more frequently to describe young women doing feminism as a political movement and also enjoying the rewards of the second and third waves in culture and everyday life. Feminism as a topic and feminists as a group often lived outside mainstream culture, and second wave feminists could not resolve the contradictions of being inside the mainstream and outside as part of an oppositional movement (Le Masurier, 2007). This, however, was resolved by popular

feminists as girls' magazines and popular programming began to incorporate feminist ideals. Feminism's popularity started to grow bigger with the evolved definition of Girl Power. Feminism did not have to lose its radical politics, but was able to find a place within popular culture, allowing the language of feminism to be the language of every woman. To identify with being feminine often means a rejection of feminism, as Morris (1988) describes. However, the incorporation of feminism into popular culture and the new popular feminism that has risen from this incorporation no longer mean that women must choose between one and the other, they can be both at the same time. The new understandings of girls' identity and their newfound visibility in culture led to their social mobility and participation in the production of the self, the workforce, their political voices, and so forth.

As previous research has demonstrated, women are viewed now as pleasure-seekers. The overthrowing of the old sexual double standard allowed women to transgress and resist patriarchal tropes of womanhood and traditional femininity. As McRobbie (2007) has noted, this type of girl "bears the superficial marks of boldness, confidence, aggression and even transgression" (732). These descriptive words for the new girl are often accepted in mainstream culture and a new understanding of girlhood has changed the way girls position themselves within society and understand their own identities as being both feminine and feminist.

Mainstream popular culture and its focus on celebrity did not hinder feminism's incorporation into popular culture. Many of the researchers discussed in Chapter 2 came to feminism in the same way I did—in piecemeal form and through celebrity feminists such as Helen Reddy and Germaine Greer. Popular culture introduced less radical

women to feminism through popular discourses. Songs such as *I Am Woman* attracted broad appeal, but also public acceptance to feminist motivations through a less threatening and widespread method (Arrow, 2007).

Girls have often been positioned as passive consumers of mass cultural products, but through a discussion of music videos and magazines, I demonstrated that girls' cultural texts opened doors for girls' feminist thinking and expression. The ideas and styles that came from music dictated the way my friends and I dressed, behaved and spoke. We transgressed in our style, we typically went overboard in our behaviour and we wanted to do everything the boys were allowed to do, such as go to all-ages clubs and all night raves. Through the music chapter, I outlined the ways music television and music videos/lyrics played on MuchMusic influenced my feminist identity and girl group's identity. I discussed the many topics of female taboo raised by Madonna, Gwen Stefani and the Spice Girls, in order to demonstrate the ability to understand and come to feminism in a fashionable and less radical way. The musical artists I have talked about do not necessarily incorporate one feminist identity, but each artist or girl group takes on different goals or ideas and thus when put together I got a whole picture.

Madonna and her particular flair for feminism led to the popular category, the "Madonna School of Feminism" (Bronstein, 2005, 791). This school of thought was interested in transgressing patriarchal norms, gender and sexual tropes through the breaching of social norms. Madonna was my first experience with a woman who was feminine and sexy, but transgressive, harsh, and edgy. Through on-stage masturbation and drag performances, Madonna transgressed gender and social norms and appeared political and deviant. Her politics are related to the sexual double standard and inequality

amongst the sexes and races. By incorporating Madonna's style of dress and some of her attitudes my friends and I learned that we were more than just passive girls. We learned that we could be whatever we wanted and without fear of retribution.

The Spice Girls on the other hand offered a version of feminism that could be displayed on the playground and in the classrooms. They focused mostly on the relationships between girls and boys and attempted to explain equality through public sexual repertoires and dating. For example, some lyrics stressed the importance of a girl asking out a boy, breaking traditional dating rules like going Dutch, and so forth. The Spice Girls idea of feminism could be easily adopted by anyone with access to a Spice Girls song, via radio, internet, the purchase of an album, etc., because their idea of feminism was related to the personal (as being somewhat political). Their songs and music videos were about self-sufficiency, being strong, being powered, and being in control of who you are and what you want to be.

Each Spice Girl also represents something different about feminism. Ginger always appears as though she is dressed in drag; Baby gets what she wants because she is willing to represent herself as a child; Posh demonstrates femininity and a strong attitude; Sporty is as her name suggests, sporty, and the process of becoming physically fit and strong is usually associated with masculine activities such as weight lifting; and Scary utilizes her big hair as a symbol of outrageousness and defiance (she is also the only black girl in the group).

Gwen Stefani has an ever-changing attitude. Her debut years with No Doubt were her most feminist and hardcore. As the music industry changed, she became a solo artist who continued with her feminist ideals, but become more feminine in her aesthetic.

Much like Madonna, Stefani used style to transgress typical State norms. Her blonde hair, combat boots and glamorous red-carpet dresses were all the rage at my school. It was fun to change up our style and mix boyish clothes with girl's clothes. However, Stefani's lyrics, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, criticized the constructions of girlhood and patriarchal norms. Stefani was a synthesis of masculine and feminine characteristics as she was aggressive on stage (air kicks and punches), empowered and frustrated in her lyrics, and gender-confused in her style.

As demonstrated by Madonna, the Spice Girls, and Gwen Stefani, popular feminism is a toolbox. There are various ways to display popular feminist ideals of individuality, sexuality, power, control and femininity. Each of these artists offers something different to the female listener/viewer. The empowerment my friends and I received from these artists allowed us to piece together our solo and group identity. This is essential to our makeup as not all popular feminist practices are important to everyone. I feel I do not need to be overly aggressive because I have an understanding family and a group of friends that I can debate with without fear of losing our friendship; so the ideas of aggressive behaviour are not necessarily relevant to my particular feminist flavour. This will be the case with most popular feminists. I think if I had done interviews or ethnographic research, this is one thing that would have been very dominant in the findings. Popular feminism has a flavour for every girl, attitudes and behaviours that we can choose to adopt or not. It is a way of being and a way of reading texts. That is, popular feminism is an attitude and behaviour that is adopted by individual girls and their girls' cultural grouping based on the images of empowerment presented to them through media texts. Popular feminism is also a way of reading texts. The images and messages

presented to young girls through media texts are read in a way that makes feminism fun and appealing. We lose the other “f” word and are left with a new more appealing term in Girl Power. The varying complexities described by musical artists help in the formation and manufacturing of popular feminist identities. Through a semiotic and discourse analysis of music videos and lyrics I found that a postmodern, popular feminist era is favoured as the newest form of feminism. Popular feminism illustrated through music reflects the exploitation of gender and sexuality through lyrics, video, and overall style. With these things in mind, artists like Madonna, the Spice Girls, and Gwen Stefani have transgressive power that they hand over to audience members in a positive and empowering way so that we may continue, at a local level, to transgress the dominant ideologies affecting us daily.

Magazines help girls like me further the importance of popular feminism by offering a space for discussion. The presentation of popular feminism is very different in girls’ magazines than in popular music. In the process of conducting the magazine research I was looking for things similar to the music findings, and these were not as easily found. There were a few advertisements, which I discussed, that were reflective of the popular feminist ethos of the musical artists, but overall the main recognition to be noted from girls’ magazines was the commitment to female solidarity and the creation of a community of girls through the magazines. The main topics discussed in my once favourite girl mags were independence, such as being financially independent from your partner and well educated so that you can have financial independence and rely solely on yourself.

YM, *Seventeen*, *Elle Girl* and *Cosmo Girl* are mainstream girls magazines designed for financial profit, but as the articles, editors' letters, editorials, and readers' letters revealed, these magazines can be read as a feminist text for mainstream girls' culture. The girls reading these magazines—like myself and my friends—are engaged with the feminist tone of the staff writers, editors, and advertisers and ideas of popular feminism were apparent, to some extent, in every issue I examined. While I regret to say that the women's magazines of the 1970s had more feminist content, what was evident in the girl mags I examined was the risks they did take with editorial content, advertisements and the amount of space dedicated to popular feminist issues, whether they would be tagged as such or not. So while girls' magazines are often criticized for commercialism, is it not possible that the texts within the pages of these magazines help those girls who have yet to reach a popular feminist identity a place to begin to learn and understand feminism? The magazines offer a place for girls, like myself, to believe in popular feminism, to provide girls with a sense of empowerment and accomplishment, which ultimately should lead them to seek out other feminist texts within and outside the margins of mainstream girls' culture, just like I am doing now in the process of completing this chapter.

The reading of magazines by my friends and me demonstrate part social transformation—as our understanding of ourselves and our place in society evolved—and part fun. Our understanding of girl power, in all its wonderful complexities and contradictions could be found within the pages of the beauty and fashion magazines. The articles and advertisements signified a celebration of our girlhood, femininity and feminism. Reading the magazines and learning about feminism through a popular girl

method is “empowerment that comes from within, the power of women and girls to break traditional molds and become whom they want to be, feminine but strong, free yet in control” (Geissler, 2001, 324). Magazines elevate to dizzy heights the importance of femininity, but for the most part today’s feminist is feminine as well, which leads to my understanding and argument about the collapse of the feminine versus feminist polarity. Rather than being one way or the other, magazines present great celebrity stories, such as Angelina Jolie’s adventures to Africa, and motivational articles written by “average” girls.

Limitations

Every study, method, and theory has holes or limitations. These are not easily avoided, but by acknowledging them, I can address what other types of future research would help elaborate on my current findings.

The Method

Semiotic and discourse analysis are both qualitative methods that stem from a person’s own understanding of words and images. Thus, there is a significant limitation to what can be said and the reproduction of the study. However, the reproduction of the study is no concern to postmodernists, as postmodernism believes in multiple truths. Semiologists also choose their images on the basis of interest, rather than on how statistically representative they are to a wider set of images, such as is the case with content analysis (Rose, 2001). As Rose (2001) notes,

[i]n semiology there is no stable point that can provide an entrance into the meaning-making process; all meanings are relational not only within the image but also in relation to other images and to broader dominant codes, referent systems and mythologies (91).

Meanings are multiple and thus my understanding of a sign may not be taken up by others. Some signs also have more than one meaning and will be interpreted differently by people of different ages, classes, socio-economic status, and backgrounds. As Rose notes, “social identity is constructed through ideologies of social difference” (2001, 96). Different social groups will encode and decode messages very differently and might interpret images in different ways. Sign producers often attempt to mediate this problem by encoding a preferred message into the image (Hall, 1980).

Rose raises some other limitations to using semiotic analysis. First, the “preference for detailed readings of individual images raises questions about the representativeness and replicability of its analysis” (2001, 97). In order to overcome this issue, I attempted to be clear about how and why I chose the texts I worked with and how I felt they fit into a wider understanding of girls’ culture and popular feminism. However, there is still the question of someone else’s understanding of the same advertisements, magazine stories, and music videos and lyrics. Would another person come to the same conclusions about these texts and discourses as I did? I feel that I provided enough detailed analysis and an understanding of what I considered to be the signs clearly so others could clearly read my thesis, but as for the replication, this is not even desirable to postmodernism. My analysis of media texts and discourses was used to forward my argument about particular processes of meaning-making within popular girls’ culture, and not to exemplify particular types of texts and discourses reflecting consumption.

Second, “semiology tends to invent new terminology for its own sake” (Rose, 2001, 97). Rose argues that sometimes the use of new terms is confusing for readers or

even unnecessary. To overcome this drawback I elaborated on important definitions in order to ensure that readers could follow my line of thought. Stemming from elaborate terminology is reflexivity. As Rose poses, “semiology is capable of acknowledging its own interpretive practices” (2001, 98). This raises the following questions: 1) What makes me so insightful?; 2) How come I can see these texts and discourses differently?; and 3) What makes me the expert on this topic? Semiology sometimes positions the researcher as “the one who sees and knows” (Rose, 2001, 98).

Lastly, the omission of “the empirical exploration of polysemy and logonomic systems” (Rose, 2001, 98) means that the researcher rarely comes to grips with diverse ways of seeing. As Rose continues, the semiologist is not concerned with social practices, institutions and relations where visual texts are produced and interpreted. In my research I was not interested in how others might see, I was interested in how I saw these texts, how I engaged with them, and how people like “me” might have engaged with popular feminism through popular culture. This meant that I was not looking beyond my own understanding of these texts. I was interested in exactly how people like me—well educated, white, middle-class girls—could understand feminism through mainstream girls’ culture.

Discourse analysis follows much of the same limitations. Discourse analysts usually select small data sets which emerge from specific social settings (Tonkiss, 2004), thus findings are “unlikely to support claims of being more widely representative, so raising problems regarding generalization and...external validity” (Tonkiss, 2004, 380). Internal validity in this case is less questionable as the analyst and reader are often confident the researcher has successfully conducted interpretative rigour and internal

consistency while remaining open to criticisms regarding other critical insights and arguments (Tonkiss, 2004). By taking a critical and open stance towards girls' culture, popular feminism and the analysis of such related texts can be understood as part of a reflexive approach to social research. In aiming to be reflexive in my research by utilizing my own experiences, I questioned my own assumptions, critically examined the processes of inquiry, and considered my effect on the research—including the way I selected my data, my own preconceived assumptions, and how my theoretical framework shaped the process of data collection and analysis. By using my experiences and stories as examples, I was better able to control these issues as it was important for me to explore them in detail.

To overcome these critiques I would have needed to conduct interviews with girls my own age, such as my friends, girls living in different locales around North America, and girls living in today's popular feminist world to see if their understanding of popular feminism was similar to my own. While this would have been desirable, time constraints made it difficult to conduct such research. In the future this would be a great way to expand the discussion my own experiences with mainstream girls' culture and popular feminism.

One major issue with semiotics is that alone it is not enough. To explain my results I had to draw on other sources of knowledge, on social theories of gender and feminism, and on earlier studies of gender construction, such as through the work of McRobbie and previous ideological and stereotypical images of femininity and feminism to see the changes that have occurred over time. This is why discourse analysis was incorporated along with my own experiences with mainstream girls' cultural texts.

Popular Feminism

Popular feminism, much like postfeminism, is highly criticized. Two major critical questions stemming from academic feminists are, 1) How can popular culture offer anything truly political if it is based on commodified images and the need to make profit?—Girl power being the most formative example of this depoliticization—and 2) Popular feminism is not social justice driven so how can it be political? As Morag Shiach (2003) believes, the intersection between feminism and popular culture has also been troubled. The two terms (feminism and popular culture) are not parallel, Shiach suggests, as “one designates a political stance, the other an object of study” (37). Many researchers have noted that popular culture is more than just an area of study.

Considering the implications and influence popular culture (or mass culture) has had on society it is hardly just an area of study. Hoggart (1958) describes mass culture similar to McRobbie, as debased, parasitic and dangerous. Hoggart believes that mass culture is a threat to critical thought and class identity and I would assume to the uprising of a new popular feminist movement, approach and practice. As Shiach suggests the term popular culture “carries within it a series of debates about political legitimacy, class identity, and cultural value, which inform the theoretical framework and the methodological procedures of cultural studies” (1995, 37). My aim throughout the entirety of my thesis project was to demonstrate that female youth participated in their culture, struggling to shape it, rather than being just subjected to it; girls held the power to create and wheeled their culture.

Commodities are central to women’s culture, but they are also central to women’s understanding of feminism. Popular culture and promotional culture in particular, have

turned feminism into things, such as objects to be purchased for the sake of femininity, but that “represent feminist values, meanings, and goals” (Cole & Hribar, 1995, 356). This problematic “commodity feminism” was important to the creation and circulation of the “new woman” (now defined by visual clichés), such as those signs and attitudes representing the liberal subject who is positioned as individualistic, independent, self-accepted and has the freedom to choose (Cole & Hribar, 1995). Similar anxieties have been associated with “commodity feminism” and central to what Arlene Stein (1989) terms the “style wars.” The alliance between commodities and the commodification of feminism is more important than critics believe. As Cole and Hribar (1995) suggest,

Despite their erroneous characterization of the material circumstances and governing powers of our lives, celebrity feminism/popular feminism are the discourses that provide women with ways of thinking and talking about the conditions of their lives, their selves, and their relations to other women (365).

A particular article of clothing, a funky new hairdo and so forth are ways to differentiate myself from others and also demonstrate my subscription to a particular culture and a particular attitude. I may be mainstream, but I am certainly not synonymous with other girls like me. We currently live in a moment not marked by movement feminism. It is not dead as I have said before, but it has changed and our adaptation to celebrity and popular feminism has filled the void. This void, according to Cole and Hribar is filled by “representing politics in the spaces where power and lifestyle intersect” (1995, 365). Our everyday concerns are presented through our individual style and our ability to exercise our individual will (Cole & Hribar, 1995). Reading magazines and watching music television were two ways my friends and I accumulated the many identities and styles we combined through the narration of popular feminism within our girls’ culture.

The link between celebrity and feminism has also been highly debated. How can a feminist be a celebrity when they work within the industry which attempts to oppress them? Celebrity feminism, however, has brought many women to feminism and the most important of movement goals. Today's girl culture is founded on the actions of celebrities, the musical artists and videos, the movie actresses and actors, the directors, writers, and so forth. They are the basis of girls' consumption and their ability to persuade and be positive, empowering role models is one way my friends and I learned our repertoire of sexual agency and our position within society. Syibal Nolan (1999) says, "when the era of the personal is the political dawned, a young woman called Germaine Greer was on hand with the right qualifications as commentator" (168). The qualifications held by Greer, such as being media savvy, are qualifications the artists I have discussed in the previous chapters hold. Female artists important to me were media savvy, brought feminism to my life in an entertaining and understandable fashion, and have the "capacity and preparedness to personalize a political cause" (Lilburn, Magery & Sheridan, 2000, 344), such as inequality. As Lilburn (2000) and colleagues note, the celebrity is an individual personality only at first. This is how they make their way to the top, into a position that affords them media attention and the right to speak freely. Once they have achieved this authority position it is time for them to become political. "By virtue of publicity, [the celebrity] can become political by maintaining or challenging the definition of our subjective and our collective identities" say Lilburn et al. (347). In an extension of this thinking, Lilburn et al. quote from Marshall (1997) stating, the "celebrity is 'the site of intense work on the meaning of both individuality and collective

identity in contemporary culture” (347). Celebrities negotiate feminism in the public sphere and make it popular enough for active cultural play, according to Cole and Hribar.

Popular feminism is criticized constantly for not being politically aligned. As Gills and Munford (2004) express though, groups such as the Spice Girls and magazines such as *Bitch* and *Bust* have the “vigorous reclamation and recuperation of the word ‘girl’ as no longer a simply derogatory and disrespectful term” (169) in common. Gills and Munford also note that girl culture has been a site of criticism for second wave feminists. Girl culture’s ability to be viewed as a site of resistance to patriarchal structures has been questioned. This is where we most frequently notice that girls’ culture is “positioned as a depoliticized and dehistoricised product of the ‘backlash’ against feminism” (Gills & Munford, 2004). While Gills and Munford discuss the less popular Riot Grrls, popular artists such as Lil’ Kim, Fergie, and Queen Latifa intervened in the hip-hop male universe. In addition to overcoming some of the most challenging breaks in music history, these popular artists discussed issues of sexual abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, individuality, and female power. While their discussions were based in musical lyrics and audience members could not respond in written form, it was clear that they had an impact on the way women viewed themselves and brought many women’s issues and concerns to the fore for discussion. To a similar extent, magazines functioned in much the same way. Magazine writers (and everyday girls) create a space for girls to communicate with other girls about women’s issues—sexual harassment, the sexual double standard, eating disorders, and so forth. The communities set up through music television programming and girls’ magazines are not structurally different to the second-wave consciousness-raising groups and support networks of the 1960s and 1970s. The

monthly girls' magazines and daily MuchMusic programming created by CityTV spread girls' issues and recognition across the country. The burgeoning of feminist magazines, such as *Bitch* and *Bust* and the variety of girl created zines on the internet, called attention to the presence of popular and celebrity feminism in a time of so-called feminist backlash often referred to as postfeminism.

For me and my friends, femininity and feminism are no longer binary oppositions; they are the center of our agency, confidence and resistance. As Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller (editors of *Bust*) suggest, these two terms feed off each other, and magazines, such as *Bust* enjoy showing the reader that girls' culture is fun and exciting but also a time of contradiction and change. Gills and Munford, quoting from Karp and Stoller, note that the brave new girl is "raw and real, straightforward and sarcastic, smart and silly" (171). In discussing girls' culture, Gills and Munford quote again Karp and Stoller as saying, Girl Culture is "that shared set of female experiences that includes Barbies and blowjobs, sexism and shoplifting, *Vogue* and vaginas" (171). As witnessed here, girl culture is not just about commodification, the purchasing of goods to represent being feminist, but an attitude and understanding that two often contradicting terms actually co-exist; that it is okay to like Barbies and be sexually desiring.

The Study

There is much to be said on the topic of popular feminism and almost every method would be useful in answering the questions I set out to examine. Time limitations made it more difficult to conduct participant research, so instead I opted to use my own stories as a beginning point. I would consider myself the target audience for popular feminism and girls' culture as I have disposable income and access to the girls'

cultural texts and products on the market. However, there are some limitations that should be addressed with regards to this study, which could benefit from the incorporation of qualitative participant research, especially one-on-one interviews and focus groups. By doing this, I could benefit from the experiences of other girls of different ages, socio-economic status, sexualities, and ethnicities to hear what they think of the mixed and complex messages provided to them through popular media.

We cannot be sure of the effect singers and songwriters like Gwen Stefani have on their audiences. Music and girls' magazine influenced my friends and me drastically, but this is not necessarily the case for all girls experienced in popular girls' culture. As Wald (1998) suggests,

The contradictions that characterize the use of the girl as a mode of cultural resistance within female rock performance are not necessarily experienced as such by consumers of this music, who may be more or less receptive, depending on the context and the particularities of their own social locations, to the limitations (political, ideological, and even aesthetic) that such contradiction imposes on a straightforwardly celebratory narrative of such performance (607).

Due to these contradictions, in the future it would be best to interview girls and hold focus groups where discussions of artists like Stefani, Madonna and Pink can be discussed. By doing this, we can begin to understand how the contradictory nature and feminist voices of these women's lyrics and music are interpreted and received by various audiences whose members are similar to myself. As Wald suggests, research into discourses of girlhood, popular feminism, transgression and so forth, are crucial to understanding how these popular feminist female performers and their audience members have created "avenues of feminist agency within traditionally masculine popular forms" (607). Wald continues to suggest that rock music, alternative music, and in my personal

opinion popular music, “provide[s] crucial sites within which young women can negotiate their own representations of girlhood in varying degrees of opposition to, or collaboration with, hegemonic narratives” (608).

Lastly, this thesis focused on me—a well-educated, white, liberated girl—and did not effectively consider how my brand of feminism may or may not function for girls of different social classes, different sexualities, and different ethnicities. This is where interviews and focus groups are important. The artists that I examined and the images I chose for semiotic and discourse analysis still, to date, focus extensively on westernized norms. Difference is rarely shown, but that does not mean that popular feminism is not important or understood by non-white, non-middle-class girls. One important point to note is that sexuality and the way sexuality is portrayed in music, music programming and girls’ magazines have changed. The androgynous look of the fashion model and the dual marketing approach taken up by advertisers and artists have clearly changed the sexual readings of texts. Sexuality is no longer strictly heterosexual—even though it still remains the dominant—but homosexuality and bisexuality are found between the pages of fashion and beauty magazines, tabloid magazines and within popular female (and male) performers.

Popular Feminism for Today’s Girl

Popular feminism is an era of change, an era of contradiction and mixed messages. I lived this era from my tween years through today. It is a complex historical moment that is often defined by backlash and liberalism, but I learned a lot about feminism from popular culture and it is my hope that others like me have learned in much the same fashion. Political movements have been important to our past. We benefit

everyday from the battles our mothers fought, but as I have mentioned before there are still battles taking place. While equality might not be at the forefront of our minds every day, other previous movement goals are questioned, such as gay rights. I have many hopes for girls today and for girls of the future. Today, I hope that we continue to learn our repertoire of sexual behaviour and empowered agency from social institutions and media. The media have taught me so much about myself and without it I would never have come to feminism at all. I understood feminist goals and I understood that I lived in a society that privileged my accomplishments much more than the world my mother grew up in and those values were instilled in me from a young child. However, these did not really take hold until I spent more time engaging with girls' popular cultural texts.

Lowe's (2003) final comments reflect much of the hope that I have for girls today and in the future. She says:

Today's early adolescent, middle-class, suburban girls—many of whom have cell phones, beepers, and boyfriends—are smart and sophisticated young feminists. Indeed, they are quite articulate when it comes to condemning patriarchal values and resist conforming to traditional ideals of femininity. They actively read the many media texts they take in each day, often scrutinizing those they find troublesome or confusing. Their individual readings of various media texts frequently frustrate them, particularly when their feminist consciousness engages the increasingly decentered self of pop culture (139).

I hope that in the future, artists like Pink and Madonna continue the good work; that new artists continue to inspire in similar ways. Music and magazines discuss timely issues and thus it is important for them to expand on the changes, good and bad, that happen in our world and heighten our awareness of public issues.

This is why this thesis matters to me and should matter to other girls. Popular feminism is a fairly new term, but its effects have been taking place for years in the

voices of the Spice Girls, Madonna, Alanis Morissette, Pink, Meredith Brooks, and Fiona Apple. I took a great deal from popular culture and I think more critically than ever before. Songs like *Dear Mr. President* by Pink remind me that we are still battling, that public consciousness and awareness are important, and that girls need to pick up their pens and pencils, grab a piece of paper and start hacking away at policies to change the way the world is, not just for girls, but for homosexuals, and different ethnicities. I wrote this thesis on the basis of my life, on my experiences. I feel that my voice is important, that this topic is important to girls and academics alike, because we have moved away from movement feminism. We no longer separate feminism and femininity.

When I first considered this topic I took a look around the university, around the malls, in my classrooms. I found that girls' style had changed drastically from my tween and teen years. Their style was mixed and popular, and focused a lot on celebrity fashion. Sometimes I overheard conversations about sexuality, power and control, about how other girls dressed, about attitudes towards boys and school, and what I learned from these few conversations was that girls were still concerned with feminism; we still strive for equality and liberation. Popular culture offered me a space to deliberate my place in society. It raised concerns I never knew I had and discussed topics of female taboo. At this time, I think it is important to note the still very present popular feminism going on today with a discussion of the latest Pink song *Dear Mr. President*.

Pink: *Dear Mr. President*

Pink's *Dear Mr. President* is a set of rhetorical questions for the current President of the United States of America, George W. Bush. She joined the rising popularity of Bush bashing in 2005 when she wrote the song. While the song was not

produced or sung live until 2006, it rarely made it to air until recently (summer of 2007). When I first heard the song on the radio I was surprised that it was actually aired. When I was doing research on it, as I thought it would be a good concluding point for my thesis, I realized that not much had been written and that in fact, the song was quite old (in terms of the historical life of popular culture). The song, which was resisted by media for the longest time addresses some of the most important issues going on in American society today. While I live in Canada, the decisions made in the USA change our economy, our popular culture, our understanding of the world in general. After listening to the song a number of times on the radio I started picking up more and more pieces. I finally googled the lyrics and read them through. Over the past year, I have been examining songs that I felt carried a popular feminist tone, or a political message. I found many songs, mostly by male artists, that discussed world issues. Popular feminism was a personal movement, an approach to the self, a decision to be true to ourselves, to stand up for our beliefs and to not be held back by our gender. As Kelley (1994) quotes from Keohane,

Feminism embraces the belief that no one of either sex should be channeled into (or out of) a particular life course by gender. Each person should have the opportunity so far as possible, to pursue her own visions, hopes, and dreams—to prepare herself to realize her own ambitions and to define her own identity, untrammelled by stereotypical expectations about what men or women can or cannot, should or should not, do (87).

And from all of this, we should have the authority to question others on the basis of any hindrance. This is exactly what Pink does.

Equality is not the topic for this song per se, but it could be argued that equality is questioned with regards to the “us” versus “them” polarity. Pink’s questions are relevant

to the current US economy and the war in Iraq. She questions Bush on the controversial issues of homelessness, “what do you feel when you see all the homeless on the street?,” war, “How do you dream when a mother has no chance to say goodbye?” and “Let me tell you ‘bout hard work/Rebuilding your house after the bombs took them away,” homosexuality, “what kind of father might hate his own daughter if she were gay?,” sexual reproduction and the attempted ban on abortion, “What kind of father would take his own daughter’s rights away?,” and lastly drug abuse, “you’ve come a long way from whiskey and cocaine.” The music video that accompanies *Dear Mr. President* is a live concert production from Wembley Arena in London where Pink is accompanied by the Indigo Girls and background screens with pictures pertaining to the song’s lyrics, such as coffins draped in the USA flag, crying mothers being handed the American flag at the burial of a son or daughter, homeless people sleeping on the street, people destroyed by war and natural disasters, and images of a smiling Bush interweaved in between.

For those who question the authenticity of popular feminism, or view popular feminism as strictly an act of power through sexuality, we must turn to songs and artists like Pink who demonstrate that there is still political voices to be heard. Throughout her music video, we see images of protesters, holding signs reading “God does not hate gays,” poverty stricken neighborhoods, orphaned children, natural disasters, and fallen soldiers. It is clear that political movements built on the second wave are still present today and that celebrities like Pink have brought them once again to fore. I was so moved by this piece and when I finally saw the music video for it I loved how it was live concert footage. Instead of the glitz and glam of traditional music videos, the lyrics and

the images of what Pink was singing were made prominent and the artist was not important.

Conclusion

Through semiotic and discourse analysis, an analysis of popular music and magazines, and an exploration of my own feminist consciousness, I have shown the importance of girls' magazines and music to a feminist understanding of sexuality, femininity, complex identities, power, strength, and gender. Through the examination of postmodern and popular feminist ideas I deconstructed and analyzed the images and ideas featured in the popular discourses I found relevant to my own feminist identity.

Feminism is not dead! Popular feminism has filled the void between movement feminism and the historical position we are at now. Feminism has made great strides for women; we are committed to each other, we appreciate each other more frequently; we stick together. We are empowered and strong. We are independent and educated. We transgress patriarchal norms where necessary. We are feminine and feminist.

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