How To Be A Feminist: Media, Gender, and Age in the Era of Instructional Feminism

By

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Introduction:
A Girl's Place Within Feminism, Past and Present

In 2015, *Hunger Games* star Amandla Stenberg, then 16, was named *Ms* magazine's "Feminist of the Year" for her eloquent statements on intersectional feminism and a viral video she created called "Don't Cash Crop My Cornrows," which critiques white female pop stars such as Katy Perry for appropriating the hairstyle within the larger historical context of Black cultural appropriation. The YouTube video description notes she created the video for her high school history course, yet this everyday situation of a teen completing her homework became a viral moment via a combination of Stenberg's franchise film fame, the clarity with which she speaks on this complex issue, the media's delight that Stenberg is so precociously well-spoken and mature in the video, and a moment in pop culture when intersectional feminism found itself widely discussed. While Stenberg stands out as an exemplary spokesperson, this video and her[1] title from *Ms* occurred within a particular pop culture moment beginning around 2014/2015 in which a wide variety of young stars found themselves publicly embracing feminism to various degrees. Former Disney Channel stars Demi Lovato and Zendaya both claimed the identity in 2014 (on Twitter) and 2015 (in an interview), respectively (Simone, 2014; Koerner, 2015). Fresh off ending her Nickelodeon series in 2014, Ariana Grande posted a lengthy Twitter thread about the sexism in the press coverage of her and her career, a thread in which Gloria Steinem is

[1] In 2017, Stenberg changed her pronouns to she/they via an announcement on her Instagram. I have deferred to using she/her/hers from those options, as that was also how she was referred to at the time of this anecdote and because she remains comfortable being referred to as such.

quoted twice and Grande notes the legacy of “female activism” in her family (Lawson, 2015). In 2014, UN Ambassador Emma Watson launched the HeForShe campaign within the organization, which urged boys and men to join the fight for gender equality and identify as feminists (Barker, 2014). Rowan Blanchard, star of Disney Channel series *Girl Meets World*, posted an essay about intersectional feminism to Tumblr, where she cited both Kimberlé Crenshaw and Stenberg (Coggan, 2015). Fittingly, in the same year *Ms* crowned Stenberg Feminist of the Year, they also deemed 2015 "the year feminist declarations were too many to count" (Hallett, 2015). This is just to name a few of many such examples that occurred at this time.

These moments fall squarely within what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) has termed “popular feminism,” her label for the particular conjunctural moment within which Western, primarily American media currently finds itself, one in which many of the biggest female stars claim the label of "feminist" loudly and proudly, no longer considering it a dirty word. Banet-Weiser (2018) defines popular feminism by three criteria: one, "feminism manifests in discourses and practices that are circulated in popular, commercial media;" two, it is "popular" in the sense that it is broadly liked by other like-minded people and/or groups; and three, it is "a space where competing demands for power battle it out" which means there are different forms and types of feminism circulating within these popular spaces, with some made more visible than others (p. 1). Banet-Weiser (2018) and other feminist scholars often cite Beyoncé’s 2014 MTV Video Music Awards performance, in which she lit the word “feminist” up behind her in flashing lights, “a key signifying moment” for popular feminism (p. 9). While this Beyoncé performance can be pointed to as among the most visible early moments of popular feminism, as my initial examples

demonstrate, the trend can be identified in a broad range of media and female celebrities. Yet it is most often applied to make sense of the celebrity texts and media objects of adult women, when quite clearly, girls and girl stars were involved from the beginning. When taken together, the force of these concurrent trends demonstrates a marked turn from the previous era of postfeminism, in which a disavowal of gender inequality and feminism dominated public discourse. While aspects of postfeminism remain, we are quite clearly in a new feminist moment and as such, scholars must reimagine the media objects once understood primarily within a postfeminist framework.

Girl-centric media objects are one such space in need of re-examination. Yet despite the visibility of girls in this popular feminist turn, postfeminism and the era of "girl power" remains a key theoretical basis for scholars analyzing girlhood popular culture (Kennedy, 2018, Blue, 2017, Projansky, 2014). Many of the cornerstone moments provided as evidence of a new feminist sensibility center on adult female celebrities or how adult women move through institutions such as Hollywood, but this moment equally influences girls and their pop culture, especially as digital mediascapes continually blur the boundaries between what content is meant for women and what is meant for girls. Indeed, feminism is no longer positioned as something young women will learn in college or adulthood, but is instead imagined precisely as something they can, or even should, embrace as girls. My dissertation will then examine how the rise of popular feminism influences, proliferates through, and is represented in girls' media and how it has discursively reframed girls' position in American pop culture as well as how it affects the girl subject's process of identity construction. I propose that popular feminism manifests in girlhood media as *instructional feminism*. By instructional, I mean that girls are meant to be

actively learning through their engagement with media that is coded as feminist or has a feminist message or that they are meant to utilize feminist discourses to critique their media, much like Stenberg did for her history project. Instruction occurs at the level of a literal learning process; where once feminist ideology was conventionally thought of as something young women learned in college, today many books, TV series/films, and social programs actively seek to teach girls about what feminism is and its history in simple terms aimed at their learning level. Where once girls embodied the state of pre-consciousness to patriarchy that adult feminists needed to learn their way out of (Driscoll, 2002), now this education is considered to be something that can and should happen at a much younger age. But even more importantly for my project, instruction occurs at the level of teaching girls how to be a particular *type* of girl and future woman. In other words, this feminist messaging often claims the broad goal of “empowerment” but its primary function is in fact to instruct on the ideal beliefs, behaviors, and appearances of the feminist girl.

Thus, instructional feminism is part of the larger movement of popular feminism, but it manifests in unique ways when refracted through the lens of age by both cultural creators and consumers. As such, it shares the above characteristics of popular feminism – circulated through popular media sources, widely accepted and celebrated by like-minded groups, and nonetheless still a site of ideological struggles within feminism, with some versions more primed to be widely visible than others. However, within these characteristics it also has its own unique features. First, it is a version of feminism directed at adolescent girls (and as I clarify when discussing terminology, I use "girls" here to indicate those young people expected to learn the gendered performance of femininity; they do not all need to individually identify as cis-gendered girls or future women). There

are several ways a media object might be indicated as "for girls" – if it's a star, she might be a girl herself; a TV show might highlight girl protagonists; a media institution might outwardly say this is one of or the primary demographic they are targeting; or broader discourses might indicate that this is a product "for girls." In any case, that notion that a media object is in some way "for girls" then informs the feminist message it presents. And thus the second feature of instructional feminism is that it includes aspects unique to the conscious inclusion of age. The first feature is that the feminist message will be both concerned with empowering girls in the here-and-now while also being future-oriented, with an eye towards what type of woman this feminist girl will grow into should she learn and embody all the instructions imparted. The second feature is that with their youth, the feminist girl will have more restrictions – both implicit and explicit – placed upon their potential enactment of that feminism and these limitations are folded into the feminist message itself. While the feminist messages themselves are often broadly about opening possibilities to girls, they invariably come with a caveat to that behavior, a way the girl must amend her own behavior lest she somehow endanger herself in the present or set that future woman up for failure; both the possibilities and the limitations of feminism for girls are, however, framed within the rhetoric of empowerment and thus difficult to disentangle from one another.

Given these parallel characterizations, instructional feminism could, then, be understood simply as an offshoot of popular feminism. Banet-Weiser's (2018) foundational work on the concept of popular feminism, and much of the subsequent scholarship deconstructing popular feminism and its ethos, includes girl subjects as part of the analysis as seemingly a matter of course, and therefore without addressing that it is quite notable

and novel that girls are a taken-for-granted fact of current feminist movements, nor that the girls' age might affect how this feminism is understood and enacted. Often, it is even implicitly suggested that much of popular feminist messaging is aimed directly at girls, rather than at adult women, or is largely for girls' benefit (Banet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2020). There is an opportunity, then, in differentiating girls as subjects, namely in identifying the nuances and changes in both message and effect that come with the added complication of age as an identity category. Once one considers age, a central outcome of the ideology's malleability is that it allows for the negotiations and (re)drawing of discursive boundaries around girlhood as a subject position. All girls are hailed, told they can and should be feminists, and that they can do anything, but because they are not yet women, they find themselves confronting the limits of this expansive rhetoric, both explicitly and in coded terms.

Many have noted that adolescence is the time when children are inculcated into the gendered behaviors that make up a feminine or masculine identity (Butler, 1990; Driscoll, 2002; Halberstam, 1998). Instructional feminism certainly falls broadly within this practice. What is unique to this current moment, wherein instructional feminism exists within the broader mass media trend of popular feminism, is that instructional feminism's unique features often lead to a blurring of boundaries between what is considered "appropriate" or desirable for childhood versus adulthood. Additionally, there is often a concurrent push back to reassert these boundaries. Digital media environments, wherein audience demographics are more difficult to discern while simultaneously barriers separating child and adult content also remain a prominent concern, provide a key terrain on which this push and pull between blurring boundaries and re-forming them takes place.

Understanding how successful and normative girlhood is (re)defined in this novel media environment and new feminist moment is a chief goal of this project.

What that redefinition is marked by, then, is the transgression/reassertion of the boundary between girlhood and womanhood, and instructional feminism is key to discursively framing the rationales on each side of these logics. It can be utilized in divergent ways because it is a pliable ideology, and one that exists on a spectrum. Popular feminism is a spectrum, one in which corporate, highly visible forms of feminism reside on one end and radical, political, and intersectional feminism resides on the other, with many iterations falling somewhere in between (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Popular feminism is also "accommodating" in that it seeks to actively welcome men into the movement and push back against connotations that feminists are "man haters" or "killjoys," and this ethos of accommodation enables the ideology to shift along a spectrum (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 14-15). If a movement can happily accommodate everyone, that power can be used to demonstrate solidarity with other marginalized identities, letting BIPOC, queer, disabled, and trans- and non-binary people feel welcome. On the other hand, it can then also be easily co-opted by corporations as an identity generally leached of any inconvenient or politicized connotations.

Instructional feminism functions along a similar spectrum, with a corporatized and sanitized version of feminism made available to girls on one end and with a more radical version, disruptive to both normative visions of girlhood and institutions, on another. Any feminism along this spectrum hails girls and invites them to make "feminist" an integral part of their identity construction, but this generalized interpellation is still differently accessible to, and subsequently enacted differently by, girls based on other identity factors

such as their race and class. Instructional feminism is most easily accessed and embodied by the same feminine bodies that have most easily accessed past feminisms and postfeminist ideals – white, thin, able-bodied, middle/upper-class, heterosexual, and cis-gendered women – that find themselves the idealized target of activist movements and marketing campaigns alike. But it is not only *for* these girls; it actively welcomes all to ascribe to its values, aims, and norms. However, this does not mean that many girls face no material limits in their ability to achieve and fully embody these values and norms, making their experience of instructional feminism vastly different than those girls who always already embody its norms. It is also important to note that I am basing this spectrum on a primarily American context. Likewise, I am referring to predominantly American feminist histories that popular and instructional feminism are alternately drawing from and contrasting themselves to, with some overlaps in U.K. and Australian media and feminist histories. So additionally, instructional feminism is not only for American girls necessarily, but my understanding is based upon a largely American definition and construction of girlhood and feminism, and further inquiries into how feminism for girls operates in non-Western contexts would be a rich field of study but currently outside the scope of this research.

Popular feminist sentiment has its own limits; namely, it is met with the countervailing force of popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Likewise, Angela McRobbie notes that the new wave of feminism is countered by women's striving for perfection, and the subsequent competition amongst women this sows (McRobbie, 2015). In other words, the popularization of feminism is always met with some opposition, both internal and external to the movement. While both popular misogyny and striving for

perfection are evident in instructional feminism as well, I posit that specific to the locus of age, the most prominent oppositional force is that girls are consistently framed as in need of protection, no matter how mature and autonomous a girl is imagined and encouraged to be by feminist messaging. It is this assumed need for protection that provides a basis and structure for the limitations found in the dual impulse to empower girls while simultaneously protect them from the perceived dangers of being a girl. They may need protection from predatory men and boys, from online bullying, from low self-esteem, or from other, more amorphous dangers such as growing up "too fast." The danger may change from context to context, but messages of girlhood empowerment are nevertheless continuously met with the suggestion that feminism can only do so much, and thus safeguards for the uniquely imperiled adolescent girl are necessary. It is in both the world of opportunities offered to girls, but also the limitations placed on those opportunities, that the differences in popular and instructional feminism are found.

I do not wish simply to reify the girl-as-agent versus the girl-as-victim rhetoric that dominates both this discourse and an ample amount of the previous scholarship on girls. Instead, in the examples that structure each chapter, I will deconstruct both what instructional feminism teaches girls they should be and how this same rhetoric places limitations on that imagined feminist girl. This is not to place certain media objects in the categories of either empowering or restricting girls, but rather to understand how the boundaries and norms around adolescence and girlhood are redrawn and reinforced under this new age of feminism, and to demonstrate the myriad ways girls find themselves in more complex positions than merely normative or transgressive, empowered or victim, than the discourse itself allows. In short, my goal is to understand how girlhood as an

identity and social category are constructed through the rhetoric of feminism that is currently pervasive in Western media that targets a female audience, and what this means for the expectations and idealizations placed upon girls.

Much like the fact that youth are "taught" gendered performances via social forces is not a new idea in and of itself, neither is the idea that media of all types impart certain ideological lessons upon their audiences. Many of the most foundational texts of Cultural Studies as a field make this point, and it is upon this concept of media itself that I am building. As Raymond Williams (1989) summed it up in 1958, "culture is ordinary." That is, culture is intrinsic to everyday life in every culture; we are surrounded and suffused by it and, in turn, that means everyone is gleaning complex, polysemic meaning from it as well. Likewise, Richard Hoggart (1957) argues cultural texts are "value-laden" and those values interact with individuals as they go about their everyday lives (p. 19). Both scholars sought to dissolve distinctions between "low-brow" and "high-brow" cultural texts, and by extension assumptions about presumed low-brow and high-brow audiences, but also key to this understanding of media is that this means any media text can be understood as both holding and potentially imparting ideological value. In a specific and relevant example, John Hartley (1992) highlights the emphasis on analyzing visual media in the feminist movement and notes, “the purpose of these campaigns has been not only to politicize and change mediated visualizations of gender, but to change readers’ behaviour in turn; using pictures, in short, to dramatize and teach private politics” (p. 6).

Importantly, the imparting of said values, ideologies, and attendant behaviors – or what could otherwise be understood as "instruction" – is not simply a top-down process from media to audience. Williams (2005) explains that the arts "express also and

significantly some emergent practices and meanings, yet some of these may eventually be incorporated, as they reach people and begin to move them…In this process, of course, the dominant culture itself changes, not in its central formation, but in many of its articulated features" (p. 31). Thus, this process is not one in which ideologies are taken up wholly and cleanly into a text and then diffused through society as such; it is a piecemeal and uneven process. Further, it is a circular process, because of the ways in which these "emergent practices and meanings" show up in dominant culture then funnel back and continue to shape future media texts in turn. In discussing how to analyze TV as a complex cultural artifact, John Fiske and John Hartley (1978) note that it is hard to even be aware this process is occurring because "our perception is not so much an inherited mechanism as a learnt one - the daily manifestation of our whole personal history of socialization and interaction with the cultural environment" (p. 69). In such a system it is not often easy to identify from where any one ideological lesson originates. What constitutes "the media" occurs on three levels: the image itself; the institutions, employees, and professional practices that create it; and the "the culture for which the messages are meaningful" or the "macro-group" that are both part of the audience and part of the culture crafting these messages. Thus, this is not a "closed system" of meaning-making. Instead, a "culture communicates with itself" via the mediation performed by the second level communicators, with the results manifested in the first level of image (Fiske and Hartley, p. 82). When I say that contemporary feminism is instructional to girls, then, I mean that the media texts which contain it are teaching an individual form of politics, ala Hartley's (1992) assessment, but also that it cannot be treated as one, monolithic "lesson" from one, monolithic source. I will instead look to those specific "articulated features" of instructional

feminism within culture, understanding that it is both mediated by the creative industries but also representative of a culture that is communicating with itself, and therefore working through and shifting what popular feminism can or should mean for girls in this moment.

This dissertation will then make two interventions into the scholarship that currently exists at the crossroads of girlhood studies and feminist media studies: one, to theorize feminism specific to the context of girl-centric media, and thus better understand a particularly notable moment in mainstream feminism; two, to further nuance girls themselves within girlhood studies analysis, continuing to dismantle the victim/resistor binary as well as trouble the subject who is typically centered. Specifically, for the sake of a concentrated analysis, I will focus on media aimed at girls roughly aged 10-18, yet always keeping in mind that tween and teen are fluid identity categories, as they are ambiguously defined by the transitional state of being no longer a child, but not yet an adult. These subjects are also broadly understood through their generational category. They are a part of Generation Z (Gen Z), defined as those born in the late 1990s to 2010. The categories of teen and tween, as well as these labelled generational cohorts, are constructed culturally and by consumer industries and as such shift over time and carry different import and resonances within different mediums. Additionally, tween and teen are in themselves distinct categories, which I endeavor to differentiate while again making clear that these boundaries continually dissolve and reform in the current media landscape.

Girls and youth are central to popular feminist discourse and, as such, understanding girls' place within contemporary feminism is crucial to understanding the movement itself, and what it is asking of girls and the fantasy it forwards of the ideal type

of woman they can and should become one day. This discourse occurs within a dynamic media moment, in which digital media environments make it nearly impossible to impose traditional audience demographic borders while simultaneously insisting on the importance of boundaries between media for children and adults. Additionally, youthful audiences are able to lay claim to their own corners of the digital mediascape, like TikTok, using techniques to define their space both novel to new platforms and as old as youth media itself. My dissertation then finds itself at the interstices of these still new, still evolving discourses and industries, asking both how the successful girl is defined and how her media plays a key role in this instructional process.

A Note on Terminology:

First, I would like to note the terminology I will be using to refer to various adolescent subjects. Variously, I will be invoking the terms childhood, adolescence, tweenhood, teenhood, and girlhood. Much of my analysis will be devoted to how such categories are culturally constructed, and therefore the boundaries of which are changeable based on time and context, as well as attempts by adults to put parameters on fundamentally amorphous time periods and unique individuals and bodies. Thus, I will not belabor in-depth definitions here, as questioning such definitions is, in part, the point of my project. However, there are typical usages of these terms in both academic and common discourses and so my usage reflects said discourses.

Childhood and adolescence are both catchall terms for periods considered "not adulthood." Childhood is typically considered the period of life that ends when puberty sets in (Cunningham, 2006). Adolescence is then the period between the onset of puberty and

adulthood, although when adulthood officially starts is culturally dependent and has changed much over time (Cunningham, 2006; Baxter, 2008). Adolescence can be used somewhat interchangeably with "teenhood," which is also the period between the onset of puberty and adulthood, typically roughly from ages 13/14 to 18. Teenhood became more legible as a demographic category once "teen" became a legible consumer category, and therefore is also largely constructed by the various creative industries. From there, "the tween" became an even finer distinction in demographic category, carving out a space between childhood but before the total onset of puberty, usually ages roughly 10-14 (Coulter, 2014; Cook, 2004). I use girlhood to then distinguish those who are learning the tenets of girlhood and femininity during these time periods. This does not mean that all subjects in this category identify as girls or will go on to identify as women, and as such can include trans and non-binary children. Instead, it reflects that gendering and the process of learning gender are as close to a universal of childhood as one can get, and so these subjects are still learning how to be a girl, whether they take these lessons on board, defy them, or some combination thereof. Additionally, there has been a widespread deployment of the term "girl" in popular culture to refer to women in their early to mid-twenties as well. This semantic shift is representative of the elongated time period of identity exploration, indecision, and general sentiments of "finding oneself" that have culturally marked adolescence (Grdešić 2013; Fuller and Driscoll 2015). However, for purposes of clarity and scope, when I use the term "girl" or "girlhood," I am only referencing subjects still in their adolescent tween or teen years, which in an American context cuts off at 18 or 19; those in their twenties I would place in the category of adulthood.

Culturally Defining Adolescence

In structuring this dissertation around the notion of boundary-crossing between adolescence and adulthood, girlhood and womanhood, first it is important to establish how culturally we have defined the category of "child" and later more fine-grained distinctions such as adolescent, teen, and tween, and thus how such boundaries came to be established. I will trace this broadly through what has been called "the invention of childhood" (Cunningham, 2006) and more specifically "the invention of adolescence" (Baxter, 2008) and will specifically focus on the point where adolescents' engagement with media becomes a key part of this ever-ongoing process of invention, which was around the mid-20th century. However, this is often a far-reaching topic, so I will also focus on the key structural boundaries separating adolescence and adulthood that I utilize myself in my own analyses. These are the boundaries of education versus work, asexual innocence versus sexually knowing, and apolitical non-citizen versus active citizen.

We construct these boundaries in several ways. Perhaps most concretely, we construct them legally. In the U.S. and many other countries, when a person turns 18 they are legally considered an adult, gaining both rights and also potentially harsher consequences in our judicial system as a result. We construct laws around child labor, determining when a child is still too much a child to labor at all, and what stage of development means they may work part time, and in what types of labor. And we construct laws around the age of consent and age when a child can marry, both of which attempt to define when a child becomes enough of an adult to consent to sexual activity and participate with those of their same or other ages. We also construct these boundaries through consumer cultures and practices. Regulatory bodies or departments determine age

ranges that certain media is "appropriate" for with ratings and other content warnings. The fashion industry creates new, more detailed categories within childhood in order to sell clothing and other products meant for the body. Media companies brand media products based on life-stage which in turn help to define that life-stage. And we also produce these boundaries culturally through more esoteric understandings of concepts such as innocence and maturity. This includes discourses over when a child is mature enough to make their own decisions, say to join social media or engage in sexual activity, or at what ages they should be afforded privacy, the independence to go places without their parents, etc. While my following examples have aspects of the legal boundary-drawing that can help demarcate how age is being understood in more concrete ways, mostly I will be dealing with how consumer industries and/or cultural notions of innocence and propriety are constructing modern notions of adolescence and the gendered category of girlhood in particular.

At the beginning of the 20th century, major cultural changes such as industrialization and urbanization – and the attendant changes to the economy, the family, religious worship, and much more they brought about – also brought about major shifts in how childhood and adolescence were defined. Namely, that these became distinct, legible categories was in itself novel, as was the idea that these were precarious periods that should first and foremost be held separate and even protected from the adult world (Cunningham, 2006; Baxter, 2008). Kent Baxter (2008) argues that adolescence's establishment as such in this period of upheaval sets the stage for the definition of this lifestage as a "problem" in need of rigorous oversight and control from adults. Thus, in the mid-20th century, youth leisure time became a point of public contention, seen as a time

when, if not regulated through "enriching" or "morally upright" activities, youths would instead run wild, causing a hysteria around the specter of juvenile delinquency (Cunningham 2006; Baxter 2008; Martin 2008). This fear was enhanced because it was also in the 1930s that industries began to consider children direct customers and marketed to them accordingly, rather than their parents (Cook, 2004). This meant children were understood as ideal customers as media technologies changed rapidly mid-century. Up to this point, much of childhood culture had occurred outside the home, but with the rise of television and other indoor media pursuits, there were increased concerns of what, exactly children were doing outdoors. The cinema became a potential "bad influence," especially with the popularity of violent westerns being linked to an increased concern in "juvenile delinquency" and violence in adolescents, namely boys (Martin, 2008).

These fears were also very much linked to the shifting perceptions of the economic value of children. Before, especially for boys, adolescence was often when kids would start working or enter apprenticeships in order to contribute to their household's economics. However, during this period the child becomes a figure who is “economically ‘worthless’ but emotionally ‘priceless’” (Zelizer, 1994, p. 1). In short, the child is no longer expected to economically contribute to the household, their value coming from the sentiments they inspire in their parents such as love and happiness, and parents who do utilize their children to make money are seen as avaricious (Zelizer, 1994). This was enabled by the time's shift away from an agrarian economy and to an industrialized one that often wanted older, more well-educated workers. These two intertwined changes led to an increased period of schooling for children (Zelizer, 1994; Cunningham, 2006). The distinction between schooling for childhood, working for adulthood as well as protection in the home

versus active in public life thus became key boundary markers for childhood. And within this definitional work, media started to emerge as both a potential enemy of childhood, disrupting these boundaries, and an ally to adults seeking to reinforce them.

Following the 1970s and into the 21st century, Cunningham (2006) argues three major changes occur to further shift the definitional boundaries of childhood: a further elongation of schooling, raising the average age of leaving school from 16 to 18; conflicting ideals on how free childhood should be of domestic worries such as contributing money to the household; and an increased insistence on the legal rights of children, inspired by the Second Wave feminist movement that was concurrently insisting upon the legal rights of women (p. 220-221). These shifts place the definition of the child in the 21st century at several points of tension. First, children now have more legal rights that treat them as individuals, but with an expectation that they be economically dependent upon their parents. Secondly, there is a cultural expectation that children subordinate their own wishes and desires to their parents, while there is a simultaneous expectation that adults shield childhood as a time and space free of the worries of the adult world.

And once again, the child's place in the commercial world was a key site where one can observe these tensions. Being free from the corrupting aspects of adult culture, childhood was idealized as a space that should stand separate from the commercialized world, especially given that children are meant to be prized only for their sentimental value, making the notion of childhood appear "radically incompatible" with thinking of children in terms of the economic value they may bring (Zelizer, 1994, p. 11). Yet at the same time, young people as potential consumers only grew during this time, as they had more leisure time and more money to spend solely on their own leisure, or at least more

sway to convince parents to spend money on them. This is not anathema to this growing understanding of childhood and adolescence, however; adults seeking to "understand" adolescence did so as a means to control adolescence and the individuals therein. Eventually, all of the fears of social change represented by the fears surrounding adolescents – of their "delinquency", of their need for both protection and structure – could be “sublimated by a capitalist script that contained them [adolescents] through both production and consumption” (Baxter 2008, p. 8). In fact, Daniel Cook (2004) argues that in the end the emergence of the sentimental/moral framing of childhood would help to drive the rise of consumer industries targeting children, by re-defining commodities as beneficial to children (i.e. they would aid in things like "childhood development" and naturalizing the idea of children as desiring of goods, and thus naturalizing the very idea of consumerism as originating in childhood) (p. 12-13). While thinking of children as consumers never forms a completely easy relationship, understanding the various childhood/adolescent lifestages through the lens of how children could "best" consume to become ideal future, adult producers (and still consumers, of course) became a primary means adults sought to control said lifestage.

Within these broad cultural shifts in the definitions of childhood, there is also a move to further segment childhood. Of relevance to my analysis is how childhood became segmented by gendered identities and by age categories. Cunningham (2006) notes that while the traits, clothing, and activities we culturally define as masculine or feminine shift over time, the impulse to gender childhood and place children into clear categories of "boy" or "girl," with attendant expectations, does remain consistent over time (p. 244). In other

words, childhood remains "the place where we learn how to be feminine and how to be masculine" (Cunningham, 2006, p. 244) it is just the lessons themselves that change.

With the rise in adolescent leisure cultures, as well as the concerns over keeping youth safe within the home, how tweens and teens spent their leisure time became one key front on distinguishing boyhood and girlhood cultures. When subcultural studies boomed within the Birmingham School, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1976) realized that while unstated, all of the subcultures featured boys and young men, out "in the streets" and utilizing public spaces to construct their subcultures. McRobbie and Garber's study urged scholars not simply to look at the "spectacular" youth subcultures, such as the punks and the mods that so interested this subfield in this era. They posited that girls' subcultures were curtailed by their gender, and often their class as well. They had less leisure money to spend than boys, typically, they were expected to be in the home more to help with domestic tasks and prepare themselves for marriage, and they would face harsher social consequences should they be found to be "misbehaving" outside the home. However, while less visible to both industries and scholars alike, girls had their own unique subcultures nonetheless. They posited one subculture therein to be "teenybopper" culture – or the ways in which girls would bond over a shared love of celebrity singers (McRobbie and Garber, 1976).

McRobbie (1991) notes that much of girl culture revolves around mass-produced media; in this era, that is pop stars, girls' magazines, fashion/makeup, and television. She observes that such pursuits are understandable, given they keep girls inside the home where they are expected and cost less money, but also because they are less constricted by the notions of "cool" that dictate so many of the boyhood subcultures, a distinction almost

impossible for girls to achieve by dint of the gender within said subcultures. Additionally, girlhood sexuality is much more heavily policed than boyhood sexuality – in the above legal and cultural boundary work happening around youth sexuality, it is almost invariably girls that are the imagined victims in need of protection. McRobbie (1991) argues that girlhood cultures that include things such as putting the posters of male pop idols on their walls, or reading about relationships in magazines, provide a space for girls to explore their sexuality without fears of reprisal or condemnation.

In short, the bedroom provides a space of safety and privacy for girls to explore their own interests with one another. McRobbie (1991) studied how this creation of their own subcultures intersected with the identity category of class – for instance, she noted they had particular classed ways of amending their school uniforms to individualize and further feminize them – which also demonstrated that while perhaps not as overtly rebellious as certain boy cultures and while embracing mass media, girls still had their own methods of resistance to dominant expectations. However, one can also see the strides that future girlhood scholars would make to further consider intersections of identity – race/ethnicity goes largely unexamined here and girlhood sexuality is assumed to be heterosexual and that it will follow a heteronormative trajectory, for instance (Kearney, 2007a). What this work does provide is a basis for establishing not only that girlhood has a unique culture, but also the most common component parts to it – celebrity, television, fashion/beauty industries, and magazines. Because of their close correlation with girlhood (and future womanhood) these media themselves are feminized. These foundations of girlhood culture also then form the basis for choosing my own case studies, which center

upon celebrity, fashion, television, and the somewhat new addition of social media, and indication of how bedroom culture continues to evolve.

The concept of bedroom culture has been more fully explored by scholars and simply shifted over time as well, and so our understanding of that culture has become more detailed and nuanced. Firstly, McRobbie and Garber's (1976) initial study was situated in a specifically postwar period in the U.K. that was in general more interested in re-establishing the centrality and power of the domestic sphere in daily life. Secondly, it primarily frames girls as consumers of pop culture, unintentionally playing into binaries that would see girls as consumers and boys as producers. Kearney (2007a) posits that bedroom culture is in fact a space of "cultural productivity" for girls as well as a space to consume (p. 130). Reading in-between the lines of several girlhood subculture studies, she notes there are mentions of girls writing poetry, making their own music, crafting collages, and more. They do not simply sit idle with their media objects of choice. This was then enabled further by the rise of at-home media-making technologies, like the growing ubiquity of at-home computers and video recorders. In the intervening years since Kearney (2006) wrote this book, this phenomenon has only continued to speed up through the use of smartphones that have photo and video capacities, as well as the further ability for girls to disseminate what they make through the advent of YouTube and social media platforms. And girls are not simply producing personal, creative projects – the private sphere is also a place where youths are engaging with politics and activism (Harris, 2001). As Harris (2001) argues, in the moment when girls were incredibly visible in mass media in the late 1990s and early 2000s, "this is not because young women have not managed to get out of the bedroom or do not know how to position themselves in the public domain. Instead, it is

because they themselves are choosing, politicizing, and re-invigorating the private as a response to the reception of their arrival" (p. 132). In short, much like McRobbie (1991) argued for the safety of bedroom culture for girls to evade surveillance, the space of the bedroom provides this same protection even when girlhood culture is no longer rendered invisible. Thus, while McRobbie and Garber (1976) establish the idea of "bedroom culture" well before social media was possible, the practices of it – personal, political, and any combination thereof – fit squarely within that mold and thus fit with these other media of girlhood culture.

Youth culture is not only segmented by gender, but once childhood and adolescence are established, these categories are further segmented by ages that correlate to various lifestages. Segmenting age demographics is appealing to consumer industries because "childhood generates bodies as well as meanings which grow, interact, and transform to the point of creating new childhoods, new meanings, and quite often new markets and in the process effectively ensuring the movement and transformation of exchange value beyond any one cohort or generation" (Cook, 2004, p. 2). While children younger than ten or so are also segmented, here I am going to focus on how "adolescence" became further segmented to "tweens" and "teens." As the "baby boom" post-WWII generation aged, that meant more and more potential consumers. Quickly, pre-teens and teens, and especially girls within this age-range, became the most attractive of these consumers (Cook, 2004, p. 120), not only because girls/women are generally seen as primary consumers, but because the segmentation of these ages was established in the fashion industries and largely based on accommodating changing bodies in the times right before and then after puberty. Girls' bodies – and thus their own sexuality or potential to be viewed as sexual – were

unsurprisingly framed as in need of more protection and surveillance than boys. Teen girls wished to show their affinity with young adult women, rather than with children, and the fashion industry wanted to serve this market. Likewise, younger girls then wanted to emulate teen girls, but this style was seen as "too adult" or provocative for those girls who had not yet fully gone through puberty, usually ages roughly 8-12 (although the term is very malleable and shifts based on sociohistorical context), leading to interim products such as "training bras" or "starter cosmetics." In both cases, the ambiguity of the category produced tension and judgement around determining if girls were dressing age-appropriately, and the blame for a failure to do this could fall on the industry, her mother, or the girl herself (Cook, 2004, p. 129-142).

The concurrent emergence of a legible girlhood culture, namely in the form of girls' magazines like *Seventeen*, helped to legitimize these segmentations further. However, it is the rise of visible girl culture in the 1990s "girl moment" – and the worldwide success of the Spice Girls in particular – that would convince the creative industries that tween girls, specifically, were a market to target, what Coulter (2014) calls a moment of "crystallization" for the demo (p. 5). She argues that "tween" is a highly gendered category; it is sometimes invoked to describe boys, but when it comes to playing video games or participating in sports, activities most stereotypically categorized as for the tween boy, boys' action in these activities is still emphasized over their role as consumers. It is girls who are considered avid consumers, and thus whom much of the anxieties over childhood consumerism center upon (Coulter, 2014). However, it is not simply the articulation between femininity and consumerism that crystallize the tween. It is also industrial changes that lead up to this moment when their market value is recognized. While this

trajectory in the media and consumer industries would define the boundaries of adolescence and girlhood, it would also lead to a moment when girls and girlhood culture were more visible in popular culture than ever before. This would garner the attention of both popular press, feminist activists, and media scholars alike.

Feminist Waves, Feminist Sentiments: Transitioning from Post- to Popular Feminism

The foundational theories of postfeminism, popular feminism, and the discursive construction of feminist movements as waves are key to my research. As noted, I agree with scholars such as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) and Angela McRobbie (2020) that in Westernized media spaces, we are firmly within a new feminist conjunctural moment, that of popular feminism. This then necessitates a re-theorizing of how feminism affects, is found in, and proliferates through girlhood culture. This also necessitates making clear the ways in which popular and instructional feminism have broken from, but also retain legacies with, the previous iterations of feminism. As Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, unique to popular feminism is its sampling of ideologies from both Second Wave liberal feminism, postfeminism, and Third Wave intersectional feminism. Thus, central to my theorization of instructional feminism is not only its links to popular feminism writ large, but the ways in which that necessarily means it also recalls and borrows from an amalgam of feminist beliefs and rhetorical frameworks.

How these new iterations of feminism are identified and later solidified in the popular imaginary is often rooted in media depictions of women and the movement, making feminist media studies a crucial tool in understanding not only changes in feminist thought and public reactions to feminism, but for understanding how these ideas intersect

across movements in more complex ways than the typical chronological "waves" narrative suggests. Media have been central to the project of Western feminism as well as in discursively framing popular understandings of feminism, including its organization into waves. For example, the beginning of the Second Wave is often traced to the 1968 protest of the Miss America pageant, in which the protesters argued against the image of women they believed the televised pageant propagated, one in which women are hypersexualized and valued only for their appearance. Critical analyses of mediated representations of women and their furtherance of stereotypes then became a central project of the movement. And it was also media's continued focused on the (erroneous) notion that this protest was a "bra burning" that solidified this iconography as a defining feature of the Second Wave. It was not until postfeminist sentiment became a noticeable trend, however, that media were seen as not only reflecting an already ongoing trend in society, but co-constitutive of new, unnamed movements and shifts in feminism, and as harbingers of these shifts.

Postfeminism gained purchase as a term in the 1990s and 2000s to describe a particular moment in mass media and celebrity culture in which feminism was disavowed, pushed aside as something that was no longer needed given the gains women had made via the Second Wave feminist movement. With feminism framed as no longer necessary, things once thought sexist could now be embraced as "empowering," especially hypersexuality and investing large amounts of time and resources into one's personal appearance. Postfeminism has strong ties to neoliberalism, and thus feminism's downswing was met with the rise of an ideology that touted the primacy of individual choice as the driving force of the individual's social and economic lives, rather than acknowledging the importance of

systems and institutions. Postfeminism took up this same rhetoric to tout a woman's ability to "choose" certain life paths, whether that be a high-powered career or life as a stay-at-home mother, as the example par excellence that gender equality had won the day. Women could "have it all" now, although that mostly translated into meeting the near-impossible and ever-growing demands of a taxing work life, motherhood, and marriage (Modleski, 1991; Sarah Projansky, 2001; Tasker & Negra, 2007). Postfeminism is not so much a coherent set of ideologies or political beliefs as it is a "sensibility," one that was largely seen in and analyzed through media (Gill, 2007). Texts featuring women primarily concerned with finding a male romantic partner, achieving a glamorous appearance, and securing a high-powered career (in other words, "having it all"), such as *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones' Diary,* became oft-cited examples of postfeminism at work (McRobbie, 2004; Tasker & Negra, 2007).

These analyses often highlight how white, Western, middle class women are the imagined audience for postfeminist sentiment, yet in so doing they continue to center white women as the ones who are hailed by, perform, and believe in postfeminism, or suggest that nonwhite and/or non-Western women who also embody postfeminist sensibilities are simply mimicking white, Western standards (McRobbie, 2008). Simidele Dosekun (2020) provides a key intervention in this thinking, noting that postfeminism interpellates subjects and asks them to see themselves as, say, women who can "have it all" and conduct themselves accordingly, thus making a disposable income the key factor in becoming a postfeminist subject, as the ability to buy designer goods, expensive makeup and hair products, and hire housekeepers or nannies to maintain the all-important work-life balance is central to crafting the ideal postfeminist self. This fact of class stratification can be found

across racial, ethnic, and national contexts. Crucial, then, is Dosekun's (2020) conclusion that "while postfeminism is not for white girls only, or for white girls really, we can say that it works through them in particular kinds of ways" (p. 10). Black postfeminist figures such as Beyoncé or Nicki Minaj work within this system, then, simultaneously forwarding an intertwined myth of postracism and postfeminism.

Much like postfeminism's confluence with neoliberalism, it also is closely linked with fragmentations of feminism via identity, namely Black and queer feminism that did not see itself represented in the mainstream Second Wave. Postfeminism by this definition, then, critically engages with past feminisms while also engaging with other social movements, taking up ideas from postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism. It is a more inclusive feminism that also understands that inclusion necessarily results in a fragmented feminism, and this lack of a fully unified theory is accepted (Brooks, 1997; Lotz, 2006). While the former definition of postfeminism is much more widely used, making Lotz (2006) and Brooks' (1997) definition not as useful of a shorthand, in many ways it presages what others would term Third Wave feminism. The Third Wave is defined by where it broke from the Second. This therefore encompasses feminist fractions that are otherwise at odds, namely, both the postfeminist rejection of liberal feminism as well as Black Feminism, which publicly broke from the Second Wave, an act often traced to the Combahee River Collective's statement (1977), and its ideologies canonized in Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) foundational texts on intersectionality. When considering a Third Wave as a movement predominantly led by Black feminists, it is also clear that feminism never truly "went away" or was never disavowed in the ways that basic definitions of postfeminism suggest. More accurately, there was simply a (white, middle

class) mainstream disavowal of the primarily white, middle class Women's Liberation Movement.

When the postfeminist moment ended, or if it even has, remains contentious, but the idea that sentiments have undoubtedly shifted into *something* new is consistent across most feminist analyses of contemporary Western media. Rosalind Gill questions if we are now "post-postfeminism," again pointing to the seemingly widespread embrace of feminism in pop culture, but concludes that we are not, given sexism is still framed by media as an individual rather than structural issue and that the feminism itself is simply "in fashion" and "cool" but devoid of any real politics. It is simply "rebranded" feminism with the same trappings of postfeminism (Gill, 2016). Catherine Rottenberg's (2014) concept of "neoliberal feminism" takes the popularization of feminism more seriously than Gill (2016) but comes to similar conclusions. Noticing that women no longer deny the existence of gender inequality and now publicly draw attention to its most obvious forms, Rottenberg (2014) argues this new feminist subject "accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance" (p. 420) and while this subject may see sexism in society, she disavows the systemic cultural and economic forces undergirding inequality. Thus, neoliberal feminism not only fails to critique neoliberal ideology, it further entrenches it because the political identity of feminism has been hollowed out, and is now incapable of structural critique or change (Rottenberg, 2014). In either case, both conceive of this turn towards feminism as ultimately a false one, unable to address the systemic reasons for inequality and often foreclosing the ability for another version of feminism to do so.

This skepticism regarding the popular embrace of feminism is certainly warranted. Yet a more nuanced and generous reading of this trend does not dismiss this new articulation of feminism as simply postfeminism and/or neoliberalism by a different name, but accounts for the ways in which popular feminism both engages with legitimately progressive ideas while simultaneously these ideas are constantly negotiated, managed, or sanitized by its enunciation in mainstream pop culture. Intrinsic to popular feminism is that it "circulates in an economy of visibility" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 10). In order to be popular, feminism must capture a portion of the attention economy and the accessibility of that economy (especially via social media) further enhances its visibility and popularity. Attention can at once confer legitimacy and importance to a cause, but it also means that it must be accepted and taken up by neoliberal institutions, especially corporations, that render it a consumer product rather than a political ideology.

Likewise, McRobbie (2015) notes that she now sees a "very different picture" from her "gloomy prognosis" of postfeminism's effects and, instead, there are now "many new kinds of molecular radical feminism" (p. 9). However, as noted, McRobbie (2020) believes this often turns women towards an unhealthy pursuit of "the perfect," an imperative that now incorporates feminist messaging so that achieving perfection in work life, family life, and in one's personal appearance is now a "moral imperative" (p. 45). This forms what she terms the perfect-imperfect-resilience (p-i-r) dispositif, in which the impossibility of actually achieving the perfect is then responded to with narratives in which women are urged to embrace "the imperfect" – or those flaws women should "learn to love" – which itself operates within carefully demarcated boundaries of acceptability. Additionally, the gendered harm the perfect results in, as well as other recognized forms of gender

discrimination, are met with “resilience” narratives, discourses based in therapeutic techniques which acknowledge the damage done while setting up acceptable means by which these difficulties should be overcome. McRobbie (2020) cautions that resilience narratives often trade in neoliberal values which set women up to expect gendered inequality, only to suggest the sole way to cope is to cultivate personal “strength” and “independence.” What makes the p-i-r dispositif new is its investment in claiming a feminist ethos, yet primarily it functions as a means to manage and control emerging feminisms (McRobbie, 2020, p. 44-46). These discourses then proliferate widely through popular culture, “usurping” these new feminist expressions, undercutting the radical beliefs they may have originally embodied, and instead become the “dominate frame of reference for understanding female complaint" (McRobbie, 2020, p. 65).

As is obvious from this brief history, clearly delineating U.S. feminism into waves or separate movements is a fraught endeavor. Feminist scholars have critiqued this waves construction of feminist history as reductive, obscuring the heterogeneity of both women and ideas that exists in these movements (Siegel, 1997; Nicholson 2010). This rhetoric can often adopt what Deborah Siegel (1997) calls a “metonymic view” of previous waves, in which one part of a waves’ activity is substituted for the whole and renders the previous wave the “bad mother” of a younger, better feminist (p. 59-60). Additionally, focusing on a wave’s failings often still centers the dominant white, middle-class voices most visible in mainstream versions of these waves, rather than the coalitions that can and have been built between the diverse voices working within and on the margins of these movements (Heywood and Drake, 1997). Finally, it suggests that feminism as an ideology and political action follows a linear history, with clear peaks and ebbs. The truth is that these waves

often overlap with one another or are not so cleanly defined as a narrativized history would suggest, and the wave metaphor does not account for the ways in which feminism continues to succeed in some areas while failing in others even during "peaks" (Nicholson 2010).

Nonetheless, the waves are important as discursive frameworks through which U.S. feminism is understood because they are ubiquitously employed as a framework for public discourse about feminism, and thus this history and the tensions between waves carry import for understanding the popular feminism of today. I believe this is especially important when considering girls' role within these feminist movements and thus understanding feminism from an (inter)generational perspective. Winch, Littler, and Keller (2016) argue for just such a perspective. Instead of utilizing these concepts to construct a linear history, one can instead use their invocation to understand how power is functioning discursively. As they explain:

> precisely because of the problematic ways that is it used, and the prevalence of it as a volatile, yet only too palpable organizing category, generation is both in need of continual critical analysis, and is an important tool to be used—with care and nuance—when examining the multiple routes through which power functions in order to marginalize, reward, and oppress (Winch et al., 2016, p. 561).

This tool is effective for understanding a feminist conjuncture, conceiving of a particular moment as a site of struggle in which ideology takes shape and locating "affective flashpoints" within that conjuncture (Winch et al., 2016, p. 565). This figuring of the waves as not simply a linear history, but instead a generational passing, with the messiness that intergenerational exchange elicits, is key to understanding not only the particular contemporary feminist moment, but the importance of generation and, by extension youth, in its construction. If the waves are often figured as a passing and changing of feminist

beliefs from one generation to the next, it is not enough to understand popular feminism as an awakening of sorts from postfeminism, but as a new generation of feminists grappling with the advancements and mistakes of the feminist movements before them.

Girls' Place in Feminism and Feminist Media Studies

It is then important to understand this discursive project of defining feminism specifically within girlhood culture, not only to continue parsing how waves, eras, and generation are employed as technologies of power, but because dominant forms of feminism and girlhood have a fraught history that informs how girls are brought into feminism today. Catherine Driscoll (2002) argues that feminist theory as a whole, and especially Second Wave feminism, only invokes girlhood as a counterpoint to describe what a mature, feminist woman is not. In Second Wave feminism, "new" or younger generations were often framed as a stage of "immature and unconscious" womanhood, designating girls and young housewives as prey to false consciousness (Driscoll, 2002, p. 130-132). Girlhood was often pinpointed as the space where patriarchal inequality began without ever accounting for girls' agency in relation to these forces (Coulter, 2014, p. 47).

Even early work specifically in girlhood studies was often equally guilty of failing to recognize girls' agency as their own form of feminist activism or belief system as previous scholarship had been. Mary Pipher's phenomenally successful treatise, *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), set the tone. Pipher explicitly calls out the feminist movement for empowering adult women but not doing the same for girls. She labels adolescence as a time of loss for girls – a loss of their self esteem, voice, and individuality – and therefore a time when they are in danger and in need of protection. Without such protection, in Pipher's telling, girls

fall prey to eating disorders, depression and anxiety, and behaviors such as underage drinking and sex. *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) was taken up widely in schools and by parents as a solution to the "problem" of girlhood. Thus, its figuration of girls as victims of gendered oppression, and the subsequent fear this would lead to ruined adulthoods, became the overarching framework for discussing girlhood. Quickly, Piphers' rather bleak picture of girlhood was countered with studies centering girls' as resistors to, or at least negotiators of, patriarchy. Studies also sought to nuance experiences of girlhood along lines of race, ethnicity, and class. Like Pipher, these studies often drew from ethnographies performed in schools, but unlike Pipher, they did not frame these "problem" behaviors as something of an inevitability for girls, but as labels from adult authority figures that are often highly raced and classed. Instead of finding girls falling prey to this loss of confidence and turning towards "bad" behaviors en masse, researchers found that poor and/or racial minorities often find pride in actively resisting the norms of their white, middle class peers (Bettie, 2003), that notions of academic success for girls are highly raced, classed, and gendered and thus achievement in such a setting often requires students who are racial minorities to deconstruct their own cultural values and identities (Fordham, 1996), and that bullying and competition amongst high school girls is a highly racialized gender performance (Fordham, 2016).

A key text in this revised analysis is Anita Harris' *Future Girl* (2003), which analyzes the discourses of girlhood success and failure themselves. She argues that girlhood has been discursively constructed around two archetypes that girls can fill: the "at-risk" vs. the "can-do" girl. The "can-do" girl first and foremost keeps herself future-oriented in order to set herself up for success in adulthood. She therefore works hard to do very well in school,

excels at sports or other extracurriculars, she knows she must put off motherhood to an "appropriate age" in order to maximize her career, but does not disavow it or other modes of traditional femininity. She is "self-inventing, ambitious, and confident" (Harris, 2003, p. 17). While she is not imagined to be problem-free, her problems are imagined to be individualized and rather easily dealt with in adolescence to make way for her future success (Harris, 2003, p. 32). The "at-risk" girls are most often those who cannot access this "can-do" persona easily, or at all. This is primarily poor/working class girls and girls of color. The "at-risk" girl has "misaligned ambitions" in that, if she wishes to have a professional career, it is made clear to her that she has not adequately prepared for this in her youth. She is seen to have "disordered" consumption habits, such as drinking or doing drugs. And the most prominent example of the "at-risk" girl is the teen mom, who has both failed to plan for her future "properly" and has shown herself to have disordered consumption in how she has used her leisure time. The "at risk" girls' problems are also individualized, but for her this is by increasing surveillance and discipline under the guise of helping her (Harris, 2003, p. 25-30).

This categorical schema remains relevant for how girls are discussed by adults and represented by media. While girls and their lived experiences are certainly more complex than either category, they remain useful for understanding how girls are understood within institutions, such as in schools or by the state, especially when it comes to those girls most likely to face disciplinary sanctions for perceived bad behavior, and for understanding how girlhood gets represented back to girls' themselves via media. Despite the cultural studies bent of Harris' foundational text, it does not reflect the full conflation of girlhood studies and media studies. Instead, this occurred at a similar time, in response to the "girl moment"

of the 1990s and early 2000s, when a particularly mainstream, popular strand of girlhood media made it impossible for those in feminist media studies to ignore the importance of girls in media and as audience members (Driscoll, 2002; Kearney, 2006; Projansky, 2014; Coulter, 2014). Deregulation in the 1980s paved the way for this heightened industry interest in girl markets in the 1990s. The FCC lifted restrictions on the mixing of advertisements and children's television content, allowing toy companies to create their own shows, with the main draw being that the entire show would essentially act as an advertisement for the related merchandise. Strawberry Shortcake in particular became an incredibly popular character, TV show, and doll via this synergistic process, and with it, the girl market was seen as a lucrative demographic to target (Coulter, 2014). Concurrently, television also saw the rise of cable, and the attendant rise in narrowcasting practices. This not only enabled channels dedicated to children/tween programming to exist but gave rise to so many that these channels sought to differentiate even further by gender. With the success of *Clarissa Explains It All*, Nickelodeon in particular branded itself as a channel for girls. In so doing, they directly contested industry lore that posited boys would never watch a girl protagonist, and much like Strawberry Shortcake, demonstrated that girls were a desirable audience to cultivate (Banet-Weiser, 2007).

While these key events demonstrated the potential of the tween and teen girl market to the entertainment industry, it was not until the worldwide success of The Spice Girls that the power of this market became widely apparent. At the same time, the riot grrrl movement gained purchase, a feminist punk collective that began in the 1990s, most notable for the all-female punk bands it spawned and the "zines" (homemade magazines and newsletters) girls created. The Spice Girls and the Riot Grrrls would come to define

analyses of the “girl moment” within feminist media studies and they were often placed in direct opposition to one another. Riot Grrrls appealed to feminist scholars, which is hardly surprising given that it was an explicitly feminist movement, one that embraced an angry tone and actively included queer women. It also put girls’ agency front and center because they made their own media, tying themselves directly to a punk-rock, subcultural lineage in the process. In short, the Riot Grrrls both actively and consciously defied gender stereotypes while also providing an interesting foil to academic scholarship that reiterates certain gender binaries, such as the idea that producing is masculine and consuming is feminine. They also serve as a demonstration of the strides feminism had made, even as these girls needed to push back on sexism, because they were able to access the same active, public aspects of subcultural participation that only a generation prior were thought to be entirely masculinized and closed off to girls.

In contrast to this scrappy, DIY ethos, The Spice Girls’ mantra of “girl power” is often presented as the corporate, consumerist, extremely watered-down version of feminism for girls. Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) compares the commercial forms of feminism folded into the broader "girl power" ethos with the Riot Grrrl movement. She argues that the Riot Grrrl movement urges girls to “find their own voices” in a safe, girl-centric community built upon both feminist and punk ideologies. This is in contrast to commercial forms of girlhood advocacy which reified "middle-class standards" for girlhood (p. 83). Riot Grrrl is important, then, because it ruptures both commercial, feminist, and hyper-masculine punk cultures by instead demonstrating how girls wish to reject "the naturalized story of girlhood" via their media creation (Kearney 2006, p. 88-89). Meanwhile, Ellen Riordan (2001) argues that “girl power” sprang from the idea that girls and girls’ culture needed to

be valued more highly, but quickly became commodified and actively produced multiple, muddied textual meanings, rather than a decidedly feminist one, in order to garner the largest audience possible. In short, this debate continues to separate girls as either victims (in this case, of corporate consumer culture) or as agentive resistors. Yet as Riordan's (2001) argument alludes to, both Girl Power and Riot Grrrls arise from a similar impetus – to assert girls' place within feminism and to assert the value of their unique cultures and perspectives. Given this shared value, it is incumbent on scholars to also then take each girl subculture seriously and consider that there may be tensions and ideological struggle in both. Catherine Driscoll (1999) troubles this victim/resistor binary by interrogating what constitutes "agency" within these subcultures more critically, noting "when agency is evaluated according to resistance it is inevitable that the agency of some people or groups—the ones with least access to modes of cultural production, for example—will seem less independent and less individual than others" (p. 188). This is certainly born out in the riot grrrls, an almost entirely white and middle-class movement, given what type of girl can participate in open youthful rebellion (Kearney, 2006). Driscoll instead advocates for looking at how these subcultures allow girls to access feminism, pointing to the utility of the widely accessible version that the Spice Girls and "girl power" provide. This allows the researcher to understand the political appeal of these messages "to girls *as they are* rather than as they might be" (Driscoll, 1999, 189).

Driscoll's (1999) argument represents an early iteration of how the field of girlhood studies evolves post-girl power. Transcending the victim/resistor binary is widely agreed upon, as well as considering girls' race/ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and class as central influences to their cultural participation. And while the unique moment of the 1990s

produced a large body of work at the intersections of girlhood studies and feminist media studies, this work did not often make a conscious effort to theorize what would constitute a true combination of the methods and theories unique to each field. Sarah Projansky (2014) proposes a "feminist girls' media studies" defined simply as "feminist scholarship (however the author defines her/his feminism) that focuses on the relationship between girls and media" (p. 13). This requires an interdisciplinary approach, culled not only from the major contributions of girlhood and feminist media studies, but from public policy and sociological accounts that note the roles media play in girls' lives. When utilizing this third body of scholarship, Projansky (2014) urges girlhood studies to move beyond the "myopia" that fixated on the scholarly and public discourses that pathologized girls and created moral panics around them, those same discourses that discipline girls via "can-do" or "at-risk" categorization. She cautions that, while certainly worthy of critical analysis, consistently analyzing these hegemonic constructions can serve to reinforce their status as the only identifications available to girls, ignoring the girls and representations of girls that live in the margins. Instead, she argues that, "various alternative girls—often girls of color and/or queer girls—are right there, right in front of us in the vast mediascape" (Projansky, 2014, p. 17).

To take up Projansky's (2014) call entails analyzing media representations for complex, multi-layered meanings, grounding them with historical specificity, acknowledging the role of industry in structuring them, including public policy and activist work centering or led by girls, and approaching all of the above from an interdisciplinary, intersectional perspective. While I do not think the can-do/at-risk binary can be completely moved on from yet, as it remains a ubiquitous discourse that seeks to discipline girls'

behaviors, Projansky makes a crucial intervention in noting that the girls who fall outside the bounds of this rigid formulation are very much present and deserve equal attention in analysis. It is this conception of feminist girls' media studies that I proceed with in my own analysis, as well as taking heed of those calls to nuance girlhood studies post the girl power era. I also add Winch et al.'s (2016) call for an intergenerational understanding of feminism to this analytic plan. To understand the current feminist conjuncture, one cannot simply look to the present and future of girls' media but must understand the history of girls' role in feminism, as the specter of generational exchange and inter-generational boundary crossing is continually felt in the present.

How To Be A Feminist: Learning and Un-learning the Lessons of Instructional Feminism

I seek to demonstrate a range of instructions given to girls within this new feminist conjuncture, looking moreover across a range of media where such instructions circulate. As such, each chapter looks to both a different boundary that is typically drawn between girlhood and adulthood as well as a different medium and aspect of popular feminism that is used within that feminism. I utilize a breadth of media types in my analysis in order to demonstrate the widespread nature of popular feminist discourse in girlhood media; however, beyond just exhibiting scope, each specific case study was also chosen to fit within those feminized forms of media associated with the privatized "bedroom culture" of girlhood: celebrities, fashion, television, and social media. In each chapter's case study, I do not only look to examples of subjects learning and embodying the tenets of instructional feminism "correctly," but also those subjects who fail and/or reject its lessons. In either

case, whether the subject is exemplary of instructional feminism or out of sync in some way, I sought to heed Projansky's (2014) call to center those subjects so often found "on the margins" of studies on girlhood. I highlight a diverse range of subjects along several points of identity, such as race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, and neurodivergence, within each chapter.

To tackle varied media objects, I am also using a mixture of methodologies. These are primarily textual and discursive analyses, which include both close reads of specific texts as well as taking a broader perspective on discourses that span across different pieces of media. When it comes to the public figures I analyze, this includes using Richard Dyer's (1979) star-as-text model, in which the star can be close-read as one text, but that text is made up of an amalgam of the stars' interviews, public appearance, roles in film/TV, and gossip about them, as well as anything else that might contribute to their overall public persona. However, in addition, I have attempted to not treat young public figures as *only* texts, especially those who are not supported by the various apparatuses of the traditional entertainment industry, such as publicists, which help to consciously construct the star image. Instead, I weave in said figures' own words, writings, speeches, etc. to give a sense of that they can be representors of themselves, not simply reflections of an amalgamated media image. I do this not only to best serve my analysis, but to give weight to the voices of young girls. It is a principle of girlhood studies to listen to girls' themselves when attempting to understand the valences of girlhood and girlhood culture, trusting that they are the best interpreters and spokespeople for their own lives and beliefs. While complications from the Covid-19 pandemic truncated my timeline in such a way I was not able to conduct audience research, I attempt to still abide by this principle by

foregrounding what my case studies say about themselves. When that is not possible (or the girls in question are fictional, such as in my television analysis) I make clear when what I am representing is an adult perspective on adolescence and not necessarily indicative of actual adolescent beliefs or behaviors. This can be illuminating in its own way by demonstrating how visions of girlhood are constructed by those in positions of authority, such as interviews I perform with industry workers, but it is a distinction. Finally, I thread industry analysis throughout as needed, as understanding the context in which this media is made is equally important to understanding certain decisions, inclusions of ideology, etc. as analyzing the resulting media object.

I begin in Chapter One exploring one of the most prominent imperatives of instructional feminism, yet also the lesson that breaks most explicitly with past constructions of girlhood: that girls should begin professionalizing at a young age. I analyze this within celebrity culture, specifically via the tween celebrity's red carpet fashion and the linked discourses of the child star-executive producer. Trends on the red carpet have taken a markedly mature turn for tween girls, namely via the popularity of the pantsuit, demonstrating a shift away from the hyperfeminine aesthetics attributed to postfeminist girl culture. This mature style works concurrently with positive narratives of teen girl stars producing their own content. Such positive reception allows girl stars to cross the boundary into performing professional, full-time labor that usually separates adolescence and adulthood because these celebrities utilize the popular feminist rhetoric of the working girl/woman as a figure of empowerment. I use *black-ish* and *Little* star Marsai Martin as a case study for the exemplary figure of such lessons, but also for examining how intersecting identities such as race must be factored into understandings of how one achieves "success"

as the ideal, feminist girl. As a Black girl, Martin must work both with and against the "adultification" of Black children, compounded by fears over working children and child stars specifically growing up "too soon," in order to craft herself as empowering as both a girl and a member of Black Hollywood.

In Chapter Two, I turn to a topic that has similarly served as a traditional boundary between adolescence and adulthood in the past that is now contested via instructional feminism: teen girls as sexually desiring subjects. While Chapter One focuses on an aspect of instructional feminism that is popularly framed as unquestionably empowering, however, this chapter shifts my analysis to continued tensions within instructional feminism, as the concept of teen girls' sexual agency continues to have a fraught, and often contradictory, discourse attached to it. I investigate this via teen television, and specifically via the marked changes in the genre's approach to sex and sexuality and the industrial reasons behind those changes. Where once the depiction of teen sex and sexuality was marked by the moralizing tone that programs took when discussing it, as well as by the heteronormative and conservative approach taken when sex was had by teens on these shows, now sex is depicted and discussed much more freely on teen series and queer characters are more prevalent (if, as I will argue, still censured). Utilizing interviews with industry workers, I look to how adults are conceptualizing teen girl sexuality through characters as well as their conception of the teen audience.

If in Chapter Two my focus was girls as agentive figures in their own sexuality, in Chapter Three I look to the flipside of this dynamic: girls as objects of sexual desire. Here, I engage with long-running discourses about the "sexualization of girls" within and through media such as magazines, advertisements, and television, and the assumed harms this does

to girls in "real life." Such discourses often pathologize girls who are "sexualized," yet girls themselves become the responsible parties for managing their own appearance and behavior to try and mitigate the imagined negative, sexualizing effects. I utilize the prominence of girl creators on TikTok to explore how instructional feminism first instructs girls on how they can make bodily displays – here, through the popular trends of dancing, lip syncing, and "get ready with me" videos on the platform – to foreclose handwringing discourse that they are participating in their own sexualization. But once these norms are established, I use creator Danielle Cohn as a case study for a girl who actively rejects the lessons of instructional feminism. Through Cohn's embrace of many of the aesthetics and behaviors of the "sexualized" girl, I argue that she demonstrates how girlhood can be embodied beyond typical binaries of good girl/bad girl or can-do/at-risk girl. Cohn then also demonstrates how eschewing the rhetoric of instructional feminism can in actuality be more radical than embracing this popularized feminist ethos.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I return to the figure of the girl celebrity but in the more specific form of the celebrity girl activist. I trace the common scholarly arguments about such figures; namely, that while such girls fight for commendable causes, adult spheres of media flatten them into symbols of hope and optimism for the future. In so doing, adults in power can foreclose addressing systemic issues in the present because the girl activist represents a brighter future that will come through their activism. They are also proof of the gains of feminism, symbols of how women and even young girls now have a voice in the political sphere. These discourses thus render girl activists both as proof of the efficacy of the current state of politics and policy, because such a nation-state has allowed a girl to shine in such a manner, yet simultaneously as proof that nothing can be done in the

present, for change will come in the hypothetical future this younger generation will surely bring about. I agree with such assessments, but in this chapter I argue that if we look to what the activists themselves say about their work and their own experience of being in the media spotlight, we can see they are heavily aware that the media will produce this flattening effect while rendering them celebrities. Using the case studies of Greta Thunberg and X González, I trace two means by which they attempt to combat these narratives. First, each emphasizes their own identity and positionality and thus resists the symbolization process by underlining both their own personal stakes in their causes and making clear they cannot stand in for all young people affected by said issue. Secondly, they adopt an angry affect in their various forms of public address, and thus resist the narrative that they are "hopeful, harmless, and heroic" (Taft, 2020). In both cases, Thunberg and González refuse the boundary-crossing between adolescence and adulthood that is entering the public sphere and becoming an active democratic citizen. They repeatedly reassert their status as teens, even as various media encourage the popular feminist embrace in crossing this particular boundary. Like Cohn in Chapter Three, this is a refusal of the most normativizing lessons of instructional feminism, but in other ways it is an embrace of its lessons, just those on the most radical ends of its spectrum.

I conclude by re-asserting the stakes I see in these discourses, including the critiques I have and the potential I see in instructional feminism. Additionally, I gesture to how scholarship in this vein may expand in the future, namely in considering the perspective of the average girl herself in these debates through audience research, as well as more fully considering the rising threats of popular misogyny in girlhood spaces in response. While I am critical of the demands and expectations instructional feminism

places on girls, I also am not blind to how exciting it is that feminism is so accessible to a younger generation. Thus, I end in a place wherein I remain cautious and critical of how instructional feminism is spread via institutions and broader discourses, but also inspired by the ways in which I see girls engage with these discourses and find unique, often transgressive ways, to embody their own principles.

It is widely understood that children learn how to perform gender, and this places restrictions – some implicit, some explicit – on their behaviors and attitudes from an early age. However, in understanding how the contemporary discourses of popular feminism contribute to this process, I aim to deepen our understanding of both this feminist moment and how this feminist ideology shapes and affects girls. This may be through welcoming girls into the feminist movement or to identify themselves as feminist, but it also works in subtler ways, affecting how girls embody their femininity, understand their own agency (or lack thereof), and assert their place in a world run by adults. In so doing, clear changes are seen in how girlhood is integrated into mainstream, Western feminist movements as well as how the very concept of girlhood itself is undergoing a shift in this sociocultural moment. While adult anxieties will perhaps always find their way into the shaping of our understandings of adolescence, there is also a way forward in which the re-shaping of these boundaries may mean a more expansive, even rebellious, notion of how to be a girl.

Chapter 1: Be Professional
The Aesthetics and Industrial Practices of the Girl Star as an Executive

The typical story we tell about the American child star goes something like this: a wide-eyed, precocious child with prodigious talent becomes popular. Love and praise for this child and their talent is simultaneously met with paternalistic worries from adults because the child has crossed into a world that is inherently unsafe to them. Despite (or because of) their current popularity, they are also doomed to an unsuccessful adulthood because they have entered this unsafe world too soon, counter to the normal progression of a working life. At best, they will lose their air of innocence and so also lose one of their chief appeals, making them unable to transition into adult stardom. They become most notable for being a former child star, consigned to a mediocre role in the industry, or perhaps they will simply fade into complete obscurity. At worst, they will be the child star whose life takes a dark and dramatic turn, becoming more known as a tabloid fixture for their bad behavior and troubled personal life than as a star with particular talents. This minefield of a narrative becomes all the more complex and heightened for the girl star to navigate around. Usually, she is overdetermined as a victim-in-the-making due to her gender, inexorably mistreated by those in the industry and by the entire apparatus of the media industries.

Of course, such a cultural narrative is just that – a story we tell. A story that is more useful in instilling and upholding myths around childhood and normative ideas about the linear progression to adulthood than it is in charting the real lives of child stars. There are certainly former child stars whose stories seem to prove the rule here but gone are the nuances of their individual lives or second acts that upend ideas of what a "successful"

adulthood and adult career might look like. Largely ignored are the narratives of child stars that do not follow this trajectory at all. The story of a midrange child star who encounters little controversy and goes on to have a similar career in adulthood is hardly interesting fodder for celebrity gossip, after all. However, I argue there is a third way in which this narrative is disrupted, one that is less about pointing to the fallacies of this sweeping generalization of child stars and more about re-writing the narrative itself. This is done via the figure of the girl star who has learned all the lessons of instructional feminism and can both look the part of the empowered girl and act out those lessons on the massive stage of American media stardom.

Specifically, in this chapter I will be braiding together two, related trends in girl stardom that signify the values of maturity, can-do attitude, and high achieving goals that is at the root of much of the instruction in instructional feminism. First, in recent years we have seen an eruption of mature-beyond-their-years styles for girl stars on the red carpet. However, unlike in years past when the worry over "mature" clothing would be that it sexualizes a girl "too early" (think, debates over how young is too young to wear a miniskirt, or a bikini), instead these stars are wearing the heavily symbolic outfit of the pantsuit, one much more highly associated with a corporate, working woman than with sexuality. Second, in recent years these stars have increasingly been referred to *as* working women (or rather, women-in-the-making), and/or as serving a corporatized working role – that of an executive producer, and often with her own production company, no less. This role of producer is legitimated as work, counter to the way a child star's acting is often read, and much like the "too mature" clothing, this is not discursively represented as a threat to the child or evidence of the future-victim status, but instead celebrated as a sign of

the child star's maturity and, oftentimes, popular feminist beliefs. In this way, the adoption of the most corporatized, neoliberal lessons of instructional feminism allow the girl star to cross the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood – here, the line of being a working professional – with ease and celebration, rather than the typical handwringing and portents of future failures that would typically accompany such a crossing.

When it comes to fashion, the markedly mature turn that style has taken for teen and tween stars not only demonstrates the work-centric focus of much of popular feminism, but is a notable shift away from the hyperfeminine aesthetics attributed to postfeminist girl culture. If one looks at the American red carpet in the late 1990s and early 2000s, one sees a decidedly less formal and professionalized space. Girl stars overwhelmingly wore jeans with form-fitting t-shirts and tank tops, and most often in those once-clear aesthetic markers of girlhood: pastels and glitter (Kearney, 2015). But with the deployment of the pantsuit on the red carpet, girls' star images support discourses that celebrate these tween-professionals for their precocious intelligence, ambition, and maturity. Such images and surrounding discourse also engage popular feminist sentiment on the virtues of entrepreneurialism as evidence of an empowered, independent, and therefore inherently feminist, girl/woman. The list of girls who have worn pantsuits on the red carpet in recent years is long: Skai Jackson (then 14) at the 2016 Nickelodeon Kids Choice Awards [figure1], McKenna Grace (then 11) at the 2017 Teen Choice Awards [figure 2], Julia Butters (then 10) at the 2019 Power of Young Hollywood event [figure 3], Millie Bobby Brown (then 14) at a promotional event for *Stranger Things* Season 2 [figure 4], and Storm Reid (then 15) at the 2018 Nickelodeon Kid's Choice Awards [figure 5], to name just a few examples.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

While this ubiquity demonstrates how instructional feminist rhetoric implicates all girls in its lessons, the embodiments of these lessons must be read intersectionally. In this chapter, I focus on Marsai Martin to demonstrate how the aesthetics of professionalism must be read against a history of adultifying Black girls. I argue that the result of the images

and the attendant celebratory press these girl stars receive demonstrate a breakdown in a formerly firm barrier between adolescence and adulthood: that of professional work. Once, adolescence was defined by a lack of work and a focus on education and the transgression of this line was cause for alarm, as we have seen in the former narratives of the at-risk child star. Now, in the discourses circulated by industry press and celebrity gossip that make up these celebrity's star texts, that boundary can be happily crossed if framed in the language of popular feminism. When it comes to Black girls, this boundary negotiation becomes more complex, however, as they have historically never been granted the benefits of presumed innocence that white girlhood symbolically carries. Their crossing into adult spaces in adult spaces of labor then comes with a further burden of respectability politics to prove their maturity, but likewise uses their "adultified" status for professional benefit.

Methodology

Instructional feminism can be found across girlhood culture, so I am employing a case study approach to demonstrate the ways in which its lessons are enacted and embodied by individuals, while still attending to how individual choices are situated within broader cultural discourses. For the year of 2019 and into 2020, before the Covid-19 pandemic effectively ended red carpet events for a prolonged period, I followed celebrity fashion blogs and saved images of girl stars wearing pantsuits. I also went back into these blogs' archives for images tracing back to when the trend first become broadly popular via major fashion houses' runway shows around 2015/2016. From there, I was able to clock both which stars were clearly centering fashion as a key aspect of their star image generally and also which wore pantsuits frequently, using the professionalized garment to further define

that image. I focus on Marsai Martin as a case study, and also analyze Julia Butters' appearances as a point of comparison. I chose them because they are emblematic of this trend—I could choose a number of girl stars as case studies and their outfits and styling would not be drastically different—but also because they demonstrate how racial identity informs readings of fashion, star images, and the combination of the two.

The focus on one particular fashion trend may appear ephemeral, fickle as the fashion industry often is, but it is notable that the pantsuit's eruption in popularity is concurrent with the rise of popular feminism. Winch et al. (2016) advocate for a "conjunctural analysis" to understand contemporary, intergenerational feminism. Utilizing Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall's definition of the concept, Winch et al. (2016) summarize a conjuncture as "the power dynamics, the character, the balance of social, political, and cultural forces at a given time that gave a particular moment its shape." One then uses the cultural, historical context of the conjuncture to understand how political subjectivities form within it (p. 562). Using this method, I then am not simply performing textual analysis on a star image, but analyzing a trend and individual celebrities as elements that give this feminist moment its shape.

Additionally, I weave in an industrial-discursive approach to understand the concurrent rise in the child star executive producer. I seek to understand this shift from an industrial perspective, as part of an industry-wide rise in celebrity production companies writ large, while primarily centering the discourse surrounding girl stars specifically taking on this position of executive producer, entrepreneur, and "boss." This is to understand this industrial trend in relation to – and, as I will show, a deviation from – past narratives of the female child star. And in so doing, I demonstrate how even as there are industrial reasons

behind why so many tweens and teens have been handed the reigns of production companies, how that move has been received by the press and comes to shape the star's image is both constitutive of and reflective of instructional feminist sentiment about work.

Fashion as Cultural Analysis

The ethos of popular feminism often finds itself expressed via sartorial choices and celebrities are often the means by which these ideologies spread (Banet-Weiser 2018). But this is not the only reason red carpet fashion is a particularly apt venue to analyze instructional feminism. Style is a key site upon which cultural tensions, dialectics, and discourses are made legible, especially when analyzing youth and girlhood cultures (McRobbie, 1991). Often, fashion has been analyzed using a semiotic approach in which a garment can be "read" as signifying a particular identity or ideology (Hebdige, 1979). Daniel Miller argues against the semiotic approach to analyzing fashion, though, reasoning that seeing clothing only as a sign suggests that they are simply objects meant to convey a deeper, "truer" self underneath. Instead, he argues that clothing "plays a considerable and active part in constituting the particular experience of the self, in determining what the self is" (Miller, 2010, p. 28). Simidele Dosekun (2020) argues that fashion has an interpellative function in which women are hailed to see themselves, and therefore style themselves, as not just a woman but a *particular type* of woman. Importantly, Dosekun's (2020) case study of Black, Nigerian women demonstrates that while whiteness is a normativizing and oppressive force in postfeminist discourse, it is not only *for* white women – Black, non-Western women are still hailed by its ethos and able to constitute themselves as postfeminist subjects, especially via fashion. This same principle applies to popular

feminism and so, in this framework, the donning of a pantsuit is not simply a means by which one can express a pre-existing, inward identity of "professional woman" but one of the things that in fact constitutes that subject as a woman/girl, a professional, and a popular feminist subject. I posit that a combined semiotic-constitutive model needs to be utilized for the unique case of the celebrity, who must simultaneously be both a person and a symbol. The semiotic approach is necessary to understanding how a celebrity and her style team have consciously chosen individual elements to make a singular, visual impact that is intended to have symbolic meaning. Yet equally, the tween star is also participating in the same practices of identity construction that Miller (2010) and Dosekun (2020) point to with these choices.

Fashion is also an especially generative site for feminist discourse given how inextricably tied it is to questions of women's appearance and their bodies, a fact which is only compounded when feminism itself takes a decidedly feminine, consumer-based turn. Groenveld (2009) summed up the "issues at stake" in these debates as: "the relationship between consumerism and politics; the relationship between feminism and femininity; and the relationship between women of different class statuses" (p. 182-183). While this debate often falls along lines of embracing or condemning fashion, Marjorie Jolles and Shira Tarrant (2012) shift their focus to how feminism can be a key tool "for decoding fashion's political meaning and for acknowledging one's embeddedness in these systems of meaning" (p. 3). They note that even those feminists who unreservedly condemn the fashion-beauty complex cannot escape clothing or style, even if that style is conceptualized as one outside of and resistant to hegemonic femininity.

Within this ambivalence, the possibility for "feminist fashion" is equally contested. Often, the feminism expressed via such fashion is neoliberal in nature, framing feminism as a lifestyle, not a political ideology, which can be achieved through purchasing the right t-shirt or pair of jeans rather than through systemic change (Groenveld, 2009). And when celebrities use feminism as a branding mechanism, it renders "girl-power" just another aspect of their brand – an image that is then "legitimated by the language of enterprise or neoliberal feminism" (Hopkins, 2018, p. 102). While this renders feminine clothing's ability to convey feminist sentiment fraught, others note that simply falling back on masculine modes of dress is equally problematic. Masculinity is hegemonic and thus often taken as a given, an "un-gendered norm" (Henry, 2012, p. 22) and therefore the mode by which one can assert they "do not care" about fashion when wearing it. However, masculine style has gone through just as many trends and iterations as feminine clothing, often intentionally so for consumer-driven ends. What is even considered to be "masculine dress" is temporally and geographically specific; for example, form-fitting "skinny" jeans are now a ubiquitous trend for men, when only decades prior such tight clothing was considered gender-bending (Tarrant, 2012b; Hollander, 1994). In short, a woman adopting a masculine style is not inherently feminist, either. It is because fashion is a fraught topic for feminists that I argue it is even more imperative it is studied, and why it proves a crucial site upon which contemporary enunciations of feminism occur in complex ways.

Feminism and Labor

Likewise, the role of women working in professionalized spaces has been equally central to not only feminist debates but the definition of feminism itself, or the ability to label oneself

a feminist. Feminism and labor have a long history, but I will start with feminist Marxists, who begin writing in earnest during the Second Wave, and thus align well with that movement's interest in labor. The feminist Marxists rightly pointed out that Marx largely forgets the role of women in the proletariat-bourgeoisie structure of power he outlined. They note the importance of the unpaid, domestic labor women were performing in upholding this system, not simply the exploitation of the proletariat. Namely, that women are reproducing labor power, through the literal reproduction of humans and through maintaining the home so the laborer can return to work the next day. As Michèle Barrett argues in 1980, while gendered divisions and inequality existed prior to capitalism, "capitalism brought an exacerbation of these divisions" because it constructed a wage-labor system "in which the relationship of women to the class structure came to be partially mediated by an assumed or actual dependence on male wage." Thus, she posits that while the question of women's liberation under capitalism is a complex one, it certainly necessitates a redivision of labor and domestic responsibilities, both being shared between men and women (Barrett, 1997, p. 127). Even outside of a strictly Marxist framework, the necessity of a true *division*, with women not only becoming wage-earners but men also helping with domestic labor, became well-known during the Second Wave via seminal texts such as Arlie Hochschild's concept of home being the "second shift" for women workers (Hochschild, 1989).

However, despite Marxism's overlooking of women, Nancy Hartsock (1997) argues this does not mean that Marxism cannot provide a "historical materialism" approach to understanding structures of power, noting that one can use Marx's approach to understand how the "sexual division of labor" upholds a patriarchal capitalist system (p. 216-217). She

argues that in every society, there is a division of labor along lines of sex[2] that is "central to the organization of labor more generally" (Hartsock, 1997, p. 221). She sums this division up as: "Whether or not all of us do both, women as a sex are institutionally responsible for producing both goods and human beings and all women are forced to become the kinds of people who can do both" and this makes women's "immersion in the world of use" total, rather than confined to the workplace (Hartsock, 1997, p. 223-224). Hence, while one can see why the push for women to enter the workforce became central to the mainstream Second Wave feminist movement, there already existed a tension in unquestioningly celebrating that messaging without also attempting to dismantle gendered ideologies, inequalities, and capitalism itself, lest women simply find themselves fully immersed in labor in all aspects of their lives.

For the purposes of this analysis, what I take from the Marxist feminists is not the acknowledgement of domestic labor as labor, critical to upholding capitalist structures. That is an eminently worthy but separate project. Instead, I wish to highlight not only their skepticism of simply making women wage-earners, but also the way in which their analysis demonstrates how labor comes to be defined and valued *as labor* and how that definitional and evaluative work ties the concept of labor to masculinity. In such an analysis, "labor" is understand as that which is done away from the home and in which the laborers receives financial compensation of some sort (no matter how exploitative said compensation may be), while domestic labor is something else, something rooted in the home and unpaid. The gendered ideologies that intersect and support this system thus mean that work done in

[2] I use "sex" here to reflect Hartsock's own use of it, rather than gender, which is a pointed choice in the text meant to denote the importance of carrying children in this system.

the home, for the family, and unpaid is feminized while work done away from the home, and professionalized and legitimated through wages, is masculinized. This is especially true for the space of the capitalist, those bourgeoisie workers set apart from the proletariat working spaces that have always had working class women working within them. In the context of the 1960s-1980s period of the Second Wave and through to today, this would translate into jobs in white collar spaces being seen as particularly good and necessary for women to break into.

In short, the implicit message is often that women's-liberation-through-work is more obvious and impactful with a woman in a c-suite, rather than on a factory assembly line. However, it is important to note that even as much as women are encouraged to enter the workforce as one of, if not the, primary ways to be a feminist in a capitalist system, such a move is often met with virulent misogyny, such as in the STEM fields. Banet-Weiser argues that such a response is "recuperative in some ways: it is dedicated to securing, and continuing, capitalism as a privileged site of patriarchy" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 135) even as women are told to be entering these sites en masse. Thus, the acts of women succeeding in prestige fields can be lauded as exceptional acts *because* such spaces are otherwise assumed patriarchal.

Not only is the concept of labor – and which types of labor – important for feminism as a movement and as an identity, but defining "proper" types of labor is also key for defining childhood. As noted, historically one key way childhood has been defined in the modern era is that it is a time free from full-time, professionalized labor and instead dedicated to schooling. However, via instructional feminism, labor is no longer seen as anathema to childhood, the figure of the laboring child a tragic one emblematic of social ills.

Instead, the working child can be figured as a capitalism success story, if it is the "right" type of labor on the "right" type of child.

The figure of the child star proves an interesting amalgam of these tensions: they are both glamourized and praised for their exceptionalism, while simultaneously assumed to be doomed to a failed adulthood; they are both symbols of success through personal talent and of the exploitation of adults. Historically, a common framing of the child star by celebrity press, and often implicitly or explicitly supported by those within the industry, is that they are pushed into the world of labor by an avaricious parent, and exploited by the entertainment industries, who the media both decries for the future of and delights in the downfall of. As Jane O'Connor argues, this is a fundamentally middle-class set of assumptions around the value of work, who should work, and when. The underlying message is that "being a 'proper' parent involves protecting your child from the entertainment industry, and being a 'proper' child involves not performing for money" (O'Connor, 2008, p. 2). To do otherwise is to doom the child star to future regret and failure. Such framing skirts the issue of media discourses focus on the most lurid of "downfall" stories for child stars and ignores the many former young performers that go on to live perfectly average, banal lives unworthy of further celebrity gossip, making the idea that said downfall is inevitable something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet at the height of their successes, child stars are often also praised by the media as well for their seemingly precocious talents. Such a shame, such discourses suggest, that such a promising young person will eventually fall because their innocence was not properly protected.

These tensions reflect how the conceptualization of the star as a commodity – and therefore the child as a commodity in this case – cannot align easily or neatly with modern

conceptions of adolescence as a socially-constructed category. Namely, that Western tweens and teens do sometimes work, but that work is meant to be light, part-time work that does not detract from education as their top priority. The wages from said work would then go towards youthful leisure pursuits, not meaningfully contribute to the family's livelihood. Child stars, even with legal strictures on their on-set working hours and enforcement of schooling, are assumed to prioritize their professional lives and stories abound of parents taking advantage of their child's income to fund the family. Thus, it is not simply the working itself that upsets the tenets of modern, Western definitions of adolescence, but that adults are turning profits off of it, and that youth in itself that is a key selling point of the star commodity (O'Connor, 2008).

If, then, child stars are viewed as doomed because they have not had a "normal" adolescence, they demonstrate what society deems a "normal" adolescence to be by serving as examples of what it is not. As such, by tracing shifting concepts of the child star one can also trace shifting concepts of what makes an adolescence a "normal" one (O'Connor, 2011). O'Connor argues there are three distinct eras of child stars. The first comes from "the era of the child star" – the classic Hollywood era that saw the rise of genuine superstar children such as Jackie Coogan and Shirley Temple. This era proved both the appeal and lucrativeness of childhood stardom (to audiences on Hollywood's end and for families and children looking into breaking into the business on the other). It also saw the rise of controversies around child stars and instantiated many of the narratives around childhood stardom: avaricious stage parents, exposure to the world of adults "too soon," and the loss of one's career once they can no longer trade in on their cuteness or innocence. Regardless, the child was a commodity, in contrast to what was established by the "century of the child"

(Cunningham 1995), that childhood should be marked as a protected space of innocence. O'Connor notes that discourses about child stars skirted this issue by framing the child star as exceptional – so preternaturally talented, or wise, even somewhat magical, that they could not be contained to a "normal" life (O'Connor, 2011).

The collapse of the studio system and the rise of television saw the birth of a new era of child star – the precocious kid in a nuclear family in a middle-class sitcom who were vehicles to express wholesome family values. This era also saw the increasing pressures of individual (rather than studio-contracted) stardom and the field of child stardom became more competitive and with a higher expectation of professionalism from the child actors. On the flip side, film in the 1960s and 1970s was increasingly including "controversial" content (namely, sex and violence) and there was much outcry about child stars' participation in such films, seemingly reinforcing the idea of children in Hollywood being exposed to too much, too soon. Then, by the 1990s, there was a turn back in film content to less controversial material, and especially to using child stars as figures of precocious talent and innocence. However, such stars seem to have learned from the history of childhood stardom before them, often insisting that they have otherwise normal childhoods and are generally well-adjusted and happy in their roles. O'Connor argues this leads into the current era of the "media-savvy 'child-adults.'" These child stars avert concerns over their future downfalls by showing a clear command over their own images and careers. O'Connor points to Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen as the prime example of this era, who, even as tweens, were not simply actresses but created a media empire that encompassed film, television, clothing, and more and spanned distribution methods (O'Connor, 2011). This does not mitigate all potential concerns over the girl child star – the

Olsens garnered much media speculation and concern over their bodies (albeit, how genuine that concern was remains questionable as it was often laced with judgement and gawking). However, in establishing themselves as career women with knowledge of the industry, they did project a level of control over themselves and their careers compared to child stars of the past, which allowed them to be re-framed in discourses as less likely to burn out and fail in their present and future careers.

The Olsen twins as the beginning of this new era of child star is an apt comparison, as they were also the youngest – then and now, although I will discuss the slipperiness of this superlative – producers of film and TV, starting their production company at age ten. I believe we are seeing the fruition of this media-savvy child-adult era and, crucially, how it interacts with other contemporary social movements shaping the creative industries; namely, popular feminism. I aim to continue O'Connor's (2011) trajectory of the evolving conception and reception of the child star. In this chapter, I take child stars as case studies because they embody this unique transgression of boundaries between adulthood and childhood as well as carry with them the history of how discourses of adolescence are shaped by this transgression playing out in the public eye. How said history has been treated by media discourses comes to inform how stars present themselves, how we as audiences interpret that presentation, and how the media itself continues to further (or not, as the case largely is here) those narratives of success and downfall. The questions of *how* and *why* in all of these cases then lead us to understanding how ever-shifting ideologies intersect with our cultural definitions of girlhood adolescence – here, via changing relations to capitalism, labor, and feminism.

A Brief History of Women's Pantsuits

The pantsuit is my primary outfit of study because it is one such contested piece of "feminist fashion" and its current popularity for young stars is not simply a passing fashion trend. It is representative of a marked shift – both visual and discursive – in girls' relation to work and professionalism. A woman wearing menswear has often been invoked as a sign of feminist resistance and shifting gender relations. As women entered the workforce en masse during WWII in the United States, *Vogue*'s fashion editor at the time, Elizabeth Penrose, publicly chided the women who would wear their utilitarian uniforms outside of work as "letting themselves go" and "slackers in slacks" (Euse, 2016). Nevertheless, menswear was introduced into women's wardrobes, but usually by rendering it more feminine. Most trace the beginning of women's suiting to Coco Chanel's first tweed suit in 1923, which featured a blazer-like jacket but paired with a skirt instead of pants. Elsa Schiapirelli debuted a woman's suit with pants in the 1930's. However, it was not until the 1980s "power suit" that the outfit became fully associated with women in the workforce. Mary Edwards (2018) argues that the pantsuit is so appealing for working women because their bodies are instantly more visible and sexualized than men's in a workplace. The outfit gained popularity for women in a professional environment because it "might have the potential to limit the meanings that may be read into women's bodies, meanings that can distract others from attending to the meanings women actually want to convey" (Edwards, 2018, p. 573). While the power suit had a symbolic and constitutive role in enshrining the high-powered, corporate woman as an archetype in popular consciousness, in a prescient gesture towards neoliberalism, that image would overlap with the pantsuit's role in constructing the "wealthy woman" in popular culture. *Dynasty* costume designer Nolan

Miller, in speaking about the custom suits he designed for women in the show, said "When she walks down the hall, you may not know who she is, but you know she's rich, and you know you better get out of the way" (Sullivan, 2016). Here, the "power" in power suit comes to symbolize wealth, not necessarily power achieved in or through the workplace. But in either case, the woman's pantsuit in this era became shorthand for a formidable, powerful woman, one who has adopted characteristics associated with masculinity to achieve success and reflects this in her clothing.

Despite the upsides of rendering one's body less visible in the workplace and generally projecting an image of authority, the pantsuit is "booby-trapped" – women gain power from its masculinity but that same masculinity is also considered "unsuitable" (Edwards, 2018, p. 574). That it is a double-edged sword became clear when, only a few years after the trend's 80s heyday, Hillary Clinton was oft-ridiculed for frequently wearing pantsuits during her husband's presidential run, contributing to the derogatory interpretations of her First Lady persona as emasculating and lacking in femininity. However, Edwards (2018) argues that if the pantsuit is understood as a "female costume," then it can be seen as a transgression of patriarchal norms and a conscious rejection of its values (p. 576). In the era of popular rather than postfeminism, Clinton's supporters did just this, re-working the infamously mocked pantsuit into a symbol of feminist politics, calling themselves the "pantsuit nation" on social media during her 2016 presidential campaign. Post-election, several women turned Pantsuit Nation into a non-profit not just for gender equality, but also to address issues ranging from "immigration reform to the rights of people with disabilities, from racial justice to religious freedom, from protecting access to healthcare to the fight for full and unfettered equality for the LGBTQIA

community" (Pantsuit Nation "Our Mission"). While not on the fully radical end of the spectrum, Pantsuit Nation embraces a version of popular feminism that sees the ideology as extending beyond gender and into questions of oppression based on intersectional identities, positioning the pantsuit as a symbol for those politics.

Preteens in Pantsuits: Popular Feminism on the Red Carpet

All of these interpretations of the pantsuit have an imagined adult woman as its wearer, but the dynamics shift considerably when a young girl is its wearer. A tween star wearing this outfit on the red carpet continues to recall the pantsuit's history as a feminist symbol, especially in relation to her status in the workplace, yet these girls (and their adult stylists) must also navigate several contradictions specific to a young girl's image: the fashion worn must construct an image that conveys professionalism and maturity, but it also must convey innocence lest it seemingly sexualize young, female bodies (which are forever viewed as in danger of sexualization); they must symbolize good taste while also coming across as young and fun; and they must be feminine while still appearing to be serious and venue-appropriate. This is largely done by introducing elements of girlhood aesthetics into the otherwise adult outfit. Mary Celeste Kearney (2015) argues that sparkle is a key marker of girlhood aesthetics, equal to pink. Sparkle itself is a stand-in for many popular feminist ethos; it assures the young girl her outfit will "signify a late modern femininity associated with empowerment, visibility and independent wealth" (Kearney, 2015, p. 264). Taking up Gonick et al.'s (2009) call to attend more fully to girls' agency post-girl power, Kearney (2015) considers how "the pronounced superficiality, theatricality and ironic knowingness of postfeminist glamour" can potentially be resistant when viewed through a queer and

feminist camp perspective, urging us to not simply dismiss the pleasures and power in sparkly femininity.

I aim to build on Kearney's insights of the ambivalent symbolic power of girlhood aesthetics while also arguing that these aesthetics are deployed to different strategic ends when in an overwhelmingly adult, mature outfit. I focus specifically on Marsai Martin [figure 6] and Julia Butters [figure 3]. I use Butters to first lay out what would be the most corporate, postfeminist end of the instructional feminism spectrum; as white, thin, able-bodied, and cis-gendered, Butters is the ideal and oft-imagined figure embodying the postfeminist sensibilities found in instructional feminism. Martin then provides an example of how a potentially more radical or subversive feminism may be read into these outfits when the race of the wearer is considered. In both cases, these outfits are reflective of a larger discourse regarding the maturity and professionalism of female child stars in the U.S. entertainment industry. Martin especially has become a poster-child for the successful, mature, and entrepreneurial child star as embodied by the actress-cum-executive producer. Coverage of Martin and her peers present a notable shift in discourses surrounding adolescents who transgress boundaries between childhood and adulthood through work, especially child stars. This shift is built upon the foundations of the can-do girl archetype, still a predominate way in which successful girlhood is defined. It also builds upon the media-savvy child-adult narrative, which provided child stars a new avenue by which to be understood as successful when previously there were few, and that was by visibly extending their skills beyond acting and into marketing and producing. The instructional feminist lesson of professionalism embodied by Martin and her

contemporaries combines both of these narratives, while adding that the tween girl star's feminist beliefs are key to her personal and professional success

At the time of the red carpet I am analyzing, Julia Butters was a ten-year-old actress, most notable for playing a child star who is professional and insightful beyond her years in the film *Once Upon a Time… in Hollywood*. In 2019, there were promotional events for the film's premieres in several cities, press junkets, and the awards season marketing campaign. In this example, Butters attended *Variety*'s "Power in Young Hollywood" event, an event meant to honor young stars experiencing success in the entertainment industry as well as generally promote *Variety* and that year's co-sponsor, the young adult cable channel Freeform. Attendance at the event is promotion for the celebrity and their image as well as any project they may currently be promoting. Butters wore a pale pink, satin Stella McCartney pantsuit. Underneath the suit she wore a collared shirt with sparkly bow appliqués at the collar and ruffled cuffs that peek out of her suit jacket. She accessorized with an extremely small pink handbag with a pearl handle, and sparkly silver slingback pumps. Her hair is slicked back into a high ponytail and she clearly wore makeup, although it is light and meant to mimic a "natural" look. The outfit is a prime example of combining girlish and womanly aesthetics. Butters is able to wear a high-end designer before the collection is released to the general public—this suit is from Stella McCartney's Spring 2020 collection—but being fashion-forward largely necessitates wearing designs meant for adult women, as runways rarely feature clothing made for the tween age demo. A pantsuit paired with a collared, button-up shirt and slingbacks would read as adult on its own, even matronly given this particular combination of pieces' association with a ladies-who-lunch style, and Butters does appear quite a bit older than a ten-year-old at this event. The

inclusion of girlhood aesthetic markers such as pink, sparkle, and other details that read as cute, such as the tiny bag and bows, are clearly meant to age-down the outfit and have Butters continue to read as young and even innocent while simultaneously modeling couture.

In short, she successfully embodies the contradictions asked of a young girl on the red carpet. She projects the image of a professional woman for what is essentially a promotional and networking event for herself, not just by wearing the pantsuit, but by pairing it with sensible and feminine heels, and styling that reads as both classy and natural for her hair and makeup. Despite the nod to menswear in the form of a suit, her outfit still comes across as extremely feminine by contemporary standards given the color, fabric, and feminine cut of the suit. And while her outfit is mature, it does not sexualize her body, lest it raise the endemic concerns of the at-risk female child star. Butters embodies the postfeminist influences of instructional feminism – professionalism as a personal responsibility, garnering respect and an air of seriousness from clothing while still upholding norms of femininity. This sensibility then informs her persona, not as a projection of her future self but what one can expect of her as a young star and working professional right now, aligning neatly with the character she plays in the film she promotes at such an event.

Figure 7: @marsaimartin. "Marsai Martin at the Pandora Street of Loves Party" August 30, 2019.

In many ways, fourteen-year-old actress Marsai Martin embodies similar ideologies in her red carpet style; she even wore a pink, satin pantsuit around the same time Butters did [figure 7], pointing to the ubiquity of the trend and its assumed appropriateness for young girls. However, because Martin is Black, her outfits cannot be read in exactly the same manner as Butters. I will analyze one of Martin's outfits in-depth – when she appeared on *Good Morning* America to promote her first producing venture, *Little* [figure 6]. However first, it is important to establish both the industrial context and the context of her identity as a Black girl more generally to frame how I analyze that one, representative outfit. Childhood, and especially the concept of innocence that is intrinsic to constructions of childhood, is predicated upon whiteness (Bernstein, 2011). A presumed lack of innocence is a key factor in what Ann Ferguson terms the “adultification” of young, Black boys, wherein these boys are viewed as dangerous and aggressive at young ages and therefore deserving of adult punishments for even minor infractions. This adultification applies to Black girls as well – Edward Morris (2007) finds that “Similar to Black boys…the adultification of Black girls can lead to a perception of them as aggressively feminine” (p. 503) which results in perceptions from adults that they are overly sexual or too loud and “sassy” (Morris 2007; Harris 2003; Brown 2009). Despite being viewed differently, Black girls are still held to the norms of white femininity and this, combined with their always-adult status, means they are more heavily surveilled for

potential deviations from norms, leaving them an especially vulnerable population (Morris, 2016).

Literal Girlbosses: The Child Star Producer as Feminist Role Model

Navigating these stereotypes and preconceptions was doubly important for Martin during her *Little* press tour because she was not only framing herself as the star, but also as an executive producer of the film, and the one who conceived of and pitched the film's premise at only ten years old, no less. Martin heading up her own production company must first be understood as part of a larger industrial move that has seen celebrity "shingles" proliferate. As a framework, I am using Graeme Turner's (2007) understanding of the celebrity persona as a commodity that is constantly negotiating multiple interests at once, as many can make money from the persona – the celebrity themselves, of course, but also their agents/managers/publicists, studios and networks, and journalism beats that cover or use celebrities. These interests can be counter to one another at times, but they can also work symbiotically across the increasingly inter-connected sectors of the conglomerated media industries (Turner, 2007).

Since the dissolution of the studio system, with stars no longer under exclusive contracts, celebrities have sought ways to diversify their earnings and interests while studios have sought ways to keep top stars tied to their business. Funding a star's production company is one such way to do this, for both. Production companies are funded by studios (the jargon of "shingle" comes from the phrase that such companies were "hanging a shingle" on the studio lot), either through robust sums of money that allow the company to set up shop and have a pot of money for development or via "housekeeping"

deals that give the company office space on the lot and money for overhead costs like salaries, but nothing more (Heidenry, 2017). On the celebrity's side, this allows for them to become an executive producer – perhaps developing projects they themselves wish to star in, or simply producing (hopefully) successful projects, and in either scenario now collecting back-end profits should the project prove profitable, which are usually far more lucrative than even the most generous of up-front salaries. The studios benefit because by funding such companies they are promised a "first look" at all developing projects and thus can essentially call dibs on said star's projects, functionally constructing a contract of sorts with desirable talent (although the star can still act in others' projects, as well as take their own projects to other studios should the home studio pass after the first look).

While theoretically, then, this is a win-win for both star and studio, functionally the popularity of celebrity production companies goes through peaks and valleys. They are often pejoratively called "vanity shingles" because the impression is the studio sets up such a deal to placate a star and maintain a good relationship with them, while having no real faith in their skills as a day-to-day producer. Meanwhile, the star uses the company to fund vanity projects themselves or, at worst, simply uses the company as a tax haven for personal expenses masquerading as business expenses (Heidenry, 2017; Bing, 2003). However, despite this framing that vanity shingles are simply stars' whims, the boom-and-bust approach to granting production companies to stars appears more so driven by studios, who find themselves widely and easily doling out deals (with studios often having 30+ shingles at time) in order to harness star power, especially so after several prominent star shingles produce hits. They then cut such companies in large numbers during economically lean times, especially so if a star's production company acquires a large

development slate but gets little to nothing into production, or perhaps produced only one or two under-performing projects. Such a rise – with successful production companies emerging from Clint Eastwood, Mel Gibson, and Tom Cruise – only for subsequent mass cuts from studios occurred in the late 1990s/early 2000s (Waxman, 1998, Bing, 2003).

Hollywood appears to be in a unique boom/bust period yet again, with similarly high levels of independent shingles at each studio, but also high-profile sales of many of those companies, albeit with financial incentives for both celebrity and studio in this case. Namely, that in the streaming era wherein many companies are trying to increase their international reach and are cooperating with other global entities accordingly, many international media conglomerates and private equity firms are buying out stars' companies and then consolidating all of these minor companies into their conglomerate structure. This has resulted in lucrative deals such as Reese Witherspoon's $900 million dollar sale of company Hello Sunshine to a Blackstone Group-backed private equity firm (Roxborough, 2021) or Brad Pitt's Plan B Entertainment selling in the "low hundreds of millions" to French conglomerate Mediawan (Weprin, 2022). Here, the celebrity-commodity can also be utilized as a lure for international appeal, allowing major conglomerates to spread to new territories utilizing the broad appeal of the star, while providing the star with both a wider reach and a generous paycheck.

In such an environment, it is not uncommon for any star with even a mildly notable role to be able to raise funding for a shingle, but it is a more recent development that so many child stars are granted one. Even more unusual is that the outward reception of their production companies is widely praised – there is no hint that these are mere "vanity" shingles, but instead that they are serious entrepreneurial endeavors. Likewise, there is no

further complication via the involvement of the child star; there are no concerns that these are, in fact, children. There is no hint that working full time, taking on adult responsibilities, and making adult salaries might be of issue. These child stars-turned-producers are also by and large girls and thus the celebratory nature of their coverage is also gendered, framing their turn to producing in girl-power, popular feminist terms of empowerment, independence, and wins for representation in media.

For example, a *Vogue* profile of Zendaya, then 16 and still most known as a Disney Channel star, describes her as a "take-no-prisoners, suffer-no fools businesswomen" and declares she "changed the Disney game" when she made becoming a producer a requirement to her signing onto her second Disney Channel show, *K.C. Undercover*. She then promptly used her producorial power to request that her character have martial arts training so she could "do everything that a guy can do" (Aguirre, 2017). Similarly, *Variety* declared Millie Bobby Brown (then 15) a "force to be reckoned with" when she signed on as both star and producer of the film *Enola Holmes*, an experience which left her "feeling empowered." The article highlights quotes from Brown that women "need to be heard," be "a part of the conversation" and "in charge" (Malkin, 2020). Thus, while these girl-producers often still have to make nods to their youth to demonstrate they have not fully crossed over into adult work-worlds, such unilaterally positive coverage for this crossing over is notably different from past hand-wringing over child stars growing up "too quickly," at risk of financial exploitation, and almost inevitably headed to bad ends as a result.

In 2019, when she was 14 years old, Marsai Martin established her production company Genius Productions, primarily so she could produce *Little*. The press coverage for Martin and *Little* follows the same script of girl-power empowerment and, following

Martin's lead, emphasizes not only the feminism seemingly inherent in such an act but the intersectional addition that this is a step forward for Black girls. She explains that she started Genius Productions because "as a young Black girl, I know what it's like to not be seen" and noting that Hollywood "in the beginning" was dominated by white men but she could tell stories that were more "authentic" and "relatable," clearly positioning herself as part of a seemingly larger sea-change when it comes to representation in Hollywood (Boateng, 2021). She also ties her personal beliefs to advocacy and activist work done by her company, noting she sees the two as tied together because her position gives her a certain level of access and the potential to grant that access to others. "I use my voice in spaces where not a lot of young Black girls are" Martin explains, "and am able to put other people's voices out there and make sure they have a seat at the table as well" (Campano, 2022). These sentiments are in-line with Zendaya and Brown's words on how the authority granted by the position of executive producer allows them to make feminist stances in their work, while centering advocacy and advancement for Black girls more specifically.

Additionally, most coverage of Martin and her company point out that she is not only young but *the youngest* executive producer of a studio film in history, marking her as particularly special and mature beyond her years (Schaffstall, 2019; El-Mahmoud, 2019; Ifeanyi, 2019). This emphasis is clearly meant to highlight her youth and, even within her young cohort of stars, mark her as particularly exceptional – especially given that what is often glossed over in these stories is the caveat that Martin is the youngest producer of a *studio* film. As noted, the Olsen twins remain the youngest-ever producers at age 10, but they produced direct-to-video, independently financed films (O'Connor, 2011). Again, this

is not to detract from Martin's accomplishments, but to demonstrate the press' reliance on this type of qualifying descriptor in order to maintain an exceptionalism narrative.

Thus, Martin is no longer simply a professional actress, but also a producer and entrepreneur, a transformation that is necessary to be treated as a media savvy child-adult star. A *Teen Vogue* profile of Martin briefly notes she is now home-schooled before seemingly negating this statement by instead asserting she has “traded a school desk for her own production office, complete with six employees” (Dodson, 2019). While Martin cannot fully deny her tweenhood, and therefore nods to the schooling she still does, a cornerstone of her star image is her status as a working professional and thus the education/professional boundary between adolescence and adulthood is regularly transgressed.

Additionally, Martin’s star image was already one of precocious intelligence and popular feminist-approved ambition because of her first major role on the ABC sitcom *Black-ish*. There, she plays the youngest daughter Diane in the central Johnson family, who is the most ambitious and intelligent of the children; her character’s humor is often derived from the ways she can sarcastically mock her siblings and parents with an air of superiority. The branding of her company then correlates with this image. The title itself recalls this knowledge of Martin and/or her characters as young geniuses (although she has never officially given a reason behind the moniker). The company's logo features a profile silhouette that again recalls, if not actively copies, the character design of Diane, as the silhouette has a Black girls' natural hair affixed into a high bun and wears colorful glasses, exactly as the character of Diane is costumed. Martin’s star image then seamlessly merges her individual persona with her two most high-profile roles, which is then

reinforced by how adults speak and write about Martin and how she herself emphasizes the parallels between herself and her character.

Fashionable Working Girl: Utilizing Fashion for the Professional Star Image

Between how closely Martin's persona is tied to her characters and the furor raised over her status as fourteen-year-old producer, Martin's image during the *Little* press tour had to attend to high expectations for her to display preternatural professionalism, maturity, and intelligence for her age. It is then no surprise that pantsuits became a major feature in her press wardrobe, especially on occasions that required her to discuss her role as a producer in depth, such as on talk show appearances. Not only do pantsuits convey these qualities, but they also refer back to visual signifiers of the film itself. *Little* sees tech mogul Jordan (Regina Hall) magically transform into a 13-year-old (played by Martin) overnight, putting both her career and personal life in danger of collapse. The main promotional images in the film's poster and trailer show Martin in a pink, plaid pantsuit belonging to the adult version of her character, making a child in an adult's professional wardrobe a repeated visual signifier of the film. The film character of Jordan quite literally becomes what instructional feminism teaches – that a girl who fully embraces the lessons of feminism has the maturity of an adult woman in a child's body, and the pink pantsuit is a visual metonym for this child-adult status. The pantsuits Martin wore for promotional purposes then immediately recall the film, implying that she, like her character, is essentially an adult trapped in a tween body. Press for the film implicitly draws the connections between the ubiquity of the pantsuit in promotion, popular feminist discourses, and Martin's professionalism. In one profile of Martin, Martin's character is labeled "an actual Girlboss" in a play on the

frequently used corporate moniker for successful businesswomen, before noting that she navigates the film in a "covetable pink pantsuit" that Martin asserts she herself would "totally wear" (Kovan, 2019).

Martin's appearance on *Good Morning America* during the *Little* press tour provides a representative case study [figure 6]. Martin wore a pastel, abstract patterned pantsuit by high fashion label Sies Marjan from their Spring 2019 collection. She wore the full runway ensemble and matched the suit with a collared, button-up shirt in the same pattern underneath. Mimicking the runway look helps to cement Martin's status as a young fashionista, an image she began crafting during this promotional tour. Celebrities frequently borrow clothes straight from the runway but often trade out certain elements to make the outfits less high fashion and more mainstream or "wearable" to an average person. To not only wear the entire runway look but also choose an up-and-coming designer noted for their unique and fresh perspective solidifies Martin as not just well-dressed, but someone with knowledge of the fashion industry and a willingness to try experimental designs.

Figure 6: Instar Images. "Marsai Martin on *Good Morning America.*" April 3, 2019.

Yet even with its high fashion bonafides, this outfit does not stray too far from embodying the lessons of instructional feminism. Sies Marjan modeled the outfit on an adult woman; it is clearly for an adult, as all of these pantsuits worn by teens are, but with elements introduced that signal Martin's youth while still maintaining her professionalism.

The suit is rendered in girlish pastels and a fun, exuberant pattern. Like Butters, Martin clearly wore makeup but it is applied to look natural. She wore high heels, but the suit's pants cover the majority, obscuring that they are high stilettos, which could otherwise be read as sexy. Conversely, she has also rendered it more professional than the adult model who wears it on the runway – on the latter, the jacket is open and the shirt underneath is untucked and only partially buttoned, so a small portion of the model's stomach shows, and the suit is styled more casually with pink sneakers [figure 8]. Martin not only buttoned the jacket, but also buttoned the shirt all the way up to her neck; far from showing her stomach, the overall effect is quite modest. She also accessorized with glasses at this event, which she rarely did during *Little* promotion. This recalls her role on *Black-ish*, where Diane is given the nickname "Gurkel" (girl-Urkel) to signify both her ever-present glasses and her "nerdy" intelligence. While Martin the star is much more fashionable than Diane the character, she continues to sparingly invoke the character's instructional feminist qualities for herself.

Figure 8: Vlamos, Yannis. "Sies Marjan Spring 2019 Ready-To-Wear." Vogue.com. September 9, 2018.

Much like Butters, this outfit balances the contradictions inherent in instructional feminist messaging – it clearly denotes her professionalism, maturity, and intelligence while also gesturing towards her youth. And while none of the women mentioned dress in anything approaching "sexy," given the moral panic around young female sexuality, Black female bodies are even more hyper-sexualized than young white girls and thus Black tween

stars' bodies and appearance are hypervisible and more readily viewed as "at risk" for potential future transgressions. In short, Black girls and white girls may both be read as having adult characteristics, but Black girls face greater barriers in having this status be discursively constructed as something positive, feminist, and aspirational. The pantsuit, and its ability to potentially neutralize the female body in a workplace setting, then becomes a key tool for a Black girl such as Martin to assert her professional status. And once again, it is an example of the ways in which girls take on the beliefs, values, and strategies of adult feminism and fully embody them even as tweens.

Expecting girls to maintain a mature, adult affect and image from a young age is certainly a fraught prospect given the discourses of fear and risk that so often accompany girls crossing the discursive boundaries of adolescence. However, because young Black girls are adultified, read a different way, Martin is simply capitalizing on a preconception she will inevitably acquire either way. In other words, if a young Black girl is not afforded the presumption of youth and the freedoms that provides, she might as well attempt to benefit, both financially and culturally, from unfair social structures. That way, aspects of her identity that would normally render her "at risk" and therefore in danger of constant judgment and/or condemnation are instead read as positives by adults in power. This solution is a double-edged sword, though, in that intersectional inequalities may be tacitly understood and acknowledged, but the answer is not to disrupt the systems that reinforce these inequalities, but instead to be the most impressive embodiment of instructional feminism's lessons and therefore beyond reproach. White, middle-class, heteronormative values continue to remain at the heart of idealized embodiments of feminism. As more girls have access to feminism as a concept via its mass media popularity, its embodiment on girls

of different races, ethnicities, sexualities, gender presentation, and body type will point to the ways in which intersectionality informs the enactment and needs of feminism.

Conclusion

Popular feminism has found widespread visibility and support in Western popular culture, but this particular feminist conjuncture must be theorized differently along the vector of age. Instructional feminism is then a body of discourses within popular feminism aimed directly at girls, teaching them how to be feminist women within this particular cultural moment. Instructional feminist discourse results in the reconstruction of boundaries separating adolescence from adulthood. In the case of tween stars and their red carpet fashion, this leads to the blurring of a formerly firm boundary wherein entering the professional workforce was clearly meant for adulthood and young people who transgressed that boundary were in need of protection and at risk for other damaging behaviors. Yet no longer is that particular transgression viewed as risky behavior so long as the girl performs her professionalism as an empowering, feminist act. This must be understood intersectionally as well and, in the case of Black girls, embodying the correct feminist professionalism can further mitigate the inequalities these girls often face from other forms of adultification.

Girlhood professionalism is only one vector along which instructional feminism works, however; the discourses that fall under this umbrella reaffirm and redefine the concept of girlhood across many of the classic distinctions that separate girls from women: sexuality, their relation to their bodies, their education, and their engagement in other spheres once reserved for adults, such as politics. All provide avenues for future

scholarship that seeks to understand how the current feminist moment affects girls specifically. Additionally, understanding instructional feminism entirely through the discourses that circulate in girls' popular culture has its limits and further research is needed to understand how adults shape discourses meant for girls and how the average girl incorporates or rejects these lessons in everyday life. Understanding how contemporary feminism functions through such varied media and through diverse and unique girls is crucial to understanding popular feminism overall. Instructional feminism is an ambivalent process with ambivalent results – often, it leads to an early adoption and enactment of adult, neoliberal values. But in respecting girls' agency, it opens the possibility for an intersectional feminist resistance, one that may happen even on the red carpet.

Chapter 2: Be Desiring
Industrial Shifts in the Depiction of Sex on Teen TV and the Formation of the Sex Positive Girl

"HBO's Explicit 'Euphoria' Courts Controversy: How Much Teen Sex and Drugs Is Too Much?" asks a headline from *The Hollywood Reporter* (Sandberg, 2019). Or, as an editorial from *Esquire* more succinctly puts it, "HBO's *Euphoria* Made Me Feel Old and Scared" (Miller, 2019). And it is not only *Euphoria* that is causing a furor over sexual content in American teen TV; opinion pieces on the topic abound and come from publications that are both left- and right-leaning politically. "'Riverdale' Oversexualizes Its Teenage Characters" declares an op-ed in *Teen Vogue* (Russo, 2017); "'Chilling Adventures of Sabrina' underage orgy scene on Netflix marks 'troubling trend' critics say" (Flood, 2018) comes from Fox News; and the conservative, infamous Parent's Television Council condemns all of Netflix's teen content as inappropriate, writing "Netflix's Misleading 'Teen TV' Category Can Lead Young Viewers to Explicit Content" (PTC, 2019). This line of thinking plays into fears about teen media consumption that recur when each new generation reaches teenhood since television became widely available in homes in the 1950s. Namely, that what adolescents watch on television will directly affect their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and that effect will be for the worse, especially when it comes to sexual content.

Yet what is unique about this era is not only the proliferation and increased explicitness of the sexual content in teen TV, but the socially conscious, "sex positive" attitude with which many of these series approach the topic. This can garner praise just as the content itself garners ire. *Teen Vogue*, after running negative opinion pieces on *Riverdale*, praised its sister series: "*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* Gets the Sex Talk Totally Right" (Drucker, 2019). The same publication also positively highlights the increase in

queer representation, with such headlines as, “The 'Gossip Girl' Approach to Polyamory Is a Refreshing Step Forward” (Belle, 2021). And still others note the seeming turn for the genre as a whole, with *Screen Crush* running the listicle “The 10 Most Sex-Positive Teen Series on Streaming” including *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and *Euphoria* as well as series like Netflix’s *Never Have I Ever* and *Sex Education* (Epting, 2021).

These series’ embrace of a sex positive, feminist ethos means that they are not only willing to depict more sex than American teen series of the past, but put less restriction on the boundaries of what is deemed “appropriate” or “healthy” representations of sexuality. This is a marked change from the overtly pedagogical approach taken by past teen television shows when tackling controversial issues. This chapter posits that there is a large-scale industrial change in how sex is approached and depicted on teen TV, wherein the amount that can be shown on screen may vary depending on network or platform rules, but the shift in attitude and tone is consistent across series. That shift is away from the overtly pedagogical approach to storylines involving sex with teenagers, which often had an accompanying earnest and moralizing tone emblematized by the “very special episode” approach many teen shows took for “issue” episodes. The Very Special Episode format and teen TV generally are both televisual “bad objects” (Hilmes, 2005) that those in the industry actively try to distance themselves from in favor of approaches that are instead understood as markers of "quality" television. However, the discourses that surround teen TV largely remain the same as those that the lesson-based episodes were once responding to: depictions of sex or performances of sexuality, especially from teen girls and queer characters, cause outcry resulting in social media backlash, groups such as the Parents

Television Council condemning the series, op-eds from concerned parents voicing their dismay, and open-ended discussion on what such content may be "doing" to teen viewers. So the question then becomes, if an earnest, moralizing tone and assertions that TV could teach adolescents "good" lessons were responses to such discourses in the past, and if industry workers currently reject this response from a tonal perspective, how do they now discursively position themselves in relation to such debates? I argue it is by situating these series within an instructional feminist discourse, forwarding a message that audiences should not only be feminists, but sex positive feminists that understand both their own sexuality, the patriarchal systems underpinning sexual power dynamics, and the risks of coercion and assault this system poses to young women. I utilize interviews with entertainment industry professionals to understand the industrial reasons for this shift, exploring the move from an approach to teen sexuality that was based on teaching "good" behavior to one in which TV creators rely upon notions of quality that allow for (or as these creators often argue, requires) a more explicit take on teen sex and one that depicts a wider range of sex and sexuality than seen in the past.

That said, there are still clear generic and industrial markers that signify teen TV, and as a genre it is on the upswing in popularity. Peaks in production of American teen TV roughly correlate with the impression that a critical mass of a generation have aged into their teen years, predicated on industry lore that teens are a ready-made audience who can be homogenized based upon generational stereotypes (Osgerby, 2004; Davis and Dickinson, 2004). The success of a few teen TV shows within these cycles of popularity inevitably spur imitators, self-perpetuating the trend. While there are generic similarities across these cycles, each is also unique as it not only reflects television industrial trends of

that time, but assumptions about adolescence and what will appeal to a youthful sensibility at that time, too. In short, if “the teen” is continually redefined via cultural discourses, then the teen TV cycle of the moment is one avenue by which we can see how certain boundaries and norms may be reinscribed or changed to reflect the particular moment. This new crop of teen TV shows is deeply embedded in this process, both as a response to changing notions of who teens are and what they care about, but also as media texts that help to define these boundaries and definitions. Specifically, contemporary teen shows are responding to and shaping notions of Gen Z. While some in Gen Z are slightly past their teen years when teen TV experiences a resurgence beginning around the 2016-2017 season, and many are still quite a bit younger, importantly from an industrial standpoint, Gen Z is viewed largely as in the teenage lifestage and thus are at an age when they should be courted as desirable consumers. Television and youth media studies scholars have only begun to conceptualize how this new spike in the teen TV genre differs from the last major uptick in teen series in the 2000s, and thus how new series may also differ in how they craft the image of the "the teen" (both as an imagined audience member and as characters).

I am interested, then, in how teen TV—and those who produce it—do this work of defining teenhood and specifically teen girlhood. Here, I examine the boundary of the adolescent as a sexually desiring and agentive subject. This is a particularly potent boundary dividing lifestages because sex is highly politicized and moralized and thus often viewed as incongruent with the carefree innocence that defines childhood. Thus, the age at which we societally deem someone able or ready to pursue sex says much about the age at which we view someone as independent, mature, and autonomous enough to make their own weighty, moral decisions. It is a state typically pushed back further for girls versus

boys in (hetero)normative assumptions of development, if they are ever granted the assumption of full sexual agency at all. As Amy Adele Hasinoff (2015) argues, both historically and contemporaneously, adults' understanding of girls as sexually agentive is often ambivalent at best. She writes, "girls seem to have agency in that their actions have an effect and they can be held responsible for them, but they are also constructed as lacking agency in that their choices are seen as inauthentic or not intentional" (p. 11). In short, the consequences of becoming sexually active are emphasized to girls, and they are often held to those consequences, but likewise they are not thought to be *actually* sexually desiring, and thus the true agent behind their own sexual behavior. As I will show here, there is still an assumption that sexual desire is prompted by something else for girls, whether it be by masculinity, patriarchal standards, or related insecurities. It is this question of intentionality that allows the depiction of girls to straddle this line between agentive enough for consequences, but not enough that they may trust their own desires to lead them well.

This tension is evident in how these series balance such a view of girlhood sexuality with their understanding of a progressive politics that appeals to Gen Z. They do not preach such retrograde notions as total abstinence or unquestioning heteronormativity. Instead, potential lessons for a teen viewer come from an engagement with instructional feminism via sex positive feminism. Like all forms of popular feminism, sex positivity in its current iteration is built on a mélange of past feminism and present interpretations – critiques about positive and negative representations of women, the debates at the center of the "porn wars" of the 1980s, and the postfeminist politics wherein "empowerment" can be found in overt sexuality are all blended into the current usage of the phrase. The American

TV industry not only adopts this rhetoric to make quality distinctions within programming, but also in response to the concurrent industry reckoning with sexual harassment spurred by the #MeToo movement. As such, while popular feminism could be incorporated into teen TV in many ways, it is most obvious in storylines centered on issues that echo this industrial environment, namely those around sexual harassment and consent.

Using interviews with industry workers and textual analysis of key series, I examine what new vision of the sexual agentive teen girl emerges. If the sexual girl is most often framed as a problem, in the past the solutions were to remain abstinent or, in some cases, confine sexual activity to monogamous, heterosexual relationships. With the influence of feminist discourses, the problem/solution calculus shifts. In the series I use as case studies, teen girl sexuality is not ipso facto a problem anymore, absolutely destined to lead to negative consequences such as pregnancy or assault if not strictly confined, and girls are allowed a wider breadth of experience to explore their sexuality. Additionally, queer sexuality is no longer represented as inherently problematic or a state of being in need of a didactic lesson for the character and/or the audience. There is still a problem, however, for the teen girls of these series to overcome: it is no longer the simple fact of their sexuality, but that said sexuality exists within a sexist world. Sexism is often embodied in these stories in dangerous boys or out-of-touch adults who represent retrograde, non-feminist ways of thinking. Nonetheless, teen girl sexuality is still framed as a danger to the girl; the solution has just shifted from abstinence and/or monogamous heteronormativity to a hyper-awareness of that danger, and to a professed need to proceed with caution as a result. While this shift in ideology, tone, explicitness, and intent from the industry has expanded the boundaries of girlhood to be more inclusive of queerness and some level of

sexual activity, ultimately it does little to change the sexual coming-of-age as a clear line between the protected innocence of childhood and the dangers of adulthood.

Teen Television: Genre, Consumer Demographic, and Social Tool

First, it is important to establish how American teen television is defined and the conditions that shaped its content in the past, so that it now serves as a counterpoint for industry professionals in the present. Teen TV has often been hard to define from a generic perspective. Such a definition balances considerations of "content, audience address, programming context, or demographics of reception (or any combination of these elements)" (Ross and Stein, 2008, p. 4). Teen TV as a label has been applicable to sitcoms, variety specials, and anthology series but with the premiere and subsequent success of *Beverly Hills 90210* in 1990, the genre, on an industrial, academic, and colloquial level, has become largely synonymous with a highly serialized, one hour drama wherein most storylines revolve around the relationships and emotional lives of a group of teen protagonists. It is closest in television lineage to the soap opera. As such, this is the generic definition I will be invoking when I discuss contemporary teen TV, although occasionally there are series that test these boundaries.

Given that the teen TV genre is so intimately tied to the assumed teen audience, it is also intimately tied to the concept of the teen as a consumer category. The rise of the genre coincides with the visible teen as a leisure consumer in the 1950s and the genre spikes in popularity in “cycles” (Wilks 2021) each time a new generation enters their teen years en masse (Osgerby, 2004; Davis and Dickinson, 2004). These cycles are more an industrial imaginary of “the youth” at any given moment, not an actual reflection of demographics. In

fact, those narrowcasting to "teen" audiences are usually attempting to engage a multigenerational audience that also includes tweens and those in their twenties that instead of literal age share a "'youthful' sensibility" especially when it comes to consumption patterns (Kearney, 2007b, p. 19). These programs also draw in tweens who are aspirationally "aging up" their consumption and young adults for whom the life stage of adolescence has been extended with the rise of prolonged schooling and delayed marriage, parenthood, and home ownership. This creates a "multi-generational coalitional" audience where the viewers may not share an exact life stage but they do share that similar youthful sensibility (Kearney, 2007b).

In the initial teen consumer boom of the 1950s and 1960s, the television's appeal to a teen audience quickly became primarily an appeal to teen girl audiences, specifically. Girl-centric series such as *Gidget* (1965) and variety shows appealing to presumed female interests of pop music and dancing like *American Bandstand* (1952-1989) found great success (Osgerby, 2004). Much like age demographics, it is also an amalgam of actual ratings data and industry lore to imagine this audience as primarily feminine, and to assume that as the most susceptible (and therefore desirable) demo to direct one's advertising towards. Young women are assumed to be spending more time in the home and spending more money on leisure products such as clothing and beauty items; thus the home- and advertising-based medium of television was feminized, while film still often appealed directly to men and boys. The assumption that teen girls in particular are easy targets persists, but this causes tensions with media associations of teen culture and feminine culture as low brow. Due to the culturally denigrated status of both feminized and youthful media, "all of these elements combine to ensure a cultural arena that may be

highly desirable from an industrial perspective, but that may be looked down upon by the broader culture and society" (Ross and Stein 2008, p. 8).

The industrial appeal of the teen audience proved crucial to the post-network era of narrowcasting. The launch of Fox as a broadcast competitor to the "big 3" of ABC, NBC, and CBS began a trend of relying on a youth audience to launch a new network when the advent of cable and satellite meant that channels could no longer rely upon mass audience appeal. Fox did not specifically target a teen audience but instead that general youthful sensibility with an appeal to a particular attitude (Zook, 1999). Filling their slate with irreverent, ironic, and deeply intertextual programs such as *The Simpsons* was less about appealing directly to teens and more about establishing that the programming was not for those in the Boomer and Silent generations, albeit with one clear teen appeal in *90210* (Ross and Stein, 2008). The WB then capitalized upon a similar strategy, but differentiated themselves by more actively appealing directly to teens with shows that centered teen characters, beginning with flagships *Dawson's Creek* (1998 – 2003) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997 – 2003). The WB forewent the cynicism and ironic knowingness that marked Fox (and the new cable youth network MTV) in lieu of earnest melodrama (Ross and Stein, 2008; Wee, 2008). Once Fox abandoned targeting one age demographic so specifically and the UPN went after Black audiences more so than youth audiences, the WB became nearly synonymous with teen TV. The WB's early programming thus not only solidified the teen TV genre as one based in serial melodrama, but one in which the teens face serious issues and earnestly learn lessons from them.

However, the WB also clearly went after an imagined white, middle class teen audience. Their casts reflected this, and the issues addressed rarely touched upon race or

class. Several years later, this would allow space for The N to brand itself as a voice for the "authentic" teen experience, wherein authenticity was often interpreted as a willingness to touch on difficult topics surrounding race and class, as well as deal with queerness and gendered issues such as sexual violence, in more explicit ways and in storylines that did not individualize these issues, but pointed to their systemic nature (Ross, 2008). Namely, this was through their flagship show, the Canadian import *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Set in a Toronto high school, *Degrassi* became notorious for its willingness to address virtually every issue a teen could face, often overlapping and moving through these plots at a breakneck speed that would impress even the American soap opera. The highly serialized nature of the story allowed for these issues to come back repeatedly, often leading to storylines about the systemic nature of racism and sexism, rather than relegating such complex issues to one-off episodes. This was not simply for storytelling purposes; the creators of *Degrassi* wished for the show to serve a civic, educational function. Sharon Marie Ross summarizes the writers' goal that "teen viewers will adopt the stance that 'if you really understood your neighbors, if you really understood your classmate,' one could become a better citizen and contribute more meaningfully to one's community" (Ross, 2008, p. 66). Thus, while going for a more "authentic" tone, there is still a certain level of earnestness and explicit messaging built into the series.

However, as Wilks (2021) notes, on American teen TV, the cycle of the 90s/00s implicitly held dominant Whiteness as an unspoken norm, and it is the most current cycle that seeks to represent race with specificity. So while much of the teen TV of the 90s/00s cycle was marked by earnest moralizing for a white, middle class teen audience, The N and *Degrassi* prove to be a key precursor to the current cycle, which seeks to convey quality,

groundedness, and authenticity through diverse casting and a commitment to dealing with issues in a gritty or darkly "realistic" fashion. Additionally, this turn towards racial specificity is ultimately part of an industrial strategy, with claims of verisimilitude bolstering the marketing of teen series as premium content rather than "bad objects", even as workers also take pride in the progressive narratives (Wilks 2021). As my analysis will show, representations of gender and feminism often function in a similar way within industry discourses in this cycle. And this interpretation of teen TV may not be so overt in the messages it wishes to impart, nor so circumspect in the ideal forms of adolescence inherent in those messages, but it nonetheless still sees a social value in the lessons it can impart to its young audience.

Teen TV as Corruptor and/or Instructor

This impulse to impart lessons to the teen audience is not simply a means of brand differentiation amongst channels, but another aspect inherent to the genre; namely that teen TV is always surrounded by a discourse as to how it might directly affect teens' behavior, especially when framed in the language of what TV might be "teaching" adolescents, and thus the content of the genre is always in conversation with this discourse. This is felt in both audience calls for television to teach lessons to youthful audiences and in producers claiming that their programming can teach lessons; sometimes these calls are at odds with one another, sometimes they are in agreement, but they are always in conversation within broader discourses. Usually, when coming from outside the industry, the effects are presumed to be a negative. However, there were early arguments for youth-targeted TV that it would work as a "safe harbor" for teens. When television became more

widely available in homes in the 1950s, industry workers crafted teen-oriented programs with the promise "that television had the power to create a 'virtual space' in which teenagers could congregate in small groups nationwide, under the watchful gaze of parents" that would counteract the moral panic surrounding "juvenile delinquency" happening concurrently (Martin, 2008, p. 27). The content of these programs was of little concern, what was more important was TV's ability to quite literally draw the teenager into the family home and keep them there. This initial fear of juvenile delinquency and TV's potential role in it is relatively unique in that TV is viewed as an aid to mitigating the problems of adolescence rather than an instigator of it. However, it is also emblematic of several trends visible in the recurring moral panics surrounding each cycle of teen TV: the actual program content is given little, if any, detailed analysis; the panic says more about adult anxieties surrounding teen culture than it does about the actualities of teen culture; TV is viewed as something that not only influences teens but can cause a direct and tangible change in their behavior; and the TV industry uses these societal concerns for their own promotional purposes.

From an industry standpoint, there is a tension in framing television as something that can be a net-good for teen's behavior and/or morals. On the one hand, framing TV as a societal good is often an economic imperative and marketing strategy that can be viewed rather cynically, simply done to get parents and/or the FCC out of the industry and its regulatory systems. On the other, there are the individual creators and series that must go forth and actually craft what these lessons will be and how they may be helpful to teens, regardless. ABC's *After School Specials* (1972-1997) are an early industry iteration of this push and the various levels of motivations behind it. The *Specials* were a series of TV

movies that would air in the "after school" timeslot of 4pm on weekdays. They focused on serious issues facing teens, such as divorce, substance abuse (both in teens and their parents), teen pregnancy, and many more. And the action remained firmly with the teens – while adults might appear in roles like parents or teachers, creator Martin Tahse emphasized that key to the series was that teen characters solved the problems at hand so that the teen viewers could learn lessons as to how to solve potentially similar problems in their own lives (Passanante Ellman, 2010; Pike, 2011; Keeler, 2016). It was also a direct response to charges that TV was now a "vast wasteland" and especially detrimental to youth audiences. A broad movement to "upgrade" youth programming was headed by a citizen's group called Action for Children's Television at the same time a report from the Surgeon General warned that violent TV might make children more violent. These combined efforts led to a report in the spring of 1972 from the FCC that children's programming must become less violent and should "expand the minds" of young viewers (Hendershot, 1998). *Specials* would then premiere that fall. The optimism shown for the new medium in the 1950s may have worn off, but creators like Tahse still effectively forwarded arguments that television could be good for youth audiences.

Specials not only establishes an instructional approach to teen television – that the teen audience can and will learn lessons from their television consumption and thus the message of any given episode should be "positive" – but also establishes many of the ideological foundations for those lessons that continue to persist within the genre. Often, these lessons circumscribed "correct" adolescence along lines of normativity. Correct adolescence was invariably heteronormative, white, middle-class, and able-bodied. Episodes that represented disability presented it as a problem that can and must be

overcome, while the “normal” adolescence achieved after that overcoming would feature a heterosexual romance (Passanante Ellman, 2010). Several of the movies were progressive enough to include some light messaging from the concurrent Women’s Movement, but nevertheless presented a muddled message around feminism that supported stereotypical gender roles more often than not (Pike, 2011). Finally, while most *Specials* were about a maturation process that would bring the central teen closer to adulthood, those featuring teens dealing with alcoholic parents were about regressing back to a normative view of adolescence, one in which the teen does not have to take on too many “adult” roles too soon and instead can focus on things like having fun with friends and doing well in school (Keeler, 2016). In all of these case studies, what is clear is that *Specials* adhered to pre-established societal norms regarding the life stage while simultaneously participating in the definitional and constructive process of what a normal or correct adolescence looks like for its audience. Proper adolescence is defined narrowly, but the *Specials* acknowledged that teens have complex lives that can make reaching this perfectly normative status difficult to achieve. *Specials* thus positioned themselves in the role of “trusted friend” (Keeler, 2016), understanding of the myriad difficulties of adolescence and able to offer sage advice as to how to overcome them.

While *Specials* declined in popularity – and the copycats on rival networks CBS and NBC failed – their influence would continue to be felt in the “very special episode” (VSE) of future teen TV cycles. VSEs are typically considered singular episodes in teen-oriented programming that "address topical and challenging social issues in overly simplistic ways" (Cohn and Porst, 2021, p. 1). Key to defining VSE's is the notion that they do not occur in "quality" programming, even though one could certainly argue that episodes lauded for

their aesthetic and/or narrative departures could also be considered "special episodes." They're also often assumed to be relics of the 1980s and '90s, and thus something TV has evolved past, although once again many notable, stand-alone episodes of contemporary TV could be defined as such (Cohn and Porst, 2021). Cohn and Porst's argument is essential for troubling the assumed "bad object" status of VSEs, but it is important to acknowledge this *assumed* definition, as it is still the one industry workers often fall back on to explain what their contemporary, higher quality series are not.

Despite this pedagogical legacy, in subsequent years, the discourses surrounding teen TV framed the genre less like a trusted friend that has proven to be a good influence and more like the devil on a teen's shoulder, urging them to replicate the salacious behaviors found in the teen soap opera. In many ways, this is a straightforward media effects argument, but it is heightened because of the presumed youth of its audience. As Davis and Dickinson (2004) argue,

> Within many of our societies, the role of the media is considered vital – if not somewhat accountable – for the handling of teenagers' greater entry into citizenship, responsibility, and wider and more multifaceted forms of social interaction. The subsequent shaping of teen TV in line with this role must necessarily take into consideration what is generally accepted to be "appropriate" to the exploration and cementing of teenagers' new-found positions within the world (p. 10).

Questions of teen TV's role in molding citizens are not only concerned with a general societal responsibility, but also are wrapped up in an industrial project of legitimizing the genre itself. Because it is lucrative but often associated with the low brow, teen TV programs of the 2000s also adopted many of the markers of "quality TV" endemic to that era: they demonstrated textual reflexivity (shows often commented on themselves with meta-reflections in-text); character reflexivity (programs pushed back on the concept of

the inarticulate, hormone-addled teen with hyper-verbal, self-examining characters); and by engaging with discourses of authorship via the showrunner (Hills, 2004, p. 59). Additionally, these programs integrated cinematic filming techniques and adopted a "liberal humanist" bent to the issues tackled (Wee, 2008). Thus, a pattern emerged in which teen TV was largely framed in a negative light for what it would impart to young audiences, only for there to be an industrial, discursive pushback in both reframing content as progressive and generally moving the genre away from its "trashy" connotations.

Sexual Content and the Teen Audience

These tensions are especially apparent when it comes to depictions of sex and sexuality on teen TV. Discourses about the effects of viewing sex on TV recur in each cycle, it is simply the degrees of what can and is shown on these programs that changes, while the basic arguments stay largely the same. Whether it is concern over "sexual" dancing on programs like *American Bandstand*, the simple inclusion of queer characters on *Dawson's Creek* and *Buffy*, or a storyline centered on a threesome in *Gossip Girl*, the argument against these depictions remain similar: these acts are immoral – often in and of themselves and especially so for young people – and that seeing them on TV will make young people think that these actions are okay, perhaps even so okay the teen should mimic them.

There are arguments that depictions of sex on teen TV can have a beneficial impact; namely, that in a country which often provides insufficient, abstinence-centric sex education, media can be one of the few venues by which young people, and especially girls, can learn about sexual pleasure and fulfillment (Arthurs and Zacharias, 2006). Likewise, Buckingham and Bragg's (2004) research with teen audiences found they labeled certain

storylines as “helpful” or “informative,” such as an ongoing story of a girls’ rape that audience members noted was beyond their experience but could help them think through what to do if they ever found themselves in a similar position – although Buckingham and Bragg note the debates around morality in this storyline and others also point to how there is rarely one singular lesson the audience learns. These audience members were likewise willing to label many sexy storylines as either unrealistic or simply there because “sex sells” and therefore of little pedagogical value to them (p. 157-160). In short, teen audiences' own understandings of “learning” from television is complex, but it is not inconceivable that if a teen audience member learns anything about sex from television, it may be about their sexual health, safety, and pleasure. However, positive arguments are few and far between; when sex in youth media is discussed in popular discourse it is almost always in a negative light (Arthurs and Zacharias, 2006) and still mediated by the influences of parents, peers, and schooling (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004).

The fallacies inherent in the “negative effects” arguments are twofold: their invocation of “the children” as corrupted innocents and their understanding of media effects. Firstly, such arguments presume media depictions will “turn” young people sexual, as though they can exist in a pure, de-sexualized state before exposure via the media. However, "it is not so much that children have suddenly become sexual, more that adults are now being forced to recognise this fact" (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004, p. 4) when that fact is depicted by the media. The depiction does not, in fact, invent childhood sexuality whole cloth. Secondly, these arguments rest on erroneous interpretations of media effects more generally. There is a flattening of both content and audience response – what is considered arousing and/or explicit is often in the eye of the beholder, but these arguments

presume an incredibly homogenous audience in terms of both sexuality and response. Additionally, distinctions need to be made in the type of "effect" media may have – there can be an effect on actual behavior (the teen will actively go out to have sex), an effect on thoughts (they will start thinking about sex/thinking about it more), and an effect on beliefs (usually, that they will begin to think of non-heteronormative sex as permissible or even desirable) (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004). That media can drastically change any one of these things in their viewers is already questionable, especially when one considers the complicating factors of family and peer influence outside of media viewing, but to flatten all three together ignores key distinctions in adolescent sexual behavior and beliefs.

Such negative arguments are heightened by the identity of the imagined, imperiled teen, namely when it comes to girlhood and/or queer sexuality. Heightened concerns surrounding girlhood sexuality and queer sexuality inform these discourses; a moral panic is rarely started if a white, cis-gendered, straight teen boy has sex on television. In the teen TV cycle of the '90s and '00s, queerness is often reduced to the "coming out" narrative, wherein the character is stuck in the dramatic moment of revealing their queerness but then rarely moves past this, as series struggle to or resist integrating queerness into the quotidian of show's diegesis and therefore normalizing it. This pattern is seen in foundational series such as *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Melrose Place* (Allen, 1995). The result of which is a limited representation of queer life and minimal, at best, representation of actual queer sexual activity, even kissing (Gross, 2001). Glyn Davis (2004) notes that this argument is true to a certain extent but somewhat harsh on television as a medium, which was already deploying a more nuanced approach by the time *Dawson's Creek* revealed that main character Jack was gay in 1999, since the longevity and serialization of teen dramas

allows for a much more nuanced and complex depiction of queer teen life than other media afford.

Queer sexuality was depicted as chaste due to both hesitancy from network executives to depict anything physical between queer characters and because creators felt the burden of representation and thus were highly concerned with making the depictions of these characters "positive" ones (Gross, 2001; Birnbaum, 2015). The assumption that adolescents are more susceptible to media persists, and so the logic goes that "if the media can influence people's opinions regarding social and cultural groups, directly and/or cumulatively, then the educative potential that lies behind the representation of queer individuals cannot be ignored" (Davis 2004, p. 134). Thus, both media advocates and series creators wanted queer characters to be seen as role models and this often translated into de-sexualizing these characters and placing them into heteronormative frameworks. These internal concerns about presenting positive representation were further compounded by network mandates. *90210* and *Melrose Place* creator Darren Starr remembers a "talk about it, don't show it" policy Fox had at the time (Birnbaum, 2015) and networks were generally wary of backlash from conservative and religious groups about depicting queerness at all, especially to a young audience.

Concerns regarding teen girl sexuality can also coincide with "positive role model" discourses, namely by defining the boundaries of appropriate expressions of burgeoning feminine sexuality and narratively punishing those characters who cross these boundaries. "Slut" remains an ever-present pejorative to police what is viewed as sexual excess in girls, but total sexual abstinence is now also distinctly uncool, and so the girl must walk a tightrope of engaging in some sexual activity, but only in the "correct" ways (Bay Cheng,

2015). This regulation is all-the-more omnipresent and complicated to navigate for girls of color, working class girls, and queer girls because they are already framed as having "abjected" sexuality and thus are even more heavily regulated in complicated ways within this continuum, often assumed to already be starting on the "slutty" and therefore bad end of the spectrum (Tolman et al., 2015).

While much of this research focuses on peer interactions, media depictions of girlhood sexuality are also a regulatory force and largely operate along this same slut-prude continuum. This is quite clear in virginity loss narratives in teen TV, which generally fall into common "sexual scripts." First is total abstinence, in which virginity is prized. Second is the "management" script, in which teenage sexual behavior is inevitable and thus, if it must happen, should happen within "safe" and "appropriate" confines, namely that virginity is lost within a monogamous, loving, heterosexual relationship. Third is the urgency script, in which virginity carries a social stigma and must be lost to maintain social status and affirm gender identity, which is much more common for teen boy characters (Kelly, 2010). I would also add the sexual assault script – certainly the least desirable way for a character to lose her virginity, but this script carefully avoids the rape culture language that would slut-shame such a girl. Instead, these often become "issue" episodes/storylines, and due to the heavy serialization of teen dramas, often provide a fuller, more systemic analysis of gendered sexual violence over the course of several episodes (Berridge, 2013). Finally, it is important to note the girl who does not have a virginity loss arc because she has already lost it off screen, usually before the timeline of the series has begun, such as Jen (Michelle Williams) on *Dawson's Creek*. While the above scripts mitigate a girl being labelled as a "slut" by outlining the parameters of how to walk

the non-prude/non-slut line, a lack of virginity is a clear indication of a "bad girl" past, of which the character is meant to be ashamed and faces negative consequences for her presumed bad behavior (quite infamously, for instance, Jen ends the series as a single mother and then dies in the finale).

Much of scholarship about a given series' approach to girlhood sexuality, and especially those stories dealing with sexual assault, attempts to define how feminist or anti-feminist said approach is. However, as Jenny Bavidge (2004) notes about the ample cultural and scholarly discourse around *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its approach to gendered storylines about misogyny, heterosexual relationships, and sexual violence, it's nigh impossible to make a declarative judgment on whether a series is or is not feminist. More productive is to understand how the series' representations are a product of the feminist moment it was made within and thus "enables, and has offered up, an interrogation of the social and cultural construction of female adolescence" within that same milieu (p. 41). My own analysis follows Bavidge's lead. Rather than judging the feminist bonafides of any one series or storyline, I instead question how existing within the cultural moment of popular feminism affects the choices made by industry workers and thus the representation of girlhood seen on our TV screens, which is both symptomatic of and simultaneously part of the project of (re)defining girlhood – here, through the boundary-marker of adolescent sex and sexuality.

Methodology:

I use a combined textual and industrial analysis approach to examine these issues within contemporary teen television. I have chosen four series to focus on: *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-

present), *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* (Freeform, 2020-2021), *Riverdale* (CW, 2017-present), and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix, 2018-2020). These four series should not be taken as particularly special but instead fairly standard—indeed, because I am studying an industry-wide trend, other contemporary teen TV shows are referenced in both my own analysis and the interviews I conducted—although each was chosen for specific reasons. First, they encompass broadcast, cable, premium subscription, and streaming platforms, while both *Everything's Gonna Be Okay (EGBO)* and *Riverdale* move between distributors, demonstrating the similarities and differences in distribution platforms' approach to content moderation and narrowcasting practices based on age, especially in an era in which programs slide between platforms and often audiences have difficulty discerning the origins of a program. Secondly, each series prominently features at least one (usually multiple) storylines about teen female sexuality. An increase in depictions of sexuality is now commonplace, but these series stand out either for being on the extreme end of the trend, such as *Euphoria*, or for approaching an issue that has recurred within the genre in a novel way, such as *EGBO* exploring consent via a teen girl, but doing so through the lens of an autistic girl, whose difficulty in reading others complicates an already questionable moment of consent. Thirdly, all series include popular feminist rhetoric, usually using teen girl characters as the mouthpiece. Finally, all inspire some level of cultural critique and thinkpieces related to their sexual and feminist politics within adult media spheres, while both *Riverdale* and *Euphoria* appear to have captured the zeitgeist with teen audiences as well, demonstrating tensions between what is popular with adults, what is popular with teens, and what inspires discourse in cultural spaces on the Internet.

I marry an analysis of the content within these shows with an industrial analysis. I ascribe to Havens, Tinic, and Lotz's (2009) mid-level approach to critical media industry studies, focusing on "particular organization, agents and practices within what have become vast media conglomerates" (p. 236). In this way, the day-to-day practices of those in the industry are understood within the context of large-scale industrial conditions. Workers understand their own labor within these systems, but their individualized viewpoints on the content itself is crucial to understand how such creative decision demarcate boundaries of appropriateness and realism when it comes to constructing depictions of girlhood. Thus, I conducted roughly one-hour interviews via Zoom with a range of workers whom all performed some level of creative work on these series. My interviewees are Naomi Funabashi, then the Vice President of Programming and Development at Freeform. Nathan Muller, the Director of Development at Freeform; due to an executive shortage Muller also effectively served as the Current Programming executive on *EGBO*, overseeing production and providing notes for the whole of Season One, rather than simply through the pilot, as development executives usually do. I also interviewed Amanda Blumenthal, the intimacy coordinator on a number of series including *Euphoria*, although her contract barred her from speaking on the series specifically and she instead spoke on her role more generally, including working with young actors and characters. Finally, I interviewed a writer who worked on both *CAOS* and *Riverdale,* who did not wish to be named.

I supplemented these interviews with press interviews, especially in those cases where my own access was limited. While personal interviews remain ideal, I found that what I was told during them did not drastically differ from what was said in press

interviews; often workers knew to mimic company talking points or repeat the showrunner's own words about the show. I also often marry these interviews with the thinkpieces and reviews of these series that also discursively position these series within the American TV industry and its contemporary trends as well as draw boundaries around propriety and morality in the often prurient content of these programs.

"Authentic, Not Gratuitous": Industrial Rationales for Increased Sexual Content in Teen TV

In my four case studies, the central storylines of the series all lend themselves to telling stories about teen girl sexuality. *Euphoria* centers on Rue (Zendaya) and her struggle towards sobriety, which is complicated by a romance with a new girl in town, Jules (Hunter Schaeffer). The show also highlights the story of one of the side characters each episode, providing a range of stories about sex and sexuality. *Riverdale* centers on the high school dramas of the iconic characters from Archie Comics, but adds a murder-mystery narrative and gothic ambiance that transforms the wholesome vision of teen Americana that defines the original comics into a dark soap opera focused on the sex, lies, and murder that occur beneath the surface of the titular idyllic town. *CAOS* comes from the same team as *Riverdale* and here they can fully embrace the supernatural elements of the gothic, rebooting the 1990s sitcom about a teen witch trying to have a normal high school experience by eschewing zany sitcom antics for a much darker story that emphasizes Sabrina's (Kiernan Shipka) new life after officially joining the Church of Satan and enrolling in a witchcraft boarding school. Finally, *EGBO* finds twenty-something Nicholas (Josh Thomas) needing to take over the care of his two teenaged half-sisters when their father passes away.

What I found in my interviews was that overall, the move to depict teen girls as sexually active and sex positive is not a conscious attempt to restructure the boundaries of girlhood, but instead an industrial move that nonetheless also carries with it the former effect. Industry workers frequently deploy popular feminist rhetoric to then make sense of and explain these choices. Two primary factors influence this decision to make teen TV more sexually explicit. The first factor is a wish to push an individual program or brand closer to notions of "quality" television, and therefore away from teen TV's bad object status. It is this tonal shift that workers reflect here. The second factor is a need to address the changing nature of audience demographic boundaries and narrowcasting in the streaming era. Industry workers often discuss these two concerns separately, but they are implicitly linked, as creating a show with "edge" (Curtin, 1996) has become a commonsense tactic for rising above the overwhelming amount of television across all channels and platforms.

Funabashi notes just how pervasive this logic is throughout the industry generally speaking, but simultaneously how it reflects beliefs about the Gen Z audience, specifically. Cable channel Freeform was originally branded as ABC Family. The channel is owned by Disney, something the ABC label linked more clearly if not exactly directly, and the name further suggested family-friendly content. Funabashi explained that as Freeform they wanted to distance themselves from both labels and developing "premium" content was the primary means of doing so, adding "we believe our audience is a sophisticated audience, but there's not necessarily a conversation it's just like, we believe that." She later added, "I also just think everyone wants to be premium. Everyone wants to be able to attract top talent and top talent wants to be premium." In short, the assumption that

television audiences, even relatively young ones, are “sophisticated” in their tastes is widespread enough that it does not necessitate further conversation. However, this is hardly a unique strategy within the industry and so branding oneself as a home for premium, quality content is also a competitive move, not just to attract audiences but to attract creative talent as well.

Additionally, both Funabashi and Muller use the phrase “age up and edge up” to describe the shift from ABC Family to Freeform content, creating a clear link between creating content with edge and navigating more fluid age demographic boundaries. Muller describes ABC Family as being for “13-year-olds and their moms” to co-view programs together while both describe Freeform as being for the “new-adult lifestage” that is not so clearly demarcated by age but instead by having “first” life experiences, such as one’s first important job or first serious relationship. Likewise, at similarly youth-branded channel The CW, *Riverdale* executive producer Greg Berlanti allegedly said “you need a dead body” in order to stand out in the era of peak TV. Showrunner Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa noted that switching the show to a murder-mystery made it a “loss of innocence” narrative rather than a coming-of-age, transforming the show into “something a little bit darker, a little moodier, a little noir” and placing the characters in “more adult, more edgy situations” (Stanhope, 2017). With this rhetoric, making content "darker" and "edgier" becomes a shorthand for making a series that, while still appealing to a youthful sensibility, appeals to a slightly more worldly, mature version of that sensibility.

The primary way those creating teen TV mark the genre as part of this premium pantheon of shows is by actively separating itself from its earnest past. Each industry worker I spoke with and many of the supplementary interviews I read pointedly distanced

the shows they work on from the earnest, moralizing past of teen TV, where the lessons of an episode were explicit and rather conservative, especially in their approach to sex. This is primarily a change in tone and approach to storylines, but it also translates to quite literally showing more on screen. Once again noting the shift from ABC Family, Muller observes, "*Secret Life, Switched at Birth, The Fosters* [all ABC Family series], they were all really progressive shows, they were just done in an earnest manner that made them feel safer… I think we just wanted to keep the essence of what ABC Family was doing by telling real stories about young people that aren't normally on TV, but strip away that earnestness or Technicolor that I think those shows had." Later discussing *EGBO* specifically, he describes approaching the teen girls' storylines that may have lessons attached as "chocolate-covered broccoli" because audiences will not realize they have been fed some sort of lesson given the show's often humorous approach: "there's consequences, but not consequences in like a *Full House*, 'here's the lesson of the week' way." HBO Chairman Richard Plepler allegedly used Netflix's controversial series *13 Reasons Why* as a call to up the ante in *Euphoria,* telling others *Euphoria* would make *13 Reasons* "look like an after-school special" (Sandberg, 2019).

Instead, what is viewed as the opposite of this "after-school special" approach is "gritty" or "dark" programming. This often translates to more sexual content, both in having characters talk frankly about their sex lives and having teen characters have sex on screen. Obviously, those series on channels and platforms free from both FCC and S&P (Standards and Practices) departments are able to do this the most explicitly, especially HBO and *Euphoria,* given that HBO has made explicit sexual content a synecdoche for the quality their brand represents. Speaking about her work on premium channels generally,

Blumenthal said that the note from the studio/platform to the production team she heard most was to include *more* nudity: “Some projects get pitched to the studio as ‘this is going to be the sexy version of blah blah blah,’ this is going to be a sexy show. And then they start shooting and it turns out the person in charge is actually kind of a prude and doesn’t like having naked people on camera. And then the studio’s like, ‘this is not what we bought, you need more nudity.’” Blumenthal points to an interesting tension here, wherein sexiness is a selling point for a series and a way series and channels/platforms brand themselves (i.e. they are the “sexy version” of a comparative narrative) but that comes up against day-to-day realities in production and what creatives feel comfortable doing or what feels right for the story. Ultimately, I continually heard that it was the story and production environment of the individual show that dictated the amount and explicitness of sexual content, more so than literal S&P protocols.

The writer on *CAOS* provided a direct example of this when discussing that series’ approach to sex scenes and the relative lack thereof when compared to sister series *Riverdale.* Noting the realities of the actors they worked with she said, “pretty early on in the writer’s room we realized the kids on *Sabrina* are younger literally and come across more innocent. So even though we originally wanted to tell the story of Sabrina losing her virginity really early on, it didn’t really seem authentic to the character when Kiernan [Shipka] and a lot of the other kids came across as 14, not these 25-year-old *Riverdale* kids playing 16.” Later addressing a much-discussed "orgy" scene in Season One, which Sabrina the character is not a part of and is shot relatively chastely for an orgy (there is no nudity and only kissing is shown), she said “I think honestly Netflix wanted the show to be that times ten." The writer noted the genesis of the show was exactly what Blumenthal

described: it was sold as the "sexy" version of the sitcom. The writer explains, "I think we all wanted *Sabrina*, when we were younger, to be sexier, so this was the opportunity to have…the show you always wanted where it's like Sabrina is full bad girl." Yet once cast, this no longer felt like the right direction for the show. Thus, while airing on The CW and therefore subject to much stricter FCC broadcast rules around sexual content than a series on Netflix, *Riverdale* is considered the much more edgy series when it comes to its sexual content between the two.

This former impulse to amplify the sexiness of a series reflects an industry-wide trend in the genre, but the specificities of individual writer's rooms and sets do still mold the end product. Freeform has an S&P department, but as a cable channel it sets its own standards rather than being required to follow the FCC's guidelines, and can therefore break them at will. Funabashi notes that the transition from ABC Family has been a difficult one in this regard, as internally they negotiated what the brand change meant for S&P regulations. "We [the development team] fight them [S&P] all the time…It's gotten easier to push them once FX joined the family [after the Disney/Fox merger] because then we had another cable within family to literally compare to. And we actually can't do as much as FX, but we can get really close." She also noted that one of her colleagues often responds to notes from S&P with "well it's a suggestion, right?" after learning their rules are not hard and fast. So not only are content regulations not consistent across cable channels, even those owned within the same conglomerate, but internally they are under constant negotiation. Thus, while S&P rules and restrictions based on distribution platform do affect the levels of explicitness a teen TV show can get away with, it is not the only or even primary determinant of how much a show wishes to push those boundaries.

That said, all of the discussed series include potentially (and arguably intentionally) controversial sexual material. Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* and the discourse that surrounded its first season came up repeatedly in my interviews and seems to serve as an early touch point for the new direction in contemporary teen TV. Critics condemned the series for both glamorizing suicide and for depicting a teen boy rape the teen girl protagonist violently and explicitly. Creators' takeaways from the media discourse cycle surrounding *13 Reasons* vary, although rarely if ever did they conclude that this meant they should make their own content less explicit or controversial. Blumenthal defended the creative choices in the rape scene, saying "I think they do a really good, nuanced depiction with the content" and believes audience should be confronted with content that is perhaps uncomfortable but important, saying "if it scares you, then start having conversations with the people in your life about it." In a similar vein, the *CAOS* writer noted that far from making Netflix wary of courting too much controversy in their teen programming, she thinks the subsequent press surrounding *13 Reasons* made Netflix actively seek it, giving those on *CAOS* as much leeway as they would like when it came to including potentially divisive storylines.

This suggests that not only do teen TV creators pay attention to other shows that find themselves in typical discourse cycles about what is or is not appropriate to show adolescents, but they also (or the channels/platforms they work for) have reasons for welcoming similar discourses about their own series. So while certain factions may be loud regarding their fears about the impact of such content on young minds, these seemingly have little effect on TV industry workers' creative decisions. Instead, they continue to include such storylines and hope that they will spark conversation amongst viewers.

Notably, the hope is to spark conversation, not teach a lesson; as Plepler noted (and many voice a similar sentiment) they are adamantly *not* creating anything that would share commonalities with *Afterschool Specials*. Drawing a fine but firm line between a conversation-starter and a lesson is a primary way workers make this distinction. This is not to say workers are disingenuous when they say they hope controversial subject matter sparks conversations – in fact, those I spoke with were quite genuine in a desire to engage with pressing issues in the culture and/or for young people. Instead, this semantic move differentiates this new cycle of shows tonally and signals them as quality, while simultaneously providing an explanation for the inclusion of material that will be sure to anger many.

The justification for the inclusion of controversial material is often that it is realistic, especially in depicting just how difficult and complex life is for kids these days. Claiming realism is, of course, often a shorthand for quality, regardless of genre. However, in the case of teen television, these claims of realism can also serve as a justification for content creatives and executives have already faced controversy for or anticipate controversy for. This can be done with an assertion that is often accompanied by a let's-be-frank tone: that teenagers have sex and therefore to depict it is reflective of reality, no matter how much parents might wish to deny it. What these depictions look like reveal the line between what the adult creatives view as grounded realism and still within the bounds of propriety. Funabashi summed up Freeform's approach as "we want authentic but not gratuitous." Muller provides an example of this when discussing an *EGBO* storyline that was pulled back for potentially crossing a line. In it, Matilda has proposed a threesome with her two closest autistic friends; Muller stated that originally the scene was meant to show much more but

instead, in the final version the male character decides he is not ready and leaves before anything happens. Muller explains: "That storyline evolved over time. And I think that was partly from our sensitivity that these are teenagers, we want to portray teenagers in an accurate way, which teenagers are having sex, let's just be honest they are. But also in an appropriate way."

Critical discussions of these series often take a similar tact. *Euphoria* inspired a small flurry of thinkpieces and reviews during its debut season and all of them foregrounded the idea that the show was shocking in its explicitness and "for parents, it's sure to be something of a horror show" (Viruet, 2019), inspiring headlines such as "A Horrified Dad's Guide to Not Watching 'Euphoria'" (Harvilla, 2019). And yet while many accede that the shock-value seems to be the point and that the explicitness is directly tied to both HBO's brand specifically and much of "prestige TV" of the moment generally, they also often note that nonetheless these ideas are based in some level of realism. The series emphasizes "this (very-real!) idea of fucked-up teenagers" and while the constant grimness may become tedious "maybe it can be argued that that's sort of the point, that for Teens These Days, this is all par for the course; everything that parents fear is nothing more than mundane" (Viruet, 2019). To the series' most staunch defenders, the gravity of the realism is the show's best feature. *Esquire* Culture Editor Matt Miller (2019) puts *Euphoria* in direct contrast to past teen series *Skins* and *Degrassi*, claiming it was these latter shows that were simply shocking for the sake of being shocking, but *Euphoria* "seeks out realism" and "as far as I could tell—a decade removed from being a teen myself—*Euphoria* accurately captures a social existence defined by texting, by dating apps, by PornHub, by dick pics, and nude selfies." These assertions are furthered with yet another marker of quality TV discourse,

that of the auteur, as creator Sam Levinson has discussed how his own struggles with addiction as a teenager inform Rue's story, aiding in the assertions of verisimilitude. Underlying such assertions of realism are tried-and-true methods of asserting quality and as such, these assertions both mitigate controversy and continue the discursive work of separating these contemporary series from teen TV's delegitimized past.

Not only are such storylines justified as realistic, but often creators frame these stories as potentially insightful to adults rather than the products of adult imaginaries of teen life and sexuality. The first season of *Riverdale* introduces "Dark Betty," an alter-ego for the quintessential girl-next-door Betty Cooper (Lili Reinhardt) who dons a black wig and lingerie-esque outfits to exact revenge on a male classmate who has sexually harassed multiple girls. Dark Betty is reintroduced in Season Two via the character's wish to explore being a camgirl, as the character feels this will allow her to work out a "darkness" she feels inside of her. From its pilot episode, discourse around *Riverdale* fixated on how it turned the incredibly wholesome characters of Archie Comics sexy, but having both a 16-year-old and specifically the enduring character of Betty Cooper become a camgirl was a bridge too far for many, and the episode caused a small discourse cycle on the propriety of such a move. Reinhardt was then asked to speak on the story and mitigate the controversy, both defending the storyline while downplaying its significance. She assures that "webcamming wasn't a natural progression of things, and not to say Betty continues webcamming in the future" but "it was a way for her to express her budding sexuality, and now that she's back with her boyfriend, that's a lot healthier of an option in exploring her sexuality. One that's not necessarily dangerous or taboo" (Ivie, 2018). This reproduces adult anxieties about transgressive forms of sex and sexuality that appear novel to a new generation (here, sex

enabled by and through technology) while reinscribing the boundaries of monogamous, heteronormative sex through the rhetoric of what is "heathy" or "safe." And while camming may not have been a “natural progression,” Reinhardt justifies the overall move to make the teens of Archie Comics more sexual, arguing, “it makes sense that something that was once so innocent as the Archie Comics is now so sexualized in the modern world. I have a 14-year-old sister, and I see how fast she’s grown up and how quickly kids are growing up these days with the internet and social media” (Ivie, 2018). Reinhardt was only 21-years-old at the time of this interview, and yet while she is hardly removed from the Internet generation herself, the issue is still once again framed as an adult understanding of the unique experience of contemporary adolescence and need to reflect this onscreen.

The notion of "realism" is a rather slippery term in this usage, used in a way that both signals a genuine belief in what life is currently like for Gen Z (even while said belief is not really being backed up by much other than anecdotal evidence viewed from an adult vantage) and also a way to signal the contemporary teen content is different than the more saccharine or preachy approach to the topic of sex than was taken in the past. This is not to say workers are disingenuous when they say they hope controversial subject matter sparks conversations, or when they say they hope their work reflects what Gen Z is truly experiencing. In fact, those I spoke with were quite genuine in a desire to engage with pressing issues in the culture and/or for young people. Instead, this semantic move differentiates this new cycle of shows tonally and signals them as quality, while simultaneously providing an explanation for the inclusion of material that will be sure to anger many.

"Somewhere along the way, femininity conquered me": Drawing New Boundaries for the Sex-Positive, Feminist Girl

These industrial choices do not exist within a vacuum. They are both responding to and crafting popular understandings of feminism, the current teen generation, and how feminism and Gen Z relate to one another. To try and balance achieving a subtle approach to messaging in-line with conceptions of quality TV and still mitigating controversy, these series adopt a sex positive, feminist perspective. This still functions like a lesson on how girls should be, albeit a subtler one and from a slightly different, more progressive perspective than the Very Special Episode. In the case of those stories that involve a teen girl's sex life, the lessons relate to how she should behave sexually in order to both be personally empowered and navigate a patriarchal world filled with sexist double-standards and sexual violence against women and girls. In adopting popular feminist, sex positive rhetoric to impose lessons, such series can paradoxically end up in a similar place to those past earnest, didactic shows and episodes they wish to separate themselves from. The lessons are less overtly stated, but there are still consequences for the "wrong" type of sexual behavior, and due to the predilection towards dark tones and explicit content, such consequences are often more violent and punishing than in the past.

First, in order to understand current conceptions of sex positivity, one needs to go back to the origins of the term. In 1982, Gayle Rubin responded to the "anti-porn" feminists, who saw the results of the free love movements of the 1960s and '70s as nothing more than another way to center male pleasure and subjugate women, with a conference talk that became a treatise for sex positivity. She argues against "sex negativity" in which "Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force"

(Rubin, 2012, p. 148). She traces how in moments when sexuality is heavily politicized, "the children" become a key domain by which sexual life is negotiated and debated, stating "the current wave of erotic terror has reached deepest into those areas bordered in some way, if only symbolically, by the sexuality of the young" (p. 141). Her call for a "pro-sex" feminism that works towards "sexual liberation that would work for women as well as for men" (p. 172) would then necessarily include a liberation that does not alternately demonize or deny the sexuality of the young.

bell hooks adds an important dimension to this idea of sexual liberation in 1984, when she argues that the concept of "sexual liberation" became simply a call for women to have more and better sex which, while perhaps "exciting and pleasurable," did not "deconstruct the power relations between men and women in the sexual sphere" (p. 147). Thus, the feminist disillusionment with sexual liberation is understandable, as it is often quite easy to identify the ways in which patriarchy continues to function in even a "liberated" sexual culture, but these analyses fail to imagine alternatives. hooks argues the alternative must center sexual well-being; all of our sexual culture is repressive, even to men, because it is built upon "repression, guilt, shame, dominance, conquest, and exploitation" (p. 149). Key for hooks is dismantling the idea that everyone "should" be having sex, or that sexual impulses (especially that boys/men always want sex) are entirely "natural." Such an assumption leads men and women to act out sexual scripts, wherein men must pursue sex and women react to these advances. hooks concludes "a liberatory sexuality would not teach women to see their bodies as accessible to all men, or to all women for that matter. It would favor instead a sexuality that is open or closed based on the nature of individual interaction" (p. 155).

Both Rubin and hooks are considered seminal texts in the foundations of sex-positive feminism, but notably only Rubin's description continues in the more popularized versions found within postfeminism and popular feminism. In other words, such an understanding urges an open-minded acceptance of varied, non-heteronormative forms of sex and a de-stigmatization of female sexuality, but hooks' caution that this is but one step in sexual liberation and does not dismantle gendered dynamics that can lead to coercion has been largely ignored. This manifests in postfeminist thinking that hypersexuality is akin to empowerment for women (e.g. Gill, 2007). This specific mentality within postfeminism has been thoroughly critiqued, both at the time and in subsequent feminist scholarship. However, I argue that a basic through-line from the theories of the 1980s into the popular feminist era still exists: that women having pleasurable sex and claiming their sexuality in both public and private capacities is understood as in and of itself empowering, but sex positivity for women and girls (in the mainstream understanding) begins and ends there. While there is a greater understanding of asexuality as part of the spectrum of sexuality, this is understood as its own sexuality, and thus is not enough to address hooks' critique of equating sex positivity with a "more and better" philosophy among those who are sexually active. Additionally, other postfeminist ways of thinking remain as well, namely the supremacy of individual choice as the ultimate answer to systemic problems. This is reminiscent of hooks' call for a sexual liberation based on individual interactions, but ignores how hooks roots her critique in systemic gendered dynamics and the need to disrupt them, instead settling for the ability to choose a partner regardless of gender or race as the goal of liberation, without interrogating how these interactions may still be steeped in sexist, racist, and/or heteronormative conventions.

This version of sex positive rhetoric, and how it applies to teen girls, is evidenced in teen TV. While industry workers eschew any notion they are producing episodes with explicit messages, such series nonetheless hold lessons that fit within the framework of instructional feminism. And while they may be feminist messages, they are not necessarily imagining alternatives to patriarchy, but are instead concerned with pointing out how patriarchy functions. The end result is that while these series no longer end with didactic lessons and, far from promoting abstinence, often allow their teen characters to explore their sexuality, they still often come to conclusions about the danger of sex for the teen girl, but this time because of sexism.

I will highlight two storylines about teen girls discovering their sexuality and, in the process, finding themselves potential victims of assault, one centered on the character of Matilda (Kayla Cromer) in *EGBO* and the other focused on the character of Jules in *Euphoria.* Both storylines, while taking very different tonal approaches, demonstrate how series braid together this notion of sex positivity with lessons to girls on the dangers of sex. While I highlight only these two stories so that I may go in-depth, all the series I focused on include a storyline about sexual harassment and/or assault on teen girls. And this is not surprising in the current approach many teen series are taking to incorporate popular feminist rhetoric. Emily Ryalls (2020) argues that contemporary series are responding to a period from roughly 2012 to 2015 in which there were several major high-profile rape cases in colleges and high schools shifted the mainstream discourse on consent. She argues "while rape and sexual violence narratives have always held a place in the teen drama series genre, these shows are specifically reflective of the contemporary cultural move from the outdated 'no means no' model to articulations of 'yes means yes.'" (p. 2). Ryalls

also notes how explicit rape scenes are in these series, arguing they function as a way for the audience to have a clear understanding that a rape has occurred, making the pushback these girls receive—usually from adult authority figures who embody outmoded ways of thinking about rape—seem particularly insidious and blatantly wrong. However, such series muddle this message in order to uphold ideas of "honorable masculinity" that take pains to demonstrate there are "good guys" who will seeks affirmative consent. In both series, the female assault victims send these “good guys” mixed signals and are unclear about what they want when confronted with such a boy. In so doing, these series reinforce rape culture myths that sometimes a girl’s no *does* mean yes and that it is quite clear who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, and rapists all fall clearly into the latter category (Ryalls, 2020).

All of the series I focus on follow similar patterns to what Ryalls outlines by depicting a broader spectrum of sexual consent and the range of circumstances where consent is in question, which then carries unique instructional messaging. This lesson acknowledges girls have their own sexual desires and agency, while emphasizing that nonetheless, such desires still pale in comparison to the sexual drive of boys/men, and therefore the circumstances of any sexual encounter must be "right" or else the girl will suffer consequences. The correctness of said circumstances rests both on the individual interaction and the placement of that situation within the broader context of a patriarchal society. Is the sexual partner one of the "good ones," as Ryalls (2020) outlines, and is the girl being equally "good" herself? Are the power dynamics equal, or balanced towards the boy and/or man? And is the girl herself aware of how the conditions of patriarchy have led her to the circumstances of a bad encounter, or must she learn this lesson?

One of the inciting incidents of *Euphoria*'s pilot emblematizes how these series utilize stories of dubious consent to explore such questions, while the narrative itself dances around coming to any firm conclusions on the matter. Jules' introductory scene depicts her swiping through a gay hookup app, seemingly posing as slightly older than she is and matching with men decades her senior clearly looking for young, trans girls. Ensconced in her bedroom, having chosen to reject a new friend's invitation to hang out in lieu of immersing herself in this digital fantasy world, she smiles down at the validation she gets from the men here, her phone lighting up her face. However, when she actually goes to meet one of these men in the real world, the show immediately adopts an ominous tone, the feeling that there is something to fear apparent in the music, the dark lighting, and the run-down motel set. The man, Cal (Eric Dane), fetishizes her youth claiming "I'm envious of your generation, you know, you guys don't care as much about the rules." The adult character weaponizes the generational divide, especially as it relates to an acceptance of queerness. What follows is then an extremely graphic and aggressive sex scene, which includes full-frontal nudity from Dane, and Cal first shoving his fingers into Jules' mouth before roughly pinning her to the bed and pushing her face down into the comforter. The camera goes into close-up on Jules' face, showing that her eyes have gone dead and she has seemingly disassociated from the encounter—she certainly is not gaining any pleasure from it. After, Cal goes to the bathroom and Jules sees his phone light up, a picture of his wife and children the background. She silently places his wedding ring on top of the phone before leaving without a goodbye, making quite clear to the audience that she knows this was adultery and has no wish to prolong the experience.

Unlike Ryall's assessment, *Euphoria* somewhat blurs the good guy/bad guy dichotomy with the character of Cal, but not in a way that forwards a feminist reading. We learn Cal is the father of another main character, Nate (Jacob Elordi); Cal tapes his encounters, sometimes with and sometimes without the consent of his partners, and after accidentally seeing these videos at a young age, Nate has become even more violent towards women and queer people than his father. Meanwhile, in a subsequent episode Cal learns Jules is a high school student and is genuinely shocked and concerned, for himself and what this means legally, but also because he does feel guilt for taking advantage of someone so young, implicitly putting some fault on Jules for lying about her age. This plays out a dangerous trope in rape culture rhetoric, in which men's fear of being "tricked" into rape in some way, when they believed the sex to be legal and consensual, is centered as a legitimate concern. This is in addition to the "deceiver trope" (McKinnon, 2014) in which a trans woman is so sexually attractive she leads straight men into believing she is cisgendered, "tricking" them into attraction. Jules' does not lie about her gender – that is in fact her appeal to Cal – but the narrative nonetheless places her in the role of a trans girl so sexually attractive and therefore powerful, she tricks a cisgendered man into a sexual scenario that horrifies him.

Cal becomes something of a sympathetic figure in his status as a closeted man, while Nate emerges as the harasser of Jules and general villain of the series. When Nate see the video of Cal and Jules together (taken without Jules' consent), he uses the same app to pose as someone else and message Jules. They send increasingly intimate messages – both emotionally and sexually – to one another, until he convinces her to send nude photos of herself. When Jules is finally set to meet this boy in person, the scene tips between romance

and horror. They meet at night in a deserted park; Jules is clearly excited for the meeting as a small smile plays on her face when she hears his car approach. The bright beam of SUV headlights keeps Nate in silhouette as he slowly approaches Jules and the music is foreboding, making clear Jules does not realize the threat that is approaching her in the darkness. Yet, when Nate's face is finally revealed, those lights instead become a golden beam through the trees, romantically lighting them as they stand by the water, and Nate tells her their texting was real for him. He thinks of her constantly and feels closer to her than he has with anyone. While they acknowledge they do not trust one another, they kiss anyways, the lyrics of the background music now providing a more tender tone. Until Nate shoves his fingers in Jules' mouth, mimicking what his father did, and the scene turns once again to horror. Nate jeers that she is "broken," threatens her with the photos, saying she "knowingly produced and distributed child pornography," charges which could place her on the sex offenders registry and render her a social pariah, all to threaten her away from ever saying anything about her encounter with Cal, and thus potentially ruining their family's reputation.

The threat of the video proving that Cal committed statutory rape hangs over the rest of the series, and Jules is clearly upset when she learns of it and smashes the physical copy Nate eventually gives to her. However, the audience never learns her feelings about being recorded without her consent; instead, the video becomes something of a physical manifestation of the battle of masculinity waged between Nate and his father. Nate and Cal largely recede from Jules' storyline, becoming stand-ins for the ways in which Jules has consistently chosen the "wrong" partners, a character beat presented as a duel flaw and coping mechanism rooted squarely in her femininity. Episode Four of Season One begins

with Rue narrating Jules' back story and a direct line is drawn between Jules' identity as a trans girl and her sexual behavior. Rue delivers drily, "by 13, she started to transition and by 16, Jules had gotten a little slutty" and notes that all of Jules' hookups are the same: cis, white, much older men already in some form of committed relationship, who declare themselves to be "100% straight." After noting that "some" of these men are aggressive, we flash back to the encounter with Cal. Rue's voiceover explains, "whenever anything got too uncomfortable, Jules would just imagine that she wasn't really herself and this wasn't really her life. She was just a character in a book, or a movie, or a show, and none of it was real and if it was, it didn't matter. It's not like her body ever really belonged to her in the first place." Once again, sexual behavior that actively harms her is linked explicitly to her gender dysphoria and subsequent transition, all of which is then tied to her sense of agency, if she is truly the owner of her own body.

This link between Jules' femininity and sexual risk-taking is made even more explicit in one of the specials that aired between the first and second seasons of the series. Created as character studies of Rue and Jules, respectively, these episodes act as transitional content while production otherwise stalled during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also the only episode of *Euphoria* where creator Sam Levinson shares writing credit; the trans actress who plays Jules, Hunter Schafer, co-wrote the script. In behind-the-scenes interviews that the creative team do after every episode, the actors all mention being prompted by Levinson to write extensive histories for their characters and Schafer's insights from that activity inform this episode, which goes in-depth on her trans identity more than any storyline within the show proper. The episode is emblematic of contemporary teen TV's ties to its past and how it tries to deviate from said past. In many

ways, it is constructed in the Very Special Episode model. It is something of an outlier from the rest of the series both aesthetically and in its narrative structure, as it is written as one in-real-time therapy session, and it focuses on a one character and their issues around sex, gender, and addiction (it is revealed in this episode that part of why Jules is both so drawn to and terrified of Rue is that her own mother is an addict as well). Yet the episode also takes pains to maintain markers of its less earnest, more "gritty" tone. There are fantasy sex scenes interspersed throughout Jules' explanation of herself and her behaviors, many of which feature Schafer partially nude or in lingerie. Jules' only scene partner being the adult playing her therapist means there is no judgment when she talks about her promiscuous sex life, only prompting questions and a wish to understand. And there is no sense of narrative closure – Jules comes to no firm decisions or conclusions about her gender, her relation to men, or her relationship with Rue by the end of the session, all of which are issues that surface and intermingle as she reflects on the events that transpired in Season One.

Despite this open-ended narrative structure, as I argue, there are still takeaways to be had when deconstructing the choices made here. Jules opens her session by stating she is considering no longer taking her hormones. Her therapist asks if she is thinking about de-transitioning, but it becomes clear that is not quite what she intends, but rather she is struggling to define what being a girl now means to her. Jules explains, "I feel like I've framed my entire womanhood around men…I look at myself and I'm like how the fuck did I spend my entire life building this, like, my body and my personality and my soul around what I think men desire? Just like, it's embarrassing. I feel like a fraud." She goes on to explain that in sleeping with so many men, she felt like she was "conquering femininity"

but that "somewhere along the way, femininity conquered me." Jules' identity as a trans girl gives her a unique perspective on how femininity has informed her identity, especially her sexual identity, given that she has more consciously constructed said identity than other female characters on the show. Yet this framing, and the show's narrative inconsistencies with what roles Nate and Cal serve in Jules' story, ultimately leave one with the message that femininity is the problem, something a young girl will feel compelled to "conquer," lest its dangers conquer her. In this way, Nate and Cal are simply symbols of that larger sexual danger posed to girl, and the danger is only doubled for a trans girl like Jules, who can be alternately fetishized and victimized for both her femininity and her queerness. While the show certainly frames Jules' choice to transition as necessary and the right choice for her, the act of becoming a girl evinces little joy, either.

The solution to this problem of femininity is less clear. There is one way to read the show that, much like the "bad girls" of teen TV past, Jules simply needs to have sex within the parameters of a loving, monogamous, long-term relationship. Here, that would be a relationship with Rue, a message born out by the fact that the romance between Rue and Jules is presented as the central love story, surrounded by fleeting, dramatic relationships the other teen characters are experiencing. At every turn in this arc about Jules' sexuality, Rue is presented as the better alternative waiting for Jules – she meets Rue shortly after her encounter with Cal and Rue confidently asserts in her voiceover that their meeting has lessened the impact of it in Jules' mind; Rue shyly texts Jules about having a nice time with her when Jules is going to meet up with Nate in the park, the sweet message waiting for Jules in her pocket a marked contrast from the danger Nate presents; and Jules runs to Rue after that park meeting and they share their first kiss, the camera swirling around them in

the style of grand romance. This is the type of romance and sex that the sex-positive girl should strive for – that which empowers her rather than disempowers her. It is certainly notable that the relationship presented as deeper and more genuine is the one with a queer, Black girl, but it is also the one presented as far more traditional along the lines of sex. Rue and Jules are shy around one another, and they proceed from a highly charged but platonic friendship to sex relatively slowly in the world of *Euphoria*.

But there are aspects of the series that complicate this reading. The narrative largely takes a post-race, post-queer approach to both Rue and Jules' identities, only ever addressing them directly in their special episodes and a few infrequent, offhand remarks within the first and second seasons, thus making it hard to assert that Levinson is making any particularly transgressive point about Black and/or queer girl sexuality. And ultimately, the show's rather bleak tonal approach to all of its characters means even the "correct" relationship is not presented as particularly good for Jules, in the end, as Rue's addiction and their mutual co-dependence eventually tear them apart. That it is hard to pin down any one reading of Jules and Rue's relationship on the show is in keeping with the idea that workers want to "start conversations" rather than provide definitive moral lessons. And yet, in the punishing nature of how the girl characters of the show experience sex and how femininity itself is presented as key to that outcome, *Euphoria* does provide a lesson on how very cautious the teen girl must be, how finely she should hone her performance of femininity, in order to experience the empowerment that a popular feminism, sex-positive ethos promises her sex life can and should produce.

Beyond simply the quantity and explicitness of sex in teen series, another marked way such series depart from past depictions of teen sex is by dismissing the idea that girls

should fiercely guard their virginity, even if they must still fiercely guard their sexual autonomy overall. In Season One of *EGBO*, Matilda is a teen girl on the autism spectrum who is exploring her budding sexuality with enthusiasm. In an early scene, creator Josh Thomas pokes fun at the potential limits of sexual open-mindedness for teens. Thomas' character Nicholas tells the girls he wants to make their home a sex-positive one, and Matilda then utilizes this language to ask if she can bring two classmates home for a threesome. At this point in the series, Matilda has never had sex and the show depicts her enthusiasm as perhaps also propelling her to barrel forward too quickly. Nicholas, however, sticking to his sex-positive ethos, says he can't think of a reason why not.

Here, the fictionalized testing of the boundaries of sex positivity for teens reflects a similar boundary negotiation from the network itself. Muller explained, "S&P flagged it being like 'this feels like really bad parenting', which is by the way the point, he doesn't know what he's doing as a parent, so great, that's the show. But even more so, it was just irresponsible particularly when talking about teen sex. So they were like, can there be some hesitation or an implication that there could be consequences?" And so, they added in another joke, where Nicholas's boyfriend Alex reacts with an incredulous "*think harder*" after Nicholas claims he cannot think of a reason Matilda shouldn't have a casual threesome. Muller notes they were then "acknowledging that maybe this isn't the best idea" but "it's not telling them [a presumed teen audience] one way or another you should or shouldn't have sex but just, maybe think about this." Muller acknowledges the note was a good one in the end, as Alex's response provided a better end-beat to the joke. More importantly, such a negotiation over how to draw boundaries while still respecting the autonomy of the teen girl became broadly emblematic of the central themes of coming into

adulthood (for both the teen girls and twenty-something Nicholas) that the show centers upon, so much so this clip was heavily used in promotional materials.

This negotiation of the scene between creators and the network demonstrates both how far teen TV has come in terms of what is deemed appropriate for its audience and how there are still certain limits in place. There is no hesitancy on the part of executives around the queerness of the threesome coupling (not only in that there are multiple partners but that one is another girl) nor in the idea that Matilda is not only curious about sex but is actively and eagerly pursuing it. Yet there is still hesitancy around adults placing absolutely no restrictions on teen sexuality nor providing any guidance to the teens, including in-text guidance to their audience, which they negotiate by softening the pedagogical tone of such content.

The lesson around why teens should treat sex seriously becomes more explicit in a later storyline in the season, in which Matilda loses her virginity in a scenario where her ability to consent is in question, while Matilda herself asserts that she wanted to have sex and has no regrets about the encounter. It is a nuanced storyline that seeks to balance questions of agency with that of the character's youth, inexperience, and difficulty in reading others due to her autism. The sequence begins with Matilda attending a house party for the first time; her two fellow autistic friends are too nervous to go in with her, in the end, and so Matilda forges ahead alone, drinking straight out of a bottle of Schnapps to ease her clear anxiety. She is so insistent because she was invited by a popular boy, Luke, who seems to accept the autistic traits she believes typically turn others off. Given this boy's kindness (and cuteness) she is determined to lose her virginity to him. However, when her crush is evident, the boy gently turns her down and Matilda asks if he was only

being nice to her because he felt he had to, because she's "different." Not really answering that question, he leaves Matilda devastated and now truly on her own at this party.

She runs to the back of the house, where an RV is on the lawn and one of Luke's friends, Zane, is inside it and witness to her breakdown. She rants to Zane about the situation, he confirms he thinks Luke rejected her because she has autism, and Matilda asserts she is still "a woman" with a "budding sexuality" and that all she wanted was to have sex, claiming "it didn't have to be long, or good." She then asks Zane is she's pretty, he agrees she is, and she repeats "I am pretty" to herself like a mantra. She then kisses Zane and insists she wants to have sex. Zane demurs at first, half-heartedly saying he's "not sure" while Matilda remains insistent. Recalling hooks' (1984) observation that sex positivity often still reflects gendered notions of "natural" sex drives, Matilda indignantly asks "aren't teen boys always supposed to want to have sex?" and this seems to be what tips Zane into hesitant agreement, as he now initiates their kissing. As they proceed, how she views herself as different from other girls clearly continues to worry her; she half-apologizes, "I can't wear Victoria's Secret lingerie like the cool girls, I can only wear cotton boy shorts," which Zane breezes past saying he does not care. The act itself clearly begins painfully for Matilda and the camera stays on a mid-shot of her face, Zane's face turned away, to capture her expression as it goes from pain to something between excitement and wonder as she marvels "we're doing it, we're having sex." We then cut immediately to their getting dressed afterward, Matilda confidently saying "I think we can get *a lot* better at it" – a statement that both indicates she did not have a particularly good time, but also not such a bad one that she wouldn't consider sleeping with Zane again. However, Zane clearly

understands something questionable has occurred here, as his only response is to ask that she not tell anyone what happened, and she agrees.

However, despite this promise of silence, we immediately cut to Matilda's younger sister Genevieve needing to offload this secret to her friend Tallulah, Matilda clearly having told her almost immediately. "Doesn't this sound so bad?" Genevieve asks anxiously and her friend concurs, "that is literally the worst story I have ever heard." They become increasingly hysteric over all the reasons it was bad, namely that she was drunk and had been crying just beforehand (Tallulah will add: "and autistic!" when they reiterate this list later), and conclude she was "taken advantage of." Tallulah, the most outspoken of the preteen set of characters on the show, asserts the women of the school must know about Zane, declaring, "if we have learned anything from recent history, it's that we women are all responsible for each other." The show is clearly framing Tallulah as a little too enamored with her own crusade, as she forgets what Matilda might want entirely. However, the circumstances do not negate Tallulah's statement, either. It is telling that it is her sister whom Matilda confides in and that it is fellow girls, ones with no sexual experience themselves but with knowledge of the current discourses about feminism and consent, who can articulate why this situation feels wrong. Everything comes to a head when Genevieve and Tallulah confront Zane publicly, getting the attention of the principal, and subsequently Zane's father and Nicholas. Zane immediately wants to simply get out of the situation; with the blessing of his father and the principal he leaves the meeting, ignoring Matilda on the way out, and any pretense that he might have been one of the "good guys" is now gone. When the father continues to be dismissive and the principal hedges that the situation

seems "complicated" Nicholas cuts him off: "Nope, not complicated. It's simple. Drunk, crying, underage, autistic."

While three adult men sit inside a room, arguing over first if it really happened and then, how bad it really was, the two girls sit outside, physically cut off from this conversation about them. Matilda asserts, "I was fine with it, why won't you believe me?" clearly upset that she is not trusted with her own mind rather than the circumstance under which she had sex. Later, they go home and Matilda and Nicholas have a long conversation about what has happened that moves them around their home, ranging over the course of a night. Matilda starts be asserting, "I used him. I just needed to tick the box [meaning lose her virginity]" and later exclaiming, "I'm so confused, I thought we were sex positive!" and Nicholas responding, "We are sex positive, but this particular situation, it's tricky." Matilda makes clear she then needs rules: is she or is she not allowed to have sex when drunk? If she wasn't crying about the sex, but Luke, does that make Zane okay? When Nicholas tells her that, in this case, he can't give her black and white rules she wonders why Nicholas could have sex when drunk or sad, but she cannot. "Is it because I'm a girl? Or because I have autism? Or something else I don't understand?" And Nicholas answers it's unfair but yes, it is all of those things. Still frustrated and confused, Matilda moves on to an attempt to clearly define rape, describing a rape scene in a movie that was violent, where the woman was held against her will, and said she thought that was rape. Nicholas, fumbling with his answer, tries to explain that there is a "rainbow of rape" that ranges from what she just described from the movie to the "highly controversial grey area we find ourselves firmly in." Matilda wants him to tell her if she was or was not raped but he concludes "I wasn't there…if you say you weren't, then I think I have to believe you." Nicholas begins to

question his own righteous stance in the principal's office because Matilda claims that he and Genevieve ruined her excitement and now she's embarrassed a group of adult authority figures know about her sex life.

The storyline ends in this uncertain place. On the one hand, the show is primarily filtered through Nicholas' perspective and so it is easy to have to sit in the same emotions he does here – while we may be uncomfortable with the situation, ultimately we just have to believe Matilda when she says it was what she wanted, and she is fine with the situation. However, unlike Nicholas, we the audience *were* there, in the scene with Matilda, and also have the further perspective to see how her insecurities about her autism directly intersect with her insecurities about her sexual desirability. Her unwavering assertions to Nicholas and Genevieve that she knew exactly what she wanted and got it are colored by our own knowledge she may not have quite understood herself as well as she believes in that moment. Ultimately, then, a question over her agency (did this repeated refrain of circumstances – drunk, crying, autistic – render her unable to be truly agentive in that moment) also becomes a question of intention, the two becoming inextricably intertwined. While the tone of *EGBO* is not anywhere near so bleak or punishing as *Euphoria,* in many ways this recalls what throws Jules' sexual encounters into grey areas of consent as well. Jules' complex feelings around her trans identity prompt her to prove her femininity through sex with men; likewise, Matilda's insecurities about her neurodivergent identity prompt her to prove her feminine appeal through sex with men. In both cases, it is the implication that these are not the right motivations that complicate their sexual agency, and the wrongness is rooted in the complex intersections of identity with their status as girls in a patriarchal world where no amount of feminism can shake the feeling that their

value is decided by men. The boys prove themselves to be dangers, to be sure, but also largely inconsequential to what the girl *really* needs to learn about why she pursued sex in the way that she did, and which resulted in a situation that falls somewhere in that "controversial grey area." Neither Jules nor Matilda are shamed within the show for their sexual drive in and of itself, but also learn that within patriarchal (and transphobic, ableist) worlds, they also must be on-guard, and other girls should be on-guard for themselves and their peers as well. It is notable that while these characters and the shows themselves are framed as sex positive, they also seem to say that the "more and better" model of sex positivity is impossible in this environment – the girls of teen TV are having more sex, but it's certainly not better – and that is because it is still occurring within a misogynistic milieu. Yet the lesson at the heart of this conclusion is simply to remain constantly vigilant of sexism and the ever-present potential for mistreatment by boys and men, but what remains unclear is how one would go about remaining sex positive in such an environment.

Conclusion

Hollywood is dealing with a complex cultural moment, wherein popular feminism is in the cultural zeitgeist, but which is met with conservative voices that have more opportunity than ever to spread messages of moral panic. These storylines and the behind-the-scenes discussions thus contain all of the complex considerations being weighed when tackling a story about teen sexuality in this particular moment. Creatives want to touch upon timely, sensitive topics such as sexual assault, they want to reflect socially progressive, feminist ideas such as sex positivity and acknowledge that teen girls can and should be granted sexual agency, and they also fear that such subject matter can easily veer into controversy

or accusations of poor representation and/or role modeling. While this is certainly a unique confluence of considerations, it still exists within a history of teen-oriented television and past program's reception. Popular media meant for teens has always been a place where societal fears for young people collect, especially when it comes to fears about their behaviors and beliefs around sex. There have assuredly been strides made when it comes to moral panics around queer sexuality and/or the sexual agency of girls; in many ways, we can see that progress plainly in the proliferation of teen series that represent a broad range of sexualities and sexual scenarios quite explicitly.

What this means for teen girls is that representations of their sexuality and sexual agency have widened considerably, in line with an understanding of sex positivity that follows the ethos of popular feminism. This is then met with an understanding of the patriarchal world girls live in – a message still certainly in accord with popular feminism but that also invariably cautions girls, specifically, in their sexual acts. They must be on alert for the myriad ways they can be sexually harassed, violated, and assaulted. In short, to be a sex positive feminist means also learning the ways that ideology can be taken advantage of in a patriarchal world and adjusting one's behavior accordingly. My interviews with industry workers reveals how such a representation of teen girl sexuality comes to be – the considerations of the current TV landscape, the companies they work for, their S&P departments, and their own personal beliefs and desires for the projects that are all weighed and produce a particular type of representation. A textual analysis then shows how these overlapping considerations play out within the content of the show itself. Teen TV has found itself on the upswing in a new media cycle, and in updating and redefining the

boundaries of the genre for the contemporary moment, it is imperative to understand how this in turn updates and redefines our understanding of the teen girl.

<u>Chapter 3: Be Desirable:</u>

<u>The "Sexualization of Girls" Controversy Meets TikTok Body Positivity</u>

If there is any one theme running under all of popular feminism, and that is distilled most clearly to the girls who must learn its lessons, it is that to empower oneself primarily means being confident in oneself. Supporting all the lessons of instructional feminism is the idea that a girl should have total faith in herself and her abilities to achieve these feats of success. Everyone should "love yourself" – as an oft-repeated Internet slogan would have it – and girls should love themselves enough to reach for high profile careers even as teens, to understand their sexual boundaries perfectly and solely enforce them, and, as this chapter will explore, they should love themselves enough to feel little to no insecurities about their bodies. As Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, the theme of confidence is also one that "circulates in an economy of visibility with remarkable ease and reach" (p. 92). It is a nice message, in itself, but also so palatable, asking so little of anyone else or any institution, that it is also an extremely marketable idea, too. Further complicating this seemingly unobjectionable lesson, such an imperative ignores all the many systemic and cultural reasons that girls are also taught not to feel confident or love themselves, reasons that can come from the very same sources imploring girls to achieve this personal empowerment. Instructional feminism is, after all, conditional. Girls can be present and future career women *if* they present themselves as exceptional; girls can have sexual agency *if* they guard it accordingly from men and boys; and as this chapter will explore, girls can display that sexual body publicly *if* they properly frame that display as empowerment.

The display of girls' bodies in public has long been a fraught one, as with it comes the fear that in the display, the girl subject has been opened up to a process of sexualization. Currently, the girl is nowhere on display so much as on the social media platform TikTok. While TikTok is currently a timely topic, panics over the "sexualization of girls" have sprung up periodically since the Victorian era (Buckingham et al., 2010; Egan, 2013; Tsaliki, 2015), recently reaching a zenith in the mid-2000s when postfeminist hypersexualization in media intersected with the rising visibility of girlhood in mass media (Egan, 2013; Ringrose et al., 2015). This discourse has once again found itself revived, this time in large part due to social media and girl stars' prominence on TikTok in particular, but it no longer finds itself in agreement with feminist takes on hypersexualization. Instead, it finds itself in tension with popular feminist frameworks, specifically the body positivity movement that is also largely enabled by social media. The question then becomes, if we are no longer in a postfeminist media landscape and are instead in a popular feminist landscape wherein messages condemning hegemonic beauty culture are common, how can girls still be framed as victims of a culture that wishes to sexualize and objectify them?

By analyzing several of the most prominent teen girl stars on TikTok and their videos, I examine how the prevalence of the "body positivity movement" and its rhetoric exists alongside the simultaneous celebration of and panic over girls putting themselves and their bodies on display for public consumption. I argue that the body positivity framework does not so much highlight these tensions as it is a tool used to bridge them. Much like professionalizing themselves and claiming sexual agency, when girls put their appearance on display for public consumption, they are able to escape the common moral panics surrounding the crossing of a traditional adult/adolescent boundary if they frame it

within a legibly popular feminist framework, insofar as the moral panics surrounding adolescents' use of social media are less about sexualization specifically and more a general worry that their mental health and self-esteem are negatively impacted. As I will expand upon, in the moral panic over the sexualization of girls, conservative and feminist voices often find themselves in brief (if shaky) agreement, and thus pushback must wend itself carefully through both of these perspectives. However, in framing their use of social media as "empowering" or "positive" – catchall terms that can cover myriad actions, beliefs, and feelings for both themselves and their viewers – these TikTok stars re-set the terms of the debate to no longer be about their sexualization. The debate instead is if their visible prominence empowers or victimizes them and, while not all voices agree, it does sidestep past rhetoric that only saw girls as victims, and which pathologized the girl for the viewer's sexual gaze.

In the case of the TikTok stars I followed, the potential that a girl may be viewed as sexually desirable by others (and with the likelihood that "others" includes adults) can be avoided or tacitly accepted if the girl uses the language of the body positivity movement. The girl claims ownership over her body by framing its display as an act of empowerment, rather than one in which an adult, male gaze will sexualize it. Many scholars have established how postfeminist discourses also frame visibility as empowerment (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2011; Gill, 2007). The adoption of body positivity by the girls of TikTok follow in this vein but have a slight variation – there is a feminist aim to their display, specifically to challenge hegemonic beauty standards and those that would seek to enforce them.

Again, when popular feminist rhetoric is adopted by girl culture it is not simply political, but instructional. In this case, the girl is not only defying beauty standards but

learning acceptable ways to make herself visible in a culture that increasingly requires and rewards visibility, yet still forces girls to walk a tightrope on when that visibility may or may not be "dangerous" to them. Yet if this rhetoric is understood as instructional, then girls can equally "fail" these lessons, or actively defy them, the results of which are my focus here. I focus on the case study of TikTok star Danielle Cohn. After being accused of photoshopping her body and face in photos when she was 12-13, and therefore not properly adhering to the values of body positivity, Cohn abandoned the visuals and aesthetics that would mark her as a "good girl." Today, she displays her curvy body proudly in revealing clothing, but by and large she eschews the language of body positivity to do this and instead emphasizes her status as a sexually desirable subject. In her TikTok videos, she emphasizes behaviors that would clearly classify her in the "at risk" designation of girlhood (Harris, 2003) such as her romantic life, her seemingly active, queer sex life, and her refutation of the standards for girls that dominate on the platform. These videos exist in tension with a complex star text that sees adults repeatedly trying to place her within the framework of victim, especially in relation to her "sexualization," while Cohn herself resists being easily classified into binaristic good girl/bad girl or at-risk/can-do designations. Adult accounts of Cohn's stardom often try and fail to reconcile her seemingly at-odds embodiment of both "body positivity" and behaviors that put her at-risk for "sexualization," yet Cohn's failure to take on the lessons of instructional feminism allow her to continually insist on occupying a third space between these binaries, one that can simultaneously insist on the normalcy of teen girl sexuality without attaching anxieties for her future self to it. Via the case study of Cohn, I demonstrate how the failures to learn the lessons of

instructional feminism can create its own set of opportunities to create a third space for girlhood between the binaries so often found in discourses about girls, even feminist ones.

Deconstructing The "Sexualization of Girls" Discourse:

Fears that young girls are "being sexualized" is an oft-recurring discourse that often peaks in moments when girls are particularly visible in popular culture and/or there is a sense that social mores around gender and sexuality are shifting, and specifically shifting away from white, middle-class norms and values (Kehily, 2012; Egan, 2013). As I've noted previously, when it comes to the latter, arguments that center the hypothetical harms of these changing values to adolescents are an easy and popular well to draw from. In the case of sexualizing girls, I will focus on the revival of this debate that happened in the 2000s, usually dated as beginning anew in U.S., U.K., and Australian contexts around 2006 (Egan, 2013; Renold et al., 2015), as the most direct precursor to the contemporary recurrence of this debate. At this time, a flurry of white papers, policy proposals, parenting guides, press articles, and books came out investigating the presumed problem of girlhood sexualization. Books such as Patricia Opplinger's *Girls Gone Skank: The Sexualization of Girls in American Culture* (2008) or M. Gigi Durham's *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Girls and What We Can Do About It* (2009) proclaimed this to be a widespread problem in Western media, the effect of which is that "young girls are increasingly taught to go to outrageous lengths in seeking male attention" (Opplinger, 2008) and which "undermine[s] girls' self confidence" (Durham, 2009).

An oft-cited 2008 report from the American Psychological Association sums up the stance from this particular round of such arguments well. The report defines

“sexualization” as having distinct characteristics that “set it apart from healthy sexuality” which include being objectified and defining a person’s value solely from their sexual appeal, but key to the application to children is the fourth criteria: “sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.” The report goes on to clarify that this means children are “imbued with adult sexuality” which is then different from age-appropriate self-explorations of sexuality or exposure to sexual information, but where that line resides or what makes something “age-appropriate” is undefined. And while the report notes that studies show relatively small percentages of media images “sexualizing” children (a seemingly rather important caveat that is never returned to) the authors note those that do are overwhelmingly of girls, thus making this primarily a gendered issue (APA Task Force 2008).

Later mentions of how sexualization might manifest not only undercut the previous assertions that such a definition allows space for the girls to explore their own sexuality, but demonstrate how the responsibility of sexualization gets transferred to regulating girls’ own curiosity and identity-work. For example, the study notes one clear sign of sexualization is “if girls purchase (or ask their parents to purchase) products and clothes designed to make them look physically appealing and sexy, and if they style their identities after the sexy celebrities who populate their cultural landscape, they are, in effect, sexualizing themselves." The consequences laid out are then commonplace arguments for the effects of sexualization, all of which pathologize girls and girlhood. The report concludes that the negative effects of sexualization are found in the “cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality and attitudes and beliefs” of girls themselves (APA Task Force, 2008).

Such discourses are not alone in identifying an overall increase in sexualized imagery in the media at this time, often described as "striptease culture" (McNair, 2002) or the "sexualization of culture" (Attwood, 2006). Given that this trend appeared concurrently with the "girl moment" of the 1990s and 2000s, these two media trends became intertwined in the "sexualization of girls" discourse. And there are legitimate concerns to be had about the ways in which sexual images are tied to notions of empowerment in a postfeminist media sphere and how children are brought into consumer culture generally speaking, and this more sexual consumer sphere specifically. Feminist theorists note how this newly sexualized culture is often presented as liberatory for women, but is instead "sexism with an alibi" (Whelehan, 2000). Likewise, theorists of "corporate pedophilia" posit that corporations are commodifying and capitalizing on eroticized images of young girls and thus normalizing sexual desire for children (Bray, 2008).

Thus, in this period there is a recurring image of "a new proto-sexual girl child," but ultimately the concern over this figure is rooted in a concern over how visible this makes the non-linearity of the trajectory between girlhood and womanhood, belying cultural myths for adults that such a transition has firm boundaries that mark the crossing from one to the other (Renold & Ringrose, 2011). Such concerns often started within feminist discourses about the representation of women and girls in the media, but this school of thought was quickly co-opted by a more conservative discourse, disconnecting it from a feminist critique. Instead, "changing norms of femininity become framed as a problem not of sexism, but primarily of public decency" (Duschinsky, 2013, p. 259), seen in common cries that "indecent" of "deviant" behavior was being glamorized by the media, rather than looking towards the institutional forms of sexism that objectifies women and girls.

And so quite easily, the many reports, books, and articles written in the '00s lamenting the image of the proto-sexual girl-child "enable commentators to draw moral boundaries around (hetero)normative and age-appropriate notions of girlhood sexuality, isolating and regulating what is acceptable and unacceptable desire and practice" (Ringrose et al., 2013, p. 390). In drawing such boundaries around girlhood, accounts such as this miss three key, interconnected things. First, that the concept of "sexualization" itself is vague and broadly construed, so any number of behaviors and images can fall under this umbrella. Secondly, that it suggests someone, namely an adult, is doing this to the girl via their gaze and thus it is not reflective of the lived experience of girlhood at all. And yet, thirdly, despite both these previous points, such accounts invariably center the girl and her behaviors as the problem and thus, while the sexualized girl is a somewhat abstracted concept, actual girls find themselves more highly surveilled and regulated, and their sexuality classified into the pathologized binary of "healthy" or "unhealthy." Ultimately, as this framing of the issue would have it, it is up to the girl to internalize these messages and act accordingly.

Thus, the debate is not rooted in the actual sexual behaviors or beliefs of girls, but is instead indicative of how "adults have constructed a particular social problem called sexualization" (Egan, 2013, p. 17). All studies that center girls' own viewpoints seem to come to similar conclusions: that talk about romance and attraction are not only commonplace but considered highly normative within girlhood peer groups, especially in the safe space of friendships with other girls. Additionally, this talk is not an indication that the girls are sexually active nor that they plan to become so any time soon, but instead it allows them a space to begin to map their own identities and place themselves within

(almost invariably heteronormative) cultural scripts around sexuality and desire. This troubles any clear-cut binaries between innocent child and sexually knowing woman. The very fact of sexuality is not something "imposed" upon girls by adults, but is instead something seemingly quite central to girlhood cultures and identity-work (Kehily, 2012; Renold and Ringrose, 2011; Allen and Ingram, 2015; Tsaliki, 2015). When girls did touch on aspects of the sexualization discourse, it was clear what they had internalized, or at least could repeat, moral/propriety arguments about "proper" femininity. They were much more eager to demonstrate they had learned these lessons rather than appear sexually open. They had also picked up on some of the feminist strands of such arguments, namely through pointing out the dangers and impossibilities of contemporary feminine beauty standards (Tsaliki, 2015).

These complications in the girls' discourse demonstrates that, while this discourse is primarily a problem from an adult point of view, it is girls who experience its material effects, especially in the cognitive dissonance and impossible double-binds it places girls within. Ringrose and Renold (2011) argue this results in "schizoid subjectivities" a concept they pull from Deleuzian theory wherein gender and sexuality norms "can be simultaneously displaced (what Deleuze and Guatarri would call 'deterritorialized') and refixed ('re-territorialized')" (p. 393). In short, girls experience a constant push and pull between questioning such norms and trying to re-instate them. The individual's movement between these opposing forces can split off in multiple directions, thus "rupturing any linear transition or trajectory (e.g. of the innocent girl child to the sexual woman)" (Ringrose and Renold, 2011, p. 394). There is then another push/pull the girl must contend with, between the "demand for compulsory innocence and compulsory heterosexuality"

and within which norms of race, class and gender are also being fixed (Duschinsky, 2013, p. 261). The girl is being pulled between a concept of childhood innocence and the need to be seen as desirable, when she also must live under the ever-present "threat" of her own sexuality (Duschinksy, 2013, p. 262). Miscalculating any of this marks her as at-risk (of pregnancy, of mental health concerns, of general failure in adulthood) and/or as someone who now has an "unhealthy" sexuality. Additionally, the girls' race or class identity might impose upon her different beauty standards that automatically mark her as sexually pathologized (Kehily, 2012).

The "Body Positivity Movement" and its Confluences With Sexualization Fears

Fears about sexualization's effects on girls that center around the girls' relation to her body (namely, that sexualization will result in eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorder, or more generalized insecurity) and girls' own words demonstrate how frequently and easily conflated understandings of "sexualized" images of girls are with feminine beauty standards writ large. Scholarly research also often overlaps "sexualization" and "body image" concerns in the same studies (Buckingham et al., 2010, p. 23). Both discourses center on how girls come to present their own bodies, especially as it relates to how that body will be presented as attractive to others, and with an imagined boy or man as the viewer. While many point to social media as something that is exacerbating the contingent problems of sexualization and body image issues for girls, social media is also posed as a solution to such problems through the prevalence and spread of "body positive" discourses. These "love your body" discourses (Elias & Gill, 2014) and the imperative to "be confident" (Gill & Orgad, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018) are unique in their primary address to girls and

women and in their explicit ties to feminist movements and language. Put into such language, the display of the body in public, highly visible spaces is rendered as “empowerment,” especially via a reclamation of beauty standards. Phrases from female users that certain styles of dress or makeup application are “for me” rather than for a male gaze, that they are confident in their attractiveness even if not thin, and that they “embrace” perceived flaws on their body abound in TikTok influencer spaces. Yet this ethos is highly contradictory, often covering up a “deeper and more pernicious regulation of women” that is now not simply bodily but psychic as well, and that “proves difficult to critique and perhaps impossible (in Judith Butler’s sense) to live" (Gill & Elias, 2014, p. 180).

The “body positivity movement” has come to encompass several, interrelated strands of discourses. This is why, while often focused on alleviating the pressure to be thin, I separate this discourse from fat activism. The latter focuses solely on fat individuals who face systemic, institutional biases for their fatness. The body positivity movement includes some of this rhetoric, but often instead focuses on the individuals and the “embrace” or “acceptance” of perceived bodily flaws. This has spread from fatness to an entire range of feminine beauty standards; a sample of the TikTok videos I flagged that use the #bodypositive and/or #selflove hashtag include one with a young woman who has grey hair in her twenties and leaves it undyed, extremely thin women pointing to the “flaw” of a lack of curves only to accept said flaw, and women leaving cellulite, skin spots, and “rolls” in the body un-retouched or without a filter on social media.

Such sentiment is in conversation with past feminist discourses about feminine beauty standards. Like all of popular feminism, this includes a mix of Second Wave, Third

Wave, and postfeminist rhetoric. Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990) popularized feminist critiques of the beauty standards perpetuated by the pop culture mainstream. Wolf links the pressure to adhere to increasingly rigorous beauty standards directly to representations of women in the media and women's own increased role in public life, and therefore increased visibility within in. Wolf forwards the idea that beauty is power within societal institutions, but ultimately her main solution is to call for a loosening of beauty standards rather than a questioning of said institutions. In Sandra Lee Bartky's concurrently published *Femininity and Domination* (1990), she more incisively critiques the institutionalized nature of this domination, coining the phrase the "fashion-beauty complex" to liken the fashion and beauty industries to the military-industrial complex. She described this complex as "a vast system of corporations—some of which manufacture products, others services and still others information, images, and ideologies" (Bartky, 1990, p. 39) that are now the primary regulators of femininity. Concerns with how women's bodies are disciplined, with thinness at the center, are seen in Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* (1993). Bordo (1993) notes that while ideologies of bodily discipline are certainly indebted to Foucauldian theory, it is the Second Wave rallying cry that "the personal is political" that understands how women specifically are "largely confined to a life centered *on* the body (both the beautification of one's own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of other bodies)" and that "culture's grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life" (p. 17).

The body positive movement continues these ideas that women are oppressed by beauty standards and that feminine beauty and that pop culture images, especially those produced by the fashion and beauty industries, help to craft, spread, and impose these

standards upon all women. Yet as I will go on to show, body positive rhetoric has lost a key aspect of these arguments, which is the institutionalized nature of power. Key for Bordo (1993) was that "feminist cultural critique is not a blueprint for the conduct of personal life…and does not require individuals to 'rise above' their culture" but instead "its goal is edification and understanding, enhanced *consciousness* of the power, complexity, and *systemic* nature of culture" (p. 30). Instead, current discourse falls prey to postfeminist, neoliberal narratives of individuality. And additionally, it must contend with the changing nature of pop culture and its distribution methods. The beauty standards forwarded by fashion spreads and runways, film actresses, etc. are not interchangeable with the diffuse representation of "average" women that populate social media. Instead, through the use of postfeminist and popular feminist rhetoric, this form of representation can by reconfigured as empowerment. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, central to popular feminism is the idea that it is highly visible and spreadable. However, this once again usually becomes individualized, especially via "confidence" discourses that make the project of visibility a proclamation of one's confidence and wish to instill confidence in others, especially other girls and women. This representation of the body and feminism becomes "simultaneously political, psychological and aesthetic. It links to a wider tendency within some popular feminism – for example that embraced by women's magazines – to figure feminism as an appealing and stylish identity rather than a political movement for change. Its ostensible appeal resides in the construction of a highly aestheticized version of the feminist as someone who is 'beautiful on the inside and the outside'" (Gill & Orgad, 2017, p. 18).

However, not only does this render feminist ideologies as an individualized aesthetic, but to propose social media as a platform to combat beauty standards is rather

ironic given many argue social media causes a more intense, minute surveillance of the self and one's appearance generally (Gill & Elias, 2014; Elias & Gill, 2018). Not only does social media generally increase the widespread visibility of the average girl, resulting in the self-surveillance necessary to "self-branding" (Banet-Weiser, 2011) but there is a proliferation of beauty apps that are "designed to analyse, rate, evaluate, monitor or enhance appearance" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 60). Elias and Gill (2018) define such apps as those that are "selfie-modification" tools i.e. those that can allow users to add filters or easily alter their face and/or body in photos; those that teach beauty techniques; those that allow one to do a "virtual makeover" and see what they would look like with a different hair color or certain plastic surgery procedures; apps that will scan the body for "flaws" and give the users an "honest" assessment of their appearance; and those that allow other users to "rate" other users' attractiveness (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 67-68). While Elias & Gill (2018) looked at apps that provided these functions separately and were meant solely for these beauty purposes, in many ways TikTok still falls under this purview, as its many filter options allow for modification, virtual makeovers, and services that will point out "flaws" such as a popular filter that shows users (but clearly meant for those with feminine features) where their eyebrows "should" be drawn onto their faces. When it comes to "love your body" discourses "social media are presented…as a tool for subversion rather than part of the problem" (Gill & Elias, 2014, p.181) when instead these platforms at best facilitate the problem and at worst exacerbate it.

In short, body positivity may allow for a wider range of body types to claim beauty, which is not a negligible outcome, but there are arguably stricter regulations on what else those bodies must do to achieve feminine beauty standards, a mentality which is enabled

by social media. Relatedly, then, there are also still clear demarcations around who is considered beautiful, namely in terms of race and ethnicity. So while body positivity is intended to apply to all, and its embrace of various body sizes does welcome in women of color to some extent, beauty remains a function of capitalism and therefore tied to its other interstices of power, namely whiteness. As Tressie McMillan Cottom (2019) argues, "beauty isn't actually what you look like; beauty is the preferences that reproduce the existing social order" (p. 44). Beauty is capital, and because it can function as a currency of power, beauty's main goal is to "exclude blackness. That beauty also violently conditions white women and symbolically precludes the existence of gender nonconforming people is a bonus" (McMillan Cottom, 2019, p. 45).

As capital it is valuable, and so it is no wonder women seek to name it and claim it for themselves, both in trying to adhere to beauty norms and activist attempts to redefine beauty. While Western ideologies of gender and beauty may center and value whiteness, Dosekun (2020) makes the important point that this does not mean non-Western, non-white women will not be interpellated into those ideologies. She argues, "thus, while postfeminism is not for white girls only, or for white girls really, we can say that it works through them in particular kinds of ways" (Dosekun, 2020, p. 10). Dosekun's subjects in Lagos, Nigeria adhered to rigorous beauty routines to try and secure the value of beauty, but she notes that they often took "rest" periods, where they gave themselves and their bodies breaks from such routines. However, she notes this only served the neoliberal purpose that all women must now be "aesthetic entrepreneurs" – they not only have the knowledge and skills for extensive beauty regimens, but also now know when they need to hold off to preserve the health of their hair, or nails, or skin, leading to constant "aesthetic

vigilance" even in these ostensible "off" periods. The rest only exists so that they may go back to the intense regimen and all the neoliberal, capitalist promises it holds for women (Dosekun, 2017).

I argue the body positivity movement is not dissimilar to Dosekun's (2017) periods of "rest" described here, or Angela McRobbie's (2020) conception of the perfect-imperfect-resilience (p-i-r) dispositif. When the perfect cannot be achieved there is an acknowledgement of imperfection and then a message of "resilience," usually in the form of personal overcoming narrative or being able to laugh about the imperfection. The "imperfect" is still framed as a flaw, but one girls and women can "learn to love," and that learning can only take place within neoliberal frameworks of personal "strength" and independence (McRobbie, 2020, p. 44-46). In short, periods of "rest" or acknowledgement of a failure to achieve perfection allows space to concede the impossibility of feminine beauty standards only to provide the conditions for which women can return to the pursuit of that ideal. McMillan Cottom (2019) embraces her own "unattractiveness" because "even our resistance becomes a means to commodify, and what is commodified is always, always stratified" (p. 59). In short, something like the body positivity movement, as performed and commodified on social media platforms, will always reside under the systems of power that create a hierarchical definition of beauty. Such a definition is impossible for any woman or girl to fully achieve, but nonetheless some will always be closer to accessing the capital it provides while others, namely those who are not white, able-bodied, or gender-conforming, will never have true access to that capital. This produces contradictory narratives – women and girls still receive messages that there are myriad flaws they must have knowledge of and correct about their bodies, while also hearing insistent messages that they should love

their bodies no matter what, producing additional psychological pressure (Gill & Elias, 2014; McRobbie, 2020; Backstrom, 2019). A girl is supposed to hear the ever-present critiques of the feminine body, to live in a white supremacist, heteronormative society, but never allow herself to be personally ground down by it.

While doing an ethnographic study of teens at a fat camp, Backstrom noted that while well-meaning, such messages were harmful to girls, albeit in a more fraught and complex process than that produced by straightforward anti-fat discrimination. She concluded, “the camp was able to strongly influence the children’s beliefs about fatness, weight loss, and their sense of self precisely because the shaming and stigmatizing messages were sugarcoated with messages of empowerment, acceptance, and positive emotional experiences" (Backstrom, 2019, p. 132). As such, my critique of the body positive movement is not that it is hollow in its sentiments per se, although certainly at moments it can be that. It is that such messages work to obscure the incredibly present and arguably increasing pressures of feminine beauty standards on girls, setting them up with yet another impossible task: to never feel (or at least never show that they feel) the ugly emotions that may come from such an environment. And when it is taken together with interconnected narratives about the perils of the teen girl’s body, it serves as instruction to girls for how to individualize their response to widespread misogyny, make that response palatable, and still present herself as a proper, popular feminist figure.

Good Vibes Only: Girls’ Visibility on Social Media

As noted, key to the fears of sexualization and the spread of the body positivity movement is the role of the Internet and social media specifically. Beyond changing norms around

gender and sexuality, a key component that set off the '00s moral panic around sexualization and that continues to be at the heart of the discourse today is the fear over what Internet usage is "doing" to young people and how it is changing adolescence (Tsaliki, 2015; Egan, 2013). These arguments follow the hypodermic needle theory of media covered in Chapter Two, by which having access to more sexual content via the Internet means the girl herself will become sexual. A similar line of reasoning is taken up by the body positivity movement, but in this case for good – that by being exposed to more diverse body types and notions of beauty online, girls will start to accept and love their own bodies. Of course, media does not have such clean effects for its audience in either direction. And while users on these platforms might spread messages of body positivity, the interfaces and functionality of social media rewards bodily display. Thus, platform norms continue to shape how girls present themselves on apps and how they present their relationship to their body.

A central, overarching behavioral and presentational norm established for girls on social media is a need to walk a very thin line between adhering to very high expectations for young, female neoliberal subjects in terms of both appearance and achievement while simultaneously still appearing to be approachable, likable, and pleasing. Akane Kanai (2019) agues they do so through "feeling rules" – emotional and affective labor that allows girls to turn their own struggles with self-regulation (such as consuming "too many" calories) into "humorous, relatable struggles" (p. 61). This once again recalls McRobbie's (2020) p-i-r dispositif, as the futility of the endeavor to be perfect is acknowledged, but that acknowledgment must be countered by the woman or girl demonstrating she remains resilient. Here, she can still crack a joke.

When it comes to girls specifically, and not just women generally, Natalie Coulter (2021) finds a similar phenomenon is how girls are constantly depicted as, and depict themselves as, “fun.” Once again, this crafts them into ideal neoliberal subjects, who may nominally sport some “girl power” rhetoric (or, in the case of the TikTok users I look to, vaguely feminist body positive rhetoric) but these images ultimately support neoliberal fantasies of the woman/girl who is forever happy in her place. Most importantly, she is a happy consumer. In the end, “the fun girl…is the antithesis of the feminist killjoy" (Coulter, 2021, p. 496) in that she can repeat messages that have some basis in feminism, but this is only allowed because she is does not display any of those unattractive feelings Kanai (2019) notes as off limits, namely anger. Thus, the expression of something at least tangentially related to feminism like body positivity becomes palatable when girls deploy some amalgam of these “feeling rules” – humor, affects of fun, and resilience – to ensure she is neither the at-risk girl nor the dreaded figure of the feminist killjoy.

Methodology

To begin research on this chapter, I followed several of the most popular TikTok accounts belonging to young women[3]. As of early 2023, the girls at the center of these accounts are either still teenagers or were when they became famous on the platform (or on its predecessor Vine) and are now in their early 20s. These include Charli D’Amelio (17), Dixie D’Amelio (20), Loren Gray (19), Mackenzie Ziegler (17), Avani Gregg (19), Dominik Lipa

[3] I will be quoting from social media accounts heavily in my analysis. Within these texts, the users employ a combination of generational slang and internet vernacular that is commonly used on these platforms and which often ignores spelling and grammar rules. For ease of reading, then, I do not include a correctional [sic] at every grammatical error in the quotes, but only when relevant to quoted spoken words or there appears to be an actual typo.

(20), Haley Sharpe (19), Addison Rae (21), Jalaiah Harmon (16), and Danielle Cohn (17). I based this selection on both follower counts and widespread notoriety, including in the celebrity ecosystem outside of TikTok. I have attempted to make this group as diverse as possible (Gregg and Harmon are both Black American girls, Lipa is Mexican); however, white, American, cis-gendered girl stars dominate both in terms of follower counts, but they also dominate the narrative of who is a "TikTok star". They are profiled and covered by the press with more frequency (although this is of course informed by my own biases towards English-language press, it is telling to me that Lipa does not even have a Wikipedia page, for instance, despite having 66 million followers) and are given far more opportunities outside of TikTok to build a star image. Thus, my own sample here is lacking in diversity because it is reflective of who is widely touted as a "TikTok star" – which only then further fuels those girls' follower counts and reinforces their popularity. I also followed several accounts of girls and women who posted content that predominantly addresses topics of body positivity as well as followed the hashtags #bodypositivity and #selflove. I then perform a discursive and textual analysis of these videos, using an interface analysis approach (Stanfill, 2015) to include all functionalities of the app to establish norms around presentation of the self and the invocation of body positive rhetoric. When focusing on Cohn specifically, I integrate a star text analysis that includes the various pieces of gossip and controversy that have surrounded her, focusing primarily on her own words on these subjects in the form of interviews and YouTube videos she posts, as she rarely addresses them on the TikTok platform itself.

I focus on TikTok specifically, and not other visually-oriented apps like Instagram, because the app has become all but synonymous with Gen Z. Its primary user base is

assumed to be quite young and its most prominent creators are predominantly young, white girls who first went viral on the platform when teenagers (and many still are, or have aged into their early 20s). Likewise, it is commonly understood as the "cool" platform for young people – Facebook has been out for years, now widely regarded as the home of embarrassing memes made by Boomers, while articles investigating the allure of TikTok declare that teens think Instagram "sucks now" because of its overly-curated aesthetic, the general banality of the photos that do well in terms of likes and engagement, and youthful users' preference for video content (Jennings, 2019). YouTube remains popular with children and teens, but according to data pulled from parental controls software, TikTok overtook YouTube in average daily minutes watched, both globally and in the U.S. specifically, in 2020 in the under-18 demographic, and that gap has only continued to grow over the years. In 2023, U.S. children watched TikTok for an average of 107 minutes per day, and YouTube for 67 minutes (Perez, 2023). Perhaps most telling of which platforms are perceived as "in" or "out" by the tech industry, Facebook/Meta, Instagram, and YouTube have all tried to ape TikTok in recent months. Facebook switched to displaying a user feed filled with random users posting about topics the user seems interested in, rather than a feed filled with family and friends much like TikTok's "For You Page." Meanwhile, both Instagram and YouTube created short-form video sections ("Reels" and "Shorts," respectively) to try and capture the fun, on-the-fly, less-polished content TikTok is now known for (Harwell, 2022).

This explanation of TikTok as the platform of Gen Z is of course more a product of industry lore than verifiable fact. Actual data on users is hard to acquire both due to the company's secrecy and for the perennial reasons that user identity is hard to determine

online—users can strategically leave out details about themselves, remain entirely anonymous, and outright lie, with no checks from the platform. That said, I've used data from the statistical service employed by digital advertising agencies to set the prices for ad sales on social media platforms – with the caveat that these agencies partner with social media platforms and thus their data reflects both more insider knowledge than the layperson could get and is also certainly being framed in the best possible light by the platform's parent company. But with this data, statements about TikTok's general increasing popularity as a platform, and with younger audiences in particular, hold true. It was the most downloaded mobile app in 2022 worldwide (Ceci, 2023c) and as of April 2023, the largest demographic of users worldwide was women ages 18-24, making up an estimated 20.9% of users (and without reliable age demographic data going younger than that) (Ceci, 2023b). Overall, the 18-24 demo was the largest, at 38.4%, but with the 25-34 demo not far behind at 32.5% (Ceci, 2023b). And finally, the platform does skew female as well, although with slightly less emphasis. Worldwide, female users make up a slight majority, at 53% of TikTok's users (Ceci, 2023c).

Thus, the platform does appear to skew towards Gen Z and young women, though perhaps with a bit less hyperbole than many of the discourses about the platform would currently suggest. But beyond literal demographic data, the repetition of this discourse about TikTok's users means the general understanding of the platform is shaped by the attitudes, trends, and beliefs of Gen Z; a digital world that is their domain, and arguably the only one that caters so fully to them. As Melanie Kennedy (2020) notes, this means not only do we see this youthful bent reflected in the most popular stars on the platform's literal ages, but also "the iconography, rituals, spaces and lifestyles of youth culture can be seen in

TikTok's trends, most notably its dance and stunt challenges; in the mise-en-scène of its videos (so often filmed in messy teenage bedrooms)" (p. 1070). In short, to understand how current youth culture is grappling with issues of bodily aesthetics and visibility, there is no better space for understanding that in this moment than TikTok.

Crafting Norms of Appearance on TikTok

Before delving into what makes creator Danielle Cohn's TikTok persona unique in regard to her presentation of self, I first must establish what norms she is eschewing when it comes to feminine appearance, propriety, and confidence on the app. When it comes to the most popular girl creators on the platform the most common types of videos fall into a few basic categories, with some overlap between them: videos where the girl lip syncs (usually to a song, sometimes to film/TV dialogue), short dances, hair/makeup tutorials, "get ready with me" where the girl documents her process choosing an outfit and doing her hair and makeup (but without the instructional aspect that a tutorial has); and before/after videos wherein the girl first shows herself without any makeup and hair undone and then a viral sound cue cuts to her with an extensive and impressive transformation via makeup and hair. All of the above center traditional modes of femininity and putting one's body and face on display.

In many ways, these videos fall in line with histories of girlhood activities, investigated by scholars in past digital spaces such as YouTube (Banet-Weiser, 2011) and via the general "bedroom culture" that sees a focus on fashion, makeup, and making up silly dances with friends as key pieces of girlhood-specific leisure (McRobbie, 1991; Walkerdine, 1997). This bedroom culture has shifted increasingly to a space of productivity, where the

ease and relative cheapness of creating one's own media content mean it is no longer simply a culture of consumption, but one in which girls are also producers who create their own media (Kearney, 2007). And while the most famous girls on TikTok often look much older than their years and acquit themselves with the professionalism and self-branding practices that come with being a micro-celebrity, there is still a sense of precociousness to these videos. The lip syncs and dances usually come off as relatively unpracticed – not the work of professional dancers but instead the work of teen girls just having fun. Friends often appear with the girls in their videos, especially dancing ones, once again lending the air of friends hanging out after school or at a sleepover (even if, in many cases, these friends are also TikTok-famous and the crossover serves to enhance celebrity as well). Creators will often keep in shots where they mess up in a humorous way or will show the friends dissolving into laughter at the end rather than cutting right at the end of the dance. Finally, the settings themselves add to this on-the-fly, casual air; they film these videos in kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms that bear all the trappings of their teen girlhood and relative normalcy in the face of their outsized popularity on the platform, albeit one that also often demonstrates these girls live in some degree of upper-middle-class wealth.

These girls also drive hair, makeup, and fashion trends on the platform that instantiate particular aesthetic choices as the norm, usually in conjunction with the algorithmic functionality of the app that means certain video types and sound cues come to equally shape those aesthetics. There are two clear aesthetic modes, put into stark relief by the ubiquity of the before/after videos. The first mode is naturalistic. The girl is either seemingly wearing no makeup and has not done anything to style her hair, or both are done to seem “natural” – dewy complexions without visible foundation, mascara but not

fake eyelashes, lip and cheeks tints rather than fully saturated lipsticks and blushes. Their hair is often artfully messy in ponytails or buns. This look is often paired with a casual (albeit still trendy) outfit of "athleisure," the portmanteau denoting the trend of leisure wear that is elevated from being simply pajamas by also mimicking sportswear. Thus it often includes tight leggings and/or crop tops. At the time of researching and writing, the most common form this took was over-sized, crew neck sweaters paired with spandex bike shorts. This look serves to either be a "before" (albeit one that still clearly involves thought and some level of effort) or to denote more casual, "hang out" types of videos.

The other main aesthetic mode is the opposite then, a highly made-up, glamorous look that features heavy, intricate makeup, hair done in large, shiny waves, and trendy outfits. Makeup features heavily, as it also appears to be the main topic for instructional videos as these girls will not only go through their thought process, as in a "get ready with me" video, but provide tips for how they achieve their looks, and often include brand names that are undoubtedly endorsement deals. While the trends here can ebb, such looks usually include a full face of contoured foundation, meaning the girl paints her entire face in various shades of foundation to emphasize cheekbones and jawlines while slimming her nose before blending. It also usually includes a dramatic eye makeup look, often including glitter, saturated colors, and/or intricate application of liquid eyeliner. Finally, it usually includes a bold lip color and drawn-on eyebrows. All of these features usually require multi-step process and a plethora of products [Figure 1]. Finally, this is usually paired with trendy outfits. Even more so than makeup, fashion trends on the platform cycle with rapidity, but what continues to dominate are crop tops (sometimes showing of the stomach, sometimes met by high-waisted pants), and tight dresses or skirt/top sets

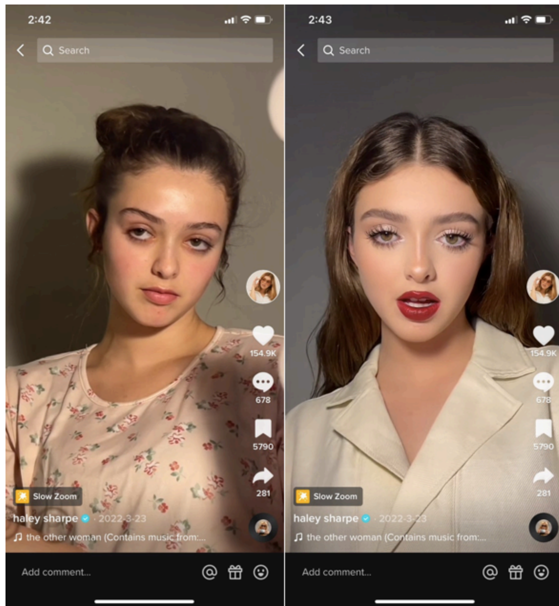

Figure 1: Haley Sharpe (@yodelinghaley) does a before and after make-up video

featuring cutouts, ruching, and/or bright colors crafted for social media by brands such as Fashion Nova.

TikTok itself then feeds the ubiquity of these two modes by placing these already popular stars on average users' "For You" suggestion feeds and making the mimicking of certain video types easy with the ability to craft videos around a soundbite. Once a particular soundbite is associated with a certain dance, lip sync, or before/after video transformation, the girls who establish these trends (or widely popularize them) then dictate the norms of appearance that go with that particular sound meme. Brands that align with these aesthetics or follow in the wake of TikTok trends, like Fashion Nova, then capitalize on it, forming partnerships with the platform's stars and inventing their own memes for the platform in order to make their sponsored content go viral. Thus, while these girls are following trends, they are not simply coming from the fashion industry top-down, but are facilitated and circulated via the TikTok ecosystem of interface, sharing features, the algorithm, and monetization practices.

These aesthetic and content choices must of course be understood within the context of Internet micro-celebrities, who rely upon projecting authenticity, displaying their "real" relationships, and cultivating a seemingly personal connection to fans to construct their status as a celebrity (Marwick, 2013; Abidin, 2015). Likewise, TikTok stars are adhering to practices of self-branding that Banet-Weiser (2011) noted in even the most

casual of teen girl YouTube users in the early years of that platform, although the TikTok stars have monetized this girlish version into a literal personal brand. And so, what makes the visibility of these girls notable is not the balance of authenticity they must perform in itself. While they must also do this, scholars have well-covered the high wire act of performing authenticity while simultaneously self-branding that online micro-celebrities must balance, and TikTok stars largely follow such patterns. Instead, what interests me is that these girls also must perform a separate, concurrent balancing act: even while they make quite clear the amount of time and effort that goes into displaying their appearance (evidenced in tutorials and getting ready videos) they also must proclaim body positivity, namely in an embrace of their "flaws" and in a purported lack of care for or refutation of the inevitable critical, sexist comments they receive about their appearance from commentators.

This is primarily done by including self-deprecating humor in the videos that are hyper-focused on the labor they put in. Additionally, the girls often "call out" negative and misogynistic commenters by drawing attention to their perceived flaws with reassurances that the star is okay with them. Creator Loren Gray provides a good example of this strategy. Gray has 54.3 million followers and numerous sponsorship deals with makeup and fashion brands such as online retailer Oh Polly, makeup brand Charlotte Tilbury, and Target's haircare brand Function of Beauty. She is white, blonde, and thin – seemingly the beauty ideal – but as noted, the "body positivity" movement has been co-opted by many women that fit normative beauty ideals in order to address personal insecurities, rendering the movement into one of personal confidence. Gray fits into this paradigm via humor, frequently making self-deprecating videos about her appearance and image on the

platform. These videos also often include a fair bit of sarcastic poking at cruel commenters. Usually, this pushback takes the form of ironically co-opting an insult commenters frequently lob at her, which is that she is a "catfish" – slang for someone posing as a different (usually more conventionally attractive) person online and tricking another with this persona. It has since been deployed more generally in misogynistic arguments that girls and women "trick" men into thinking they are more attractive than they "really" are via their makeup application. Given that dramatic makeup transformations are also extremely popular as a video format on TikTok (and Gray is known for her expert and heavy application of makeup), this criticism is lobbed quite frequently on the platform and towards these girl stars. Gray sarcastically calls herself a catfish often in response to such comments and points out that what she is criticized for and what makes her successful on the platform are one and the same. She starts one makeup tutorial saying, "as many of you are aware I am, in fact, a catfish…so I figured why not capitalize on that and show everyone how I do it, what the sorcery is" before launching into a complex routine that nonetheless also pokes fun at herself throughout, lending that air of authenticity required of these stars even as she transforms into the glamorous persona she's known for.

However, sometimes Gray takes aim at her own body, rather than simply responding to commenters. In one such video, Gray follows a sound trend that uses the song "Pocket Rocket" by Cochise which includes lip syncing along to a few lyrics before cutting the camera at the lyric "she be tryin' to flirt" down to the girls' hip and butt moving to the music. Many of the other top stars, such as Addison Rae, did this trend sincerely and when done so, it works as a clear invitation to view the girl as a sexual object. The girl "flirts" by moving in a sexual way and segmenting her own body to just her hips and butt.

Gray starts the video seemingly earnestly, but is barely moving once the camera shifts to her lower half, before cutting abruptly to a close-up of her face, her large eyes blinking and looking off to the side as if in mild embarrassment, before once again cutting to a full-range shot of her body, her hands thrown up in a shrug with the text on screen saying "turns out u gotta have a booty to participate :/". In the full-body shot at the end she turns to the side, providing visual evidence of just how "flat" her backside is. The caption for the entire video reads "walking my noodle ass outta here. y'all killin it tho." [Figure 2]. Gray calls attention to the perceived flaw of not having specific curves, but also demonstrates that she is not actually upset by this by making a joke of it. Her facial expression and body language convey "oh well" instead of any true distress over her own body, as does the ":/" in the caption, conveying the facial expression equivalent of a shrug emoji. She ends by then still complimenting those who can "participate" in this trend, telling this implied group of girls and women who do have the "necessary" curves that they are "killin it," again proving herself to be a good sport and supportive of other women rather than envious.

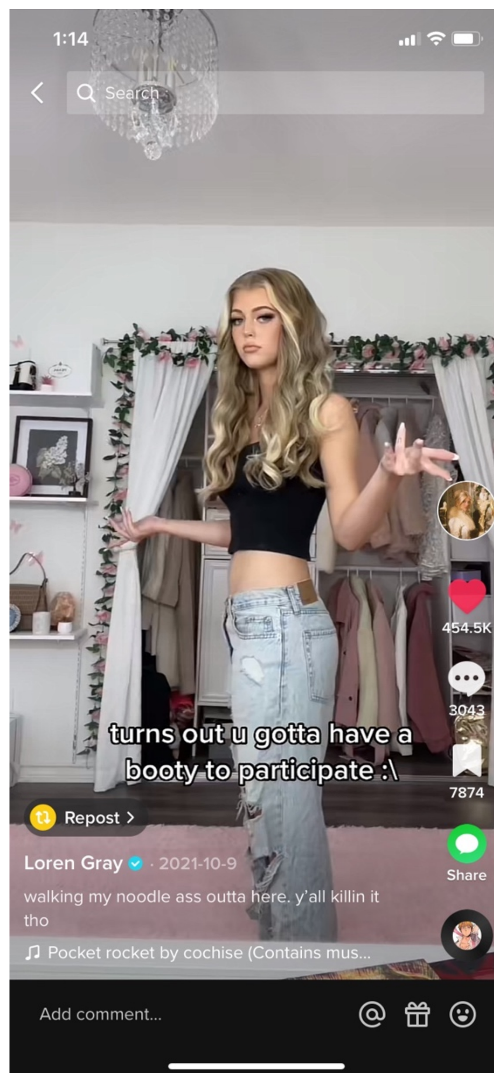

Figure 2

While this vein of self-deprecating humor allows stars to maintain the delicate balance between genuine anger and fun, between vehement feminism and personal empowerment, sometimes they do appear to reach particular breaking points and respond

more sincerely. Often, such responses do not actually happen on the TikTok app itself, but on their other social media platforms. For example, in April of 2020, a flurry of TikTok videos criticizing her body prompted Addison Rae to tweet the following: "i've seen 5-10 tweets & tiktoks today talking negatively about my body and weight… it makes me feel insecure, but luckily i'm looking at it in a different light. i've been very motivated to start eating better and working out everyday to become the healthiest version of myself!" she then threads a follow-up tweet stating "It definitely hurts to see people on my fyp [For You Page] calling me 'a whale' and saying 'she's fat now' and I just want to encourage everyone who hears these things about themselves to love yourself!! if you are healthy and happy, do NOT listen to these hurtful comments. you are perfect." These tweets are earnest in tone and Rae makes clear what has upset her; she does not obfuscate what has been said or that it has hurt her, nor does she try to joke about either of those realities to lessen the emotion behind her words. However, she also elides that such comments are based in misogyny and fatphobia and instead turns the narrative to one of personal empowerment, and ironically one of personal empowerment that also reiterates narratives based in fatphobia. Her own positive response is to align with narratives that see thinness and fitness as akin to virtue – here, to "start eating better and working out everyday" demonstrates that she has risen above such mean-spirited commenters but also assures everyone that she is still doing the labor to maintain feminine beauty standards of thinness, under the guise of health. She then makes a common rhetorical move of taking the emphasis off her individual feelings and making this a universal message of body positivity, urging her undefined (although presumably heavily young and female) audience to "love yourself" and to tell oneself "you are perfect."

In such back-and-forth with commenters, micro-celebrities can utilize their friendships with other micro-celebrities for additional content. These friendships are often one of the facets of their image most heavily leaned upon to connote authenticity and carefree girlishness and so it is unsurprising that while a sincere tone is infrequently used to defend oneself from body-shaming, it is often deployed by these stars when coming to defense of their friends that have been body-shamed. A few weeks after Rae expressed the above frustrations with comments about her body, Charli D'Amelio faced a similar incident and had a similar response to Rae's above. Rae then seemingly came to D'Amelio's defense, tweeting "it is not your job to judge the appearance of another persons face and/or body," following it with, "Just because you can be mean to someone, doesn't mean you should be…I feel like we've all heard the saying 'if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all' at least once growing up... why can't we live by that?" The lack of specificity in the post makes it difficult to say she is directly defending D'Amelio, but the timing (a few hours after D'Amelio posted) and the generalized use of second person makes it easy to assume that she is and most publications that covered the day's events framed it as such (Henry, 2020; Bowenbank, 2020). While this is not wholly dissimilar to the response to her own critics, she is more pointed when she is not defending herself but someone else. Here, she calls such commenters judgmental and mean fairly directly. She also does not feel the need to counter such claims with proof of virtue or bodily control like she did for herself – there is no suggestion D'Amelio should change anything here, only those who feel as though they are entitled to an opinion on her body need to change.

Despite the slightly angrier tone of Rae's defense of D'Amelio, it nonetheless still ends with a very generalized call for kindness, rather than any acknowledgment of how

these girls' gender and age clearly inform the criticism they receive. While I am not critiquing how these girls handle the persistent and cruel comments they get personally, these incidents are demonstrative of the larger trend wherein the reason "body positivity" is needed – i.e. the constant condemnation of women and girls' bodies – becomes obscured to instead forward a much more generalized call for kindness. And it is also clear how the girls feel the need to distance themselves from even these relatively benign statements; they often turn the spotlight away from themselves and point to friends or just people on the internet in general who face a similar constant stream of critique. They also rarely post such strong statements on their TikTok accounts, the platform where they have the most followers and that is most linked to their fame, instead spreading their response between Instagram and Twitter. Their TikToks then remain entirely on brand, containing only the lighter, playful videos that depict a carefree girlhood. In some ways, these responses can be read as overall calls for kindness that keep their performances of the self firmly within the realm of agreeable girlhood that is meant to be fun and light described by Coulter (2021) and Kanai (2019). In Chapter Four, I delve further into why feminists, girls, and girl feminists are often resistant to expressing anger in public personas, and the public figures that refute this mentality and utilize affects of anger to varying effect. However, here, the avoidance of anger or other "negative" affects go hand-in-hand with the general sunny, upbeat, "positive" tonal approach that characterizes the body positivity movement as well.

In sum, superstar creators such as the D'Amelio sisters, Loren Gray, and Addison Rae have played a large part in establishing norms of feminine appearance on the app; the size of their following means they dictate trends in beauty and fashion and even if they do not start meme video trends on the app, their popularity means their iteration will be

pushed to the top of many users' "for you" pages and spread the trend more widely. The trends they have instantiated solidify a feminine appearance that adheres to gendered norms at their most restrictive and most desirable, rendering the feminine body and its desirability highly visible. This opens these girls, and all the users who follow their trends, up to panics over the sexualization of girls. Yet they balance incessant commentary about their appearance with rhetoric lifted from popularized body positivity campaigns. Trying to reconcile these otherwise discordant positions renders this popular iteration of "body positivity" ultimately more supportive of the status quo than disruptive of it, as it simply seeks to absorb certain small variations into an otherwise still-restrictive vision of beauty. These girls are sometimes still the subject of purported concerns for sexualization, but they largely avoid these criticisms because they have framed the visibility of their own appearance in such terms.

While body positive rhetoric allows them to reclaim their bodies and resist simply becoming passive subjects of other users' gazes, it also evacuates their words of any more radical body politics. Gone is any acknowledgement that the stars' or users' gender, race, sexuality, or age influences these comments. Also gone is any indication of the negative emotions this might lead to, replaced instead by self-deprecation or vague inspirational messages. I posit this allows these girls to maintain the requisite balancing act of the highly visible, "body positive" girl. They utilize both a popular feminist version of body positivity to show how they accept their own bodies and reject body discrimination while also demonstrating how they perform the arduous work of maintaining a feminine and desirable appearance. This self-presentation then neatly aligns with models of successful girlhood and while it would be inaccurate to say they are never the subject of moral panics

over sexualization, it is notably muted for their being both highly visible, appearance-centered, and often doing things like dancing that would be construed as "sexualized" in their content.

The Bad Girl With Harvard Dreams: Case Study of Influencer Danielle Cohn

If Loren Gray, Addison Rae, and Charli D'Amelio (among many others) provide examples of girls implementing the lessons of a popular feminist body positivity movement, and do so while maintaining a balance of disclosing insecurity while remaining positive rather than angry, then creator Danielle Cohn provides a counterpoint to such a strategy. Danielle Cohn created her online presence at a young age, but began making a noticeable impact as an influencer around 2016-2018 when she was 12/13. At this time, she had roughly 2.6 million followers on Instagram and 11.2 on TikTok (she originally made a name for herself when the app was called Music.ly). This was the year that Cohn's family moved from Florida to Los Angeles to forward her career as an influencer (Koul, 2018). At this point, Cohn's online presence was essentially the same as the norms described above. Music.ly was set up as a platform for lip synching videos and that is what Cohn did and continued to do as it became TikTok – she lip synchs and dances in front of the camera, almost always in full hair and makeup that makes her look much older than her actual age. Her outfits are a bit revealing, but not overly scandalous, mostly consisting of mid-riff baring tops and baggy pants.

During this time, Cohn experienced the type of body-shaming and judgment that is de rigeur for these stars, regardless of their age. In 2016, when she was 12 years old, she had apparently received an amount of criticism on her appearance that prompted her to

respond. She re-posted one of her Music.ly videos to her Instagram where she lip synchs to the Rachel Platt song "Fight Song." She playfully throws punches to the camera at lyrics like "this is my fight song/take back my life song" and cuts the video at the lyrics "my power's turned up." She paired it with the following caption:

> After reading comments I get the point I have a big nose, I am fat, I am short, I wear too many crop tops, and I am ugly. To be honest who are you to judge me, god made me this way this is the way he wanted me. He wanted me to be a confident person. No body is perfect I have many insecurities but I have learned to overcome them. After being at the show tonight listening to Rachel sing this song I have decided that people are always gonna be negative but god put me on this world to make a difference. That is to build other people self confidence and to feel good about themselves. Life it too short to hate and bully. Everyone being bullied fight back. If I didn't fight back I wouldn't be where I am today.

From the first line, one can see how critiques of Cohn's appearance meld with critiques of her sexualization (wearing "too many crop tops"); the latter accusation has plagued her throughout her time as an influencer. Her response here demonstrates how often critiques of the body go hand-in-hand with critiques of self-presentation, namely being too sexual. Due to panics over the sexualization of girls always become individualized failings of girls themselves, concern and criticism become indistinguishable to Cohn herself. All amount to how she is presenting herself incorrectly according to patriarchal norms of feminine embodiment for her age. At this point, she is still using the language of body positivity in response. A mainstream pop song that exemplifies popular feminist ethos inspires her. She notes that she may have "insecurities" but she is also working to be "confident" and much like Rae and D'Amelio went on to do, she then universalizes this message to be about how she is going to spread an anti-bullying, pseudo-body positive message for all.

However, these comments and controversies did not stop and only seemed to intensify when it appeared as though users had "caught" Cohn not living up to these ideals.

Many began to speculate that Cohn was using photoshop on her Instagram photos. A YouTube video entitled "Is Danielle Cohn Really Photoshopping Her Body?" was posted in February 2018, seemingly responding to the online conversation taking place in Cohn's comments and in other spaces where influencer "drama" is discussed. The video does not have commentary within it – it simply places videos from Cohn's TikTok/Music.ly side-by-side with a photos of Cohn in the same outfit (presumably taken the same day) posted to her Instagram, the implication being she could photoshop an Instagram photo but not a moving video. The video description simply says "what do you guys think does Danielle Cohn uses [sic] photoshop?" (BiscuitBailey, 2018). Thus, the video refrains from actively passing judgment on Cohn's body, although it contains an implicit criticism of Cohn using photoshop if she does, but does invite viewers to pass that judgment. The incident provides a key example of the double-bind of popular feminist body positivity: girls must feel confident about their appearance at all times, even when inundated with constant criticisms of their appearance. To show any wavering of that confidence (such as by using photo editing services) becomes yet another thing that girl can be criticized for. Here, it is less Cohn's body itself that is being criticized, but instead that she may be "misrepresenting" it online.

In the intervening years between 2018 to the present, Cohn continued making similar videos, and the same type of videos that the most followed girl stars largely make – lip synchs, short dances, and often just posing in mirrors with jutted hips and pouted lips to show off an outfit or new hair style [Figure 3]. However, after this apparent failure to learn

Figure 3

the "correct" form of body positivity and self-presentation, Cohn has leaned into these aspects of her image. Instead of eliding the charges of sexualization that these other stars seem to, Cohn frequently mentions her sexuality on the platform and has paired that with an unapologetic presentation of her body that does not entirely fit beauty norms. Her star text itself is often framed by adults as one that is contradictory or near-impossible to fully reconcile. "Explainers" of TikTok stars meant for out-of-touch adults trying to understand the youth abound, and most that "explain" Cohn sum her up as a star constantly embroiled in scandals, and scandals that are always centered on her age, her body and how she presents it, her romantic/sexual life, or some combination of the three.

Buzzfeed reporter Scaachi Koul has done multiple, more in-depth stories on TikTok influencers and Cohn specifically that provide a more nuanced picture of the star, yet still demonstrate how the "problem" of Cohn's girlhood remains central to an adult view of her star text. When first following the star in 2018, Koul noted the simultaneously massive and yet insulated and niche world of TikTok stars and their fans is inherently "perplexing" to adults and describes Cohn and her contemporaries as "teenage curiosities." It is when she first notes the push-pull between Cohn's clear youth and the ways in which she seems to embody blurred boundaries between girlhood and womanhood, noting that her image is

"seemingly curated to make her appear older, but in person she just looks like a pubescent girl with a remarkable amount of hair extensions" (Koul, 2018). When Koul (2020) followed up with Cohn two years later, she sums up the seemingly bifurcated nature of Cohn's image well, and how deeply that is tied to Cohn's body and appearance. She writes of Cohn, "she still looks like she's 25, complete with a makeup-aided Kardashian face, and she still acts like she's about 15, a consummate teenager who just wants to go to the mall and eat Chik-fil-A. But now I can't help noticing that I think she's the most cynical and jaded teenager I've ever met. The harassment and trolling bothers her less than it did then [speaking of her 2018 profiling of the star] and she possesses a sort of body confidence I wish I had now, never mind at 16" (Koul, 2020). Clear then is that at the heart of the consternation over Cohn is not simply that she presents her body and appearance in a way that strikes many as "too adult," arguably all of the most prominent girl TikTok stars do this, but that in this new era of her stardom, this comes also with an affective register that also feels adult. That she appears in some respects to carry out the ethos of "love your body" cannot be uncoupled from the fact that she does not perform it with the other central ethos of the movement – positivity. Instead, Cohn projects a jaded cynicism, as Koul sees here, or as I often read it, a sort of weary resignation over how the "controversies" so deeply rooted in desires to corral her behavior into boundaries of propriety would never truly end for her.

Cohn is broadly painted as controversial, but two major stories dominate this narrative about her. First, the revelation that Cohn had an abortion when she was 15 and secondly, a persistent conspiracy theory that Cohn is actually two years younger than she claims and her mother pushed her into representing herself as older online so that they

could monetize Cohn's sexualized image more easily. Yet unlike these earlier incidents of controversy, Cohn's response has been much more complex, often melding an embrace of this "bad girl" image while insisting it is not, in fact, bad and combining it with classic hallmarks of the "can do" girl, namely via her academic and career ambitions. While these two archetypes are so often framed as anathema to one another, Cohn demonstrates how in resisting or reworking the lessons of "confidence" and "body positivity" her star text also reveals the tensions inherent in linking appearance with sexuality, linking individual sexuality with sexualization, and thinking that any of these things inevitably doom a young girl. So while Cohn's star text is not then any more or less authentically feminist than those of, say, Rae or the D'Amelios, her refusal to learn the "right" lessons of body positivity and empowerment-via-visibility reveals the contradictions in those lessons and therefore the ways in which girls are set up for failure.

Cohn's body and appearance have changed much since her early years as an influencer, including clearly going through puberty in those intervening years. She has now adopted certain aesthetic markers of her "bad girl" image that are in contrast to the softer femininity displayed by the most followed girls on TikTok. She has several large, prominent tattoos (and TikTok videos that detail all of them), several piercings, and at the time of writing, she has her hair dyed almost black with bright red streaks in the front. She continues to favor the popular dichotomy of dressed-down, no makeup look for casual, on-the-fly videos and heavily made-up and long, curled hair with extensions for videos meant to show off her appearance. After years of receiving hateful comments for visibly gaining weight, she has seemingly embraced the fact that she is not as thin as most of the popular TikTokers. She does not have a flat stomach or slim thighs, but she displays these features

proudly, often wearing crop tops or just a sports bra, short shorts, and small bikinis in her videos. But she does not comment on these features at all in her videos; not in the self-deprecating way of Loren Gray in captions or self-mocking videos, nor in highlighting commenters she wants to admonish for their negativity.

She has not shied away from the idea that such an appearance sexualizes her, although she centers her content on her own sexuality. She has come out as pansexual, but without any great reveal and instead with a touch of combativeness. For example, in one video the on-screen text reads "me being happy with my sexuality" while she lip synchs to the song "Bisexual Anthem" by artist Domo Wilson. Her appearance in the video is typical for her – she is sitting down in sweat pants and a cropped hoodie, the zipper of the hoodie pulled down to reveal her cleavage and the crop showing off part of her stomach. Her hair is blown out and with full extensions, but her makeup is relatively light. In short, she has highlighted her own body, namely in the pulled down zipper, but she also is not presenting herself as overtly sexy as she does in many other videos, wearing sweats and sitting down rather than dancing along. Cohn mouths along to the lyrics "I like girls/oh my gosh/big booty, big tits/I like guys too though/super sexy, big dick." The song then switches registers and her on-screen text reads "Society:" to indicate this is now no longer her words but society's expectations. She leans back with a disgruntled look on her face, no longer lip synching along, while the lyrics say "You can't choose both/pick a side/pick a side/do you like fucking girls or do you like fucking guys" and then she begins to sing along again to the lyrics "I like both" while the text on-screen reads "I like all" with a heart and rainbow emoji.

Her caption simply reads "#pansexuals" with a rainbow flag emoji and heart emojis in the colors and sequence of the pansexual pride flag [Figure 4].

The lyrics to the song are aggressively sexual and importantly, the lyrics Cohn sings along to center the subject inhabiting the sexual gaze. First and most obviously this video and several others like it (Cohn noted her pansexuality previous to this video) take Cohn out of the implicit gender binary of the "sexualization" discourse. While who is doing the sexualizing in the sexualization of girls is often obscured in the discourse, the assumed gaze is invariably a straight, male one. Likewise, it takes her out of the passive role that girls are also slotted into in said discourse; not only in pronouncing her own sexuality, but in making herself active in the act of desiring. What Cohn lip synchs to is als

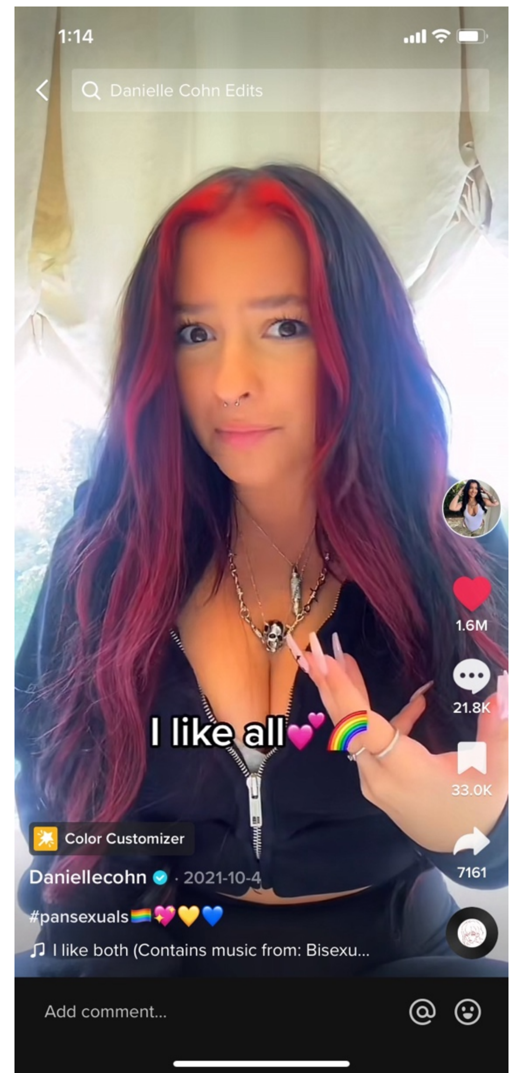

Figure 4

one doing the sexualizing, not the object of it. She makes even more clear that this is her own perspective by modifying the meaning of the lyrics; this is the "Bisexual Anthem" but she clarifies she is pansexual, and her on screen text make the small but crucial tweak of like "both" to liking "all" to reframe this as her own desire. This is in contrast to the aforementioned example of the Cochise song, wherein the girls act out the actions of a man observing a woman "flirting" and are interpreting that imagined girl, actively welcoming and inciting a sexually desiring gaze from a man.

Inevitably, Cohn's image elicits proclamations of concern from viewers over potential sexualization. As noted, when she was as young as 12 she was already receiving comments about her predilection for crop tops and dancing videos that encapsulate the contradictions inherent in the sexualization discourse. Comments of concern for what this would mean for Cohn, that this would in some way ruin her and her future, almost seamlessly become comments admonishing Cohn (and often her mother), rendering these behaviors as personal failings. This "concern" is most obvious in the conspiracy theory that Cohn is two years younger than she states publicly, a move these users posit is at the behest of Cohn's mother, Jennifer. It is public knowledge that Cohn is the primary earner of her family and her mother acts as her manager. In a 2020 podcast interview Cohn and her mother did with Koul, Koul notes that Cohn purchased the large Calabases, California home that Cohn, her mother, and younger brother all live in, while also keeping a vacation home in their home state of Florida [the family has since moved back to Florida permanently]. Jennifer is also frank in this profile about what Cohn makes, noting she is paid roughly $5,000 per TikTok video that promotes something; usually that means a record label has paid her to make a video with a certain song to promote the song, although she will also promote products, but with less frequency (Koul, 2020). As noted in Chapter Cne, this setup is already rife with expectations that, as a break in the normative ideas of appropriate adolescent labor and child/parent relationships, such a set-up is priming the teen for a future downfall. Exacerbating this is that Cohn's influencer boyfriend, Mikey Tua, moved in with the family once he turned 18, when Cohn was 16 (or, as the conspiracy theorists would surmise, 14). Allegations then constantly follow the Cohns that Jennifer is, for all

intents and purposes, exploiting her young daughter's sexuality for money and potentially even enabling statutory rape in her own home.

Cohn and Jennifer have pushed back on such charges, Jennifer aggressively and Cohn less aggressively, but persistently. Like many TikTokers, she does not address controversies on her account. Instead, she discusses them on her other social platforms, namely her YouTube channel, or via interviews on podcasts and with other YouTubers. Her mother is often in these interviews or comes up if she is not present. Jennifer's approach to the criticisms of herself, her parenting, and Cohn's actions is direct. When Koul (2020) broaches the criticisms of Jennifer's parenting with her, Jennifer responds:

> "She has a stalker, a 24-year-old man in San Antonio, TX. He's talking about my child. I don't want him anywhere associated with my child or even having conversations…he was DM'ing [direct messaging] her 'do you smoke weed,' 'do you do this.' Why are you writing *a child.* You are a grown man. And then he wants to come for me because I called him out on it. He calls me a pedophile, he calls *me* a pedophile. But why are you a 24-year-old man contacting minors and then having hate pages [accounts dedicated to critiquing Jennifer] about me?"

She then notes she has told the police about this man, and they have done nothing, so she hires private security for Cohn's public events. While this answer sidesteps questions on her own parenting, Jennifer does point to the contradiction at the heart of many concerns about the sexualization of girls. It is an extreme example, but what she details above is indicative of how such concerns often go – the ostensible adult doing the sexualizing is often hidden in the criticism, as are behaviors from adults that would actually make a situation dangerous, such as stalking and private messaging, while the blame largely falls to the girl and/or her parents (and invariably the mother) for not properly protecting her child from the dangers of the Internet.

Cohn defends her mother but also responds to the conspiracies about her age with something akin to a weary shrug. In response to the question of her age on the YouTube series "Teenage Therapy" Cohn responds, "I just ignore it now because there's really no sense in explaining myself. People can think however old I am [sic], they can think that" but does assert she is 16 at the time of the interview. Rather, she points to the circular nature of such Internet conspiracies and gossip, impossible to shake once followers are convinced, and takes an approach of ignoring it and affecting a lack of care, whether that is genuine or not. Likewise, to the criticisms of her relationship with Tua, Cohn notes that "If you're 20 and dating someone who's 22 people don't see it as a big thing so…" (Teenage Therapy, 2020). She then trails off, leaving the conclusion here largely unsaid but implied: that 18 as an age is a somewhat arbitrary cutoff when discussing the politics of age in young relationships. Especially, as she notes, since they began dating when they were both teens and knew each other well before that point, too. She notes she "wouldn't trust any guy" that's older than her and probably would not date someone more than three years older than herself. Cohn here shows a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of age in her romantic relationships, not negating the possibility for exploitation but not seeing that as applicable in this particular instance, and centers her own judgment in choosing a partner, something that is lost in narratives that would only frame her as a passive victim, a narrative she persistently pushes against. She also, however, still delivers these words with a soft-spoken voice and often lets her voice trail off before explicitly making a point, never expressing any indignation or visible anger, but rather cynicism and a clear dismissal of the idea that these controversies come from a place of concern.

The other major controversy Cohn was embroiled in, that comes up in any interview she does, is when a leaked audio recording revealed that she had an abortion when she was 15. An adult, family friend posted audio from the Cohn's in-home security system of Cohn and her mother having a fight about the abortion to YouTube. Ethically, I have chosen not to listen to the audio itself as it was obtained and released without the Cohns' consent and clearly remains very painful to this day. However, this is also a key moment in her star text; as noted, journalists and fans alike consistently ask her about the abortion and the posting of the audio and Cohn has now spoken publicly about it at length. She will answer questions about it in an interview and the most detailed account comes from Cohn herself, as she released a long explanatory video on her YouTube channel titled "The Truth About My Abortion" (2020). I heavily draw on Cohn's own words here to understand how she synthesizes this incident with the knowledge that she has always been dogged by critiques about the dangers of her sexuality, as well as showing how it served as something of a turning point for how she handled such critiques.

The video begins markedly different from any of her other content. Gone is the incredibly confident girl who looks older than her years; here she sits on her bed in a sweatshirt, truly no hair or makeup done, and wearing glasses. Her hands are constantly moving in apparent nervousness, usually because she is wringing them together. Her voice, which she never uses in her TikTok videos, is incredibly soft. In short, she looks like the anxious 16-year-old that she is, and her appearance here can be somewhat surprising if one has only consumed her TikTok videos. She begins the video with something of a content warning, stating, "before I start this video, if you're under the age of 18 I suggest you ask a parent before watching this or be with someone over the age of 18 while watching this

because I will be talking about some things that are very inappropriate." The profound irony in this statement sets the tone for the video. Here is an underage girl all but forced to discuss her abortion publicly because of adult actions – both the betrayal of the family friend and because as she indicates here, she knows she has many adult viewers and they are the ones seemingly most interested and "concerned" about this event. However, there is also the capitulation to such a mindset that discussing an abortion would be inherently "inappropriate" content for those under the age of 18. Her only other disclaimer is also one of the few times in my research I saw her respond with emotion to hateful comments; she all but pleads for people to be kind in response to video, noting "I definitely know that I did mess up. But I'm going through a lot right now with everything and I just don't want to have to deal with hate comments."

Cohn continually notes that she has made a mistake and takes responsibility for that fact throughout the video, but she couples this with seemingly oppositional statements about how she wishes to normalize the idea of teen girls having sex, that nonetheless girls can still be pressured into specific acts, and that needing an abortion is also normal. At one point early on in the video she states:

> Teenagers being teenagers, it's a very normal thing to try things out with your boyfriend. And it is also a very common thing to manipulate people into doing these type of sexual things, which happens a lot. Trust me, I know. It happened to me. But [I'm] not gonna talk about that. I made a big mistake and, ya know, had sex. Am I proud of what I did? No. Because I hate what I did, I really do. It's been months and I still don't really know how to cope with the fact of what I did.

While she never clarifies exactly what she means by manipulation, nor does she ever go so far as to call what happened to her assault, the suggestion throughout the video seems to be that she was interested in some sexual experimentation at the time, but her boyfriend

pressured her to do more than she was comfortable with (and clarifies this boyfriend was not Tua).

She continues drawing attention to the double standards girls face, although not explicitly so, by noting that what was most hurtful was not the abortion itself but that this unnamed boyfriend abandoned her after learning of the pregnancy, so she went through it all alone, only telling her mother after the fact. What is notable here is that while trying to parse the complexities of such an emotionally fraught experience, Cohn continually insists that teenage sexuality and curiosity is “normal.” She later notes that what helped alleviate the feelings of loneliness she had at the time was seeing other girls her age at the Planned Parenthood she went to and the support she received from the female staff at the facility. Despite these feelings of solidarity she had with other women during the process who seem to have eased her feelings of guilt to some extent, she is not able to shake the language of shame she demonstrates in the above quote and continues to frame the sex she had as a lapse in personal responsibility throughout the video.

I do not see the contradiction in this as disingenuous on Cohn’s part, but a manifestation of something else she states throughout the video: that she is herself still coming to terms with feelings of guilt over having the abortion, especially since she notes she grew up being told abortion was wrong, but she is trying to feel less shame over the situation and hopes that her account will help shed a different light on the idea of there being “consequences” to sex. She does so by speaking of the abortion itself in quite a bit of detail, going through what the clinic nurses recommended, taking the pill, and the pain she had after taking the second pill in the process. She notes, “people don’t see the reality of what girls go through when they go through this” and adds the she herself assumed it

would be an invasive procedure when she first went in. She ends the video on a somewhat upbeat note, comparatively. Touching on the approach to sex education she experienced in her schooling she explains, "they teach you about pregnancies, but do they really teach you about abortion, about how it feels to go through an abortion? No. And I think that's why I was so ready to come out with this video because I was like, people really don't know. And I want to be the person to tell people what you have to go through to do this, so I'm glad I got to do that."

Thus, despite adopting some of the language of the sexualization of girls discourse (that having sex is a "mistake" or something a girl should feel great shame for) Cohn is in many ways also subverting that rhetoric. She finds a way to connect the idea of there being negative consequences to more complex understandings of what that "consequence" is, tying it to gendered inequalities in romantic relationships, a normalization of teen girls' sexual desire, and a need to understand the practicalities of what many assume is the worst-case scenario for the sexually active teen girl: teen pregnancy and the need for an abortion. In trying to work through these complex ideas, seemingly almost in real time as she speaks, while also personally working through feelings of shame, Cohn demonstrates the grey area between popular feminist narratives of personal empowerment and sexualization narratives about personal responsibility. In displaying this ambivalence, Cohn reveals the untenable nature of inhabiting either (much less both) of these positions entirely and in their purest forms.

Despite this complex, ambivalent understanding of her own persona and life, and despite the subtle forms of body positivity she performs that would seem popular feminist-approved, Cohn herself is incredibly aware that she has the trappings of the at-risk girl,

especially that her appearance inevitably leads to broad assumptions about her. Yet she also makes clear that it is not at all how she sees herself. This is summed up in a quote from the Teenage Therapy interview, wherein the interviewer asks, quite bluntly, "Do you think people have this image of you that you're stupid, that you're a pretty girl and that's it?" and Cohn responds:

> I feel like that, yeah. People kind of think really different [sic] of me on social media. I mean I don't really know though, because I can't see myself in their eyes, so I don't really know how people think of me, but a lot of people when they meet me they'll be like 'wow, you seem like really rude on social media but you're really nice.' or some people will be like, 'I thought you were gonna be really nice but you're rude.' I promise you I'm not a rude person, I'm just a very shy person (Teenage Therapy, 2020).

As is perhaps unsurprising for someone who has spent her entire adolescence building an online self-brand, Cohn demonstrates here how she can draw a clear line between her online persona and her offline self, as well as how both personas include aspects that others view as opposing.

A simple video of Cohn dancing in a Harvard sweatshirt is the clearest example of how Cohn sees these aspects of herself as all part of a whole, while those who understand her solely through her TikTok persona cannot reconcile these same aspects since common discourse about the sexualization of girls would have them be irreconcilable. In the video, Cohn wears a cropped Harvard sweatshirt and black sweatpants [figure 5]. She dances and

lip syncs along to the Usher song "I Don't Mind" in what appears to be a hotel room. It is a fairly standard video for Cohn, but it blew up to become her most viewed video; as of this writing in June 2023, the video has 58.4 million views. It is also her "most dueted" video, meaning other users on the platform take the clip and make their own video off of it. Often for dance videos that means another user doing the same dance side by side, but this dance inspired many joking duets as well, which point to the "aggressive" hair flip and hip movements Cohn does in the video as well as comment (usually in a rather mean-spirited way) upon her wearing the Harvard paraphernalia. Cohn also has the video "pinned" on her page, meaning it remains at the top of her feed when you view her profile, rather than getting lost in the otherwise chronologically ordered feed of any TikTok user.

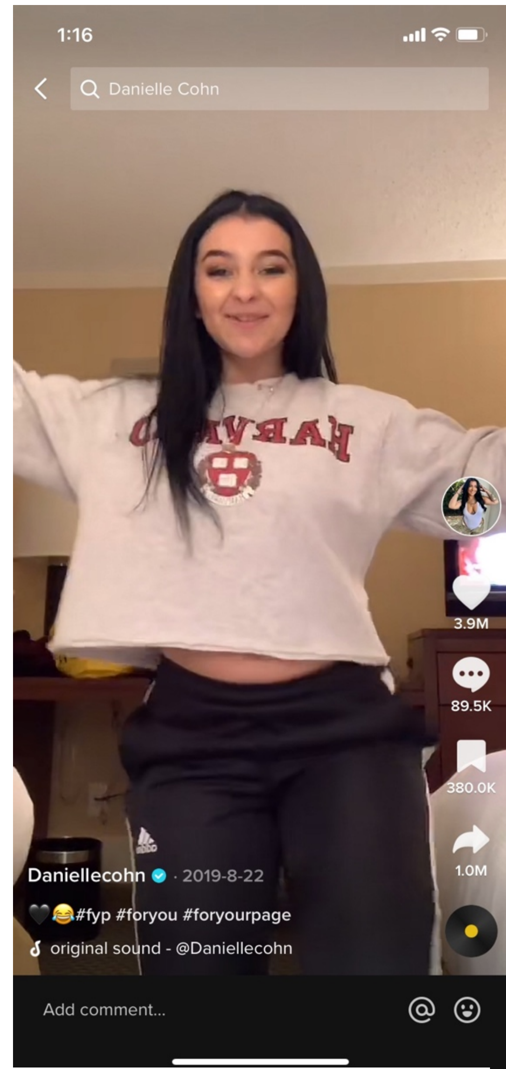

Figure 5

Cohn clearly knows this video is a success in terms of the virality of it and what was no doubt quite a lot of attention brought to her profile, given that when dueting certain videos becomes a trend on the platform, it can expand who will see and interact with videos far beyond a users' normal audience. But Cohn is also aware that the heightened interest in the video did not just come from the dance itself. In the Teenage Therapy interview, she says people were "weirded out… like, 'Why is she wearing a Harvard sweater?'" The interviewer then interjects: "like she's a wannabe" and Cohn agrees,

responding, “Yeah. But the only reason I wore it is ‘cause it’s my dream college! So, people are always like, is she trying to look smart or something? And I’m like no, that’s where I want to go. So, I think that’s why it was such a big thing.” Once again, she clearly understands that her image on the platform does not coincide with a girl whose dream it is to attend Harvard. This cognitive dissonance for viewers is heightened because the video includes Cohn’s typically sexualized dancing. The song is about a stripper and the lyrics Cohn specifically dances along to in the clip narrates: “You can twerk while in a split, you racking up them tips/Your body rock and your booty poppin', I'm proud to call you my bitch.” She is once again embracing an overtly sexualized persona (here, that of a stripper) but in doing so in one of the few instances where she lets this more conventional “good girl” aspect of her personality filter into her TikTok persona.

It is fitting that Cohn’s most viral video is the one in which she puts her assemblage of this otherwise “schizoid subjectivity” (Renold and Ringrose, 2011) on display. While the response to the video showed a typical disbelief or inability to understand that Cohn can be all of these things at once, her own embrace of the video, negative comments and all, show her subtle but persistent resistance to being placed on either end of the good girl or bad girl dichotomy. As such, her star text is productively difficult to place into positive or negative, feminist or anti-feminist boxes. I myself had to resist a number of the responses that are tumbled into the sexualization discourse while consuming her content, a mixture of slight alarm at her more overt sexual displays and concern over her wellbeing. Yet, her unapologetic embodiment of her sexuality also read as a far more radical – and confident – re-definition of embodied girlhood than many of the explicit proclamations of body positivity and empowerment made by other girl influencers. Equally complex was how

Cohn deals with negative perceptions her online performance then elicits; there is the acknowledgment of shame, and of a hardened cynicism that belie easy messages of kindness and positivity in the face of such critique, but there is also a resolve that she can still achieve other markers of successful girlhood, such as scholastic success, too. Accepting this performance of girlhood on Cohn's terms can be difficult, but to question why it is difficult reveals the possibilities to be found in failure, to question if it is failure at all, and to instead see how discourses placing conditions upon these lessons of sexual and bodily autonomy are often as limiting as they are liberating.

Conclusion

The body positivity movement is a key example of how popular feminism responds to and circulates through contemporary popular culture. It is no surprise that a movement centered on one's appearance is so prominent at a time when image-based social media is widely used, and widely used by young people no less. New media technologies are easy vessels into which adults can funnel their anxieties over adolescence; TikTok is then an easy target for anxieties regarding Gen Z, as the platform has become all but synonymous with that generational cohort. TikTok is vast and one person can hardly scratch the surface of its content, and thus any number of anxieties over the changing nature of tween and teenhood might be explored there, feminist and otherwise. I have focused on the body positivity movement because of its overlaps with past moral, media-based panics over girls and specifically the display of their bodies. Said panics concern the "sexualization of girls" and the worry that, especially in the late 1990's and early 2000's, as girls become more visible and central to popular culture, they are simultaneously absorbed into a media

environment that is overtly sexual – the result of which was that these girls would be viewed as sexual objects and actual girls would mimic this behavior in some way, sexualizing themselves and in the process making their relationship to their own appearance and body "unhealthy."

Given the popularity of girl stars in particular on TikTok, and their predilection towards activities like dancing and skin-bearing fashions on the app, one might assume that once again, adults (and the media discourses that reflect adult concerns) would question if the media was sexualizing girls and if girls were sexualizing themselves in turn. While I cannot say that issue has absolutely never been raised in relation to TikTok, it is decidedly muted in comparison to twenty years ago. Instead, the body positivity movement allows these girls to reframe their bodily display as empowering and use that same language to push back on critiques against their appearance or their choices on how to present that appearance. Nonetheless, the most prominent stars still use this rhetoric less to make radical critiques of beauty standards or misogyny and instead to learn certain norms, broadly speaking and those established on and by the platform itself, that circumscribe their own performances. I look to creator Danielle Cohn to explore what happens when a girl fails to learn these unspoken norms, or perhaps simply chooses to ignore them. In abandoning the language of body positivity and empowerment, but instead displaying both her body and sexuality quite prominently, Cohn showed the limitations of such normative understandings of the body positive ethos. In her failure to learn those related lessons of instructional feminism, she was put almost immediately into the narrative of the bad girl, destined to make bad decisions and with little hope to attain the trappings of a successful girlhood or future womanhood. Yet Cohn does not restrict herself

to such a box, creating a star text that is difficult for others to synthesize into a pre-established narrative of girlhood. By not following these lessons, Cohn reveals the ways in which residing somewhere in the ill-defined, shifting middle of the popular feminist spectrum, or perhaps arguably tangentially to it, opens up further ways we can imagine the performance of girlhood, its promises and its dangers, and what future that allows a girl to imagine for herself.

Chapter 4: Be The Solution:
The Celebrity Girl Activist and the Productive Affects of Shaming, Silence, and Anger

"You all come to us young people for hope. How dare you." Greta Thunberg intones, her voice shaking with barely suppressed rage, during her infamous speech at the 2018 UN Climate Action Summit. X González[4], with tears of grief and frustration in their eyes, lists the various fallacies used to discount the Parkland teen activists, and yells one final one: "that us kids don't know what we're talking about, that we're too young to understand how the government works. We call BS!" Both Thunberg's repeated refrain of "how dare you" and González's similarly structured repetition of "we call BS" became rallying cries, powerful rhetorical moments to pull from the speeches that launched them onto the world's stage, respectively. Yet often elided is what was at the heart of these viral moments of shaming – that these young activists were not only enraged over adult politicians' lack of action on the critical, urgent issues of climate change and gun reform, but that they specifically tied this rage to their frustration that they – children – were even there at all, overnight figureheads of entire, complex movements.

Thunberg and González in many ways exemplify the apex of popular feminism. They are easily highlighted as exceptional girls, perfect examples of the sentiment that

[4] On February 21, 2021 X González, née Emma, posted an Instagram photo with the caption "i'm [sic] non-binary" and in their Instagram bio wrote "Call me X" and listed they/them pronouns. As such, I will be using this name and these pronouns whenever I refer to them. However, during González's primary years in the spotlight, they still went by Emma and used she/her pronouns. I will be changing the name and pronouns with brackets in quoted material, but continue to include references to them as a girl, as their status as an activist-celebrity has been largely understood and written about within a framework of girlhood and thus is of relevance to my own analysis.

women/girls not only can do anything, but that they are singularly good at those things they do try. And likewise, they embody not only a feminist ethos, but one that is arguably on the more radical end of the spectrum of popular feminism Banet-Weiser describes. They *do* launch critiques of how oppression is systemic and institutional, not merely personal. And the *do* see the ways in which various forms of oppression interlock and intersect; their issues of choice are not overtly feminist ones, but they use the ethos of intersectional feminism when they provide nuanced examples of how said issues impact people differently along lines of class, gender, race, and nationality. And yet, both Thunberg and González themselves have pushed back on the role the media has cast them in since they first became famous. Previous chapters have outlined how the ideologies and language of instructional feminism allow girls to cross boundaries between adolescence and adulthood not only with ease, but often with celebration. When viewed only through the lens of mass media, Thunberg and González seem no different: they are welcomed into the adult space of politics and civic engagement and for being there they are lauded. Yet when taking in their own words, one sees that they continually try to re-establish that boundary themselves. They make their status as children central to their respective messages because in their framing, this incongruity of a teenager going toe-to-toe with political leaders, or having political leaders turn to them for solutions, points to the fact that something is deeply broken in our political sphere. Children should not be asked to act as politicians on the world's stage. Their very existence as celebrated figures demonstrates that adults have failed this younger generation. Their status does not signify the wins of popular feminism, as much as those who wish to elevate Thunberg and González would have it be so.

Several scholars have noted how celebrity girl activists are thrust into a process of "figuration" (Castañeda, 2002) by the media, made into symbols of youthful hope and optimism while being evacuated of any of the thornier critiques their politics or the issues they focus on might actually have (Bent, 2020; Biressi, 2018; Hesford, 2014; Taft, 2020). So too have many scholars noted how constantly turning activist efforts back towards children rests the "solution" to all manner of large, complex social issues on the backs of these children, effectively taking the onus off of current adults to do anything to change the status quo and, in this act of displacing responsibility onto the next generation, covering up the historical and current conditions that have led to problem (Koffman & Gill, 2013, Mauk et al., 2020, Knotts, 2022). In this discursive construction, the girl who has taken on the lessons of instructional feminism would happily and energetically take on this mantle.

In this chapter, I argue that Thunberg and González's insistence on maintaining their status as children is an ideological choice to resist this process of figuration and the ways in which it can allow girl activists to be used as symbols for politicians or other leading figures, while said adult leaders do not actually take any meaningful steps towards progress or change. In short, they refuse to accept the idea that the solution resides solely in themselves or their generation. They do this through two primary means. First, they forefront their individual identities, tying unique aspects of themselves such as their queerness and Latinx identity (in X's case) and neurodivergence (in Thunberg's case) directly to their activist work. In so doing, they resist being easily rendered into a flattened symbol and instead force those listening to confront the human impacted by the issues they speak on. Secondly, they utilize affects in their public addresses seemingly anathema to girl-power's upbeat insistence that girls are the future: anger, frustration, and grief.

In acknowledging how media discourses engage in this process of figuration, but putting my own focus primarily on how the subjects themselves complicate and resist this process, I aim to intervene in past scholarship that takes the symbolization of these girls by the media and politicians at face value. These studies are immensely valuable – much of the foundation for how I discuss youth activists rests upon it – but they also have a tendency to suggest the activist's own words and behaviors are easily absorbed into these media narratives. I complicate this idea by intertwining media representations of González Thunberg with how they represent themselves, which proves to be quite counter to the media narratives about them. I cannot argue any one side of this push-and-pull towards and against figuration is ever wholly successful or unsuccessful. Instead, what this process demonstrates is the evolution of the figure of the celebrity girl activist, from unseen, to celebrated symbols, to current iterations that reveal how savvy these activists are about the role and function of the media. They demonstrate how the media's appetite for the activist girl image can both be used to their advantage while also requiring constant vigilance and resistance to how their image may be used as a tool by those in power, working against the media impulse to uphold the celebrity at the expense of the activist message.

Intersections of Feminism and the Activist Girl

Scholars have been understandably interested in youth activists for many of the same reasons the mass media often is: their youthfulness is at once seemingly precociously incongruous with the seriousness of the issues they discuss, and yet that youthfulness suggests an optimism and a promise for the future that counteracts the bleakness of those

same serious issues. Additionally, youth activists have been at the forefront of many prominent moments of activist history generally, such as the May, 1968 student protests in France, the June, 1987 Democratic Struggle in South Korea, or the U.S. protests of the Vietnam War that were centrally located on college campuses, to list just a few examples. However, childhood is also a culturally constructed designation and is largely defined by the myth of "innocence." When that myth is utilized in politics, that means the innocent child is free from the adult concerns of the political world. The innocent child is then a conveniently hollowed figure, able to be used equally by both progressive and conservative politics – a figure for whom we must urgently take action as they are imperiled or a figure for whom we must protect from the corrupting sphere of adult politics and changing norms. In either case, "we opportunistically evoke the figure of the innocent child as a ‘human shield’ against criticism" (Jenkins, 1998, p. 2). In other words, once a child is propped up as the victim or recipient of any given social policy, the ability to criticize that line of argument is cut short.

Thus, a celebrity youth activist can provide both these functions – the intrigue of doing the activism themselves, yet as a celebrity easily rendered more symbol than person. They are then easily called up and referenced when politicians want to make any number of points: about trying to return to a more innocent past, or an urgent need to do something for the future of said symbolic child, and much in between. I am utilizing Castañeda's (2002) concept of "figuration" as it relates to "the child" to situate this phenomenon in a larger context of how the sign of "the child" is utilized by adults/in adult spheres such as politics, and more importantly to explain the *why* of this process. Castañeda argues that "figuration entails simultaneously semiotic and material practices…Figuration is thus

understood here to incorporate a double force: constitutive effect and generative circulation" (p. 3). In short, the figure of the child becomes a sign, but that sign effects the world materially, circulating and continuously reconstituting childhood figurations. It "plays a unique and constitutive role in the (adult) making of worlds" (Castañeda, 2002, p. 1) and thus, understanding the figure also allows us to understand to what purpose this figure is made and how it enables certain choices in said world-construction.

Yet it is in more recent years that girls, specifically, became the focus of both activist efforts regarding gender and youth and, in turn, the focus as activists themselves. Girl-centric causes can range from encouraging the popular feminist Global North girl to support the imagined impoverished girls of the Global South through consumerism (Koffman & Gill, 2013), encouraging young girls to learn to code (Mauk et al., 2020; Knotts, 2022), or encouraging girls to play sports in order to become "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Hayhurst, 2014, p. 299). It now seems as though "empowering" girls, and by extension then the good, properly empowered behavior that follows, can solve any number of social ills from global wealth inequality, to sexism and racism in the STEM fields, to women's ability to survive and thrive in a global neoliberal economy. As all of these authors note, this is a neoliberal logic that sees any number of large, systemic, and contemporaneous problems as mere "pipeline" issues, solved once these girls eventually grow up to be women with their newly empowered habits.

However, this still does not frame girls as active political actors themselves. When first writing in 2010, Taft notes that actual girl activists were largely rendered invisible in discussions and depictions of youth activism up to that point. Likewise, activism and political identities were largely rendered invisible in girlhood studies scholarship.

Scholarship focused instead on how girls were resistant (or not) to things like dominate gender norms, consumption patterns encouraged by the creative industries, etc. but did not investigate girls' actual political beliefs (Taft, 2010). While they may not have yet been acknowledged as activists themselves, Taft echoes the sentiment that civic engagement programs aimed at youth seemed to have a special interest in girls' empowerment, specifically, resulting in a message that "empowered girls are not just ideal for other girls to model themselves after, but are also models for contemporary citizenship more broadly" (Taft, 2010, p. 6) which is very much in-line with scholarship that notes that non-profit and development discourses often place aiding the girl as a key to any number of social ills.

This is very much in line with the postfeminist, "girl power" ethos of the early 2000s, which results in the can-do girl oriented towards future success and, in the activist context, results in what Anita Biressi (2018) terms the "good girl." The good girl "has the world at her feet and is committed to career planning and future success" and unlike the can-do girl "need not embrace consumerism as part of her identity" and instead she is "friendly, unthreatening, 'natural and authentic' and full of good will" (Biressi, 2018, p. 402). In short, this girl is informed, educated, and well-meaning enough to have political opinions, but she is not going to actually rebel or be disruptive in her actions or address. This vision of the girl is still very future-oriented and it is the promise of a future, still purely hypothetical success for this girl that proves that progress has been made, some form of social equality achieved. The result of which is a side-lining or ignoring of the very real structural inequalities many of these girls will face in trying to attain that success, as well as all the girls who already face such inequalities and are not able to attain the status of the "good girl" (Biressi, 2018). Likewise, such discourses often simultaneously highlight

all the girls who need to be aided by various activist initiatives, invariably all of those girls who cannot achieve can-do or good girl status from the outset: girls living in poverty, girls with limited access to education, girls in danger of marrying and/or getting pregnant young, and many more. Thus, this era is marked by "the contrast between girls' powerlessness and their exceptional capacity" (Koffman & Gill, 2013, p. 88).

Yet both of these readings of girls' place in civic life are still indebted to a postfeminist era and framework. All of the above could fall under the umbrella of "commodity activism" a corporatized version of activism inextricable from its neoliberal context which suggests "there is no 'outside' to the logics of contemporary capitalism" (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012, p. 2). Thus, it is arguably impossible for any well-known activist not to be pushed into the more commodifiable box of "celebrity." As popular feminism rose, so too did a clear articulation between its application and activism, including when it came to girls. So too was it inextricably tied to corporate and/or commodity activism, as many brands used the "cause " of addressing gendered subjectivity and sexism as a form of "corporate responsibility." Thus, the inherent activism of popular feminism became a means for corporations to brand themselves, but in so doing popular feminism was also being branded (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 43-44).

Nonetheless, it should not be discounted that feminism, and especially that which manifests in girlhood culture, actively encourages various forms of political engagement. Emily Bent (2020) notes the melding of these two eras, arguing "girl-power feminism represents a distinct form of popular feminism that imagines girls as highly responsible subjects primed to save the world with their extraordinary abilities" (p. 797). But much like McRobbie (2020) argues that popularized forms of feminism created the p-i-r dispositif,

Bent (2020) argues this framing of girlhood activism encourages personal resilience rather than attempts to fundamentally change systems and institutions. It further individualizes pressing, complex issues by overselling the idea of individuals who are exceptional as a means to make change while underselling the importance and impact of collective work (Bent, 2020). As such, while this strain of girl-power feminism specifically refers to popular feminist sentiments, such a stance is nonetheless tied to neoliberal ideals of individualization and is thus still primarily tied to postfeminism.

Given these changes, when Taft returned to her study of girl activists in 2020, she found a very different picture of girls' role. Not only are they no longer ignored, but a select few girl activists that have become verifiable, international celebrities. Most notably Malala Yousefzai, but Taft also points to my own case studies, Thunberg and González, as well as Chilean activist Camila Vallejo and Palestinian activist Ahed Tamimi. As Taft (2020) argues, it is not the existence of girl activists which is new but that "changes in the political, social, and cultural landscape have made girl activists both more legible and more desirable for media attention and public consumption. The girl activist has become a compelling figure" (p. 2). She argues these girls come to stand in for a combination of hopefulness, harmlessness, and heroism – a combination that serves more to soothe public anxieties about the future than it does to address the actual issues these girls speak on, which ultimately has "ironically demobilizing effects" (Taft, 2020, p. 3). Much like Biressi's (2018) conclusion about the "good girl" figure, it is the promise of this brighter future embodied by such hopeful youth that becomes proof in itself that the politics of the present are working, even counter to the outcry from the girls themselves that this is adamantly not the case.

While these girls are by and large lauded for their activist efforts and their embodiment of popular feminism, it cannot be discounted that being in the public eye equally welcomes harsh criticism, especially when they are viewed more like typical female celebrities rather than average activists working in the arena of civic engagement. The "girl power" script "sticks" to these girl activists, which in turn reinforces or comes to impose and expect normative standards of girlhood, too (Bent, 2020, p. 798). Placing the "exceptional girl trope" upon them "turns girl activists into public celebrities marked for continuous surveillance and scrutiny" (Bent, 2020, p. 800). And as Sarah Projansky (2014) has noted, our media ecosystem both loves the precocious girl celebrity but seems to equally revel in her downfall, fascinated by the idea of the "crash-and-burn girl celebrity" who does not uphold the unspoken promises of her exceptional girlhood. Popular feminism is met with popular misogyny and as the former is enabled by the spreadability of digital media, so too is the latter (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The activists I study here found themselves at the heart of vicious online attacks, which then often spread into mainstream media sources, such as Fox News. Additionally, their agendas and affects are fundamentally more radical than those supported by the corporatized end of the popular feminist spectrum, that which encourages commodity activism. The girls uplifted by the media as celebrity-activists are supposed to “take their exceptional places in the halls of power and influence” (Brown, 2016, p. 3). When they instead choose to criticize and attempt to dismantle institutions that are bastions to white, masculine, heteronormative forms of power, such girls can find themselves media targets, perhaps not by the exact same channels and organizations that would have them be darlings of the media instead, but with just as much if not more vehemence.

How Girl Culture Supports and Reflects Activism

Given girl culture's embrace of popular feminism, it is unsurprising that as girl activists were being made stars, so too was girls' media embracing an activist bent with enthusiasm. Not only were Yousefzai, Thunberg, etc. often features in girls' media, but in general much of girls' media embraced a host of political/ideological issues and encouraged activism. This was most notable in the turn *Teen Vogue* took towards being, in their own words, "woke," which they describe as "more about a sensibility. This is somebody who is sophisticated, conscious" (Warrington, 2017). This turn came in 2016 after a major editorial shift, when parent company Condé Nast hired the relatively young 29-year-old Elaine Welteroth as senior editor and designated a new editorial position for Phillip Picard covering "politics and activism" (Gilbert, 2016). What was notable to many about this shift was not just the politics focus for a young audience, but that it was coming from the *Vogue* brand specifically, a name synonymous with feminine investment in fashion and beauty and little else. But this was not so much a brand heel-turn as it was instead an ideological statement on how traditionally feminine pursuits can co-exist with activism, and as such "these magazines produce and reimagine girls as political activists who are also engaged with traditional expectations of femininity informed by domesticity, consumption and beauty" (Coulter & Moruzi, 2020, p. 766).

As Coulter and Moruzi (2020) note, this is not entirely new. They also study girlhood periodical *The Girl's Realm* from Victorian England to show how that magazine also engaged directly with issues of reform in its era, and thus girlhood studies scholars should resist describing this as an entirely new era or as though girlhood manifestations of

feminism are always in a state of general forward progress. Instead, "*Teen Vogue* becomes part of a legacy of magazines that have established girlhood as a political subjectivity and have challenged hegemonic notions of girls as apolitical" (Coulter & Moruzi, 2020, p. 768). However, what both they and I posit *is* new is that it is a clear break with postfeminist rhetoric. In girls' magazines of the postfeminist era, girls were largely rendered as passive consumers of mass culture; even if they were increasingly becoming producers of their own media, this was not the way girlhood was primarily represented. There may be nods to their increasing education and career prospects, but functionally little space was spent on those categories, especially in relation to time spent on fashion, hair/makeup, and boy celebrities (Kearney, 1998, p. 292-293). So, this renewed interest in girls' culture on politics and activism, most emblematized by the editorial turn in *Teen Vogue* but found across girls' media, then instead informs instructional feminism. Messages such as those found in *Teen Vogue* suggest that to be a feminist is not only to care about issues related to gender, but to care about the many, intersecting issues related to identity and other progressive politics as well, all of which combines in the creation of a general identity of an informed, politically-engaged girl.

As there has been a general shift in the content of girls' media in this regard, so too have shifts in the media itself enabled the spread of that content. Namely, the link between digital media, especially social media, and activism. Specifically, I want to highlight the link between digitality and youth, feminist activism here and how the visibility of that activism (both in daily life and online) shapes affective relationships to it and to the girls practicing it. Historically, especially in the postfeminist era that spread a particular type of hyperfemininity, one of the reasons that girls' activism has been rendered invisible is

because activism was counter to many core tenants of girlhood identity and how girls are represented: an activist is serious, a girl superficial; an activist is supportive, teen girls are mean; an activist is confident, girls are insecure (Taft, 2010, 88). However, girl-power (in its myriad manifestations) and popular feminism has girls venturing into identifying themselves as "a bit of a feminist" and as such taking up activist, or at least political, causes in relation to that feminism (Ringrose & Renold, 2016).

Ringrose and Renold (2016) specifically analyzed the affects this engendered in a group of teen girls in a girlhood empowerment group at their school. Their use of affect theory has informed my own; they explain, "we are not theorizing affect, however, as solely subjective 'felt states of emotion' (Clough 2010: 207) but also as a force that flows through and between bodies and things, which can increase or decrease capacities to act" (p. 106). Crucial, then, is not only how a girls' feminist beliefs, identity, and/or activist action make her feel, but also how these inform their relations with others and how others respond to them as feminists/activists. Ringrose and Renold (2016) note that finding likeminded peers who shared their nascent feminist beliefs was often a source of joy, excitement, and motivation for those they interviewed, which was born out in the accounts from the Parkland teens and Thunberg about their own youth movements – that finding peers that shared their beliefs was a great source of joy and support amidst otherwise intense pressure and that the energy inspired by their activism was an antidote to issues and situations that had otherwise depressed and/or traumatized them.

However, for those that Ringrose and Renold (2016) interview, these positive affects were countered by what Sarah Ahmed (2010) has termed the "feminist killjoy" label and the attendant negative affects that "stick" to it. Ahmed described the feminist killjoy as

a figure who brings unpleasant truths, such as sexism, "in the room" and thus brings down everyone else's happiness by doing so. The killjoy then likewise reveals that such happiness is dependent on ignoring or taking for granted power dynamics, such as gendered and sexual ones, that are of course always in the room, whether the feminist calls them out or not. As a result, "we can consider the relationship between the negativity of the figure of the feminist killjoy and how certain bodies are 'encountered' as being negative. ... To be recognized as a feminist is to be assigned to a difficult category and a category of difficulty" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 66). Later expanding upon the concept, Ahmed (2017) visualizes the killjoy as herself as a young girl, sitting at the dinner table with her family, feeling compelled to say the difficult thing, the feminist thing, when it arises, and receiving a series of rolled eyes and dismissive comments from her family as a result. This is, of course, an alienating feeling but Ahmed (2017) stresses that alienation can also be "studious," that "you learn more about wishes when they are not what you wish for" and in that way, alienation is not unlike wonder (p. 41). In not only literally visualizing the feminist killjoy as a young girl, but in describing the process of becoming one as also a process of learning about the world, and learning how to be critical of it and deconstruct its objects, Ahmed shows how this affective state is perhaps one particularly primed for the newly-conscious activist to adopt. It is not an easy affective place to reside in, but Ahmed also demonstrates how there is power in this role, and promise in it, too.

While not using the exact label of "killjoy," the teen feminists that Ringrose and Renold worked with clearly understood being stuck in the category of "difficult" – they knew that by virtue of being "the feminists" at school they carried certain labels and assumptions with them, "they talk about having a reputation that precedes them, an

affectivity that follows them around" (Ringrose & Renold, 2016, p. 110). Thunberg and González embrace the "killjoy" figure in many ways in their use of affect and willingness to voice unpleasant truths, and as such have an affectivity that follows them around. Both the establishing of this affect and the spreading of it, of seeing it as not only what Thunberg and González personally feel but how that creates an affective relation with those who encounter them, is informed by their own use of social media and the way in which coverage of them circulates online through social media. Many scholars have discussed social media's ability to spread activist messages, enhance engagement with activist causes through digital networks, and make more visible historical, ongoing concerns in progressive movements such as feminism while also remaining critical and cognizant of the ways in which such activism nonetheless relies upon corporate-owned platforms that encourage an individualistic, neoliberal approach to issues (Rodino-Colocino, 2014; Clark-Parsons, 2018; Jackson et al., 2020). We see both sides of this debate in how girls utilize social media platforms to become engaged with activism and make certain ideologies, such as feminism, central to their own identity as well. I do not wish to rehash the debate around how successful or unsuccessful social media is as a means to enact progressive, systemic change. Instead, I wish to use the tensions inherent in social media activism as a lens by which to understand the affect used by and sticking to Thunberg and González.

As noted in Chapter Three, "there is a heightened requirement of young women to invest emotional or affective labour in producing selves that are agreeable for others, converting their regulation into humorous, relatable struggles" (Kanai, 2017, p. 61). Kanai (2017) was referring to general girl presentations of the self online, some that lightly touched upon feminist-adjacent topics like dieting, but ultimately were more about the girl

herself and her life. Users would deploy humor and sarcasm to address difficult gendered issues, such as constant regulation of the body and body image issues, but continue to make their general affect fun and light to be more palatable. However, age seems to be a distinguishing factor here. Surveying the ways in which feminists had found both use and limitations in #MeToo, Mendes et al. (2018) found young people found social media to a be a critical space for them because they were otherwise denied political voices or an ability to participate in the civic sphere. Additionally, "Twitter provided knowledge and opportunities for learning and dialogue that school could not" because so often adolescence is conceptualized as something separate from current politics (Mendes et al., 2018, p. 241). Thus, online spaces prove crucial to girls as a means to not only learn about politics, but to understand their own affective relationship to "being political."

This complex affective mix of humor, acceptance, and sharing of pain is not only seen in online spaces with nascent or only vaguely gendered content. Similar rhetorical, affective moves are made in activist, feminist content as well, often by online feminists taking the virulently hateful and often violent misogynistic comments they get and reposting such comments with jokes and insults to the commentator. This allows the harassed to emerge "as an empowered, witty, and strong woman" who has taken her power back (Saraswati, 2021, p. 1). Like others who have analyzed social media activism, Saraswati (2021) argues that often, no matter how attuned to systemic oppression the actual feminist herself is, the neoliberal structures of social media render the activism and the activist's persona neoliberal, too. However, when it comes to the use of affects then, Saraswati (2021) takes a balanced approach, noting that this drive to always project a "positive affect" on social media means feminist users "represent themselves as happy,

entertaining, or successful, no matter what happens to them (even sexual harassment, violence, and abuse)" (p. 6). To post about a horrible thing that has happened with no softening or humor would betray the neoliberal logics driving social media itself. Nonetheless, there is an expression of pain in personal, activist accountings or in social media movements that call for personal testimony, such as #MeToo, and Saraswati (2021) frames "pain as conjuring up a space of creativity, connection, and conversation—pain as generative" because it not only serves as a means of communication but can spur others towards activist work as it calls for a response (p. 21). Likewise, Saraswati calls for a nuanced approach to silence as well as "it challenges the hierarchy of voice as having more value than staying silent and thus illustrates the currency of silence in the sharing economy of emotions…the pressure and imperative to speak, to have a voice, to tweet or share something on social media can itself be a form of violence" (p. 27-28). Over time, Thunberg and González use all of these affects – humor, albeit often quite cutting and dark, camaraderie, pain, and silence.

Methodology

I am utilizing a dual discourse and textual analysis to analyze both what is said about Thunberg and González and what they say about themselves. I aim to put these two modes of representation in conversation with one another. When it comes to the former, in many ways I am utilizing a traditional celebrity studies approach to read the images of these girls as media constructions. Like the celebrities analyzed in Chapter One, the text consists of an amalgam of news stories, profiles, and public appearances that together form a coherent image. However, unlike the celebrities analyzed in Chapter One, neither Thunberg nor

González wish to position themselves as such and in fact wish to push against being constructed as a celebrity. In braiding together these methods, I hope to show how their media-constructed images and their own words, actions, and affects form a dialectic, constantly in conversation with one another and informing the construction of both.

From Every-Girl to Exceptional: The Framing of González and Thunberg's Rise to Prominence

As I dove into reading and viewing as much as I could about Thunberg and González, I was struck by how clearly their stories mirrored one another, despite their many differences. They have taken on very different causes, they come from different countries, and there are few overlaps in their identities. Yet if one is to trace the broad strokes of their stories, both can be summed up with a similar narrative arc. Both experience an awakening that forces them to feel as though they have been called to act, as they find themselves in a unique position to be a prominent voice for an issue that has personally impacted them. Both come to international attention via a barn-burner of a public speech that goes viral. Both then use their newfound fame to amplify their section of the movement, but shy away from the notion that they themselves are famous or a leader of the cause overall. Finally, both eventually stepped back from taking an active and public role in the political sphere, eventually too frustrated with adult inaction and empty promises to continue. I do not want to suggest these stories are, in fact, exactly the same, nor that these two impressive young people are simply interchangeable. Instead, I want to utilize this narrative arc to explore *why* it is so sticky, why even as Thunberg and González themselves try to complicate their public positions, similar patterns emerge, and thus how the process of figuration of the girl-

activist holds in some ways and is challenged in others. In so doing, Thunberg and González stand as examples for both how the process of instructional feminism would allow for another adolescence/adulthood boundary crossing here, but also the utility in *not* crossing that boundary.

And so, I start at the beginning. Both Thunberg and González's stories as activists and public figures begin with their own feelings of purpose. Initially, how they tell their own stories and how the media tells their stories share much overlap, because their beginnings start with a clear inciting incident and the call to action that follows. Such calls to action also highlight the ways in which they are so especially suited as individuals to this moment. A classic start to a hero's journey, really.

The beginning of González's story begins definitively, and with tragedy. On February 14th, 2018 an active shooter entered Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The shooter murdered 17 people and injured 17 others in a span of only six minutes with the use of a semi-automatic assault rifle. González was one of the school's students; they hid out in a cupboard in their classroom while the shooter moved through the school. Only hours before, as the president of the school's LGBTQ club, they had been handing out love notes students could send one another for Valentine's Day – a poignant fact that would later come up frequently to underscore the abrupt end to a previously joyful day and life, as well as present one running thread of González's identity, their queerness. After the shooting, the typical media storm descended on Parkland; given the unfortunate frequency of mass shootings in America, this attention would normally occur for a few days, before the media loses interest and disperses. However this time, the media interviewed a particularly well-spoken and media savvy student, David Hogg, right in the aftermath. Hogg

became a go-to figure for the news media to reach out to for comment, especially for Anderson Cooper's show on CNN. CNN also reached out to student Cameron Klasky based on a series of angry and grieving tweets he posted the night of the shooting. Those producers asked Hogg for other "articulate" students they could speak with and he suggested González (together, these students are often referred to as the "big three" for the Stoneman Douglas students who became well-known media fixtures for the burgeoning movement). González felt what many of the Parkland students did: grief mixed with rage over the inaction of politicians around matters of gun control. A feeling that this could have been prevented if only adults with power would simply *do something*. It proved a potent affective combination that would make their public statements in the days succeeding the shooting resonate widely (Witt, 2018; Alter, 2018; Cullen, 2019) and would keep Parkland and the survivors of the shooting in the public eye far longer than typical. Quickly, the teens would narrow their activist focus to criticizing the power of the National Rifle Association (NRA) has, as a lobby and over the politicians to whom they give campaign donations.

Thunberg and her family recount her own path towards becoming a figurehead of the climate justice movement as beginning when she watched a documentary about climate change in school. The film not only made her interested in the topic; as someone with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), she hyper-fixated and read all she could on the topic. This only made her further despair at how bleak the scientific outlook is and how, paradoxically in her mind, it seemed as though the outlook on anyone doing anything about it was equally bleak. From there, a few of her autistic traits – her tendency to go non-verbal for long stretches of time, her rejection of food – meant she fell into such a deep depression her parents worried for her life. She went so long without eating that she was almost

hospitalized. Thunberg herself says the only way she was able to pull herself out of her depression was to decide she was going to do something with all she had learned on the topic. First, her family started changing their own habits to be more eco-conscious and then she began her weekly Friday school strikes for climate change outside Swedish parliament (Alter et al., 2019; Grossman, 2020). The parallels are such that Thunberg was inspired to model her own actions off that of the Parkland activists, who also performed school strikes (Alter et al, 2019).

What these beginnings emphasize is the idea that Thunberg and González were both perfectly average teens before their moment of awakening, but that somehow simultaneously there was also something intrinsically special about them that primed them to be particularly apt as spokespeople. In both cases, their status as teenagers is central to both why they are average but also why they have the skills to be useful in this moment, as well as why they are exceptional enough to make waves. For the former position, writers and newscasters often note that youth have historically been a part of the largest and loudest social movements, but also that this generation specifically is well-equipped because they are the Internet generation, and therefore more media savvy generally and specifically well-versed in how to use social media to spread a message. "Kids shouldn't have to fight their leaders to demand safety — but it isn't surprising either" writes Madeline Aggeler (2018) for *The Cut*, "students have been at the forefront of our country's most powerful social movements." Later, Aggeler (2018) goes on to note, "like most teenagers today, [González] has an implicit understanding of the power of social media and branding." Likewise, when Thunberg was named *Time*'s "Person of the Year" in 2019, while Thunberg the individual was being recognized, often the power of her and her message was

put into language that placed the power in youthfulness overall. The headline on the cover was in fact, simply, "the power of youth" – notably, not the power of Thunberg, personally. (The accompanying photos do, however, certainly place Thunberg in a powerful light, shot as she is from low angles, with a stormy sea behind her, always a stern expression on her face). In the full article, this message was reiterated through lines such as "leaders respond to pressure, pressure is created by movements, movements are built by thousands of people changing their minds. And sometimes, the best way to change a mind is to see the world through the eyes of a child" (Alter et al., 2019). In all these quotes, it is the youthfulness of the activist themselves that make them so successful, so innovative, enlarging the focus from just Thunberg and González as individuals.

Yet simultaneously, such stories invariably center the individual youth activist, the histories and trends of youth activism more a contextual backdrop rather than the point. As such, statements about the general predilection of youth towards activism will be countered, sometimes in the space of a sentence, with statements that point to the exceptional status of these two individuals, respectively, and why they were uniquely positioned to answer the call they heard and become the leaders they proved to be. For González, it is not simply that they are particularly articulate and a gifted writer, although these are qualities that certainly helped raise their profile, but also that they carry markers of difference that, when deployed by adult accountings of the March For Our Lives (MFOL) movement, seem to suggest there is some intrinsic pull towards progressive activism that comes from their queerness and their Cuban identity. Journalist Dave Cullen, who wrote a definitive accounting of the 1999 Columbine school shooting, began following the Parkland teens early in their days of activism, sensing something was different about this response

to a mass school shooting. His first introduction of González very pointedly centers on their individuality, framing the way they speak for themselves as unique, even in this group of outspoken kids: “[X] González liked to write. The best profiles written about [them] were written by [them]. ‘I’m 18 years old, Cuban and bisexual,’[they] wrote in an early one." Cullen then goes on to recount the anecdote that González had been handing out "love confessions" that fateful day (Cullen, 2019, p. 29).

González's quote is from an op-ed they wrote for *Harper's Bazaar,* a little over a week after the shooting, and it is how the article begins. It is an effective introduction, on Cullen's part. Using González's own words and description of themself makes an impactful point about the uniqueness of their intersectional identity, succinctly hitting the three points that adult journalists would continually circle back to: young, Latinx, and queer. However, what is also interesting is what is cut out from González's op-ed, especially by jumping then to the work of the LGBTQ club that day. First, that González lists other things that make them unique too, such as, "I’m allergic to 12 things" and "I draw, paint, crochet, sew, embroider—anything productive I can do with my hands while watching Netflix." Before they then abruptly start a new paragraph to make a stark and impactful point: "But none of this matters anymore" (González, 2018b). González goes on to try and emphasize that the movement is much larger than themself, much larger than even the "big three" Parkland student personalities that have garnered so much airtime – it is all of the students, all of the parents, all of the teachers affected by this shooting and the many other victims of gun violence, numbers that have yet to move the needle on gun control in America. This abrupt switch from the hyper-personal to an insistence that the personal does not matter, not in this context, makes two clear points: first, that González feels all of

these parts of themself have been subsumed under the weight of this new mission and secondly, that they are no individual celebrity or leader, but just one part of a larger whole. I agree with Cullen – the best writing about González is often that which they do themselves, but not simply because it is personal. Instead, it is because their writing seeks to complicate the narrative of their rise, even at the moment of introduction.

Yet this fight against individualization and celebrification, against a fixation on their own unique identity, proves to be something of a losing battle. As noted, at the time, González still used she/her pronouns, but along with proudly identifying themselves as bisexual, they also had a somewhat genderqueer physical appearance, namely in the form of their shaved head. Their shaved head comes up in every profile of González, especially as a form to initially introduce them as a subject. After saying that it is not surprising that youth in general have become leaders in progressive activism, one journalist notes: "Nor is it surprising that a young woman with a shaved head and the last name González has become a figurehead for #NeverAgain [the hashtag the Parkland teens originally used after the shooting]" (Aggeler, 2018). This makes clear that while youth activism might not be surprising or special in and of itself, González *is* special and worthy of a solo profile. In the *Time* profile of all the teens, Charlotte Alter (2018) first introduces González by calling them the "buzzcut senior." It has led others to compare González to Joan of Arc, and specifically Maria Falconetti's portrayal of the martyr in 1928 with her "brutally close-cropped hair" (Mead, 2018). *Vogue* took one cheeky hashtag González used in a tweet – #BaldiesGetTheJobDone – and constructed an entire article around it, arguing that even if they shaved their head before the shooting, it "makes for a politicized statement" and declaring "if this is what the future of America looks like, we're all in" (Van Paris, 2018).

And while the haircut is largely celebrated, it also could be used as a focal point for critics; Republican Maine House candidate Leslie Gibson called González a "skinhead lesbian" before shortly thereafter dropping out of the race, in large part because of these comments (Brammer, 2018). In the continual invocation of the buzzcut, all seem to make a tacit connection between González's non-normative appearance with an intrinsic call to activism and progressive politics. The suggestion seems to be, *of course* they have become the leader of a youthful, rebellious movement – just look at them.

González, for their own part, also draws something of a line between their haircut and their politics, although the line is a bit less straight. The Parkland teens wrote a book, with each taking a chapter. González's chapter is ostensibly about the February 17th rally where they gave the infamous "we call BS" speech. However, it discusses the actual rally very little and proves to be a more a meditation on grief, rage, and how this group of young people did the work of activism while in the midst of processing these emotions. González discusses why they first decided to shave their head, which was less an overt rejection of normative femininity and more a subtle implication of the pressures of normative femininity. They note that in the humid Florida heat, they were always uncomfortable with long hair – literally, but also because they were always worrying it was frizzing, there seemed to be nothing to do with it but put it in a ponytail, and González did not think they looked particularly good in a ponytail. They write, "it sounds stupid but to have such a large insecurity, so prevalent in my everyday life, was often crippling. So, what do we do with insecurities? We get rid of them, cut them off at the source literally. It's liberating, a small victory to shave my head myself every week" (Gonzàlez, 2018a, p. 32). This is a relatively short tangent wedged between their reflections on how to balance anger with joy. The

overall point here and its placement thus makes their shaved head less about their identity per se, and instead about a general orientation towards their activist work and their life overall, post-trauma. To González, the shaved head seems to symbolize less what a radical they are and more a larger point about doing away with what makes your life worse, not better. As I will go on to explicate in more detail, this pairs well with what is actually radical about González's message, and what is therefore most incongruous with the ways in which mainstream media wishes to figure girl activists – González is okay with simply doing away with the institutions (like the NRA) or entrenched politicians that symbolize said institutions that are actively harmful. They call for simply cutting off the source of such grief and rage.

In Thunberg's case, it is her diagnosis as someone with ASD that most marks her as an exceptional individual. In a survey of 21 profiles written about Thunberg, Ryalls and Mazzarella (2021) found that Thunberg's autism is commented upon in 18 of them. The way her autism is framed is overwhelmingly "not as a deficit, but as a positive contributor to Thunberg's activism" and as "her superpower, a factor of her exceptionalism" (Ryalls & Mazzarella, 2021, p. 443-444). The accompanying profile when Thunberg won *Time*'s Person of the Year sums up how and why her autism acts as a superpower and sets her apart as an individual well:

> She has Asperger's syndrome, which means she doesn't operate on the same emotional register as many of the people she meets. She dislikes crowds; ignores small talk; and speaks in direct, uncomplicated sentences. She cannot be flattered or distracted. She is not impressed by other people's celebrity, nor does she seem to have interest in her own growing fame. But these very qualities have helped make her a global sensation. Where others smile to cut the tension, Thunberg is withering. Where others speak the language of hope, Thunberg repeats the unassailable science: Oceans will rise. Cities will flood. Millions of people will suffer. (Alter et al., 2019)

As this article makes plain, it is not simply that her autistic traits make her a particularly good activist, especially for an issue as urgent and dire as climate change, but they are equally what make people want to hold her up as exceptional, and therefore famous. It is ironically these same traits that make her want to eschew fame, which only has the opposite effect of making her seem even more special. The fame is then taken to be something of an inevitable and unavoidable outcome of this uniqueness.

Thunberg herself often reiterates this framing of her autism as a superpower, even as she continues to resist the idea that means she should be a celebrity. In Nathan Grossman's documentary about her, *I Am Greta,* Thunberg is the first on-screen to bring up her autism, in the voiceover that is framing her journey over the past year from the beginning of the school strikes to a momentous trip to a U.N. summit in America. First, she sets herself, and children writ large, in opposition to adults: "Adults always say one thing, and then do something completely different. They say that we only have one planet and we should take care of it, and yet no one gives a damn about the climate crisis." She then continues this line of thinking – why she is willing to say the difficult, unpleasant, but necessary things rather than the adult politicians – narrating, "sometimes, it feels like we who have Asperger's or autism are the only ones who see through the noise." In this way, both profiles and Thunberg herself often tie together her autism, her youth, and how both make her exceptionally well-placed to speak on this topic in this moment.

This is aided by Thunberg's whiteness and enhanced girlishness. Her periods of food deprivation stunted her growth, making her appear even younger than she really is. "Thunberg is 16 but looks 12" (Alter et al., 2019) or a similar sentiment is a common refrain in articles about her. However, that her small stature is due to those autistic

symptoms that have proven challenging for Thunberg and her family is often glided over in favor of noting another trait that enhances her girlishness: her preferred hairstyle of braids. This styling choice (also often tied to the simplicity of her chosen wardrobe) is framed as a result the exceptional aspects of her autism, namely that her focus is beyond such things as her appearance and she simply wants a simple hairstyle that keeps her hair out of her way, so that she may instead focus on her more important pursuits. Her Swedish heritage is somewhat less-often commented upon, but is still mentioned and usually more subtly conveyed in accompanying photos, which trend towards showing Thunberg in the sweeping, cold landscapes of Northern Europe, and/or offer close-ups on her blue eyes and blonde hair, all of which ties Thunberg to her whiteness. This inherent whiteness and girlishness, despite the very un-girlish delivery of her message, "marks her as idealized and exceptional, as *the* icon of the global climate change movement" (Ryalls & Mazzarella, 2021, p. 444). This both helps explain Thunberg's celebrity rise rather than many of the indigenous girl activists that have protested around climate change before and since Thunberg's efforts (a disparity Thunberg herself is cognizant of an tries to rectify, which I will discuss later in more depth) as well as why her ASD can be framed as a "superpower" and is rarely associated with negative portrayals and stereotypes of both ASD and disability generally that are otherwise unfortunately common in representations.

In the case of both Thunberg and González, it is clear how patterns emerge to frame the celebrity girl activist as both a symbol of all youth and as individually exceptional. How the media itself will do so is clear from the beginning. In each case, both activists can trace their start to a clear inciting incident. These incidents are personally impactful for them, and likewise an enticingly easy place for media outlets to begin the narrative of something

like a hero's journey for them. They may follow patterns of youth activism, but such a narrative suggest that this hero is special, uniquely fitted to take on the mantle of a difficult task and lead others. And what makes either of these kids unique is intimately tied with their personal identities – gender and age, of course, and also sexuality, race, nationality, and ability. In many ways, Thunberg and González's own words coincide with this framing of how they came to their work, albeit their own takes often offer a bit more nuance and even at the beginning demonstrate they will push back on their celebrification. But it is when both, respectively, gave incendiary speeches directly to the audience of politicians that had courted their ire that a clear bifurcation between their own conception of their place in the media and the media's continued attempts to box them into common narratives of the exceptional girl would begin to show.

"Crying is a kind of communication": Dialectics of Affect and Figuration as Youth Activists

While their beginnings in activism are traced to different moments, both Thunberg and González became widely visible, celebrity-adjacent figures after giving searing, anger-filled speeches at public events, which were subsequently filmed and went viral online. For González, this was the February 17th, 2018 rally held in Fort Lauderdale, FL. This was only three days after the shooting and while the student survivors had begun to be fixtures on news outlets, they had not yet begun to formalize their roles as activists, and thus this rally was organized by a group of adults. It is where González gave the infamous "we call BS" speech and, in that moment, became one of if not the most well-known and visible of the Parkland survivors. For Thunberg, this moment came at the 2019 UN Climate Action

Summit, which she was invited to after the school strikes had started to garner worldwide attention. It is there that she began her speech with a scathing "how dare you" to those adults in attendance, before launching into an impassioned speech that minced no words on the calamities that will come from climate change and how disgusted she was with politicians, including the assembled group, taking half-measures meant to placate rather than truly change anything.

While the content of these speeches is important, it has been fairly well-covered by both popular and academic coverage. Instead, I wish to highlight the unique affects of delivery and word choice, both of which demonstrate the divide between the personas Thunberg and González craft themselves and the "hopeful, harmless, and optimistic" figuration Taft (2020) describes as typical for the girl activist and in which discourse about the two often tries to slot them. Namely, these speeches are marked by outrage, anger, grief, and acts of public shaming and it is these choices that made them go viral, made them resonate, even as the then-heightened discourse about both teens would then continually try and soften their more radical edges after the fact. These also occur in the middle of their narratives, so to speak, when their roles as leaders of solidified activist movements and organizations became more formalized.

It is also when tensions over kids "running" political movements became a more contentious topic, as their actions coalesced into formal non-profits while teenagers remained the figureheads and seemingly in key leadership roles. It is when both González and Thunberg's insistence on their own continued status as adolescents, rather than future-adults ready to engage in public politics, come most to a head. For González, initial appearances of the Parkland students became a systemized set of rallies, marches, and

appearances that led the teens to tour the U.S. over the summer of 2018. They also needed to make use of an influx of funds the survivors received as their media profile grew, all of which came together under the organization MFOL. For Thunberg, her once-solitary Friday "school strikes" outside the Swedish parliament became an international wave of Friday school strikes which then became the organization Fridays For Future which describes itself as a "youth-led and -organised global climate strike movement" (Fridays for Future) that aids other young activists in beginning their own Friday School Strikes for Climate with advice and resources. Both organizations get their name from Twitter hashtags the Parkland survivors and Thunberg first used to spread their message. Both activists' more formalized entry into institutionalized spaces of power also extends beyond these organizations and includes their invitation directly into politics; via meeting with politicians and world leaders, speaking at UN conferences and CNN Town Hall debates, and more, both teens were asked to circulate in spheres once strictly labeled as the adult realm of politics. Both of these circumstances thus prompted questions on if teens should be tasked with such responsibilities while likewise inviting them to take on said responsibilities, but expecting them to adopt a more formal, professional (usually construed not-so-subtly as "adult" or "mature") mode of address and presentation of the self.

First, I would like to return to these watershed speeches to demonstrate how the teens presented themselves and formed this affective persona that would mark both their star images and the ways in which audiences received them. González begins their speech by holding aloft their notes from their AP Government class. Immediately, they make achingly clear how young they are, that just days ago they were nothing more than an

average student taking notes in class. They also almost immediately begin crying the moment they begin speaking, but do not shy away from this emotional response, as they are quite skilled at speaking clearly and strongly through tears. The class notes not only highlight their youth, but also highlight that they come to this issue through a process of *ongoing* instruction, one that has helped inform their words today (they had in fact just had a unit on special interest groups, knowledge that proved key to their specific critical aim at the NRA) but also had been unnaturally interrupted by the tragedy of the shooting and the need to immediately launch to action after it. "Instead of worrying about our AP Gov chapter 16 test" González explained, "we have to be studying our notes to make sure our arguments based on politics and political history are water-tight. The students of this school have been having debates on guns for what feels like our entire lives. AP Gov had about 3 debates this year. Some discussions on the subject even occurred during the shooting while students were hiding in closets." Unlike much of the instructional feminism thus far, González does not frame instruction into ideology here as something that can be cleanly taken on board by youth in order to fashion future successful, neoliberal adults. It is something young people learn and then see repeatedly *not* followed through on by the actual adults in power. Biressi (2018) notes that it is the promise that the "good girl" activist will certainly have a successful (in the neoliberal, postfeminist sense) adulthood if they simply learn these lessons, and it is this promise that proves the present policies are working. This fantasy is categorically denied here by a girl activist themself. The hanging accusation here is then: how can one continue to abide the strictures to be a good girl, learn lessons, and have civil debate when the material reality of that debate wants to kill you in the present?

González continues to cry throughout this speech, but their voice also builds in anger as they go, sometimes reaching the level of shouting, especially as they outline many of the ways that pro-gun sides of the debate are often just victim-blaming. In short, they make no effort to hide that the entire event is emotional, but also which points in particular swing them between grief to rage. There is a target for that rage – namely the NRA and then-President Donald Trump. After detailing how much money Trump received from the NRA during his presidential campaign, they say, “To any politician who is taking money from the NRA, shame on you” which prompts the crowd to chant “shame on you." Finally, they move into the section of the speech with the refrains of "we call BS!" which the crowd also begins to chant along with. This too, was a product of instruction, as they explained they read several famous political speeches from history in preparation to write this speech and noted that what each speech had in common was some sort of hook that the crowd could repeat (González, 2018a). It is notable that the phrase they chose to be most easily pulled from the speech itself, what the speech would come to be referred to in short-hand from that point onwards, was a phrase that mixed anger and utter frustration at the hopeful, optimistic lies their generation is told by adults in power.

González and other Parkland activists have noted that this ability to emote, and to still speak so eloquently through that emotion, was clearly a key part of what made González so compelling. "It’s not a coincidence that a disproportionate number of the Never Again leaders are dedicated members of the drama club" notes one profile, leading into the teens' ability to emote, especially in public appearances and/or on camera (Witt, 2018). However, González was not in the drama club, but Cameron Kasky sums up why they still fit so well: “Because David has an amazing composure, he’s incredibly politically intelligent;

I have a little bit of composure; and [X], beautifully, has no composure, because [they're] not trying to hide anything from anybody" to which González added the quippy rejoinder, “All these kids are drama kids, and I’m a dramatic kid, so it really meshes well" (Witt, 2018).

The media in many respects reveled in the kids' no-holds-barred approach to speaking to adult politicians. This is often framed by the media as unique to their teenhood, a framing that read generously can suggest why having teens in this conversation is crucial, while on the other hand suggests such affective responses are simply products of their age, and thus all the heavy suggestion that they are not yet "mature" enough come to fruition. “Teens have always had a unique talent for humiliation, and social media only sharpens their knives" journalist Charlotte Alter (2018) later argues, seemingly suggesting the Parkland teens have an adept rhetorical skill that aid in the activists' overall goal of public shaming, and this skill is enhanced by the media platforms their generation knows best. Yet only a few sentences prior described the activists as such: "like many teenagers, they’re at a peculiar stage in their lives where they feel at once vulnerable and invincible, highly social yet impervious to the etiquette expected from adults.” This in some way mimics those descriptions of Thunberg's ASD as a "superpower" – here, their age gives them a similar ability to see through bullshit and speak/act accordingly. However, there is also the heavy suggestions that this is simply the same as any emotional phase from a teenager who has not yet had the life experience of an adult who no longer feels invincible and thus, takes more measured steps as a result.

Despite this characterization that the activists' emotions are a universal of teenhood, González was clearly aware they were walking something of an affective

tightrope, that their being "emotional" was also an easy point of critique for many, a clear sign that they were not fit to be taking on such a fraught, complex topic. "Adults are saying that children are emotional. I should hope so—some of our closest friends were taken before their time because of a senseless act of violence that should never have occurred. If we weren't emotional, they would criticize us for that, as well. Adults are saying that children are disrespectful. But how can we respect people who don't respect us?" and later cuts to the heart of much of criticism scholars have over the figuration of the good girl activist: "Adults like us when we have strong test scores, but they hate us when we have strong opinions" (González, 2018b). Likewise, it is often their anger and frustrations that is pulled out as the most effective of the affects González and other activists used, but González notes that their clear grief was also something they chose to embrace, with full knowledge it can make others uncomfortable. Describing both their "we call BS" speech but also the complex stew of emotions they were working through in those first, chaotic days they note, "crying is really healthy and feels very good, I really don't know why people are so against it. Maybe because it's loud. Crying is a kind of communication, and communication is key" (González 2018a, p. 32). This statement comes after they note that they are most angered by the politicians who seem entirely emotionless in the face of tragedy, who can now give pat, canned answers to mass shooting victims and move on. Thus, while González's passionate deliveries and strong words are genuine, it was also a clear strategy to press against what they knew were expectations of the "good" youth activist and place themselves in direct opposition to the adults they are criticizing.

While this affective choice was clearly effective in many respects, there was nonetheless still an attempt to temper it, not just by the discourses that surround the girl

activist but by González, too, as a rise to prominence urged a feeling that they needed to show certain markers of "respectability" or "maturity." I use "respectability" here as a nod to the concept of "respectability politics," which are behaviors, affects, and styles that Black people, and Black women in particular, are expected to maintain to prove their value to white society, but have also come to be used more broadly to address how marginalized groups are expected to lift themselves by maintaining these white, middle class standards (Higginbotham, 1994; Harris, 2014; Pitcan et al. 2018). While MFOL wanted to keep the activists' youth front and center to their message, they also bristled at not being taken seriously for the same reasons. After following them for weeks and receiving almost universal access to their efforts, Dave Cullen (2019) noted the only thing they were "consistently cagey" about was just how much adult help they were receiving, especially when it came to handling the roughly 3.5 million dollars they had received in donations at that point (p. 65). Managing their affects became one method in this endeavor to be taken seriously in adult spaces of power – which necessitated negotiating the fiery responses they had become known for and assumptions of their maturity, or lack thereof, as the case may be. González felt the pressure to employ certain affective traits that would signal this increasingly large cause was in good hands. While I argue this affect is both new for the girl activist and an important disruption of their figuration into the "good girl" paradigm of the hopeful figure, there was still a compulsion at this early stage to temper affects. González notes that they "kept it PG," during their public appearances at this time, holding themselves back from truly "cursing at Congress" in order to still seem like a "morally upright person" (González, 2023). Hence, the choice in that first speech to use "BS" rather than the full "bullshit."

This management of their affect was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the appearance González and other Parkland activists made at CNN town halls, where they were meant to debate prominent adult figureheads of the pro-fun movement. González was paired with Dana Loesch, a spokeswoman for the NRA. The MFOL organizer chose González to square off against Loesch because Loesch was seen as the trickiest opponent, as she has the ability to speak very calmly, appear very rational (despite repeating the same policy points as any other NRA proponent), and often mentions her children to soften her general mien towards the issue, which projects a more empathetic air than many of the other pro-gun advocates who often came off as blustering and downright cruel in their lack of compassion towards the survivors in the intervening days. It was decided that with González's eloquence, even in the face of emotional circumstances, she would be the best person to take on Loesch (Cullen, 2019). Thus, in so many words, González was asked to match the performed calm logic that Loesch employs, the unspoken assumption being those who do not get riled or emotional when debating will appear more "objective" and therefore credible.

This is quite evident in the actual town hall, which is an incredibly subdued public appearance for González. Right off the bat, González must take on the affect of "civil debate" that CNN imposes on this town hall setup. All of the activists are gathered on-stage, seated in bleachers, with the student debater standing amidst them, speaking into a microphone, while Loesch and Broward County (where Parkland is located) sheriff Scott Israel sit apart across from the students. The setup suggests solidarity for the teen activists, but also a certain level of elevated authority for the adults, as it becomes clear Israel is much more on the side of the teens, and thus the division here is not one of "sides." After a simultaneously

empty but condescending opening in which Loesch asserts that she does not think anyone should deny them a voice "because you are young," González must thank her for this basic acknowledgement of their right to speak. Instead, it is the surrounding audience that gets to play the affective role that González would normally play themself. When Loesch goes on to say "think of how far you could go for voicing your opinions," seemingly suggesting this is all simply some sort of summer work they're doing to be future politicians, the crowd boos and a few shout undistinguishable phrases, but when the camera pans to the activists and González standing amidst them, all are maintaining carefully neutral expressions.

Finally, González is able to ask their question, which is a delicately worded and generally a softball: "do you believe it should be harder to obtain semi-automatic and fully automatic weapons?" Later, González explained this was also a product of CNN's "civil debate" approach to the town hall – the activists had to submit a list of questions beforehand, and CNN producers only okayed the most basic and safe among them. González also crafted the wording exactly, notably using "weapons" rather than "guns" because they had been advised if they used the latter, the other side would simply argue about the semantics of what it means for a gun to be semi- or fully-automatic (González, 2023). Unlike the rallies and media appearances where González had been more or less given free rein to speak as they like, here their words are both curtailed by the forum itself as well as by trying to cater to the opposing sides' frustrating but effective method of side-stepping questions and changing the terms of the argument.

Nonetheless, Loesch danced around even this simple question and, despite the careful wording, still only argued the semantics of "fully automatic" guns already being banned. Again, the crowd reflects the anger at this non-answer rather than González,

although they do try to raise their voice above the crowd a few times to clarify they were discussing accessories such as bump stocks, which for all intents and purposes render semi-automatic guns fully automatic. However, essentially, the actual asking of that question is the only time González truly speaks during the town hall; they are never given the space of a proper rebuttal. After those few attempts at further clarification and pressing on Loesch, they do not speak again. Instead, it is Sheriff Israel who cuts through the crowd's noise to respond angrily to Loesch's assertion she is "standing up" and "fighting" for all children. In aligning himself with the teens, he also comes to essentially co-opt their voice and persona, later saying "[X] and I, we call BS on that" after making a lengthy statement about what needs to be done to combat gun violence in schools. This is a speech which González would most likely agree with in part (a blanket call for gun reform) but almost certainly not in full (much more of the speech is devoted to how police officers need to be granted more power to detain people and take away guns, and to have even more of a presence in schools, which, given that González also made a point of linking of gun violence and police brutality in Black and brown communities in their activist work, seems unlikely they would want their name thrown in with). Then, the moderator turns to the audience for pre-arranged questions for Loesch, González's minimal role officially concluded. This is the most high-profile of public appearances where González fits squarely into the role of figuration – there as a symbol and nothing more – and it is also the appearance where their affect is the most constrained, the most in-line with notions of stoic maturity and respectability.

Thunberg sees much less change in her affect across appearances than what I have outlined for González here – she remains consistently angry, insistent, and on-message,

although she is more apt to use humor than González. However, her humor is quite dark and biting, not exactly in-line with the use of humor meant to soften the killjoy or make her more likable that was noted by Kanai (2019) and Saraswati (2021). Adults uneasiness with how to receive Thunberg's messages is clear from the first moments of her speech at the UN Climate Summit in 2019. After noting her invitation to speak here, her opening line ends with: "my message is that we will be watching you" which receives chuckles from the audience, until Thunberg's stern, unsmiling face clues them in that this is not, in fact, a joke. In many ways, while the Friday School Strikes had been going on for a year, this conference was Thunberg's introduction to the international world stage, and it is clear here that her affect is not yet known or understood. She then launches into her repetition of "how dare you," her voice wavering with rage and emotion. She is blistering in her set-down of the very world leaders that sit in the room with her. Key to her message is that she will not allow adults to adopt the conventional narrative that children have bright futures, that her own attendance in that room is testament to that fact. Instead, she argues "you have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words, and yet I'm one of the lucky ones" before noting her privilege as a white, middle class citizen of Western Europe means she has not yet felt the most devastating consequences of climate change, as those of the Global South, the poor, and other marginalized people have. She establishes a common sentiment she will go on to repeat – that young people must do this work in the present only because adults are the ones who are acting like children. Speaking of the half-measures that have been banded about at the conference, evidence they are not yet facing how dire the situation it, she admonishes, "these numbers are uncomfortable, and you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is." It is children who have been forced to confront the bald

facts of the future and therefore adopt this maturity that by all rights should be embodied by the adults in the room instead.

Documentarian Nathan Grossman was following Thunberg at this point and the film provides insight into Thunberg's approach to the speech and its aftermath. The viewer sees Thunberg's mounting disillusionment early on in the conference, as she marvels there are essentially no vegan options for food at the venue, despite veganism being a common lifestyle choice to reduce one's carbon footprint. She is also shown putting the finishing touches on this speech in her hotel room with father Svante. He listens to her read the speech and notes the language she is using might be too "harsh" to which she responds, "but it's true!" He counsels that perhaps she just tweak phrasing such as "mass extinction" to something a bit less dire, but she asserts that impressing upon the audience that the situation *is* dire is important. Finally, she asks him to please just be quiet. It is clear throughout the film that Thunberg's parents are incredibly supportive but also that Svante, as the parent who primarily travels with her, also wants to watch over her and mitigate the emotional outcomes of Thunberg's outspokenness, especially as we see the mounting criticisms against her coming from social media and conservative media. But in this scene, it becomes clear that Thunberg's dismissal of normative authorial positions, here between parent and child or simply between adult and minor, carries in all aspects when it comes to her activist work. Like the Parkland activists, while clearly parents are involved, depictions of Thunberg's work make clear that the activism itself and her affective choices in public speaking and appearances are entirely her own.

Thunberg delivers exactly the speech she wants to, harsh language and all. And if the crowd clearly does not yet know how to respond to her at the beginning of the speech, it

becomes clear they will continue to try and treat her more like a celebrity and symbol in the aftermath, despite her words. Grossman follows Thunberg as she re-enters the conference post-speech and a group of the adults in attendance clamor for her attention, pulling her into a group photo where they all smile broadly and give thumbs-up, while Thunberg stands awkwardly in the center of the group and can only manage a tight, thin-lipped smile. It is a shot that makes clear just how hard it already is, and will only increasingly be, for Thunberg to be treated as anything other than a celebrity at such events, even as she gives a speech that unequivocally demonstrates her anger at these same adults who want to pull her in for a photo-op. The documentary then switches to splices of news media that demonstrate how the speech was received and dissembled afterward. The speech is framed as a "scolding" by an anchor, for example, picking up on not just the anger but the ways in which Thunberg attempts to reverse the adult-child power dynamics and place herself in a position to be the one to do the scolding. But such news coverage also picks up on Thunberg's individual characteristics that will make it so hard for discourse about her to not individualize and exceptionalize her. For example, for the speech she wore what would become a go-to outfit, a bright pink, loose fitting cotton top, nondescript pants, and her ever-present braids. The commentators in these clips all note that she "isn't wearing anything special," seeming proof of her difference from other young girls, the seriousness of her cause superseding her interest in the typical feminine pursuits of fashion and make-up.

However, there is also the secondary later framing in this sequence from the documentary itself. Grossman wants to demonstrate how Thunberg's celebrity grew, despite her own reluctance over that fact, and counteracts some of these narratives. Earlier

in the film, he shows Thunberg wanting to choose even more non-descript clothing for the speech, seemingly unaware what statement, if any, her choices would make. It is Svante who urges her to choose something a little more special, which is how they land on the pink shirt. Likewise, Svante and Thunberg note that her tendency towards loose, cotton clothing is related to the sensory issues she has as a result of ASD. In some ways, this juxtaposed framing in the documentary still individualizes Thunberg's choices. Her choices in appearance, her distaste for crowds and photo-ops, are still attributable to her ASD, but the myth of the "autism superpower" is nuanced with these day to day considerations she and her father must make, less proof of what a serious, preternatural girl she is and instead something that both helps her activism but makes celebrity extremely difficult.

Thunberg never changes her affective register over the course of her public appearances. Speeches at climate conferences and rallies carry similar messages and her social media presence remains fierce. She was particularly noted for responding to the right-wing political leaders via her Twitter, but in this medium her affect recalls Saraswati's (2021) observation that online activists often use the most offensive comments lobbed against them and flip them into jokes. After Thunberg's UN speech, Trump sarcastically tweeted, “She seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!” and Thunberg changed her Twitter bio to "A very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future." She has also changed her bio to "a kind but poorly informed teenager" after Russian President Vladimir Putin described her in those exact terms at a press conference (BBC News, 2019). In the intervening years she has made several such jokes, by either changing her bio or mimicking the tweets of her detractors, throwing their rhetoric and accusations back in their faces. She not only sends

the message that their criticisms do not affect her, that they in fact just continue to make her respect traditional political leaders less and less, but also that she herself never directly insults, she just repeats their own petty words back to them. While I agree with Saraswati (2021) that this joking affect often serves to undercut the impact and pain in facing a constant barrage of sexist and/or ableist comments, it does have a different valence when the power dynamic between activist and critic is further imbalanced by age. Here, Thunberg's highlighting and resistance to Trump and Putin's words reduces them to schoolyard bullies, immaturely calling her names while she instead deals with the serious issues facing the world. It serves her larger message that world leader are acting like children, as she has often repeated, and thereby grossly letting down the generation of actual children who must pick up the slack. When paired with the actual anger and pain Thunberg emotes when speaking publicly, this approach to her online persona no longer reads as Thunberg trying to project an air of being disaffected – she is decidedly not in any other aspect of her public life – but instead that she is angry about the *right* things to be angry about, unlike these men in positions of authority and power.

Thunberg is clearly unwilling to defer to adults generally, as by dint of age she is expected to, or those in positions of power that normally garner ceremonial demonstrations of respect, if nothing else. Unlike González, Thunberg did not slowly fade from public view. While she does not demonstrate grief and sadness in the same ways or to the same extent González does, there are clearly moments during the height of her fame when the toll is clear. In one public appearance depicted in Grossman's documentary, multiple reporters are asking her questions, she begins to choke up and interviews pounce asking why. She responds that she keeps having to say the same things repeatedly, and they

are horrifying things, and so to get visibly upset just once is "only reasonable." It is this discord with Thunberg's angry affect that sets the stage for her to begin withdrawing more from the public eye: people like Thunberg's anger because it is cathartic to see someone finally express the frustrations many clearly feel about the inaction and apathy that so many in power seemingly have to urgent plights. But the process of figuration blunts this; her anger is almost immediately transformed into a cute curiosity, to see such ferocity in such a small, young girl. It is the UN speech and the moments after on a mass media scale – she is lauded for her work, praised for her rightful anger, then immediately pulled into purely symbolic photos where she is asked to smile with those she just condemned, all while she wonders if anyone really heard her at all.

The End?: Silence and Absence as Affect and Activism

If the figuration of these young activists held together, I would be able to describe the triumphant, optimistic cap to their narratives utilized by the media. That I cannot do so can be understood in two ways. First, as evidence that they continued to complicate their own narratives and resist both this process and the easier narrative of exceptional girlhood promoted by popular feminism. Instead, how they have foregrounded the tensions within their own images make a neat summary impossible. Secondly, that their own worst fears came to fruition and both the media and politicians used them as symbols of a hypothetical progress without ever implementing real change. While most scholarly reads of girl activists would trend towards the latter explanation, I believe that both of these things can be true.

In the case of both Thunberg and González, they took a step back from their positions as figureheads of these movements, for their own individual reasons, but also because both could see the ways in which they had been rendered symbols and felt stepping back was one way to mitigate this. González describes this realization as somewhat surreal. They reflect, “the strangest part of being a survivor was how badly strangers wanted to touch me, like I was a living relic" (González, 2023). And González fully understands how their own highly personal expressions of grief and rage not only did not mitigate this effect, but only added to it: "From the first time I spoke up at that first rally, full of rage, with a shaved head, I’d become a symbol, and that’s what the people who came to see us wanted from me" (González, 2023). In this piece, González tells a fitting anecdote that sums up her disillusionment with the reception of the Parkland activists. The activists were asked to attend a private event in DC after a rally, one that was filled with politicians and others with power. They describe an older man approaching them and:

> with all the positivity in the world, he clapped me on the shoulder and said, "Well, it’s on you kids now; we fucked it all up, and now it’s your job to fix it." How nice that must have felt for him, or for the countless people who would, in the coming years, say exactly the same thing to me, offloading the capacity to make change to us as a way of absolving themselves of their own role in America’s problems. How much pressure fell squarely on my shoulders with every hand that rested there, telling me to fix this problem, to take this chance and run with it. (González, 2023)

With this anecdote González makes quite clear that if scholars can analyze and perceive the ways in which youth activists are used to displace the problems of the present on to the next generation, those living that experience are very well aware that is what is happening. They are also hyper-aware that despite being invited into the halls of power, such as the activists were here, by virtue of their position and their age they have no real power to implement the various legal reforms they advocate for. In highlighting this, González makes

clear that no matter how exceptional or how well one learns the correct lessons of behavior, adolescents cannot fully function in this sphere in the same way as adults. This relatively quick process of disillusionment with what MFOL and the Parkland teens could accomplish, as well as their own continuing feelings of grief and PTSD, meant that only a few months after the MFOL movement began, in the summer of 2018, González began to place themself in less visible roles within the organization, before fully stepping back after entering university that Fall.

Thunberg reflects a similar process of disillusionment with the highly visible positions she was elevated to by politicians and the media. As Grossman's documentary comes to a close, he depicts the strain the year of rising fame placed on Thunberg. She describes sitting in these rooms with politicians and fantasizing about just standing up and screaming, she is so frustrated with the fact that all they do is "sit around and talk" without taking actual action. Eventually, she decided to simply stop entering those rooms. In November of 2021 she seemed to set the stage for this decision, tweeting "a reminder: the people in power don't need conferences, treaties or agreements to start taking real climate action. They can start today. When enough people come together then change will come and we can achieve almost anything. So instead of looking for hope - start creating it" (@GretaThunberg). As of January 2023, this tweet remains "pinned" to her profile, which is an interface design that allows one tweet to remain prominently at the top of user's profile rather than get pushed down sequentially in their timeline. It is an easy to access and highly visible means for Thunberg to demonstrate where she currently stands. It is also a succinct summary of how she utilizes the affect of hope, which is to resist that she in and of

herself embodies it for some hypothetical future and instead that it is something that needs to be actively worked towards through concrete action.

This position would become even more clear in the following year, when Thunberg declared she had been invited but would not be attending the most recent UN Climate Summit (now shortened in name to COP27). She explained, "the COPs are mainly used as an opportunity for leaders and people in power to get attention, using many different kinds of greenwashing," and further explained, "so as it is, the COPs are not really working, unless of course we use them as an opportunity to mobilise." She further criticized the conference for being held in Egypt, where many peaceful protestors are currently imprisoned (Guardian Staff, 2022). In short, Thunberg realized that her own refusal to attend and her rationale for why would now perhaps garner more attention, and thus perhaps instigate more actual action, than if she were to attend again and give another impassioned, but ultimately ignored, speech. And one thing she could use that statement for was to draw attention to the treatment of protesters in non-democratic countries, as her fellow youth organizers had taught her.

Both González and Thunberg's actions recall Saraswati's (2021) argument for the power of silence as an affect, although not precisely in the way Saraswati means it. For Saraswati, silence was a means to resist the neoliberal effects of social media, which always seeks to commodify both politics and pain. There is power in not posting, in not participating, and keeping something for oneself. This tracks more cleanly onto González's accounting of their step away from activism more so than Thunberg's. González is candid about the emotional strain of the months following the school shooting, in hindsight realizing their non-stop work was also clearly a coping mechanism. They confide to having

a panic attack when confronted with counter-protesters carrying guns and generally feeling overwhelmingly angry and depressed during this time period. The choice to step back was in trying to find joy and normalcy again (González 2018a). It was in stepping away from activism and MFOL, learning more broadly about a range of systemic issues and ideologies in college rather than focusing solely on gun control, that they were able to tentatively return to doing activist work at the end of 2022 (González, 2023). Thunberg, meanwhile, attaches a more defiant affect to her choice to step back from public, high visibility spaces. But in both cases, each makes a clear point that their step back is also a principled one based in their own approaches to activism. They also both make clear they understand they have been used by those in power and by the media as symbols, and a clear way to stop this process is to take the advice González once gave about her own hair – cut it off at the source.

It also was a strategic and ideological decision to de-center themselves and allow space for other, less privileged youth activists to make themselves heard. Bent (2020) details how González took a step away from the spotlight, politics, and being at the center of the gun debate. This was interpreted by journalists/punditry as perhaps a sign that they had reached the limits of their political aptitude, but the girl power script of activism not only believes that girls can change the world but that they alone can, and that shouldering that burden is something they are able to do through personal strength (Bent 2020). But, of course, they cannot do it alone, and taking a step back and letting other voices be heard is a key part of activism and, as Bent (2020) argues, public feminist activism specifically. González would nod to this ethos while at the height of their fame, consistently citing the teachers who had most informed their knowledge of history and the government, as well as

drawing attention back to the other Parkland activists, especially those more behind-the-scenes who were doing much of the actual organizing, such as Jaclyn Corrin.

This ethos is most evident in the Parkland activists' partnering with a pre-existing non—profit called the Peace Warriors, who through community works attempt to combat youth gun violence in cities, especially in Chicago where they are based. González and the other activists were well aware that a chief reason they were granted such a large amount of public attention and high-profile support was due to their upper-middle class status and that most in the group are white. Parkland itself is a wealthy, mostly gated community. From the moment *Anderson Cooper 360* producers used the highly loaded word "articulate" to describe the type of students they wanted to feature, it was clear that there were class and racial biases underlying why the Parkland students were received so favorably by the media, and therefore who the media tends to highlight as the exceptional youth activist. However, the Parkland activists understood that only focusing on the victims of mass shootings in schools would leave out the vast majority of victims of gun violence. So, they brought in the Peace Warriors to essentially pass their media presence and newfound Washington connections along to those who had been doing this work for years without the same level of attention. Peace Warrior D'Angelo McCade summed up what the groups provided to one another as: "we taught them the principles, and they taught us about policy" (Cullen, 2019, p. 107). Thus, in stepping back and largely silencing themself, González was in fact taking an action in-line with their own politics and approach to activism.

Thunberg, too, has repeatedly attempted to draw attention away from herself and to other youth environmental activists that have been working towards these issues, but with

less acknowledgement. And much like the Parkland activists, Thunberg also makes clear these under-sung activists are also the ones that come from the marginalized communities most impacted by the issue at hand – here, the effects of climate change are felt most by Indigenous, impoverished, and Global South peoples, and thus they are also the communities that have been working towards such solutions far before Thunberg's engagement. The media often highlights how the Friday School Strikes inspired youth activists across the entire globe to perform similar strikes. However, Thunberg herself attempts to correct the notion, then, that youth environmental activism begins with her first strike, or that she is the sole reason that environmental activism among young people has become so large and so visible. As evidence of this coalition-building, on March 15th, 2019 there was one mass school strike and march, which over 1 million strikers across 125 and countries. At a press conference in Madrid just before the mass march, Thunberg attempted to re-direct journalists, telling them to ask questions “not just to me,” but to the other Fridays for Future organizers on stage with her. When journalists repeatedly failed to do this, she took the matter into her own hands and would lob the questions she got to her co-organizers, consistently asking them what they thought instead of answering a question herself (Alter et al., 2019). Likewise, when the Covid-19 pandemic ground most of Fridays for Future's activities to a halt, Thunberg used the time to Zoom with other diverse, youth organizers from around the globe, which coalesced into "decolonization trainings" for the mostly white, Western European make-up of Fridays For Future. These sessions were largely led by Vanessa Nakate from Uganda, Disha Ravi from India, and Mitzi Jonelle Tan from the Philippines. They outlined many of the reasons FoF's go-to forms of protest and natural disaster response did not work in countries where they, say, lived under

dictatorships or had to serve much larger populations of impoverished people. Thunberg was a participant in these sessions and, later, in the write-up of these activities she refused to be interviewed, instead letting these other organizers speak for the more consciously intersectional change in both her own and FoF's approach (Mathiesen, 2022).

Despite these admirable efforts on the parts of González and Thunberg, it is notable that much of what I could find on the other, diverse activists they partnered with were only a sentence, maybe a paragraph, in much longer books and profiles dedicated to the celebrity individuals. And in such adult works, despite these threads of resistance, these complications of affects of hope and optimism, nonetheless that is often how adult reporting on them frames the issues. The front of Cullen's book *Parkland* praise the book as "uplifting," "a balm," and "optimistic." Thunberg is singled out as *Time*'s "Person of the Year" in 2019 and the cover story ends on an apt metaphor for this media framing: Thunberg is standing on a platform in front of and slightly above a crowd, ready to speak. From there, "she can see in every direction. The view is of a vast sea of young people from nations all over the world, the great force of them surging and cresting, ready to rise" (Alter et al., 2019). In short, Thunberg stands above, ready to direct and oversee this otherwise indistinguishable mass of young people she has worked up into an angry storm along with her. This, despite the fact that Thunberg consistently frames herself as just one part of the storm and, as she made clear from her first major speech, that she is "one of the lucky ones" when it comes to wealth and other privileges that would shield her from the worst effects of climate change.

The affects used to nonetheless highlight González or Thunberg's relative exceptionality can switch – Thunberg lauded as a hopeful, optimistic light for our future

while the productive anger of González and MFOL is emphasized. But in both cases, it is clear that the pull of both figuration generally – and the symbolic celebrity images that renders González and Thunberg into – as well as the narrative that what they symbolize is hope and optimism is clearly a process neither can fully overcome. Thus, silence becomes another affective tool to combat this, when anger, pain, and frustration proved not quite enough of a complication to their images.

Conclusion

Both González and Thunberg, as well as the other girl activists that have been held up as celebrities and symbols, are and can be inspiring to many – they have already proven as much and I was certainly not immune to this effect while doing this research. To say that they were rendered into figures and became frustrated with both this process and the lack of actual action from adult politicians is not to say they accomplished nothing tangible. Not only did both spearhead movements that mobilized millions and instigated worldwide protests, but there have been incremental policy changes as well, in large part due to the visibility and pressure placed on their respective issues by themselves and their organizations. González notes they feel immense pride over the concrete impacts the movement had, including "the banning of bump stocks, the rise of 'red flag' laws, countless voters registered, and a blueprint for activism and protesting for Gen Z to utilize" (González, 2023). Similar to that last point, Thunberg's influence on climate activism is so outsized a study dubbed it "The Greta Thunberg Effect," noting there was a significant increase in willingness to engage in collective action about the environment if the participant had heard of Thunberg, not simply because she has swayed them on the issue,

but because she herself gave them more confidence that average citizens could affect governmental policies (Sabherwal et al., 2021). Popular press outside of academia quickly picked up this nomenclature, spreading the usage of "The Greta Thunberg Effect" as a shorthand for her influence.

Nonetheless, as scholars have noted, neither escaped the figuration process that sees the girl activist rendered into a symbol of hope and optimism for the future, with that symbol doing the work of standing in for actual action in the present. The girl as our savior, the solution to our social ills, but the results of which will only be felt in a distant future. However, in only performing media discourse analysis on what is written about such activists by adults, we scholars can lose sight on what the activists say about themselves and their own causes and ideologies. When disentangling what is said about them and what they say about themselves, it is clear that in both words and especially in affect, youth activists such as Thunberg and González actively complicate and often outright defy their figuration of the hopeful, happy, and harmless girl. They use both their own status as teens and their affective address to do this. In embracing their status as adolescents, rather than crossing the adolescent-adult boundaries of citizenship via popular feminist, respectability politics, they make clear the disjuncture of children being in such a space. Their presence and persistent highlighting of the discord of it seeks to demonstrate that something has gone terribly wrong on the adult end, that adults have failed and thus children are forced to step in. Likewise, in consistently utilizing affects of anger, grief, and frustration (and, when using humor, a rather biting wit rather than a tone that de-escalates) they embrace the figure of the "killjoy," the figure that is not afraid to bring bad feelings into the room in order to uncover the actual root cause of the bad feelings.

To follow the media narratives of Thunberg and González, then, only tells us a certain type of story, and more importantly from a certain perspective: an adult one, which seeks to render these girls into more easily digestible, harmless figures and use them as symbols for the hope of the future rather than the immediate needs of the present. But to try and see the narrative from the perspective of Thunberg and González themselves tells a different story, one with the same major climactic events and general contours, but with a different tone and point of view that makes it much more difficult to slot them easily into pre-existing molds of figuration. It is a point of view that demonstrates how this media process can be resisted as well as how instructional feminism can remain within the realm of the adolescent, rather than teaching young people how to be a child-adult. In not trying to fit into a mold that allows them to respectably pass into the world of adults, the youth activists' own unique form of protest can be understood in all the energetic, angry and, yes, inspiring radicality it possesses.

Conclusion

When I first began *How To Be A Feminist*, I kept a short list of a few factors that might shape the course of how U.S. media would approach feminism and, therefore, how girls' media might feel the effects in the form of instructional feminism. One thing that is both challenging and exciting about working with contemporary media as a scholar is that you are observing changes in real time – the work feels simultaneously urgent and also like the conclusion you reached today might not be exactly true tomorrow. This list I made in the summer of 2020 makes quite clear how fast media cycles occur right now: trends, content, policy changes, industry mergers, and more underwent massive changes with extreme swiftness. At that time, I was monitoring if then-President Donald Trump would truly outlaw TikTok in America in a fit of pique, who would win the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and how a wave of #BlackLivesMatter protests would affect how the creative industries approached issues of racism, equity, and representation. Certain things never came to pass, such as a federal ban on TikTok (although certain state restrictions have, and the platform remains an easy scapegoat for broader fears about tech industries). And certain things inevitably did – America was going to have a president one way or another. But I believe most interesting to the continuing study of adolescence and feminism is the extremity with which many of these future outcomes manifested.

What surprised me most was that while certain core moral panics recurred as one might expect, the backlash has been more virulent, explicit, and far-reaching in its consequences than I had anticipated in those nascent predictions. Over the period I wrote this, the U.S. experienced many events that have and will continue to impact public discourses on feminism and girlhood. There was the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* and thus

the immediate and ongoing curtailing of abortion access in America. There is a queer-phobic hysteria directed at teachers, drag queens, and even books themselves accused of "grooming" children sexually, leading to far-reaching "book bans" and other forms of curricular control in public schools and libraries. And there was the Biden administration calling congressional hearings to question TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew – ostensibly over concerns about data privacy, but which quickly devolved into fears over teens' usage of the platform, all of which was laced with a strain of xenophobia regarding the platform's Chinese parent company. There are two ways in which we can understand these changes, noting firstly that the relatively moderate ideological approach of popular feminism is inadequate to countering the virulence of popular misogyny and other forms of gendered hate like transphobia; and secondly that such a strong backlash points to the ways in which adolescents actually *are* taking on the lessons of popular feminism and deconstructing ingrained ideologies of the gender binary in the process. The nature of thinking of feminism as a spectrum means that both of these things can be true, depending on the context.

Thus, I have sought to frame the learning of feminism – and the gendered characteristics that go along with it – as a form of instruction for young people, but the content of that instruction still exists along this spectrum. As my research has shown, moral panics about youth-directed media recur over time, just in slightly new versions or centered on new forms of media. I have coined the term *instructional feminism* to capture this current iteration of girlhood media, which is uniquely bound to an understanding of feminism emergent within the past ten odd years, and yet nonetheless still linked with both past versions of feminism and past versions of moral panic for girls. Those moral panics

circle around a central idea: that girls' visibility and/or participation in mass media will result in them growing up "too fast" and thus taking on beliefs or behaviors inappropriate to their age and, implicitly, their gender.

This is quite reminiscent of the high visibility of girls' culture in the late 1990s/early 2000s via "girl power," but one key difference that instructional feminism allows for is an easier crossing of the boundaries culturally established between girlhood and womanhood. The fears around a girl "growing up too soon" thus become moot, when the growing up simply proves the benefits of following the guidelines of a popularized, neoliberal, suitably empowered model for girlhood and future womanhood. This model would see girls be productive and ambitious workers in the neoliberal economy; sex-positive and open-minded and yet still on-guard against the sexual behaviors of boys and men; highly visible, self-branding subjects that nonetheless take on none of the pathologies of low self-esteem or confidence in their bodies and appearance; and active, informed citizens of the world who care about important, pressing issues while also working mostly within the status quo in a pleasing, polite manner.

While instructional feminism is in many ways liberatory, then, so too is it often another way to surveil and draw boundaries around girlhood identities, and to punish and/or pathologize young people when they fail to meet these standards predicated on adult anxieties. In each of my chapter case studies, I have sought to show the ways in which following the tenets of instructional feminism – and therefore embodying an ideal of girlhood – can have these balanced effects, but so too can resisting, questioning, or outright rejecting the lessons of the most popularized forms of feminism. In Chapter One, I looked to preteen and teen girl stars who embody the popular feminist idea that working in a

corporate, white collar capacity is a win for women and girls. There is a rise in such girls taking on the titles of such jobs literally, with many being granted their own production shingles during this time, but there is also a rise in such girls physically embodying this idea in the forms of more mature red carpet, promotional styles (namely, in the form of the pantsuit). This is a marked change in past discourses of child stardom, which utilized the assumed unnaturalness of laboring children (who are often also the primary breadwinners of their families) to predict the future failures and tragedies of these children, even as they were celebrated in the moment. I focused on star Marsai Martin to analyze specifically how a Black girl follows these lessons. That Martin can be celebrated for such moves and held up as a role model, rather than causing concerns over her status as a child star and a girl that looks older than her years, is not only a demonstration of how embracing the most corporatized, neoliberal lessons of instructional feminism can help girls mitigate the moral panics associated with blurring the lines between adolescence and adulthood, but that there may be benefits for those girls (namely, Black and brown girls) who are always already adultified. Historically, Black girls have been more heavily surveilled and punished for perceived bad behavior due to the perception they are more adult (and therefore, less inherently innocent) than white girls, but here Martin is able to use that narrative to her advantage, turning it into a sign of her intelligence, maturity, and professionalism. On the other hand, one can see that discourses about shifts in these boundaries (or at least the reception of ignoring a boundary) are nonetheless still invested in maintaining status quo understandings of "proper" or "successful" girlhood in relation to capitalism, and figures such as Martin still must work within these confines.

In Chapter Two, I turned to a boundary that is more fraught and contested: that of the girl as a sexually agentive subject. I examined the past and present of American teen TV to understand, from both an industrial and textual perspective, how the genre has gone from a careful, conservative approach to depicting teen sex, especially for girls and/or queer characters, to one that embraces both graphic sexual content and sexual expression beyond heteronormative expectations. By engaging with popular feminist sexual politics, especially those that fall under the umbrella of "sex positivity", I argued that these series can embrace a wider spectrum of girlhood sexuality while nonetheless still framing girlhood sexuality as inherently dangerous to the girls themselves in the forms of harassment and sexual violence, and therefore they still must regulate their own behaviors. To the adult industry workers creating these series, this is a genuine attempt to engage with what they view as the politics of Gen Z (as well as stay true to their own politics). They view Gen Z audiences as generally ideologically progressive and engaged, especially along the lines of identity. They also wish to capture a "realistic" display of the problems facing young people today. Yet it is also a clear industrial move meant to both legitimize and promote the genre in the era of both "prestige" and "too much" TV and a way of explaining provocative content choices as both timely and necessary, rather than simply prurient. Nonetheless, childhood innocence has often been framed as anathema to sexuality, and the acknowledgement of people as sexual agents is often a firm dividing line between adolescence and adulthood. It is framed as a boundary that must be carefully approached in socially acceptable developmental stages. Thus, while couching the storylines revolving around sex in the language of sex positivity, these series still cause much furor and

backlash as well, proving this boundary to be less easily crossed than that of professional work.

While Chapters One and Two utilized case studies that were attempting to adhere to the lessons of instructional feminism – albeit embodied in their own ways and attendant to the tensions of those embodiments – Chapters Three and Four focused on girls who resisted these lessons. Such forms of resistance are productive, boundary-pushing, and even feminist in their own way. In Chapter Three, I analyzed the teen girl microcelebrities of TikTok to explore the melding of the body positivity movement with concerns over the "sexualization" of girls as they become hyper-visible in mass media. Much like depicting teen girls as sexually active in teen TV arcs from handwringing concern to seemingly wider acceptance, so too does the arc of the visible girl go from quite loud and panicked outcry following the "girl moment" of the '00s to something that is more easily accepted when such visibility is placed within the language of popular feminism: in this case, the language of the body positivity movement.

Utilizing the language of body positivity, some of the platform's biggest stars can push back on critiques of their appearance in the form of popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser 2018) and on critiques that they may be sexualized or exploited. They do so by claiming autonomy over their own bodies and presentation of those bodies, as well as claiming a happiness and pleasure in their own appearance, encapsulated by the imperative the girls must "love yourself." However, such girls still fall strictly within conventional beauty standards (thin, white, feminine) demonstrating the ways in which "body positivity" has rhetorically shifted from fat activism to a focus on individual insecurities, as well as how the platform continues to reward and enforce certain idealized types of bodily presentation

despite such language. I looked to the account of creator Danielle Cohn to illustrate an example of a girl who resists such lessons. When a preteen, Cohn utilized the rhetoric of body positivity in order to respond to cruel comments about her body and appearance that I noted here. However, after going through puberty, and with it undergoing a noticeable change in her body, as well as experiencing several personal "scandals" surrounding her age and sexuality, Cohn instead embraced her "bad girl" image. She shows off her body in crop tops and bikinis, talks about her pansexuality openly, and affects an apathetic stance to the idea that she is being sexualized and exploited by adults. And yet she also embraces many of the hallmarks of a "good girl," especially when it comes to academic and career ambitions. In looking to a girl star who has "failed" to learn the lessons of instructional feminism, I show how resisting such messages can have its own radical effect. In the case of Cohn, her self-presentation and narrativization demonstrates how, in not attempting to live up to an idealized image of neoliberal, feminist, girlhood, she in fact dismantles the good girl/bad girl or can-do/at-risk binary that so often limits and disciplines girls.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I centered on to two teen activists who would seem to be the exemplary representatives of instructional feminism's lessons. Greta Thunberg and X González are incredibly well-spoken, politically engaged, and highly visible as a result. This has allowed them to cross into the world of civic engagement and politics – usually coded as an adult space both legally but also by virtue of rhetoric that would have protecting children as the center of many policy choices, but always as dual victims and beneficiaries, never as active in the process themselves. As several girlhood scholars have shown, the media discourses about Thunberg, González, and other young girl activists have a tendency to dilute their politics and instead revert them to symbols of innocent and/or endangered

childhood. However, I showed that Thunberg and González are both aware of this rhetorical process and resist it themselves. In so doing, they resist much of the rhetoric of instructional feminism too. Primarily, they do so by questioning the taken-for-granted notion that it is to be celebrated that they are considered active citizens and welcomed into the adult world of politics. To convey this, they adopt both words and affects that resist the behavioral strictures inherent in much of instructional feminism at its most normativizing – that girls should be informed and engaged but still polite, with ultimate goals to join societal institutions rather than overthrow them. While Cohn does not frame her various modes of resistance as ideological, Thunberg and González demonstrate how resistance to the more restrictive forms of popular feminism, those which simply reify the status quo, can be an actively ideological choice for young people. In many ways, Thunberg and González *are* exemplary representatives of instructional feminism, but of the more radical end of its spectrum. They are examples of all the possibilities of instructing young people on systems of inequality, but so too are they examples of the benefits of viewing those same young people as instructors themselves, upending unilateral flows of authority and disrupting the aspects of instructional feminism that seek to restrict and contain its subjects.

In short, there is much to celebrate about the more widespread support for feminism, and girls' more visible and central inclusion in it as a movement. But there is also much of which to be wary. I mention the popular misogyny experienced by those girls who make up my case studies in a few of my chapters, but my study has largely elided the outsized vitriol these young people can often elicit in favor of analyzing the effects of popular feminism. One cannot forget that moral panics are often based not simply in

genuine care and concern for girls, but in prejudicial fears as well. Discourses based in protectionism, even when begun from a politically progressive point, can easily be co-opted for conservative messaging. I believe that centering girls who are not necessarily the ideals of popular feminism is one way in which we as scholars can ensure our own legitimate critiques of this movement – and the visibility of girls within it – do not become co-opted for such protectionist, regressive narratives. That could be via stars like Martin who uphold many of its mainstream tenets yet still dismantle historic, racist correlations such as the articulation of innocence with whiteness, or Cohn who actively embraces many of the characteristics that would mark a girl as "at risk." In either case, balancing the limitations of instructional feminism with its possibilities *and* with the ways in which girls might not follow said lessons will be crucial to complicating narratives of moral panic. And yet, I do believe understanding the misogynistic backlash (which is of course often intertwined with racist, ableist, transphobic, and/or homophobic language as well) to such girls' appearance in the public eye is necessary work for future scholarship as well.

Likewise, while I tried to incorporate the perspectives of girls themselves throughout and to defer to what they say about themselves in the cases in which their own identities or actions become centerpieces of public discourse, these are still all public figures. What is still needed is to understand how the average tween and teen girl media consumer understands these messages and how she incorporates them (or doesn't) into her less spectacularized life. The average girl is receiving said messages through another layer of mediation, with the girls who make up my case studies as role models (or anti-role models, as the case may be). As many youth media studies scholars have shown, preteens and teens have polysemic readings of media texts, just like any adult, and likewise a certain

level of media savvy then makes them question the images they consume. While my research at this stage could not yet include the perspectives of the average girl consumer, my own perspective is of course an adult one, and future research would reveal how far our own adult, scholarly analyses of feminism and girlhood culture can extend to those who are the target audiences for such media.

Instruction, of course, is never crafted or taught within a vacuum. Behind any lesson, certain implicit assumptions and choices are made: who is framed as in need of these lessons to begin with, and why? Who benefits from learning the lesson, and implementing it to perfection – and who does not? What are the consequences if one fails to learn these lessons? The power is still with those teaching the lesson as they set the terms for what should be taught and in what way. It is at best a position that manifests as beneficial guidance, but authority nonetheless, and at worst a position from which to patronize or discipline. While learning feminist lessons is certainly not inherently a bad thing (I could hardly call myself a feminist and think otherwise), we must question who is providing this lesson and to what end. While at times this allows girls to cross boundaries once meant to separate them from adulthood without the selfsame censures they would have experienced in the past, in its most mainstream forms, the ways in which girls can or should do this are still dictated by adults, and often even more so by institutional structures coded as for adults, such as the entertainment industries or the halls of governance.

It is equally important, then, to understand the ways in which these lessons can be learned differently, or un-learned, or dictated instead by the girls themselves. Girlhood has long been defined by a system of binaries, corralled as much by what it is not as by what it is. Is a girl the high achieving ideal, or at risk? Is she a producer, or a consumer? Is she the

victim of cultural forces, or a resistor to them? But learning about feminism, and likewise learning what one's identity is or might be within and through that ideology, does not have to obey these constraints. If a girl wishes to learn how to be a feminist, in the current feminist moment there would appear to be simultaneously one right, idealized answer and yet also a series of contradictory answers that are nigh impossible for any one person to embody. It would be so difficult to find one, definitive answer because how to be a feminist is a spectrum, and it is a process. Ideally, while still treated critically, this spectrum and this process can present myriad opportunities for how to be a feminist and how to be a girl.

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