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Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism

During the 1990s, popular discourse shifted toward what some might consider "pro-girl" rhetoric. At the same time, in the academy as well as among feminist activists, women began talking about a shift in feminist consciousness. Out of this intellectual and activist form of feminism emerged one of many young feminist movements, Riot Grrrl. While this movement might have pushed for girls to be powerful, this push was very different from the idea of girl power being popularized by media. This article examines the notion of empowerment as it relates to feminist agency. Drawing from theoretical ideas in both political economy and feminism, this article uses commodification as an entry point to examine pro-girl rhetoric as it is articulated in popular and feminist discourses. As this article suggests, commodification demonstrates how not all pro-girl rhetoric offers an opportunity for girls to transcend individual consumption to enact collective change in social relations.

During the 1990s, popular discourse shifted toward what some might consider "pro-girl" rhetoric. The effects of title IX were starting to show, and in the 1996 Olympic Games, women athletes rose to the occasion. The successes of the U.S. women athletes came not in what some might consider traditional "girl" sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, and synchronized swimming, but U.S. women won medals in more "masculine" sports such as soccer, basketball, and ice hockey. These specific events led up to the infusion of "girl power" rhetoric and "girls rule" paraphernalia that circulated throughout popular discourse and culture.

At the same time, in the academy as well as among feminist activists, women began talking about a shift in feminist consciousness. Struggling with issues of difference and diversity, as well as an intellectual infusion of poststructural theories in the academy, second-wave feminism began to give way to a new generation of feminist consciousness. Out of this intellectual and activist form of feminism emerged one of many young feminist movements, Riot Grrrl. While this movement might have pushed for girls to be powerful, Riot Grrrl promoted a very different type of feminism from the one being popularized by media and articulated as girl power.

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Inspired by these events of the 1990s, this article examines the notion of empowerment as it relates to feminist agency. Drawing from theoretical ideas in both political economy and feminism, this article explicates pro-girl rhetoric as it is articulated in popular and feminist discourses. As this article suggests, using the idea of commodification demonstrates that not all pro-girl rhetoric offers an opportunity for girls to transcend individual consumption to enact collective change in social relations.

This article also demonstrates the integration of cultural analysis and political economy. Although many contemporary feminist analyses offer critiques of culture by locating the body as a site of ideological production, this article demonstrates the need to look at the material production of culture. Drawing on the idea of commodification allows for an examination of culture in the context of capitalist incentives. Even though capitalism does not determine culture, it profoundly shapes cultural production, which in turn shapes social relations. With this in mind, this article is organized into sections that bring together the ideas of third-wave feminism, agency and empowerment, and commodification. Finally, this article will use an empirical example of Riot Grrrl and girl power to show how commodified pro-girl rhetoric has taken the feminist out of feminism.

Third-Wave Feminism

The emergence of pro-girl rhetoric took place in the early 1990s, during a period that many feminists would consider the beginning as the third wave. While second-wave feminists sought reproductive rights and equal pay for a group of predominantly middle-class, white women, third-wave feminism works explicitly toward understanding difference and respecting its importance to feminist thought. Although second-wave feminism attempted to be inclusive of diversity, lesbians and women of color faced different issues that often were better addressed by the gay rights and civil rights movements, respectively. For feminist academics, third wave means including concerns of women of color, women from developing nations, and women who are lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered. Although some common themes unify third-wave feminists, the rhetoric of postfeminism creates confusion because many postfeminist ideals contradict third wave-values, and the two are often conflated.[1]

In Rebecca Walker's (1995) introduction to her third-wave feminist reader/anthology, *To Be Real*, she discusses how for many women, particularly young women, feminism is a contested terrain. Walker speaks to the tension between second-wave and third-wave feminists, namely, that some issues and politics have changed for women. Younger women not only have benefited personally from the gains of second-wave feminists in terms of labor equity and

reproduction rights but also have come of age during a time of extreme political conservatism (growing up during the Reagan-Bush era) and a backlash against feminism. Younger women often see the world in a different way, filtered through distinct experiences that do not always allow them to think of the world as fixed struggles. Walker writes,

> this [binary and inflexible] way of ordering the world is especially difficult for a generation that has grown up transgender, bisexual, interracial and knowing and loving people who are racist, sexist, and otherwise afflicted. We have trouble formulating and perpetuating theories that compartmentalize and divide according to race and gender and all of the other signifiers. For us the lines between Us and Them are often blurred, and as a result we find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving. (P. xxxiii)

These core politics of third-wave feminism often seem apolitical, unstructured, and not radical in the eyes of second-wave feminists who expressed their passions quite differently.

Manifesta, a book by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000), attempts to bring together various positions and practices of contemporary feminism and explain them through the lens of third wave. A major concern for the authors is that feminists steeped in second-wave theory misunderstand and consequently misinterpret and malign the actions and ideals of younger women. The rupture between these feminisms, explains the authors, stems from the complicated nature of third-wave feminist politics that often seem contradictory. For example, Baumgardner and Richards describe different "types" of third-wave feminists, whose political actions take a range of forms, such as "Girlies" and "Riot Grrrl." While Riot Grrrl takes a radical form reminiscent of leftist grassroots activism, Girlies reappropriate and celebrate "traditionally" socially constructed ideas of femininity.

Agency and Empowerment

Feminist scholars, particularly in political science, philosophy, and sociology, have written at length about the issue of agency. Feminists relying on cultural studies write about agency, too; however, the concept is usually theorized in terms of women's resistance rather than other types of independent action. Empowerment, on the other hand, has been theorized only recently by feminist scholars working in the area of developing nations. Over the past decade or so, the rhetoric of empowerment has become quite commonplace in U.S. popular discourse. While agency and empowerment appear similar on some level, the appropriation of empowerment into mainstream popular culture raises con-

cerns for feminist cultural analysis. One specific concern is that women may feel empowered at the individual level, without any compulsion to act as a collective body. As this article suggests, the commodification of empowerment indicates hegemonic expansion as explained by Chantel Mouffe (1979, 182-83). When thought of this way, the rhetoric of empowerment contributes to rearticulating dominant patriarchal and capitalist values, while not substantially disrupting power relations.

Empowerment

Drawing on the writings of feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young, Janice L. Ristock and Joan Pennell (1996) suggest that empowerment means "to enhance our ability to control our own lives, or to 'develop a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life'" (p. 1). The authors further suggest that empowerment occurs on multiple levels: individual, interpersonal, professional, organizational, and societal. Except in the first instance of the individual level, Ristock and Pennell stress the notion of collective action within empowerment. Evident in their discussion, empowerment at the individual level should lead women to act on other levels to displace oppressive power relations. For Ristock and Pennell, empowerment in research means thinking consciously about power relations, cultural context, and social action. According to the authors, "it is an approach to building knowledge that seeks to change the conditions of people's lives, both individually and collectively" (p. 2).

Jo Rowlands (1997) defines empowerment as "bottom-up" expansion opposed to a "top-down" hierarchical approach. For Rowlands, empowerment is praxis and means taking theories and turning them into practical ways to help people make social change in their lives. Similar to the model laid out by Ristock and Pennell (1996), Rowlands states that empowerment is experienced within three dimensions: personal, relational, and collective. She stresses collective action and cautions that empowerment is invoked in such a way that presupposes its meaning, which can easily be adopted by people ideologically Right and Left (Rowlands 1997, 7). Because of the term's imprecise meaning, further confounded by its circulation in popular discourse, rhetoric of empowerment can unwittingly advance an individual sense of entitlement rather than pose a challenge to patriarchal and capitalist structures.

Agency

Marxism has theorized agency as collective, that for a "revolution" or a structural shift to occur, individual actors must act collectively to ensure free-

dom for all people. Feminists, too, theorize collective agency, but they also leave room to conceive of agency on an individual level, in other words women having oppositional responses or posing resistance to structural constraints. However, the notion of resistance can be problematic, as seen in specific studies of subcultures (Hebdige 1979). Frequently, we can overestimate the power of resistance particularly when organized within capitalism. While Marxism may appear not to leave any room for individual agency, Marx suggested that people do make history, just not under conditions that they freely make. While social structures do constrain actions and ideas, structures are changeable, and the nature of those structures allows the space for subjects to reproduce or transform them.

According to Patrocinion P. Schweickart (1995), a politics of resistance puts the accent on *individual* agency (p. 232). This articulation of agency essentially leaves us with a similar dilemma as with the concept of empowerment: if feminists think of people as individual actors rather than social agents, social change may not occur. Moreover, if the idea of resistance presupposes the definition of agency, then we might overlook the importance of capitalism in shaping social relations. Lois McNay (2000) points out this problem of an ambiguous definition of agency and the dilemma of conceptualization agency only as resistance:

> not to deny the efficacy of all forms of resistance, but it is to suggest that a more precise and varied account of agency is required to explain the differing motivations and ways in which individuals and groups struggle over, appropriate and transform cultural meanings and resources. This, in turn, indicates the necessity of contextualizing agency within power relations in order to understand how acts deemed as resistant may transcend their immediate sphere in order to transform collective behaviors and norms. (P. 4)

The idea of the "collective subject" has troubled both Marxists and feminists for some time (Schweickart 1995). Simply put, how can a group of self-interested individuals also work as a collective? Yet, Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach suggests that the point of the philosopher (or feminist) is not merely to interpret the world but to change it (1988); therefore, agency cannot be enacted solely on the individual level or in the self-interest of individuals. Similarly, Schweickart (1995) argues for a definition of feminism that acknowledges the heterogeneity of feminism and calls for a "model for collectivity that does not nullify individual autonomy" (p. 231).

This discussion of empowerment and agency points to the difficulty and the necessity of defining what it means for women to "resist" or to take action. If empowerment stops at the individual level as described by Ristock and Pennell (1996) and Rowlands (1997), and there is no collective consciousness beyond that of the individual, then how can this transform social consciousness and

social practices that limit women? Over the past decade, the rhetoric of empowerment in the United States has been commodified in popular discourse and in self-help literature (much of which is aimed at women), thereby confining agency to an individual level and not contributing to structural transformations that will indeed change the lives of women living within patriarchal and capitalist structures. Collective transformations cannot occur if individuals only work to make themselves feel better.

Commodification: An Entry Point to Feminist Cultural Production

Third-wave feminists can be thought of as experts in cultural production and consumption. Growing up in an electronic age, many of these women have used copy machines, home recording (audio and video), and the Internet to both produce and consume culture. Commodification offers what Vincent Mosco (1996) terms "an entry point" from which to examine social relations. Because of the interrelatedness of third-wave cultural production and consumption, analyzing commodification helps to explicate complex social relations. As will be illustrated below, using commodification as an entry point illustrates differences between two popular culture portrayals, Riot Grrrl and girl power, and how the two became conflated.

For Marx, the theory of the commodity established the fundamental framework to describe and analyze capital and is based on the notion that human societies must produce their own material conditions of existence. According to Marxist theory, a commodity is the form products take when societal production is organized through exchange. In *Capital*, Marx (1967) established that commodity production constitutes a social relationship between producers, and out of this interdependence arises a contradiction, or what Marx described as commodity fetishism. The idea of commodity fetishism points to the ways in which the economic forms of capitalism conceal social relations because the products of human labor appear independent from those who created them. Marx's theory of the commodity is important because it establishes the idea that appearance may conceal reality.

In the *Political Economy of Communication*, Mosco (1996) suggests that commodification can be used as an entry point to study social relations. As suggested by Marx (1967), and further developed by other critical political economists, the process of commodification embodies naturalized social relations that create and reproduce social stratification through capitalism. Mosco (1996) succinctly defines commodification as "the process of transforming use values into exchange values" (p. 141). Essentially, commodities are the material goods that embody social relations as organized through the process of exchange. Marx looked to the commodity form as the "most explicit repre-

sentation of capitalist production" (p. 141). The purpose of Marx's analysis of commodity production is to reveal the "mystification" of the commodity form itself. As explained by Mosco, the mystification occurs in two ways: First, the commodity naturalizes social relations between capital and labor, and second, the commodity becomes reified, or takes on a life of its own (p. 142). By examining the commodity, political economists seek to explicate the social relations it embodies and masks. Tracing social relations through the production of commodities allows one to examine not only economic constraints that control cultural production but also the reproduction of social inequalities arising from labor relations.

The process of commodification is particularly important in communication because in addition to media commodities' being able to produce surplus value for corporations or owners, they help shape consciousness through the circulation of ideological meaning. Advocating an approach that embraces the "duality" of cultural commodities, Meehan (1994) suggests "one must rethink" media commodities "as both culture industry and industrial culture" (p. 564). As Meehan suggests, cultural commodities embody both social relations and ideological meaning. The work of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) further illustrates the intricate connection between the creation of surplus value by large media corporations and the dissemination of ideological messages.

A significant contribution to conceptualizing the commodification process in communication comes from Dallas Smythe (1978) who suggested that the audience is the primary commodity of media. According to Smythe's argument, the audience as commodity links media content, advertisers, and audience, in what Mosco (1996) terms "a set of binding reciprocal relationships," whereby media companies construct audiences through programming, and advertisers pay for access to audiences (p. 148). In the end, the audience is the commodity manufactured and sold by media corporations to advertisers. Smythe's contribution of the audience as commodity expanded the conceptualization of commodity production beyond media products such as newspapers, magazines, records, television shows, films, and so on. The notion of the audience as a commodity helps clarify how the rhetoric of empowerment can be used to draw in and claim an audience. This will be illustrated below in the example of girl power.

Riot Grrrl and Girl Power

Riot Grrrl refers to a grassroots movement that started in Olympia, Washington, and Washington, D.C. The movement started in the punk rock community, with several women starting their own bands as well as "consciousness-raising" groups. Riot Grrrl inspired a lot of young women to produce subversive cul-

ture, not only in the form of punk rock music but also in "zines" (home made, cut-and-paste, photocopied publications) and Internet sites where they circulated their poetry and art.

Riot Grrrls, or women coming out of the movement, also have been quite successful with establishing their own recording labels, which include CandyAss and Chainsaw. The most recent label to emerge is Mr. Lady Records and Video out of Durham, North Carolina. Mr. Lady was founded by Kaia Wilson, a singer/songwriter, and her girlfriend Tammy Rae Carland, a photographer and video artist. Wilson and Carland started Mr. Lady "partly because [they] felt like there weren't enough women- and/or dyke-run record labels and there are even fewer affordable and accessible means of distributing work by independent video artists and film makers."[2] Riot Grrrls have been successful in using their music and art for grassroots activism.

Riot Grrrl cultural production in the form of art, zines, and music illustrates an interesting point raised by Walter Benjamin (1968) in his article, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin suggests that perhaps technology could lead to a socialist aesthetic by supplanting "high" art, giving more people, or the masses, access to produce art. As Benjamin suggests, greater access to art has the potential to politicize and democratize art, thereby emancipating people because they can take part in its production. Riot Grrrls successfully create a feminist aesthetic with Xerox machines, toy instruments, and the Internet. Through their writing, art, and music, Riot Grrrls have mobilized girls and women into a movement where they are active producers and not just passive consumers of culture.

Riot Grrrl Cultural Production

Riot Grrrl cultural production takes the form of music, art, and poetry, circulated via independent record labels, zines, and the Internet. Riot Grrrl messages are overtly political, and many young feminists with a Riot Grrrl sensibility engage in grassroots activism via their cultural production. According to the *New York Times* writer Ann Powers (1993), Riot Grrrl music is "rock's new feminism." Powers sizes up these feminist musicians in the following way: "The women behind this amorphous movement distrust conventional politics, shun media labels and decry attempts to lump their divergent work into one category. These women have no specific name for their new paradigm" (p. 34).

Many of the women involved in the early stages of the Riot Grrrl movement were college educated and well versed in feminist theory. This partly accounts for their feminist consciousness. Hanna herself has been accused of sounding overly academic, but to her, the social problems she sees in everyday life are quite evident and transcend feminist theory:

> I've been made fun of; people have said, "You sound like a first-year college student who just read Marx." But I ask, are we really in a postfeminist era? There's no day care; lesbians aren't allowed to marry. One of the most modern strategies is to say, "There's no racism anymore," but we know there is. People act like getting rid of sexism and racism and homophobia is impossible, but it's not.[3]

Hanna's feminist consciousness reflects a third-wave feminist approach. While she is strongly committed to changing overarching structures that oppress women—that is, capitalism and patriarchy—she is also influenced by French poststructuralism and literary theorist Hélène Cixous who introduced the idea of l'ecriture feminine. This theory suggests that because language is androcentric, women need to create their own, one that is better suited to express women's experience. Riot Grrrls such as Hanna take this charge seriously as they write about experiences of girls informed by a feminist epistemology.

Some common themes that emerge in Riot Grrrl music, zines, and Internet sites center on girls' controlling their own cultural production. Riot Grrrl bands sing about respecting and admiring girls, which directly counters "catty" or petty behavior in which young women are socialized to take part. Third ways feminists do not let differences in sexuality divide them—a common tension that existed for second wave. Evident in most Bikini Kill (a noted Riot Grrrl band) songs are messages of self-acceptance and community support and love, messages not frequently taught to young girls. Rather than take on the mundane topics of pop music, Bikini Kill songs tackle issues of rape, domestic violence, incest, abortion, eating disorders, body image, and sexuality. For Bikini Kill, as well as other Riot Grrrl bands, music is political. According to Kathleen Hanna, former lead singer for the band,

> We have to sit through so much music about being in love or breaking up, and that is some of the most irrelevant shit out there. Not having health care and having a bladder infection I couldn't get treatment for; I think I cried over that more than I cried over any guy. Where are the songs about being broke or our friends' being broke?[4]

Riot Grrrl music puts forth a radical message without sugar coating it. Powerful lyrics encourage active cultural consumption that involves production, because the words center girls as both subject and object of (girl) desire and invite girls to participate in the do-it-yourself of making music and self-empowerment. Radical messages inspire young women to take action against patriarchal capitalist institutions that may constrain them.

The network of Riot Grrrls depends greatly on the distribution and circulation of zines. According to Allison Wolfe of the band Bratmobile, "The bands and the fanzines were just necessary for social survival" (Brace 1999, N15).

Zines are homemade publications that contain poetry, manifestos, reviews, advice, and collages. They used to be "cut-and-paste," literally. Before computers were widely accessible to the U.S. middle class, people would take magazines, newspapers, flyers, anything with printed word and pictures, cut them up and paste letters, words, phrases, and pictures into a new context to make a collage of new meanings. These pages would then be photocopied and distributed among friends or at local record shops. Zines primarily centered around music scenes and bands, but Riot Grrrls have shifted the focus, particularly with Internet e-zines. While computers have made production and distribution of zines easier, authors still like to retain a nonprofessional or a more crude look. This aesthetic lends credibility to their critique of dominant structures and expresses a genuine rebellion against the status quo of professionalization.

Although Riot Grrrls speak openly about sexuality, the most common message in both their music and zines centers on radicalizing girls in every way possible. Riot Grrrl strongly encourages girls to come together and support one another. This also counters gendered socialization that encourages girls to fight over boys. One fanzine stresses that girls should come together, because without "girl unity now, we will never start a revolution" (Kaltefleiter 1995, fig. 44). Finally, Riot Grrrl promotes girls' taking action and speaking up for themselves and taking charge. As another zine states, "ALL MY LIFE I HAVE BEEN SEARCHING FOR A WAY OUT. NOW I AM CREATING ONE" (Kaltefleiter 1995, fig. 31), and another one declares, "Burn down all the walls that say you can't" (Kaltefleiter 1995, fig. 27).

While the circulation of Riot Grrrl music and zines helps define this feminist network, the Internet helps them foster a dynamic movement. Riot Grrrls primarily in the United States but also in Canada and the United Kingdom have connected, shared, and distributed their work via the Internet. Riot Grrrl Web sites are turning into e-zines, and the content is original art, inspiring essays, and engrossing bulletin board discussions. Many of these young women offer help to other girls interested in Web design. The Internet helps to build and maintain a Riot Grrrl community.

Many of the Riot Grrrl home pages contained practical information such as listing times, dates, and locations for meetings and other Riot Grrrl events. Most of the Web sites also included some type of mission statement that discussed the purpose of Riot Grrrl in general and that specific person's interpretation of what that meant to her. All of the Web sites provided links to other Riot Grrrl–related sites or pro girl pages. Riot Grrrl Web sites also discussed different grassroots activism in which the chapters were involved. For example, the Cincinnati Riot Grrrl chapter linked with the local organization Foods Not Bombs and organized a group to work at a local women's shelter.

The Washington, D.C., Riot Grrrl chapter distributes zines for other Riot Grrrls via the Internet. Their collection and back catalog is limited, but the group is working to put various ones online. These zines deal specifically with Riot Grrrl issues and include challenging male-centered writing and exposing sexism, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. The D.C. Riot Grrrl chapter is also involved with the organization Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive (HIPS). Through volunteer work, D.C. Riot Grrrls work to improve the lives of female, male, and transgendered prostitutes by helping them find medical care and, ultimately, an alternative to prostitution. Riot Grrrl's understanding of third-wave feminism builds off second-wave feminist critique of overarching social structures while incorporating ideas of power and subjectivity as envisioned in postmodern feminism. Riot Grrrls realize this through grassroots activism.

Although the above discussion celebrates Riot Grrrl cultural production, it is necessary to acknowledge that to a certain extent, Riot Grrrl–inspired music and art is commodified. Riot Grrrl–inspired bands produce and distribute CDs structured by the constraints of exchange value (albeit through an independent network of production and distribution), and similarly, zines and Internet sites are organized within the constraints of capitalism. However, this quasi-independent production and distribution network promotes a strong third-wave feminist message that is very different from the pro-girl rhetoric of girl power produced and circulated as popular culture. Riot Grrrl–inspired labels and grassroots organizations run as collectives: artists have more control, political messages are not compromised, and a profit motive does not solely organize labor. While the nature of exchange value is oppressive and patterns of production and distribution follow a capitalist model, I would suggest that within this alternative process, patriarchal and capitalist structures are challenged.

Commodifying Girl Power

Although Riot Grrrl as a social movement eluded commodification, the idea of empowering girls did not. Riot Grrrl cultural production in the form of music, zines, art, and so on, helped popularize the notion of girl power, which suggests that as a society, we should value girls and traditionally girl activities more than we currently do. The logic follows that if we start to value girls more and celebrate their culture, girls in turn will feel positive about themselves and will achieve higher self-esteem.

The idea of girl power, although quite admirable, unfortunately became reified into tangible commodities bought and sold most notably by entertainment corporations. These commodities are most evident in popular culture such as music (the Spice Girls), television (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), and the Internet

(gURL sites). All of these examples point to how a use value, the idea of valuing girls, is changed into an exchange value, commodities intended to "empower" girls. In the process of this transformation or commodification, the original meaning of girl empowerment became watered-down so that it means something to everyone. Subsequently, this diluting effect allows for girl power to be rearticulated in a number of ways and appeal to the widest audience. While feminists debate the ideologically contradictory meanings embodied in popular culture icons, I suggest that examining them with Marx's notion of commodification reveals how opposing textual meanings work to command the largest audience possible (or potentially the most profit).

The most evident example of the commodification of girl power takes the form of the Spice Girls. The Spice Girls, a British pop band, were the rage in both the United States and Britain in the mid-1990s. The Spice Girls won substantial notoriety in the mainstream press on both continents for their contradictory "brand of feminism." Embedded in the Spice Girls's theme of girl power are conflicting messages about what empowerment means for girls. For the Spice Girls, scantily dressed, full-on makeup, and a lot of body adornments, the apparent message was that empowerment came in the way one dresses, looks, and uses her sexuality for a heterosexual male gaze to get what she wants. Their image countered what some regarded as feminist or pro-girl lyrics such as "I'll tell ya what I want, what I really, really want." In their megahit, "Wannabe," the Spice Girls demand that boys treat them with respect. "Wannabe" topped the chart in 35 countries, and "in a five-month period, [the Spice Girls] sold 10 million albums, grossing an estimated $165 million for Virgin records" (Douglas 1997, 21-2). Although their song lyrics and interviews paid lip service to girls' taking charge and engendering change, their images contradicted this, suggesting similar patterns of women's oppression: the only way for girls to achieve power is by using one's sexuality and looks.

Historically, women and girls gain access to power in society through the way they look and their sexuality. This is particularly evident in media representations. Women rarely are shown achieving power through their skills and intelligence; women earn power (or access to power) when they use their sexuality and looks. These messages are not new and are what second-wave feminists fought against throughout the 1970s and 80s. While third-wave feminists, such as Riot Grrrls, take issue with second-wave feminism's de-emphasis and de-gendering of the body, they also look toward redefining what "sexy" is. For Riot Grrrls, "sexy" does not mean dressing and adorning oneself for the male gaze, unless of course you can turn the gaze back onto the male. The Spice Girls, however, do not subvert a patriarchal gaze. Instead, they capitalize off a constructed and commodified image of female beauty. The Spice Girls are not about celebrating all types of women's bodies, which would include ones that are fat, one-breasted, short, hippy, and so on. The Spice Girls reinscribe

already socialized and institutionalized acceptable female bodies and female power.

Although it can be argued that the Spice Girls celebrate traditional girl culture (e.g., makeup, clothes, beauty, etc.), they offer little to change the fact that girls do not freely choose to enjoy these things. Girls are socialized to participate in these activities that cannot give them direct access to economic or political power. Patriarchal society is structured in such a way that women and girls seek male approval, focus on their beauty, and act passively. Unfortunately, these are primary vehicles that serve an indirect means of accessing social, political, and economic power for women. The Spice Girls celebrate and encourage young women to no longer passively consume but to actively consume makeup and clothing and to no longer be passive objects of the male gaze but to actively construct themselves for the male gaze. So while girls are being taught to be more active and take charge, Spice Girl ideology still serves a similar end, using beauty and sexuality as power, rather than encouraging girls to develop other means of acquiring power.

The market saturation of the Spice Girls' music, dolls, fashion, and girl power paraphernalia generated enormous popularity for the group. The Spice girls embodied an idealized femininity and presented contradictory messages that reinforced capitalist and patriarchal social relations. They could be marketed promoting a sexy feminism. Patriarchal institutions did not perceive them as a real threat (as many feminists are considered), because the Spice Girls did not ask for substantial social change, and the media industry loved them because they generated considerable attention and profit. The Spice Girls offer no critique of the status quo, and they offer no alternative activities for girls to participate in; they offer a celebration of what girls already do rather than encourage girls to seek power through direct economic and political means. While celebrating "girl culture" is perhaps a side step in the right direction since we do need to value and encourage girls, the Spice Girls mask patriarchal and capitalist structures that enable girls to reproduce oppressive behaviors. By relying on standard notions of beauty, the Spice Girls attract a significant number of girls who are already socialized to focus on physical looks while offering messages that seem to suggest empowerment. The media industry uses this commodified feminism not to empower girls but, rather, to encourage their dedicated consumption to pro-girl artifacts (music, concert tickets, dolls, clothes, fashions, etc.). Commodified feminism can then be read as a new kind of feminism (one that becomes conflated with third-wave feminism).

Third-wave feminism is different from the Spice Girls' "brand of feminism" because not only does third-wave feminism focus on feminist body politics but it also recognizes that there are structural forces, particularly patriarchy and capitalism, that contribute to the way society shapes and constrains women.

While many third-wave feminists focus on asserting one's sexuality, it is not necessarily for the male gaze. It is often for a girl gaze, one that allows girls to be both subject and object. It is meant to empower girls through redefining sexuality by getting girls to like and take pleasure in their own bodies, no matter what size, shape, or color. Third-wave feminism also tackles structural injustices—such as racism, sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, classism, fatism, ageism, and so on—and actively works to debunk these notions. It is clear why third-wave feminism is hard to commodify, but if one picks and chooses, there are certainly aspects that can be transformed into commodities, such as the notion of girl power.

The hype surrounding the Spice Girls may have faded, but it has been replaced by commodified girl power on television. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one of the most noted successes. While the show draws both criticism and praise from parents and academics, many teenage girls embrace the character Buffy's supernatural powers as affirming. Buffy staves off sexual assault, forces people to treat her with respect, and kills evil vampires. She has little time to become distracted by problems with boyfriends. Buffy represents a girl power feminist icon for many girls and women. However, critics charge that *Buffy* falls into similar pitfalls as other popular television shows because it relies on a "beautiful babe as superhero" who does not necessarily "model empowerment so much as sexuality" (Goodale 1999, 13).

Buffy the Vampire Slayer was originally targeted at male teens, but it has turned out to be one of the WB Network's highest rated shows among women 18 to 34 (Rogers 1998). With a male demographic originally intended, it seems evident that producers did not intend to market a feminist show. However, *Buffy* (the show and the character) as commodified girl power has turned into a lucrative product for the WB Network. The FX cable network reportedly bid for rerun rights to *Buffy* in a deal that would cost them about $650,000 per episode or about $65 million over the initial four- to five-year license term (Littleton 1998).

One negative consequence of commodified girl power is the symbolic annihilation of older women as leads on television shows. Leslie Moonves, chief executive officer for CBS, contends that the shift to using younger women as leads is because demographics are shifting. She states, "Whether we like it or not, most advertisers have a certain target audience in mind, and that group happens to be young and male" (Goodale 1999, 13). As this quote illustrates, the WB Network does not even consider the potential of the socially just message of "girl power"; it follows the dictum of the industry: revenue through advertising dollars.

As a recent article in *Ms.* magazine makes clear, girl power is also commodified through the Internet. As discussed previously, the Internet has been an important tool for the continuation and maintenance of Riot Grrrl. It

helps young women with similar values connect online. The Internet and its accessibility have changed greatly in the past six years. In addition to the Web's being more user friendly, it is also much more commercial. Capitalizing on the popular rhetoric of girl power, there are several Web sites for teen girls that are advertiser driven; these include gURL.com, hipo.com, bolt.com, and more. In "exchange" for free e-mail, home pages, bulletin boards, and "community," the girls who subscribe to one of these Internet service providers are then sold to advertisers for "their collective $275 billion in disposable income" (Johnston 2000, 81). One eighteen-year-old girl commented, "Most sites are being *marketed to* teens, as opposed to being *made for* teens" (Johnston 2000, 82).

The selling of the audience as commodity is not a new concept in political economy. Dallas Smythe (1978) stressed the importance of the relationship between media corporations, advertisers, and audiences. This relationship suggests that media corporations construct audiences through programming, advertisers pay for access to this audience, and audiences become the commodity because they are sold to advertisers. By reifying the notion of girl power into something that can be bought and sold, Internet service providers can sell a specific demographic of young girls (or a niche) to advertisers. While the girl sites appear to be "free" for subscribers, girls are being transformed into commodities by Internet service providers for advertisers.

As mentioned earlier, Riot Grrrl has not necessarily been commodified (even though many of its ideals have been); however, Riot Grrrls are seeing the effects of the commodification of girl power. Since the notion of girl power has become commodified and popularized, there has been a conflation of this idea with the ethos of Riot Grrrl. Many young girls who embrace the idea of girl power have little to no understanding about the differences between girl power and Riot Grrrl. Riot Grrrl is a slogan for outspoken, confident young girls, although these girls have no inkling as to the politics Riot Grrrl stands for. The effects of commodification on the Riot Grrrl movement are illustrated by the following quote. In regard to the most current popular (post) Riot Grrrl band, Sleater Kinney, one woman coming out of the Riot Grrrl movement said the following:

> I love Sleater Kinney, but I don't enjoy going to their shows anymore. I didn't even go to the last one that was here. . . . It's too much like a fashion show. . . . The younger women don't know anything about them; they're [Sleater Kinney] just the hot thing at the time. . . . The last Sleater Kinney show I went to was the one with The Need and Bratmobile, and people were talking through Bratmobile and making fun of Bratmobile, like high school kids. I think it's a positive thing that they're there and being exposed to it, but they just don't make any effort to understand that this band is more than just playing music for "me" for an hour. . . . I went to hear music, and those people went to be seen. . . . I hope that they pick up

> on how important Sleater Kinney's music and music like theirs is, and how important [the bands are] being women, feminists, and queers.[5]

So while Riot Grrrl as a movement has not been commodified, the effects of commodification have crept into and dilute its meaning. As girl power becomes increasingly popularized, genuine Riot Grrrl values are being overshadowed by commodified fashion statements. It is no longer about the core politics of Riot Grrrl that take on social injustices structured by patriarchy and capitalism; it is about purchasing commodities in the form of concert tickets, CDs, Doc. Martens, Fluevogs, and so on to be a part of the girl power trend.

The commodification of girl power as illustrated in the examples of the Spice Girls, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and gURL.com sites should be thought about in terms of Chantel Mouffe's (1979) idea of hegemonic expansion. According to Mouffe, hegemonic expansion allows for the dominant culture to "adopt" the ideas of marginal cultures (p. 182). While this adoption does force dominant culture to change, it fails to decenter dominant culture. Instead, dominant values are rearticulated in a way that "satisfies" both cultures while not requiring a structural change that would substantially disrupt power relations. The commodification of girl power demonstrates how the feminist rhetoric of empowering girls became subsumed in the dominant culture and in the process, became neutralized. In turn, the dominant culture changes insofar as it takes on and rearticulates once-marginalized rhetoric, but through the adoption process, the radical message about structural change is lost. Moreover, this adoption of once-marginalized pro-girl rhetoric compromises the more subversive form of feminism, Riot Grrrl.

In the above examples of the Spice Girls, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and gURL.com sites, empowerment for girls and young women occurs at different levels, but it still takes place primarily at the individual and interpersonal levels (Ristock and Pennell 1996) or the individual and relational levels (Rowlands 1997). Empowerment according to Ristock and Pennell (1996) "means to enhance our ability to control our own lives, or to 'develop a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life'" (p. 4). For Rowlands (1997), empowerment is directly tied to social change. The examples of commodified girl power or pro-girl rhetoric indicate that empowerment has stopped at the individual level and, therefore, does not dramatically change the social conditions of women's and girls' lives. However, media corporations continue to make money off of trendy "feminist" commodities.

Although the process of commodification appears to offer some positive consequences (such as inserting pro-girl rhetoric in popular discourse), I would argue that in the end, most of the benefits are minimized. The process of commodification in the case of girl power has the positive effect of increasing

public awareness. However, when something becomes commodified, it is first co-opted, and co-optation tends to neutralize the radical potential of messages. For example, instead of girl power encouraging girls to achieve power through direct means (like Riot Grrrl advocates), it reinforces girls' participation in passive consumption. This type of individual empowerment—girls feel better about themselves because they acquire purchasing power—can perhaps move us slowly toward a shift in attitude about girls, but the process is very slow and fails to address structural issues that oppress girls. Consequently, social relations do not change, especially issues of class, which are obfuscated by the normalization of consumption as a means to empowerment. On the other hand, feminism perhaps gains from the commodification of girl power, as its underlying assumptions are contested publicly by a larger and more diverse group of feminists.

Conclusion

This article argues for an examination of the rhetoric of feminist empowerment. I suggest that there are serious implications for the popularization of the term "empowerment," and this needs to be situated in a discussion of feminist agency. While I do believe that individual empowerment in women can help foster collective agency, it more often has the effect of stunting women, encouraging them to work only for themselves in the immediate moment. This of course is far from women working collectively as individuals toward significant structural changes that will help improve the lives of others. Without a doubt, it is necessary for women to feel some sort of power, but as this article suggests, when it is commodified, empowerment can come at the expense of actual change.

Schweickart (1995) suggests that we need a definition of feminism "that clarifies and articulates our sense of feminism as a movement whose coherence hinges on the heterogeneity of its constituents, and whose stability and durability depends on its capacity for revision and development" (p. 235). Third-wave feminism allows for this, yet within its multiple articulations, women must distinguish between what is a feminist project originating from feminist roots and what is feminist rhetoric being packaged and sold by media industries and bought by a large number of young women. A cultural analysis informed by political economy, in this case commodification, illustrates how cultural production can be part of a feminist project for social change (Riot Grrrl) and also commodified "feminist" rhetoric (girl power). If empowerment stops at an individual level, it does just that, serves the individual. If this is the case, women will be forever reproducing social relations that are rooted in patriarchal oppression and capitalist exploitation.

Notes

1. Although Baumgardner and Richards (2000) prefer to think of postfeminism as part of third-wave feminism, it is useful to make a distinction in this article for the sake of clarity. Postfeminist values suggest that women have achieved equality and need to "move on" from their victim status.

2. Quoted on Mr. Lady Records and Videos homepage, http://www.mrlady.com.html, 12 May 2000.

3. Tizzy Asher, interview with Kathleen Hanna, http://www.chickpages.com/girlbands/rebelgrl/jra.html, 13 July 1999.

4. Quoted in *Efforts Towards Change, Loudly, Furiously, and Profoundly* by J. Kim, http://www.seattlesquare.com/pandemonium/cdreviewstext/KathleenHanna.htm, 13 July 1999.

5. Personal interview with a DJ from a Pacific Northwest college radio station, who came out of the Riot Grrrl movement, 13 December 1999.

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