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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

This paper is situated within this continuing debate amongst feminist scholars. However, my goal is to shift the discussion away from debating the merits and drawbacks of teen magazines’ content, toward examining the production of teen magazines and the connection between feminist politics and the politics of production – an important but
often overlooked factor in feminist research on media. Very few academic studies of
popular magazines examine *who* is writing and editing the publications and how their
work is shaped and contrained by cultural and economic factors (Jaques, 2004; Currie,

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

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

**Literature Review**

Throughout the 1990s, several cultural developments added new insight into the
ongoing feminist debate about the potential benefits and harms of mainstream magazines
aimed at women and girls. The advent of third wave feminism is often dated to Rebecca
Walker’s 1992 essay in *Ms.* called “Becoming the Third Wave,” in which she located
herself as part of a new, re-energized generation of feminists wanting a feminism which
they felt spoke more to their own experiences (Lorber, 2005; Karlyn, 2003). The third
wave grew into a complex movement and there remains considerable confusion amongst feminists and non-feminists alike about what specifically defines the third wave. Most feminist theorists agree that the third wave prioritizes the entitlement of each individual to define feminism for herself, which leads to an embracing of contradiction, conflict, and messiness when it comes to agreeing on a specific third wave agenda (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003; Heywood and Drake, 1997; Henry, 2005). However, the engagement with personal and political transformation and a focus on grassroots activism remain essential parts of the movement (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000).

According to the commonly-used “wave” metaphor, the first wave of feminism refers to the movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which revolved largely around suffrage. The second wave refers to the late 1960s and 1970s (what is commonly referred to as ‘the feminist movement’) and, as I’ve outlined above, the third wave refers to the more individualistic feminist movement of the 1990s and beyond. As many scholars have noted, however, there are serious problems with feminism’s continual usage of the wave metaphor (McRobbie, 2009; Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). Among other things, this model incorrectly implies a straightforward, linear movement of a singular “feminism”, fails to recognize the complex inter-relatedness of different feminisms, and ignores the many commonalities between feminists of different generations (McRobbie, 2009; Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). While I have chosen to use the “wave” model for the sake of simplicity when referring to different feminist points of view loosely associated with different generations and historical periods, I do not wish to suggest that the second and third waves of feminism are separate, conflicting groups of women. Instead, I hope that my discussion will help distinguish a variety of feminist perspectives and how they meet and depart from one another.

During the 1990’s, third wave feminists adopted popular culture as a site not only for feminist critique, but also for potential empowerment of women. Around this time popular culture itself was becoming more girl-centered, with girls becoming the focus of many pop culture products in music, television, and movies (Hopkins, 2002). This was the era when the Spice Girls sold millions of albums with their fun “Girl Power” message, and a slew of other powerful pop culture girl heroes like Xena Warrior Princess
and the PowerPuff Girls ruled the cable networks (Hopkins, 2002). This “mainstreaming”
of girlhood has led some scholars to characterize much of the popular culture of this
period as “girl culture” (Karlyn, 2003; Hopkins 2002). Some feminists began to ask
whether teen magazines, along with other feminine-scripted items such as Barbie dolls,
make-up, and fashion, could be sites for female empowerment and resistance to
patriarchal notions of the feminine as weak (Karlyn, 2003).

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

But “girl culture” was not without its critiques, from both within and outside
feminist communities. Many feminists viewed the third wave’s adoption of a pop culture
centered celebration of girlhood and, as a result, its easy adaptation to the mainstream
“girl power” phenomenon as selling out to capitalist commodification, politically void,
and not useful for feminism as a social movement (Hains, 2004; Taft, 2004; McRobbie,
2009). Rebecca Hains (2004) argues that while “girl power” positively reflects a valuing
of the girlish, it does not challenge or even subvert mainstream femininity. She also
criticizes it for encouraging consumption rather than a do-it-yourself ethic, for
emphasizing the personal in ways that seem apolitical, and for excluding girls whose
bodies do not fit the thin, athletic mold. McRobbie (2009) points out that “girl power”
has very limited capacity to make sense of the way that gender inequalities affect real-
world social issues. She writes (2009:158), “it is not just a question of [girl power] being
inimical with recent directions in feminist theory, it is also ill-equipped to deal with war, with militarism, with ‘resurgent patriarchy,’ with questions of cultural difference, with race and ethnicity, and notably with the instrumentalisation of feminism on the global political stage.” Other social commentators criticize the “girl power” trend for its hijacking and trivializing of feminism. For example, in a 1998 article for *Time*, journalist Ginia Bellafante (1998:55) described today’s “pseudo-feminism” as “stylish fluff” that has made feminism “devolve into the silly.”

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

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

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

Whatever its implications from a feminist point of view, this new focus on girls meant that girls were now seen as a valuable demographic in the capitalist marketplace (Karlyn, 2003). As a result, media companies scrambled to pump resources into their teen titles, leading to a revival of the teen magazine market. For example, seventeen teen magazines launched in 1998, in comparison to only five in 1990 (Min Online, 2006). The staff at teen publications were also affected by this new cultural context, as women who grew up with third wave feminist values within the “girl power” climate of the 90s began entering the workforce, including taking up editorial positions at blossoming teen magazines. Several of the editors I interviewed spoke of being very influenced by the feminist pop culture of the 90s, including “angry girl music” of the Riot Grrrls and
publications such as *Sassy*. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that this influence may be one factor informing their current magazine work.

**Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

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

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

For example, during the 1990s, many third wave feminists began to criticize second wave feminists’ supposed disdain for pop culture and instead began to reconceptualize pop culture from an ironic, media-savvy standpoint, embracing it as a site
for potential feminist resistance (Heywood and Drake, 1997). This strategy became a
distinguishing feature of this “new” kind of feminism. Karlyn (2003: 10) writes,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The labeling issue: Are these editors feminists?

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

Several of the editors mentioned that it was important for them to identify themselves as feminists in hopes of undermining prevalent stereotypes of feminists as militant, man-hating women. For example, another editor, a former Health and Beauty Editor at Teen Vogue said, I would say that I call myself a feminist because I think it’s important to realize that the feminist movement is NOT over…I also think it’s important to make people realize that feminists aren’t the stereotypical man-haters. I’m into fashion – I’ve worked at many fashion magazines – and have a boyfriend and am pretty laid-back and easygoing, which is still, unfortunately, not what people think of when they think of feminists. So I hope calling myself a feminist makes them re-think.

In this sense, editors see themselves as helping to break down the stereotype that “real feminists” don’t wear lipstick, and thus opening up the public perception of feminists.
While the editors used the term “feminist” to describe themselves, they were vague about how this label specifically applied to their roles as magazine editors and the stories they write and edit. Instead editors focused on the mainstream stereotypes of feminists, primarily in terms of appearance (e.g., non-fashionable) and personality (e.g., uptight and angry), and positioned themselves as contradicting these stereotypes. While it is indeed important to challenge these limiting stereotypes, some of the editors seemed to emphasize the claiming of a feminist identity without addressing what political beliefs, values, and commitments are involved in that identity—a question arguably more important than whether a feminist wears fashionable clothes or not.

Dicker and Piepmeier (2003: 17) characterize this common lack of political rigor as a “feminist free-for-all”, meaning that everything and everyone can fit under the feminist umbrella regardless of what they actually think, do, or believe. As a result, feminist politics become diluted in an attempt to complicate and broaden the general understanding of feminism. This tendency has, unfortunately, characterized much third wave writing and has muddied third wave conceptions of what a feminist is (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). While the third wave has helped make feminism accessible to a broad range of people who may have previously been uncomfortable with the term, it must not empty feminism of its political content in favor of adopting a non-threatening style that merely conforms to mainstream notions of beauty and femininity.

To highlight these complications around the definition and boundaries of feminism, I will refer to the editors I interviewed as being self-identified feminists, rather than attempting to say in some definitive way whether they are feminists or not. Thus, I hope to position the term “feminist” itself as up for critique and contestation.

Successes and challenges: Trojan horses in Manhattan’s media landscape

The editors have enjoyed some success in introducing feminist content into their respective publications. All of them spoke enthusiastically about recent well-written stories dealing with feminist issues. “I would say that teen magazines handle all the hot button issues reasonably well, they try to be very responsible,” one editor maintained. She noted that she has written on topics such as abortion, date rape, and dating violence for teen publications. Other feminist content discussed by editors includes a story about
comprehensive sex education and teen activists who are trying to get it at their schools, an expose on sorority life, and a profile of three pregnant teen girls and the choices they made about their pregnancies.

Sexual health is a topic that most editors agree is covered reasonably well by teen magazines. Editors mentioned stories on STD’s, gynecological visits, birth control, and HPV as recent examples of stories that made the health sections of teen publications feminist in orientation. One argued, however, that while publications print sophisticated sexual health pages, there are still very few articles written about sexuality itself.

“There’s so much stuff written about STD’s and all this stuff associated with sex,” she says, “but very little about sex itself, which I think is really confusing for teenagers. I see very few magazines doing that [talking frankly about sex] because I think they’re nervous to say anything other than, you know, ‘wait until you’re in love – abstinence!’”

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

All of the editors were frank about the challenges of being feminists in the mainstream magazine industry. The biggest challenge identified by editors is the corporate culture that permeates an industry dominated by the mega-corporations of Hearst, Advance (which owns all Condé Nast titles), Time Warner, and Meredith Corporation. According to “The State of the News Media 2010,” a report released by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, these four companies together own close to three-quarters of all American-published magazines (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). The predominant concern amongst editors was the conservative nature of advertisers, which affects all aspects of the production process – pitching, reporting,
writing, and editing stories. Several of the editors revealed that particular topics they
want to write about, such as abortion and sex, just don’t get approved by senior editors
due to their “controversial” nature.

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

Intensifying corporate control of media has been well documented by media
scholars over the past three decades (Bagdikian, 1983, 2004; Herman and Chomsky,
1988; McChesney and Foster, 2003; McChesney, 2008). This increased corporate control
not only means more media conglomeration, but also an increased presence of
advertising in media industries. In fact, advertising dollars have become the primary
source of revenue for many media industries, and media outlets that do not attract
advertisers find themselves at a significant disadvantage in the marketplace (McChesney
and Foster, 2003). This increased economic clout means that advertisers themselves are
making editorial content demands and if media firms do not accommodate their wishes
they are threatened with pulled advertising money. McChesney and Foster (2003: 4)
argue,
We are rapidly moving to a whole new paradigm for media and commercialism, where traditional borders are disintegrating and conventional standards are being replaced with something significantly different. It is more than the balance of power shifting between media firms and advertisers; it is about the marriage of editorial/entertainment and commercialism to such an extent that they are becoming indistinguishable.

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

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

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

Editors also spoke of the standard teen magazine format as posing a challenge to their efforts to incorporate feminist pieces, as complex stories must be adapted to a very limited page space and word count. Other challenges include working with other departments to ensure the maintenance of a feminist tone, and making sure the piece’s
original message is preserved after the editing process. One editor, who has never been
on staff at a teen publication but has done freelance work for several mainstream teen and
women’s magazines, said that she occasionally struggles to tell “fascinating political
stories” in a way that fits into the teen magazine mold. “You can’t go in there and be like,
‘I want you to run this story that really should be run in The Nation in your publication,’”
she said. She also spoke of the financial challenges that freelance feminist writers
experience when choosing what stories to tell, explaining,

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

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

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

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

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

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

This strategy differs somewhat from second wave feminist tactics, as some second wave feminists emphasized the importance of establishing separate feminist institutions away from the mainstream (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). An obvious example would be the launch of Ms. in 1972, a magazine with the overt agenda of advancing feminist goals and reporting on women’s issues. In our interview, Baumgardner (who once worked at Ms.) explained that, in contrast, “the third wave is bringing feminism into other institutions… it’s an integrating force.” This strategy builds upon the third wave’s interaction with mainstream institutions, including the media and the popular culture and entertainment industries.
However, this interaction must be examined with an eye to the structural context of corporate capitalism within which it takes place. McRobbie (2009: 5) questions whether individual women – even those who may be feminist-influenced graduates or schooled in feminist thought – can actually maintain a commitment to feminist issues within the confines of the corporate magazine world. She critiques her own past naiveté, indicating that she “did not fully engage with the way in which the battle for circulation figures could see an editor sacked for displeasing a company with a lucrative advertising contract.” She also notes that the critique of capitalism which had been a defining feature of past socialist-feminist scholarship seems to have been replaced in contemporary feminist thought with a desire not only to participate in corporate capitalism, but also to believe that a feminist agenda can be incorporated within the current frameworks of capitalism.

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

Given the concern expressed by all the editors about advertisers and corporate influence on content, it is not surprising that several of them mentioned “disguising” feminist content as a crucial strategy. This strategy includes tactics such as “couching” feminism within less threatening topics, such as entertainment stories, and labeling feminist content as something else. In this sense, a lot of attention is paid to language, in particular to avoiding the “f-word.” The former NYLON editor explains, “You can do it [mention feminism] at Teen Vogue now and then, but you’re not going to see issue after issue talking about feminism openly. I think it’s a struggle for a lot of editors to find ways to get it in – but I think they do. It’s so much about how you label it, if you label it something different it’s ok, usually.”
The editor from *CosmoGIRL!* acknowledges that this is the strategy used at her magazine. “I really do the feminist thing, but we don’t throw the f-word out there at all,” she said, “I think it’s a scary word and I think it’s a scary word for girls. Even for me now, I hear the word, and it has so many connotations. We’ve actually had meetings about this, about how we can strip the word of its bad rep.” Instead, *CosmoGIRL!* editors have decided to steer clear of the term and opt for less political terms such as “empowerment.” According to her it’s part of a larger strategy to encourage girls to empower themselves without making them call themselves feminists, despite the fact that they’re still engaging with feminist ideals. The strategy appeases advertisers and avoids alienating girls who may be put off by the term, while still preserving editors’ own beliefs about the importance of feminist content.

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

In the September 2006 issue of *CosmoGIRL!*, the regular column “She’s So CosmoGirl” profiled Shaina Muñoz, a Hispanic girl who revealed that she often felt that she didn’t fit into her white, affluent, private high school. She decided that her classmates could benefit from being educated on diversity issues and she wanted to help open up discussion about issues such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status in her school. After she submitted a proposal for an elective diversity class to school administrators, her course was approved and Muñoz was named co-instructor along with several teachers. Muñoz’s story emphasizes the pervasive narrative found in
the “She’s So CosmoGirl” column – the ability of an individual to get motivated, take action, and make a difference. Other 2006 “She’s So CosmoGirl” profiles showcased girls who have fought for freedom of speech, tackled gender bias in the technology industry, and educated fellow students on their privacy rights, for example. These stories all contain an individualist notion of activism within a larger celebration of individual agency. The girls are touted as heroines with personal qualities and abilities that have made them strong leaders, and the implication is that individual girls can make a difference – a message that is empowering for readers because it suggests that this success can be attained by any one of them.

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

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

By substituting the word “empowerment” for “feminism,” the editors seem to assume that these words have the same meaning, when this is in fact not the case: “feminism” names a political critique and a collective movement, whereas “empowerment” can name a merely individual condition. Unlike “feminism,” the word “empowerment” has no political implications, and consequently, carries with it no
responsibility to critique structural inequalities like patriarchy or capitalism. In fact, the word “empowerment” easily supports capitalism because it privileges individual action and the individual’s ability to change their own situation, rather than collective movement or change, as was central to feminist and socialist movements (McRobbie, 2009). Gill (2007) argues that this language of individualism is common in women’s glossies and that the emphasis on personal solutions is at the expense of collective social and political struggle. Furthermore, avoiding the word “feminism” also does not encourage girls to become self-identified feminist women, which may only continue to perpetuate many of the stereotypes about feminists that are currently prevalent. Consequently, while this strategy may be the best possible option under the circumstances, the editors’ optimism about this tactic reveals that long-term social changes may not be on the agenda of teen magazines. As a result I am doubtful that disguising feminism will do much to contribute to meaningful, long lasting, feminist changes.

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

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

While she argues that Sassy’s beauty coverage is an example of “fun feminism” she seems to be implying that non-dogmatic beauty coverage that provides readers with choice and consequently, “never made girls feel bad” for what they had or did not have
was liberating. This is indeed true to a certain extent. *Sassy* did offer up more than one image of beauty to their readers, including images that contradicted dominant standards of beauty. For example, *Sassy* ran beauty stories about dying your hair with Jell-o and often poked fun at normative beauty standards by running features like “13 Reasons Not To Diet” and “Our First Annual Junk Food Taste Off.” But while the magazine was more diverse than its teen magazine competitors at the time and tended to promote body acceptance within its copy, it still showed only thin models and girls in its pages (Jesella and Meltzer, 2007).

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

A large body of feminist work has documented the harmful effects of the beauty industry on girls and women (Wolf, 1991; Bordo, 1993; Jeffreys, 2005; APA, 2007).
Research has also demonstrated that girls’ readings of teen magazines center on images of “beauty”, rather than on the articles, even those giving advice about fashion, hair, and make-up. Thus, girls are specifically concerned with the visual representations of the ideal female body found in teen magazines, typically defined by “clear skin, a slim build [and], developed bust” (Duke and Kreshel, 1998: 57). These images and their messages have been found to have a profoundly negative effect on girls. For example, a 2007 report by the American Psychological Association (APA) revealed that problematic models of femininity, including sexual objectification and a narrow and unrealistic standard of physical beauty, are very dangerous for girls. The results of continual exposure to such messages include diminished cognitive and emotional abilities, mental and physical health problems (including eating disorders, low self esteem, and depression), the inability to develop a healthy sexuality, and diminished self worth (APA, 2007).

Increased rates of sexual harassment, sexual violence, and use of child pornography have also been linked to media objectification of women and girls (APA, 2007).

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

Against this backdrop of a powerful beauty mandate for girls, ‘fun’ does not seem to capture even remotely the complexity of girls’ relationship to their own bodies. Rather, the discourse is part of the shift from objectification to subjectification in which more and more of the normative requirements of femininity must be presented as freely chosen and pleasurable, and internally motivated rather than imposed or influenced by wider culture.
Thus, by presenting beauty as a “fun choice” it appears that the problematic aspects of the beauty industry have been removed, when in reality, the harm is merely being couched in the language of celebrating choice, empowerment, and fun.

One editor talked about how *CosmoGIRL!* editors use pop culture references and celebrities to make their regular “Project 2024” column more exciting. (“Project 2024” is a question-and-answer interview with a leader who has achieved success in her field. The column’s overall goal is to get a CosmoGirl in the White House by the year 2024.)

“We try to sex it up a bit – and that’s one of the challenges with feminism – making it sexy, making it appealing,” she said. For example, the June/July 2006 “Project 2024” column profiles Christina Norman, who, as the president of MTV, occupies a position that many teen girls would covet. But despite the fact that Norman is a black woman in an industry notorious for its sexism and racism, the story contains no reference to such issues or obstacles. Readers are instead offered tips on how to accomplish their goals and break into the entertainment industry. Norman’s advice is to “Speak up for yourself because you are valid. Your needs are valid, what you want is valid, and what you give is valid. You’ve got to find a way to use your voice to get what you need” (Landy, 2006: 123). Norman is put forward as a model, living proof that girls can get to the top through hard work and dedication.

This type of discourse, consistent throughout the “Project 2024” profiles, emphasizes the themes of the regular feature – to encourage girls to set goals, believe in themselves, and strive for success in whatever they do. While these are positive messages, a larger feminist framework is replaced by an individualistic, success-oriented “pep talk” that escapes a heavy discussion about the real barriers, such as unequal pay, that women still experience in the workplace. Instead, the columns draw on a fun, fantasy-type “you go girl” narrative that points to the individual’s ability to succeed in the capitalist marketplace as the ultimate indicator of feminist empowerment.

This dynamic can be seen even more clearly in an editor’s discussion of a 2024 interview with P.Diddy, whom she cites as one of the “super successful yet sexy at the same time” people they want to cover in the column. While this editor did recognize that sometimes tapping into the celebrity sensibility compromises the broader premise of the
piece, she clearly sees the marketing appeal of the “celebrity” approach as too powerful
to resist. The former NYLON editor concurred with this strategy. “I think the best way to
approach any political issue with that age group is through some kind of pop culture tie
in,” she said. “And I think stuff like that makes so much sense – to be able to relate to
teenagers on that level, and I don’t think there’s anything shallow about it or anything
wrong with it because that’s just what works.” With respect to the P.Diddy interview, the
CosmoGIRL! editor explained, “Granted, he’s a pimp, he’s P.Diddy. He’s a great role
model, but it’s not like he’s the best. But we’re hoping he can give us tricks to basically
doing it all and having it all and it’s a way to make the initiative seem uber-popular and
trendy.”

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

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

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

Contradictions

The editors’ discussion of their practical strategies revealed that it is a continual task for them to navigate the contradictions of bringing a feminist perspective to mainstream magazines— for example, the frequent instances where feminist content directly collides with anti-feminist content. All of the editors recognized such contradictions as problematic but ultimately accepted them as part of the meeting of feminism and pop culture in a corporate environment. For example, one spoke of writing an in-depth story about body image, only to see the story sandwiched between pictures of Nicole Richie and Mischa Barton, women who, as the editor pointed out, “looked like they had serious eating disorders, and yet, who the magazine was touting as beautiful.” Or, again, regarding CosmoGIRL’s P.Diddy article, the editor recognized that “he’s a great role model but it’s not like he’s the best.” She knows that P.Diddy’s music, like
mainstream hip hop culture in general, is not exactly “feminist”; however, the magazine accepts these tensions because it ultimately needs to balance what advertisers want, what readers want, and what editors want. Again this illuminates the power that commercial corporations have over the production of magazines (Gill, 2007).

Father and beauty spreads were the areas that editors appeared most concerned about from a critical feminist perspective, although (as one argued when speaking about Sassy) editors believe these sections of the magazines can be made more feminist by keeping it fun and offering girls choices. But despite some recent efforts to use “real girl” models and incorporate a diversity of body types into the editorial spreads, skinny models continue to dominate advertising pages and editorial pieces, especially those about celebrities. Editors appear to accept this as a “given,” indicating a belief that they have little power to change this aspect of the publication.

The contradictions played out in the pages of the magazine may be more acceptable to the editors because they are strongly influenced by third wave feminist ideas (Walker, 1995; Heywood and Drake, 1997; Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). While feminism has always been complex, encompassing conflicting ideas about such topics as pornography for example, the third wave has truly embraced this “messiness” as one of its defining features. According to Dicker and Piepmeier (2003: 16), “the third wave distinguishes itself from the second wave...through its emphasis on paradox, conflict, multiplicity, and messiness.” The editors seem to understand this, and as their interviews suggest, they attempt to incorporate their understanding of a popular feminism into their respective publications, without being too stymied by the contradictions involved in such attempts. “We make sure to keep the ‘feel good about yourself’ message consistent and try to encourage the girls, you know, ‘don’t buy into our fashion spreads or the whole skinny model thing’,” one editor said. “I believe in my heart though that, this publication in particular, we are giving them some meat, we’re feeding them positive messages. It sometimes seems frivolous and it seems fun but underneath it all it’s more serious.”

As I have argued, while many of the topics editors discussed are indeed feminist in nature, the issue of what constitutes a feminist message was often not articulated clearly by the editors. For example, persons who have attained commercial success are put forward as role models, with little attention paid to how they have achieved their
success, how their success affects others, or what obstacles they may have faced in doing so. While the boundary and meaning of feminism is a larger theoretical problem that third wave feminists must resolve, the unquestioning use of the term “empowerment” by some of the editors may prevent them from undertaking a more critical analysis of their content. This again points to the risk of “feminist free-for-all” wherein almost anything can be claimed as “feminist” without the structural analysis or political rigor that characterizes more traditional feminist critique.

Conclusions

The previous discussion illuminates some of the tensions created when feminism and pop culture merge in a corporate, mainstream space. All of the editors I interviewed acknowledged and accepted these contradictions as part of their job and developed specific, practical strategies to incorporate a popular feminism into their publications. I classified these tactics as being indicative of a “third wave ethic,” as many of the strategies relied on the tenets of third wave feminism, such as making feminism fun. However, this third wave ethic also influences the content of the magazine, such as in the ways feminism is framed and sold to readers. Primarily, feminism is packaged as a fun celebration of individual agency, with the assurance that choice, hard work, and dedication will lead to success and an empowered, feminist life. To some degree, this can be seen as a truly positive and liberating feminist message – girls can do anything, be anything, and live the dynamic and fulfilling lives that weren’t always an option for past generations of women.

While an individualistic expression of feminism is not necessarily inherently problematic, by itself it only offers girls a limited understanding of contemporary gender relations. In other words, it is only half of the story that girls need to hear about feminism. This is because the individualized feminism offered by editors overlooks structural barriers such as sexism, racism and classism, important factors that continue to shape the lives of girls. So while editors do rely on particular aspects of the third wave to incorporate feminism into their content, they tend to “cherry pick” and do not incorporate
the structural analysis—the understanding of the barriers facing women as a group—that must inform any effective feminism, no matter of what “wave” it is a part. 

This structural analysis, although sometimes assumed by critics to be absent from the third wave, is in fact the third wave’s political backbone, existing alongside any individualized expressions of feminism (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). Dicker and Piepmeier (2003: 18) argue, “As many third wavers realize, it’s fine to engage with the world in a playful, individualistic way, but for that engagement to be informed by feminism, it has to take into account the power relations surrounding gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.” One group that has done this is the Third Wave Foundation, an organization of self-proclaimed third wavers who work nationally in the United States through strategic grant making, leadership development, and philanthropic advocacy to support equality initiatives for young women and transgender youth, such as the 2009 Latina Health Summit and Young Women’s Collaborative. Because this political rigor is conspicuously absent from the feminism found in teen magazines, I question whether feminism framed as “empowerment” and a celebration of individual agency is adequate as a way to promote feminism to a diverse population of girls reading teen magazines.

The individualized feminism presented in mainstream teen magazines may be more easily accepted by corporate, mainstream publications because it reinforces larger cultural narratives about hard work, success, and the “American Dream.” In this sense, editors appear to be surrendering some of their own independent perspectives by aligning their feminism with a corporate capitalist ideology already accepted by mainstream American society. Thus, their version of popular feminism lacks a critique of capitalism and as a result, fails to incorporate important critiques that have been cornerstones of feminist research, such as those of consumption and the beauty industry, in favor of presenting topics in a playful, “fun” tone. This is problematic because important power hierarchies never get addressed, and the feminism presented is merely stylistic and not geared towards social change.

Ultimately, this discussion raises the question of whether individualized feminism, as presented in teen publications, is good or bad for girls and for the future of feminism. Similar debates have engulfed the third wave, as feminists wonder whether the
third wave’s individualistic framework tends to pit the advancement of individual women against social change for women as a group. While for some readers, exposure to individualized feminism may be the initial step towards a broader understanding of inequality and social change, this transition would depend on the independent critical thought of readers in linking their own empowerment to that of girls and women as a social group. To examine this possibility, further research would be needed regarding how girls read and interpret third-wave-inspired feminist content in teen magazines.
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Ariel Levy’s 2005 book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, documents the increasing popularity of “raunch culture” in the mainstream. Levy characterizes “raunch culture” as an overt celebration of the sexuality of pornography (like *Playboy*) and porn culture (like “stripers” and “pimps”) and the belief that young women’s willing participation in such industries indicates they are liberated and empowered.