Rebecca C. Hains

Are super girls super for girls?

The negotiation of beauty ideals in girl power cartoons

Supergirls populating the screen as active heroines are attractive role models for girls – but it is problematic that even with these characters physical attractiveness is central. A qualitative study from the USA shows how 8- to 11-year-old girls judge the appearance of characters in girl power cartoons and how they relate it to their own body.

In the 1990s, prominent books such as Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) raised public concern by arguing that as girls approach adolescence, they face problems that boys do not: their self-esteem and academic performance drop, and their concerns with their appearances increase. Since then, numerous psychological studies have indicated that Western cultural beauty ideals are a major influence in the development of these problems. Factors such as family relationships, teasing by peers, and media exposure have a negative effect on girls' body images, which numerous studies have shown can lead to serious issues including mental health problems and eating disorders (e.g. Archibald et al., 1999; Byely et al., 2000; Davison/McCabe, 2006; Parkinson et al., 1998; Sands/Wardle, 2003).

In the wake of the cultural attention to girls sparked by works such as *Reviving Ophelia*, the concept of girl power emerged. Girl power suggests that girls are strong and capable of anything, and that playing with femininity can be positive and empowering. Thus, girl power can be considered a response to girls' problems, intended to empower pre-adolescent girls before they reach the crisis of female adolescence. By embracing normative femininity, girl power offers cultural support to girls and all things girlish. Girl power positions a feminine appearance as something girls and women can enact playfully, for their own pleasure, rather than to satisfy a male gaze – a progressive concept.

Girl power and beauty ideals

Girl power is complex to negotiate, however. Girl power offers problematic messages alongside the positive: Although girl power intends to subvert normative femininity by making its production about one's own pleasure, the end result of a girl power ethos is a capitulation to dominant social constructs regarding girls and femininity. Girls still aspire to achieve a specific appearance as they grow up: a face made up with cosmetics; long, straight hair, preferably blonde or at least highlighted; a slender body with long legs and shapely breasts; and clothing that accentuates the wearer's figure, precariously balancing the virgin/whore dichotomy: "good-girl" respectability with an implied "bad-girl" sexual availability. In short, girls still internalise the female body ideal that psychologists find so dangerous, along with all of its trappings. This means that although girl power offers progressive messages, from a feminist perspective, it is simultaneously regressive as well.

In girl power television programmes, including television cartoons, the range of physical appearances positioned as socially acceptable is extremely limited. Girl power cartoons such as *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Totally Spies*, *Kim Possible*, *My Life as a Teenage Robot*, *Atomic Betty*, and *W.I.T.C.H.* offer pre-adolescent viewers strong, smart, brave female role models who look wholesome, but their bodies and personal styles have little variance. Within the narratives of girl power cartoon episodes, girls whose physical appearances do not conform are positioned as outcasts, as unsuitable superheroes. They are excluded from the girl power clique. This message is in dialogue with the messages about female beauty that pre-teen girls receive from the broader cultural environment: in programming like *American Idol*, *America's Next Top Model*, and *The Swan*; in advertisements, movies, and music; in toys and books; in television news broadcasts; and from the people around them. From these sources, girls quickly learn the rules of normative feminine beauty and how to achieve them through clothing, makeup, accessories, diet strategies, and plastic surgery. These rules are on display everywhere, as common as the air that we breathe – and

given about the same amount of critical thought. It is no wonder that preadolescent and adolescent girls fixate unhealthily on whether their appearance aligns with the usually impossible Western beauty ideal. Many criticise this ideal on the grounds that most women cannot possibly attain it in a healthy way (e.g. Wiseman et al., 1992), and psychologists have argued that media images cause body image issues and eating disorders (Nemeroff et al., 1994; Stice, 1994; McCabe/Ricciardelli, 2001). Tiggemann (2005) found that children's social learning from television in particular has negative effects on their body images, and genres that focussed on physical appearance (such as soap operas) have an especially strong influence. Given this situation, then, girl power's uncritical embrace and promotion of normative femininity is a considerable problem. What are its implications for real girls?

My Life as a Teenage Robot

Idea: Rob Renzetti

Jenny is a female teenager – and a super power robot. Her "mother", a scientist, constructed her to save the planet from catastrophes, but Jenny would prefer to do something really interesting, e.g. to go to school.

How girls negotiate girl power and normative femininity

I sought an answer to this question through fieldwork. I spent over a year studying two groups of pre-teen girls, ages 8 to 11, who enjoyed watching girl power cartoons. My informants lived in the suburbs of a major city on the east coast of the United States, with key informants composed of a group of African-American girls and a group of Caucasian girls from neighbouring towns. Grounding my work in a feminist cultural studies perspective, I used a bricolage of methods, including frequent interviews with girls in groups at their after-care programmes (meeting twice weekly with each group over a period of several months); individual interviews in the homes of key informants, sometimes including conversations with their parents and siblings; and field observations during the girls' library class periods and lunch recess.

Physical appearance on screen

The girls I interviewed had surprisingly little to say about the appearances of the girl heroes they liked. In response to my asking, "What do you think about how these girls look?", Audrey[1] described the Powerpuff Girls as "cool and pretty." Zoë and Kylie both described them as "pretty". Kylie elaborated, "their hair, it's always, like, nice, and, um, I like their dresses […] and shoes." Recalling an episode of *My Life as a Teenage Robot* in which Jenny receives a spray-paint makeover, Desirée described Jenny as looking "cute" and "pretty." In contrast, my informants tended to be more specific about their dislikes. For example, when Alex of *Totally Spies* became extremely muscular in "The Incredible Bulk", Kylie said, "She looked ugly. Her muscles made her ugly and her voice made her sound ugly." Audrey agreed, saying, "She sounds like a man!" After we screened *W.I.T.C.H.* (see ill. 1) for the first time, only a few weeks after it had premiered on television, my informants debated whether the five superhero girls looked "cool" or "weird".

ZOË: I think they looked weird because how small the wings were, and how high their socks were, and then, like, they had a green shirt and then they had a point in the front, but, like, all flat and straight in the back and then, like, they had a skirt, a purple skirt, that goes up right up to right there, to their waist.
ANGELA: Yeah, they could be rock stars like that – not.
REBECCA: [chuckles] Kylie, what did you think?
KYLIE: I think their outfit was cool because they have wings, and they got long, those long, um, big sleeves. And then they have this skirt that goes up like this and goes to their belly button –
ZOË: Like, at the bottom of – right here [pulling up her shirt and point to the bottom of her belly button]. [some chuckling]
KYLIE: And, um, I like their shoes and their wings. And I also liked their hair a little bit.

This snippet of conversation illustrates the specificity with which my informants could critique cartoon characters' appearances, and it also demonstrates how disagreement could lead to more fruitful conversation than simple agreement that characters are "pretty". Perhaps because "pretty" is the norm, mediated and modelled throughout society, there is not much to say about it. Deviance is easier to discuss.

My informants and I watched several girl power cartoon episodes in which a main character's physical appearance suddenly deviated from the norm. For example, we screened *Powerpuff* episodes "The Mane Event", in which Blossom receives a terrible haircut from her sisters, and "Twisted Sister", in which the Girls create a new Powerpuff who is as unsightly as she is an ineffectual superhero. We also screened several *My Life as a Teenage Robot* episodes in which the protagonist Jenny had trouble with her appearance, such as "Hostile Makeover", in which Lexus, a robot villain from outer space, tries to make Jenny join forces with her, in part through the strategy of making her look ugly; and the *Totally Spies* episode "Passion Patties", in which the Spies try to track down a villain whose addictive cookies make people who consume them obese.

W.I.T.C.H.
Idea: Elisabetta Gnone
W.I.T.C.H. are the 12- and 13-year-old girls Will, Irma, Taranee, Cornelia and Hay Lin who are chosen as guardians with magical powers.
Their mystic, dangerous task is to watch the safety net which separates the good part of the universe from the bad one.

My informants were generally sympathetic when the main characters unwillingly deviated from normative femininity. For example, regarding Jenny, the Teenage Robot, and her constant quest to look more like a "normal girl":

TIANA: [Jenny] probably feels like she's an outcast from everybody because she probably doesn't get invited to a lot of social events […]. Anyway, like, she'd be at parties and stuff, she probably couldn't get dressed up like the rest of the girls, like 'I'll go buy a new dress', and 'I got a new Gucci pocketbook, I got new jeans and sneakers'. She can't, like, wear that kind of stuff, she's, like, blah. She can get, like, a paint job.

Regarding Blossom of *The Powerpuff Girls*, Bobbie expressed empathy.

BOBBIE: [The episode] was OK, um, but the strange thing is, is that Blossom had perfect hair and Bubbles and Buttercup didn't, and when I sleep over at my friend's house, they wake up with perfect hair, and I wake up and my hair is real knotty and it's all over, and it's just strange, and I don't they should've made fun of Blossom because they should've thought of the consequences.

As girls in the viewing audience generally identify with the characters they admire, my informants tended to see such situations from the characters' perspectives. In contrast, they found it funny when one-off characters unwittingly departed from prevailing feminine norms. For example, while Angela did not like it when Clover of *Totally Spies* was afflicted with the "Passion Patties" cookie addiction and grew obese, she and most other girls found it funny to see non-recurring characters afflicted. When I asked why, my informants focussed on the way the cartoon characters were rendered. Zoë replied that they just looked funny because their entire bodies were small, except for the stomach, "which is a big, humongous ball". Kelly agreed: she said that they each looked like "a bouncing ball", and Maria said they looked like her hamster.

Angela concluded that it was funny because real people can't get as fat as the characters in the cartoon. In other words, because of the medium, the girls did not take the content of "Passion Patties" too seriously. However, social learning theory might suggest that the divide between the fantasy world of cartoons and real-world situations is not as wide as we might think. In a comment that illustrates this point, Angela went on to justify the humour of "Passion Patties" by blaming the obese characters for their own problems:

ANGELA: They shouldn't have opened their mouth so they wouldn't eat any cookies and they wouldn't get fat.

Children like my informants could easily apply this logic to real-world situations. It implies it is okay to make fun of people for failing to conform when conformity is within their control. However, obesity is a global epidemic (World Health Organization, 2007). It has serious health implications, and people do not willingly become obese. My informants' idea that obesity is preventable and funny is therefore a problem. However, the cartoon we watched does not bear particular responsibility for that; to the contrary, the cartoon's narrative depicted normal people becoming overweight because of a villain's plot, one which made self-control physically impossible. This suggests that as children's cartoon viewing is in discourse with the ideas they have internalised from the surrounding culture, it is sometimes difficult for them to grasp a story's moral – an important point, as girl power and girl power cartoons are often charged with boosting girls' self-esteem through positive lessons.

Another episode whose lessons my informants had trouble grasping was "Twisted Sister", in which the Powerpuff Girls sneak into their father's laboratory. There, they create Bunny, a fourth Powerpuff who is ugly and unintelligent, unlike her smart, pretty sisters. The episode contains several positive lessons: that children should have a strong work ethic, that sneaking around without a parent's help can have dire consequences, and that one should not judge other people too quickly. However, I also worry that the cartoon inadvertently suggests the real problem with Bunny was not the sneaky, careless way she was made, but rather with the way that she looked. Because of these concerns, I asked my informants what they thought the Powerpuff Girls learned in that episode. Angela's response was that the Powerpuff Girls did not learn a

Totally Spies
Idea: Vincent Chalvon-Demersay, David Michel
The 3 super agents Sam, Alex and Clover repeatedly save the world and at the same time lead a normal teenage life like millions of other girls, too.

Powerpuff Girls
Idea: Craig McCracken
The 3 pre-school girls Blossom, Bubbles and Buttercup are not only cute-looking: After an experiment of their mentor, Professor Utonium, they are equipped with super powers. Together, they fight the evil in their hometown as the Powerpuff Girls.

lesson "because", she said, "there's nothing to learn." A year later, when I visited her at home, Angela insisted that only programmes for younger children teach lessons to their viewers.

ANGELA: [The cartoons I watch] don't have a point to the show, they don't, like, have a goal, like, to be, um, like, they don't learn a lesson every day. But they don't, like, learn a lesson, like, like, on the *Teletubbies* – wait, not on the *Teletubby* – on *The Wiggles* – "time to share! Let's share! This is how we share! We take a toy, give it to somebody else, and play with it."

Among some girls, then, the well-intended lessons of girl power cartoons may not be consciously learned, partly because they perceive a difference between educational programmes for pre-schoolers and the cartoons for pre-teens. The former teach, but the latter only entertain and are not to be taken seriously. Other girls in my study recognised that cartoons have pedagogical functions, though.

KYLIE: The lesson is never to go into somebody else's lab, and don't create something that's dumb.
ZOË: The lesson is, you shouldn't go in someone's lab without the person's permission, and […] next time, ask Professor to help you make another one so she won't explode and she won't be stupid like Bunny. And she won't cry, like, every time they say she wasn't a good one, cuz she *would* be a good one if they didn't create her without Professor because she just had all these weird problems with her body – hump back, crooked teeth, feet spaced out, hairy ears, all this other stuff.

Kylie and Zoë seemed to have a basic grasp of the moral of "Twisted Sister". In addition to the producers' intended messages, Zoë also indicated that Bunny would have turned out alright if the Powerpuff's father had helped them, because she would neither have been "stupid" nor have "had all these weird problems with her body". Yet one of the episode's lessons was not to judge people by how they look, and it attempted to separate Bunny's behaviour from her appearance. Her "weird problems" with her body were beside the point. Zoë's response conflated the real problem – the way the girls created Bunny, and her resultant undesirable behaviour – with Bunny's appearance.

Might the intended message of "Twisted Sister" have been received more clearly if Bunny looked as cute as her sisters – if the visual of a non-normative girl had not been associated with all the other problems that arose in the episode? Among some girls, the well-intended lessons of girl power cartoons may not be learned, because viewers sometimes conflate appearances with personality traits. This is one of the reasons why so many scholars have criticised the stereotyping of women, minorities, foreigners, the elderly, and other marginalised groups in the media (e. g. Gerbner/Signorielli, 1979; Gerbner, 1998; Tuchman, 1978). I fear that in many cases, the physical appearances of girl power cartoon characters compete with or negate other, more positive aspects of these shows.

Physical appearance in everyday life

Conversations about the appearances of girl heroes often segued into conversations about my informants' own appearances. For example, after talking about how funny it was when people became obese in "Passion Patties", Bobbie revealed that she did not agree with the other girls' perception of its humour, or even with Angela's assertion that real people cannot get that fat. The lone voice of dissent, she negotiated this storyline in a different, more personal way than did the other informants. She seemed to empathise with all of the characters – not just the girl heroes – in part because she said she was often teased about her weight. She read the cartoon as in discourse with her own painful experiences. As a result, my informants' conversation quickly turned from laughter to quiet reflection as Bobbie shared how her peers make fun of her for being "fat".

BOBBIE: I'm big-boned, so a lot of people say that my thighs are really fat.
REBECCA: Oh!
BOBBIE: But – it really annoys me. I'm jealous because all my friends, like, most people you look at them, their thighs are, like, this big [making a circle with her thumbs and forefingers]. I'm so jealous.
REBECCA: Yeah. I never had thighs that big. [Molly, the day-care employee who is in the room with the group, starts to laugh a little.]
BOBBIE: And, you know what else? Like, if, like, there's this girl that lives down my street – sometimes she's my friend, sometimes she hates me, like, and sometimes she can be, like, really, really rude – […] when she wants to play with the other people, who are *my* friends, it always causes a big fight, and she's, like, "Well, you're so fat!"
MOLLY: Well, that's rude.
REBECCA: That is really rude.
BOBBIE: She calls everybody fat. And, um, people call me fat all the time –
REBECCA: I'm sorry they do that!
BOBBIE: – and I hate it.

As time went on, my informants often shared such stories with our group, confiding about the cruel things that other children had said to them. Simultaneously, however, they were quick to judge others on the basis of appearance. For example, Rhea once said, "No offence, but my principal wears her pants all the way

right here [pointing to a spot right above her navel]", eliciting a laugh from her peers. They dismissed Britney Spears as "chubby", and they used appearance to judge material culture, too. For example, my informants enjoyed discussing Bratz dolls, fashion dolls of diverse racial identities that meet the dominant standards of feminine beauty to which so many girls aspire. My informants volunteered that they not only wanted to play with Bratz dolls; they also wanted to look and dress like them – in revealing halter tops or belly shirts, in short skirts or tight pants, and with "bling-bling" accessories. Unlike Barbie, who at least came in astronaut and teacher editions, dressing up in revealing clothing is the only pastime that Bratz dolls seem to model for young girls. As stated in the manufacturers' promotional copy for the "Funk N Glow" line of Bratz dolls, recommended for children ages 6 to 11, "Bratz know how important it is to be seen!" (cf. also Lamb/Brown, 2006, pp. 218-219).

As mentioned earlier, my informants often shared with our group the hurtful comments that other children made about their appearances. Our conversations often segued from what other people said into self-criticisms. My informants assessed their own bodies with the same critical eye that they cast upon celebrities and Bratz dolls. For example, shortly after Bobbie told us how people would tease her by calling her fat, Angela said, "I think I am kinda chubby." She commented, "I want to be like my dad, because he's skinny, but he eats so much – I don't ever see him eat any fruit – or vegetables. But he's so skinny." My informants spoke easily about how they wished they could look, and their wishes always aligned with the ideals of normative femininity that are promoted by girl power and the broader cultural environment.

The desire to be thin ran strong among my informants, emerging in my informants' conversation and drawings. They often expressed a desire to be thinner, as well as to wear more stylish clothing. Some girls went further, expressing a desire to change just about everything about themselves: to diminish their height, shoe size, the size of their teeth, as well as their eye colour, hair colour, hair texture, and more. By wishing for such drastic, holistic changes to their appearances, my informants expressed consuming worries that their bodies did not align with the exceptionally thin ideal that they perceived as the norm. Through their words and the pictures they drew for me, several informants seemed to suggest that they wished their bodies would just shrink away (see ill. 2) – which does not suggest that a lifetime immersed in girl power rhetoric, including girl power cartoons, has effectively addressed the problems that Mary Pipher brought to the public consciousness more than 10 years ago. Today's girls have just as many concerns with their appearance as did those girls who grew up without the support of girl power. What does this mean?

Conclusions

In my study, several interconnected findings emerged about girl power and the negotiation of normative femininity. The girls in my study had a hard time specifying what they liked about their girl power heroes' appearances, but they could easily critique the appearances of non-normative characters. My informants seemed more likely to empathise with heroes who unwillingly failed to conform, but made fun of non-recurring characters similarly afflicted with nonconforming appearances. Physical appearances contain their own semiotic messages, which compete with and contradict the narrative messages of some television cartoons. As such, my informants had trouble grasping the intended lessons of girl-power cartoon narratives – lessons such as not judging people based on their appearance. This implies that visual stereotyping conflates appearance and personality for pre-teen viewers, teaching them the opposite: that you *can* tell a book by its cover.

Bratz

Idea: Carter Bryant

Bratz, that is the 4 schoolgirls Yasmin, Sasha, Jade and Cloe who have a lot in common. In their close-knit clique they share a "passion for fashion", they know the latest trends and publish their own teen-lifestyle magazine.

The girls I interviewed were quick to critique the appearances of girls and women in popular culture if those appearances did not align closely enough with normatively feminine ideals. Unfortunately, they were also frequently criticised in similar ways by their peers, and they attended to broader cultural messages about the pursuit of normative femininity. At various points, they even demonstrated a basic awareness of diet strategies and eating disorders. These facts had implications in my informants' everyday lives. My informants were quite critical of their own appearance. They knew how to critique the appearances of girls and women in popular culture, and they had learned to turn these critical tools on themselves. Unfortunately, when they measured themselves against the ideal, they could see that they fell short.

Given the broader cultural context, the idea of empowering girls through television content seems like a Sisyphean task. Any progressive mes-

sages contained by girl power cartoons are drowned in the sea of normative femininity in which our society swims. It might help if girl power cartoons could avoid capitulating to the norm and subvert it – not with inward intentionality, but through outward action. The question is, what would such a cartoon look like, and could it succeed in the marketplace? Girls are indoctrinated into normative femininity from such an early age that girls may not even be willing to watch a programme in which role-model girls did not meet their high standards for physical appearance.

It might help if producers created more girl-centred cartoons in which the girl heroes are not teenagers, but younger girls, more like the Powerpuffs. A study by Wardle and Watters (2004) revealed that going to school with older girls is correlated with 9- to 11-year-old girls having greater levels of body dissatisfaction. The researchers found that such girls have higher incidences of body image issues, including having internalised a thinner female ideal body and perceiving oneself as more overweight, than girls who go to a school with a smaller age range of students. If this is the case, the same social learning implications might apply to girls watching television programmes and consuming other popular culture artefacts depicting girls older than themselves. There is no easy answer, however; after all, aspirational viewing occurs across most segments of society, and tween girls are keen on getting a taste of teenage life – of glimpsing into their futures. However, I think fire is largely fuelled by the girl culture industry. Would girls be so eager to play at growing up if the marketplace wasn't funded with the countless dollars spent persuading girls to want to do so?

It seems that girls negotiate girl power in the same way that they negotiate the rest of our cultural environment. Dialogic theory is quite helpful in making sense of this. Most problems with girl power are non-exclusive to girl power itself. For this reason, it is difficult to debate the merits of girl power cartoons themselves, for any girl who views them brings with her the biases and perspectives of the broader cultural environment, with its laudatory views on the normative feminine beauty ideal. As a result, girl power cartoons' deliberate messages about not judging people based on appearance are sometimes overwhelmed by what girls bring to their viewing, making the progressive content of such shows misunderstood, misinterpreted, or unnoticed. ■

Ill. 2: **"How I look" (left) and "How I would like to look" (right)**

NOTE

1 All informant names have been changed.

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