

GROWING UP WITH
Girl
power

girlhood
on screen
and in
everyday
life

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Introduction

"It's not every day that girls show boys they're strong, but girls are real strong. Like me."

—Angela, age 8 (*Euro-American*)

"We can be as strong as we want."

—Bobbi, age 10 (*Euro-American*)

"It doesn't matter what the boys think!"

—Roshanda, age 6 (*African-American*)

In the 1990s, girl power saturated the marketplace, infusing empowerment rhetoric into all aspects of girls' culture. Exclamations such as "Girls rule!" and "You go, girl!" became commonplace. Along with "Girl power!", these phrases appeared on countless products available for purchase—everything from pop music to pillowcases; clothing to car seat covers; eyeglasses to embroidery patterns; pocketknives to posters (Hains, 2009). For a generation of girls, girl power discourse has always existed, promoting the ideas that girls are strong, smart, and empowered and that their interests are of cultural value. Girl power rhetoric has also been full of contradictions, however; it has often implied that there is a limited range of acceptable physical behaviors and appearances for girls, and critics have argued that girl power's mode of empowerment problematically targets slender, white, middle-class girls above all others (Durham, 2003; Hains, 2004). Thus, girl power is empow-

ering but also constraining; feminist but also postfeminist; progressive but also regressive (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2004; Driscoll, 1999; Lemish, 2003; Newsom, 2004). What have real girls—girls like Angela and Bobbi and Roshanda, quoted in the epigraph—made of all these mixed messages?

Growing up with Girl Power addresses this question, focusing in particular on girl power's manifestations in children's popular culture. It considers music (particularly the Spice Girls), then prioritizes television in light of cultural critics' argument that television serves a socializing function in our society. As social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests, when we watch television, we learn. When television characters are shown being rewarded or punished for their actions and attitudes, we learn about cultural norms: what behaviors, roles and expectations are appropriate for various people—including ourselves—within the existing social order (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). In this context, television's girls are symbolic models (Ormrod, 1999) through which viewers—male and female, adults and children—learn about girls' status in society, their relationships to others in our social structure, and the possibilities and limitations culturally proscribed of girlhood.

Forty years of studies have confirmed that children's programming is rife with gender stereotypes, influencing cultural ideas about girlhood. Time and again, girls have been depicted as passive and uninteresting, as objects instead of subjects—as people whose stories are less attention-worthy than those of boys. Boys have been depicted as having agency, status, and power while girls just looked pretty. In children's television programs and advertisements, boys have been featured more frequently, more prominently, and in a wider range of settings and activities than girls (i.e., Barner, 1999; Browne, 1998; Larson, 2001; Seiter, 1992; Signorielli, 1989; Sternglanz and Serbin, 1974). This constituted a symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978) of girls, who were omitted from or trivialized in a range of story lines, and condemned if they failed to meet a very narrow range of standards for acceptable female behavior and appearance.

In the 1990s, pro-girl rhetoric gained traction in U.S. culture and many other countries, lessening girls' symbolic annihilation and the perpetual reinscription of restrictive female sex roles. Children's television networks began airing shows internationally about complex, interesting female protagonists, such as Nickelodeon's *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991–1994), *The Wild Thornberrys* (1998–2004), and *As Told by Ginger* (2000–2009). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2004) considered these programs to be girl power texts in which “empowerment and agency define[d] girls more than helplessness and dependency” (p. 136). This was the opposite of much prior children's television programming. Banet-Weiser (2004) noted that despite this

progress, these girl power shows have been criticized as commercial texts devoid of real political engagement (p. 137)—but she argued that they nonetheless “provide[d] a different cultural script for both girl and boy audience members, a script that challenge[d] conventional narratives and images about what girls are and who they should be” (pp. 135–136).

This positive change also extended into action-adventure television cartoons—a remarkable improvement, given that in this genre, story lines consistently had trivialized or omitted girls altogether. As Ellen Seiter (1992) observed, in the 1970s, action-adventure children’s television included girls on only a token level, and by the early 1990s, girls were typically excluded altogether. Yet in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many action-adventure cartoons featured girls and teams of heroic girls who would always save the world—fists first, if necessary, harnessing and owning their anger. In programs like Cartoon Network’s *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998–2005), *Totally Spies* (2001–2007) and Disney’s *Kim Possible* (2002–2007), girls were superheroes in their own rights—smart, strong, and savvy. Their acts of strength and bravery were the rule, not the exception, in their behavior. It was an unprecedented televisual representation.

This book documents how girl hero cartoons emerged and contributed to cultural discourse about pre-teen girls. It begins by situating girl hero cartoons within other major discourses about girlhood. Chapter One considers studies by the American Association of University Women, books by popular authors such as Mary Pipher and Peggy Orenstein, and the riot grrrls’ creative output, including the concept of girl power—as well as their media reception. Chapter Two explores the mainstreaming of girl power effected by the Spice Girls and what it came to mean in their hands, while Chapter Three describes how young feminists who grew up with the Spice Girls recollect receiving the band’s discourses on girlhood. Through retrospective interviews, I consider whether and how they feel the Spice Girls’ mainstreaming of girl power influenced them and informed their feminist identities.

Chapter Four builds upon the first three chapters by unpacking the stories girl hero cartoons have told, examining their discourses about girlhood and empowerment. Then, Chapter Five describes the research methodologies used for the studies described in Chapters Six through through Nine. These latter chapters explore what the girl hero cartoon’s discourse on girl power meant to pre-adolescent girls in the cartoons’ target audience while the cartoons were popular. In the research that underpins these chapters, I viewed and discussed girl hero cartoons with real girls. We explored what it meant to grow up with girl power, contradictions and all. Through these conversations, I learned how girls have negotiated the cartoons’

representations of sexism, strength, intelligence, identity, femininity, and race, and how they related these readings to their everyday lives. Chapter Nine moves beyond the girl hero cartoons to investigate other modes of girl power preferred by the African-American girls in my study. It focuses especially on the Bratz brand of diverse dolls that many of the girls loved—and used in surprising ways. Thus, *Growing up with Girl Power* both analyzes discourses on girlhood and reveals how real girls have drawn upon girl power discourse while negotiating pre-adolescent identities.

Although *Growing up with Girl Power* examines girl power within a U.S. context, it may be read in relation to the girl power literature previously published in other nations. The Spice Girls were a British pop music act who gained global popularity, making girl power a truly international phenomenon. As such, scholars beyond the U.S. have published numerous internationally situated interrogations of the Spice Girls and other girl power vehicles. These publications include the works of Catherine Driscoll, Anita Harris, Dafna Lemish, Valerie Walkerdine, and Rebecca Willett, among others. *Growing up with Girl Power* provides a perspective on girl power's reception by U.S. girls that both informs and is informed by studies in Australia, Canada, Israel, the United Kingdom, and other nations.

This book also has deeper implications beyond our understanding of girl power alone. Its overarching goals are to enhance our understanding of girls as audience members and of girls' identity development processes. How do girls negotiate the media's representations of girls, and how are these negotiations influenced by their broader cultural context? How do girls then inform their self-images and identity construction through the consumption of these representations and related social influences? Engaging with feminist theory and cultural studies scholarship, *Growing up with Girl Power* offers answers to these questions.