

11-2010

## Perfect Little Feminists? Young Girls in the US Interpret Gender, Violence, and Friendship in Cartoons

Spring-Serenity Duvall

University of South Carolina - Aiken, springd@usca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/aiken\\_communications\\_facpub](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/aiken_communications_facpub)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Publication Info

Postprint version. Published in *Journal of Children and Media*, Volume 4, Issue 4, 2010, pages 402-417.  
Duvall, S. (2010). Perfect little feminists? Young girls in the US interpret gender, violence, and friendship in cartoons. *Journal of Children and Media*, 4(4), 402-417.

© Journal of Children and Media, 2010, Taylor and Francis.

*This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in The Journal of Children and Media, 2010, © Taylor & Francis, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/17482798.2010.510007>*

DOI:10.1080/17482798.2010.510007

This Article is brought to you by the Communication Department at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

Perfect little feminists?:  
Young girls in the U.S. interpret gender, violence, and friendship in cartoons

Abstract

Girls' studies has emerged as a dynamic area of scholarship that examines the cultural construction of girlhood, the role that girls play in society, their identity formation, and their representation in media. This paper extends previous research by interviewing young girls about their interactions with each other as they view and interpret animated cartoons. Expanding claims that Girl Power programs such as *The Powerpuff Girls* empower viewers, I also discuss the role of third wave, commodity, and post feminism in influencing girls' expectations of gender equality even as they embrace gender role differences. In discussing the importance of researchers engaging with young girls, I also address some of the challenges that accompany (and perhaps discourage) conducting audiences studies with young people.

Keywords

Cartoons, Girls, Girls' studies, Powerpuff Girls, SpongeBob SquarePants, Samurai Jack, Violence

Spring-Serenity Duvall

Indiana University

School of Journalism

704 E. Maxwell Lane

Bloomington, IN 47401

812-333-7141

ssduvall@indiana.edu

**Spring-Serenity Duvall** is a doctoral candidate in the Indiana University School of Journalism with a minor in Gender Studies. Her dissertation examines constructions of gender, consumerism, religion and power in media coverage of transnational celebrity activism. She has presented research at annual conferences of the International Communication Association, the Association of Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication (USA), the Political Studies Association (UK), and the National Communication Association (USA).

Following the overwhelming success of the British girl-band Spice Girls, the 1990s were characterized by Girl Powered media and marketing. Driven in part by the cultural industries' realization that girls were a lucrative niche-market, the boom in girl-centric entertainment media and merchandise in the 1990s and early 2000s coincided with a renewed focus in public and academic discourse on "girls in crisis" (Garbarino 2006; Gonick, 2003; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007; Pipher, 1994; Winter, 1997). Foremost in one strand of research was a concern with the pervasive negative stereotypes of women and girls in media and the detrimental effect of media on girls' self esteem (Christian-Smith, 1988; Peirce, 1993). There also emerged analyses of potential empowerment as girls were recognized as active media consumers and producers rather than as passive victims of the cultural industries (Clark, 2005; Durham, 1999a; Kearney, 2003; Mazzarella, 2005; Wald, 1998). Grounded in cultural theory (McRobbie, 1991) and psychology (Gilligan, 1982), the contemporary girls' studies project has provided insight into girls negotiating identity in diasporas (Durham, 2004), representations of tough girls in violent fantasy and science fiction media (Inness, 2004), the constructions of girlhood and "good girl" stereotypes (Griffin, 2004; Inness, 2007), the emergence of complex female cartoon characters (Banet-Weiser, 2004; Hains, 2004, 2007, 2008), issues of sexuality (Gleeson & Frith, 2004), consumerism (Harris, 2004; Schor, 2004) and the role and definition of feminism for younger generations (Eisenhauer, 2004; Jowett, 2004).

However, one limitation of girls' studies continues to be its relative lack of attention to girls' personal accounts of their experiences with media, despite Mazzarella and Pecora's recognition of "the need to shift the focus toward studying how girls

negotiate these artifacts and messages, and more importantly, to listen to the voices of girls themselves instead of relying on adult academicians' deconstruction of media content" (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007, p. 112). When conducted, audience studies have revealed the importance role that media plays in the lives and identities of young girls (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002; Currie, 1999; Driscoll, 1999; Durham, 1999b; Lemish, 1998; Mayer, 2001; Reinharz, 1992). Researchers have even analyzed internet message board content as a window into girls' online identity performances (Vickery 2009). My study contributes to the dynamic, yet still underdeveloped area of ethnographic girls' studies by interviewing young girls about their experiences with animated cartoons and their opinions about gender and violence.

*The Powerpuff Girls (PPG)* first aired on Cartoon Network in 1998 and featured three aggressive, super-powered young sisters as lead characters in a weekly half-hour television program. *PPG* joined the pantheon of Girl Power adult-targeted films and television programs that flooded media outlets in the early- to mid-1990s (Brown, 2004; Early & Kennedy, 2003; Ono, 2000). *PPG* quickly evolved into a multi-media franchise that sparked a new genre of Girl Power cartoon programming including *Totally Spies* and *My Life as a Teenage Robot* (Banet-Weiser, 2004; Hains, 2004, 2007, 2008). Despite the pop cultural influence of *PPG* and the myriad representations of gender-bending, feminism and girl power in the program, *PPG* creator Craig McCracken claims in an interview with feminist magazine *Bust* that he did not intentionally create a program that dealt openly with gender roles because "[f]ive-year-old kids don't really know about gender roles, or sex, or anything. They're just little kids dealing with the same dumb things, whether they are boys or girls. And that's how we approach the show. A lot of

people respond to it as, ‘Oh you really understand little girls.’ But I think I just know kids” (Fried, 2002, p. 48). In this brief statement, McCracken professes a belief that young girls are not able to understand gender roles or sex, and furthermore are not even concerned with such issues. McCracken’s comments may be interpreted as simply part of a larger rhetorical framework in which media industry insiders eschew gender politics and claim that children’s media is “just” entertainment. However, the appearance of his remarks in a feminist publication during an interview in which he discusses his own perspectives on gender, his experiences being raised by his mothers and sister, and his personal definition of feminism is significant. The placement and tone of the interview inspired me to make a closer examination of *PPG* through a textual analysis of representations of gender, violence, and friendship in the program (O’Neal, 2003).

Findings from my textual analysis and from other studies of *PPG* form the foundation of this qualitative audience study in which I explore whether and how young girls *do* “know about gender roles” and how they might apply their knowledge to interpret *PPG* and other cartoon programs. I discuss research that situates the program as a third wave feminist text and then argue for the importance of considering young girls’ opinions as they view *PPG* in the context of their lived experiences and broader media consumption. I also address some of the challenges that accompany (and perhaps discourage) conducting audiences studies with young people. I begin, however, by briefly examining the feminist theory and girls’ studies that inform analyses of *PPG* and my own interviews with young girls.

Third Wave, Commodity, and Post Feminisms: Locating *The Powerpuff Girls*

Entering public consciousness in the early 1990s, third wave feminism is most commonly associated with women who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s (Gilley, 2005; Walker, 1992). Third wave feminism has roots in radical efforts by lesbians and women of color to push United States feminisms to take greater account of racism, classism, and sexuality. It also represents a break from the second wave because “third wavers appear gleefully brazen brimming with optimism and intoxicated by their own potential” as they take gender equality for granted and focus on self-fulfillment and the power to make personal choices rather than collective action (Shugart, 2001, p. 133; See also: Gillis, Howie, & Munford, 2004; Henry, 2004; Hogeland, 2001). While some scholars have criticized third wavers as individualistic to a fault, the movement arises in part from the “postmodern deconstruction of the unified self” that encourages multiplicity of identity (Gilley, 2005, p. 189; Heywood & Drake, 1997). Heywood and Drake point out that a third wave performance of multi-faceted identities arises from young feminists being “shaped by struggles between various feminisms as well as by cultural backlash against feminism and activism,” (1997, p. 2). Thus, third wavers embrace a pluralism not only of race, class, and political perspectives, but also of sexuality, clothing styles, and behaviors, be they feminine, masculine, or neither. The terms “Girl Power” and “Powerpuff Girls” are themselves contradictory, signifying both strength and innocence as third wave pop culture embraces the term “girl” that previous generations of feminists shunned as derogatory (Hains, 2004).

Third wave feminism often embraces purchasing power as an expression of personal and political power, but Goldman, Heath and Smith (1991) rightly point out that buying into consumer identities that have been “fragmented and flattened” by capitalist corporations reinforces stereotypes and inequality instead of bolstering any significant social change. In the case of feminist movements, market-place connotations of femininity and feminism as simply two more choices that do not have political significance is “turning the opposition between these philosophical worldviews into an array of commodity choices” (Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991, p. 348). Commodity feminism shows that the advertising campaigns and corporations that profit from the sale of tough chick images are defining the very meaning of “feminist”.

The common tendency of third wave and commodity feminism to foreground consumerism and individualism while marginalizing collective action, as well as the strong backlashes against feminisms, feed concerns that younger generations are coming of age in a postfeminist cultural and political era. Postfeminism is an active “revision of feminism that encourages women’s private, consumer lifestyles rather than cultivating a desire for public life and political activism” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 2). By producing images of seemingly empowered, yet politically disengaged women such as Ally McBeal [*Ally McBeal*] (McKenna, 2002) and Carrie Bradshaw [*Sex and the City*] (Arthurs, 2003) media texts contribute to an appearance of gender equality that renders feminism irrelevant and disguises material inequalities that continue to exist in public and private spaces. The prevalence of postfeminism in media may contribute to the cultural and personal conditions in which young girls grow and develop (or not) their feminist philosophies. As Heywood and Drake point out in discussing the evolution of third wave

feminism, it is vital that we understand the political and gendered context in which young girls come of age, including the backlashes against feminism that may cause young girls to reject the label or to claim its irrelevance.

Researchers have found that *PPG* is intrinsically tied to third wave, commodity, and post feminisms. Following the overall tendency of girls' studies to focus on content, several studies of *PPG* have analyzed its position as a third wave text (Hains, 2004, 2007, 2008), as an example of commodity feminism (Fuqua, 2002), and as empowering for young girls (Hopkins, 2002; Potts, 2001). As a media franchise that thrives on sales of apparel and other products, the mass marketing of products designed to promote *PPG* could serve to commodify the image of a strong, independent girl and diminish the otherwise empowering messages in the program (Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991). Fuqua (2002) traces the multimedia and business practices of *The Powerpuff Girls* and concludes, "... the texts of *The Powerpuff Girls* represent a contradictory view of girl-power" (p. 217). The result, for young consumers, is that the enjoyment of a television program that supposedly promotes empowerment for young girls could become inseparable from the pleasure of consuming related goods (Fuqua, 2002; Schor, 2004).

In an analysis of audience response to *PPG*, Potts (2001) notes that an overwhelming number of viewers (and parents of young viewers) identified *PPG* as unequivocally empowering for young girls and enjoyable for adults. Potts also argues that the program facilitates "a powerful equality among male and female children that accentuates the things children have in common –such as their fragility and susceptibility to danger – rather than what separates them" (p. 7). Pott's (2001) study parallels my own by exploring audience responses to *PPG*, yet even though Potts (2001) writes that she

interviewed some children for her study, there are no quotes attributed to a child or specific reference to a child's response in her entire article. My goal is to elevate young girls' voices-without relying on parental interpretations alone to make arguments about what girls believe or enjoy.

In three analyses that take a nuanced view of the potential for empowerment in *PPG*, Rebecca Hains addresses the empowering and problematic aspects of the program (2004). *PPG* is set in the fictional City of Townsville; the title characters are three young sisters who were scientifically created when Professor Utonium mixed "sugar, spice, and everything nice" to create the "perfect little girls." During the process, Chemical X accidentally spilled into the formula and Blossom, Buttercup and Bubbles gained superpowers. Now the kindergartners attend Pokey Oaks Elementary School and also "fight crime and the forces of evil, all before bedtime." Hains argues, "from a feminist standpoint, *PPG*'s origin is more troubling, for these perfect and powerful girls who embody feminist ideals and fantasies are products of an error" (Hains, 2004, p. 16). In addition to undermining feminism with the girls' creation myth, the program also mocks second wave feminism in

dialogue that clarifies *PPG*'s ideological stance: Girl power does not seek to overthrow patriarchal institutions, view women as victims, or hate men. Rather, girl power supports the conservative stance that men and women are equal, for females are already strong and empowered. (Hains, 2004, p. 17).

Hains' emphasis on the contradictory and ambiguous nature of *PPG* highlights the need to discuss the program with young viewers in order to better understand their interpretations of the program.

While textual analyses have provided invaluable insight into *PPG*, my study employs interviews to explore how young girls interpret animated media, what kinds of characters they embrace, and how their viewing experiences fit into their everyday lives. It is worthwhile to interview young girls precisely because girls' studies show they serve as a lightning rod for public and academic debate. Just as women and minorities have historically been constructed passive subjects in popular culture, children's agency has also been limited by powerful adults who control media production, marketing, and academic inquiry (Parameswaran, 2003). Children are a marginalized group, as they are commonly denied a voice in much of society and are often the objects of research that obscures their voices and opinions. One might argue that children exercise their agency through consumerism, yet this only reinforces the need for scholars to study children's media practices. The purpose of this study is to contribute to ongoing research in girls' studies that privileges girls' voices and personal interpretations of media content.

### Methods

A number of researchers have recognized the importance of interviewing young people about their media consumption in order to break the cycle of marginalization (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002; Mayer, 2001; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007; Reinharz, 1992). Interviews allow us to more fully engage with young girls as "active negotiators and producers of culture rather than simple consumers" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 423). By interviewing instead of surveying or testing children, their thoughts and opinions can inform research and balance the opinions of adult researcher (Reinharz, 1992). I follow Alzuru-Acosta and Kreshel (2002) by taking the stance that my study participants are the experts on the topic of their own experiences and focus on understanding their unique

perspectives. When using focus groups the relationship between the researcher and young participants is crucial to the integrity of the research process (Mayer, 2001). I was able to mimic Mayer's (2001) methods to build a measure of rapport between my participants and myself by spending time getting to know them at the beginning of the interviews and by allowing them to guide the course of our conversations.

I met with six groups of girls ages 6 to 12 years old for a total of 28 participants, for approximately one and one half hour each from summer of 2004 to spring of 2005. This number of participants allowed for ample discovery of issues and themes that emerged, in part because most of the girls were from the same community and the same school system. As Morgan points out, "the more homogeneous your groups are in terms of background and role-based perspectives, the fewer you need" (Morgan 1988, p. 42). The participants in my focus groups were from primarily upper- to middle-class families and most attended private Christian schools. Two girls attended an alternative private school and three attended public school. All of the girls were Caucasian except for one African-American girl and one Asian girl. The lack of racial diversity is a limitation of this study and highlights the challenge in locating a diverse group of children to interview. Although a small homogenous group does not allow for broad generalizations, it is useful for drawing conclusions based on the girls' commonalities.

Using the snowballing method, I met with the four groups arranged through acquaintances in the homes of four of the participants. I then arranged a focus group of Boys and Girls Club members, one group of students from a private alternative school. The composition of the groups, made up of sisters and friends, was ideal, as the girls were already acquainted and comfortable with each other. The girls tended to be quite

sociable and willing to talk, but as an ice-breaker I began each interview by asking them to help test my tape recorder: I pushed “record” and asked them to tell me jokes, then rewound the tape and let them listen to their own voices. This never failed to elicit giggles and to make them more at ease with the tape recorder and with me.

In addition to building rapport, another challenge was leading the focus groups in such a way that all of the girls were able to participate fully. When interviewing young people, Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002) advocate structured questioning in order to avoid reinforcing age-related power relationships. I made every effort during the interviews to question younger girls first so their opinions would be less influenced by the older participants. In reporting these interviews, I also try to strike a balance between quoting their answers and summarizing overall reactions that may have been mostly non-verbal or jumbled voices of girls talking over each other in a way that would make incoherent quotes.

The popular and academic discourse surrounding the PPG guides this study, but I also chose to engage with girls beyond their experience of one program. The clips I showed during the interviews were chosen after textual analyses of *PPG* and other cartoons revealed the segments to be likely catalysts for conversation about violence and gender dynamics (O’Neal, 2003; Duvall, 2008). The girls watched a segment of *PPG*, a segment of *Sponge Bob SquarePants*, and (if time allowed) a segment of *Samurai Jack* in order to stimulate conversation. I chose all three programs with the goal of presenting animated shows that were distinctly different from each other, yet were individually complex enough to prompt discussion. My intention was not to ask the girls I interviewed simply to compare and contrast the clips I showed, but rather to show them an assortment

of content in order to inspire responses on a variety of topics, including gender roles and violence, and to allow their responses to guide our conversation.

First, the girls viewed a segment of *PPG* that contained an example of Blossom, Buttercup and Bubbles combining aggressive super-power tactics with feminine wiles to defeat their opponents, The Rowdy-Ruff Boys. In the now infamous “Rowdy Ruff Boys” episode (Hains, 2004), arch villain Mojo Jojo creates male counterparts to *The Powerpuff Girls* who begin fighting with the girls and are surprised to find that the girls resist. The boys want to know why the girls are not crying and the sisters respond that it takes a lot more than “a few cheap shots” to make them cry. The girls eventually outsmart the boys and win by doing the one thing the girls are told that boys can’t stand; batting their eyes at the boys and smiling sweetly, each girl kisses one boy’s cheek, with the tomboy Buttercup wincing all the while. The girls’ elaborate performance of niceness causes the boys to explode and the girls have once again saved their town.

By contrast, *SpongeBob SquarePants* is a humorous program about an undersea-dwelling sponge and his starfish best friend Patrick. *SpongeBob* emerged as a darling of Nickelodeon in 1999. The ambiguously gendered SpongeBob and Patrick have been the subject of popular and scholarly debate about the homosexual undertones to the program, which argue that SpongeBob and Patrick are coded as gay characters (Dennis, 2003). Although I did not address sexuality with the girls I interviewed, the strong contrast between *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *PPG* stimulated discussion about the lead characters’ friendship and a disagreement between the two.

The final clip that I was only able to show to three of the six focus groups due to time constraints was a graphic fight scene from the Cartoon Network original *Samurai*

*Jack*. First aired in 2001, *Samurai Jack* is both the most recent and the most violent cartoon I showed the girls. Following the same Japanese anime visual style as *PPG* but with a much darker tone, *Samurai Jack* narrates the tale of an adult warrior trapped in a time warp and fighting futuristic robots with his ancient magic sword. The level of graphic violence coupled with the on-going narrative of Jack acting on the “side of righteousness” made for interesting discussions of gendered violence.

My analysis of the interviews was ongoing, which allowed me to see the girls’ reactions and make adjustments in subsequent interviews. I took note of emerging themes as the interviews progressed, but conducted detailed analysis at the conclusion of the study. Because a central purpose of this audience study was to examine violence and gender, I first read the transcripts of my interviews and noted common threads of conversation addressing those two topics. I then reread each transcript several times to identify other unexpected themes (such as discussions of age) that were evident in the conversations but that I had not intentionally tried to elicit. I also listened to each tape and studied my notes on the girls’ body language, facial expressions, reactions, and interactions. Finally, I compiled the quotes that most represented each theme and assigned pseudonyms to each girl for the purposes of reporting findings.

#### Female friendships: The function of viewing cartoons in groups

At the beginning of each interview, I asked the girls questions about their family and school lives, as well as their opinions about boys, friends, and media in general, and their viewing habits. Of particular note was that the girls told me their daily cartoon viewing rarely took place in solitude. Durham (1999) argues that viewing media in groups of female friends and discussing media culture with other girls helps to balance

negative media messages because young viewers have a more difficult time resisting negative gender representations in isolation.

As I interviewed groups of friends and sisters I was able to observe the kind of setting in which the girls typically watched afternoon cartoons. Also, the girls tended to be so comfortable with each other that they would frequently interrupt or finish each other's sentences, thus creating lively discussions. Margaret (six-years-old), who attends a local private school, said she always watches cartoons after school with "my sister and my friends when they come over." Katy (twelve-years-old) said that she and her sister, April (nine-years-old) watch cartoons "sometimes alone, sometimes together, or sometimes people come over or come and go." By regularly viewing cartoons with female friends and siblings, the girls seem to be benefiting from the social female bonds that Durham (1999a) advocates: they have learned to be outspoken about their preferences and ideas. After observing the girls talking directly to each other, I also believe that interviewing organically existing groups of friends and sisters may have mitigated the possibility that the girls could simply tell me what they thought I wanted to hear.

#### Building barriers: Age and gender as determinants of what is "cool"

One interesting discovery that emerged during the focus groups came not from my questions, but from the spontaneous physical and verbal reactions of participants. When the girls learned which cartoon clips we would be watching, their reactions ranged from disappointment to elation. In most cases, they were disappointed with the choice of *Powerpuff Girls*, thrilled with the choice of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and utterly lukewarm towards *Samurai Jack*. "I'm crazy about SpongeBob!" Ella (six-years-old)

exclaimed and her friend Jane (seven-years-old) agreed that SpongeBob is “funny” like their other favorite, *Looney Tunes*. Ella, her sister Mandy (eleven-years-old) and friend Jane (seven-years-old) in particular continued to discuss their favorite SpongeBob in great detail.

“I like SpongeBob because he does crazy stuff. Like, he goes, he thinks he’s going on the moon but the rocket goes past the moon and back down to the ground.” (Ella).

“Yeah and they think everybody in bikini bottom is, like, an alien - ” (Mandy)

“ - and, and then they just capture up and they capture Stanley - ” (Ella)

- and in one of the cartoons he rips his pants!” (Jane)

Many of the girls would literally plead to watch the *SpongeBob* clip first, which we usually did because I had no strong reason to show the clips in a specific order and found that letting them determine the direction of the interviews to some extent made them more comfortable and eager to talk than if I had tried to exert control. The girls’ positive response to *SpongeBob* supports previous research establishing that young girls tend to prefer humorous, non-violent cartoons (Cantor & Nathanson, 1997). In comparing *SB* and *PPG* the girls seemed most concerned with watching what they thought was “cool.” *PPG* had been on air for almost a decade when these interviews took place, so there had been ample time for the program to be perceived by some as being outdated. Many of the participants in my focus groups mentioned that they “used to watch” *PPG*, but don’t anymore because they have outgrown the program.

“We used to watch that [PPG] all the time. That was our favorite show a while back.” (Katy, twelve-years-old)

“Why did you stop watching?” (Interviewer)

“Too kiddish,” (April, nine-years-old, Katy’s sister)

Consumption of media that is considered age appropriate and “cool” becomes a key component of defining identity in terms of age (Schultze, et al., 1991). When rejecting *PPG* as passé, some did do so because of violence, as I will discuss below, but the girls overwhelmingly disdained the show as outdated and did not mind violence in more current shows that featured girl fighters.

“It’s [*Totally Spies* is] so cool - because they have, like, laser lipstick and there’re like special spy glasses that they have - they’re really cool,” (Mandy, eleven-years-old).

So, it was not primarily violence that caused many of the girls to reject *PPG*, but disdain for media that was not considered fresh and cool. Mandy also showed a continuation of her preference for shows like *All Grown Up!* and *Totally Spies* that featured characters to whom she felt she could relate. She said she didn’t like *PPG* “because they’re just, sort of, *fake*, like they were made up and they’re just sort of fake and that can’t really happen.”

Youth culture has always been delineated in opposition to mainstream “grown-up” culture (adults in general but parents in particular) as well as what is considered “too young” to be cool by those in the know (Schultze, et al., 1991). But, girls as young as six were already demarcating media based on their assessments of which programs were grown-up enough for their viewing tastes. By the time the girls were six, and especially eleven and twelve years old, many had decided that the kindergarten Blossom, Buttercup, and Bubbles were made for “little girls” to enjoy and not suited to their more mature

sensibilities. One reason for dismissing certain programs may also be that many of the girls I interviewed were living and viewing with older sisters and mimicking the older behaviors and tastes that they saw every day. The girls' acute awareness of age as an influence on their media interpretations implies that the pressure to seem "grown-up" and to leave behind childish things is compelling in their lives. The girls admitted enjoying *PPG* when they were younger, but as they grew older and new fads entered their awareness, *PPG* was categorized as appropriate only for younger audiences, but it still remained more appealing than programs such as *Samurai Jack* that featured more masculine violence.

#### Tough girls and posturing boys: Interpreting gender and violence

While the girls demonstrated consensus in segmenting cartoons based on age-appropriateness, they were quite divided on how to assign gender labels to programs when I asked them about boys' and girls' preferences for programs. Some girls spoke up immediately to say that certain programs are viewed exclusively by one gender, but others explained that there was a great deal of variation. The girls who viewed *Samurai Jack* were convinced that only boys would watch such a show. Jillian (eight-years-old) said *Samurai Jack* was a "boy's show" because "Samurai Jack is a boy. And there's lots of fighting and guns and all that stuff. And boys like fighting and girls don't." Not only did the girls believe that boys would prefer violent cartoons, but they thought boys would like the violence because they were more prone to violent behavior than girls. Britney (eight-years-old) said: "Samurai Jack is nothing but boy stuff ... a lot of violence like kill, kill, like boys do." Some of the girls also suggested that boys would prefer *Toy Story* and *Batman*,

“Because they’re superheroes and because they’re boys!” (Jane, seven-years-old)

“And they do a lot of fighting” (Ella, six-years-old)

Even though convinced that violence appeals to boys more than girls, there were caveats to their general claim that girls did not like violence. The girls argued that the “girl shows” are different from “boy shows,” even when both contained fighting:

... because the *Totally Spies* are all girls, but they fight, like, supervillains and all that stuff – and they don’t fight as harsh as boys do. They [girls] usually don’t have guns, they just have cool super gadgets and all that stuff (Mandy, eleven-years-old).

Mandy’s revealing distinction between the violence in *PPG* and *Totally Spies* as being fundamentally different from *Samurai Jack* parallels the opinions of the girls who identified that feminine violence (i.e. that which was performed by girls and had a less harsh/graphic quality than masculine violence) was more appealing than masculine violence. They did not reject violent programs outright, but were quick to describe the quality of violence (and therefore programming) that appealed to girls rather than boys. While the girls did think that boys might enjoy *PPG*, they thought that boys would *only* watch because “they might like the fighting” (Sara, eight-years-old) whereas girls would watch fighting “because it’s girls doing the fighting” (April, nine-years-old) and because “fighting isn’t the main thing, the main thing is it’s about girls” (Katy, April’s twelve-year-old sister).

The girls I interviewed differentiated between masculine and feminine violence in cartoons and generally preferred programs that contained very little violence, or violence that was performed by female characters for pro-social purposes. Jade (eight-years-old)

said that fighting in *PPG* was “good” because the bad guys “don’t get hurt” but are only put in jail, while a seven-year-old said that there is “not good fighting in boy’s cartoons” because boy’s cartoons were “gory” and had “killing.” Still, some of the girls rejected the violence in *PPG* and Anna (six-years-old) said she didn’t like *PPG* because “they kill people.”

Many of the girls also recognized justifiable violence. Kim (seven-years-old) said that acceptable violence was “make-believe...nobody gets hurt, it’s just a cartoon,” and Jessica (nine-years-old) said cartoon violence is acceptable “because it’s fake.” While many of the girls agreed that starting a fight was wrong, they saw no problem with fighting in order to defend themselves from harm:

“If no one else was there, if someone was starting to hurt you, then you should start fighting,” (Ella, six-year-old).

“... ‘cause they have to fight, they have to fight bad guys on that show,” (Mandy, eleven-years-old).

“Otherwise the city would be in trouble and other people would die” (Jane, seven-years-old).

Anna, (six-years-old) said that it was “okay” for *PPG* to fight and April (nine-years-old) also said fighting was acceptable “because there are bad guys around” and “they were trying to save their town.” The girls argued that it was right for Blossom, Buttercup and Bubbles to fight out of self-defense and a duty towards their community.

The ways in which the girls believed fights should be resolved were also influenced by their ability to recognize the difference between fighting bad guys or not. In the screened clip of *SpongeBob* the title character and his best friend Patrick argue and

then make-up by apologizing to each other and working together in a moment of crisis. Katy (twelve-years-old) said that “they weren’t really fighting” because Patrick and SpongeBob had not come to physical blows and Mandy (eleven-years-old) also said that fighting on *SB* was “just for fun,” even when characters were hurt. Most of the girls believed that apologizing and making up was the best way to resolve a fight. April and Katy did not think that the two characters should be fighting at all, based on their friendship.

“They shouldn’t be fighting because they’re best friends” (April, nine-years-old)

“And they’re fighting over something that’s stupid” (Katy, twelve-years-old)

Some girls believed that people should take advantage of alternative resolutions before engaging in violence. In the *Samurai Jack* clip, where a fight broke out between Jack and a machine gun-wielding Scottish warrior because both refused to let the other pass, the girls agreed that they “could have scooted aside” to avoid a fight (Gaby, eight-years-old). Although this view may seem simplistic, the girls did not approve of violence simply for the sake of entertainment and instead were quick to point out alternatives to violence. But, when it came to bad guys, the girls saw no need to play nice “because they’re mean,” (Jane, seven-years-old). Ella (six-years-old) said she would never apologize to bad guys, but would “just stomp them.” During moments in the cartoon clips when a character was attacked outright by an enemy the girls thought that the heroines or heroes had no alternative but to fight back with violence.

As the interviews progressed the girls revealed an uneven awareness of gender differences. In a similar fashion as their initial responses to the choice of cartoons for the focus group, I was able to glean as much information about their interpretation of *PPG*

from their body language and their casual comments as I was from their verbal answers. Even after asking for *SpongeBob* over all other cartoons, the girls tended to react gleefully to the clip of *PPG* I showed, cheering along with the fighting, laughing at the jokes, and commenting throughout on the action.

The clip I showed from *PPG* featured a fight between *PPG* and the *Rowdy Ruff Boys*, boy superheroes designed to destroy the girls. In one group interview, the girls openly debated the beginning of the clip, where the Rowdy Ruff Boys attack Blossom, Buttercup, and Bubbles and act surprised that the girls do not cry:

“That’s [crying is] for babies!” (Jillian, eight-years-old)

“But you’re supposed to cry about things that are to cry about –” (Margaret, six-years-old)

“– like cuts –” (Jillian)

“– and sad things.” (Margaret)

In an interesting moment of conviction, the majority of girls I interviewed vigorously denied that being attacked by boys was a good reason for crying because the girls did not believe that boys were as tough as they pretended to be. Emma (six-years-old) said, “Boys wear their hats backwards just to look tough. They’re not that tough, they’re just kindergarteners,” and her friend Laura (six-years-old) replied, “I beat them up all the time.”

Even girls as young as six-years-old were strongly opinionated about their parity with boys and when asked whether girls or boys were stronger, Anna (six-years-old) replied, “I think they’re both tough.” The girls seemed to take gender equality for granted, but did show a strong tendency to articulate gender role differences. Specifically,

the girls stated that Blossom, Buttercup, and Bubbles were just as good as the Rowdy Ruff Boys. The end of the clip I showed, where *PPG* defeat the *Rowdy Ruff Boys* by kissing the boys coyly, produced embarrassed giggles; Dana (eight-years-old) said, “I think that’s sweet” and April (nine-years-old) also said it was a “nice” way to end the fight. The girls agreed that little boys are “scared of make-up and beautiful girls” and one of the girls entertained me (and their friends) with tales of pursuing boys around the playground with make-up, saying: “One day, I brought in some lip gloss and we were chasing the boys away with it and they were like, ahhh!” (Jillian, eight-years-old). Girls’ ability to articulate their beliefs in gender parity are not new, but are expressions of the increasingly common cultural presence and vocabulary of Girl Power that facilitates discussions of equality (Lemish, 1998).

The contradictions in the girls’ responses to violent content show that they view violence as justifiable in certain situations and that they prefer non-gory violence performed by female characters, but the key factor in whether girls labeled violent cartoons as enjoyable or rejected them as “for boys” was whether the girls could relate to the main characters. Jane (seven-years-old) said that girls like Blossom, Buttercup, and Bubble “because it’s the Powerpuff *Girls* not the Powerpuff *Boys*!” Many of the girls I interviewed agreed that *PPG* was more enjoyable “because there’s girls in it!” (Sara, eight-years-old) and because they “like girls more than boys” (Jade, eight-years-old). The girls enjoyed watching what the lead female characters did when not fighting. Cleaning their rooms, playing with each other and attending school were all routines in *PPG* and other cartoons with which the girls could relate. Mandy (eleven-years-old) said that she

enjoyed *All Grown Up!* because she saw the characters as having experiences similar to her own.

“It’s the *Rugrats* show where they’re all grown up and it’s stuff that, like, everybody goes through, like school and stuff.” (Mandy, eleven-years-old).

“Grown up, so your age?” (Interviewer)

“Yeah, my age, around eleven or twelve.”

The everyday, non-violent practices of certain characters helped make some programs more enjoyable than such as *Samurai Jack*, mostly because such shows were interpreted as undiluted violence with little other redeeming content.

#### Discussion

One of the most interesting aspects of watching and listening to young girls was seeing them simultaneously embrace both gender-role differences and gender equality. The girls appeared to have internalized certain gender norms that made it seem natural to them that boys fear lip-gloss, enjoy different cartoons, and generally behave differently. In contrast to adult interpretations of *PPG* that suggest the program fosters commonalities between boys and girls, the girls I spoke with firmly differentiated between the kinds of cartoons girls and boys enjoy, why the differences exist, and the gender-role differences they experienced in their everyday lives (Potts, 2001). But, despite these differences, the girls also believed strongly that they were as tough as boys and in no way inferior; quite the opposite as the girls derided boys’ perceived faults and did not believe that boys are as tough as they pretend to be.

While programs such as *PPG* may play some role in empowering girls, there are at least two other explanations for their expectation of gender equality even in the face of

perceived gender role differences. For one thing, these young girls are coming of age at a time when feminism has accomplished great change in the social fabric thus creating normative expectations of gender equality. According to Banet-Weiser, “Baumgardner and Richards (2000) argue that young women who make up the third wave are ‘born with feminism simply in the water,’ a kind of ‘political fluoride’ that protects against the ‘decay’ of earlier sexism and gender discrimination” (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p.122). We are still more likely to see ambiguous and contradictory media representations of female empowerment than unequivocally empowering ones, but programs like *PPG* certainly paint a relatively more progressive picture than media images of the past. And, like other Girl Power media from the last two decades, *PPG* may be “recruited as ideological support in everyday experience of gender inequality and prejudice” (Lemish, 1998). Thus, media may serve as a useful tool for girls as they navigate personal and societal gender expectations (Durham, 1999b and 2004).

Secondly, all the girls I interviewed were from in or near a relatively progressive town where gender equity seemed to be encouraged in schools as well as in the community events and activities in which the girls participated. A majority of the girls I interviewed also lived in households where one or both parents were college educated and most expressed progressive ideals that foster confidence and independence in their daughters. I must conclude that family and community life play a significant role in building these girls’ beliefs that they are every bit as good, if not better, than boys. Part of the characteristics of their family and community life includes the fact that the girls tend to view television together, so that strong female social bonds help girls negotiate media messages and find empowerment (Durham, 1999a). This holds both promise and

challenge, as there is potential for peer interactions to influence young girls either towards or away from feminism.

Research has shown that adults are the ones investing the *PPG* with progressive, empowering political meaning, while the girls I interviewed are more likely to enjoy the latest “cool” media phenomenon and not display overtly political tendencies (Potts, 2001). *PPG* and *SpongeBob* have been established as polysemous texts with mobility to travel through a variety of social arenas, so young girls are able to grasp certain aspects of the programs and fit those pieces into their own lives, while parents may recognize and reinforce empowering messages in *PPG*. I do argue that much of the responsibility for girls’ development must be attributed to their unmediated lives, but Girl Power has come to permeate the overall media landscape to such an extent that its ideals now seem natural to the young girls, who are immersed in representations of relative gender equity. It is possible that taking gender equality for granted is a sign of post-feminism, where the struggle for equality is assumed to be won and there is no need for further efforts. The young middle class girls that I interviewed seemed to expect gender equality, but with their ready acceptance of gender-role differences, the question remains: will the girls I interviewed, and indeed much of their generation, grow to embrace a third (or fourth?) wave feminist politics or will they develop a postfeminist perspective that views women as already equal to men and therefore not needing to struggle for gender equality?

Children’s relationship with media has long been the subject of survey and experimental research and while Girls’ studies research has made great strides in recent decades, there remains potential for continued research that engages with girls, privileges their voices, and investigates the ways in which they interpret and produce media as they

form identities and opinions. My paper contributes to the growing body of Girls' studies research while simultaneously highlighting opportunities for future audience research. While I chose a variety of cartoon clips to show during my interviews, a comparison of only girl-centered media could examine the ways in which girls interpret subtle differences in gender constructions. In addition, my interviews were relatively brief, could have benefited from greater diversity among the girls, and did not involve observing them outside of the focus groups. A future ethnographic study could include a variety of settings where girls and boys interact, as well as where children choose or produce media and engage in social or political action.

#### References cited

- Acosta-Alzuru, C. & Kreshel, P. J. (2002). "I'm and American Girl ... Whatever that means": Girls Consuming Pleasant Company's American Girl Identity. *Journal of Communication*, 52(1), 139-162.
- Arthurs, J. (2003). Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating postfeminist drama. *Feminist Media Studies*, 3(1), 83-99.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2004). Girls rule!: Gender, feminism, and Nickelodeon. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 21 (2), 119-139.
- Baumgardner, J. & Richards, A. (2003). The number one question about feminism. *Feminist Studies*, 29, 450.
- Brown, J. A. (2004). Gender, sexuality, and toughness: The bad girls of action film and comic books. In Sherrie A. Innes (Ed), *Action chicks: New images of tough women in popular culture* (47-74). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

- Cantor, J. and Nathanson, A. I. (1997). Predictors of children's interest in violent television programs. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 41 (2), 155-168.
- Christian-Smith, L. K. (1988). Romancing the girl: Adolescent romance novels and the construction of femininity. In L. G. Roman, L. K. Christian-Smith & E. Ellsworth (Eds.), *Becoming feminine: The politics of popular culture* (76–101). London: Falmer Press.
- Clark, L. S. (2005). The constant contact generation: Exploring teen friendship networks online. In S. R. Mazzarella (Ed.), *Girl wide web: Girls, the Internet, and the negotiation of identity* (203–221). New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Dennis, J. P. (2003). Signifying same-sex desire in television cartoons. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 31(3), 132-140.
- Durham, M. G. (1999a) Articulating adolescent girls' resistance to patriarchal discourse in popular media. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 22(2), 210-229.
- Durham, M. G. (1999b). Girls, media, and the negotiation of sexuality: A study of race, class, and gender in adolescent peer groups. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76, 193–216.
- Durham, M. G. (2004). Constructing the “new ethnicities”: Media, sexuality, the diaspora identity in the lives of Asian immigrant girls. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22(2), 210–229.
- Duvall, S.S. (2008). *Perfect Little Feminists? Young Girls Interpret Gender, Violence and Friendship in the Powerpuff Girls*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Chicago.

- Early, F. & Kennedy, K. (2003). *Athena's daughters: Television's new women warriors*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Eisenhauer, J. (2004). Mythic figures and lived identities: Locating the "girl" in feminist discourse. In Anita Harris (Ed.), *All About the Girl* (79-90). New York and London: Routledge.
- Fried, J. (2002). Puff Daddy: The man who gave birth to The Powerpuff Girls has great mojo. *Bust*, Spring (19), 50.
- Fuqua, J. Van (2002). What are those little girls made of?: The Powerpuff Girls and consumer culture. In Carole A. Stable and Mark Harrison (Eds.), *Prime time animation: Television animation and America Culture* (203-219). London: Routledge.
- Garbarino, J. (2006). *See Jane hit: Why girls are growing more violent and what we can do about it*. London: Penguin Press.
- Gilley, J. (2005). Writings of the third wave. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 44(3), 187-198.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gillis, S., Howie, G., & Munford, R. (2004). *Third wave feminism*. New York: Pelgrave MacMillan.
- Gleeson, K. & Frith, H. (2004). Pretty in pink: Young women presenting mature sexual identities. In Anita Harris (Ed.), *All About the Girl* (103-114). New York and London: Routledge.
- Goldman, R., Heath, D., Smith, S. (1991). Commodity feminism. *Critical Studies in*

- Mass Communication*, 8 (3), 333-351.
- Gonick, M. (2004). The “mean girl” crisis: Problematizing representations of girls’ friendships. *Feminism and Psychology*, 14(3), 395–400.
- Griffin, C. (2004). Good girls, bad girls: Anglocentrism and diversity in the constitution of contemporary girlhood. In Anita Harris (Ed.), *All About the Girl* (29-44). New York and London: Routledge.
- Hains, R. C. (2004). The problematics of reclaiming the girlish: The Powerpuff Girls and girl power. *Femspec*, 5(2), 1–39.
- Hains, R.C. (2007). “Pretty smart”: Subversive intelligence in girl power cartoons. In Sherrie A. Innes (Ed.), *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture* (65-84). New York: Palgrave.
- Hains, R.C. (2008). Power(puff) feminism: The Powerpuff Girls as a site of strength and collective action in the third wave. In Marian Meyers (Ed.), *Mediated women: Representations in popular culture*, 2nd ed. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Harris, A. (2004). *All about the girl: Culture, power, and identity*. London: Routledge.
- Henry, A. (2004). *Not my mother’s sister: generational conflict and third wave feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University press.
- Heywood, L. L. (2006). *The women’s movement today: An encyclopedia of third-wave feminism*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Heywood, L. L. & Drake, J. (1997). *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hogeland, L. M. (2001). Against generational thinking, or, some things that “third wave” feminism isn’t. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 24 (1), 107-121.

- Hollows, J. and Moseley, R. (2006). *Feminism in popular culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Hopkins, S. (2002). *Girl Heroes: The New Force in Popular Culture*. Australia: Pluto Press.
- Inness, S. A. (2004). *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Inness, S.A. (2007). *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave.
- Jowett, M. (2004). "I don't see feminists as you see feminists": Young women negotiating feminism in contemporary Britain. In Anita Harris (Ed.), *All About the Girl* (91-102). New York and London: Routledge.
- Kearney, M. C. (2003). Girls make movies. In K. Mallin & S. Pearce (Eds.), *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images, and Identities* (17-34). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Lemish, D. (1998). Spice Girls' talk: A case study in the development of gendered identity. In Inness, S.A. (Ed.), *Millennium girls: Today's girls around the world* (pp. 145-167). New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Mayer, V. (2001). When the Camera Won't Focus: Tensions in Media Ethnography. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1 (3), 307-322.
- Mazzarella, S. R. (2005). *Girl wide web: Girls, the Internet, and the negotiation of identity*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Mazzarella, S. R., & Pecora, N. (2007). Girls in crisis: Newspaper coverage of adolescent girls. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 31(1), 6-27.
- McKenna, S. E. (2002). The queer insistence of Ally McBeal: Lesbian chic, postfeminism, and lesbian reception. *The Communication review*, 5, 285-314.

McRobbie, A. (1991). *Feminism and youth culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*.

Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Mitchell, C. & Reid-Walsh, J. (2002). *Researching children's popular culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Morgan, D. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Par, CA: Sage.

Nathanson, A. I. (2001). Parent and child perspectives on the presence and meaning of parental television mediation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 45 (2), 201-220.

O'Neal, S.S. (2003) *Perfect Little Feminists: Resistance, Femininity and Violence in The Powerpuff Girls*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Kansas City.

Ono, K. A. (2000). To be a vampire on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: Race and ("other") socially marginalizing positions on horror TV. In Elyce Rae Helford (Ed.), *Fantasy girls: Gender in the new universe of science fiction and fantasy television* (163-187). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Ltd.

Parameswaran, R. (2003). Resuscitating Feminist Audience Studies: Revisiting the Politics of Representation and Resistance. In: A.N. Valdivia (Ed.), *A Companion to Media Studies*. Maine: Blackwell Publishing Limited. pp. 311-336.

Peirce, K. (1993). Socialization of teenage girls through teen-magazine fiction: The making of a new woman or an old lady? *Sex Roles*, 29, 59-68.

Pipher, M. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Potts, D. L. (2001). Channeling girl power: Positive female media images in "The

- Powerpuff Girls.” *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education*, 1(4), 1-8.
- Preston, E. and White, C. (2004). Commodifying kids: Branded identities and the selling of adspace on kids’ networks. *Communication Quarterly*, 52 (2), 115-128.
- Reinharz, S.. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schor, J. (2004). *Born to buy: The commercialized child and the new consumer culture*. New York: Scribner.
- Schultze, Q. J., Anker, R. M., Bratt, J. D., Romanowski, W. D., Worst J. W., Zuidervaart, L. (1991). *Dancing in the dark: Youth, popular culture, and the Electronic media*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Shugart, H. A., Waggoner, C. E., Hallstein, D. L. O. (2001). Mediating third-wave feminism: Appropriation as postmodern media practice. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 18 (2), 194-210.
- Vavrus, Mary Douglas. (2002). Domesticating patriarchy: Hegemonic masculinity and television's "Mr. Mom". *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 19 (3, September), 352-375.
- Vickery, J.R. (2009). “i HATE HATE HATE being single” and “why is getting a bf so hard for me?”: Reproducing heteronormative femininity on gURL.com. *Girlhood Studies*, 2(1), 40-53.
- Wald, G. (1998). Just a girl? Rock music, feminism, and the cultural construction of female youth. *Signs*, 23(3), 585–610.
- Walker, R. (1992). “Becoming the Third Wave,” *Ms.* 12 (Jan./Feb.), 41.

Westcott, T. (2002). Mommy, will you buy me that? *Worldscreen.com* (online magazine), October.

Winter, M. (1997). Teenage girls in jeopardy. *Human Ecology*, 25(3), 12–15.

Zack, N. (2005). *Inclusive feminism: A third wave theory of women's commonality*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.