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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Anti-feminist messages in American television programming for young girls

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Although 'girl power' has become a mainstream concept, some scholars have argued that we are in the midst of a media-generated backlash designed to undo the empowerment of girls and women. US popular culture targets young girls with anti-feminist messages, which undermine feminist inroads. To explore this issue, I conduct qualitative textual analysis of four television programs aimed at young girls. I find that much of this programming is anti-feminist.

Keywords: girls' studies; feminism; youth; televison media

From 2008 to 2011, there was a popular show on the Disney Channel in the US called *Suite Life on Deck*, aimed at an audience of preadolescent girls. On this program, teenagers attended high school on a cruise ship that traveled around the world. In one episode, their teacher, Miss Tutwiler, lectured about fairy-tales in preparation for their visit to Germany. Miss Tutwiler said, 'Before we read the fairy-tales, we need to understand the context of the patriarchal society in which they originated'. She made a time-line illustrating how women were systematically disenfranchised for hundreds of years. One by one, the kids fell asleep. With her back to the class, Miss Tutwiler explained: 'Now by the end of the eighteenth century, after years of women being treated like cattle, we finally saw the birth of feminism.' Meanwhile, the kids dreamed about the fairy-tales …

One girl dreamed that she was the queen in *Snow White*. She asked the magic mirror, 'Mirror, mirror in the woods, now who's *really* got the goods?' When the mirror answered, 'Snow White', the enraged queen summoned the hunter, telling him, 'I want you to find a girl.' The hunter groaned, 'You sound like my mother.' Although he was told to kill Snow White, the hunter secretly warned her to flee into the woods, where she stumbled upon the dwarves' slovenly cabin. The dwarves asked Snow White to stay to 'do a little cooking and cleaning'. She protested, 'What do I look like, the maid?' One dwarf held up a tiny French maid's costume and said, 'You will when you wear the uniform.' Another dwarf handed her a broom, and she began cleaning.

Throughout the episode, several students' dreams similarly revised other fairy-tales. Eventually Miss Tutwiler noticed her sleeping students: 'Well. I put my whole class to sleep.' She looked at her watch: 'That gives me 20 minutes to get a pedicure. My feet *are* getting kinda gnarly!' She stepped over her prone students and left.

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This episode began with the promise of a feminist critique of fairy-tales. On the surface, the kids' dreams *could* be interpreted as an extension of that critique, humorously highlighting the sexism inherent in the tales. At the same time, however, their dreams were riddled with decidedly non-feminist messages. The lecture on feminism literally put everyone to sleep. And even the ostensibly passionate Miss Tutwiler – rather than waking them – abandoned her efforts in favor of a pedicure. The messages about feminism, gender stereotypes, and sexuality were muddied. Programs like this one are broadcast in the US several times a day, every day, where they are consumed by millions of young girls.

Western girls today are supposedly growing up in a society where feminist progress is an everyday, taken-for-granted reality (Baumgardner and Richards 1999, 2004). Feminism has taught girls that they do not have to be docile, passive, and obedient, but can instead protest and act out. 'Misbehaving women' have helped shift the traditional gender order (Ulrich 2008), and new feminisms are developing to meet the changing lives of Western girls (Aapola *et al.* 2005).

But despite these inroads – or perhaps because of them – a media-generated backlash against 'girl power' has emerged. McRobbie (2004) has argued that the media discourage girls' misbehavior and encourage, instead, 'bad' behavior disguised as feminism. 'Bad' behavior is antisocial, selfish, and anti-feminist. Threatened by the changing gender order, 'post-feminist' media are distorting and undoing feminism. What do these distorted messages about feminism look like? How are they marketed to young girls – the future feminists of society?

In this paper, I analyze messages about gender, sexuality, and feminism that are made available to young girls through television programming on two major cable networks in the US. Through qualitative textual analysis of 45 episodes of four television series aimed at young girls, I find that the prevailing messages were anti-feminist. Despite the successes of feminist movement, there is evidence of the media backlash described by McRobbie (2004).

Young feminisms

Feminism takes myriad forms and is defined in various ways across time and place (Lorber 2009). At its heart, feminism problematizes inequality between men and women, boys and girls. Conventional wisdom associates feminism with adults rather than children. However, thanks to the development of the field of Girls' Studies, feminism has been targeted at and applied to children. According to Kearney (2009), Girls' Studies developed in response to two trends in the literature: researchers' treatment of boys' experiences as the standard for all kids; and Women's Studies' marginalization of girlhood in its attempt to separate women from girls. Girls' Studies re-centered girls'[1] experiences as worthy of study, revealing unique problems faced by girls and empowering them (see also Harris 2004).

Aapola *et al.* (2005) describe two new 'young feminisms' that emerged from this discourse on girls. First is 'girl power feminism', which eschews traditional femininity. It rejects the idea that 'proper girls' must be 'heterosexual, chaste, submissive, attentive to their "looks," family-oriented, professionally unambitious and compliant' (2005, p. 6). In contrast, the girl power image is heroic: 'feisty, sassy, attractive and assertive young women who are protagonists of TV shows, pop culture icons, and media idols' (p. 8). Girl power is a 'sassy, don't-mess-with-me adolescent spirit' (p. 28). These girls are sexual actors, neither objects nor victims (Thorpe 2008).

The second is 'third-wave feminism', or 'girly feminism'. Baumgardner and Richards (1999, p. 83) argue that third-wave feminists were 'born with feminism simply in the

water', which acted as an invisible 'political fluoride' protecting against the 'decay' of patriarchy. Feminism and its critics have always been part of these girls' lives (Baumgardner and Richards 2004). Many of these girls repudiate 'feminist' identity, even while espousing feminist rhetoric. They expect to be treated as equals to boys, despite the persistence of long-standing structural gender inequalities, such as the pay gap. They feel entitled to gender and sexual equity, without feeling compelled to take a stand.

Girls' Studies has spawned feminist analyses of contemporary girls' experiences and struggles, engendering some anxiety. For example, parents and teachers worry that girls are becoming too sexual too soon, mostly because of the media's hypersexualization of girlhood (Pipher 1994, Durham 2009, Levin and Kilbourne 2009). Others fear that girl power encourages girls to act 'like boys', leading them to adopt bullying and antisocial behaviors (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2004). Aapola *et al.* (2005) argue that confusion over girls' sexual empowerment has led people to conclude, erroneously, that society no longer needs feminism. McRobbie agrees:

> My argument is that 'postfeminism' actively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account in order to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, a spent force. (McRobbie 2004, p. 4)

Similarly, Ringrose (2007) conceptualizes post-feminism as 'part backlash, part cultural diffusion, part repressed anxiety over shifting gender orders' (p. 473). Girl power has threatened the dominant gender order, and post-feminism is a persuasive conservative orthodoxy (Bourdieu 1977) for repositioning girls into a subordinate status.

Children's television and the deployment of post-feminism

McRobbie (2004, 2008) sees the media as driving post-feminism, eroding feminist inroads. She writes that the media, '… a complex array of machinations … are perniciously effective in regard to the undoing of feminism' (2004, p. 3). She argues, 'The media have become the critical site for defining emergent sexual codes of conduct. They pass judgment and establish the rules of play' (2004, p. 7). The media have distorted girl power by valorizing 'emancipated female subjects' who glorify self-expression above political consciousness, thereby giving them 'license to behave badly' (2004, p. 9).

Kids easily absorb messages communicated through popular media, because 'young children are immersed in media-rich worlds' (Martin and Kazyak 2009, p. 317). McAllister and Giglio (2005) explain that the media have an especially great impact on children, who consume it while their identities are being formed (see also Corsaro 1997, Baker-Sperry 2007). Television media have been shown to impact children's early gendered behavior (Powell and Abels 2002). Indeed, the media might have a greater impact on children today than ever before, given the nearly ubiquitous nature of television programming directed at them in the US (McAllister and Giglio 2005). McAllister and Giglio explain that cable television has produced entire networks – 'kidnets' – aimed at children. Recognized for their buying potential, and for their influence over parents' buying practices, children have become an important audience for advertisers. Children's programming is broadcast 24 hours a day, every day, and the number of kids' channels grows each year. The two largest kidnets are Disney and Nickelodeon. On 14 March 2011, Disney channel ranked as the number one network in the US among tweens for the sixteenth week in a row, according to Tvbythenumbers.com. Even during the National Basketball Association playoffs in spring 2011, Disney ranked as the third most watched network during prime time, among all viewers. When rating all-day programming between

November 2010 and May 2011, Nickelodeon consistently topped the charts at about 2.1 million viewers, with Disney coming in second at 1.6 million. *Hannah Montana*'s final episode garnered a monster 6 + million viewers. Adults and children watch these networks. They also buy T-shirts, dolls, CDs, and DVDs. These shows are entire industries (McAllister and Giglio 2005).

Nickelodeon has several channels: Nick Jr, Nick, Teennick, Nick at Nite, and Nicktoons. Programming on these channels often overlaps. Similarly, Disney broadcasts on three channels: Disney Channel, Disney XD, and Playhouse Disney. Both Disney and Nickelodeon are broadcast in the US, Latin America, Central and Southeast Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, India, and Taiwan. Although I only examine US programming, programs of this sort are broadcast internationally.

To fill air time, episodes from a single series are rebroadcast five to six times daily, with a single episode often airing twice a day. Thus, the opportunity for children to consume the same program repeatedly is substantial. And, as Crawley *et al.* (1999) have shown, repeated viewing leads to greater comprehension by child viewers.

Much programming on both Disney and Nickelodeon is aimed specifically at young girls. Banet-Weiser (2004), in her analysis of Nickelodeon's programming, says that 'Nickelodeon is one of the most influential producers of children's programming and media in the U.S., and it attracts a large audience of pre-adolescent and adolescent girls' (2004, p. 120). She says that Nickelodeon 'produces girl culture', and I argue that Disney does as well.

Disney, which began making movies in the 1930s, has long been criticized for their heteronormative, misogynist, and racist messages (Bell *et al.* 1995, Best and Lowney 2009). Martin and Kazyak (2009), for example, have shown that even G-rated, animated Disney movies are riddled with heterosexualized imagery. Similarly, Martin's (2009) study of mothers shows that girls learn Disney's story-lines about princesses, falling in love, and marriage, and that mothers use these themes as they interpret their children's interactions and identities. Disney's animators continue to hypersexualize young female characters and demonize sexually mature females, despite criticism (Giroux 1999). Disney's enormous corporate reach and creative public relations department have protected their 'squeaky clean' image (Giroux 1999, Best and Lowney 2009).

A relative newcomer, 30-year-old Nickelodeon has been less thoroughly studied in regard to gendered messages. According to Banet-Weiser (2004), Nickelodeon has enjoyed critical acclaim for its pro-girl programming. In 2000, the Museums of Television and Radio in both New York and Los Angeles heralded Nickelodeon for 20 years of positive programming, for challenging gender stereotypes, and for featuring girls as protagonists. Banet-Weiser credits Nickelodeon with helping to make 'girl power' a mainstream concept: 'In the contemporary cultural climate, the empowerment of girls is now something that is more or less taken for granted by both children and parents, and has certainly been incorporated into commodity culture' (Banet-Weiser 2004, p. 120). Interestingly, *none* of Nickelodeon's pro-girl programming analyzed by Banet-Weiser is still on the air, even in re-runs. Girl power series, like *Wild Thornberries*, *As Told by Ginger*, and *Rocket Power*, are gone. Despite critical acclaim, Nickelodeon has begun to produce a form of girl culture similar to Disney's, neither of which, I argue, is feminist.

In this paper, I analyze the content of television programming by Disney and Nickelodeon that is aimed at young girls. I recognize that, although children consume a great deal of television on a weekly basis, they do not passively absorb larger cultural messages. Children are actors in their own right, negotiating meanings among themselves (Thorne 1993, Van Ausdale and Feagin 2002, Myers and Raymond 2010), with adults

(Baraldi 2008, DeMol and Buysse 2008), and with the media itself (Fingerson 1999, Bragg and Buckingham 2004). However, children are affected by and grapple with cultural frames (Myers and Raymond 2010, Neitzel and Chafel 2010). Martin and Kazyak (2009) have argued that it is therefore important to understand the messages that are available to the children who consume them.

Using qualitative textual analysis of popular programming aimed at young girls, I find that anti-feminist messages are aggressively marketed to young girls. These media messages help to foment a context in which everyday girls make real-life choices (Bjornstrom *et al.* 2010).

Methods

In an earlier phase of this project (2008–2010), I conducted focus group interviews with elementary-school-aged girls ($n = 62$), to find out their interests, hobbies, and activities (Myers and Raymond 2010). The focus groups provided information about the kinds of media consumed by these girls. Primarily, these girls regularly watched Disney shows *Hannah Montana*, *Suite Life on Deck*, and *Wizards of Waverly Place*, as well as Nickelodeon's *iCarly*. They quoted lines from the shows, discussed the actors' biographies and romantic exploits, and argued about which show was the best. Girls in my study used these programs as references for how boys and girls should interact in 'real life'.

Because of the salience of these shows in everyday girls' lives, I conducted qualitative textual analysis of them, which I report here. Three of these shows featured girl characters as protagonists, and the fourth (*Suite Life*) had myriad girls as supporting characters. All were aimed at young girls, although they were watched by millions of viewers of all ages. In fact, they were among the most popular programs nationwide, according to Tvbythenumbers.com. *Hannah Montana* and *iCarly* were hugely popular shows, rated in the top 10 most viewed cable shows week after week in the spring of 2010. In fall of 2010, *Hannah* tied as the most watched show among kids aged 6–14.

During the data collection period, each series was in its third season, at least, and each season had 25–30 half-hour episodes (about 22 minutes long without commercials). I did not randomly select episodes, as many were not easily available. I watched only recent shows, from the second season of each series or later. I recorded the shows, watched them on Youtube.com, and/or ordered them through cable's 'OnDemand'. In total, I analyzed 13 episodes of *Suite Life on Deck*, 10 episodes of *Hannah Montana*, 10 episodes of *Wizards of Waverly Place*, and 12 episodes of *iCarly* (45 total episodes). Table 1 describes each program.

My analysis centered on the meanings constructed through the plots lines, dialogue, costuming, and physical representations/embodiment of characters in these programs. Because these programs were literally scripted, every message was carefully planned, practiced, edited, and finally communicated to viewers. My analytic strategy draws upon critical discourse analysis (CDA), whose goal is to examine the social construction of reality through language, both spoken and textual (Fairclough 1992, van Dijk 1993, Halliday 1994, Galasinski 2011). CDA reveals meanings beyond simple dichotomies (Wodak 1999), focusing on contradictions (Billig *et al.* 1988). CDA recognizes that there are multiple interpretations to most messages and that analyses must be on-going, subject to change over time and in different contexts (Wodak 1999). I follow those tenets here. However, I do not employ a strict critical discourse analysis. I analyze more than dialogue: I include additional forms of communication such as costuming, characters' embodiment, and elements of physical comedy.

Table 1. Description of television programs analyzed.

Program	Premise	Main characters	Role in story	Gender	Race
Hannah Montana (Disney)	Tennessee native, Miley, moves with her family to LA, where she lives a double life: she's secretly a pop-star (Hannah Montana). The comedy centers on Miley keeping her secret.	Miley	Protagonist	Girl	White
		Robbie Ray	Miley's father	Man	White
		Jackson	Miley's brother	Boy	White
		Oliver	Miley's friend	Boy	White
		Lilly	Miley's friend	Girl	White
		Rico	Kids' nemesis	Boy	Latino
Suite Life on Deck (Disney)	In this sequel to *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, twins Zack and Cody go to high school on a cruise ship. The show focuses on the difference between the boys.	Zack	Protagonist	Boy	White
		Cody	Protagonist	Boy	White
		London Tipton	Heiress whose father owns the hip	Girl	Asian
		Woody			
		Bailey	Cody's room-mate	Boy	White
		Marcus	Cody's girl-friend	Girl	White
		Mr Moseby	Zack's room-mate	Boy	Black
			School supervisor	Man	Black
Wizards of Waverly Place (Disney)	A family of wizards live on Waverly Place, in NYC. The kids learn to be wizards from their father, and they interact with magical creatures from the wizarding world. The show centers on sibling rivalry and magical mayhem.	Alex	Protagonist	Girl	Latina
		Justin	Alex's older brother	Boy	Latino
		Max	Alex's younger brother	Boy	Latino
		Theresa	Mom	Woman	Latina
		Jerry	Dad	Man	White
		Harper	Alex's best friend	Girl	
iCarly (Nickelodeon)	Carly lives with her brother, Spencer, in an apartment in Seattle. Carly and her best friend, Sam, write and star in a weekly web show, *iCarly*, with friend, Freddy. The program centers on the impact of the web show on their lives.	Carly	Protagonist	Girl	White
		Spencer	Carly's brother	Man	White
		Sam	Carly's best friend	Girl	White
		Freddy	Carly's friend	Boy	White
		Mrs Benson	Freddy's mom	Woman	White
		Gibby	Kids' friend	Boy	White

I took a grounded approach to data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Lofland *et al.* 2005, Warren and Karner 2009). I first constructed a coding tool to use when watching episodes, which primarily emerged from the content of the programming itself. I also included categories similar to Martin and Kazyak's (2009) in their analysis of G-rated movies. The tool evolved as I watched the shows, expanding to include new categories as necessary. Eventually, this coding schema grew to include 72 concepts.

I coded each episode as such: (1) I watched each episode entirely without taking notes to make sure I caught the physical and verbal content. (2) I watched each episode again, taking copious notes. Dialogue was rich, bombarding the viewer with messages about boys, girls, romance, and bodies at a rapid-fire pace, so coding was time-consuming. (3) I had a graduate assistant independently code 25% of the episodes, randomly selected from the total list of episodes included in this study. Our percent agreement was 0.83, meaning we coded data the same way 83% of the time. I used HyperResearch software to aid in coding, and major patterns began to coalesce.

Findings

In my analysis, I found that the prevailing messages in the television programs were anti-feminist, operationalized as such: programs celebrated beauty and heterosexual coupling, demonized strong and unattractive women, and valorized antisocial girls. They 'took feminism into account', while simultaneously dismissing it. These messages were overt, integrated into main plot lines, episode after episode, across all four series.

Although this analysis is largely qualitative, I did note the frequency of anti-feminist incidents. Of all of the shows, *iCarly* was the most thoroughly saturated with anti-feminist messages, with an average of 11.4 incidents per 22-minute episode. *Hannah Montana* contained the fewest messages (6.4 per episode), but their content was no less problematic than other shows' messages. *Suite Life* was the most traditionally sexist show, concentrating primarily on valorizing beauty, heterosexism, and degrading women/girls. They also 'took feminism into account' most often. *Wizards* and *iCarly* centered on badly behaved girls. Anti-feminist messages were broadcast every 2–3 minutes on these shows, making them hard to avoid.

Beauty and boys

Similar to Martin and Kazyak's (2009) argument about G-rated films, a major message across programs was that girls were more valuable if they were beautiful. Plot lines on episodes of two shows centered on beauty pageants (twice on *Suite Life* and once on *iCarly*). For example, on *Suite Life*, the boys staged a beauty pageant to meet girls. London saw the announcement and squealed: 'A beauty pageant. And I'm beauty-ful!' She cleared off a shelf in her cabin to make room for her tiaras. Her room-mate, Bailey, protested when London moved her things. London said, 'What do you need a tiara shelf for? If you enter a beauty contest, the only thing they'll put on *your* head is a paper bag.' To London, beauty was a girl's most important attribute, and imperfection should be hidden from view, under a 'paper bag'.

In these television programs, girls were more valuable if they were desired by boys. Plot lines focused on finding and keeping boyfriends (on all shows) and getting dates for the prom (*Hannah*, *Wizards*, and *Suite Life*). Heterosexual coupling enhanced the status of both boys and girls. For example on *Hannah Montana*, Oliver and Lilly bragged about going to the prom together:

> Oliver and Lilly walked through school, arms around each others' shoulders. To a group of girls, Oliver said, 'Oh I am so sorry, ladies, it's too late, but don't hate, Ollie's already got a prom date.' As he spoke, Lilly mouthed his words, and waved at the girls, tauntingly. They went up to a group of guys, and Lilly said, 'You can have your eggs, and you can have your bacon, but you can't have Lilly, 'cause she's taken.'

It was not enough for Oliver and Lilly to be a couple; they made a spectacle of themselves, broadcasting to single girls and boys that they had missed their chance to date one of them. They asserted that being date-less was problematic. Lilly said, 'You know it's so great not having to sit around praying that the one guy you really want to go with will ask you. That feeling of being so desperate, so needy, so, so, so . . . ' They walked closer to Miley, who was staring at a guy and whispering, 'Ask me. Ask me. Ask me.' Lilly said, 'So, *that*', pointing at Miley. Miley mewled, 'Ask me nooooow!' Oliver shook his head, saying, 'Single people.' Lilly stroked Miley's hair and said, 'So sad.' Oliver and Lilly called each other, 'Olliepop' and 'Lillipop', and gazed at each other longingly.

Heteronormative messages such as these are readily available in children's media (Bell *et al.* 1995, Giroux 1999, Martin and Kazyak 2009): girls must attract and attach themselves to boys so as to achieve status and satisfaction. Television programming allows these messages to be repackaged daily, even hourly, for children's viewing.

Degrading and objectifying femininity

The television programs degraded femininity at least once per episode. For example, on *Suite Life*, femininity was frequently associated with weakness. In one episode, Zack complimented an old man on his athleticism. The man asked, 'What do you think, I'm a little girl?' In another episode, Woody arm-wrestled a female classmate, who slammed his arm down so hard that he fell out of his desk. She held up her arms and yelled, 'In your face! Eighty-three pounds of pure power!' Cody said, 'Dude, you just got beat by a girl who can fit in a keyhole.' Their teacher asked Woody what he was doing on the floor. Zack said, 'Looking for his pride.' Woody called, 'Can't find it! Oo, but I found a piece of gum!' which he took from beneath the desk and ate. Although a girl won the match, the over-arching message in this scene was not girl power. Instead, the focus was on Woody's losing the match, which feminized and devalued him.

Television programs also objectified girls for male consumption. For example, in one episode of *Hannah*, Miley tried to convince Oliver and Lilly that she did not want a boyfriend. Oliver stood up on the crowded beach and said, 'Yo! Single dudes! Listen up! I got a perfectly good girl here, good height-to-weight ratio, not hard to look at. Let's start the bidding at uh . . . ' Miley knocked him down. He continued, from the ground, 'She's got a temperament issue, but the right guy could tame her.' Miley grabbed him by the nose. He said, 'You're blowing the sales pitch.' Miley said, 'I can get a boyfriend on my own.' Oliver said, 'You might want to speed it up, because you're starting to look a little pathetic.' Oliver tried to auction off Miley, but she did not passively accept his efforts. She physically interrupted him. Yet, he had the last word, reminding her that girls should have boyfriends in order to fit in.

On these programs, teenagers openly demeaned adult women in positions of authority. For example, on *iCarly*, Freddy's mom – Mrs Benson, the only parent on the series – was depicted as a shrill, unstable harpy, and the kids openly disrespected her. In one episode, Freddy pushed Carly out of the way of an on-coming truck, but he got hit instead, breaking his leg. Mrs Benson repeatedly hissed at Carly, 'It should have been you!' Carly brought Freddy flowers, and his mother soaked them in bleach and pounded them with a mallet to 'protect Freddy from allergens'. In another episode, Mrs Benson forbade Freddy to attend

a mixed martial arts match. She explained, 'Exposure to violence is very bad for a teenaged boy's development.' Sam snarled, 'Says who?' Mrs Benson shrieked: 'I read it on aggressiveparenting.com!' Sam groaned, 'Why you gotta always irritate everybody?' Mrs Benson was portrayed as pathologically overprotective, even when her concerns were valid.

On *Wizards*, even fantasy creatures were demeaned if they were strong women. In one episode, Mother Nature punished Justin for using magic to alter the weather. She arrived dressed in black spandex and leather, with a black floral garland in her hair and an Earth decal on her biker vest. Justin said, 'I thought you were supposed to be all natural, like sandals with birds flying around you.' She said, 'Yeah, yeah, I used to dress like that, but nobody took me seriously. What I wear to work is my business. I don't want to talk about this.' To punish Justin, Mother Nature assigned him his own rain cloud, drenching him incessantly. Later, Mother Nature admitted that she had over-reacted, saying, 'I've had a lot to deal with lately.' Alex asked, 'Is it dating trouble? Because I can help you with that.' Justin said, 'No, Alex, she's talking about the *environment*.' Mother Nature said, 'You people have to understand this is a delicate system. Every time you mess with the weather, it affects somewhere else.' Alex said, 'I think I found your dating problem: it's that non-stop talking about the weather, isn't it?' Mother Nature dressed tough to be taken seriously, and she wielded power over the elements, but she was casually dismissed and reduced to a heterosexual failure by a teenaged girl.

Girls behaving badly

Each series had strong girl characters. On the surface, these seemed like 'grrrls', who eschewed passive femininity to get ahead in a 'man's world'. However, on closer inspection, they resembled McRobbie's (2004) 'badly behaved' girls: they bullied and cheated. Two characters stood out for their bad behavior: Sam from *iCarly* and Alex from *Wizards*. Both were portrayed as tomboys – they even had boys' names – but they were more complicated than that.

Sam was not the official protagonist in *iCarly*, but she was a central character, appearing in every episode. Many episodes centered on her character flaws: she hated school, cheated on tests, and refused to do homework. She lied easily and frequently. She stole lunches from kids at school. She had been in 'juvie'. She once suggested that her mobster uncle, Carmine, could be hired to hurt Freddy's mom. Another time, she offered to have Uncle Carmine make the school superintendant 'disappear'. Sam wanted to go to the mixed martial arts match 'to learn a shoulder-crushing move'. Carly patted Sam, saying, 'I bet you can learn all kinds of new ways to hurt people.' Sam, excited, yelled 'I *know*!' In a paintball war, Sam shot several of her classmates between the eyes, like an assassin. Another time, she put sticks of butter in a sock and 'got swingy with it', smacking the faces of television writers who had stolen ideas from the iCarly webshow. She threw herself onto a couch and pitched a screaming fit to persuade Carly to enter a beauty pageant. Her mother appeared only once,[2] but Sam described her as a 'dead-beat', and she spent time at Carly's apartment to avoid her. Sam terrorized most people, but Carly always affectionately tolerated her, like a child.

Wizards' Alex was more clever than thuggish, more manipulative than violent. Like Sam, she was sarcastic, selfish, and lazy, failing at school and wizarding. She lied and cheated. Even the program's theme song, sung by Alex, stated that you could use magic to 'write a report on a book you never read'. Being bad was a central part of Alex's identity. The school principal wanted Alex's help in catching rule-breakers at school, explaining,

'You are an evil genius, not just evil.' Flattered, she helped. But she was so good at catching rule-breakers that someone put a 'good citizenship' award on her locker. Alex said,

> That's low! Harper, you have to help me. If I don't stop being good, one day I'm going to wake up as a doctor. Or worse! One of those guys who drives the back end of the fire truck!

Alex's parents were suspicious of her when she was nice, and they pretended not to know her when she misbehaved. Harper repeatedly asked her to stop being bad, but she kept being her friend and acquiesced to her bullying.

Both Sam and Alex were heterosexually desirable, despite their 'bad girl' nature. Sam looked femme: she had almost-waist-length blond hair, curled in ringlets. She dressed in tight T-shirts and skater shorts, like the other girls. She practiced an in-your-face heterosexuality. She stole a boy's basketball because she thought he was cute. She bragged about boys she'd kissed and competed with Carly for boys' attention. Alex was portrayed as a tomboy who hated dresses, yet she always wore high heels, tight jeans, and lots of jewelry. She flirted with boys skillfully. For example, in one episode Alex agreed to help Harper set up the school's Quizbowl. She approached a tough boy, asking, 'Do you want to thumb wrestle for jobs?' He said, 'Cute.' She flipped her hair and said, 'Oh, I know. Get used to it.' Charmed, he followed her around for the rest of the episode.

These girls represented the media-warped version of strong girls described by McRobbie (2004). Their characters valorized some elements of grrrl power, such as femininity, self-confidence, and sexual assertiveness. But their power was amped up into antisocial, self-interested aggression. These characters were heterosexy bullies, not feminists.

Post-feminism

Applying McRobbie's (2004, 2008) definition, I find that these programs were not only anti-feminist but also post-feminist: they *ostensibly* supported tenets of feminism, but usually undermined them in the end. Sometimes, the post-feminist messages were subtle. For example, both *Hannah* and *Suite Life* featured smart, goal-oriented girl characters: Miley and Bailey, respectively. Miley adroitly juggled a career as a pop-star, her school work, and her friends. Bailey excelled at all subjects in school, spoke Japanese, and earned an academic scholarship. Both came from small towns and succeeded at big challenges. These characters sent feminist messages. Yet both girls turned to jelly around cute boys. On *Hannah*, after Miley repeatedly assured Oliver and Lilly that she did not want a boyfriend, she was taken aback by a blind date they had arranged. He was so cute that Miley batted her lashes at him and spoke in a baby voice. He said, 'You have the cutest accent.' Miley said, 'Well fiddle-dee-dee, I do believe I am a-blushing.' Miley's feminist resolve dissolved under his gaze. Similarly, on one episode of *Suite Life*, the kids toured a museum in Greece. Bailey admired the artifacts, saying, 'What a magnificent vase.' London said, 'What a hot guy!' Bailey chastised London, telling her how lucky she was to be surrounded by ancient art. London turned Bailey's head to see the 'hot guy', and Bailey said, 'Sweet potato pie! I wouldn't mind looking for a penny in a haystack with him.' She instantly abandoned her scholarly appreciation of antiquities so as to objectify a living Adonis – indeed, that was his actual name. So even though Bailey and Miley were strong, they went weak around 'hot guys'. Heterosexual desire drowned out competing messages about independence and intellect.

Most of the post-feminist messages were overt. Many characters actually invoked feminism, and then acted in ways that negated it, as in the fairy-tale episode of *Suite Life*,

discussed in the opening of this paper. Similarly, on *Wizards*, Justin was assigned to catch monsters for wizarding school. Misreading his instruments, he almost turned in his vampire girlfriend, Juliet, and her parents to the wizarding authorities. He diverted the authorities but was disappointed in the end: 'I kind of wish I *had* caught three monsters. I would have gotten a trophy.' He gestured to Juliet, saying, 'Well, I guess *my* trophy's right here.' Juliet flinched: 'Justin, as a woman of the twenty-first century, do *not* objectify me. But . . . as a woman who's been alive for thousands and thousands of years before that . . . come here!' She smiled, pulled him into a hug, and he looked relieved. In effect, Juliet dismissed feminism as a fad.

On *Suite Life*, Bailey entered that beauty pageant to try to beat London. Cody, her boy-friend, thought she was kidding. Bailey showed him the gingham dress she planned to wear. He said, 'Ahh, and to *protest* [the pageant], you're going to undermine the event by wearing an ugly dress and avoiding all the trappings of conventional female beauty?' She was offended, and he realized that she really meant to compete. He said, 'I thought you'd find beauty pageants sexist and demeaning to women.' Bailey said, 'Pageants are about more than beauty. You can win scholarships.' During the interview part of the pageant, Bailey showed her intellect: 'Thus, by balancing classic Keynesian economics with the best of Malthusian theory, we can decrease Third World debt by increasing our gross domestic product.' Zack called out: 'Boring!' Noticing the audience glazing over, Bailey announced, 'I love puppies!' Everyone cheered, and she won. Bailey mimicked the non-intellectual contestants strategically, but she did so to beat them at their own game, not to rise above the competition itself.

On *Hannah*, Miley hoped that Gabe would ask her to the prom, but she made light of it to Lilly and Oliver: 'I mean either way is fine with me. I'm an independent, mature, strooong woman.' But when Gabe walked toward her, she launched herself into his path and muttered 'Ask me to prom!' He kept walking. When she finally got up the nerve to ask him herself, he already had a date, Theresa. Miley said she didn't mind that Gabe was going with Theresa. But when Theresa walked by her at lunch, Miley stuck out her leg and tripped her. When Theresa fell down, Miley laughed and said, 'Now I feel much better!'

These girl characters tried to 'talk the feminist talk'. They invoked feminist concepts. They understood and seemingly problematized sexism and objectification. They recognized that beauty pageants demean women and that strong women don't need boyfriends. And yet, their behavior ultimately undermined girl power within the same episode: Juliet rewarded Justin with a hug; Bailey acted puerile to win the pageant; and Miley first begged a boy to ask her out and then physically attacked his date. Rather than rejecting the tenets of traditional femininity, these girls acquiesced to heteronormative pressure so as to fit in. They all 'took feminism into account', and then dismissed it. These programs portrayed feminism as unnecessary, as actually interfering with the girls' true goals. Ironically, these characters were most heroic when they yielded their independence and embraced heterosexualized fantasies about girlhood.

Conclusion

I began this paper by exploring the content of distorted messages about feminism and how they were marketed to young girls. In examining television programming aimed at young girls, I discovered pervasive anti-feminist messages. These messages distorted feminism by objectifying and demeaning femininity, while ostensibly celebrating girls' sexuality and strength. They perverted girl power into a cut-throat 'bad girl' archetype. They 'took feminism into account', and then dismissed it as unnecessary if not problematic.

These series aggressively marketed anti- and post-feminist messages to young girls, broadcasting them about every two minutes per 26-minute episode. These messages were virtually inescapable for viewers. Based on my earlier research (Myers and Raymond 2010), I know that everyday girls avidly consumed these messages, applying them to their real lives.

Baumgardner and Richards (1999, p. 83) have argued that young girls today are growing up with 'feminism simply in the water', like invisible 'political fluoride' protecting them from patriarchal decay. If they are correct, I would expect that anti-feminist messages would be few and far between. I found the opposite. Most girls today are immersed in 'media-rich worlds' (Martin and Kazyak 2009). Perhaps, for them, their 'water' is *the media*. If so, resisting anti-feminism will be especially challenging. One wonders how long feminist inoculation can last given the content of girls' favorite television shows. Although I analyzed US programming only, both Disney and Nickelodeon are international companies, broadcasting similar messages world-wide.

In this analysis, I found evidence of a media backlash against young feminisms, consistent with McRobbie's (2008) argument. The media's repackaging and distortion of feminism subtly reinscribes gender and re-subordinates girls to boys and to each other based on a hierarchy of heterosexualized capital. Instead of promoting sisterhood in these shows, girl protagonists policed older women and each other, to the raucous amusement of the pre-recorded laugh-track in the background. The take-away message: feminism is a joke.

If we continue on this trajectory, the effectiveness of young feminism to empower and politicize girls will be eroded. The consequences are great: the larger feminist project – which seeks to eradicate social inequalities (Lorber 2006) – depends upon future generations of feminists. Young girls benefit psychically, physically, and materially from feminist progress (Manago *et al.* 2009). Young feminists must recognize the ways that the media distort and undo girl power even for very young girls, and reclaim the voice of authority so as to ensure that girls today continue to benefit from the positive effects of feminism.

Notes

1. Children, tweens, teens, young women, and middle-aged women are called 'girls' or 'girlie' in this literature (Harris 2004).
2. That episode garnered the most cable viewers for that week, with 5.9 million viewers.

Notes on contributor

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