

Feminism, Inc.:

Coming of Age In Girl Power Media Culture

Emilie Zaslow

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Most millennials remember the first time they heard a song by the Spice Girls, or fell in love with television shows like *Buffy* or *Gilmore Girls*, or even when they bought their first poster of a celebrity like Jennifer Lopez. These (and many other) cultural works define a generation of young Americans. However, in addition to the identity achieved through these cultural artifacts, these phenomena actually define much more—they are artifacts of *girl power media* that signify something much larger for the idea of what it is to be a young woman today. Emilie Zaslow presents a strong case for this understanding of seemingly innocuous media and cultural trends—this media genre is actually a carefully repackaged consumer good that obscures the processes of identity formation and future considerations for young women across the western world.

Zaslow begins appropriately by defining the phrase *girl power media*, as it is the foundation from which the rest of the argument is built. According to *Feminism, Inc.*, girl power media is epitomized by “crossings between girlishness and female empowerment”—a spectrum where girl power media is a midpoint between traditional femininity and powerful feminist agency (2). Furthermore, Zaslow insists that girl power media acts as a euphemism for what once was considered feminism, a euphemism pioneered by cultural heroes like the Spice Girls. She argues that girl power media has elements of both capitalistic strategy and empowerment through hyperidentity. Zaslow concludes her introduction with the following: “Girl power *is* a watered-down feminist position available as a stylish accessory, but it is also a meaningful and widespread embodiment of some feminist positions that girls draw upon as they create their gender identities” (9). This unique contradiction is the backbone of her book.

Zaslow then launches into a brief history of girl power media. She discusses the competing discourses at play in American society and academia; everything from pro-girl, pro-sex, anti-oppression rhetoric to the behaviors and strategies of cultural producers (advertisers, manufacturers and designers) over the course of the last half-century. She asserts, “[g]irl power is the cultural industries’ response to [modern pro-women, feminist] movements,” originally chartered by “individuals and

subcultural groups” and later coopted by “corporations” (31). Thus, rather than being a social movement for justice, equality, and independence, girl power is a convergence of historical forces and commodification. Zaslow then delves into her methodology and highlights the lapses and shortcomings of previous research designs. She insists that in considering social processes and the disparities between real life experiences (“focus[ing] on the intersection of the cultural and social”), her analysis is more complete (55). Zaslow then explores the notion of female sexuality through the lens of authenticity, interpretation and contradiction. She declares outright that “girls receive a series of discordant messages about female sexuality”: “something to be guarded,” “something to be used,” and “a political issue” (57-58). Through an analysis of modern pop music (Beyonce, Katy Perry, Pussycat Dolls, Beastie Boys and more), Zaslow presents the case that authenticity is lost in a battle between subject and object; the lines of the “contradicting mediascape” are so blurred that many girls are left feeling trapped in a whirlwind of power, sexuality and profit (78, 82). Interestingly, Zaslow actually takes a step back to consider not simply the female body, but the clothed female body. She explores the hyper-consumption, performance, and commodification of feminine style (84-85). Women think they have the power, she concludes, but in fact, they do not: “[a]dding girls’ voices and choices to the discussion of their relationship with style does not necessarily lead to a passing over of power” (103). Or, in short, “promises” are being made by girl power, promises that obscure the reality of these cultural representations and exchanges (103-104). Zaslow argues that this deceptive disempowerment continues over into employment and motherhood. She claims that archaic beliefs about family-work balance, rhetoric of choice and self-determination, and real-life discordances are to blame for a cultural environment that is directly at odds with the idea of the independent woman. *Feminism, Inc.* concludes on a solemn note: “[i]f these girls struggle to imagine a womanhood that is as liberating as those of the women they see in girl power media culture” they cannot aptly provide any resistance to constraints that challenged previous generations (126). The final part of the book explores an idea that has plagued previous sections: a working definition of feminism for the modern young woman. Zaslow considers whether feminism is a social movement, a stylish identity marker or a blend of the two. She finds that there is a successful model of “affirmation” and “resistance against dominant ideological perspectives” but that “it fails to make girls aware of a range of possible strategies for [real] social change” (155). Zaslow brings her book to a grim finale, citing the discordance of mediated narratives and the social and economic realities that face women in the modern world.

The critical detail of the lens Zaslow employs to explore the realms of media, gender, sex, economics, society and culture is exquisite. However, while there are very few doubts about the predatory strategies of so-called cultural producers, especially in regards to women and girls in media, the

assumption that this is a reemerging trend ought to be challenged. In her introduction, Zaslow identifies a trend that she characterizes as refocusing on the teenage girl. She claims, that after a post-war boom, the focus on women ebbed noticeably before a relatively recent resurgence with girl power media and subsequent stylistic and commercial developments. It is hard to argue that femininity, womanhood or femaleness have ever left the public consciousness much less art and media (dating back to the time of classical painters of centuries past). This argument might be made better with a qualification regarding the specific elements that label any one group a commercial target market. Fortunately, this assertion does not invalidate many of Zaslow's other claims, including the crucial foundational concept of girl power media.

The arguments presented in *Feminism, Inc.* are fundamentally a concern for those in a variety of disciplines including, but not limited to, those of science, technology, and society. Many of Zaslow's ideas draw from social science backgrounds, such as social psychology, sociology and even perhaps anthropology. Additionally, exploring the idea of femininity and the female body is by definition a biological endeavor. The study of media itself is, of course, dependent upon a strong understanding of available technology and its trajectory through history (in this case with cable television and pop music). Finally, much of these social processes are enacted throughout various cultural and societal environments that shape and mold them into the entities that Zaslow has described.