



The Importance of Zines in the Lives of Teenage Girls

Typically, mainstream magazines for girls, such as *Seventeen* and *YM*, have a limited focus in which articles on beauty, fashion, and boys seem to dominate the pages. These subjects can potentially lead to teenage girls feeling inadequate or uncool if their interests differ from what appears to be the norm. The problem with mainstream culture (especially mainstream culture aimed at teenage girls) is that it can contribute to low self-esteem: teenage girls are made to think that their lives would be complete if only they had the hottest boyfriend, the clearest skin, the coolest clothes, and the perfect (translation: thinner) body. The emphasis is not on individuality, but on conformity: these magazines contribute to and reinforce stereotypic gender roles for adolescent girls (Willemsen 853). Finders notes that these types of magazines are marketed for one particular type of reader: "the social queen, the middle-class female" (77).

What happens to those girls who are not social queens? Or to those girls who resent being confined within this label? Magazines, Finders continues, "serve adolescents to unite particular groups of peers and exclude others, serving as a powerful tool to mark insiders and outsiders" (77). What about those girls who are interested in things beyond fashion, beauty, and boys? Where is there a safe space for the poets, the singers, the anarchists, the athletes, the knitters, the shy, the forlorn, the solemn, the aggressive, the confused, the scared, the abused, the outraged? The answer can quite literally be found in zines. Zines act as an alternative literary form that contributes to

teenage empowerment by offering viewpoints that exist outside of the stereotypical gender confines many young girls feel pressure to conform to.

The evolution of zine culture coincided with the riot grrrl movement. The term *riot grrrl* was first used in zines by musicians and activists in the United States in the early 1990s. The riot grrrl movement was "a part of this third wave [feminist] ambition and organized a subculture of young girls who wanted to express themselves and their experiences as well as their feminist beliefs" (Spencer 48). Girl zines are defined as "do-it-yourself publications made primarily by and for girls and women" (Green & Taormino xvi), that are produced without the pressures of publishing corporations, allowing a space for "uncensored, underground writing on the edge" (Green & Taormin xi). Girl zines are an alternative literary form for young girls to explore interests outside the scope of large magazines, and offer an innovative lens from which young girls can see themselves and their positions in their communities.

The appeal of zines for young girls is as diverse as the topics of zines themselves: "grrrls turn to zines for a variety of reasons: for personal expression, an outlet for creativity, to break out of isolation, in search of friends, a community network, and as a form of cultural and political resistance" (Spencer 51). As a literary source, zines contribute to the development of teens' self-identities. In her study of how literacy pedagogy and textual representations define and maintain social roles, Finders studied the reading habits of grade seven girls, with a specific focus on how mainstream fashion magazines (like *Seventeen*, *Sassy*, and *YM*) helped define and maintain social roles. From her study, Finders determined the following: reading magazines is an exclusive social event; reading magazines is used to ascribe special status; experiences reported in the magazines were appropriated by the girls as their own (Finders, 77).

These findings, although derived from a study of mainstream magazines, hold relevance for zines as well. Zines, unlike mainstream magazines, do not cater to a specific demographic, but exist for anyone with an interest in creating an outlet in which their voice can be heard. The relationship between the creation (writing) and absorption (reading) of zines allows teenagers to express and explore viewpoints that may not have an outlet anywhere else. Unlike the consumerist ideology behind mainstream magazines, zine culture celebrates and requires creativity and the production of a discourse that exists as an alternative to the narrow acceptability of mainstream teenage girl culture.

Zine culture emphasizes cultural and political subversion; teenage girls, by creating their own outlets of expression, are

combating the mainstream ideology that women exist primarily as consumers, rather than as creators. Green and Taormino state that, "women have historically had limited access to channels of communication, and, ultimately, to power" (xii). Being able to contribute to a form of literature that embraces ideologies that are contradictory to those of the mainstream allows teens to learn about alternative viewpoints, and become stronger women. This, in turn, can help teens examine their own self-definitions, and by creating and/or reading zines, teenage girls are contributing to a definition of self that is based on their own terms.

Works Cited

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