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Do We Dare Question Kindness? The Commodification of Becoming a Strong, Kind Female

ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism and its focus on consumption, disposability, and individualism has managed to undercut ideals of female empowerment and kindness. This paper discusses the problematic approach to commercializing and incentivizing being kind and being strong, specifically as it relates to young girls and women. Through an analysis of clothing and commercials, this paper looks at the commodification of personality traits and empowerment. It is through these mechanisms that marketers commodify kindness -- it is palatable enough to sell, and just far enough away from the word feminism to not upset potential brand loyalists. By taking this soft approach, rather than working to bolster the identities of women and girls and to empower them, these companies in their commercial advertising and clothing options continue to center girls and women as consumers, while failing to challenge the dominant structures in place.

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to question the ways in which kindness and female strength or, "girl power", have now become goods for purchase, rather than personality traits or individual commitments. Through the lens of critical media literacy, I interrogate the concept of childhood for girls, specifically as it relates to the perpetuation of kindness and girl power. These words and phrases hold different meanings based on the individual, but far too often they are diluted to catchy slogans aimed at female buyers. While these messages may be intended to empower both young girls and women, instead these portrayals have the potential to work against them, because the messaging is not only relentless, but also shallow in nature. As Lamb and Brown[1] explain: *"...the beginning of a genuine movement to give girls more power and more choice got co-opted and turned into a marketing scheme that reinforced age-old stereotypes".* It is because of this skewed messaging that I draw attention to the lack of critical media literacy in PK-12 curriculum in the United States, which contributes to children and adults alike being unable to identify and address hegemonic messages in all forms of text.

This study demonstrates the overabundance of messages grounded in girl power and kindness directed towards women and girls and is guided by the current literature that focuses on advertising, marketing, and the dominant discourse around girls and women. Based on the findings, I argue that dominant structures are not challenged by these superficial messages; that by commodifying girl power, girls and women are being recognized as consumers, not empowered people; and that when girl power is commodified, feminist ideals become a slogan, rather than a movement.

Advertisers have always looked at young people for their buying power, but I argue that society has reached a new level of consumption and commodification.[2] Shirley Steinberg[3] reminds her readers in *Kinderculture* that childhood is something that is now pre-fabricated and built upon the foundation of buying power and marketing. When one views this prefabricated childhood based on hyper-consumerism in a way that extends to ideas of kindness and strength, this practice of commodifying childhood becomes almost grotesque.

Steven Mintz[4] offers a similar critique of childhood, acknowledging the struggles that young people have always faced in our world and the ways they are compounded by the pressures and demands of society. Unfortunately, not everyone views young people in the same way Mintz does, as adults have the tendency to denigrate the younger generation. Because humans' memories are biased, the dialogue quickly becomes "kids these days", with a focus on putting down young people[5]. The older generation chooses to criticize the younger generation, instead of question their role in the framing of childhood. Rather than blame young people for their behavior or ignore the difficulties that are inherent to growing up in a neoliberal society, educators, researchers, and parents should instead cast a critical eye on the different forms of media and products that target young people, specifically girls.

With that in mind, this paper utilizes a contextual analysis of artifacts in order to unpack the messaging that besieges women and girls on a regular basis through different forms of media and imagery, specifically in marketing and clothing. Incessant messaging about what it means to be a girl, the perpetuation of constant kindness, and the supposed support for girl power are at the forefront of much of the marketing and products directed towards girls and

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1   LAMB, S., BROWN, L. M.: *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes.* New York : St. Martin's Press, 2006, p. 1.
2   See: BAUMAN, Z.: *Consuming Life.* MA : Polity Press, 2007.
3   See: STEINBERG, S.: *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood.* CO : Westview Press, 2004.
4   See: MINTZ, S.: *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood.* MA : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.
5   See: PROTZKO, J., SCHOOLER, J.: Kids These Days: Why the Youth of Today Seem Lacking. In *Science Advances,* 2019, Vol. 5, p. 1-6.

women. This analysis is framed using the lenses of critical media literacy and neoliberalism as a way to understand the effects of different types of texts and the impact of hegemony on girls and women. After analysis and discussion, this paper will conclude with recommendations for educators, parents, and researchers, as it is critical to understand how media and imagery leave lasting effects on young girls and women, and what can be done to combat these effects.

While all demographics are preyed upon by media and advertising, I contend that there is a pointed effort recently to push the idea of "girl power".[6] Throughout this paper, the phrase "girl power" is used; however, this phrase does not only apply to children and teenagers, but it is also often used in reference to adult women. While there are many positives in acknowledging the strengths, attributes, and abilities of women and girls, there has become a toxic level of commodification of this idea. Robert Goldman[7] defined "commodity feminism" as *"the issue of rewriting feminism into the corporate world of consumer culture"* and this type of feminism is what permeates advertising and clothing marketed towards girls and women. Rather than perpetuating and embracing the idea of girl power in a holistic, authentic, and genuine way, it has instead been turned into another product for purchase, an idea for major marketing machines, and an easy way to make a profit. This is true as well for the concept of kindness. Instead of working to empower girls and women, the concept of kindness is repeatedly marketed towards females, enabling the concept of feminism to be softened and made more palatable, instead of being a rallying cry for women's rights and equality.

The issue of softening feminist ideals is problematic in and of itself, as that assumes that there is one way to be a feminist. There have been many waves of the feminist movement, many of which have left out women of color, or pushed back on the politics of previous generations. Sandra Chang-Kredl[8] describes third wave feminism as exploding in the 1990s as a way to interrogate ideas of gender and sexuality. This third wave pushed back on what is described as the second wave of feminism from the 1970s and 1980s, which focused more on women striving to enter men's spaces. This dichotomy is still troubling, however, as Catherine Rottenberg[9] explains. She notes that the feminist movement has taken an individual stance, running parallel to neoliberal policies and leaving women and girls to take full responsibility for their own well-being, leaving collective forms of action and support forgotten. With the issue of feminism so fluid and evolving, it is puzzling how marketers can take such a strong stance against it, especially when a neoliberal view of feminism is often the version that is most apparent in advertisements and products.

While consumers may view these advertisements and products as ones that are trying to empower and elevate women and girls, journalist and media critic Jennifer Pozner explains a different concept: the marketers themselves see this approach as a way to draw in brand loyalists from a very young age.[10] Brands may be drawing in buyers with messages of girl power, but this is not in the name of advancing a feminist argument. Instead, this messaging is in the name of profit. Becky Swanson, executive creator at Leo Burnett, a large advertising firm in Chicago, stated explicitly *"I don't think anybody wants to talk about feminism anymore. It's one of the most misunderstood and controversial words out there. [But] if you talk about it*

6   See also: LAMB, S., BROWN, L. M.: *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes.* New York : St. Martin's Press, 2006; LESKO, N. et. al.: The Promises of Empowered Girls. In WYN, J., CAHILL, H. (eds.): *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies,* 1996, Vol. 28, No. 2, p.139-161.

7   GOLDMAN, R.: *Reading Ads Socially.* NY : Routledge, 1992, p. 131.

8   See: CHANG-KREDL, S.: "The Toughest Chick in the Alien World": "Girl Power" and the Cartoon Network. In MACEDO, D., STEINBERG, S. (eds.): *Media Literacy.* NY : Peter Lang, 2009, p. 395-404.

9   See: ROTTENBERG, C.: The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism. In *Cultural Studies,* 2014, Vol. 25, No. 3, p. 279-297.

10   See: CLARK, A.: *Let's Hear It for the Girls.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.brittonmdg.com/blog/lets-hear-it-for-the-girls/>.

as 'girl power,' that's purely positive."[11] It appears then that these advertisements are not purely about empowering young women and girls, but walking the line between embracing 'soft' elements of feminism in order to move merchandise while not alienating other consumers for whom the word feminism has a negative connotation. With that in mind, parents, educators, and researchers need to interrogate the ways ideals of kindness and female strength have been framed for young people, specifically in advertising and different forms of media. Once audiences learn to question and critique, they can then take the first step which involves pushing back against the commodification of qualities such as kindness and girl power in order to move towards a more authentic engagement with girls and women in a way that works to see all voices elevated, all personalities celebrated, and all presentations of what it means to be a girl or woman acknowledged and valued.

2 Literature Review

A review of the literature illustrates a variety of ways in which scholars view girls, women, feminism, and how the media plays a role in the presentation of each. While the literature explains the ways girlhood and feminism are shaped in and by society, this paper intends to fill the gap that exists in regard to how different forms of texts work to perpetuate the idea that kindness is for girls and women, while hiding behind a female empowerment approach. Additionally, because we live in a time of fierce neoliberalism, I contend that it is important to think about how society constructs childhood for girls in a world that is mediated by consumption and commodification.

Politics of History and Kindness
When thinking about the advocacy for unwavering kindness, advertising messages and popular products make clear that this characteristic is one they push on girls and women, rather than on boys and men. When we are living in such a divisive time in history, why is this personality trait and behavior choice emblazoned on so many materials intended for girls and women, but not for everyone? Riverside-Webster's[12] dictionary defines kindness as *"warm-hearted, friendly, or generous in nature".* Other definitions of kindness often include ideas regarding being generous, helpful, or considerate. Some include an additional mention of being kind due to an expectation of reward. However, in all of the definitions I examined, there was no gendered expectation, no layer of gender identity and how that does or does not play a role in being kind. Yet, when looking at products and marketing, there is clearly a gendered approach to this concept.

Major corporations make a spectacle of promoting ideas of girl power and kindness, but it is not clear why these two ideas are often conflated, or at the very least, presented together. On the one hand, there is an incredible push for girl power on items marketed towards girls and women, but on the other hand, there is also a consistent message that girls and women are to "sprinkle kindness like confetti". This raises the question of why this characteristic is promoted more heavily to girls and women. Additionally, it is helpful to try to define kindness, as the overuse of the term in recent years likely has caused folx to construct their own understanding. Shoshana Magnet, Corinne Lysandra Mason, and Kathryn Trevenen[13] define kindness as the ability *to "bear the vulnerability of others and that bothers to do the labor of being compassionate while not*

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11 ZMUDA, N., DIAZ, A. C.: *Female Empowerment in Ads: Soft Feminism or Soft Soap? Go-Girl Marketing is the Hot New Trend. But are These Ads Culture-Changing or Simply 'Pinkwashing'?* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/marketers-soft-feminism/294740>.

12 *KINDNESS.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kindness>.

13 MAGNET, S., MASON, C., TREVENEN, K.: Feminism, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Kindness. In *Feminist Teacher*, 2014, Vol. 25, p. 3. [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5406/femteacher.25.1.0001>.

giving in to forms of leniency that make appraisal impossible." The authors wrote this definition in the same vein as the work of Rowland[14] and Phillips and Taylor,[15] with the focus being on a commitment to social justice. While this definition is meaningful and critical, I would argue that most advertisers who are constantly pushing for kindness or girl power are not thinking of those terms in a way that conveys the ability to be vulnerable or compassionate. Instead, marketers continue to use these terms in relation to girls and women, without them being much more than a byline. Why is this message so heavily geared towards females?

Magnet, Mason, and Trevenen examined this question as well, taking a historical approach to discover the origins of kindness. During the Industrial Revolution, kindness was conflated with domestic lives and tasks, juxtaposed with the industrial work that was associated with men at the time. Because of this, kindness began to be assigned to women, which added an additional layer. Since then, rather than kindness being a universal value, it is instead associated with emotion and thus, devalued. This becomes further complicated when one examines the ways in which emotion is often performative, as illustrated by Magnet, Mason, and Trevenen's explanation of "moral weeping", a term used to describe the behavior of privileged women that deceives them into believing they are extremely tenderhearted and morally good people. This concept speaks to the process of socialization of women and girls, how society teaches them to put others before themselves, and to compromise their own needs and desires for the sake of others.

With this in mind, big business packages girl power and kindness together as a way to draw in lifelong brand loyalists and supposedly empower women and girls. However, these same companies are quite careful not to wade too far deeply into the waters of feminism, as that word is simply too divisive, too dangerous. It is at this point that kindness becomes commodified – it is palatable enough to sell, and just far enough away from the word feminism not to ruffle any feathers. By taking this soft approach, rather than working to truly bolster the identities of women and girls and to empower them, these companies, in their commercial advertising and clothing options, instead fall back on the overly emotive, feminized ideals of what it means to be kind.

This brings to mind the idea of respectability politics, and the character traits that many use to police and define what it means to be socially acceptable as a female. In 1993, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham[16] coined the term respectability politics in her book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920.* Higginbotham explained that when groups of people who are traditionally marginalized are told or teach themselves to behave better in order to gain the respect of the dominant group, that is respectability politics. The problem with respectability politics is that it is a false narrative. No matter how kind (read: quiet, subordinate, etc.) girls and women behave, they simply will not be given equal billing with men. So from very young ages, all the way to adulthood, we see generations of women and girls socialized into these ideas, believing that the kinder they are the more likeable they will be, when really, that is not the case at all. This also calls into question the conflicting messages of empowering women, while still asking them to be kind. When fighting for equal rights, or choosing to be strong mentally, physically, and emotionally, or even choosing what it means to do something "like a girl", kindness is not necessarily going to be the prevailing personality trait. Thus, society presents women and girls with conflicting messages and these messages are compounded for young people, who are often viewed through a deficit lens during their adolescent and teenage years.[17]

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14   See: ROWLAND, S.: Kindness. In *London Review of Education,* 2009, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 207-210.

15   See also: PHILLIPS, A., TAYLOR, B.: *On Kindness.* NY : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.

16   See: HIGGINBOTHAM, E. B.: *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920.* MA : Harvard University Press, 1994.

17   See: MINTZ, S.: *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood.* MA : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.

The Construction of Childhood and the Commodification of Girlhood

As referenced above, childhood has become a heavily constructed undertaking.[18] Not only do adults hold a very specific view of young people, but marketers work to reach young children from a very young age, going so far as to employ developmental psychologists to aid them in understanding what young people are drawn to and desire. Thus, there is a paradox here. While Mintz[19] reminds his readers that adults treat children as marginal subjects when it comes to viewing them as historical actors, this is not true when they are viewed as consumers. Children are viewed for their buying power, with Chang-Kredl[20] explaining: *"One way of understanding the branding and structuring of television networks as specifically for kid consumption is to see this as an effort to erect a clear distinction between the culture of children and the culture of adults, in order to emphasize an every-younger audience of consumers."*

When looking at the buying power of children and the construction of hegemonic messages, one can see what Lesko, Chacko, and Khaja-Moolji[21] describe as a progress narrative. For girls, this progress narrative is one of girl power, as it *"entices, energizes, and focuses attention".* Society continues to push a promise of happiness on girls through the element of girl power, but this rhetoric is often one that is individualized and aligned with the neoliberal belief system. Not only that, but as girl power continues to be appropriated by the mainstream media and big marketers, we see more of the commodification of girlhood and less of a disruption in inequitable structures.

Adolescence and the Dominant Discourse

The narrative surrounding the time of adolescence has always been one that frames young people in a negative light.[22] Often the framing follows the same refrain repeatedly; namely, that adolescence is a time of out-of-control behavior, with young people driven by hormones and peers, unable to manage their own emotions and make sound decisions. Nancy Lesko[23] tries to debunk that thinking by pushing back on the ways in which scholars "naturalize" what it means to be an adolescent and instead question what counts as "normal" when defining the time of adolescence. She argues that this misconception of youth as dangerous plays a role in the thinking and assumptions that teachers make about young people, which contributes to adults constantly working to control the behavior of all young people, rather than see adolescents in an individual light.

Gayle Kimball's work[24] echoes this same thinking. Kimball posits, even in scholarly work that claims to center youth voice, young people are still viewed through a deficit lens, and their voices are rarely amplified or centered in work that is written about them. Kimball argues that there is an entire population of young people – adolescent girls and young women specifically – who are activists in their own right, and not passive, emotional consumers of media who need to be controlled and contained. This issue of control and containment constantly rises to the surface, working to silence the voices of young people, rather than recognize the meaningful

18 See: STEINBERG, S.: *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood.* CO : Westview Press, 2004; LESKO, N.: Denaturalizing Adolescence: The Politics of Contemporary Representations. In *Youth and Society,* 1996, Vol. 28, No. 2, p. 139-161; LAMB, S., BROWN, L. M.: *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes,* NY : St. Martin's Press, 2006.

19 See: MINTZ, S.: *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood.* MA : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.

20 See: CHANG-KREDL, S.: "The Toughest Chick in the Alien World": "Girl power" and the Cartoon Network. In MACEDO, D., STEINBERG, S. (eds.): *Media Literacy.* NY : Peter Lang, 2009, p. 399.

21 LESKO, N. et al.: The Promises of Empowered Girls. In WYN, J., CAHILL, H. (eds.): *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies.* NY : Spring, 2015, p. 38.

22 See: ALTIKULAC, S. et. al.: The Teenage Brain: Public Perceptions of Neurocognitive Development During Adolescence. In *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience,* 2019, Vol. 31, No. 3, p. 339-359.

23 See: LESKO, N.: Denaturalizing Adolescence: The Politics of Contemporary Representations. In *Youth and Society,* 1996, Vol. 28, No. 2, p. 139-161.

24 See: KIMBALL, G.: Media Empowers Brave Girls to be Global Activists. In *Journal of International Women's Studies,* 2019, Vol. 20, No. 7, p. 35-56.

work that young people, and specifically young women, are doing. Kimball shares a list of young women who are working to raise their voices and bring light to a number of causes, yet the media rarely highlights these types of stories. Young women such as Malala, who is a champion of female education, and Mari Copeny, who is advocating for clean water in Flint, Michigan are just two of the many names Kimball highlights in order to draw attention to the inequity between the behavior of young people and the way the media portray them. When readers look at these examples, on one hand they see true leaders who are working as social activists at very young ages, which is both commendable and remarkable. On the other hand, they also see two individual voices, working to rally people around their causes that are far bigger than they are. Lesko, Chacko, and Khaja-Moolji[25] describe Malala as *"ideal personage of an empowered, postfeminist Muslim girl. Hers is a story of individual triumph to be replicated by other Muslim girls".* So here again, we see the element of one individual in a neoliberal world, versus collective action and support. These two voices in a sea of many speak to the deep hold that neoliberalism holds on our world. Why is a teenager still fighting for clean water more than 5 years later? While there has been support for her cause, clearly there has not been enough if this fight is not over. When we push the responsibility on individuals to make big social changes, the weight of individualism becomes almost too much to bear.

Kimball also discusses these social movements led by youth, and specifically by young women, when she shares the work of MIT media professor Sasha Costanza-Chock. Costanza-Chock described youth movements as being invisible and indicative of the ways in which the mainstream media repeatedly misrepresents young people in a global context. Again, when the dominant discourse has the power to affect how people think about and view young people, it often falls short of amplifying their voices and celebrating their achievements and instead falls back on the same tired trope of youth as dangerous or "at-risk". As a society, not only are neoliberal policies that govern young people's existence completely ignored, but adolescence is viewed through a deficit lens, rather than as an asset and this is a very dangerous hegemonic device.

Critical Media Literacy for Women and Girls

In order to push back on the hegemony that is at work in the dominant discourse around young people, there is a very real need for critical media literacy. As mentioned above, when constructing the narrative of young people, and specifically girls and young women, there are often conflicting approaches. On one side, we see marketers and advertisers working hard to push the narrative of "girl power" and kindness. There are plethoras of books that support what it means to be a girl or how to be kind in today's world, in addition to the endless number of commercials that support the image of strong females. On the other side, as Lynn Mikel Brown[26] explains, there is often a grotesque amount of attention paid to the idea of "girlfighting". This attention to "girlfighting" runs in direct contradiction to the push for kindness and empowerment. How can girls and women be kind and lift each other up if they are constantly fighting? This is a prime example of the ways in which narratives are created to fit the image one wants to project. Brown pushes back on this narrative, writing that girls and women are often told to "be nice", which is often simply code for be passive, be feminine, be less angry, etc. Instead of telling girls to be nice, Brown suggests we instead encourage them to identify their own feelings and the catalysts that make them feel that way. She goes on to support the idea of bringing media criticism into the classroom so that girls and young women can question imagery, media, and product messages. This approach is not only beneficial for the students, but Brown mentions that educators can benefit from this approach as well, as many are often not educated on current issues involving girls, so instead they fall back on the stereotypical messages about what it means to be a girl.

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[25] LESKO, N. et al.: The Promises of Empowered Girls. In WYN, J., CAHILL, H. (eds.): *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies.* NY : Springer, 2015, p. 39.

[26] See: BROWN, L. M.: *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls.* NY : NYU Press, 2004.

However, what it means to be a girl seems to be subject to a variety of conflicting messages. As mentioned above, Brown[27] posits that being a girl is framed as being in constant conflict with other girls. However, as marketing would have you believe, being a girl means being empowered and being kind, but definitely not being a feminist. Yes, producers of apparel want to project the image of strong women and yes, producers of feminine products want to bolster the idea of taking ownership over what it means to do something "like a girl", but they all fall short of sharing or celebrating an explicitly feminist message. Part of this, as Sandra Chang-Kredl[28] explains is because girls are seen as "media commodities". She writes: *"The process of appropriating a social movement (such as girl power) into capitalist, mainstream media requires a watering down of the movement so that its commodification can mean something to all."* With that said, we see again how the concept of girl power is more about selling merchandise and less about feminism.

For most advertisers, feminism is a dirty word, and one they will not explicitly use in their advertising. Emilie Zaslow[29] examined this idea in the text *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*. Zaslow explains how media and marketers simply use diluted ideas of feminism and, when situated in a neoliberal world, become more about individual change or status, rather than about a collective group working together to embrace and uphold ideas of feminism. Interestingly, Zaslow learned that participants in a study she conducted had two conflicting concepts of what it means to be a feminist. The young women in her study described being a feminist as either an active role or a performative role. When in an active role, feminists fight for equal rights for women; however, in a performative role, women and girls must be completely independent and self-sufficient. These conflicting ideas of what it means to be a feminist demonstrates the power and influence media has in how this identity is constructed and understood, and also speaks to how neoliberalism's conception of the individual above all now even plays a role in how people see and define the idea and practice of feminism.

This notion of how media and marketing portray the idea of feminism matters, as there appears to be a conflation of the concepts of feminism and girl power. As mentioned above, Becky Swanson, executive creator at Leo Burnett, made clear that it simply is not popular to talk about feminism anymore. However, for these major marketing firms, apparently it is acceptable to use the phrase girl power and conflate this with working to empower and protect women and girls in the same way that feminist activism is working to elevate all women. Additionally, when girl power messages in the form of products and advertising often sit side-by-side with products perpetuating constant kindness, not only have marketers drastically watered-down concepts of feminism, but they have also aligned girl power with kindness, which as discussed earlier is often code for being meek and quiet. When the core concepts of a movement that is aimed at equity is diminished to oversimplified ideas of girl power or kindness without any real fight behind them, the media has now taken a necessary message and bastardized it for profit.

3 Theoretical Framework

I use two main theories to frame the understanding of the commodification of kindness and girl power. The first, critical media literacy, offers a critical lens through which to view various forms of texts and media. This approach to literacy suggests a need to critically question and analyze the messages and dominant voices that are portrayed in all types of texts, working to understand and analyze elements of power. The issue of power leads to the lens of neoliberalism, as folx

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[27] See: ROWN, L. M.: *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls.* NY : NYU Press, 2004.
[28] CHANG-KREDL, S.: "The Toughest Chick in the Alien World": "Girl Power" and the Cartoon Network. In MACEDO, D., STEINBERG, S. (eds.): *Media Literacy.* NY : Peter Lang, 2009, p. 397.
[29] See: ZASLOW, E.: *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture.* NY : Palgrave, Macmillan, 2009.

in the neoliberal world no longer use their individual power as a means of helping others and building community, but instead they take an "all people for themselves" attitude that breaks down a communal approach to living and instead embraces a capitalist approach.

Critical Media Literacy

Marcel Danesi[30] explained that *"the spread of youth culture as a 'cool culture' is often explained as a commodification of youth by the media, advertising, and marketing industries".* When one examines the ways in which the media advertises specifically to children, it becomes clear that it is no coincidence that companies capitalize on buying power as a means of seemingly celebrating women and girls. With that in mind, the approach to this paper was a contextual analysis of artifacts, viewed through the lens of critical media literacy in a neoliberal world. When one looks at Danesi's comment regarding how youth has been commodified by media, combined with Ernest Morrell's[31] remarks that *"media are, for today's youth, their primary cultural influence, surpassing the family and the school"*, it should become clear that different forms of media, including commercials and advertising, need to be inspected through the lens of critical media literacy. Without this inspection, parents, students, and educators run the risk of wholly embracing the messages with which they are inundated on a daily basis.

Critical media literacy, while not addressed in curriculum standards in the United States, is a method of looking at the dominant discourse found in all types of media. Its goal is to question and critique media messages, all while focusing on the idea of who has power and who does not. Who is represented and who is not? Who has a voice and who does not? Specifically, Kellner and Share[32] defined critical media literacy as an approach to teaching literacy that *"focuses on ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality; incorporating alternative media production; and expanding textual analysis to include issues of social context, control, resistance, and pleasure".* As Kellner and Share's definition articulates, this approach focuses on elements of power, questioning, and critical analysis. This means that viewers have to see themselves as active participants with the different forms of media, rather than as passive onlookers. People must critically question all of the various texts that they interact with if they are to begin to understand the power that is inherent in media. This is especially critical when big corporations are using their voice supposedly to empower girls and women – is this really the goal, or is this a great distraction to help sell goods?

Kellner and Share continued their work with critical media literacy in their 2019 text, *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education.[33]* In this text, the authors provide a thorough breakdown of what critical media literacy is and is not, how the politics of representation play a role in critical media literacy, and what this theory looks like when it is put into practice. While the authors acknowledge that critical media literacy is still a relatively new concept in education, they work to define six key conceptual understandings that can act as a guide for both educators and students. These six conceptual understandings are social construction, language and semiotics, audience and positionality, politics of representation, production and institution, and finally, social and environmental justice. Critical questions can help support these understandings in order to guide teachers and their students in deconstructing different forms of text and media and thinking critically about the material that they interact with on a regular basis.

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30   DANESI, M. The Symbolism of Cool in Adolescence and Youth Culture. In IBRAHAM, A., STEINBERG, S. (eds.): *Critical Youth Studies Reader.* NY: Peter Lang, 2014, p. 38

31   MORRELL, E.: *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation.* NY : Routledge, 2008, p. 156.

32   KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: Critical Media Literacy is Not an Option. In *Learning Inquiry,* 2007, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 62.

33   KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education.* MA : Brill Publishing, 2019, p. 6.

While critical media literacy works to teach students *"to learn from media, to resist media manipulation, and to use media materials in constructive ways,"* this is not the only purpose that critical media literacy serves. In addition to these skills, critical media literacy also encourages students to become active participants in different forms of media and to use this participation as a way to both understand the world and to be a part of a democratic society. By helping people think critically and find their voice, these skills can be the building blocks for becoming active, critically conscious citizens in a democratic world.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberal policies and different modes of control have been embedded in our society for years and they have aided in making the public compliant and pliable. Because the neoliberal mindset has become so commonplace, adults often unknowingly pass on these policies and practices to young people. Neoliberal ideas include an "every man for himself" mentality, along with the commodification of everything and a rampant level of consumption. In a neoliberal world, corporations and banks hold political power and power is concentrated in the hands of few. In addition to power aggregating in the hands of few, under neoliberalism, social services are slashed and we see an irrational dismissal of ideas such as *"fairness, quality of life, and how we create a sustainable future".*[34] According to neoliberal beliefs and practices, hardships become a result of individual choice and lack of effort, instead of an epidemic of the failing system. Because these hardships are a result of lifestyle choices, the ill fate of certain people is decidedly deserved and should have to be faced by the individual. This focus on the individual also aligns with the concept of individual success – if someone is kind or powerful, it must be due to something inherent in that individual, rather than societal structures that may aim to develop those characteristics.

Under the neoliberal regime, there is no moral obligation to care for those who cannot care for themselves or to provide quality schooling or services to those who are undesirable. Either these institutions then cease to exist in specific communities, or they continue to exist at a subpar level. Henry Giroux[35] explains in Truth Out:

As these institutions vanish – from public schools to health care centers – there is also a serious erosion of the discourses of community, justice, equality, public values, and the common good. One does not have to look too far to see what happens in America's neoliberal educational culture to see how ruthlessly the inequality of wealth, income, and power bears down on those young people and brave teachers who are struggling every day to save the schools, unions, and modes of pedagogy that offer hope at a time when schools have become just another commodity, students are reduced to clients or disposable populations, and teachers and their unions are demonized.

When the only moral imperative that exists anymore is that of neoliberalism, it should become clear that people no longer mean anything to those who hold the power. With that said, while an individual as a human being may no longer mean anything, a person's buying power most certainly does – so while those who ascribe to the neoliberal belief system do not care at all about girl power or kindness, they are more than happy to sell it to anyone who has the means.

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[34] HURSH, D.: The Crisis in Urban Education: Resisting Neoliberal Policies and Forging Democratic Possibilities. In *Educational Researcher,* 2006, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 34.

[35] GIROUX, H.: *Marching in Chicago: Resisting Rahm Emanuel's Neoliberal Savagery.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://truthout.org/articles/marching-in-chicago-resisting-rahm-emanuels-neoliberal-savagery/>.

4 Data Sources, Methods and Methodology

The data sources for this paper are a combination of media sources, some in print form and others in video form. These data sources support the idea that the commodification of kindness and 'girl power' is everywhere and that these messages often go unquestioned or worse, celebrated blindly. Numerous YouTube videos archive commercials from some of the largest companies that appear to have embraced a celebration of female strength. I examined T-shirts in girls' clothing sections from two stores in addition to viewing and analyzing commercials for popular companies. Because T-shirts are a form of self-expression, with seemingly a shirt to represent any cause or idea, they are a reasonable choice when examining the commodification of kindness and girl power. Consumers have the decision-making power to purchase items that reflect their personal belief systems, and companies are looking to capitalize on that, in order to make a profit. There is an additional layer here as well, since the clothes that young children wear are often chosen, or at least purchased, by an adult.

When gathering data sources for this study, I first looked at the top clothing companies in America,[36] followed by the ten biggest retail companies in America.[37] Based on the information, I chose to focus on Target (10th biggest retail company) and Old Navy (third biggest clothing company). These two stores provide affordable alternatives to some of the other, more expensive stores that earned places on these lists. With the stores chosen, I completed searches that first focused on girls' clothing, then on graphic T-shirts, as these pieces of clothing speak to the messaging I discuss in this paper. It is important to note that these results are specific to one small moment in time (October 2020), as online merchandising changes rapidly. However, this search does parallel the results found in an initial search conducted previously. Table 1 shows the data sources that were included in this analysis sold under the girl label and Table 2 shows the data sources that were included in this analysis and sold under the boy label.

Store	Original Number of Artifacts	Artifacts Remaining after Exclusion Criteria	Number with Messages in Question	% of Artifacts with Messages in Question
Target	407	96	12	12.5
Old Navy	155	88	19	21.6

TABLE 1: *Data Sources for Analysis, Labeled "Girl" on Shopping Site*
Source: own processing, 2022.

Store	Original Number ofArtifacts	Artifacts Remaining after ExclusionCriteria	Number with Messages in Question	% of Artifacts with Messages in Question
Target	625	92	7	7.6
Old Navy	174	204	1	0.5

TABLE 2: *Data Sources for Analysis, Labeled "Boy" on Shopping Site*
Source: own processing, 2022.

When determining inclusion and exclusion criteria, the focal point was the messaging on the shirt, and whether or not it perpetuated either a "girl power" message or one focused on being kind. With that in mind, inclusion criteria included the words "girl", "strong", "kind", "love", and "peace". Exclusion criteria included messages focused on voting, holidays, or corporate- owned characters.

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[36] HANBURY, M.: *These are the Biggest Clothing Companies in America.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/biggest-clothing-companies-in-america-2018-10>.

[37] JOHNSTON, M.: *10 Biggest Retail Companies.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www. investopedia.com/articles/markets/122415/worlds-top-10-retailers-wmt-cost.asp>.

Along with an analysis of girls' T-shirts, I also conducted an analysis of popular commercials, specifically from brands who aired longer spots during the 2015 Super Bowl. This particular Super Bowl had the largest audience of all time, with 114.4 million viewers (Basch, Kernan, & Reeves, 2016)[38] and 30-second advertising spots were priced at nearly 4.5 million dollars. This means that the companies who chose to advertise during this game had a vast audience and were willing to spend a large amount of money in order to get their message out. There were three major brands that year that put a spotlight on girls and women: Always, Dove, and Nike. In addition to these brands being present during the Super Bowl, they also have a large social media presence. When inspecting their presence on YouTube, it was possible to find archived commercials, as well as playlists each company had devoted to a message of 'girl power'. Table 3 illustrates the sources found on YouTube.

Company	Total Videos	Total Playlists	Number with Messages in Question	% of Artifacts with Messages in Question
Always	83	15	22	26.5
Dove	189	26	32	16.9
Nike[39]	180	25	6	3.3%

TABLE 3: *Commercials viewed for analysis (Posted 2014 - 2020)*
Source: own processing, 2022.

5 Results

I conducted a contextual analysis of artifacts as a method for analyzing and questioning the messages – both implicit and explicit – that are found in different forms of media marketing. Contextual analysis is an approach that involves looking at texts in all forms and asking questions such as what does the text reveal about itself or its audience, or what was the author's intention?[40] This type of analysis allows the research to characterize the text and consider circumstances around the text. These types of questions go hand-in-hand with the approach to critical media literacy that was described earlier in the paper. During the viewing and reading of these materials, overt and covert categories were used as a way of analyzing the different texts. Overt categories were composed of explicit messages regarding kindness and female strength. The covert categories included stereotypes regarding what it means to be female. I used Carspecken's [41] concept of low-level coding to help generate themes and patterns that were found in the different texts.

When I examined the T-shirts marketed towards girls, it was evident that there is a deliberate focus on marketing ideas of kindness and strength towards them. For example, in the two stores examined, after exclusionary criteria were put in place, 12.5% of the shirts included these messages at one store, while the other store had 21.6% of the shirts with a message supporting girl power, kindness, or a similar idea. This is in direct contrast to just 0.5% and 7.6% respectively of boys' shirts at those same stores. Words and images associated with love, peace, kindness, and strength were emblazoned on the girls' shirts at both stores, while one store boasted just a single boys' shirt that mentioned kindness.

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[38] See: BASCH, C. et al.: Family Fun or a Cultural Free-For-All? A Critique of the 2015 National Football League Super Bowl Commercials. In *Health Promotion Perspectives,* 2016, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 37-44.

[39] Author note: The Better for It Campaign was not found on Nike's YouTube page, but rather only found when searching for Better for It.

[40] BEHRENDT, S.: *Using Contextual Analysis to Evaluate Texts.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <http://english.unl.edu/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html>.

[41] See: CARSPECKEN, P. F.: *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide.* NY : Routledge, 1996.

In addition to the high percentage of T-shirts marketed towards girls that push the ideas of kindness and girl power, there was also a high percentage of videos that supported these messages. Percentages of video messaging that perpetuated these ideas are even higher than the percentages of the T-shirts embracing these ideas for two of the three companies analyzed. Always devotes more than one fourth of its videos on YouTube to messages of female empowerment or kindness, while Dove devotes almost one fifth. These findings indicate the amount of resources big brands are willing to use in order to sell ideas of girl power and kindness.

6 Discussion

The analysis of data brings up three main points for discussion, all of which play a role in the continued commodification of female empowerment. First, as female empowerment continues to be commodified, feminist ideas become a slogan, rather than a movement. Next, by commodifying the idea of girl power, girls and women are recognized as consumers, rather than as empowered people. Finally, structural barriers and inequities that are already in place are not challenged by messages found on T-shirts and mugs, or in commercials and YouTube videos.

Marketing

While one could argue there is a need for these positive messages, and while society must do a better job supporting and uplifting women and girls, I argue that it is important to question why these messages have become commodified, rather than deeply entrenched in societal structures and institutions. When girl power is repeatedly commodified, feminist ideals become a slogan, rather than a movement. Not only that, but we also must question what the data showed: the concept of kindness is more heavily marketed towards girls and women, often unquestioningly.

I assert that the ways in which advertisers are going about this push for "girl power", kindness, and equality reeks of commercialism and neoliberalism. A prime example of this is the mega-brand Nike, who has aired numerous commercials linked to the idea of "girl power". While these videos are meant to be inspiring, many of them often are questionable in the messages they are sending. One of the most troubling, however, is the one called "Better for It – Inner Thoughts",[42] which aired in 2014. While it is meant to show that women are "better for it" after working out, the commercial really just airs the "inner thoughts" of the women involved – most of which are catty, superficial, or full of self-doubt. The most glaring one that comes to mind is a woman in a spin class who remarks as a group of women joins the class, *"Oh good, a bunch of models right in front of me."* Nike also presents a woman lifting free weights, saying in her head, *"Don't mind me with my baby weights and my baby arms."* If this is meant to be a strong indication of what it means to be powerful and confident, then it appears as though marketers have a skewed view of what these terms mean as they relate to women. Rather than empowerment being about lifting each other up, it instead remains a slogan.

Even more interesting than the "inner thoughts" that were shared in these ads is the thought-process that went into creating them. According to Roo Ciambriello,[43] in an April 14, 2015 publication of Ad Week, Nike views this campaign as, *"the less aggressive (but maybe equally motivating) alternative to "Just do it".* I contend this suggests a stereotypical view of the female experience. Aren't these advertisements trying to undo the notion that girls and

42 *Better for It: Inner Thoughts.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WF_HqZrrx0c>.

43 CIAMBRELLO, R.: *Nike Turns Can't into Can in its Largest Women's Campaign Ever.* [online]. [2015-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.adweek.com/creativity/nike-turns-cant-can-its-largest-womens-campaign-ever-164059/>.

women need to be soft and passive? If so, what was it that made Nike and their creative team believe that women needed a less aggressive approach to advertising? Again, are these media sources trying to empower women and promote being strong and powerful, or are they trying to sell merchandise? While the obvious point of marketing is to make money and elevate brand recognition, this should not come at the expense of diluting ideas of feminism and power.

In addition to the Nike ad, the 2015 Super Bowl featured an ad by Always, a company that produces feminine care products. This advertisement worked to question what it means to do anything, "like a girl".[44] At first glance, it felt truly educative, the way that the directors and producers on set spoke to the boys about whether or not their sister or their mom runs or fights in the same ridiculous way that they had just mimed. At first glance, this video appeared to be genuinely pushing for girls and women to be recognized for being strong, brilliant, and capable. After some time passed, however, I had to revisit this initial reaction and question what was at play here. Why did it take a huge feminine care product brand and a prime slot in the Super Bowl to support this message? Where has this support always been?

Since then, I have not seen similar ads come out of the Always brand, at least not on mainstream television or during prime marketing times. There was, however, one advertisement in 2016 that despaired about how emojis do not reflect the lives of girls (Emojis, 2016).[45] The video begins with girls talking about the emojis they like to use, with one of the first statements being about the "poop emoji". After this discussion, the girls scroll through their phones, looking at the emojis available to them. Some mention that most of the girl emojis are wearing pink while others complain that there are not enough women in the jobs section of their emojis. The text laid over the video states that emojis limit girls to stereotypes, and then a narrator asks the participants in the video what types of emojis they would like to see. The video bordered on ridiculous, and the remarks in the comments section illustrated that many who watched the video ended up slamming the idea of feminism as catty and ridiculous, due to this advertisement. Rather than promote an idea of feminism, even a soft version of feminism, the advertisement instead brought ridicule. I argue that this video missed the mark on trying to promote what life is #likeagirl, and in the process, did damage to the other struggles for equity and equality that women and girls are fighting. This reiterates the idea that when "girl power" is commodified, feminist ideas become a slogan or catchphrase, rather than a movement.

While there are other parts to the Always "Like a Girl" videos, not many of them have reached the mainstream media, so it appears as though Always is not invested in promoting images of strong, powerful females. Instead, it is all about the bottom line – selling their product to whomever may have seen the commercial and felt moved by it. This is evidenced by the fact that this entire marketing campaign (case study:always#like a girl, n.d.)[46] grew out of the need to make Always relevant as a brand to millennials. Always saw their competitors using social media as a way to draw the attention of millennial girls, so they felt the need to reach that audience in a new way. Ian Heinig[47] notes that millennials represent nearly 30% of the US population as well as a lifetime value of $10 trillion, so it makes sense that a corporation would want to reach that segment of the market. The use of YouTube videos for marketing was born out of that need, and since this campaign started, it has won Emmy awards, as well as advertising awards. While the message may be well intended, it is steeped in consumption and commodification.

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[44] *Like a Girl*. [Full Video]. [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWYDTs>.

[45] *Like a Girl: Girl Emojis*. [Full Video]. [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXuYP0XlHC4>.

[46] *Always #LikeaGirl*. [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.dandad.org/en/d-ad-always-like-a-girl-campaign-case-study-insights/>.

[47] HEINIG, I.: *5 Effective Ways to Advertise to Millennials*. [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://themanifest.com/advertising/5-effective-ways-advertise-millennials>.

As women and girls continue to be viewed for their buying power, there is another main point for discussion; namely, the idea that dominant structures and hegemonic ideas about girls and women are not challenged by the messages in products and commercials. An example of this type of advertising speaks to the ways in which big brands continue to perpetuate stereotyped views of what it means to be beautiful. While Dove's "Real Beauty Sketches"[48] was seeking to get the message across that 'you are more beautiful than you think', I argue instead that it was off-base, focusing solely on hegemonic notions of beauty and the ways that others see girls and women, rather than promoting messages about female strength. The ad features a sketch artist who does not physically see the women, but who creates two sketches of them – one based on the ways in which the women describe themselves and the other based on the ways someone who met them that day describes them. Toward the end of the video, a woman remarks, *"I have some work to do on myself"* and then the male interview voice asks her if she thinks she is more beautiful than she says. Another woman comments that she looks so 'fat' in the sketch that was based on her description, while another mentions how tired she looks in her first sketch. Again, while advocating for body confidence is important, I contend this advertisement is not doing anything to promote body positivity or female empowerment. Instead, it gets viewers to tear up and make an emotional connection to the women in the video, which is ideal for selling products.

This leads to a final point of discussion: by commodifying girl power, girls and women are recognized as consumers, but are they actually being empowered? Since many of these videos claim to promote girl power and equality of the sexes, it is worth examining who is behind them. After all, if the message is that we are looking for equality for all and seeking to amplify the voices of women, then women should be the driving forces behind this marketing. When researching the Always "Like a Girl" campaign, I found that a female documentary filmmaker, Lauren Greenfield, was asked to be producer of the film. It was encouraging to see a female behind the camera in this regard. However, a man named John Casey produced the Dove commercials that worked with the idea of real beauty and the creative lead was also a man – Anselmo Ramos.[49] Additionally, the creative directors behind all of Nike's "Better for It" commercials are all men: Alberto Ponte, Ryan O'Rourke, and Dan Viens.[50] Again, if the purpose is to center the voices and experiences of life as a female, why are three men the ones in charge of creative direction? If big name companies do not have women on the creative team or behind the camera of advertisements that intend to build up women and girls, center their voices and experiences, and give them the chance to be recognized for their strength and ability, then these companies are not as invested in female empowerment as they claim to be. Kat Gordon, founder of the 3% Conference echoed this thought when she said: *"As someone who truly cares about female leadership, I'd rather you put someone on your board than pay lip service to this issue."*[51]

In addition to commercial advertising, print advertising and the clothes available for young girls and women all echo the idea of kindness and 'girl power' being in style right now. A search of two popular stores illustrates this idea. At one store, of the 155 graphic T-shirts for sale, 20 of the shirts have a message regarding female strength or kindness, including the simple

48 *Dove Real Beauty Sketches: You're More Beautiful Than You Think.* [Full video]. [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=litXW9lUauE>.

49 GROSE, J.: *The Story Behind Dove's Mega Viral "Real Beauty Sketches" Campaign.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.fastcompany.com/1682823/the-story-behind-doves-mega-viral-real-beauty-sketches-campaign>.

50 CIAMBRELLO, R.: *Nike Turns Can't into Can in its Largest Women's Campaign Ever.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://www.adweek.com/creativity/nike-turns-cant-can-its-largest-womens-campaign-ever-164059/>.

51 ZMUDA, N., DIAZ, A. C.: *Female Empowerment in Ads: Soft Feminism or Soft Soap? Go-Girl Marketing is the Hot New Trend. But are These Ads Culture-Changing or Simply 'Pinkwashing'?* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/marketers-soft-feminism/294740>.

"Girls Rule" in all capital letters, covered in sequins and "Girls Empower Girls" in hot pink, capital letters (Old Navy).[52] At another, shoppers find messages such as "Fueled by Kindness" or "A Little Kindness Can Change Everything" as just two of many options offered on young girls' T-shirts (Target).[53] Interestingly, a look at boys' T-shirts at the same stores reveal just one "Be Kind" shirt at the first store, and seven at the second. Again, while all of these messages are admirable and important, and while the world has seen action in the movements such as #MeToo or the taking down of Dr. Larry Nassar, the push for power and strength cannot simply skim the surface. When these messages stay surface level, they only act to bastardize ideas of feminism, fail to challenge the dominant discourse, and continue to see women and girls solely as consumers.

When one digs a bit deeper into the strategies and mindsets of big brands and their marketing strategies, it becomes clear that the path to female empowerment is not an altruistic one. As mentioned earlier, the "Like a Girl" campaign that Always began grew out of the need to make the brand recognizable to millennials. Additionally, Nike was looking for brand loyalists by appealing to women's interests in sports and Dove was looking to redefine beauty as a means of making an emotional connection with women and thus, amplifying their products. While companies may be operating under the guise of supporting women, make no mistake – they actively choose to soften their language and not push too far in one direction, to avoid alienating any of their other customers. As mentioned earlier, advertisers and marketers consider "feminism" a dirty word and companies will not run the risk of losing revenue in order to explicitly support female empowerment and equality. These major corporations are less concerned with supporting and uplifting women and more concerned with keeping as large of a customer base possible, as happy as possible.

Critical Media Literacy in the Classroom

When thinking about critical media literacy in the classroom, it is clear that schools in the United States do not implement these skills and practices, nor are teachers being adequately prepared to teach these concepts. While Canada mandates media literacy in every grade from 1-12,[54] the same is not true for students in the United States. Stuhlman and Silverblatt[55] found a rise in media literacy courses offered at the university level, but this does not seem to trickle down into PK-12 education for most students. One can speculate about why US schools do not teach these skills regularly, but there is not one simple answer. For example, many teachers do not feel equipped to address these topics; these skills are not found in curriculum standards, so they get overlooked; or some educators find the idea of critical media literacy to be 'political' and thus do not want to address it in their classrooms. However, while there are some teachers not doing this work in their classrooms, many others are working to implement critical media literacy practices in their classrooms and creating meaningful, thoughtful moments for their students in the process.

One example is the work done by Geralyn Bywater McLaughlin. She became aware of how heavily popular culture appeared to be influencing her students, so she chose to bring it into her classroom. In her chapter, "Six, Going on Sixteen", Bywater McLaughlin recounts her years as an early elementary school teacher and how she saw first-hand the deep impact that popular culture – specifically advertising – had on her very young students. She recounts stories of children fighting over wearing the "right" brand of sneakers and explains to her

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52 *Old Navy.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://oldnavy.com>.

53 *Target.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://target.com>.

54 See: KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education.* MA : Brill Publishing, 2019.

55 See: STUHLMAN, L., SILVERBLATT, A.: *Media Literacy in U.S. Institutions of Higher Education: Survey to Explore the Depth and Breadth of Media Literacy Education.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/>.

readers how *"child development experts now work with marketing firms to optimize the impact of commercials according to the developmental stage of the target audience".* [56] This focused, deliberate approach to targeting kids through advertising results in childhoods being shaped by corporations and value being assigned to young children and teens based on what brands they can wear, all without the benefits of critical media literacy to help them think about the constant media messages that surround them.

Instead of ignoring what she was seeing, Bywater chose to explore the media imagery and texts her students were bringing into the classroom regarding stereotyped views of toys and advertising messages about the "right" brands to wear. She worked with colleagues to form a media study group and then worked across the school to encourage families and her peers to inspect the influence that media has in their lives and to take a step back to think about how media influences might be shaping their worlds and views. Through this work, Bywater was able to help her students think critically about the imagery they were interacting with, help families engage in activities that did not involve a screen or popular culture, and encourage her peers to consider how media was a constant force in the lives of their students and think about how to inspect those messages in the classroom.

As another example, Bakari Chavanu found similar issues with advertising and a lack of criticality in his own classroom, this time a high school classroom. When working with 11th graders, Chavanu took an approach to literacy that not nearly enough students get to experience; he wrote a unit based on critical media literacy and advertising. While working with his students to deconstruct advertising practices, they questioned what messages advertisements perpetuated, the techniques advertisers use to sell products, and even issues of race, gender, and class as they appear in advertising. Chavanu's students were *"reluctant to admit advertising's influence on their own values and decisions as consumers"*, [57] which is common, given the lack of critical media literacy instruction in both formal and informal education. However, by the end of the unit, Chavanu felt the unit had been successful, and that his students started to see themselves as *"critically conscious citizens rather than manipulated consumers".* [58]

While these two examples represent just a small sample of how critical media literacy can be brought into the classroom, there are options for every grade level and every content area. The point is that teachers need to be interacting with students in a way that views them as active thinkers, rather than passive consumers. By drawing students into conversation about the media they interact with, the images they see, and the messages they receive, teachers can draw the concepts of critical media literacy into every classroom. When working with students in the area of critical media literacy, it is imperative that educators must first be media literate themselves. This includes being *"prepared with a framework and pedagogy to guide their students to critically question and create alternatives to the messages they are seeing, hearing, and using every day".* [59] While this may feel challenging when teachers are already under so much pressure, the reality is that implementing critical media literacy in classrooms can help support many of the Common Core State Standards. [60] These practices open the door to so many possibilities for both students and teachers at a time when critical thinking is of the utmost importance.

[56] BYWATER-MCLAUGHLIN, G.: Six, Going on Sixteen. In MARSHALL, E., SENSOY, O. (eds.): *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media.* WI : Rethinking Schools, 2016, p. 31.
[57] CHAVANU, B.: *Seventeen, Self-Image, and Stereotypes*. In MARSHALL, E., SENSOY, O. (eds.): *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media.* WI : Rethinking Schools, 2016, p. 23.
[58] CHAVANU, B.: *Seventeen, Self-Image, and Stereotypes*. In MARSHALL, E., SENSOY, O. (eds.): *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media.* WI : Rethinking Schools, 2016, p. 27.
[59] KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education.* MA : Brill Publishing, 2019, p. 79.
[60] *Common Core State Standards.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSI_Math%Standards.pdf>.

This is the power inherent in critical media literacy. Many approaches to literacy are all missing the elements of power, questioning and critical analysis. Educators must move beyond that, in order to help young people learn how to be critical of the various texts that they interact with if they are to begin to understand the power that is inherent in media. We must ensure that all of our students get the chance to learn these skills and understand the ways in which media mediates their understanding of the world. This is true not only for students, but for adults as well. In today's media-saturated world, this should seem like an obvious – if not imperative – skill for all youth. Not only should schools expose students to critical media literacy, but they should also support students in becoming proficient with these skills. Unfortunately, unlike scholars and educators in places such as Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, the United States views critical media literacy as something that is seen as optional, at best and unnecessary, at worst.[61]

Considering the capacity that media has to present images and meaning to youth and, thus, to understand their world, educators must rise to the challenge of helping students understand the multicultural society that they now inhabit. Because so much of what is presented to students is either what they choose to see or what the mainstream media allows them to see, it is imperative that educators help young people become sensitized to topics that are not brought to light in the classroom, including social inequities and injustices. Critical media literacy that acknowledges media texts of all types that students are engaging with needs to be included in the formal school curriculum. Without some guidance and dialogue, the relationship that youth and media share will be one of stereotypes and discriminatory views based on gender, race, class, and sexuality. As educators work to help students manage all of this, however, it is important not to view students as being passive in this process. Children need to become active in the meaning- making process and as Beverly Daniel Tatum reminds us: *"children need to be able to recognize distorted representations, they also need to know what can be done about them".*[62] This is especially important, given how much advertising is directed towards young people. By exposing both youth and adults to critical media literacy, they can be given the opportunity to explore ideas that are not otherwise discussed with them, to work with these messages and experiment with what they mean to them and how these hegemonic and stereotypical images and messages affect their own identities and thoughts. These moments of exploration and understanding can prove very powerful in the lives of youth and allow them the freedom and agency to decide how media will affect their lives in the future.

The effect that media has on young people needs to be examined and critiqued, and that is what critical media literacy strives to do. Kellner explains that by working to teach critical media literacy in our schools, educators can work toward the goal of critiquing mainstream media and examining the ideology, power, and domination that are in play in all forms of text that young people are interacting with on a daily basis. This examination of media, technology, and even products in popular stores can then allow students to gain a greater understanding of both the reality that they are experiencing, as well as the social realities of the world around them. In this way, not only are students working to understand the ways in which they receive media and make meaning of it, but they are also becoming active members in a neoliberal society that needs to challenge the dominant discourse and the messages disseminated to the public.

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[61] See: KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: Critical Media Literacy is Not an Option. In *Learning Inquiry,* 2007, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 59-69.

[62] DANIEL-TATUM, B.: *"Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race.* NY : Basic Books, 2017, p. 49.

7 Conclusion

The key is, can advertising get to a point where women are in leadership [roles], where women's perspectives inform the ads, and the products aren't actively dangerous to the health, safety or equity of women? Until Donna Draper is making as many decisions over the content of advertising as Don Draper, and the products being sold don't sell women out, then this trend is nothing more than another selling tool – and that tool won't work very well in the long run.

Zmuda and Diaz[63] highlighted the work of journalist Jennifer Pozner above when they shared this message. As Pozner made clear, this trend of girl power and kindness will simply entrench itself as a marketing ploy that will eventually fizzle out when it no longer draws huge revenue. If there is no substance, no belief system, no women behind the advertising and marketing decisions, kindness and girl power will continue to be commodified, girls and women will be viewed as consumers first, and the current structures in place will fail to be challenged. However, it is important to realize that simply having a Donna Draper making decisions in the boardroom does not ensure what is necessary here; namely, an authentic engagement with girls and women, and a level of support that is intended to empower and uplift women and girls, rather than simply draw in lifelong brand loyalists.

In order to move beyond a check-listed version of gender equity and equality, there need to be efforts from schools, universities, corporations, and the media to center and uplift the voices of women and girls. Rather than commercials that share the supposed inner thoughts of women, instead more companies can follow the route of Brooks Running and Dick's Sporting Goods. Whenever a customer makes a purchase from their Empower Her line of shoes and clothes, a percent of proceeds goes to Girls on the Run, which is a non-profit organization focused on supporting girls to lead healthy lives.[64] Another example of working to empower and support women and girls in an authentic way would be to examine decision-making processes across institutions. Who has power and who does not? Who sits at the head of the table and who works in a support role? Is success and power defined as a few individuals who made it to the top, or is there collective action and support for all? It is not enough to say that a woman is present in the boardroom, as Pozner suggested. Instead, that presence needs to come with improving conditions for all females in the workplace, not just a few women who climbed the ladder. As Catherine Rottenberg reminds her reader: *"This amorphous "ambition gap" very quickly comes to stand in for inequality, radically reducing inequality to the absence of women in positions at the top."*[65] When companies continue to take a superficial or neoliberal approach to empowerment and support, they will not achieve fundamental change.

The lingering issue here is, when the neoliberal world works so pervasively to commodify and individualize everything, ideas as simple but as imperative as kindness and girl power become perverted. Rather than big brands working to support and uplift women and girls, they are instead searching for brand loyalists. Instead of working to challenge hegemonic ideas of what it means to be a girl, companies continue to see girls and women as consumers, rather than as part of a community. With this in mind, schools, parents, educators, and the mainstream media need to be mindful of the ways in which they address certain concepts. Rather than make kindness and girl power seem like something that is very in style right now, they need to continue to push for basic human decency, which includes social justice and equity in all settings. In schools, educators and administrators need to stop giving out rewards for every

63 ZMUDA, N., DIAZ, A. C.: *Female Empowerment in Ads: Soft Feminism or Soft Soap? Go-Girl Marketing is the Hot New Trend. But are These Ads Culture-Changing or Simply "Pinkwashing"?* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/marketers-soft-feminism/294740>.

64 *Empower Her Collection.* [online]. [2022-03-26]. Available at: <https://support.brooksrunning.com/hc/en-us/articles/360055848312-Empower-Her-collection->.

65 ROTTENBERG, C.: The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism. In *Cultural Studies,* 2014, Vol. 28, No. 3, p. 425.

single act of kindness and turning kindness into a competition, where kids can fight to see who displays the most acts of kindness. Instead of these approaches, educators need to continue to make these ideas explicit for children – all children, not just girls. Part of making these ideas explicit for all children lies in deep discussions about what it means to be kind and strong and powerful and how that can take on many different shapes and forms, depending on the person. Another part of this speaks to the need to teach children and adults what it means to be an ally, to raise up the voices of others, and to ensure that those who are traditionally marginalized are empowered and supported. A final part of making these ideas explicit for all who view them lies in critical media literacy, and encouraging viewers to interrogate the messages that they are bombarded by on a regular basis. Society cannot blindly buy into marketing campaigns that seem strong or equitable on the surface; there is a need to question, critique, and think about media and advertising in order to push back on commodification and challenge dominant structures. If big brands can tap into children as huge revenue, we can tap into children's hearts and minds early. And we don't need a T-shirt to do it.

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