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**Talking Back to the Teenage Girls' Magazine:
Reading, Writing and Selling *Sassy*, 1992-94**

by

Avril Archibald, B.J.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Communications

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

September 1, 1995

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**Talking Back to the Teenage Girls' Magazine:
Reading, Writing and Selling Sassy, 1992-94**

submitted by Avril Archibald, B.J.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Thesis Supervisor

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September, 1995

Abstract

This thesis articulates some of the ways *Sassy* magazine, prior to December 1994, was constructed as an "alternative," niche magazine within the market of teenage girls' magazines in the United States. It will become clear after looking at *Sassy's* history in the magazine industry, its themes and discourses, and the perspectives of some of its readers, that *Sassy* was created and produced as a magazine more "authentic" and "alternative" than its competitors while maintaining its commercial and mainstream status. In relation to its competitors, *Sassy* positioned and marketed itself as a more "cutting-edge" magazine for its inclusion and concern with feminist politics, alternative music culture and critiques of American culture. This thesis will consider those practices against a context of scholarly work on popular culture and consumerism and feminist critiques of popular female cultural forms, particularly teenage girls' magazines.

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Finally, I would like to thank the young women who participated in my focus groups. Each volunteered an afternoon to meet with a stranger just to talk about a topic that interested her. Their insights and thoughts about *Sassy* have given life to this thesis and, although they must remain anonymous, I regard them as some of my most meaningful sources.

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Introduction

Much of the discussion around popular teenage girls' magazines has centred around debates over the ideological effects of such texts upon their readers. Mainstream media analyses and feminist cultural studies analyses of teenage girls' magazines have tended to argue that these magazines reproduce gender inequality and patriarchal power relations. Conversely, much of the audience-based theory has sought to demonstrate that readers are capable of undermining or subverting such meanings. Each of these positions more or less locates cultural significance at the level of either the producer or the consumer. My argument is that neither position fully accounts for the significance and complexity of a magazine such as *Sassy*, and it was my own difficulty with this that led me to investigate this topic of research.

Sassy magazine is a mainstream teenage girls' magazine that has been published in the United States since 1988.¹ While I missed the first few years of *Sassy* (graduating from high-school the year it was first published, I had moved on to the more "grown-up" texts of *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle*), I became intrigued with it in my early twenties. Here was a magazine that was instantly identifiable as a teenage girls'

¹*Sassy* was sold to a new publisher in October 1994 and was changed substantially, a topic I discuss later. All references to *Sassy* in this thesis refer to the magazine prior to this sale, unless otherwise indicated.

magazine, yet seemed to break many of the rules cardinal to its genre. It had an annual beauty contest where readers were judged not for their looks, but for their "sassiness" instead. It gave reasons why "being female in America still stinks big time" ("9 things about America that make us want to scream and throw stuff," August 1991), and encouraged its audience to ignore the advice they read in *Seventeen* and *YM*. And once a year it had teenage readers produce an entire issue of *Sassy*, replacing all the regular staff. *Sassy* was unusual for the topics it adopted and for the way it reformulated the relationship between the teen magazine and the female teenage reader.

A number of other things about the magazine interested me, including the ease with which it combined overtly feminist politics with a concern for beauty, fashion and the prom. It didn't reject norms of beauty, but rather embraced them along with the belief that it was not only acceptable for girls and young women to be feminists, but that this was a badge of honour. And while *Sassy* as a mass-market, mainstream magazine is clearly aligned with commercial interests and is reproductive of a discourse of consumerism, it is nonetheless mediated through a leftist or "alternative" sensibility. Articles like the ones critical of the Gulf War and the anti-abortion movement were common, and *Sassy* would more often praise obscure, alternative rock bands than profile famous rock stars. Understanding these

contradictions and complexities became the motivation and basis for this thesis — what to make of *Sassy*?

It soon became clear to me that feminist cultural critiques of mass-market women's and teenage girls' magazines — the most obvious body of research to examine — were not fully able to account for this particular cultural commodity. Traditionally this field has been concerned with demonstrating the harm of teenage magazines which reproduce sex-role stereotypes or ideologies of patriarchy. Even if this was the case for *Sassy*, the magazine is unusual in that it includes feminist discourses. Likewise, I found this research to be highly resistant to the idea that teenage girls' magazines could either be open to feminist discourses or that they could do so without "corrupting" feminism or being secretly "anti-feminist." I also found little examination of the "teenage" in teenage girls' magazines; most often these accounts privilege the feminine without examining how the feminine is mediated through adolescence. Thus, while these sources have been invaluable to my work, I have attempted to look beyond their limitations and account for *Sassy* in other, non-obvious ways.

To begin with, I wanted to avoid an approach that would, as Charlotte Brundson describes it, demonstrate of the object of study "why it is stupid to like it" (Brundson 1991, 376). Nor is my goal to "recuperate" *Sassy* or "prove" it is a superior magazine for teenage girls. Instead, I

prefer to begin with the assumption that popular culture is "neither intrinsically 'progressive' nor 'reactionary,' but highly contradictory" (Petro 1986, 17). I hope to use *Sassy* as an illustration of this ambiguity, to demonstrate a level of complexity not usually attributed to popular texts.

I have tried to understand *Sassy* as a negotiated text, whose significance is always relational. Its meaning is dependent upon the existence of a "history" of other texts — *Sassy* is only "unusual" in relation to other teenage girls' magazines to the extent that it is "typical" in relation to "more" alternative texts. The "talking back" I refer to in my title is not only a gloss on the word "sassy," but is a reference to the way in which the magazine may be seen to both acknowledge and revise the teenage girls' magazine.

Also central to my analysis is the understanding that at no one single "moment" (in *Sassy's* production, as text, in its reception) is there a stable or uniform meaning. Annette Kuhn provides an account of popular texts that is useful to this analysis:

Representations, contexts, audiences and spectators [may be] seen as a series of interconnected social discourses, certain discourses possessing greater constitutive authority at specific moments than others. Such a model permits relative autonomy for the operations of texts, readings and contexts, and also allows for contradictions, oppositional readings and varying degrees of discursive authority. (Kuhn 1987, 347).

I have attempted to construct an analysis that is guided by such an understanding. For example, not only do I examine

the magazine's history of production and the discourses within its text, I include comments gathered from readers of the magazine in the course of my own ethnographic research. While this thesis does not undertake a specific analysis of these readers or their comments, I have included them as examples of some readers' articulations of particular discourses found in *Sassy*.

The body of this thesis is divided over five chapters. Chapter one, the literature review, looks at the diverse research that informs my study of *Sassy*. Primarily this includes the work to date around teenage femininity and popular culture, magazines for teenage girls, the debates around subculture and the commodification of mass culture, and the debates around postfeminism and popular culture. I end this chapter with a review of my approach and a detailed research plan.

Chapter two examines the industry context and history of *Sassy* magazine. It looks at the conditions and circumstances within the magazine industry in the late 1980s that allowed the creation of a magazine like *Sassy*. It details *Sassy's* publishing history, telling the "story" of *Sassy's* creation, changes in ownership and final sale. Lastly, I have attempted to construct a sense of the sometimes contradictory ways *Sassy* was conceived and imagined by its publishers, advertisers, writing and editorial staff, and other industry professionals, business writers and journalists.

My third chapter begins an analysis of the discourses of *Sassy*. I attempt to formulate a way of understanding of what I call the magazine's "overarching" discourse, that of authenticity. This discourse has great resonance in many commercial, popular texts of the 20th century, particularly popular music, and for this reason I have turned to some of the cultural studies accounts of popular music. I begin this analysis by considering the way the magazine positions itself as a more authentic magazine for teenage girls through its language and tone.

The fourth chapter examines the magazine's oscillation between the alternative and the mainstream. In particular, I will examine the discourses of consumerism and anti-commercialism as they manifest in the articles on social issues, the magazine's problematizing of mainstream journalistic practices, and the coverage of alternative music and culture.

My last chapter is an examination the discourses of feminism and femininity as they appear in *Sassy*. I have sought to demonstrate that the two are not articulated as opposed or antithetical; rather, feminism and certain forms of femininity are seen as a "natural" pursuit for the "sassy girl." Using examples of beauty and fashion in the magazine I hope to show that within *Sassy* there is a degree of fluidity in the way femininity comes to be understood as not necessarily anti-feminist or bound to patriarchy.

I

Literature Review

This chapter will survey work that is concerned with teenage girls' magazines and the related subjects of adolescent femininity and consumer culture. It is an overview of three trajectories of research that relate to this thesis: the seminal "*Jackie* debate," in which a number of ideas about teenage girls' magazines converge; the research regarding teenage femininity and commodity culture; and last, commentaries on the appearance of discourses of feminism within mainstream women's and teenage girls' magazines.

The *Jackie* Debate

I begin by looking at the scholarly debate around *Jackie* magazine, a text that has received substantial critical attention from British sociologists and feminist scholars. *Jackie* is a British magazine for pre-adolescent to teenage girls that has been published by D.C. Thompson since 1964. *Jackie* is very much a recognized part of the British cultural landscape (much the same way *Seventeen* is the quintessential teen magazine in the United States), and until the mid-1980s, out-sold the teen-magazine market with its successful combination of feature stories, beauty tips, pop-star news, and romance picture (later photo) stories.¹

Today, *Jackie* no longer dominates the British teen magazine market, having been superseded by more sophisticated magazines that shun the type of romance *Jackie* favoured, in particular its use of picture stories (a development detailed by McRobbie, 1991b). Yet what follows speaks to the considerable impact of *Jackie*; I have not found another magazine that has attracted so much or such ardent attention from academics. Thus, the "debate" I have constructed here is not to familiarize the reader specifically with *Jackie* or to suggest that *Jackie* is much like *Sassy*. Rather, the construction of a *Jackie* debate on my part will highlight some of the key ways in which magazines for teenage girls have been understood in the past 20 years.

"Simple, crude and compulsive"

Connie Alderson's book *Magazines Teenagers Read* (1968) is an early attempt to come to grips with the content and appeal of British teen magazines. Alderson offers a detailed impression of *Jackie*, *Valentine* and *Trend*, as well as the results of her own ethnographic research on the reading habits of secondary-school students.

Alderson's book is prompted by a strong commitment to Newsom-style education² and a dismay with teenagers' "allegiance to magazines of the cheapest and most trivial kind" (Alderson 1968, 2). Her critique reflects a Leavisite tradition³ in its commitment to exposing the dangers of mass

cultural forms of entertainment and its concern with the movement away from works of "proven" artistic merit. It is not surprising then that it is a literary style of criticism that Alderson uses when she belittles the merits of comic-strip stories in teenage magazines:

The comments of the characters are no more than an indication of a stage in the story. They do not develop states of mind; there is just basic narrative fact. Irony is always crudely obvious. (1968, 67)

There is no striking metaphorical usage. Any attempt fails. (1968, 68)

'Love' and 'true love' are debased to the point where they are meaningless. (1968, 66)

Yet it is mainly through description that Alderson makes her arguments, providing detailed plot summaries of comic-strip stories and excerpts from interviews with pop stars. Her thinly veiled contempt for almost every instance of writing in the magazines is apparent in these simple expositions. Her "guided tours" through the magazines provide little analysis; it is as though she is sure her reader will react with as much disgust as she at the banality of it all.

It is also telling that while Alderson provides a measure of ethnographic research that is applauded in contemporary cultural studies — she conducted several interviews with secondary-school students and had them fill out questionnaires — her own theoretical paradigm overshadows the results so completely that all traces of "discovery" are

erased from her analysis. For example, she states, "The one thing which was obvious and made itself felt throughout the interviews was that *the girls wanted to read something*" (1968, 98; emphasis in original). That magazines might have provided the girls with something the classics could not is never entertained by Alderson. Her critique typifies the not uncommon view that popular culture is not "real" culture; it is seen to have little value or merit, and for her it is worthy of study only in that it provides evidence of the decline of British youth. In light of this, there is little to argue with Alderson; her terrain of debate remains the furthest from my own.

"An ideological bloc of mammoth proportions"

It is not until more than a decade later that another serious study of *Jackie* takes place, this time in Angela McRobbie's article, "Just Like a *Jackie* Story" (1981). Other related works by McRobbie include "*Jackie*: An Ideology of Adolescent Femininity" (1982) and "*Jackie* Magazine: Romantic Individualism and the Teenage Girl" (1991a), a close version of her 1982 paper.

McRobbie offers a critique of *Jackie* as a signifying system and as bearer of ideology. Her study emerges out of the work of British cultural studies in the late 1970s, in particular its research on subcultures and working class

youth.⁴ It is not surprising then that McRobbie rejects what she calls the "traditionalist thesis" – the Alderson-style argument that mass culture is cheap, vulgar and exploitative – in favour of an understanding of popular culture as providing a meaningful link to people's lives, especially to working class youth.

In particular, McRobbie's research commitments have centred around teenage femininity and popular culture. It is important to consider the context for her early work: while several of her male colleagues were studying male subcultures for their street-corner rebellions and active re-appropriation of commodity signs, there were few female equivalents of such exciting cultural subversions for McRobbie to research. Jackie, McRobbie notes soberly, "offers its readers no active 'presence' in which girls are invited to participate. The uses are, in short, prescribed by the 'map'" (1991a, 86). The "map," as seen by McRobbie, leads girls down the precarious highway of feminine adolescence, "outlining its landmarks and characteristics in detail and stressing the problematic features as well as the fun" (1991a, 83). In other words, there is little room for girls to stray from the well-worn path of femininity in reading Jackie; McRobbie cannot imagine what could they possibly do to "re-appropriate" or "subvert" it. Hence, Jackie is seen by McRobbie to carry "a powerful ideological presence as a *form*, and as such demands analysis carried out

apart from ... uses or 'readings'" (1982, 268; emphasis in original).

So, it is through a semiotic reading of the structure and content (*apart from* contextual issues and readings) that McRobbie makes her critique of *Jackie*. She uses a system where elements of the magazine (fashion, beauty, romance) are read as codes and subcodes, the "rules" that add up to a structured whole. The level of her textual analysis is laudable, extending to the brush strokes of comic drawings (1991a, 95), language used by characters (1991a, 98) and the bubbles that convey characters' thoughts (1991a, 97). McRobbie sees every element of the magazine as contributing to a single, larger structure, so that *Jackie* is treated as a complete and unified text. For example, that the title of the magazine is a girl's name is read as emblematic of the univocality of the text:

This is a sign that the magazine is concerned with the 'category of the subject', in particular the individual girl and the feminine persona. *Jackie* is both the magazine and the ideal girl. The short snappy name carries a string of connotations. British, fashionable (particularly in the 1960s), modern and cute. With the 'pet-form' abbreviated ending, it sums up all those desired qualities which the reader is supposedly seeking. (1991a, 82-83)

While McRobbie rejects the idea of conspiracy, she nevertheless emphasizes that an effort is made — by whom, it is never clear — "to win and shape the consent of the readers to a set of particular values" (1982, 264). Mainly, this is the promotion of feminine culture, with romance,

above all else, being the zenith of female experience. So strong is this "ideological bloc of mammoth proportions" (1982, 265) it not only "imprisons" (1982, 265) its readers, it "makes it impossible for any girl to talk to, or think about, a boy in terms other than those of romance" (1991a, 101). As in Alderson's assessment, *Jackie* is a formidable adversary to the well-being of British girls, only now it is seen as "a force to be reckoned with by feminists" (1982, 282), not educators armed with great books.

There are several assumptions McRobbie makes about the nature of reading and texts that are problematic. She assumes that every element of the magazine adds and contributes to a single, unified message. There are no contradictions, disruptions or negotiations in meaning, so that even little things like the cartoon bubbles contribute to some kind of master plan. She also sees the text as unidirectional, so that the messages found in *Jackie* are reproduced in the heads of readers. Here, content analysis slides into a theory of ideology, where meaning is already "all there" in the text and is easily transmitted to readers — except McRobbie, the unsusceptible, watchful critic.

Like other, similar forms of Marxist criticism, McRobbie's research assumes "that works of popular fiction could be regarded as the mere containers of ideology, conveyer belts for the reproduction and transmission of dominant ideology from the 'culture industry' to 'the

masses'" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 2). Readers are "interpreted only as 'textual subjects,' [where] audiences became primarily positioned, produced by, inscribed in, the text" (Brunt 1992, 70).

McRobbie's early analysis made sense at a time when feminist scholars were concerned with unmasking patriarchy in all its forms. And certainly, she should be commended for the due attention she pays to girls' magazines, traditionally considered one of the most debased forms of popular culture. McRobbie's work is encouraging for its commitment to teenage girl culture and for the dynamic insistence that girls deserve attention. But McRobbie oversimplifies the possibility of representational struggle. She is ever so sure that the representations of femininity in *Jackie* are false and constructed, but she considers feminism to be a natural pursuit for all girls if only they could "find" it (and it weren't being suppressed by publishers). For example, McRobbie suggests that feminist ideas could be disseminated through the proper literature (she proposes a feminist magazine for teenage girls called *Shocking Pink*), as though, some of her critics write, "feminism is like an alternative *germ*, which hopefully will be caught by more girls and will thus make them immune to traditional definitions of femininity" (Beezer et al 1986, 114). This view of mass culture reduces analysis to a kind

of "crystal ball" reading, where readers' behaviour can be predicted and inferred by peering into popular texts.

"As unrealistic as unsatisfactory"

In "Media Influence on the Socialization of Teenage Girls" (1987), Gillian Murphy provides a quantitative content analysis of stereotypical images of male and female roles in popular girls' magazines, including *Jackie* magazine in the years 1964, 1971 and 1978. Murphy's hypothesis is grounded in sociological and anthropological traditions that trace gender roles to childhood and early processes of socialization. "It is particularly at the ages of 11 and 12 that teenagers are susceptible to being influenced by media definitions of roles and behaviour since for the first time they are unsure of their own point of view" (Murphy 1987, 202).

Murphy's account of the stereotypical roles in girls' comics is characteristic of feminist communications research that relies on a socialization model of culture, which suggests that media teach us sex-stereotyped roles and behaviour. As Susan Danuta Walters defines it:

The socialization hypothesis (in its most stark form, often called the "hypodermic model") assumes a one-way flow between image and viewer, with the image acting on the viewer by prescribing roles and behaviors to a largely unspecified and undifferentiated 'receiver' of the cultural message. (Walters 1992, 71)

In the case of teenage girls, stereotypical images of women are argued to limit their options in the real world and curtail the possibilities open to them as they mature into women. So strong is this tendency, suggests Murphy, that "stereotypes are highly resistant to modification even when there is a total contradiction in the social environment" (Murphy 1987, 209). Thus, "real life" is no match for magazines, so much so that even when a "realistic image" finds its way into the text, girls cannot recognize it.

For example, Murphy says that the stereotypical images in the magazine are "as unrealistic as unsatisfactory" (Murphy 1987, 211). Yet in the 43 Jackie comic strips she examined, one had an independent, self-confident character — an anomaly that does not match with the stereotypes she found. Her only suggestion is that "perhaps it is included because the heroine's independence is seen as pure fantasy by Jackie readers" (Murphy 1987, 210). Any possible reason why the producers of Jackie would actively include a "realistic" portrayal to provide a moment of pure fantasy is never suggested. Thus, Murphy minimizes inclusions of a "realistic" role model while criticizing the magazine for its "unrealistic" ideas "firmly rooted in the 1950s" (1987, 211). Like Alderson's ethnographic research, Murphy too "misses" what is interesting in her findings, so overshadowed are they by her predetermined theoretical paradigm.

Murphy's account is a classic example of the "images of women" approach to mass media. Relying on reflection theories and positive image analysis, she judges *Jackie* by how accurately or inaccurately it portrays "real" (i.e. good, new, non-feminine) images of women as though we could find these "real" women somewhere "out there." Here lies the assumption of an unproblematic "real life" that media either distort or express, without considering that media practices are indeed part of the "real."

Lastly, the spectator is left unanalysed in this analysis if only because there is little to be said if one supposes, as she does, "a simple one-way flow that completely ignores any role for the audience/spectator in producing meaning in an interaction with the image" (Walters 1992, 73). This type of reflection model assumes that meaning is read off texts in a coherent, direct and uncontradictory way, as though "grafted onto a cognate and waiting subject, who can be so easily changed" (Walkerdine, 1984, 165).

"A self-conscious and self-reflexive approach"

Elizabeth Frazer's article "Teenage girls reading *Jackie*" (1987) marks an important departure from works that utilize textual analysis to infer the meaning of texts. When Frazer had seven different groups of girls read a story from *Jackie*, they dismissed it as pure fiction, called it boring,

and didn't identify with the main character. Ideology is therefore, Frazer argues, undercut by these readers' reflexivity.

It is through this empirical data that Frazer disputes the claims that texts have "one valid and unitary meaning" (Frazer 1987, 411) and in particular, McRobbie's claims about *Jackie's* effect on teenage girls. She says of this, "a more or less passive reader is depicted: my data shows (sic) that, on the contrary, readers take a critical stand vis a vis texts" (1987, 407) and that, "a self-conscious and reflexive approach to texts is a natural approach for teenage girls" (1987, 419).

Frazer's larger project is examining the role of ideology in the acquisition of a feminine gender. She argues that the concept of ideology is in two main ways unsatisfactory. First, as she demonstrates, people are not in the "grip" of false consciousness, nor can ideological effect simply be determined by a semiological reading of texts. Secondly, she posits alternate ways of thinking of the legitimation of social order, such as looking at discourse in place of ideology, which she argues is too difficult to research: "Its existence is only and always inferred; we can never examine it directly" (Frazer 1987, 423). She explores the idea of "discourse registers" — systems of communicating that legitimate certain ways of "talking" and favouring certain lines of questioning while

ignoring others. These, she says, are researchable and concrete, unlike ideology. So, for example, the girls in Frazer's groups move among different discourse registers in their talk on *Jackie*: first reading the story as fiction, then judging the characters against real-life experience, then using the story to provide fantasy. All in all then, there is no one way that the text of *Jackie* works for readers.

Frazer's study is valuable for its claims that the reception of texts is never obvious and apparent, but it is weakened by her failure to systematically develop the idea of discourse registers further. While she says that discourses do contain and determine the scope of speech, she never theorizes why it is possible or how girls seem to move so freely among discourse registers in their reading of the text.

Nor does Frazer pay much critical attention to the text of *Jackie* or offer her own understanding of the magazine. In the end, she legitimates readers' resistance to *Jackie* and does not move much further away from McRobbie's original argument. Only now, she has proven her readers are capable of doing what McRobbie-as-scholar does: being critical of the text. She seems to waver between suggesting that media reproduce gender inequality on the one hand, and on the other that readers are fully capable of seeing through, and thereby undermining, media messages.

It is also problematic that Frazer's focus groups were not chosen because they were *Jackie* readers — they were assembled well in advance of this discussion — and so we have no sense of how many times they have seen the magazine before these focus groups or even if they know its codes or "how" it's read. Perhaps this is why Frazer never asks the girls if they even like the magazine or if they would bother to read it in the first place. Is the dismissal of *Jackie* by many of the girls in the focus groups a refusal of discourses of femininity and romance then, or is it possible that what is being rejected is less certain ideologies than a particular expression of femininity of which there exist a range of possibilities? The question of what people don't read ("I don't watch television," "I don't read romance novels") is relational; it is only made interesting when we learn what they prefer or value instead.

"The 'natural' readers will be the most critical"

In his book, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (1989), Martin Barker provides an extensive survey of the work that has been done on *Jackie*. Although his study is largely prompted by a strong dissatisfaction with a number of approaches to magazines and comics, including McRobbie and Frazer's, he does provide some useful conclusions of his own.

The central hypothesis of his book is that there exist "contracts" between media and audience members, and that, "the media are only capable of exerting power over audiences to the extent that there is a 'contract' between texts and audiences, which relates to some specifiable aspect(s) of the audiences' social lives" (1989, 261). Barker continues,

the breadth and direction of the influence is a function of those socially constituted features of the audience's lives, and comes out of the fulfilment of the contract ... the power of 'ideology' therefore is not of some single kind, but varies entirely — from rational to emotional, from private to public, from 'harmless' to 'harmful' — according to the nature of the contract. (1989, 261)

Thus, Barker takes issue with Frazer's study, suggesting that her groups of girls are not Jackie's natural or spontaneous readers. "Just because certain girls in very widely dispersed social locations will pick up the comic and read it — perhaps even regularly — does not mean that they are the ones we need to be studying" (Barker 1989, 256). Instead, Barker says we need to look at girls who take up a contract with the magazine, girls who connect with the topics of relationships and romance, and who are undoubtedly "influenced" by the magazine. Therefore, a contract involves an agreement that a text will speak to the reader in ways that she recognizes, entering the two into a dialogue.

Barker's argument is compelling in that it suggests that media texts work by relating to some aspects of our lives, an idea that seems fairly commonsensical. The difficulty lies in putting Barker's "contract" to the test. How do we discover the basis of a contract between a particular text and its natural readers? By Barker's claim, media can only influence those who have a contract with the text, thus the idea of "always and already" influenced is decided. Must not the researcher decide ahead of time the nature of the text in order to account for its natural readers, and discount those who do not qualify? Writes Gemma Moss of Barker's hypothesis, "All too easily it will lead to the dismissal of any data which doesn't fit the critic's assumptions about what the natural audience's relationship to the text in question should be" (Moss 1993, 119). She goes on to challenge the idea of a "pure" audience, suggesting instead that readers bring with them "reading histories" that influence their reception of every new text.

Barker also posits girls' choice of *Jackie* only in terms of ideological complicity. Are girls who don't read *Jackie* rejecting it because they reject patriarchal forms of romance and femininity, or is there something in *Jackie*'s tone and address they find unappealing?

At the heart of the "*Jackie* debate" is an anxiety over media influence and young women. In all cases the researchers of *Jackie* are concerned with "effects": what is influential, how it influences and who is being affected. The meanings within *Jackie* are understood as obvious and stable and in some cases, residing solely in the text. The historical and social context in which it is read is seen as unchanging and unmediated. The form of teenage magazines itself is never considered and I find it odd that all these researchers focus almost exclusively on the photo story in *Jackie*, really only a small part of the magazine.⁵ Lastly, all these critiques, despite their differing approaches, seem to rely on the notion that real reading involves a production of meaning, while consumption of popular culture can remain only a passive experience. I would now like to examine in more detail the assumptions that structure these debates.

Femininity, Consumption and Mass Culture

Andreas Huyssen notes that since the 19th century mass culture has become associated with women, "while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men" (1986, 47). He continues: "The lure of mass culture, after all, has traditionally been described as the threat of losing oneself in dreams and delusions and of merely consuming rather than producing" (1986, 55).

Similarly, Tania Modleski notes that our ways of thinking about mass culture are so tied up with the feminine that it becomes difficult to escape the types of critique that equate "femininity, consumption, and reading, on the one hand, and masculinity, production, and writing on the other" (Modleski 1991, 26). Kirsten Drotner refers to this as the "remasculinization of cultural value" (1991, 68), and Christine Gledhill locates the origins of this characterization within middle class domesticity in the late 19th century:

Sentiment and emotiveness were reduced in significance to 'sentimentality' and exaggeration, domestic detail counted as trivia, melodramatic utopianism as escapist fantasy and this total complex devalued by association with a 'feminised' popular culture. Men no longer wept in public. (1987, 34)

Thus, not only is reading viewed in the instance of *Jackie* as a passive experience, it is further denigrated by its focus on female and feminine concerns. It is difficult then for even the most well-intentioned scholars not to implicitly condemn teenage girls' magazines as extremely limited sites of meaningful culture.

Consider McRobbie's observation about the way *Jackie* magazine offers girls no active "presence" in which they can participate. She writes, "they [teenage girls] play little, if any, role in shaping their own pop culture and their choice in consumption is materially extremely narrow. Indeed the forms made available to them make

re-appropriation difficult" (1991a, 86). Here, McRobbie locates passivity within the form itself, i.e., the magazine. So whereas boys, presumably, can make or shape their own culture, girls only "get" a magazine which feeds them inappropriate or non-feminist desires. McRobbie relies on the production/consumption dichotomy to structure her critique; girls lose out, she complains, because their "texts" don't allow the same kind of polysemic play that boys' do.

But in "Girls and Subcultures" (1975), McRobbie provides an added facet to this debate when she critiques the way researchers valorize male displays of cultural subversity over girls', a case of her recognizing the sexism of this debate while she still readily participates in it.

Bedroom Culture

"Girls and Subcultures" (1975) is a key text written by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, which appeared in a special issue of *Cultural Studies* dealing exclusively with subcultures and working class youth (republished with slight modifications in McRobbie 1991c). A related article is "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Perspective" written by McRobbie in 1980.

In the 1975 article, McRobbie and Garber argue that the term subculture has acquired masculine overtones, so much so that it has made it difficult to recognize examples of

female organizations of social life, which tend to remain invisible. In her 1980 article, McRobbie also chides theorists for failing to dislodge male connotations of youth from their studies of subculture, and gives a re-reading of the seminal texts *Learning to Labour* by Paul Willis and *Subculture* by Dick Hebdige.

In documenting the temporary flights of the Teds, Mods or Rockers ... they fail to show that it is monstrously more difficult for women to escape (even temporarily) and that these symbolic flights have often been at the expense of women (especially mothers) and girls. (1980, 114)

While the authors (McRobbie and Garber 1975, McRobbie 1980) do provide accounts of young women's involvement in Mod, Ted and Rocker culture, they prefer to look at uniquely female formations of teenage culture. "The important question, then, may not be the absence or presence of girls in the male sub-cultures, but the complimentary ways in which girls interact among themselves and with each other to form distinctive culture of their own" (McRobbie and Garber 1975, 219).

One such girl culture is teenybopper or, "the culture of the bedroom" (McRobbie and Garber 1975, 213), which I have paraphrased as "bedroom culture." Bedroom culture is seen to be easily accommodated in the home and far removed from "street-corner displays" of defiance. Here, girls spend time in their bedrooms experimenting with make-up, reading magazines and listening to records. It is flexible enough that any girl can "join," and "it does not operate

any exclusion rules or qualifications on entry" (McRobbie and Garber 1975, 220). The safety of a bedroom culture allows girls to be free from judgement or humiliation, and serves as "a kind of defensive retreat away from the possibility of being sexually labelled" (McRobbie and Garber 1975, 220). Thus, the type of "semiotic guerrilla warfare conducted through style" in male subcultures (McRobbie 1980, 117) is a public and masculine privilege, and has little resonance in the lives of most working and middle class girls.

McRobbie and Garber's articles are an important critique of the hidden assumptions that underlie the celebrations of more spectacular forms of working-class culture and which have led, writes David Buckingham, "to a comparative neglect of the more ordinary, everyday cultural activities in which the vast majority of young people participate" (1993, 12). Their observations about bedroom culture are astute in indicating that the realm of cultural autonomy is much narrower for girls than for boys, and hinges on double standards of sexuality.

However, it is not without some wistfulness that McRobbie and Garber note that teenybopper culture "is one of the most highly manufactured forms of available youth culture -- it is almost totally packaged" (1975, 220). If McRobbie and Garber desire an alternative for teenage girls, it seems above all they wish for girls to have the same

stylistic freedom of boys. So while they recognize the sexism in the valorization of male over female culture, in the end they participate in this conception by condemning the (feminine) confines of "highly manufactured culture."

Femininity as Master Discourse

Barbara Hudson, in "Femininity and Adolescence" (1984) offers a useful contribution to understanding of the uniqueness of female adolescence. She says that femininity and adolescence need to be understood as separate discourses, realms which are often at odds with one another and which in turn have lived effects for teenage girls. Because the discourse of adolescence privileges "male" behaviours, activities and desires, it is often at odds with the behavioural norms of femininity girls are increasingly expected to meet at this age. She states,

if adolescence is characterised by masculine constructs, then any attempts by girls to satisfy society's demands of them qua adolescence, are bound to involve them in displaying not only lack of maturity (since adolescence is dichotomized with maturity), but also lack of femininity.
(1984, 35)

Hudson illustrates, more so than McRobbie and Garber, the difficulties of living out the combined discourses of adolescence and femininity. In her analysis of interviews with 50, 15-year-old girls, as well as teachers and social workers, Hudson finds that the way authority figures relate to moments of deviant behaviour by girls depends on which

discourse "frames" their assessment. If girls are being judged within a feminine discourse, their behaviour is seen as gender inappropriate, having serious implications of more serious trouble, and requiring "active intervention and urgent resocialization" (Hudson 1984, 44). More rarely, when deviance is seen in light of adolescent behaviour, it is read as being a "phase," normal behaviour that girls will "naturally" grow out of.

In Hudson's assessment, femininity acts as the "master discourse" — the final judgement of girls' behaviour — and this has wide implications for girls. Despite the experience of two simultaneous discourses, this "does not by any means mean that girls are free to choose whether to orient their behaviour to a femininity standard or to an adolescence standard" (Hudson 1984, 51). She continues,

since femininity is the 'master discourse' in the sense that it is the status of femininity that teenage girls are aspiring towards and the status of adolescence that they are aiming to leave behind, being dismissed as 'adolescent' is more dangerously subversive of femininity than being 'womanly' is of adolescence. (1984, 51).

Girls must learn to walk a tightrope, tempering their rebellion and independence with mild and uncontroversial forms of zaniness and selfishness.

Consumer Wonderland

In "Alice in consumer wonderland: West German case studies in gender and consumer culture" (1984), Erica Carter

suggests that researchers who study youth subculture too often display a "distaste for the plastic glamour of commercialised youth culture; their gaze falls rather on visible subversions of dominant forms" (Carter 1984, 185). Noting that bedroom culture is largely defined by a consumer logic — its trappings are easily obtained through purchases — Carter suggests that girl culture is marginalized by emphasizing its embeddedness in the market (recalling McRobbie and Garber's statement about the "almost totally packaged" state of girl culture). Thus, although girls may be just as active as boys in their appropriation and reassembling of dominant signs, albeit within mainstream social relations, there remain doubts "as to the creative, productive and potentially subversive power of this mode of femininity" (Carter 1984, 187). So all-determining is the monolith of the market regarded, it raises constant suspicions about the legitimacy of any pleasure found in popular culture.

"If girls are absent from subcultures, then, they become visible at the point of consumption," writes Carter (1984, 197). In her examination of the post-war German market and specific instances of German, adolescent, female consumption, she rejects dichotomies of passive manipulation or active appropriation in favour of an "archaeology" of female consumption in all its complexities. The post-war period saw an explosion of consumer products, a wide array

of choice for the new German consumer. Yet the market remained dependent on consumers to employ certain skills, "from the rational decision-making of the thrifty housewife, to teenage girls' production of themselves as aesthetic objects" (Carter 1984, 207). So in fact, girls do not give themselves "over" to consumerism and whatever the market feeds them, they engage with it in different ways, "activating multiple sets of functions, meanings and values in the commodities they consume" (Carter 1984, 207-208).

Carter understands that teenage girls' involvement with consumer culture does involve choices, and these choices draw on endowing commodities with certain meanings. She gives the example of the marketing and purchasing of silk stockings by teenage girls in 1950s West Germany. In one ethnographic instance, Carter considers the biography of Annette, a 15-year-old girl who works in a textile factory while subjected to close scrutiny and protection from her mother at home. When she is not working, she is kept busy doing housework and is prevented from relationships with either sex, wary as her mother is of possible sexual adventures. While Annette is a compliant daughter, her only act of autonomy is the everyday wearing of Perlon stockings, a costly habit that requires a new pair every two or three days and which causes conflict with her mother. In reading this against the backdrop of subcultural research, Carter states,

it marks the displacement of potentially more grandiose demands for self-determination onto the only site where they may realistically be met. Annette is financially and emotionally dependent on the security of family life; she cannot allow herself prolonged struggles over points of generational difference. Repressed from the placid routine of everyday family life, these (inevitable) differences find expression in tangential conflicts and struggles. (1984, 212)

Here, consumption takes on the role of active transgression. Annette's repeated purchasing of stockings is not simply conformity with the demands of consumer culture, but is a means of asserting her autonomy and at the same time, her femininity. Thus, Annette's participation in a particular female taste culture is an essential aspect of her identity apart from the dreariness of her work and family life.

In *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (1993), Anne Friedberg provides a useful addition to the debates around female consumption. Friedberg examines Baudelaire's concept of the flâneur, the metropolitan observer who could roam the public streets observing – yet remaining unobserved – and concludes it to have been a privileged male position. For women to make equal use of public space in a leisurely manner was to risk the label of "'fille publique' (woman of the streets)," a dangerous reputation for the "'femme honnête' (respectable married woman)" (Friedberg 1993, 35). The freedom for a woman to roam the city in safety and without judgement occurs with the creation of the department store and shopping as a socially acceptable leisure

activity, offering her "a protected site for empowered gaze" (Friedberg 1993, 37). To summarize:

It was precisely while these changes in the observer were occurring in the nineteenth century that women were changing their social role and were allowed a new and more public access to mobility through urban space. As consumers, women had a new set of social prerogatives in which their social powerlessness was crossed with new paradoxes of subjective power. (Friedberg 1993, 35).

However, as Friedberg and other feminists have noted, the "freedom" associated with consumer power and choice is not without a price. While women are the major consumers and targets of advertisers, they also have the least spending power. "Shopping is more than a perceptual mode involving the empowered choices of the consumer, it — quite simply, quite materially — requires money" (Friedberg 1993, 118).

Consumption is quite clearly then a double-edged pleasure for women, a means through which dominant relations are both perpetually challenged and reinforced. Janice Winship argues that we cannot ignore that, for young people who construct themselves through consumption, "shops and their merchandise provide a vocabulary through which to fantasise" (Winship 1987, 153). But as Lisa A. Lewis summarizes, teenage-girl fantasy often gets dismissed in critics' accounts:

Culture critics' expressed aversion to dominant culture forms, their coding of the marketplace as the antithesis of authentic cultural expression

(as essentially a mechanism of capitalist reproduction), has created an obstacle to the analytical consideration of consumer girl culture. Such assumptions operate to portray girl participation in consumer culture as a kind of false consciousness, useful only as a means of preparing girls for social roles that support the economic status quo. (1990, 98)

As for the valorization of celebrated male subcultural activity, these activities are just as firmly rooted within a terrain of consumption. Their authenticity has more to do with their reliance on commodities as difference and exclusion, not sameness and homogeneity. It is this "refusal" of sameness that I suspect is partly the reason there is a lack of a teenage magazines for boys.⁶

From Femininity to Feminism and Back Again

While magazines for female readers have been seen as one of the key locations for discourses of femininity, the last 10 years have seen a growth in feminist discourses within the very same magazines. This section of my review looks at some of the recent accounts of this development.

Commodity Feminism and Postfeminism

In "Commodity Feminism" (1991), Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath and Sharon L. Smith address the rise of feminist discourses in advertising in current American women's magazines such as *Mademoiselle* and *Self*. They argue that feminist discourses are appropriated and reframed by

advertisers and women's magazines as a whole, in their ever-increasing attempts to attract a market base of readers. So, for example, advertisers assemble signs which connote particular qualities championed by feminism, including financial independence and individual freedom for women. "Commodity feminism presents feminism as a style — a semiotic abstraction — a set of visual sign values that say who you are" (Goldman et al 1991, 337).

As a result of this, what is articulated is an "aesthetically depoliticized feminism" (Goldman et al 1991, 334) in which "feminism is reduced to the status of a mere signifier or signified ... re-encoded by an advertiser as a sequences of visual cliches and reified signifiers" (Goldman et al 1991, 336). They posit:

In the context of fragmented demographic categories and fragmented consumer markets, feminism takes on a plurality of faces in the mass media, its potentially alternative ideological force thus channelled through the commodity form in ways that may modify patriarchal hegemony, but bow to capitalist hegemony. (Goldman et al 1991, 336)

Therefore, not only do the ads fail to deliver a forthright feminist message, they undermine a feminist agenda as feminist discourse is "translated back into the language of the Western male ethic of possessive individualism" (Goldman et al 1991, 336).

While these writers are quite correct in seeing in these ads a corruption of feminism, they fail to take note of the evidence these ads provide of feminism's emerging

centrality within mainstream discourse. As Bennett and Woollacott point out, media texts,

must in some way relate to and connect with popular experience and, rather than simply imposing dominant ideologies, must therefore make concessions to the opposing or different values and ideologies of subordinate social groups. (1987, 4)

Therefore, while Goldman et al quite rightfully point out that advertisers are more interested in articulating feminism as a life-style choice rather than as a political call to arms, I wonder if this is truly the most interesting observation about this development. How can a discourse that is generally seen as oppositional be appropriated directly to commercial ends without, on the one hand, disseminating further the oppositional agenda (albeit in attenuated form), and on the other, perhaps more importantly, demonstrating the pre-existing valorization of a discourse of feminism?

Secondly, Goldman et al align commodity feminism with "postfeminism," in their view the depoliticization of and dilution of second-wave feminism. Suzanne Gordon characterizes this (although she refers to it as "corporate feminism") as a narrative that tells female consumers: "Yes, women were discriminated against in the past, but that unfortunate mistake has been remedied; now every woman can attain wealth, prestige and power by dint of individual rather than collective effort" (1983, 1). Suzanna Danuta

Walters characterizes postfeminism as thinly veiled "backlash" against the gains made possible by second-wave feminism (1991). She writes, "Popular postfeminism, in claiming a generational dislocation, distances us forever from 'those women' — proclaiming the irrelevance of feminism for the hip but over wrought generation of late capitalist yuppies" (1991, 110).

There are two issues being addressed here that are seen to be intrinsically linked. The first is the "selling" of feminism by advertisers through commodification and consumer desire. The second is the "emptying" of feminism in a historical moment of late capitalism that some say has determined the irrelevance of feminism to modern women.

Elizabeth Cowie (1988) suggests that it is often assumed that feminist principles will be "turned against us" (111) when used by dominant interests. She argues that the productivity of a text does not stop simply because a meaning has been used in another context. In looking at the critique often levelled against the Virginia Slims ("You've Come a Long Way, Baby") advertising campaign, she notes: "It neither simply uses 'images of' the Women's Movement nor does it deny any notion of liberation, though it does project its notion of liberation as one associated with a particular consumer position" (1988, 112).

Thus, Cowie suggests that within a hegemonic society, oppositional meanings are not destroyed or silenced, but

realigned. I am not suggesting that feminist researchers should be pleased with finding instances of feminism in mainstream media texts and leave well enough alone. But the methodology of Goldman et al suggests that feminism must take an "all or nothing" approach. Ads in women's magazines may challenge patriarchal hegemony but to "bow" to capitalist hegemony constitutes a failure in their eyes because feminist principles are "rerouted" for corporate gain. Rather than viewing meaning production as an ongoing process, Goldman et al conflate meaning and intention, suggesting that once a meaning (feminist principles) is "recuperated" (in the wrong hands) it ceases to be productive and intertextual, becomes static, "empty."

Narratives of Closure

A further example I would like to consider also "denies" the presence of feminist discourse in magazines. In a content analysis of three teen magazines (*Sassy*, *YM* and *Seventeen*), Ellis D. Evans et al (1991) come to much the same conclusion about teen magazines that McRobbie did in 1982. Using content classification, the researchers note common themes, and the length and frequency of articles and advertising space. One of their conclusions is that the three magazines are all more alike than they are different. Yet as I have noted in the introduction to this thesis, and as I will demonstrate later, there are striking differences between

Sassy and other teen magazines. In only one instance do they admit that "*Sassy* apparently experienced some problems in advertiser support, possibly because of the more controversial nature of its style and content" (Evans et al 1991, 109), yet make no further effort toward understanding this "controversial nature." Why is controversy, which hints at contestation, swept under the carpet of complicity within dominant media? I find the glossing over of this finding to be not only an example of poor scholarship, but of a framework that Helen Pleasance has criticized as the search for a "narrative of closure."

Within this framework, the choices offered by a popular cultural form are nothing more than illusions as long as the underlying structure remains the same. It is their ideological significance which determines the meaning of cultural forms: cultural forms become the narrative devices which make sense of, and tie us into, the real, material story. The proliferation of differences covers the tracks of the real story, by, if you like, laying red herrings in our path. (1991, 71)

Pleasance critiques a reading of cultural texts as the site where dominant social meanings are contained. Rather than see dominant culture as the place where power is successfully extended and reinforced, she sees it as a "site of conflict and struggle, a place where power is never fully or permanently secured" (1991, 69). Thus, in her Gramscian-influenced account of the significance of popular cultural forms, difference and distinction are foregrounded over homogenizing sameness and seamless closure.

With this type of understanding, can we still conceive of popular texts as carrying unified and imposed ideologies? Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott suggest a more complex view of the relations between text and reader, arguing that:

The ideological work effected ... is not that of imposing a range of dominant ideologies but that of articulating the relations between a series of ideologies (subordinate as well as dominant), overlapping them onto one another so as to bring about certain movements and reformations of subjectivity. (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 5)

Street-Wise Femininity/Feminism

Both Janice Winship and Angela McRobbie have also challenged this theorization of "difference as imprisonment" (Pleasance 1991, 71). In Winship's "A Girl Needs to Get Street-Wise: Magazines for the 1980s" (1985), she examines conflicting discourses and sites of ideological rupture in the then newer British teen magazines *Etcetera*, *Mizz* and *Just Seventeen*. She says that the success of these magazines lies in their recognition of the inadequacies of earlier magazines, and that they proffer irony, humour, "trivia" and not least, "feminist culture" to attract a new readership base.

So, for example, a fashion spread in *Etcetera* called "Undercoats" — a layout of models in lingerie and trenchcoats standing in a garbage-strewn alley-way — is considered in this light. While at first glance, "any self-respecting feminist will sigh with exasperation" (Winship 1985, 25) at the soft-porn quality of these photographs,

Winship points to the humourous turn-around of it all. The models flash their bodies, playing off the image of the male pervert in raincoats while their sexuality is constructed through the difference in their "masculine" cropped hair and clumpy army boots and their "feminine" pink lips and lingerie. Winship writes,

Maybe it isn't a sexuality which wholly breaks from the oppressive codes of women as sexual commodities but neither does it straightforwardly reproduce them. The conventions of gender and sexuality are, it seems to me, being actively tampered with. (1985, 25)

Winship says that repeatedly throughout these magazines articles show up the contradictions of femininity "whilst also enjoying it" (1985, 42). Thus, while researchers may not find a self-conscious feminism in newer magazines, they will find several instances where gender roles are upset or where irony governs the reading of at-a-glance sexist imagery. "We shouldn't just contemplate the many and inevitable ways they are not feminist, but also consider what they might say to feminism" (1985, 43), argues Winship.

Although it is less explicit in her work, McRobbie (1991b) also points to the undermining of traditional forms of femininity in 1980s magazines in, "*Jackie and Just Seventeen: Girls' Comics and Magazines in the 1980s.*" Rather than an articulation of feminist discourse, McRobbie sees these changes as tied to a decrease in romance and a growth in irony, pastiche and trivia, all geared towards girls as stylish young consumers. According to McRobbie,

the feminist influence has created a more self-confident reader, one who now finds comic strips insulting and silly.

Cultural Negotiation

Thus far I have reviewed material which has had teenage girl culture as its object of analysis. This body of research has its own particular strengths which inform my subsequent reading of *Sassy*. However, I would now like to examine Christine Gledhill's concept of cultural negotiation as I believe it to be especially relevant to my study.

In "Pleasurable Negotiations" (1988), Gledhill considers a way of understanding cultural texts that understands their meaning production as an ongoing process of negotiation between producers, texts and audiences. "Cultural negotiation" is the term she uses to conceive popular culture "as the intersection of processes of production and reception, in which overlapping but non-matching determinations operate" (1988, 68).

Gledhill argues that popular texts do not contain meaning in and of themselves; nor do they emerge unified and "whole" from a consensual process of production. Rather, she understands texts as part of a process in which meaning "arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience" (1988, 68). These "competing frames" can be analysed as three "levels": institutions, texts and audiences.

For example, Gledhill suggests that within media institutions, the values and concerns of media practitioners may be in conflict with company owners, investors or advertisers. While economic determinations bear heavily on meaning production, they are not the full determinant of meaning, which has in fact been filtered through aesthetic and generic codes, professional ethics, technological limitations, and the particular sensibilities of its creators.

The text itself involves a process of negotiation. Popular texts, in their renewal and refurbishing of meaning, necessarily involve sites of contradiction and contestation to sustain themselves. For example, Gledhill writes of television:

Contradictory pressures towards programming that is both recognizably familiar (that conforms to tradition, to formal or generic convention) and also innovative and realistic (offering a twist on, or modernizing, traditional genres) leads to complex technical, formal and ideological negotiations in mainstream media texts" (1988, 69-70).

Finally, reception of texts involves a process of negotiation whereby meaning is in part determined by the reader, mediated through a makeup of class, gender, race, age and personal history. The "infiniteness" of this range is daunting, but the purpose of considering this site of negotiation is not simply to suggest that texts are open to an infinite range of meaning, thereby devaluing the worth of any one analysis. Rather, we might understand reading as a

social practice that is mediated by particular social settings and historical periods.

Gledhill's analysis is useful because it reminds us that meaning is not "sealed" at any one particular "moment" of a text. Bennett and Woollacott further this conception by suggesting that "neither text nor readers ... exist prior to or independently of the processes through which the struggle for textual meanings is socially enacted" (1987, 63). In other words, meaning production is not an activity that occurs at separate levels, it occurs all at once, "at the same time," as a social process, involving multiple parameters and determinations.

Research Plan

In many ways, my research plan for this thesis has been influenced by Gledhill's concept of cultural negotiation. Although my work is not a "test case" of her three levels of negotiation, it is a loose attempt to consider these locales of meaning production in relation to *Sassy*.

For example, I began by examining the institutional negotiations that governed the creation of *Sassy*. I looked at business, publishing, advertising and journalistic accounts of *Sassy* and the climate that made possible its creation. To achieve this, I looked at newspapers (mainly the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*), business and trade magazines (e.g. *Advertising Age*, *Mediaweek*) and other

journalistic accounts of *Sassy* and the magazine industry. Using periodical indices, I sought to locate every single article on *Sassy* that appeared in North American publications that are indexed and can be accessed in Canadian libraries. I also located articles dealing with the magazine industry in the late 1980s/early 1990s, teenage girls' magazines in general, and the demographics and spending habits of teenagers.

My data sample consisted of 37 issues of *Sassy*, mainly from 1992, 1993 and 1994 (a list of the issues appears in Appendix A). I chose this time-frame for various reasons, the main one being that I only had access to a limited number of copies. No libraries in Canada subscribe to *Sassy*, and obtaining copies from United States libraries would have incurred a high fee. Instead, I relied on my own collection and those of friends. I also felt it unnecessary to look at a complete collection of *Sassy* magazines as I felt that I was capable of drawing conclusions about the magazine from the three-year period to which I had access. As well, looking at every issue would have necessitated commentary on the changing style and content of the magazine. I do not view this thesis as a history of *Sassy*, and the last three years of the magazine (before it was purchased by Petersen Publishing) provide a stable and fairly unchanging picture.

My reading of *Sassy* revolved around an analysis of the discourses and themes that occur in *Sassy*. Unlike the tightly controlled methods of content analysis or semiotics, I have preferred to adopt a method that employs a number of analytic approaches. I have attempted to isolate several key themes and discourses in the magazine and my examples serve as illustrations, not as the site of analysis itself.

Lastly, a key research area of this thesis involved an ethnographic study of *Sassy* readers. Specifically, I conducted three focus groups, of varying size, with female readers of *Sassy* between the ages of 15 and 24. For a full description of the focus groups — their design, form and execution — see Appendix B.

I do not consider the results from these focus groups to constitute a definitive study of *Sassy*'s readership, nor do they necessarily comprise an accurate demographic representation of its readers. Rather, the comments produced are offered as another source of articulations of the discourses within *Sassy*. In other words, the focus groups' commentary was important to me primarily because it was not my own, because it sensitized me to ways of understanding *Sassy* that might be "lost" in an academic analysis. I view them as a "check" on the tendency of scholarly work to lose sight of the everyday and common sense ways in which readers consume, make sense of, and enjoy texts.

The comments and reflections from those groups were transcribed and parts of those transcriptions are included in chapters three, four and five. Their discussions are used sporadically at moments that relate to my analysis. Again, I use the focus groups' comments as illustrations — my analysis is not of the focus groups themselves. Their comments have given context and meaning to my own commentary and the very "honesty" of their responses to *Sassy* has helped me to keep in mind who this magazine is for.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to familiarize the reader with several of the debates and issues that will structure and inform my discussion of *Sassy*. I have tried to make apparent what is unsatisfactory and what is useful in accounts of femininity and mass culture, particularly in relation to teenage girls' magazines.

In looking at the *Jackie* debate, I have attempted to show the history of a debate that, while referring to a particular text, is representative of much of the research on teenage girls' magazines. I have critiqued accounts that read the text for either its harmful effects or hidden meanings, both of which imply that texts are unified in meaning and unidirectional in meaning production. I have also questioned accounts of *Jackie* that argue its "effectiveness" in terms of whether or not readers are in its

"grip" or have a "contract" with the magazine. These studies, despite their attempts to account for the reader, have failed to examine the context of teenage magazines or the form of magazines themselves.

In the second part of this chapter I have looked at the terrain of debate around femininity and mass culture, beginning with McRobbie and Garber's critique of male-subcultural research. As feminist researchers, they take issue with the valorization of male subcultural activity for its "active reappropriation" of commodity signs; this ignores the difficulty of girls' entry in such activities. Erica Carter furthers this debate by pointing out that a suspicion of mass cultural forms underpins these accounts. Barbara Hudson considers the dual, and difficult, demands of adolescence and femininity for teenage girls.

In the third part of this chapter I have examined the ways in which feminist researchers have taken into account the appearance of discourses of feminism in current women's and teenage girls' magazines. Arguments tend to revolve around the "purity" or "corruption" of feminism within these texts, and there has been an overemphasis on what Helen Pleasance calls a "narrative of closure": that the form and production of glossy, commercial magazines undermines the possibility of negotiated or resistant readings, as well as the possibility of articulating a progressive politics. As Winship and McRobbie point out, the feminism that exists in

newer magazines may not be the "right" kind feminists would like to see, but it is one that we need to pay attention to all the same.

Lastly, I have summarized Christine Gledhill's conception of the three levels of negotiation in cultural texts. She suggests that contradictory pressures and practices are at work at the productive, textual and receiving stages of meaning, and that mainstream texts are never simply a site of dominant consensus. Gledhill's understanding has influenced my own reading of *Sassy*, to which I now turn.

II

Sassy Magazine: Context and History

The intention of this chapter is to provide the reader with background on the emergence of *Sassy* in order to situate it as a cultural product arising at a particular moment in the history of the U.S. magazine industry. In examining the history and conditions of this industry in the late 1980s to early 1990s, I have turned primarily to the industry's accounts of itself, as well as those of advertisers and business writers. Not only do I examine accounts of *Sassy* in the business press, but accounts of teen magazines and the magazine industry in general. And while it is clearly not within the scope of this chapter to provide a history of teenage magazines in America, I will provide details of *Sassy's* three major competitors in the teen magazine market, with emphasis on either their current form or recent changes made by publishers.

This chapter is also an attempt to consider carefully professional knowledges and practices. That is to say, the discourses that emerge in a magazine like *Sassy* are not unmediated, and cannot be traced only to economic imperatives or cultural practices. Rather, there is a set of intersecting discourses, often conflicting, emerging from the concerns and values of *Sassy's* publishers, advertisers and editorial staff, that need to be considered. As I will

argue in the next few chapters, the overarching discourses in *Sassy* are inflected by this intersection.

In looking at the comments and practices of magazine publishers, advertising executives, media consultants, business writers, and magazine writers and editors, we find a number of perspectives too often ignored in current methodologies of cultural analysis. As Sean Nixon has suggested in his work on men's magazines, our understanding of popular cultural forms can only be ameliorated by further considering these meanings and practices, "as they are formative in the shaping of media texts; that is, to the shaping of the media texts-as-produced" (Nixon 1993, 468). Nixon argues that political economy approaches in particular can be refined by such considerations, hence avoiding the reductionism and assumptions of causality often associated with them. Thus, he suggests that this type of analysis:

of professional discourses and practices ... is a better picture of the interplay of 'economic' and 'cultural' practices and techniques in the production and regulation of commodified cultural forms like popular magazines. (1993, 469)

It is this approach then that guides this chapter, and while my aims do not extend to arguing the merits of one methodology over another, implicit here is the view that an analysis of the discourses in *Sassy* would be incomplete without considering the concerns of its media practitioners.

"La Belle Epoque" — Magazine Publishing in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s

The late 1980s and early 1990s were characterized in the business press as being a boom time for new magazines, but paradoxically, a bad time for magazines overall. On the one hand, the magazine industry had a "seemingly unlimited ability to find new audiences, thus creating new markets for advertisers" (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 254), yet was faced with a large-scale recession in advertising revenue. At the same time, publishers were guided by greater and greater specialization of their audiences. The "general interest" magazine for the "general audience" was no longer seen as a viable or profitable option. Instead, publishers tried to create spin-offs of successful niche magazines, or find new niches altogether. One writer calls the magazine industry in the late 1980s "la belle epoque," when despite "intense competition, sluggish ad sales and frequent fallout, new titles hit newsstands at an astonishing rate" (Hulin-Salkin 1987, S-1).

In the post-war period, general-audience magazines, such as *Life* and *Look*, sought huge circulations "in their competitive war with television" (Taft 1982, 22). But by the 1960s, the rising costs of producing magazines and low profit margins meant that publishers were moving towards magazines for specialized audiences with higher cover prices, so that "the reader, not the advertiser, was being

invited to pay his [sic] way" (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 246). Even so, by the 1970s, advertising sales still accounted for two-thirds of a magazine's income (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 373). By 1989, however, slightly less than half of magazine revenues came from advertising (Gardner 1990, 15). The drop in advertising is largely attributed to the large-scale recession that swiftly reversed what has been called, "the can-do mood that blanketed the U.S. in the mid-to-late 1980s [which] inspired the binge of ego-fuelled, empire-building acquisitions that swept the media industry" (Donaton 1990b, 4). In 1991, the 250th anniversary of the American magazine, many magazines had folded and staff members were fired. "Almost every major magazine company has had its version of Bloody Thursday, sometimes hitting editorial staffers, sometimes salesmen, sometimes operations staff, sometimes all of the above (Fitch 1991, 30).

Thus, once able to make a profit from advertising pages alone, magazines now had to have a profitable circulation. "'Newsstand revenue goes right to the bottom line,'" said Alex Mironovich, YM's publisher (quoted in Runn 1993, 46). The *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1991 that after years of increasing advertising rates by seven to 10 percent annually, magazines were now keeping increases below five percent, or not increasing them at all. "At the same time, publishers hope to lessen their reliance on advertising

revenue and plan to raise newsstand and subscription prices next year" (Reilly 1991b, B6).

"'Circulation-driven magazines are the key to the future,'" said Samir Husni, head of the magazine program at the University of Mississippi's department of journalism (quoted in Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 373). But while readers were willing to pay, on average, up to \$1.25^{*} more for new magazines (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 371-72), other sources detailed a consumer resistance to increased cover prices. Between 1986 and 1989, for example, the average price of a magazine rose from \$1.71 to \$2.43, or 42 percent. The effects of this were felt particularly in single-copy sales. "'Our testing has turned up varying degrees of price resistance,'" said Ed Fones, subscription marketing director of Rodale Press. "'We have some planned increases, but we're not going up as aggressively as we have in the past couple of years'" (quoted in Foster 1991, 115). Thus, while magazine publishers were once able to share the burden of increased pricing between advertising and circulation revenues, "in the current advertising environment, no one is hinting at this possibility. Consumer resistance to increased circulation prices may mean deep cuts in magazine profitability during 1991" (Foster 1991, 116).

^{*}All monetary amounts in this thesis refer to U.S. dollars.

Nonetheless, circulation has become the target focus of publishers, even if this means a reduction in overall rate base. Lower circulations allow advertisers to target audiences more accurately, and reduces the costs of expensive promotions to keep a high readership for publishers (Donaton 1991c, 50). "'It's imperative that we all get more money from circulation,'" said Francis Pandolfi, the president of Times Mirror Magazines. "'Rate-base reduction is a good way to do that'" (quoted in Fitch 1991, 32).

Despite this new-found focus, publishers still had to court advertisers and took great pains to assure them that they were reaching audiences of "specific demographics and geographic characteristics" (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 358). All in all though, companies that carried the same ads across a wide base of magazines — i.e., cosmetic ads in women's magazines — were reluctant to take chances on newcomers. "'The marketplace is a grim one,'" said Paul DuCharme, Hachette executive vice president, "'so in the short term you have to fight for market share'" (quoted in Reilly 1991b, B6). Said one advertising director the following year, "'1992 is the year of playing it safe. Publishers will put their money into ideas that are guaranteed to work, and advertising clients don't have the extra money to spend on a magazine that is unproven'" (quoted in Reilly 1992, B1).

What advertisers were attracted to was the growth in niche magazines and their ability to reach narrowly defined audiences. "'It's becoming the type of publishing,'" said Suzanne Hochman, president of Grass Roots Publishing Co. Inc. "'People aren't starting general interest magazines like *Life* or *Ladies Home Journal*. All the new ones have a target audience'" (quoted in Miller 1991b, 2). Tebbel and Zuckerman summarize these various developments, specifically in terms of women's magazines, as follows:

The lesson seemed to be that this market had now grown so large and so active that it could accommodate everything from brides to sassy teenagers, with numerous possibilities in between. Would the advertising dollar stretch as well, enough to cover the seekers after multiple female audiences? Only the nineties could provide answers. (1991, 281)

Demographic Boom: Teenagers and Teenage Magazines

Teenage magazines were no less affected by these trends. For many years they had been considered "recession proof," but as advertisers limited their spending for all magazines, the once stable publications suffered too. Also, the suffering market was attributed to shifts in the teenage population, particularly girls, which was reported to have been declining over the years (Crossen 1988a, 31), and "only the fact that advertisers felt it necessary to reach women as early as possible saved the market from declining, too" (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 277). Despite all this, teen magazines were some of the first publications to recover

from the advertising slump. In 1992 it was reported that "signs are emerging that the youth market may outpace the rest of the magazine world in rebounding from the recession. The reason can be summed up in one word: demographics" (Manly 1991a, 26).

In 1991 it was predicted that "any publication that skews under 24 will have a better year than magazines that skew over 35" (Manly 1991a, 26). This turnaround was attributed to the reported growth of the teenage population in the United States.

Last year, as the oldest baby boomers were anxiously planning their 50th birthday parties and with the 18-to-34 year-old market declining, the teen-age population increased for the first time in 16 years. Projections from the 1990 Census estimate that the number of teen-agers will grow 14 percent this decade, to 26 million in 2000 from 22.8 million in 1990. (Carmody 1993, D6)

A year later, the same reporter writes,

The magazines are competing for a lustrous prize: the attention and dollars of a teen-age population that is expected to reach nearly 25 million this year with a spending power of almost \$90 billion. The teen-age population is projected to grow until 2010, when it will peak at more than 30 million. (Carmody 1994a, D5)

While these predictions fail to match in their projected numbers, what is telling is the assuredness and optimism with which it is predicted that teenagers would provide a lucrative source of revenue for advertisers and publishers alike. In 1991 it was reported by Teenage Research Unlimited that 12- to 19-year olds spent

\$79 billion on products and services, an increase from their 1989 expenditures of \$71 billion (Eisman 1991, 55).

Although it was suggested among business writers that advertisers were, "still in a cautious mode, the pie has not increased significantly and the presence of new magazines can mean a decreased share of market for existing publications" (Carmody 1994a, D5), for the most part, they were reported to be warming to the idea of increasing their spending in teen magazines. Because teenagers were perceived to be adventurous consumers, advertisers were intent on increasing their spending in teen magazines, "including those for whom the teenage market is not their core segment" (Carmody 1994a, D5). As one media director for DeWitt Media Inc. put it:

For advertisers, this age group is particularly attractive because, as teenagers explore their own identities, they experiment with new brands of consumer products. Teenagers don't just buy more magazines every year, they buy more of everything, and advertisers have woken up to that. (quoted in Cox 1994, B1)

Companies interested in this market have run elaborate promotions to attract teenage buyers. For example, when Maybelline was interested in increasing loyalty for its products among 12- to 17-year-old girls, it created Club Shine Free, advertised in teen magazines. After girls mailed in \$3 and answered questions about their hair, skin and eye colouring, the company mailed back a beauty analysis, free mascara and a list of prizes that could be won

with other purchases. These included trial subscriptions to *YM* and *Sassy*, cosmetic organizers and date books (Eisman 1991, 56). "'The buying power of the market is growing,'" summarizes Chuck Carroll, advertising director of *Boy's Life*. "'Parents feel guilty about leaving John and Susie alone, so they're more liberal about giving them an extra few bucks to spend'" (quoted in Crossen 1990, B1).

Despite the formidable buying power of teens, they are still seen as a risky group by advertisers. Liquor and tobacco ads are strictly forbidden in teen magazines, and "large, mainstream advertisers — including soft drink, electronics and food companies — prefer to use television to reach teens" (Crossen 1988a, 31). Teenagers are also seen by advertisers to be slippery customers, prone to fads and difficult to predict. Says Anne Moore, publisher of *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, "'These kids will fool you every time ... If you miss this market by an inch, you've lost it'" (quoted in Crossen 1990, B1). The trendsetting ability of teens, while attractive to advertisers, also makes it difficult to attract customers. While one article credits *Sassy* and *YM* with turning the whole genre "cheekier," advertisers are often at a loss as how to make ads sophisticated yet accessible. "Advertisers get skittish when magazines are too edgy and dark, but also want their ads in a context considered trendy by teens" (Cox 1994, B1).

While teen magazines were benefiting from increased advertising revenue, there were questions as to how many titles the category could support. "'I don't think the market can support four magazines,'" said YM Publisher Alex Mironovich of *Sassy*, "'something's got to give'" (quoted in Donaton 1990, 41). Overall though, publishers of new magazines found the time ripe for new voices in the teen market. "'There has been an idea that the adult market is segmented, but teens are one big mass market,'" said Webb Howell, publisher of *Young Scholar*. "'We believe that there are lots of niches in this market'" (quoted in Cox 1994, B1). Newer publ. ations for youth originated on the hope "that advertisers will choose a narrower editorial focus" ("*Teen Mags...*" 1987, 23).

It is worth noting that unlike teenage girls, teenage boys are notoriously difficult to reach through magazine readership, something that is well documented in industry articles. Thus, teenage girls became the primarily sought-after target audience by advertisers interested in the teen market. Still considered a mercurial and fickle set of consumers — "'teenage girls' loyalty is as lasting as most of their relationships,'" said one media analyst (quoted in Manly 1991a, 27) — they nevertheless promised strong spending power. "'They have significantly more money to spend than they had 10 years ago,'" said 'Teen publisher Jay Cole of teenage girls. "'The ad community is particularly

interested because they want to establish brand awareness and brand loyalty in these young women so they can carry it on into adulthood'" (quoted in Carmody 1993, D6).

To summarize, the goals of magazine publishers and advertisers were seldom harmonized in this period of fierce competition for new audiences and decreased advertising revenue. In the case of teenage magazines, however, a renewed advertising interest in the teenage market worked well with publishers' desire to pursue new audience niches. Publishers intent on segmenting the teenage market further were met with better reception from advertisers keen on exploiting this key consumer group.

An obvious conclusion then is that magazines operate, develop and are produced at an intersection of these advertising and publishing concerns. As will be discussed in this and the next few chapters, in the case of *Sassy* these dual concerns have often been opposed and are further mediated by the concerns of cultural practitioners. It is through the intersection of these sometimes aligned, sometimes opposed, perspectives that the discourses we find in the magazine are produced.

Competing Step-Sisters: The Top Four

Before I begin to look specifically at *Sassy*, I would like to briefly provide background information on *Sassy*'s three main competitors: *Seventeen*, *'Teen* and *YM*. These are the

three largest selling teen magazines in North America, and provide the yardstick against which *Sassy* has been measured within the industry.

Seventeen

Seventeen has been the most durable of teen magazines, having first captured the leading share of its audience in 1944, when it was published by Walter Annenberg. It has undergone only two changes in publishers, first to Rupert Murdoch and later K-III Magazines. In the second half of 1994, *Seventeen* had a circulation of 1.9 million (Carmody 1994b, D21), far out-selling its competitors, and making it "more a mass magazine than a niche book" (Donaton 1990a, 41). Despite its title, *Seventeen* actually attempts to reach a much wider age range than other teen magazines — 13 to 24 — "so advertisers see it as a 'bridge' between traditional teen titles and women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*" (Donaton 1990a, 41).

The publishers at *Seventeen* see the magazine as having a lasting quality and don't mind being labelled more conservative than magazines like *Sassy* and *YM*. Said Publisher Ira Garey, in acknowledging that *Seventeen*'s position had been challenged by newcomers, "'We're very much a known factor. There's a certain heritage there'" (quoted in Donaton 1990a, 41).

YM

YM is a magazine that began in 1940 as *Calling All Girls*, became *Polly Pigtales* in 1946, *Young Miss* in the 1950s, *Young and Modern* in 1986 and most recently just YM, under its new owners, Gruner & Jahr USA. In 1989, the magazine was re-designed to compete with *Seventeen*, adopting a slicker design and skewing towards an older audience. Now, the magazine targets primarily high-school seniors and college students and had a circulation of 1.8 million in 1994 (Carmody 1994b, D21). One media consultant summarizes the magazine with: "'Editorially, YM is not as sophisticated as *Seventeen*, but it is not as young as *'Teen*'" (quoted in Weissman 1993, 22). Said Alex Mironovich, YM's publisher, of the magazine since its re-design: "'The perception of advertisers is that older teenagers have more money to spend ... Once they get behind the wheel, they can do serious shopping. Moving up the magazine's age places us where the most interesting and affluent teens are'" (quoted in Lipman 1989, B6).

'Teen

'Teen magazine is published by Petersen Publishing in Los Angeles and in 1994 had a circulation of 1.2 million (Carmody 1994b, D21). Aimed at girls aged 12 to 19, it has been described as "a squeaky clean publication for the high-school set that is far more talked about in Middle America

than in New York" (Donaton 1990a, 41). The magazine has apparently chosen to set its sights on a younger audience, featuring fewer articles on careers and more on beauty and fashion. "'There is a vast difference between the needs of girls 12 to 19 and women 18 to 24,'" said Jay Cole, the magazine's marketing director (quoted in Donaton 1990a, 41).

Sassy

Sassy was launched by one of Australia's biggest publishers, John Fairfax Ltd., in an attempt to enter the U.S. magazine business in June 1987.⁷ At the helm was Sandra Yates, president of Fairfax in the U.S., who determined through focus groups with teenage girls that the U.S. market was ready for a magazine loosely modelled on the Australian teen magazine, *Dolly*, also owned by Fairfax. *Sassy* would be like *Dolly* in that it would "discuss issues like sex, fashion or suicide without cloaking them in euphemisms" (Wayne 1988, D5) while remaining a glossy lifestyle magazine. Yates' early characterization of her magazine was, "'Seventeen says 'you should,' we say 'we would,'" (quoted in Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 277). The magazine was aimed at girls aged 14 to 19 "of whom there were about 14 million in the United States, fewer than a third of whom were reading a teenage magazine" (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 277), and was expected to grow from an initial circulation of 250,000 to one million in five years.

The first issue of *Sassy* appeared in February 1988 with, as described by Tebbel and Zuckerman:

a bright, breezy collection of articles and pictures covering sex, makeup and clothes, how to keep lipstick off your teeth, advice on how to buy condoms, and when to go the doctor for vaginal problems — all this in the jargon of a teenager. (1991, 277)

Although magazines like *Seventeen* had begun to deal with issues such as sexuality and AIDS long before *Sassy* arrived, neither it nor its competitors typically suggested anything other than abstinence as the safest measure in all situations. The lead article in *Sassy*'s first issue was called "Losing Your Virginity — Read This Before You Decide," and the issue carried a full-page advertisement for condoms. Publishers and editors from other teen magazines were quoted as saying they found this and other articles like it to be offensive and irresponsible: "'It's wrong,'" said Milt Franks, then *YM*'s publisher. "'We're not saying kids don't have ex. But kids drink and we don't carry beer ads, and kids get pregnant and we don't carry maternity ads'" (quoted in Crossen 1988a, 31). Similarly, said associate publisher of *'Teen*, Robert Brown, of the loss-of-virginity article, "I don't think that feature is responsible... I think it's offensive" (quoted in Crossen 1988a, 31). In interviews, the magazine's 25-year-old editor Jane Pratt defended *Sassy*'s controversial content. "'We don't leave anything out ... We don't use euphemisms, and we don't

apologize. Basically there's nothing of interest to teens I wouldn't publish'" (quoted in Gardner 1988, 23).

After only *Sassy's* second issue, Fairfax decided to divest itself of its two American publications along with its Australian magazine division and smaller newspapers in March 1988. Threatened with acquisition from another Australian company, Robert Homes & Court, Fairfax's "American expansion now appeared unwise" (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 278). Amidst much publicity, it was disclosed in May 1988 that *Sassy* and *Ms.* would be purchased by Sandra Yates and Anne Summers, Fairfax's U.S. vice president. Yates was reported as having a very unified image of both magazines, telling investors she refused to split up the magazines, seeing them as a package "requiring identical cash infusions" (Deutsch 1988, D7). Also significant was Yate's strong commitment to liberal-style feminism in her vision of the magazines. "'Feminism is not the property of the women's movement ... It is a state of mind,'" she said. "'It is democracy in action. I'm going to prove that you can run a business with feminist principles and make money'"⁸ (quoted in Deutsch 1988, D7). Yates and Summers bought *Ms.* and *Sassy* for between \$10 and \$15 million and named their company Matilda Publishing Inc.

By the fall of 1988, *Sassy* had raised its rate base from its initial start-up of 250,000, to 400,000. But in November 1988, Matilda met its first setback with an

advertiser boycott of *Sassy* organized by a conservative religious group. In July 1988 the Moral Majority had begun a letter-writing campaign to *Sassy*'s largest advertisers protesting the magazine's editorial attitude towards sex and birth control. By November, Noxell, Revlon and Maybelline pulled all advertising for the year and *Sassy*'s ad pages decreased from 36 to 30. *Sassy*'s publisher, Helen Barr, also resigned in protest with the magazine's editorial policy. She was quoted as saying, "'I favored a more traditional, conservative start until confidence could be built in the market" (quoted in Rothenberg 1988, D19). Sandra Yates responded to the boycott and resignation by saying *Sassy* had begun a "'more balanced editorial approach'" (quoted in Rothenberg 1988, D19) and the December issue featured an article entitled "Why Virgins Are Cool."

In March 1989, *Sassy* was reported as doing well in what was still a shaky climate for new magazines, claiming a rate base of 450,000, and "making it the fastest-growing teenage magazine" (Tebbel and Zuckerman 1991, 278). Most of the advertisers who had earlier withdrawn advertising had returned, and Yates, conceding in an interview, said: "'The fact is that there are a lot of very conservative teen-agers out there. We want to be a mass-market book, and we've got to be more broadly representative of all points of view'" (quoted in Sharkey 1989a, B7). Yet merely three months later, Yates had resigned as owner of Matilda Publications

Inc. and *Sassy* and *Ms.* were put up for auction. Matilda was reported to have been forced to give up control of the magazines by its financial backers, Citicorp Venture Capital Partners and the State Bank of New South Wales, "after failing to meet its business goals" (Scardino 1989, D5). Apparently, although *Sassy's* advertising and circulation were growing steadily, *Ms.* had failed to become profitable despite its editorial shift and redesign.

In August 1989, Dale W. Lang, a magazine investor and publisher,⁹ bought 50 percent shares of *Sassy* and *Ms.* magazines from Matilda's investors. Lang, having received additional financing, spoke optimistically about *Sassy's* continued progress. "'We believe it can do for the teen-magazine market what *Elle* did for the women's fashion magazines ... Within two years, it could dominate the field'" (quoted in Scardino 1989, D5). Lang's purchase was seen as notable in the industry because he was the only buyer interested in acquiring both *Sassy* and *Ms.* Said one publishing executive, "'They could have sold off *Sassy* quickly for a great deal of money ... But there was some question about whether *Ms.* could survive on its own, and none of those involved wanted to be known as the people who killed the voice of feminism in America'"¹⁰ (quoted in Scardino 1989, D5).

In October 1989, Lang said he would spend \$6 million in promoting and improving *Sassy*, which had a rate base of over

500,000 and stable advertising. He also said he would "'keep a close watch on the editorial content of the magazine'" (quoted in Reilly 1989b, B6) in light of the previous year's boycott. Lang attributed *Sassy's* growth to what "all publishers wish for: a bona fida niche" (quoted in Reilly 1989b, B6). Said Lang in one article, "'Seventeen is written more for mothers, not their daughters ... But *Sassy* has a different spirit'" (quoted in Reilly 1989b, B6). In June 1990 it was reported that Lang had "softened the controversial editorial stance but kept the magazine cutting edge" (Donaton 1990, 41).

Between 1990 and 1994, *Sassy* survived as a successful competitor to its three main rivals, placing fourth in its overall rate base (650,000 in 1991; 800,000 in July 1994). In August 1991, Lang launched a new, irreverent magazine for teenage boys called *Dirt*, hoping to have the same type of success it had with *Sassy*. Known as *Sassy's* "brother" magazine, its first issue came "polybagged" with the September issue of *Sassy*. In February 1993, Lang gained complete ownership of *Sassy* from its investors.

By April 1994, both *Dirt* and *Sassy* were in financial difficulty and required huge sums of cash to stay afloat. In order to save *Dirt*, Lang negotiated a deal with the sports cable network ESPN2 which would re-launch *Dirt* as an alternative sports magazine targeting 16- to 24-year-old males. *Sassy*, on the other hand, needed \$5 to \$6 million to

compete against its rivals. Said Lang, "'I'm one of the last independents, and I'm competing against the giants. We have a title with a good niche, but we need the resources to take it to the checkout counters'" (quoted in Kelly 1994, 15). Lang said he had carried a considerable debt load since he bought the magazine from Matilda Publishing and that while *Sassy* had been profitable for a brief period in 1992, it had not made money since (Carmody 1994b, D21). Lang claimed he needed more money to aggressively market the magazine with a new design and for promotional opportunities with advertisers (Miles 1994, 8). "'Advertisers did not increase their budgets for teen markets,'" he claimed. "'Now there are more titles. So what are we supposed to do?'" (quoted in Carmody 1994a, D5).

In October 1994, Petersen Publishing, the owners of rival magazine *'Teen*, acquired *Sassy* from Lang Communications.¹¹ The company, which already owns *'Teen*, now owns the two teen magazines that are editorially the most different. In November 1994, Petersen fired all the *Sassy* staff and moved the magazine's offices to Los Angeles. The final price settlement was sealed in December 1994 at about \$1.2 million, with Lang retaining all of the magazine's debt. Jay Cole, publisher of *'Teen*, has become executive group publisher of the new *'Teen/Sassy* Group. The redesigned magazine was launched in January 1995 as a March issue. Advertisers were guaranteed a rate base of 700,000

and the magazine is now skewed towards an audience aged 15 to 24.

The focus of *Sassy* appears to have changed dramatically. Jay Cole has claimed that while he will maintain the magazine's cutting-edge style, there would be a definite softening of the tone. "'In the last year or so, *Sassy* became more of a fringe publication rather than a cutting-edge magazine ... It missed a large part of the teen market and concentrated on a small number of teens that don't relate to the mainstream.'" He continues, "'In the last couple of years there was a darker side to *Sassy*, and I think they alienated part of their market'" (quoted in Carmody 1994c, D19). The new magazine is guided by a larger focus on fashion, beauty and entertainment.

Professional Consensus and Opinion

Sassy is the result of a number of interests coming together in a climate receptive to newer, niche publications. Its first owner, John Fairfax, found in the United States a space for a publication like the Australian *Dolly* within the readership of teenage magazines. From its inception, *Sassy* was clearly demarcated and understood as seeking a niche within the niche of magazines for teenage girls. A marketing director at a cosmetics company summarised the differences in the magazines as this:

Seventeen is more conservative. YM is more celebrity-oriented and provides more information for older teens. And 'Teen is for younger girls, very conservative and very Midwest. Sassy is off the curve — out of the mainstream and a little more off-beat. (quoted in Carmody 1993, D6)

Alexander Star, in an article in *The New Republic*, positions Sassy as "[sitting] at the cusp of mainstream and alternative tastes, poking fun at the former and publicizing the latter to its more than 750,000 readers" (1993, 25).

A magazine consultant from Walker Communications comments on the differences this way: "Seventeen gives you advice. Its voice is always Mother. Sassy is the voice of a friend. YM is sort of in between that" (quoted in Carmody 1993, D6). While spokespersons from *Seventeen* would bristle at comments like these a few years ago, they have since conceded quite willingly that Sassy is a more cutting-edge magazine. "'Sassy is a narrower publication with a smaller group of young women who identify themselves as hipper and more outside the mainstream,'" said Caroline Miller, *Seventeen*'s editor (quoted in "Miller Time" 1993, 38).

One writer of an article entitled "Former Teen Mag Junkie" notes, "there are fine lines between the different magazines for teen girls. They're hard to see — unless you're a teenager. Then they are very, very clear" (Weissman 1993, 22). A further observation is, "Adults leafing through these magazines may well be clueless about what distinguishes them. But teenagers decipher the codes

effortlessly, quickly grasping the personality of each publication" (Carmody 1994a, D5).

Sandra Yates was especially vocal about how *Sassy* was different from other teenage magazines, characterizing them as "'Good Housekeeping for teen-agers, speaking with parental voices and looking like they are suspended in aspic'" (quoted in Deutsch 1988, D7). Advertisers, no doubt, were also attracted to this characterization. With the desire to aggressively market themselves to teenagers and teenage girls in particular, *Sassy* would have appeared a valuable tool for reaching readers currently outside the reach of advertisers in this genre. But the flipside of this is captured in one journalist's characterization of *Sassy* as the magazine "that teen-agers buy but hide from their parents" (Carmody 1994b, D21). Hence the advertising boycott. The magazine's daring content no longer seemed so desirable, and was subsequently toned down.

Lastly, it is worthwhile to consider the viewpoint of *Sassy*'s writers and editors, for whom the magazine's distinctiveness takes on an even more emphatic tone. *Sassy*'s difference from other magazines is posited in related terms but with a greater degree of moral conviction. For example, staff were committed to educating readers about sex early on, as former staff writer Elizabeth Larsen describes:

At the first editorial meeting of *Sassy* magazine, in 1987, the staff sat around the editor-in-

chief's office discussing how to make our new magazine different from other teenage publications. The unanimous first priority was to provide sex education: Since we had read the competition during our own adolescence, we knew the sex information published by teen magazines was scarce and usually couched in judgemental terms. (Larsen 1990: 96)

This, of course, was one area of difference advertisers did not feel as strongly about as editors, as seen in the subsequent boycott. *Sassy* was also conceived of differently by editors and writers in terms of its ability to target what it is "really" like to be a teenager. Here, editor Christina Kelly describes the magazine in a 1993 CBC television interview:

Other teen magazines sort of write to a teenager, like an ideal teenager that doesn't exist, you know, the Hollywood ideal of what a teenager is like. But *Sassy's* more about what teenagers are really like, so it's not always positive and you know, the homecoming and the cheerleading and all that. There's some stuff that's sort of dark. (CBC Primetime Magazine, 1993)

In another interview, this time with the fanzine *Ben Is Dead*, Kelly characterizes *Sassy's* readership:

Our competitors like to say that the *Sassy* reader is like a "street" kid. That way they can get advertisers NOT to advertise in *Sassy*. But I don't think that's true. Just because we write about cutting edge music... We've always aimed it towards ALL teenagers. None of us were particularly "hip" teenagers who were totally on top of things all the time. But I think I would say our readers are more feminist than readers of the other teen magazines...and they're probably smarter. There's some overlap between *Sassy* and *YM* and *Seventeen*, but the hard-core *Sassy* reader who doesn't read the other teen magazines is probably a lot smarter and funnier than the girls who [do]. (*Sassy: Small chat with Christina Kelly, Editor 1994, 11*)

Thus, despite the overlap that Kelly mentions, *Sassy* is seen as inherently different by its writers in its imperatives, its truth value, its readership. Occasionally, writers demonstrate that they are at odds with the values and concerns of publishers and advertisers, particularly in relation to the censoring of their writing. Larsen describes the reaction to *Sassy's* prototype issue, which featured an article called "Sex for Absolute Beginners," previously run in *Dolly*. She says advertisers either decided to back out or else signed on reluctantly, afraid of "missing out" on something big. She writes,

It became clear to me later that their concerns were business rather than moral ones when I realized that many of the same companies who objected to "Sex for Absolute Beginners" in *Sassy* nevertheless advertised without complaint in *Dolly* — the most widely read teenage magazine in the world in terms of circulation per capita. For what the advertisers understood long before the editors did is that sex may sell billions of dollars of U.S. products every year, but responsible direct information about sex directed toward U.S. teenagers would not. (Larsen 1990, 96)

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter that even at the level of production there was not a completely coherent and internally consistent conception of *Sassy*. While publishers, advertisers and editorial staff were all interested in creating or supporting a unique magazine, their reasons or interests for doing so were not uniform.

For the editorial staff, one of the prime concerns of *Sassy* was to provide readers with something they could not find in other mainstream teenage magazines. Advertisers, on the other hand, while understanding that *Sassy's* content was helping to draw in a new niche of female teenage readers, were not motivated by the same concerns as the editorial staff; hence the hard-line stance by some towards content deemed overly explicit. Even at the publishing level it is worth recalling that each owner of the magazine had a particular "slant" on his or her investment. For John Fairfax, *Sassy* constituted a useful way to expand into the American market; for Sandra Yates, *Sassy* was the enactment of a capitalist venture guided by feminist principles; and in Dale Lang's eyes, *Sassy*, along with *Dirt*, were attempts to create a distinctive niche in a crowded market.

So despite the economic imperatives of publishers and advertisers, *Sassy* is ultimately a discursive rendering of all these intersecting interests. In the next few chapters, I will consider the discourses found in *Sassy*, as well as attempt to elucidate that quality of the magazine which prompted its previous owner, Dale Lang, to qualify *Sassy* as a cultural commodity both produced for, and productive of, a "bona fide niche" (quoted in Reilly 1989b, B6).

III

Structuring Discourses: The Productivity of *Sassy*

I have already looked at *Sassy* through its production and would now like to look closely at the structuring discourses and themes of its text. I will begin by considering *Sassy* as a mainstream magazine, giving a description of its visual style and content, and how it relates to magazines within its genre. However, the main concern of this chapter is demonstrating one of the key ways *Sassy* differentiates itself from other teen magazines, through its structuring discourse of authenticity.

This chapter is an attempt to illustrate how the magazine is structured by an overarching discourse of "alternativeness" and authenticity, and begins that illustration with an examination of the magazine's language and tone.

Difference vs. Similarity: *Sassy* as Commodity Form

It is clear that *Sassy* meets many of the expectations associated with teen magazines. *Sassy*, after all, was launched as a commercial enterprise, with the intention of competing directly with the top-selling mainstream teen magazines. Its main purpose was never to radicalize the genre's forms and conventions.

Sassy is a standard format, monthly magazine. Its average size is 92 pages of which (including the inside and outside covers) 35 are advertisements. Its "look" combines unusual fonts, atypical colour combinations, and uneven layout and pagination to create a visual style that is busy, fun and unpolished. Thus, while the magazine uses glossy paper, a high quality of print and professional photography, it retains an element of "haphazardness," of "looseness." Features such as "What Now" in particular emphasize the qualities of a do-it-yourself fanzine, capturing a "scrap-book" style with little inclination towards standards of design professionalism (see the following illustration of November 1992 "What Now").

Despite its eclectic look and feel, *Sassy* actually revolves around a fairly stable set of regular features, many common to the teenage magazine. Like most magazines, it has a table of contents and features an editor's and a letters-to-the-editor page. A model's face adorns the cover each month, unless it is the odd occasion when it is given over to a celebrity or "the Sassiest Girl in America."¹² It offers advice columns that deal with beauty and health and personal problems. It has two fashion spreads per issue, as well as at least two other beauty features and regular pages of fashion/beauty/health tips and news. There is one short story per issue and also published are poems, prose and essays by readers. There are typically three or four

WHAT NOW

COOL CHICK COMEDIAN

Solar Energy Is Good

by Dave Karger

It's a little-known fact, but the

comedian's new album, *Solar*, is

the first in a new series of

albums called *Solar Energy Is Good*.

The album is available on

the *Solar Energy Is Good* label.

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the *Solar Energy Is Good* label.

THE GILBERT GRAPE MOVIE

Johnny Depp has been cast as the lead in the film version of the bestselling novel *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* written by Peter Hedges. Though finally a Peter Hedges film, the happy Gilbert is played by John Cusack. Johnny's not such a bad choice, since *Edward Scissorhands* and Gilbert are not totally without kinship. The movie starts shooting this month.

A 90210 soundtrack is being released soon, with songs by Vanessa Williams, Tommy Page, Paula Abdul and Color Me

Badd. I've heard rumors that Luke and Jason may sing on it... Keanu Reeves recently did a film version of *Much Ado About Nothing*, costarring Robert Sean Leonard. Forsooth, dude.

Everyone's An A&R Person

Lori Barbero, *Babes in Toyland*'s barefoot drummer, now has her own record label, Spanish Fly Records. "I put out people who have nothing out who are serious about playing," says Lori, who used to book Run Westy Run before her life as a rock star. She bought her first drum kit from them and didn't start playing until she was 26. Spanish Fly's first release, which came out six months ago, was a single by a band called Milk; the second was by the band Dumpster Juice. Lori's now looking for a chick band to release. She will happily listen to your demo if you send it to PO Box 1825, Collax Ave., South, Minneapolis, MN 55403.

MU

DOUG MARRIS

cute band alert

BY MARY ANN

THE NEW YORK CITY BAND DOUG MARRIS is a young, energetic group of four members. They are known for their catchy tunes and live performances. The band has gained a following in the local music scene.

GO TO WORK

The Ms. Foundation For Women is organizing a day next spring when girls, aged 9-15, will accompany a parent, friend, relative to work. It's called "Take Our Daughters to Work" and the idea is to expose girls to work opportunities, to their ideas, and speak to them as valued recruits who will someday replace the current work force. To get involved, ask your mom, then write to Our Daughter Foundation for Women, Dept. B, Suite 6S, 141 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010.

ZINE OF THE MONTH

Wiglet is an idiosyncratic fanzine that is loosely associated with the Riot Grrrls. In #6, irrepressible editor Gilmore Tamny interviews the 76-year-old director of a funeral home, reviews rock shows, writes about her fascination with Michael Landon and Jane Seymour, and publishes some distinctive and thought-provoking cartoons. For the next issue

send \$1.00 and two or three stamps to *Wiglet*, 382 Wyandotte Ave., Columbus, OH 43202.

MUGGER

JOSH CHARLES UPDATE

CONCERT REL

Josh Charles is a well-known actor and musician. He has appeared in several films and is also a member of the band The Roots. He is known for his versatile talent and has a dedicated fan base.

DOUG MARRIS

feature-length articles per issue, and every month has a music/book/film review. A celebrity profile is usually common to every issue, as well as one or two other articles related to entertainment. An astrological horoscope is given each month, as is a personality quiz. Articles are punctuated by ads for makeup, clothing, personal hygiene, recorded music and so forth.

Negotiated, Relational, Intertextual Text

To almost any reader of women's/teenage girls' magazines, the departments and contents described above would be recognizable. Most of *Sassy's* contents have not been "invented," their invention lies in that they are played out differently. Where difference lies is in the fine lines between magazines suggested by a journalist in the previous chapter: "They're hard to see - unless you're a teenager. Then they are very, very clear" (Weissman 1993, 22).

Thus, it is one argument of this thesis that the way in which *Sassy* organizes, manages and modifies the "pre-existing" discourses of teenage magazines (femininity, youth, consumerism, etc.) is as important as the specific discourses differentiating it from those same magazines. As a teenage girls' magazine, *Sassy* is the same, but different. It is implicit in this analysis that the values and characteristics of *Sassy* are relational, not meaningful in and of themselves.

Sassy operates as a negotiated, relational and inter-textual text. It relies upon a relation both of similarity and of difference with *Seventeen*, *YM* and *'Teen* to set itself apart as distinctive. At the same time, by aligning itself with cultures "outside" the mainstream, *Sassy* magnifies its origins within the mainstream and hence its accessibility, as "not too different." However, these negotiations and alignments become visible only at the moment of reception, they do not exist in and of themselves within the text. Recall that for Evans et al, academics interested in teenage magazines and the socialization of girls, *Sassy's* difference from other magazines remained "invisible" in light of their larger theoretical paradigm. This is a vastly different response than that expressed by industry commentators — for whom *Sassy's* difference from *Seventeen* merited statements equating the former with a "friend" and the latter with "the voice of mother." The readers I spoke to were also quite vocal about these differences, and their comments will be considered later.

Voice of a Friend: The Pursuit of Authenticity

I would briefly like to reconsider the comments made by industry observers in the previous chapter about *Sassy*. In relation to other magazines, *Sassy* was considered in terms such as "the voice of a friend" (unlike your mother), "off the curve — out of the mainstream and a little more

off-beat," and "at the cusp of mainstream and alternative tastes." The differences are articulated both in terms of a dichotomy of age and relationship (authoritarian mother versus friend as confidant) and within a dichotomy of "mainstream" and "alternative" culture.

These characterizations are used naturally and commonsensically by commentators; their meanings are at once obvious and make sense. Yet terminology such as "mainstream" and "alternative" are notoriously difficult to define or pin down. What does "alternative" involve and what is its relationship to the mainstream?

"Alternative" in its broadest sense has been used to describe a wide variety of practices. For example, we refer to "alternative medicine" or "the alternative press" in relation to groups that deliberately set themselves apart from the dominant practices of those particular institutions. The usage that I am interested in however is one which pertains to the analysis, consumption and production of popular music, that is, "alternative music."

Without attempting to relate this term to specific musical practices, alternative music, in its most agreed upon definition, might simply be music not meant for mainstream commercial radio or widespread consumption. Even so, this is an unsatisfactory explanation because it overlooks the commercial successes of a number of "alternative bands"

and their popularity "in spite" of their non-commercial sound.

A better way to describe the ways in which alternative music is defined and understood might be that it is typically viewed as a more "authentic" music than mainstream rock and pop. It is this sense of what authenticity means in relation to music and culture that interests me, and it is for this reason I have turned to theoretical work on popular music to aid my analysis of *Sassy* in this and the next two chapters.

Art vs. Commerce: The Case of Popular Music

In *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll*, Simon Frith argues that at the core of rock ideology is "the belief in a continuing struggle between music and commerce" (1987, 41). Similarly, Will Straw has said that narratives of popular music have relied on "conceptions positing a dialectic or struggle between margin and mainstream, resistance and complicity" (1993, 6).

Pop and rock music are both commercial forms of music, but whereas pop doesn't "pretend" to be anything but a part of popular culture, rock music has traditionally been endowed with a meaning more profound. Roy Shuker suggests that this formulation is a product of the 1960s, when leading American rock critics "elaborated a view of rock as correlated with authenticity, creativity and a particular

moment: the 1960s protest movement and counterculture" (1994, 7). Furthermore, this authenticity was the embodiment of "disavowal," a rejection of pop music's complicity with the establishment. As Simon Frith writes, claims were made in the 1960s that:

... popular music could — in some circumstances — express something more than the culture of profit; that record buying could — under some cultural conditions — mean something more than passive consumption. (1987, 48)

Thus, certain forms of rock music were "exempted" from the strictures of mass culture critiques, despite their commercial status.

Mary Harron adds that in the 1960s, the differences between pop and rock music "were not between commercial and noncommercial musics, but between attitudes towards commercialism" (1988, 180). She continues, "the paradox (and the profits) lay in the fact that rock's anticommercialism became the basis of its commercial appeal" (1988, 181). Whether these be folk musics of the 1960s, punk in the 1970s or indie music of the 1980s, the positive claims made for rock music are about authenticity, "what musicians can do despite their implication in a mass medium" (Frith 1987, 55).

Thus, the claims made about rock music are not about its production, but its intention. As long as music demonstrated "real emotion" and authentic values, its means of production and distribution were unimportant. What

musicians "can do" despite their implication is achieve an authentic relationship with audiences based on honesty of meaning and honesty of experience.

The critiques of this mythology about rock music are many and varied, but it is outside the scope of this thesis to summarize them. What I find of more interest is that while such arguments originate in the mass culture critiques of the 1930s, there is today a "continuing resonance of the idea of authenticity within mass cultural ideology itself" (Frith 1986, 265).

I suggest that the idea of authenticity has great resonance within *Sassy*; it too has been "written" and understood as an oscillation between the demands of resistance and those of the market, and this in part defines and separates the magazine from its competitors. As will become clear, this discourse of authenticity — what *Sassy* can do despite its status as a commercial, mainstream magazine — encompasses a number of practices and meanings. These include its feminism, its inclination for alternative music and culture, its distrust of commercial culture and its "shared experience" with readers established through language and register. Like the ideology of rock music, *Sassy* claims for itself a position of honesty and truthfulness through the pursuit of authentic culture and with the authentication of mainstream culture.

Mode of Address

In this section I would like to describe *Sassy's* mode of address and comment on the ways language in *Sassy* contributes to the construction of a sense of honesty and authenticity. By writing style I refer mainly to four qualities: idiom, irony, irreverence and informality. These qualities do not act independently of one another nor can they be hierarchized; each relies on the existence of the others but is also productive of the others. It will become clear for example that irony cannot exist without a feeling of shared idiom; on the other hand, the ironic use of language is itself frequently idiomatic. Likewise, a feeling of informality is essential to the production of irreverence, and yet irreverence also contributes to the establishment of a playful or informal relationship between magazine and reader. Thus, there is no one essential aspect of writing that is singularly part of a *Sassy's* tone or identity; rather, all these elements together allow certain claims to be made about the magazine, particularly that it attempts to address readers in a manner more authentic or sincere than other magazines for teenage girls.

Language and Tone

The writing in *Sassy* is young, colloquial, playful and friendly. It is, in short, a language geared towards its audience: North American teenage girls between the ages of

2

PM-1 3 1/2" x 4" PHOTOGRAPHIC MICROCOPY TARGET
NBS 1010a ANSI/ISO #2 EQUIVALENT

PRECISIONSM RESOLUTION TARGETS

13 and 19, generally white and middle class. The language tends to emulate adolescent terminology and idiom: the beauty-problem page is called "Zits and Stuff," the reader-written page is "Stuff You Wrote" and the letters to-the-editor page is called "Say What." The writing involves both a rejection of the formality of "adult" language and a celebration of the constantly evolving nature of adolescent vocabulary and speech.

The most clear example of this is the "Sassy Glossary Definition," a regular item in "What Now." Each month staff define a new word allegedly in circulation among staff or acquaintances. For example, the November 1993 definition is "Kumbaya: Adjective meaning so groovy, PC and eco-perfect. A synonym for *crunchy granola*. Example: 'I don't want to go to Hampshire; that school is too kumbaya.' Abby, an intern of ours, said her brother innovated this usage." The May 1992 definition is "Wakilana: Adjective meaning crazy, wacky, nutty, zany, madcap. Usage: 'We had to reshoot the fashion photos because they weren't wakilana enough.'" Whether or not these words exist in practice outside the Sassy office, the Sassy Glossary Definition is indicative of a view of language as mutable and transitory.

Similarly, Sassy legitimizes the patterns of colloquial sounds and dialects by recording them in print. For example, in "Callus, Schmallus" ("Zits and Stuff," June 1993) a reader writes in to ask: "My feet are all callus-y

and gross. How can I do an at-home pedicure?" Andrea responds, "You can turn your home into a fancy schmancy beauty pahlah." Here, the writing is teenaged in the language of the reader (the use of "callus-y" and "gross") and irreverent of "grown-up" feminine concerns ("fancy schmancy beauty pahlah"). The shared idiom "at work" here is an appreciation of beauty (non-callused feet are prettier than callused feet) yet youthful in its rejection of the seriousness of beauty (a theme I will discuss in more detail later).

Irreverence, irony and informality are also tied up intimately with use of idiom in *Sassy*. The treatment of issues of adolescence and femininity is frequently satirical and humorous, evident in the example above and throughout the magazine. For example, in the record-review page ("Listen Up") the rating system is based on a scale of one to five hearts that denote the quality of each album. In any issue from mid-1993 onwards, the hierarchical system is explained as follows: Five hearts, "fertile, alive and in touch with the cycles of the moon;" four hearts, "making the transition from super absorbent to slender regular;" three hearts, "well, it's only five days a month;" two hearts, "doubled over in the fetal position;" one heart, "prostrate atop a crimson tide." The topic of menstruation — within its wider context of humour, myth, commercial worth and medical discourse — provides a rating system for excellent,

good, fair, poor and awful. This is a treatment that is both irreverent (is it in good taste to talk about menstruation in this context?) and informal (the aim is not to offend, only to share a joke).

The writers at *Sassy* delight in being over-the-top, parodic and self-deprecating. For example, in an article on combatting depression ("Stomp That Bad Mood," May 1993), the introductory text that precedes the story begins: "According to people who scientifically measure these things, we spend 3 out of every 10 days feeling pissy. Take it from a veteran, gals, gloom and doom is not a good look. So let's learn how to escape a deadening funk, shall we?" This is reflective of the tone of the rest of the article, which despite its fairly useful and commonsensical advice, "demeans" its counselling by continuously wrapping itself in sarcastic and hyperbolic tones. The concluding paragraph, for example, reads:

Well, I don't know about you guys, but I feel better already. I'm totally ready to chase those yucky blues away the next time they come a-knockin'! Life is sunny and beautiful! Wheee! Maybe I'll even feel this way for another two or three days.

There is little sense here of a privileged, professional and authoritative voice of knowledge. The writer's hyperbole suggests she isn't fooled by all this, so why should the reader be fooled? After all, the tag-line that runs across the text (in a coloured bar with different font) advises: "Read this story. Or if it makes you feel

better, wad it up in a little ball and throw it across the room." Thus, while the basis for this article is the debilitating effects of a bad mood, the tone lets us in on the real secret: angst is funnier than happiness, and being sarcastic (a "bitch") makes for more interesting observation than does being earnest and meaningful.

The other, unspoken aspect that licences a rather blasé attitude towards this subject matter is the very inevitability of its reoccurrence. This article — how to deal with the teenage bad mood — has been, and will be, published countless times over in the history of teenage magazines. The lack of "newness" — its status is as a cliché — in this article is all the more reason to treat it flippantly. This exemplifies the way Sassy's writers are at once expected to play the game of writing to a teenaged audience as it has always been done, and to play it differently. Thus, aspects of formal conventions that are sacred to teenage magazine writing become written ironically or are ironized.

For example, in the pages of "About Face," a page of beauty info and news "tips," commercial product placement is an inevitable and required feature. But this does not mean all products are treated equally. Consider the "About Face" page in the November 1994 issue. Mary writes fairly straightforwardly of a new eye shadow by Chanel:

I've never been a huge eyeshadow fan, but I'm finding Chanel Eye Blush very satisfying. It

comes in a tube, goes on with your finger (it's creamy), then dries, so you don't have to worry about smudges. The colors are very subtle and your eyelids don't look made-up afterward, just kind of perfect and smooth.

The above description is done in a realist mode; the attributes of the eyeshadow are described with classic, make-up "terminology": its physical properties (smooth, creamy), colour (subtle) and effect (not made up, natural). It is plain-spoken and accepting of the terms of debate around beauty products. Yet on the same page, in "The hair Andrea can live without," these discursive rules of writing are suspended for a more ironic approach. Mary writes, of a new hair video-imaging process:

The press release was just too tantalizing. "Have you been considering a new hairstyle? Our video imaging service will combine your face with unique hairstyles." We rushed a Polaroid of staff model Andrea off to Hair Illusions. Here, the results we call ... The Mary Jo Buttafuoco, The Bonnie Raitt, The Mary Lou Retton, The "Cheese Ravioli or Chicken?" USAir Hostess. Andrea's reaction: "I thought I was cute enough till I saw these. It just shows the importance of hair." For info, write to Hair Illusions ...

Here, readers are told where they can find more information concerning Hair Illusions, but the real message is far from innocent. In fact, the "true" meaning of this item is unclear — is it extolling the merits of Hair Illusions for allowing one to try out new hairstyles, even if they are awful, thus allowing one to reflect on "the importance of hair?" Or is the joke on Hair Illusions, in the very ambiguity of the praise and description that

follows (is it a good thing to have hair like Mary Lou Retton?).

The sense of irony in this item is related to what D.C. Muecke describes as a "way of writing designed to leave open the question of what the literal meaning might signify: there is a perpetual deferment of significance" (1982, 31). Furthermore, as Linda Hutcheon notes, "saying one thing and meaning another (the basic semantic part of the definition of irony) is certainly one way of subverting a dominant language from within" (1992, 13). Unlike the previous beauty item, here there is a duality or plurality of meanings. The conjoining of beauty with imaging technology is not treated sacredly or "straight" as is the new Chanel eyeshadow — it has a mocking as well as innocently praise-worthy tone to it. Whatever the reasons for this disparity in description (I suspect a certain respect for the tastefulness of Chanel versus the "lowness" of gimmicky uses of technology), my point is that there is not one cohesive language within "About Face" used to describe beauty news or information, or a single "voice" to be found in Sassy as a whole. As Hutcheon notes, "any attempt to juggle simultaneously both literal and ironic meanings cannot help but disrupt our notions of meaning as something single, dependable, or stable" (1992, 13), and as well, I would add, transparent and straightforward.

The often detached, ironic tone, serves, I believe, a dual purpose. On the one hand, it is sophisticated and knowing, imagining that its readers understand and do not need explanations. The page, "Working Our Nerves" is a key site of this brand of writing. Used as a vehicle for staff to "rant" or air their grievances, the item often assumes a sophisticated knowledge. For example, the July 1993 version features a full-page, black and white photograph of middle-aged, male "executives" sitting at a boardroom table, and has only the words, "The Patriarchy" written underneath. The assumptions that are made to elicit the necessary humorous response to this page are manifold, and the witticism lies in the denial of "too much" information or explanation.

Similarly, when the "About Face" (April 1993) page advertises the new Barbie-edition Caboodles (a colourful plastic makeup case with a miniature Barbie doll inside) with "you can't be too old to covet anything related to the blondly, wide-eyed campy wonder," once again a fairly heightened sense of the politics of popular culture is assumed. On the one hand, Barbie is an icon of female childhood experience in post-war North America, a "sign" that would be obvious to Sassy's readers. However, Barbie has also become a symbol of patriarchal-imposed forms of femininity, and has been vilified by feminists, including in the pages of Sassy (the article "13 reasons not to diet"

[August 1994] in part blames Barbie for our obsession with thinness). *Sassy* draws on both those experiences (Barbie is fun, Barbie is anti-feminist) and meaning is drawn back again to create a "third" experience. In this reading, it's fun to like Barbie, because we already know why she's bad.

These are key examples of the way in which *Sassy* both presumes and produces an intimate relationship with readers. An in-joke represents both a shared idiom and a shared marginality: a *Sassy* reader will understand the humour of the above examples that, the writers imagine, a reader of *Seventeen* perhaps won't. It is a tool both of inclusion (I understand) and distancing (those readers of other teen magazines won't get it). As Holly Kruse points out, "senses of shared identity are alliances formed out of oppositional stances" (1993, 34).

Occasionally *Sassy* will publish letters from its own readers who didn't "get it," further emphasizing that *Sassy* is a magazine "not for everyone." For example, *Sassy* published an article that put to the test advice given by *YM* and *Cosmopolitan* on how to attract a man ("How to Make Him Want You ... Bad!," March 1993). Attempting to enact — literally — advice such as "wear body-hugging styles, lots of jewellery, vivid eye-makeup and lipstick" and "kick off your shoes so he can see your lovely feet — lots of men have foot fetishes!", the authors spoof the words of wisdom given by these magazines. Each enactment fails to produce

successful results, or ends in disaster. Their final words of advice are:

... the only reason we engaged in this clinical experiment was to show how full of cheese these "Get a Guy or Be Miserable" articles are ... The Mary Ann and Margie perspective is boys are cute and we like them (unless we hate them) but they're mere dressing on the salad of life. We find it much more sensible to hang out with people — male and female — whose company we groove on, not to go hunting for a mate ... To sum up: YM and Cosmo, bite us.

In June 1993, a reader's letter in "Say What" comments:

No offense, but when you tried all the guy-getting techniques did it happen to cross your minds that these guys simply may not have found you attractive? ... So these techniques may not have worked for you, but that does not necessarily mean they will not work for someone else. If you ever do an article like that again, please try to keep more of an open mind.

Following this letter is another that comments on the same article:

When I saw the cover of the March issue ... emotion-stricken me began to cry. 'Oh, no,' I said between sobs. 'Cancel my subscription. Sassy's gone into the black hole of teenybopperdom and will never come out.' ... I read the article anyway, I laughed so hard I nearly wet my pants. Women need 'How to Get a Man' articles like we need menstrual cramps.

Clearly the magazine delights in annoying some readers while pleasing others. The reader who "fails" to get Sassy's humour is as necessary as the one who enjoys it.

Furthermore, a certain flippancy and sarcasm provides a calculated distance from dismissals of "it's just a teenage girls' magazine." Pastiche and deliberate superficiality are tropes of ironic distancing. In the March 1992

"About Face," Margie and Mary write: "With everything in such upheaval — Russia, the European Economic Community, Maybelline reformulating so many products — we're thankful lovely Great Lash Mascara is still in its pink-and-green-tube. An oasis of sameness in a turbulent world." The humour in such a trite statement is that it is the "typical" statement of a teenage girls' magazine, magnified and made grotesquely insensitive. Angela McRobbie has made similar observations about the coverage of pop singers in *Just Seventeen*. She notes, "superficiality and pastiche allow readers to position themselves at a distance from the subordination of being 'just' a fan or just a silly girl" (McRobbie 1993, 417). Here, as in the Barbie Caboodles example, it becomes cool and fun to revel in girlish concerns and the sublimely superficial.

A Shared Intimacy

The irony and irreverence of *Sassy* produces and is produced by writing that is personal and self-referential, which in turn imagines a closeness between the magazine and readers. Rarely does writing attempt to be anonymous, disinterested or neutral. Writers use only their first names in bylines and their photographs are frequently published in different contexts.¹³ Readers become familiar with "Jane," "Christina," "Margie," "Andrea," "Diane," and so forth, a

practice members of the focus groups seemed to appreciate and value. For example, the following are Group I's comments:

Avril: Do you get a picture of the editors?
 several: Yeah
 Heather: You also kind of get to know the people because you know their names. It's like Jane and somebody else.
 Jill: Yeah, I can remember Jane.
 Heather: It's like you kind of get to know the people who are writing the magazine, whereas in, like other magazines, who are they?

A member of Group II notes:

Betsy: Yeah, Sassy like, they let the writers have a personality and then the readers know that and get kind of intimate, or, I can't think of the right word, but they're close to the people. Whereas, the other magazines, you just like, you don't know any of the people. So this is more intimate with its readers.

The staff regularly share opinions, jokes and details of their lives in the magazine. An obvious example is Jane's column, "Diary," which focuses on the "goings on" of the Sassy office. For example, in May 1993, Jane relates incidents when staff have burst into tears at the office, "our all best-time Sassy crying fits." In August 1991, she uses her column to describe her appearance in R.E.M.'s video for "Shiny Happy People." In lengthier pieces of writing, staff have shared much more intimate details of their lives. In "How My Brother Came Out" (July 1993), Margie discusses her family's reaction to her brother being gay, and in "How

To ensure anonymity, all participants were given pseudonyms in the transcripts. To learn each participant's age and other details, see Appendix B.

I got my sister back," (June 1994) Mary Ann embarks on a reconciliation with a sister she has not spoken to in many years.

What occurs in these instances is more than the provision of autobiographical detail. Writers "share" with the reader details of reporting and writing typically invisible in most journalism. These might include the author's feelings about a particular topic, or how she felt undergoing the reporting of the story. For example, in "Ready to Rumble" (February 1994), Maureen relates the dissatisfaction she felt after her interview with a 16-year-old, female boxer. Midway through the article she writes,

After she leaves, I think about how I wanted to like her more than I actually wound up liking her. And how what she had to say was a little too contrived, a little too underdog, movie-of-the-weekish. Like, where were her insecurities? Even though I talked to her for over two hours, I really had no idea what her deal was.

This style of autobiographical writing drew much praise from the focus groups. For them it was a key marker of the difference between *Sassy* and other teen magazines. The following discussion occurred in Group II:

Avril: How is it that an article in 'Teen comes across as condescending to you but an article in *Sassy* might not?

Suzanne: I think mostly 'cause when the writers begin their articles for *Sassy* they usually tell a little story of how they got the interview or how they are, "when I was going to Idaho to talk about the potato farmers, this is what happened on the flight." So they're, they just take on this personal note to all their writing. Whereas a *Seventeen* writer just kind of presents the issue,

presents the events and then gives a conclusion. I might as well be reading an essay by anybody.

Lori: It's like they think that it's unprofessional to like mention their lives. Like Sassy, I've seen like Sassy get like burned by other magazines who say, "as if we care about your lives Sassy" writers, stop like giving us this info," but I do care. I don't care, but it's interesting, and it makes me want to read more.

.....

Lori: The other magazines are too scared to be goofy or unprofessional, cause they think that somehow that will tarnish them. But Sassy, the writers are goofy and all that, they're just like more like real people, they're not just, you know like Suzanne was saying when you write essays for school you can't say "I," you can't, you have to make it seem like God's writing it or like some invisible being is writing it.

Elissa: They editorialize a lot more, it's more personal. And they use their own experiences which for most teen magazines I don't think they do. It just makes it more fun for the reader and they can relate to it a lot more.

Lori: But for some reason that irritates people. It irritates other magazines.

Suzanne: It's not professional.

The production of a story — the reporting, interviewing, writing and editing — is often made part of the content. The "story behind the story" occasionally becomes more interesting than the original subject. In "With Friends Like These..." (September 1993), Diane, the only African-American writer on staff, relates her feelings about an assignment to write on racism. Diane, and Mary Ann, who is white, were given similar tasks (looking for an apartment, shopping for expensive jewellery, etc.) and told to report on their difference in treatment. Diane relates that after undergoing several "incidents" and being asked to do

more (after certain events, such as hailing a cab, fail to produce "enough" of a racist response), she begins to feel victimized and that the editors have been insensitive. The article is remarkable in its unmasking of journalistic production and the depth to which it takes us into the politics of the Sassy office. Diane, calling herself "Negro guinea pig," writes:

I began to hate the way this story was making me feel. I was mad at myself for being overzealous about the assignment, and angry about the insensitivity of the editors. None of them are people of color, so I didn't think they knew how bad it would make me feel. One day as we were walking back from a photo shoot, Christina asked me how things were going with the story, and I told her. I tried explaining to her how I was feeling and how my self-esteem had dropped very low. But I was unsuccessful in my attempts to communicate my feelings. Her response was, 'You've got to do whatever you can for your art.' She was kidding, but it still hurt. I walked down the street thinking, Yeah, well, that's easy for her to say. No one has ever called her a nigger.

This article demonstrates one of the ways in which an informal relationship with the reader is established in the magazine. It is not simply the offering of "inside" knowledge and gossip; what is being shared is the process, method and routine — a privileged viewpoint. Most of all, this style of writing assumes a *proximity* to readers, a feature that readers felt added to the magazine's authenticity. Not only did it make the magazine more personable and "fun to read," it increased the "truthfulness" of what was being said and made it more "real." As Sara from Group III commented:

Sara: Well it's very colloquial. It's very just kind of everyday talk. And you know their tendency to call one another by their first names, they really personalize the magazine. And I think they really give a sense of not separating — like obviously *Seventeen* is a really corporate magazine, they're written by a corporation. I think *Sassy*, they really try to give a sense that it's just a bunch of women sitting around, saying, you know, "I remember when I was 15 I thought this and this and this." They're very straightforward.

Several times readers differentiated *Seventeen* from *Sassy* in this manner, by emphasizing *Seventeen*'s "facelessness," "corporateness" (never mind that *Sassy* is also privately owned), and general lack of authentic intentions. A key marker of difference among magazines imagined by readers was the age of staff.¹⁴ Frequently magazines like *Seventeen* were assumed to naturally have an older staff ("old" generally referring to anyone over 30), even though there is little or no evidence to support this in the magazine.

As I have argued, the use of irony, irreverence, idiom and informality in *Sassy* are largely inseparable. Even when dealing with "serious" issues (an article on the presidential election, "What's up with this crazy election" [November 1992] or migrant farming, "These Girls Live Like Slaves" [August 1993]) the qualities of idiom and informality remain. My larger point in all this is that *Sassy* establishes for itself a privileged position of friend and confidant. Because it rejects a discourse of "the voice of authority" in favour of irony and informal sharing of detail, it establishes for itself a kind of authentic

realism. It is precisely this position that allows the magazine on occasion to be authoritative and peremptory.

For example, in the advice columns or articles that address matters of moral or medical concerns, the closeness of a shared joke is suspended for an authoritative position, whereby the knowledge and expertise of the writers supersedes the assumed "equality" between readers and writers throughout the rest of the magazine. So, for example, when a reader writes in to "Zits and Stuff" (May 1992) to ask whether she should continue to use fade cream on her skin, the columnists reply in fairly exasperated tones:

For heaven's sake, go out and get a hobby. This sounds callous, but you're far too obsessed with the flaws you see in your face and seem way too sure the real you isn't pretty. Maybe you should talk to your buds, parents or a counsellor about ways to feel better about yourself, because you deserve not to be a slave to your mirror.

Even so, this answer is less a cautionary warning than a friendly scolding for what is regarded as an unhealthy and silly obsession with looks. Readers are often reminded that while looking pretty is fun, it shouldn't be an obsession or dangerous to one's health.

When issues to do with drugs, pregnancy or suicide are at stake, readers are told very seriously to seek professional advice or speak to their parents or teacher. When problems arise with friends, parents or school, readers are told to deal with it a mature way and advice centres around

assuaging a situation in the least confrontational manner. Occasionally, the writers will become irritated with readers' problems, and point out if they think they are behaving foolishly. When a reader writes in to say that she is upset from walking in on her parents having sex in the daytime ("Help," June 1993), Kate replies, "So what's the big deal? You can't demand they wait till nighttime, because that's unfair, but you should let them know they wigged you out and you need to talk about it. And whatever you do, make sure you knock next time."

Outside of the advice columns, Sassy will occasionally forward an authoritative position in relation to issues such as sex. For example, the introduction to "6 Biggest Sex Questions. Finally." (February 1992) begins:

You've hopefully talked to your mom about sex. Maybe your health teacher cruised through the fundamentals. Probably you've plumbed the subject's mysterious depths with your g-friends. But they obviously didn't cover everything, because you keep asking us these questions. So once and for all we're gonna tell you exactly what you want to know.

When the question "I'm 14 years old. Do you think I'm old enough to have sex?" is posed, Anne responds: "No way. No way. No way. Come back here and let me explain why."

This type of address is used infrequently in Sassy. Aside from the advice columns, the authoritative position is used more in relation to makeup and beauty advice than it is to issues of moral or emotional concerns. More often these issues are explored in an analytic fashion, with interviews

and professional opinions. For example, in the article "Slut" (October 1994), Maureen speaks to two girls who have gained the reputation as a "slut" among their peers. In exploring the issue of why these girls turned to promiscuous sex at such an early age, the author can voice many of the same concerns as "6 Biggest Questions About Sex," but in a less didactic manner. She writes:

When I asked each of them why they felt compelled to mess around, they honestly couldn't figure it out. And I found it really disturbing that neither of them ever once mentioned how self-destructive her behavior was. It seems apparent that Kristi and Judy don't like themselves very much. Virtually all the psychological literature on teenage promiscuity attributes it to early childhood abuse, whether physical, sexual or emotional.

Thus, I would argue, part of Sassy's credibility arises out of its treatment of such subjects in a fashion that involves a moral but not a sermonic manner. The focus-group readers also felt that Sassy was more realistic in its understanding of what teenagers do and do not want to hear about controversial issues such as underage drinking or sexual activity.

Group I

Lynn: I think it's more realistic.
 Avril: It's realistic?
 Lynn: Well yeah, it's real life. Cause some people live like Seventeen, but more people live like Sassy.
 Rebecca: They tell you how to drink properly. The other magazines say you shouldn't be drinking, cause-
 Jessica: -yeah, but they got a bad reaction-
 Jill: -it's just kind of encouraging it.
 Rebecca: If you are going to drink, they say then how to do it.

Jessica: Well, I mean, they acknowledge the fact that most teenagers do drink.

Group III

Sara: Instead of like 'Teen magazine where it's "don't do it," and that's the whole idea whereas Sassy's like going, "maybe it's not a good idea to do it but here's what you need to know." I know when they very first started, I know the initial one had an article about losing your virginity. Just very straightforward and true. You talk to any teen and it's going on, so many of them are hugely uninformed and its frightening.

Lastly, I would like to consider a final example of the ways in which readers are "invited" into the magazine. Like other magazines, Sassy has venues for readers' opinions and expressions. There is a letters-to-the-editor page, a page that features poems and prose written by readers ("Stuff You Wrote") and a page for reader-written essays ("It Happened to Me"). But the magazine's most striking overture to readers is the reader-produced issue.

Once a year Sassy "gives over" the magazine to young readers who have qualified (through contest submissions) to take on each and every role required for the production of an issue. The reader-produced issue has a slightly different look to it from normal issues of Sassy, and the regular categories are not adhered to. The "fanzine" quality of the magazine is further heightened in this issue, as normal rules of editorial professionalism or standards of good taste are relaxed for a more amateurish approach.

For example, in the December 1992 reader-produced issue, staff provide a page of candid photographs of

themselves dying their hair with crayons, fruit juice and food colouring ("We Color It"). The style and tone of writing is similar to regular versions of *Sassy*, but the beauty advice is "beneath" even *Sassy*'s standards of "wackiness." The quality of photographs and graphics overall is not as high, and writing is not as sophisticated or experienced (arguments tend to be somewhat naive, nuances are not as well drawn out). In fact, the reader-produced issue demonstrates that within regular issues of *Sassy*, a fairly high degree of professionalism and journalism is the norm, despite its attempts to look spontaneous and haphazard.

My larger point, however, is that the reader-produced issue demonstrates an attempt by *Sassy* to assume an equality between readers and the magazine. In "handing over" an entire issue to readers, credibility is established by the suggestion that staff "know what it's like" to be young and that their motivations are authentic ("readers are what it's all about"). The reader-produced issue is also evocative of a non-professional fanzine. It comes "closest," through its use of non-professional writers and editors, to being the non-commercial, alternative publication *Sassy* so often attempts to evoke.

Conclusion

Despite its status as a mainstream magazine (reproductive of many of its competitors' qualities and content), *Sassy* seeks to articulate a difference from the mainstream by distancing itself from its commercial status. Similar to the way it has been invoked in popular music, *Sassy* is structured by a discourse of authenticity, legitimating it as alternative to the concerns and themes of mainstream teenage magazines.

A key avenue in the construction of this discourse is through its writing and tone. The writing in *Sassy* is colloquial and youthful, relying on teenage idiom and speech patterns. Its irreverent humour and irony produce a style of writing that is informal and "non-professional." Furthermore, the magazine imagines a proximity to readers, as when the staff use their first names, share their insecurities and problems, and give readers a behind-the-scenes look at journalism-at-work.

Despite its informality and inclusiveness, the above characteristics also serve as tools of exclusivity and differentiation. Irreverence and in-jokes assume a knowledge and sophistication on the part of the reader who is familiar with the codes of mainstream teenage magazines and yet is atypical in her ironic distance from them. The reader-produced issue in particular evokes most strongly the magazine's alignment with alternative fanzines and non-mainstream culture, and it is to these subjects I now turn.

IV

"Alternativeness" and the Authentication of Mainstream Culture

This chapter will examine the discourses of consumerism and anti-commercialism as they appear in *Sassy*. I will argue that within *Sassy* there is a refashioning of the ways commercial and non-commercial and feminine and masculine culture are mapped onto each other. *Sassy* works to "de-feminize" the teenage girls' magazine by deploying material, attitudes and information which are typically understood to be outside teenage girls' scope of knowledge and which are generally legitimized as more "authentic." But while mainstream culture is frequently denigrated by *Sassy* as boring, mindless and "unsassy," the magazine is defensive of its mainstream status and likewise, problematizes a non-critical acceptance of alternative culture.

I will begin by articulating *Sassy's* status as a commodity and the ways in which it is representative of an ideology of consumerism. I will then show the ways in which *Sassy* problematizes its commercial status through the inclusion of critiques of capitalism and commercial culture. Lastly, I will give examples of "alternative culture" within the magazine.

***Sassy* as Commercial Text**

Sassy itself is a commodity that is in large part concerned with the purchasing and acquiring of other commodities. It is attractive to advertisers interested in reaching a large and lucrative market; a great deal of *Sassy's* editorial content works hand-in-hand with the cycle of commodity desire advertisers rely on. Much of *Sassy* is "about" commercial products and activities; readers learn about new makeup, new clothes, new music, new movies, new books, et cetera. In all these instances, particularly in relation to makeup and clothes, the line between editorial opinion and advertising is somewhat blurred. In other instances, the alignment is quite blatant; the magazine frequently sells its name to advertisers for cross-promotional advertising. For example, the November 1992 issue has a small advertisement for a "Sassy Sack," a grab-bag filled with a shampoo sample from Salon Selectives, a small bottle of nail polish from Cutex, a sample of L'Oreal Plentitive Active Moisturizer, two Always pantiliners, and a NA NA (distributer of Doc Martens) sticker. All this for \$4.00 and \$1.00 shipping, and the first 400 orders receive a free *Sassy* cosmetic bag featuring the *Sassy* logo.

I use this example to illustrate that within *Sassy*, advertising is never "far" from the editorial content, and in certain cases the magazine very clearly aligns itself

with advertisers and consumer practices. It, like myriad other examples of commercial culture, legitimates an ideology of consumerism which in turn suggests, "that the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences" (Bocock 1993, 50). Robert Bocock notes that in a capitalist system and postmodern society, "consumer goods are part of the way in which people construct a sense of who they are, of their sense of identity through the use of symbols in consumption patterns" (1993, 52). Ian Angus similarly describes commodities as items "produced for individuals who define themselves through their difference from other consumption groups" (Angus 1989, 101).

Problematizing the Mainstream: *Sassy* as Non-Commercial Text

Despite its status as a commercial text, *Sassy* maintains an uneasy relationship with its commercial status. It renounces consumerism as often as it repeatedly espouses it. In its pursuit of authenticity, *Sassy* often warns against caring "too much" about material goods and often takes a "left-liberal" stance towards social and political issues. Its staff criticize many of the journalistic practices they are "forced" to participate in and make clear their displeasure at being subject to the imperatives of advertisers.

Critiques of Consumer Culture

Sassy is regularly "horrified" by what it sees as blatant consumerism or cold-hearted capitalism. It is also often critical of what it sees as an indifferent social system and unfair treatment of minorities and the poor.

A key example is the article "9 things about America that make us want to scream and throw things" (August 1991). The writers take aim at, among other things, American media practices (for sensationalizing stories and "ignoring" important social issues); American voting habits (apathy on the part of citizens); the American obsession with violence (particularly in the media) and the lack of a universal health-care system.

In "The 10 Unsassiest Colleges in America" (November 1993), Diane derides Brandeis University because "only the rich need apply." In "Only in America" (June 1993), Kim looks at the Mall of America, the biggest shopping mall in the United States. While she is sarcastic in her description and comments, her critique remains equivocal, attempting to explain the lure of mall life as well as mock it:

Sure, mall culture is plastic and cheesy and is slowly homogenizing America. But I can understand why people flock to these sanitized versions of real life: There's no homelessness and little violent crime, and everyone behaves in a slightly hypnotized, placid, high-on-consumerism manner.

The magazine thus politicizes issues and practices (such as shopping) that do not often receive critical

attention in the mainstream press, let alone teenage girls' magazines. It also brings to the fore issues that don't often attract mainstream attention. The readers I spoke to said they appreciated that the magazine didn't only write about "big" concerns like AIDS and racism, and that they were learning about certain issues for the first time.

Group II

- Avril: What about things like social issues, politics, or feminism?
- Suzanne: Sassy tends to deal with smaller issues, they don't like go with the big three, you know, AIDS, racism, etc. They kind of go to small ones like, farming and -
- several: (interrupt with story examples)
- Suzanne: They have ones on smaller issues that are still a big concern. But the other magazines tend to deal more with, I don't know, "This boy has AIDS" or, "blah, blah, blah", like the big issues everyone's concerned with.
- Avril: What do you think that says?
- Betsy: Broader ranges.
- Suzanne: Yeah, one's a broader topic -
- Betsy: - or not so mainstream -
- Lori: - also one's like obvious, like, obviously everyone's concerned with AIDS and obviously everyone's concerned with racism, and you see that all the time. It's just like, the people who write for YM turn on the news and just, write about those things in their like, teenage lingo. Whereas Sassy writers will like search for things you don't see all the time, things that you're not totally familiar with, that you're not totally bombarded with.
- Avril: So was there anything for example you can remember being surprised by?
- Suzanne: There's that one, in 1991 I guess, it was about farming. And, I even come from a farming family and I know nothing about farming. So I went, "hey," cause you'd never read it anywhere else, really.
- Elissa: Or if they do write about big topics they kind of personalize it a bit, like, I remember one, one of the writers was writing about how her brother was gay, and he had just come out of the closet or whatever, but she personalized it, because it was

something that had happened to her and the article was about that. So, it wasn't really a broad topic, in general it was what happened to her. So that makes it a lot more interesting to read I think.

Group III

Sara: The other thing is they always, like rather than just talk about it on the grand scale they have "It Happened to Me." It really brings you into, it's like a friend telling you about something that happened and you can relate, you can sympathize. As opposed to having this, "this is what it's really like."

Lindsey: I just find that they tend to find more different types of social issues to deal with. I mean, sure they cover all the regular ones but they do things other magazines haven't dealt with before.

One example of an article readers say they "don't see all the time" is "These Girls Live Like Slaves" (August 1993). Mary Ann looks at migrant farm workers, focusing on two teenage girls who work with their parents picking crops throughout the United States. Both from families of Mexican immigrants, the two girls suffer through low pay, exhaustion, pesticide burns and, cumulatively, years of missed schooling. She writes, "Growers rationalize away migrant workers' problems by saying they make more money here than they would in Mexico, but the truth is that most farm worker families earn less than half of what our government, clueless as it is, considers a poverty-level income." When the girls tell her they dream of moving from their families and finding office jobs, Mary Ann is not optimistic they will be successful.

"My Ambivalent Rain Forest Odyssey" (April 1994) is of interest because it problematizes the relationship between journalists and advertisers. Specifically, Margie relates her travels to the Brazilian rain forest on a trip sponsored by hair-care company Sebastian International. The company, which labels itself cruelty-free and eco-friendly, is paying for a trip for winners of an environmental awareness contest sponsored by Sebastian, as well as journalists, a filmmaker, and many hairdressers. Right from the beginning, despite her eagerness to visit the rain forest, Margie has mixed feelings:

I was all atwitter about what the rain forest might look like But I also felt like a ho. I mean, Sebastian was paying for my trip, and the publicity coordinator was so nice, and maybe she'd give me some Potion 9, a superb styling product. How could I now be unbiased? Mr. Sebastian was my friend!

Margie's ambivalent feelings for the trip are expressed through the sarcastic tones of her writing as well as her self-description as a "ho," or prostitute. It is this somewhat crude analogy that expresses the time-worn dilemma of the creative artist (or objective journalist), feeling pressured to "sell out" her vision or integrity in order to flatter a patron or sponsor. The worst-case scenario happens when Margie finds the organizers more interested in photo shoots than learning about the rain forest ecosystem, and is dismayed by her co-travellers littering and other "eco-unfriendly" behaviour.

This last article in particular demonstrates, inadvertently perhaps, *Sassy's* ambivalence about its status as a commercial magazine. The self-consciousness of the writing, as I argued in chapter three, problematizes what are typically "invisible" practices in commercial media — in this case, press junkets. Margie questions the validity of her reporting because it is supported by a major corporation, implicitly drawing attention to the difficulty of objective journalism in any instance of commercial media.

The Triumph of Mass Idols

A related area that *Sassy* is ambivalent about is its reporting on celebrities. Celebrity coverage is quite extensive in the magazine and each month usually includes a one-page profile called "One to Watch" and a longer, more in-depth profile. Celebrities are on the cover once or twice a year and have included Juliana Hatfield (September 1992), Mayim Bialik (November 1992), Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love (April 1992) and Tori Spelling (October 1993). They are also mentioned in places like "Diary" and "What Now," where writers are "catty" or "gushy" about stars' love lives, careers, personalities, and so forth. Jane frequently "swears" that she is going to marry Keanu Reeves, and Christina often "wonders" why Winona Ryder left Johnny Depp for Dave Pirner from Soul Asylum.

Yet in "Why All the Celebrity Worship?" (June 1992), Christina attempts to come to grips with her own practice and discomfort with featuring celebrities in *Sassy*. "It's so dumb," she writes, "we worship celebs because our lives are pointless, but doing that makes us feel even worse." She says she hates *Sassy's* complicity in the celebrity-building process, which may valorize "undeserving" or inauthentic stars.¹⁵ "What has Luke Perry done to redeem humanity?" writes Christina. "At press time, nothing, Still, he is widely adored." She adds,

As I write this I am painfully aware that because we, the staff of *Sassy*, put our pictures and personalities into the magazine, more people know who we are than we know who they are. We did it so you, the readers, would relate to our articles better, but it ended up making us into semi-celebrities. We get fan mail and hate mail. Either we are part of the celeb worship problem, or we are making fun of the whole thing. It depends on how you look at it.

Christina ends her article on a pessimistic note, implicitly drawing on imagery from critiques of mass society and mass culture when she writes that she is only a "cog" in the "huge media machine," adding, "I am a part of this whole process. No wonder I feel soiled at the end of my work day."

In other instances, writers contain this ambivalence by not "playing" the celebrity writing game the way it is supposed to be played. They will often be brutally honest about their subjects, relating their own impressions

garnered from an interview rather than from what is in the press release. In "Tiffani-Amber [Thiessen]: Something Does Not Compute," (November 1993) the star of "Saved by the Bell" (now on "Beverly Hills 90210") is taken to task for being dumb and having competed in beauty contests. Mary Ann relates part of their conversation when she asked Tiffani-Amber what she likes about English literature, her purported choice of college major: "She says she likes a lot of Shakespeare's lesser-known works. Like what? 'Like *Hamlet*,' she proclaims excitedly. Oh, I hadn't heard of that one," responds Mary Ann sarcastically.

In "Celebrity 'Activism'" ("Working Our Nerves" May 1994), Mary Ann criticizes celebrities who use their status to support charities and political causes, immediately obvious in her sarcastic use of quotation marks around the word "activism." In particular she attacks super-model Christy Turlington for posing for an anti-fur ad and a few months later, modelling clothes with fur on them.

Likewise, in "Mayim Bialik is not a Dag" (November 1992), Christina is overwhelmed by how "uncelebrity-like" this actress is. She is, "a teenage TV star who is neither cheesy and plastic, nor unbearably egotistical and spoiled. The star of *Blossom* leaves me with no other choice than to write a positive article, which is hard to do without sounding like *People* magazine." The comparison to *People*

magazine, used as the yardstick of the most distasteful type of celebrity journalism, clearly reveals Sassy's own philosophy on these matters. Writing a positive article about a celebrity is "hard" to do when being phony, or inauthentic, is not a natural act.

"The boycotting, censoring ways of the world"

Sassy's writers also demonstrate that they are well aware that they are constrained in what they can say. Occasionally, reference will be made to the boycott and controversy suffered earlier. Mike ("Working Our Nerves" February 1994) attacks the censorship of books in high-school libraries in "Censors Run Amok." He writes: "when organized finger-waggers start deciding what ideas and concepts you should and should not be exposed to, they're ultimately insulting your intelligence, and not giving you the chance to draw your own conclusions." In "What Now" (August 1991), Christina comments on a high-school newspaper banned from printing an article on drug-use among students. "Total freedom of the press in this country is a myth anyway, as I know all too well." In "Five Years of Sassiness" (March 1993), Christina makes reference to "the boycotting, censoring ways of the world in the course of producing 59 issues," adding, "it is easy to feel weary and jaded."

Christine Gledhill has noted that:

Within media institutions, the professional and aesthetic practices of 'creative' personnel

operate within different frameworks from, and often in conflict with, the economic or ideological purposes of companies and shareholders. Such conflict is, indeed, part of the ideology of creativity itself. (1988, 69)

Feeling "weary and jaded" is no doubt an integral part of the ideology of creativity, a product of the conflict associated with "professional and aesthetic" relationships. From the comments above it is clear that the writers at *Sassy* imagine themselves as part of a struggle to project truthfulness and authenticity in the face of censorship and advertisers' demands for uncontroversial (i.e. commercially complicit) reporting. But while I do not doubt that staff felt real frustration at times over the limitations to what they could write, part of their "credibility" or status arises out of the very ties that bind them. Their "struggle," and its manifestations in the writing and reporting, is a constant reminder to staff and readers that this is not a *typical* teenage girls' magazine. Although *Sassy* is in all respects a commercial and mainstream magazine, it sees itself as expressing authentic concerns. To return to Simon Frith, he notes that the ideology of rock music is an ideology about:

what musicians can do *despite* their implication in a mass medium. The inference is that most pop products are culturally worthless; the more sure rock fans are of the pleasures of the special worth of their artists, the more contemptuous they are of the pleasures taken by the rest of pop's consumers. (Frith 1987, 55)

While what Frith is describing is viewed in relation to the audience, the ideology of rock is ultimately fuelled at every level of the music industry, including rock journalism. The writers at *Sassy* also articulate what a magazine for teenage girls can do, despite its commercial status.

Privileging Adolescence

At the risk of stating the obvious, magazines for teenage girls are just as much characterized by the concerns of living life in one's teens as they are with being female (an unnecessary assertion perhaps, but one that is predominantly overlooked in the research on teenage girls' magazines, which privileges "the female"). These magazines take up the "traumas" associated with the teenage years: insecurity over physical development and appearance, feuding with parents and teachers over freedom and independence, confusion over sexual relationships, and so forth.

Earlier I looked at the research done by Barbara Hudson, who described femininity and adolescence as discourses often at odds with one another. In her view, girls must learn to walk a tightrope, tempering their rebellion and independence with what Hudson calls the "master discourse" of femininity, which encourages mild and uncontroversial forms of rebellion such as zaniness and selfishness. Yet I would argue that *Sassy* sets aside a space, if not a privileged one, for adolescence. In

particular it often "celebrates" adolescence as a lonely and alienating time, a sentiment that is "masculine" in its overture to non-social behaviour.

The Pleasures of Non-Sociability

In "Help" (June 1993), Kate tells a reader who is depressed and lonely after moving to Arizona from New York, "Busy yourself with finding some friends. There are always plenty of disgruntled teenagers like yourself, so search them out and bond over how marginalized you all feel in that arid retirement zone." In response to someone nervous about starting high-school and making new friends ("Help," August 1994), Kate responds: "I could offer the usual bunk about taking up hobbies and starting after-school social groups. But if that was your bag, I doubt you'd be writing." In the first example, socializing (looking for friends) is achieved through self-exclusion. The advice is not to seek out the popular crowd, or even "normal" people, but to seek solace in marginalization (with people like yourself). In the second example, "typical" advice favouring "feminine" patterns of socialization (socialize, be approachable) is rejected.

Thus, Sassy is sympathetic to the teenager who is out-of-place, lonely and miserable in high school. In "How these girls became geeks" (September 1993), Mary Ann

interviews three high-school girls about their reputations as geeks. She concludes that the reason they are outcasts among their peers is because "they're multidimensional and super talented, defying any sort of categorization (besides the geek category assigned by other kids)." Being a geek is, in a round-about way, "cool;" it means the individual is "above" the understanding of normal people.

In "Feeling Alienated?" (November 1992), Christina addresses and describes the reader's problems coping with her alienation from family, friends and society: "while you sit home creating your radical feminist fanzine and dying your eyebrows blue." Alienation is seen to be more than a "regular" teenage behaviour; this article is addressed to the reader who finds the sexist and right wing attitudes of her parents unbearable, is distant from her now popular friends and finds it distressing to live in world that "places] demands on women to be beautiful and perfect" — in other words, the teenager who rejects the political and cultural values of the mainstream. Christina's somewhat sarcastic "clues" for spotting like-minded, alienated individuals include: "1) anyone who sits alone everyday during lunch, scrawling in a journal; 2) people reading Charles Bukowski or Kafka; 3) those with L7 stickers on their notebooks."

Similarly, in "Indie Rock Memoirs: Resurfacing the Acne Years" (reader-produced issue, December 1992), staff inter-

view "indie rock" musicians about the "humbling, unspeakable horror in their pubescent past." Key to this article is the rejection of mainstream culture; the reason the writers chose not to interview Paula Abdul about her adolescence is, they say, "do we actually believe she wrote 'Rush, Rush' on yet another dateless Friday night?" Instead, the writers speak to independent-rock musicians because: "Attracted to the anguish of their songs, we find solace ... in the fact that those responsible for them are real people." Thus, not only does this article demonstrate a predilection towards the "unhappy" version of adolescence (angst and misery is more truthful and real than popularity), it highlights another element of *Sassy* I would like to discuss: its focus on non-mainstream culture.

Male Knowledges

In the conclusion of her article on femininity and adolescence, Hudson (1984) writes that one of the implications of the privileging of adolescence as a male site is that there is a whole set of "terms" and knowledge about which girls remain ignorant. She gives the example of drug use; the girls she interviewed had little knowledge of the difference between "soft" and "hard" drugs as well as the culture that accompanies their use. Another key area that I think is typically "off limits" to girls is knowledge

produced by taking popular music seriously, a view shared by researchers interested in gender and music audiences:

Subcultural youth groupings, many of which are allied, in part, by musical preferences, are usually off-limits to girls. Girls are, in effect, excluded from much of the leisure activity, social bonding practice, and subcultural formation that critics of male youth culture identify as important sites for the negotiation of social contradictions. ... Social biases constructed around gender difference push girls into less visible interior spaces, into what McRobbie and Garber label, 'bedroom culture.'" (Lewis 1990, 90)

Jon Savage has noted that since the 1950s, there has been a concern that teenage girls could not fully appreciate the seriousness of the new, emerging forms of popular music.

Pop music was now defined as a male preserve: both in the primacy of male stars ... and in the way it was consumed, in its appreciation. The typical attitude is captured in a 1956 music paper headline: "Are Bobbysoxers Musically Ignorant?" The excitement of young women was devalued in favour of male preoccupations like 'technique,' 'artistry,' and 'authenticity' — a division which still persists today. (1988, 143)

Bedroom culture, which I defined in my first chapter, and which is typically replicated in magazines for teenage girls, "carries no strict rules and requires no special commitment to internally generated ideas of 'cool'" (McRobbie and Garber 1991, 13). This includes a treatment of music where knowledge resides more in the personal details of pop stars' lives than it does in musical technique or tradition.

This is not to say that there is a lack of "ideas" or knowledge within feminine and bedroom culture. I would

argue that from an early age girls are prepared to have all kinds of specialized knowledges that men are often ignorant of: clothing styles, makeup application, skin- and hair-care, decoration, and cooking. Women often are said to have an "instinct" towards knowing when an outfit looks "just right," how to arrange a bouquet of flowers "just so," the proper way to hold a baby and which fabrics should be hand-washed or drycleaned. But these knowledges are positioned as instinct (natural, essential for a woman) and an end in themselves — one learns them *because* one is a woman. For boys, however, "male" knowledges become instrumental, a means to an end. As Lisa A. Lewis notes, adolescence, while only a fairly brief life-stage, serves and prepares boys for their adulthood much more than it does girls:

Towards this end, boys learn to feel comfortable in public space, adjust to competitive pressures, network with male peers, build a familial support system, and prepare for risk-taking in future work endeavours. The social authorisation of such practices is gender specific, and does not fully extend to girls. (1990, 90)

I would add that boys learn to acquire certain knowledges for the sake of having them, of being an "expert" in something. Music is a key area in this process because it combines all the elements of connoisseurship (detailed knowledge of categorization and genealogy) with what has become in the postwar era one of the central sites of oppositionality and youthful expression. What I would like to examine is how *Sassy* is able to confer upon its readers a

certain cultural knowledge they won't find in most magazines geared at their readership. It provides a set of cultural resources and access to terms that young women can use to partake of a world that typically excludes them. In *Sassy*, we can locate a variety of "knowledge systems," a mixture of the alternative and mainstream. *Sassy* "colonizes" what were previously only the exclusive competencies of a male world and negotiates this terrain for its readers.

Alternative Culture

Sassy regularly voices the opinion that alternative cultures are more exciting and authentic than mainstream cultures, a position that is ever apparent in its many discussions of popular culture. In the review of female comics, "Supergirls" (November 1994), Mary Ann writes "Wise older readers can find [the] overwhelmingly male, superhero-fixated culture of mainstream comics a turnoff. ... Personally, I think most of the coolness is in low-budget alternative comics, not big mainstream publishers." In "Read It" (February 1992) Kim says she reviews comics "for the same reason Christina reviews zines in 'What Now': 'cause they're underground, sometimes subversive expressions of creativity and 'cause they're cool."

In "What Now," Christina likes to review fanzines, under the heading "Zine of the Month." Fanzines are

typically non-professional, non-commercial publications, usually produced by one person or a group of friends working from their homes.¹⁶ Fanzines reviewed in *Sassy* include *Thorn* (July 1993), "an awesome girl-power zine" that examines feminist issues. *Sonic Tales* (October 1992), a series of comic strips accompanied by song lyrics, and *The Idler: Literature for Loafers* (September 1994), a British fanzine devoted to "not working." Thus, "Zine of the Month" becomes a key source of information about an "other world" of publications, where ideas and information not "saleable" in the commercial press are publicized, however mediated, to the mainstream.

But most often discussions of this nature revolve around the coverage of music. The August 1991 "Listen Up" demonstrates the respect accorded alternative versus mainstream music. Mike reviews "The Life of Riley," a release from The A-Bones, a New York indie rock band with a primarily college audience. He notes both the obscurity of this item — "you may have a little trouble getting your hands on this gem" — as well as its musical roots, with descriptive terms like "nods to semi-obscure rockabilly, surf, garage, Tex-Mex and psychedelia." On the same page, Mary reviews "Spellbound" by Paula Abdul, a top-40, dance-music pop-star from Los Angeles. The album is described as "cute" and in her final analysis, Mary writes that the songs "are perky, and a couple of them made me gag." The language

of the first review bespeaks the "seriousness" of the music that is non-mainstream (difficult to find, cannot be easily categorized, non-commercial) and musically complex (a long genealogy of influences). The Paula Abdul album is not accorded the same detail even though presumably its musical influences could be equally traced. Rather, it is described as lightweight and inconsequential, even sickening. Mary's critique is reproductive of rock ideology's demonization of pop music and its implication in commercial culture.

The authenticity of alternative music is ambivalently coded when music not made for wide-spread distribution becomes commercially successful. Quality and integrity are accorded to bands that won't "sell out," despite attempts by record companies to make them more popular. *Sassy* reproduces this ambivalence in "Now I'm Getting Pissed" ("What Now" March 1993), when Christina is upset with an independent-label, all-female band for signing with a multi-national record label. Note that she begins with a counter argument to qualify and then solidify her statement:

It usually irks me when alternative snobs complain about co-opting by the mainstream, but now I'm starting to do it too. Because this is too much! Shonen Knife have been signed to Virgin The Japanese all-girl group, darlings of the American rock underground, are known for writing songs in broken English about their love of ice cream and sympathy for the plight of the bison. Virgin is issuing a compilation of the band's previously released work called *Let's Knife*. Will they get a video on MTV? Will they be played on "alternative commercial" radio? Will they be doing Revlon commercials with Cindy?

I use these examples to demonstrate that *Sassy* presumes both a sophisticated knowledge of alternative music as well as a desire to learn more. For example, in the August 1991 "What Now," Christina asks a fan why he likes industrial music. Although the item is posed as a question — "I wanted to understand why people like industrial music, so a I located a fan named Paul" — it also serves the function of simply explaining to readers what the music sounds like and giving them some band names. In the June 1993 "What Now," Christina again tries to "understand" a music style, this time Gothic-Ambient, by asking an "industry insider" who describes it partly as a music "the big chain stores just don't understand." In October 1992, a reader writes to the help page asking: "When it comes to music, I am verbally deficient — I know what I like but never understand musical classification. What specifically are alternative, postmodern, punk, new wave and contemporary?" Christina responds in part,

Alternative is a widely used and misused term originally coined to describe music that was not commercially successful, and played only on college radio. Examples include R.E.M. and the Replacements. Now that alternative music is commercially viable, I'm not really sure what it means.

The readers I spoke to felt this was an important part of the magazine, and praised its attempts to be inclusive of non-mainstream music. They too were extremely denigrating of the types of music they said *Sassy* would never cover

seriously (including Paula Abdul) and their comments are reproductive of the arguments I have outlined above.

Group I

Avril: Let's talk about music. What are the differences in the way they address music?
 Jill: Well Sassy's more alternative.
 several: Yeah
 Jill: Like they have more stuff about Sonic Youth.
 Rebecca: Smashing Pumpkins.
 Jill: Yeah, and other stuff. And they had like an article on groups that have one girl and all guys -
 Lynn: -girl drummers.
 Jill: Yeah.
 Heather: In Seventeen they think that everybody listens to Paula Abdul. (laughter)
 Jessica: And Tiffany!
 Heather: And like, that we all really love Marky Mark.
 Jessica: Well, I know I do (sarcastically).
 Kristin: And Seventeen, it seems just like they try and catch on to something after it's been happening and they try and, I don't know, they try and pretend they made it up, or something. I was reading this one Seventeen and it was something like, "the new sound of Halifax" you know and "we're going to call it 'down home music'" - I don't know what they called it but they just sound so ridiculous.

Group II

Avril: What about in the area of music? In the reviews of bands, albums?
 Betsy: I don't think the other ones do those.
 Suzanne: No they do but they tend to stick more with -
 Lori: - Top 40 -
 Suzanne: - Top 40 and bands' second releases. But yeah they tend to stick with more mainstream stuff, and they never, ever, ever do debuts or first releases.
 Elissa: Yeah, they stick more with the mainstream -
 Suzanne: - the tried and true people.
 Elissa: And Sassy also has books, I don't think the other ones do.
 Lori: They don't seem to research it in other ones. Like, it seems like the Sassy writers, just like, have more experienced lives with music and books because like they talk about concerts they've gone to and they seem to like, jump into the music scenes that they want to write about. Like,

actually are involved with it themselves, rather than just, I don't know, flipping through some newspaper looking at the little Top 40 section, "okay we'll do that and that and that."

.....

- Elissa: As far as music goes, I'd, see I really don't know what to say because, well, Sassy they kind of deal with, I guess the music they deal with isn't really mainstream it's like she was saying, they don't, they only do like artists that are just -
- Betsy: - Celine Dion (laughs). No, no, you'd never catch something like that -
- Lori: - oh you do but then they trash it, like they, who'd they give one star to?
- Suzanne: Debbie Gibson.
- Lori: Yeah, Debbie Gibson.
- Suzanne: And Samantha Fox.

Group III

- Avril: What about music?
- Lindsey: I find there's a large difference in that. In like, the regular magazines, Seventeen and that, they always, they could never give a negative, like view of the person they're interviewing. But in this magazine they often cut down people or they'll be really honest about what they were like if they were real, whatever.
- Chris: They also interview more musicians as opposed to entertainers of something. Like other magazines are really, they'll give a review of something, they won't go out of their way to interview them.
- Lindsey: They usually have really obscure bands and stuff. You know like whenever readers write in they have that "Cute Band Alert."
- Sara: They review bands as opposed to reviewing the band two months after it's topped the *Billboard*, you know, all the mainstream charts. They did actually have bands that aren't getting paid mega bucks ... I remember two years ago my boyfriend was in a band, and it just like, if only I could get him into the "Cute Band Alert" he'd have it made! (laughs) You got this idea that it was kind of on the cutting edge of what was going on.

Partly what the readers articulate in these statements is what Roy Shuker identifies as "the pleasures of the text." He describes this as "the ability to identify with

particular forms of popular culture and a familiarity with its codes and conventions, thereby contributing to an aesthetic and emotional enjoyment of the form" (1994, 18). Although clearly this relates to almost any cultural activity, it has particular relevance to the appreciation of certain forms of popular music where the "rules of entry" are somewhat strict and contingent upon knowledge of selected musical traditions. Writes Shuker, "the insider is able to join in the game, provided he or she has the necessary background knowledge — cultural capital — to do so" (1994, 18).

If part of the appeal of "joining the game" of alternative-music culture is that it requires specialized knowledges, a related appeal is that it operates on rules of exclusion and differentiation. Taste in music, explains Shuker, referring to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, is "both conceived and maintained in social group efforts to differentiate and distance themselves from others, and underpinning varying social status positions" (1994, 248). It may be said that all forms of cultural participation and enactment work to identify subjects with particular forms of taste and cultural capital. Mark Langer has written:

Within a consumer society, people are confronted with an enormous range of goods. As they select and classify goods from all of the possibilities offered, they position themselves within a particular social space which can be determined not only by economic position, but by taste. (1993, 127)

Sassy seeks to imbue the teenage girls' magazine with a cultural capital that is particularly gendered; it "colonizes" male knowledges typically off-limits within this genre.

Ultimately, however, the incorporation of alternative culture in *Sassy* is negotiated. While it appears to uphold the masculinist valorization of the alternative, it is also frequently ambivalent, "breaking the rules" of seriousness that underpin the "serious" rock critic's approach. *Sassy* distances itself from "expert status" and frequently refuses to "play the game" of alternative culture. For example, Christina includes in "What Now" an item called "Cute Band Alert" every month. The irony of this title lies in that it suggests a "typical" way of covering popular music in a teenage girls' magazine, whereby looks and "cuteness" are the predominant qualifiers of praise. In fact, "Cute Band Alert" is quite sophisticated in linking bands to a wider music scene or tracing the band's sound to other groups. On the other hand, it also works to suggest simply, "we don't take this so seriously."

So while a sense of "in the know" pervades the writing on music, writers also attempt to deflect criticism that they are "poseurs," outsiders who attempt to be part of a scene. For example, in the June 1993 "Cute Band Alert," Christina reviews a band from British Columbia called

Mystery Machine. She writes, "I received a black-and-white glossy of the band in the mail, I found them attractive and I gave their album, *Glazed*, a cursory listen or two while dressing for work ... So call me a bad music journalist. I could care less." It is this act of "defiance" that ironically lives up to "Cute Band Alert's" first meaning. Likewise, Christina frequently shares her lack of confidence as a music journalist, such as when she describes being asked to sit on a panel of music journalists in the annual convention of the College Music Journal ("What Now," February 1992). She writes, "it was beyond terrifying to find myself seated at a U-shaped dais next to a woman who employs symbolist literature in rap reviews."

Sassy is also critical of what it sees as alternative pretentiousness, as in Andrea's review ("Read It," January 1994) of a book called *Psyche Subversion*. She writes: "This is a collection of writings by groovy alternative teens and twentysomethings. Its punk pretentiousness kind of bugs me. I don't relate to most of these ditties the way I do to the pieces you guys send in to 'Stuff You Wrote.'" Andrea is critical of "trying too hard" to be alternative, and sees the writing from Sassy's readers as more meaningful, reiterating that while a Sassy reader may want to be "in the know," she is ultimately more comfortable with a mainstream magazine than punk poetry.

In "Zine of the Month" (November 1994), Christina reluctantly reviews a fanzine called *fishwrap*, noting, "[it] angered me at first, with its snide little abuse of mainstream magazines, including *Sassy*. I felt defenseless against the sarcastic pen of editor Marty Wombacher, and gave myself an upset stomach." Here, she is defensive of the magazine's mainstream status, locating pretentiousness within the fanzine's abuse of *Sassy*.

Lastly, in "Feeling Alienated?" (November 1992), the article in which Christina gives advice to the maladjusted teen, she notes the "worst-case" scenario of trying to be too alternative:

Once you find some soul mate, be careful to avoid being conformist in your nonconformity. If everyone you know dresses in Doc Martens and has tattoos, how nutty can you be? All too often, alienation breeds its own kind of snobbery, where no one can possibly be as cool as you and you feel your culture will become co-opted by the masses.

Thus, *Sassy* negotiates alternative culture as much as it embraces it for its readers.

Alternative to What?

As I stated earlier in this chapter, the content and qualities of *Sassy* can only be judged in a relational manner. To the industry insiders quoted in the previous chapter, *Sassy* was an upstart because it included non-typical — therefore non-mainstream — material in the teenage girls' magazine. Yet from the viewpoint of academics such as Evans

et al, *Sassy* is no more alternative to the industry norm than is *YM*. In relational terms, *Sassy*, *YM*, *'Teen* and *Seventeen* are similar because they are the four biggest selling teen magazines in North America. As academics interested in the reproduction of gender and the socialization of teenage girls, they are "uninterested" in fine distinctions between magazines. But I would like to consider briefly a third view of *Sassy*, that of the alternative writer or journalist. Here, the dialectic between mainstream and alternative culture is posited in very different terms.

Consider the writings of a fanzine writer "torn" between her respect for *Sassy* and her dislike of all that corporate America (which for her, includes *Sassy*) represents:

I'll get burned for this one but I think the *Sassy* phenomena is pretty beat. I wish I did like *Sassy* more, but, you know the saying, glad to see ya, wouldn't want to be ya? What is it anyway: a socially-relevant, girl-affirmative eye-opener for teens? *People* magazine for hip adolescents? *People* magazine for the staff and friends? Fashionably smart? Cute? Cool? (Boddy 1994, 12).

The discomfort aroused over "liking" *Sassy* is a product of both its promise of oppositionality and its very "failure" to be truly oppositional.

The above quote is taken from a fanzine known as *Ben Is Dead* in its "Very Essential Super Extra-Special *Sassy* Issue" (Spring 1994). *Ben Is Dead* is a California, largely female-run fanzine geared towards young, white North American

readers interested in alternative music, other fanzines and related alternative cultures in general. This particular issue parodies *Sassy* right down to the content headings and title fonts. The style and concerns of the magazine are satirized so that the topic for "Quiz" is "Are You a Loser, Bulimic, Drug Addict, or Worse?!" while feature articles include "It Had to Happen...Grunge Prostitutes" and "Loving Chelsea," an ode to the "first daughter." According to the editor — in her version of Jane Pratt's "Diary" — when *Ben Is Dead* staff were turned down to do the *Sassy* reader-produced issue, their response was "'Fine. We'll do our own *Sassy* issue.'" The special issue is, I imagine, the *Ben Is Dead* editors' vision of what *Sassy* would be like if it were done "properly." Ads are from small record labels or boutiques. There is no censorship of language or ideas (featured is the article, "Kiddies Guide to Rolling the Perfect Spliff;" crude language and graphics abound). The beauty page features chemical-free hair products and an interview with three vintage-clothing store owners.

The ambivalent feelings the *Ben is Dead* staff have towards *Sassy* are apparent in the constant references to the magazine both in their parodies and direct commentary. The "What Now" parody begins sarcastically, "Really, we're not even going to try and top Christina Kelly (*Sassy* editor) here. She's the one with all the right connections. She's

the one in the know. We just lowly zinesters. Forgive us."

On the other hand, Darby, the zine's editor, writes:

You wonder, why aren't they even more daring, less trendy. I guess you have to consider the magazine's true intended audience — teenage girls. I don't know, maybe a mainstream teen magazine which young girls can actually relate to sounds like no big deal to you, but it was something I really yearned for when I was younger. Sassy may not have been the all-enlightening experience but, instead of drugs, Sassy could have been the thing to push me to seek different ideas and directions. (1994, 12).

This "apology" for Sassy is motivated by the fact that despite its commercial concerns and formal traditions, Sassy is still appealing in its inclusion of alternative culture and the radicalization of its genre: a product made for commercial gain that nonetheless espouses "authentic" concerns.

Another commentary on Sassy is, however, less forgiving. In "The Teen Rebel as Model Consumer: the Hip World of Sassy," T.C. Frank attacks Sassy for being "on every level, a philosophy of consuming, a primer in hip" (1993, 96). According to Frank, Sassy's self-assessment as alternative is achieved through obnoxiously endless reminders to "be yourself," parades of hip clothing and demonstrating credibility within alternative rock circles. Frank continues,

But in the Sassy universe 'alternative' doesn't mean anything like, say, 'class-conscious' or 'skeptical towards mass media' or even 'alienated from mall culture.' On the contrary, it means one is closely tuned in to the ever-quickenening peregrinations of consumerism. (98)

This article is published in *The Baffler*, a Marxist-inflected journal from Chicago, self-described as "The Journal that Blunts the Cutting Edge." Both *The Baffler* and *Ben Is Dead* view *Sassy* from their self-appointed places on the "outside," where they can simultaneously critique the mainstream and further articulate alternatives to it. But they may also be seen to rely on the existence of mainstream "alternative-oriented" magazines such as *Sassy* in order to substantiate their self-claimed positions of "true" alternativeness.

Conclusion

I have argued that despite its status as a commercial magazine interested in attracting advertisers, *Sassy* attempts to integrate non-mainstream forms of culture. While on the one hand *Sassy* is clearly implicated within a discourse of consumerism, it is also ambivalent about its commercial practices. It has published articles and statements critical of U.S. economic policies and class-based institutions, while at the same time it relies on corporate advertising. Its staff is critical of being curtailed and censored in their opinions, yet rely upon their publisher's financial power to reach a large and wide-spread audience.

Sassy "defeminizes" the teenage girls' magazine by embracing a "male" version of adolescence, which privileges feelings of independence, alienation and of non-sociability.

Part of this masculine discourse is manifest in the way *Sassy* takes popular music "seriously," a practice usually off-limits for most girls. Reviews of alternative bands, fanzines and films are slotted in next to ads for mainstream music and films. The magazine is inclusive of alternative culture, but is never wholly accepting of its exclusivity and snobbery towards the mainstream. Thus, what occurs in *Sassy* is a layering of information and attitudes that embrace both mainstream and alternative culture. The magazine negotiates both these terrains for readers, a practice that Alexander Star identifies as the magazine assuming "that its readers are immersed in teen culture's icons and artifacts but regard them with scepticism and humour, and are eager for new sources of information and entertainment" (Star 1993, 24).

Precisely where *Sassy* lies in a continuum of mainstream and alternative culture is open to debate. Its "failure" to be truly radical is a source of ambivalence or outright hostility towards *Sassy* by "genuine" non-commercial, alternative publications such as *The Baffler* or *Ben Is Dead*. On the other hand, the readers I spoke to found the magazine's alternativeness to be a source of pleasure, a radicalization of what remained, in the final instance, a mainstream magazine for teenage girls.

V

Femininity and Feminism: A Convergence of Discourses

In chapter one I ended with a discussion of Winship and McRobbie's examination of the newer (mid-1980s) British magazines for teenage girls. They both found that magazines like *Just Seventeen* and *Etcetera* had a quality wholly unlike that of the much-maligned *Jackie*: they were full of trivia and snippets of information; were "postmodern" in their use of pastiche, irony and references to popular culture; and of most interest, they blurred the once-strongly demarcated border between feminism and femininity. Winship and McRobbie, among other academics, agreed that the gender politics produced by these magazines was not reducible to any one "camp," nor could the contradictions or complexities be written off. Winship noted of the "Undercoats" fashion spread, which I discussed briefly in chapter one, that the "first" meaning of a text is not necessarily the last. While it is the case that models "flash" their bodies adorned in lacy underwear, this image "plays on several levels, only one of which is the pornographic" (1985, 25). Rather, continues Winship, "the invitation to women readers is ... to register that meaning in order to draw it back along other paths" (1985, 25).

In *Sassy* it is similarly difficult to separate out strictly "feminine" versus "feminist" discourses. Although

there is certainly a sense of the "feminine" in *Sassy*, there is, as McRobbie notes of other magazines, "a greater degree of fluidity about what femininity means and how exactly it is anchored in social reality" (McRobbie 1993, 408). In the following discussion I will examine how the magazine combines discourses of femininity and feminism to produce a particular "structure of feeling," a sensibility that the magazine itself would call "sassy."

Discourses of Feminism

Feminism in *Sassy* is simultaneously overt and implicit; it is both explained and emphasized as well assumed and taken for granted. It is clear that the writers are well-versed in feminist theories and politics. For example, "Who Here's a Feminist?" (June 1992) is explicit in its concerns. In a round-table discussion, staff discuss what it means to be a feminist.

Margie: People ... assume you're talking about a humorless, intolerant, rage-filled woman. That's such a stereotype. It's true that some of the original feminists from the '60s and '70s were pretty radical and angry — they had more of a reason to be. **Andrea t:** To me, feminism simply means a real belief in the value of women and their right to equality. If a woman or a man means that, then they are feminists. **Mary Kaye:** I agree. I've never thought twice about whether I'm a feminist. My beef is with really rigid types who have a lot of criteria for what is or isn't a true feminist — you know, shaves her pits? Not. Wears a miniskirt? Not.

But when "Diary" includes in a list of "stuff we detest" (February 1994) unexplained references to "Katie Roiphe's heinous book" and to "When rape is used as a war weapon," clearly suppositions are being made about readers' knowledge of current feminist issues. In "Working Our Nerves," (June 1994), "The Annoying New Boy Feminism" is attacked, including "Sensitive New Age boys who will not shut up," "Boys who bellow, 'I'll tell you what a feminist is today!'" and "Boys who sob, 'No we're more oppressed!'" Again, I would consider this a fairly detailed and uncommon debate; relatively advanced, its arguments (and humour) presuppose a sophisticated understanding of feminist issues. Thus, the magazine supposes that readers want to learn about feminism, but also that they share a heightened degree of knowledge concerning its issues and politics.

The discourse of feminism in *Sassy* might best be characterized as one of a liberal feminism, "punctuated" with doses of radical or even socialist feminism, depending on the topic. Very often the focus of articles is justice and equality, so concern is with girls who are not receiving the same treatment as boys. For example, "Three Girls and Their Bunsen Burners" (September 1994) looks at girls' exclusion or marginalization from the study of science in schools. "Hi Girlz, See You In Cyberspace!" (May 1993) looks at the oftentimes hostile reception of women on the Internet. In other cases, the emphasis is very "pro-girl,"

focusing on girls in non-traditional fields or taking up non-traditional activities. For example, "Supergirls" (November 1994) looks at the growing surge of female-written comics and female comic fans, noting "comic books aren't just for runny-nosed, Kryptonite-obsessed fanboys anymore." "Kicking out the jams: a how-to guide" (April 1994) tells readers how to start their own band. All of these articles are guided by a sense of there being a past and present injustice (gender inequality) that can be rectified by a greater awareness and inclusion of women in male-dominated fields (a reform of the system), a classic liberal-feminist argument.

Other articles demonstrate a radical feminist critique and link sexism to a wide-spread oppression of women. For example, in "I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar" (July 1992) Christina provides a first-hand account of her resolve to fight back against street harassment. The lengthy article details all the instances of street harassment she faced in a one-year period and what it was like after she enrolled in a self-defence course. Street harassment of women by men is viewed on a continuum of male violence against women, and the article questions why it is still seen as socially acceptable (Christina recalls as a teenager feeling "vaguely flattered ... people were noticing me on the streets, the must be a good sign, right?").

In "The He-Man Women-Haters Club" (November 1994, titled "One Girl Against the Patriarchy" on the cover), *Sassy* looks at Shannon Richey Faulker, a 19-year-old woman filing suit against the Citadel, an American military college in South Carolina that has refused her entrance because she is female. The article goes beyond the argument that this denies equal opportunity for women, and links the discrimination to a deeply rooted masculinist and militaristic tradition. Diane writes of Shannon:

Everything Shannon Faulker stands for — being an independent thinker, a fighter or an individualist — is everything that the Citadel will destroy should she become a cadet. It's their way. The military way. ... It's scary for me to think of what life would be like for Shannon should the courts finally admit her to the Citadel. The woman who sat across from me and unabashedly made no excuse for doing and being who she is will probably be a shadow of herself when the Citadel is through with her. How sad.

Thus, Shannon's crusade to enrol in the military college is not celebrated in an unproblematic manner we might associate with liberal feminism ("good for her!"). Rather, Diane questions the very desirability of such an endeavour; military college and its patriarchal hierarchy is seen as antithetical to women and independent thinkers.

In other instances, *Sassy's* critiques of institutions conjoins sexism with classism and capitalism, qualifying its approach as a socialist-feminist analysis. For instance, in "Who'd Join a Sorority?" (June 1993), Mary Ann looks at the politics and practices of college sororities in the southern

United States. She writes: "These girls have grown up emulating a sorority system that preaches 'sisterhood' and 'sharing' and 'togetherness' but that actually thrives on exclusion, on keeping blacks, the poor and anyone with zits out."

In "The Miss America Syndrome" (April 1992, titled on the cover, "One Day in the Life of Miss America, Indentured Servant"), Christina becomes disgusted with the Miss America Pageant (euphemistically called a "scholarship program") for its sexist practices: "You can't ignore that boys don't have to look good in bathing suits and pumps to finance *their* educations." But Christina reserves her greatest criticism not for Miss America, but Chevrolet, the pageant's largest corporate sponsor. In her year of touring the United States, Miss America must encourage people to buy Chevrolet cars as part of her "duties." Christina writes of this, "Miss America is sort of a racket once you've got the title, what's the payback? You're an indentured servant to the advertisers, all for the price of a college education, which every woman should have a right to anyway."

Alongside all the above discourses of feminism, Sassy often rejects an overly "politically correct" or radical feminism. In the round-table discussion on feminism (June 1992), Christina admits she gets tired of "teaching" feminism all the time. She notes:

This guy asked me if I feel like Sassy sends a mixed feminist message. I really don't feel that

I should have the responsibility of forming a feminist viewpoint in all teenage girls. What I write is what I am thinking at the moment, and the more I think about whether it is feminist in a textbook sense or politically correct, the less funny it is.

The magazine also demonstrates a sensibility of "we are beyond certain issues." For example, *Sassy* frequently uses the word "chick" in writing to refer to women and girls. Here is its understanding of the term, as explained to a boy who writes in to know if it's okay for him to describe women this way ("Help," January 1994):

Considered a derogatory term since the early '70s, *chick* is meant to imply that the girl or woman is like a 'sweet young thing' ready to be plucked. So enraging. But lately the term has been reclaimed by girls, just as some lesbians have reclaimed *dyke* and some African-Americans have reclaimed *nigger*. The idea is to take away the vicious quality by using the words in normal, positive ways. Here comes the sticky part: It really is more appropriate for a female or a lesbian or an African-American to use this terminology.

Similarly, the example of the Barbie Caboodles makeup case I gave earlier also suggests a "drawing back" of meaning along a different path. The readership of *Sassy* is assumed to be marginal to conventional femininity, but also as having gone beyond the more restrictive and puritanical concerns of 1970s feminism.

I use all these examples to demonstrate that within *Sassy* there exists a variety of feminisms. There is no one way to characterize its politics, and I suspect that its very lack of editorial mandate on feminism (its concerns are

commercial, not political) is what allows its writers to offer a wide variety of positions. At the very least, there is a critique directed against male supremacy with a will towards changing social relations.

That there is a variety of feminisms is supported in the focus groups' comments. All three groups agreed that Sassy could be characterized as feminist, although they had different ways of describing it. I suspect the variations stem from a difference in age, and hence a difference in their knowledge of feminism. For example, Group I (all of whom but one were 15 years old) described Sassy through its difference from Seventeen, to which they attributed a conspiratorial and patriarchal agenda:

Heather: Also, it's more feminist than the other ones.

several: Yeah

Heather: The other ones seem like they're written by men and this one seems like it's actually written by a woman.

Jessica: Yeah, Seventeen is kind of stuck like in the '50s.

.....

Avril: Lets say Seventeen and Sassy answer a problem, "I really like this boy but he doesn't know I exist." Is there going to be a different answer?

Tracy: Yeah, in Sassy they'll do basically what you can do, I don't know, to make the guy notice you. But then they'll say, "but that's not the most important thing."

Jessica: Yeah, well also they'll give different advice about what to do. Sassy will say, "be yourself-"

Jill: -and be confident-

Jessica: -and Seventeen will be like, "say something stupid" probably.

several: Yeah

In the second group, all of whom were 18 years old, the reading focused more on *Sassy* per se and why it was feminist. They took a tone of appreciation that *Sassy* valued girls and women, but wasn't "too" feminist or "anti-men."

Group II

Lori: What I like about them and their feminism is that they're really into girls liking girls. Like it really irritates them, you can tell, when girls are like catty, "I hate you now," or ... They sort of realize that that's how girls are taught to be and they really hate that and they try to fight it. They have articles on best friends and stuff like that.

Avril: So they're pro having girl friends.

Lori: Yeah, they're really into like girls supporting girls, and supporting girl bands and supporting girl activities.

.....

Betsy: I like having them show examples of like really cool women, but if this was like a man-hating magazine I wouldn't read it all. I just like, wouldn't deal with something that was sexist towards men, that extreme feminism.

In Group III, Sara, who was 24 years old, gave the most in-depth response when she commented on *Sassy* making feminism "cool" for girls:

Sara: I think *Sassy* has been instrumental in demystifying the whole notion of feminism cause so many people have this idea that feminists have hairy legs, raving lesbian, dyke. Which, not to say that that kind of person is bad, but I think that's a generalization. Like, I think *Sassy* means it's cool to be a feminist and for so many young women hyper afraid of identifying with that 'cause then the boys aren't going to like you and 'cause they'll think you're different ... So I think they have an agenda to get feminism across, which I think they do.

It is also worth pointing out that in relation to feminism, *Sassy* never strays far from the favoured subjects of its genre. *Sassy* has run articles on what it is like to become a model ("Model World" [July 1994], "Watch this girl become a model" [October 1991]), the qualification being that *Sassy* is explicitly critical of this as a career choice. So while the model stories may have a feminist "twist" to them, it is doubtful *Sassy* would be publishing them if they did not know this was the stuff of teenage girl fantasy. Joining a band, hating science class, joining a sorority (it is telling that the title of the article, "Who'd join a sorority?" makes possible the answer, "I would" or "I might") — these are all within the "realm of possibility" for not only *Sassy's* readership but the readership of all teenage girls' magazines. What *Sassy* does differently, of course, is problematize the issues of teen magazines at the same time it celebrates them; "playing the game" but "playing it differently," so to speak.

To continue in a similar direction, I would now like to address a part of *Sassy* that makes it most alike and most different from other teenage girls' magazines: fashion and beauty. As I said in the introduction to this thesis, *Sassy* is notable in that it combines discourses of feminism and femininity in a seemingly untroublesome manner. It is to these instances that I now turn.

Discourses of Femininity

A large part of what identifies women's and teen magazines is their investment in beauty and fashion. Despite the growing inclusion of feminist-inflected writing and content, today's magazines for women still depend overwhelmingly on the fashion and beauty industries to supply them with advertising revenue. Femininity may be mediated more and more by alternative concerns, yet it is still the "keystone" that provides the impetus for these magazines' existence.

A Textually-Mediated Discourse

For a useful analysis of femininity I have turned to Dorothy Smith's "Femininity as Discourse" (1988). In Smith's analysis, femininity is "a distinctively textual phenomenon" (1988, 38), a textually-mediated discourse vested in women's magazines, advertisements, makeup counters, fashion displays and related texts. But Smith argues that "textually-mediated discourse" does not mean a discourse outside of practice. Rather, she views it as a "dialectic between the active and creative subject and the organization of her activity in and by texts coordinating it with the market" (Smith 1988, 39). So although discourse is not limited to the text — femininity involves active work at the individual level — "it is organized by and in relation to the text" (Smith 1988, 40).

A discourse of femininity requires that women learn and take up skills in the production of beauty in such a way that we might regard the body as "a cultural medium on which meanings are inscribed and power relations are invested" (Ellison 1994, 28). Judith Butler argues that becoming a woman is "an ongoing discursive practice," (Butler 1993, 32) vested in the "repeated stylization of the body" (Butler 1993, 33). Therefore, we might understand magazines for women as producing and reproducing representations of femininity that are then "taken up" by readers.

Sassy devotes several pages to beauty and fashion, among them are regular and semi-regular features ("Put It On," "About Face," "Body Talk," "Making It," "We Try It"), fashion spreads and one or two feature articles. These texts offer knowledge and advice surrounding makeup application, hair and skin care, and demonstrate various fashion "looks." For example, in "The Eye Makeup Encyclopedia" (August 1991) step-by-step instructions are given for eye makeup application: "Majorly made-up eyes: They're gorgeous, they're fun, they're back. They're not easy. From start to finish, here's what you need to have, know and do if you want to get them right." A headline on the October 1993 issue promises "A step-by-step makeup lesson for the clueless." Both these examples acknowledge the skilled artfulness and difficulty that is required in such work, and the teen reader's inexperience in such matters.

Smith notes that in the realization of beauty, femininity requires a high level of expertise and skill, such as in achieving "majorly made-up eyes."

The production of discursive appearances is a matter of conscious art and technique. The project is the production of the visible self as an instance of the image, for instance, the 'natural' look. And it is a project for which the texts of discourse provide objectives. All texts are indexical, in the sense that their meaning is not fully contained in them, but completed in the setting of their reading. (Smith 1988, 44)

Thus, as Smith suggests, women become in their skilled practice not so much "sex object ... as object of work" (1988, 48). Sassy provides the tools and know-how to acquire beauty skills and sense. It participates in the production and reproduction of a discourse of femininity, even as it continues to draw on feminist critiques of beauty as oppressive convention.

Negotiated Femininities

Sassy is extremely critical of dieting or any other weight-control advice so frequently seen in women's magazines. The editorial stance against this is firm, and while one could easily argue that the use of thin models (on the cover, in editorial photographs, in fashion and beauty articles, in advertisements) undermines this position,¹⁷ nevertheless readers are continually urged not to diet. This is a tone repeated throughout the magazine, in different instances and contexts. For example, in "Thirteen reasons not to diet"

(August 1994), Margie tells readers thinness is favoured in America, "Because Barbie is a role model. Because magazines, ads, movies and MTV have too much power." Among the reasons given not to diet are: "Your weight was genetically programmed," "It makes you boring," "You're always hungry," "You feed the evil diet industry," "It makes you feel bad" and, "And what is the point?" Readers are reminded, "Obsessing over your thighs is neither fun nor valuable to society." In "Body Talk" (October 1992), the following appears: "More than a third of American women are trying to lose weight at any given time. *Lame.*" And in the pages of "What Now" (January 1994), Christina discusses being sent three new celebrity exercise videos:

It is in these videos that the twin demons of celebrity worship and body obsessiveness intersect and become even more powerful. The American people need to stop emulating these dorks to the point where they wish to follow their fitness routines. The idea that some of our readers might spend their money on this crap and waste their time imitating Cindy's lunges truly makes me sad. I'm serious.

But *most* of *Sassy's* readers are understood to have internalized *Sassy's* position on dieting, and this becomes another instance of their distancing from other teen magazines, as when Christina quips in one of her observations: "I just realized there are three pictures of models on this spread. What is this, *YM?*" ("*What Now,*" August 1994).

In a similar vein, Sassy is critical of beauty that is regimental or governed by strict rules. For example, in "I Was a Walking 'Before'" (May 1993) Margie discusses her visit to an image consultant:

He told us that we would each uncover our Image Identity, based on the individuality and specialness of our features and personalities. Then we would learn how to express that identity through clothes, hair and makeup. While fashion magazines tell us to follow trends and make us feel inadequate, he would teach us to enhance — 'not correct, not fix' — the perfection Nature had already given us.

Margie is found to be a "Theatrical Romantic" (as is Joan Collins) and is advised to wear "femme fatale" clothes, including rhinestones, angora, and "big fluffy fox-fur hats" and to avoid her favourite, clunky shoes. Her beauty regime includes hot-pink eyeshadow and lipstick and parting her hair on the side, despite her preference for brown lipstick and parting her hair in the middle. Although the author agrees that she looked gorgeous and felt sexy at the end of the day, she concludes:

This look is very high-maintenance — I can't help thinking that anyone who chooses to wear so much makeup needs to explore her inner life a little more It's just annoying that 'sometimes' isn't enough with this system — it's all or nothing, as dictatorial in its way as the fashion magazines and trends David condemned.

The advice of the image consultant is made suspect because it is too "high maintenance" and "dictatorial." One can't be a "theatrical romantic" some of the time, one has to look like a femme fatale (or Joan Collins) all of the

time. It's not that *Sassy* rejects certain kinds of beauty — such as the sexy, glamorous look — it rejects *having* to have a certain look. This includes the dominant images of conventional femininity found in advertisements and other magazines. There is also an ambivalence surrounding an over-investment in caring about one's looks. Where the distinction lies between learning how to have "majority made-up eyes" and needing "to explore one's inner life" is unclear.

I have already given the example of the reader who uses fade cream on her skin and who is scolded for being "far too obsessed with the flaws [she sees] in [her] face" and told to stop being "a slave to [her] mirror" ("Zits and Stuff," May 1992). But outside of what are obviously risky health practices (fade cream is generally not recommended by dermatologists), *Sassy* is also ambivalent about "beauty for beauty's sake." A key trope of *Sassy* is what I identify as the "you don't need to, but if you want to ..." approach to beauty.

For example, a reader writes in to "Zits and Stuff" (April 1994) with the question: "My eyes are way too puny. How can I make them look bigger?" Andrea replies, "I'd like to know where it says your eyes are supposed to be a certain size. But if you're totally obsessed with making them look bigger, here's how:" Note that both the above readers are characterized as "obsessed," but while the first one's

concerns are summarily rejected, the second is "given in to."

In another instance, a reader writes in to know what she can do about her thin lips ("Zits and Stuff," June 1993). Andrea replies (citing the expertise of a makeup artist) that sheer lipstick colours work best. Then she writes: "Alison [the makeup artist] also recommends against lining your lips. She thinks that your face is the way it is for a reason, and messing with it too much makes you look silly and clownish. How very sassy of her." Here, a discourse of naturalism is used to modify and "make sensible" the previous advice ("hiding" that one has thin lips, a discourse of artifice). Note also that it is "sassy" for a makeup artist (an expert is artifice) to reject "messing" with a face "too much."

I believe that these examples illustrate an ambivalence in *Sassy* about supporting and reproducing a concern with beauty while it clearly espouses a feminist politic. The tension that ensues from the conflation of discourses of feminism and femininity is resolved, or attempts resolution, in a number of ways.

In part this is produced by the ironic and irreverent use of language I described earlier. For example, the May 1992 feature "Summer O' Beauty," includes the sub-titles "Mr. Sun can be scary" and "Foundation is your friend." Later, foundation is described in a tongue-in-cheek manner

as "the Sacred Anointing Fluid." Again, I view this as an investment in pastiche and "silliness," the magazine's way of "rewriting" what has been written before and a way of distancing itself from accusations of triviality. Even so, this feature retains an instructional function that does not detract from its "faith" in the practice and skills of beauty. The writing may be tongue-in-cheek, but it is never nasty or suggestive that this is all a waste of time.

Fashion also reproduces a discourse of femininity, linked as it is to constantly updated and renewed normative images. Roland Barthes has observed that "fashion dogmatically rejects the fashion which preceeded it, its own past; every new fashion is a refusal to inherit, a subversion against the oppression of the preceeding fashion" (1983, 273). But unlike the "fashion amnesia" of so many magazines — which never seem to address how short-lived their inventions are — Sassy is self-conscious of the vicissitudes of fashion cycles, often admitting its own failures or rejecting its previous predilections. In "I Would Still Totally Wear That — Or Perhaps Not," ("Put It On," October 1993) staff look back on their earlier fashion preferences:

Andrea L: I'm way over the dresses-over-jeans look now. But I'm still into tight little tops, and, being the compulsive shoehead that I am, I continue to collect clogs and boots. **Jacinta:** I would totally not wear harness motorcycle boots. I'm still into long prairie dresses, even though I

now think the one I wore in that shoot was way too short.

The July 1992 fashion spread, "You're a Nut" tells readers, "Fake fur with stripes may look strange now, but it'll be all the rage in a matter of months. Or so says Jacinta." In the fifth anniversary issue, Christina proudly states that *Sassy* was responsible for starting the following trends: "Dresses over jeans, chokers/leather thongs, overalls, clogs and Birkenstocks." Under the list "Fashion Trends We Now Hate," she lists she once adored "grunge, motorcycle boots, over-the-knee socks, big wacky peace signs, Pucci prints, '60s clothes, baby doll dresses," commenting at the end, "Fashion is by its very nature fickle."

So although *Sassy's* complicity with the fashion industry is obvious (it accepts the market-driven turnover of seasons, themes and trends) it is also "too open" about its complicity to be entirely non-critical. There is a subtle problematization of the discourse of fashion in the way it plays up its fashion failure (every prediction ultimately fails), suggesting that success in fashion is arbitrary. Again, *Sassy* works at rendering the invisible and seemingly natural processes of fashion change visible and socially (and commercially) constructed.

In fact the real heroines of *Sassy* are those who have an innate and individual fashion style. Lauded are those who create a look out of discount clothing or unique

garments. For example, in "This is Lila" ("Put It On," March 1994), the magazine writes: "When we saw 16-year-old Lila, a high school student and aspiring painter/photographer, on the street, we begged her to be on this page. Her style (sort of a bohemian, less denim-and-sweats form of hip-hop) was definitely worth sharing with you." In the November 1992 "Put It On" they write "Last March we spotted 17-year-old Chloë on a NYC street in her signature corduroy overalls and haven't let her alone since." When they ask her where she gets her clothes, she replies, "I never miss a tag sale or walk past a thrift shop without going in. You can get good cheap stuff that no one else will have."

Again, there is a negotiated opposition to the norms of the fashion industry that takes place here. Just as the previous examples over-emphasize that fashion is a continuous cycle of new clothes that need to be bought, here there is a negotiated rejection of the system, a minor contestation against spending "too much" money. "Real" style can't be bought "off the racks" or imitated from a fashion magazine; real fashion sense means looking like no one else. At the same time, the magazine rejects an overly earnest approach ("It's what's inside you that counts, not what you wear") and fully admits, "clothes are important." Although both these "rebellions" are minor within the larger complicity with the fashion system, they are nonetheless in

line with a discourse of alternativeness, relative to other teenage girls' magazines.

A further vein of a mediated or alternative femininity is in the inclusion of "non-feminine" styling, such as how to make hair into dreadlocks or "fake insta-dreads" ("Zits and Stuff," March 1992) or how to dye hair a non-natural shade such as blue or green ("How Brave," May 1994). These examples are influenced by Rastafarian and punk hair fashions, both of which, in their "purest" forms, are non-commercial styles.

Certainly there is an eclecticism to *Sassy's* beauty and fashion. For example, the April 1994 issue features a fashion spread called "Subculture" in which models in a New York night-club sneer at the camera while wearing "punk" clothing: kilts with fishnet stockings, leather jackets and dog-collars (see accompanying illustration). Dispersed throughout the layout are quotes from *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Dick Hebdige. The text uses mixed up fonts drawing upon a punk iconography, similar to that found on the Sex Pistols' album cover for *God Save the Queen*. Another fashion spread, in the same issue, is called "How Pretty" (see accompanying illustration) and features a single model wearing "pretty" clothes shot against a background of pastel flowers. The somewhat ironic sub-title for the feature reads "Flowers sure are the harbingers of

Subculture

“(Of course,

punk did more

than just

upset the

wardrobe”

How
pretty

spring" and the model wears an "ultra short smocked dress," an "embroidered peasant blouse" and a "flippy skirt," among other obviously "feminine" items of clothing. Thus, while it is not unusual for women's magazines to include several "versions" of feminine style, in these cases "ugly" or conventionally non-feminine clothing is on par with the obviously girlish and feminine. Conventionally feminine clothing is viewed as simply "another," not necessarily the obvious, way of dressing.

The term negotiation implies "the holding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give and take" (Gledhill 1988, 67). All of the examples I have given demonstrate a negotiation of conventional femininity and the dominant discourses surrounding magazine reporting on beauty and fashion. Before I comment further on this, I would like to examine one more instance in which a number of the issues I have raised thus far "meet" in the space of eight pages, in an "ongoing process of give and take."

Feminism and Femininity: "Anti-Prissing" the Prom

In the March 1993 issue, *Sassy* tackles one of the biggest and most competitive requirements of all teenage magazines in the spring: prom clothing.¹⁸ Here, it features a fashion spread called "Promtasia: An Anti-Priss Fantasy Starring Three Demented Wallflowers" (see accompanying illustration). Readers are told to "mix something very girlie with

Prom Dress

HAIR MR DANIEL HOWELL MAKEUP VEEHAN LEE VARTAL SALON MODEL JESSICA

gussied-up DMs [Doc Marten boots]," "look like a debutante or a wacky fancified schoolgirl," and "do something nutso with your hair, then don't think about it for the rest of the night." Models wear black and white prom dresses with high-heeled clogs, Doc Marten boots and silver, platform Birkenstock sandals. Readers are advised to wear little makeup ("use only one color for lips, eyes and cheeks, creating a nice soft look and giving you only one thing to keep in your purse") and to have "Promtastically worry-free hair: Half up and half down is the way to go. Barrettes can hold hair in place and are meant to show." Thus, readers are counselled to be "anti-prissy" in their prom attire, to deliberately mix and match feminine clothing with alternative styling, to not worry and fret over makeup and hair.¹⁹

A variety of discourses structure this feature. On the one hand, girls are reminded of an event in North American culture second only to their wedding in terms of romantic potential and feminine appeal. A discourse of romance is key to young women's understanding of the prom: the weeks of planning an outfit and look is not an end in itself; the effort will either pay off in an "evening to remember" or not. The "dateless" girl can only experience the prom in body but not in spirit, its real potential lies in being with a special boy and surrounded by other couples. Yet, consider the title of this feature: "... Starring Three Demented Wallflowers." Wallflowers are obviously a

reference to girls who don't have dates, who miserably cling to the edges of the gym hoping someone will ask them to dance. But demented wallflowers? These are girls who revel in their datelessness, who "crazily" would rather hang out with their girlfriends than with a boy. Thus a feminist discourse in part structures the theme of this fashion spread in its rejection of romance in favour of independence and female camaraderie.²⁰

A discourse of femininity is also key to this feature. Tips like "use only one color for lips, eyes and cheeks, creating a nice soft look" are central to the disciplinary codes that govern the skills actively taken up by women. Young women learn that going to the prom requires an "extra special look," different from their daytime wear, weekend wear or work wear. This feature is a both a reminder of and a lesson in that there is a different mood to femininity for every occasion.

On the other hand, what are we to make of the "anti-priss" advice that follows? Readers are encouraged to have "nutso" hair, half down up and half down, with barrettes (hair tools for little girls) showing. Further advice suggests upturning the prom look by mixing "something very girlie with gussied-up DMs [Doc Marten boots]," a deliberate mix and match of the codes of overly feminine (little-girl wear) with the overly masculine (Doc Marten boots).

Femininity becomes over codified so it is read as pastiche (dressing up to look like little girls dressing up as women) and undermined by anti-feminine attire: "ugly" Birkenstocks, artless clogs and punk-associated boots. This is obviously antithetical to typical prom advice, and one only has to look at the 13 pages of prom ads in this issue to get a sense of the mainstream consensus around what is appropriate. Models wear bright makeup and teased, curled and pushed up hair. They wear sequined and lacy dresses with high-heel shoes and stockings and have accessories and corsages to match.

The prom advice tells us that even the most formal events deserve to be subverted with hair that is "nutso" and a look that is "wacky." It is both charming and appealing, an act of subverting the tightly coded rules that structure the conventional prom look and behaviour. That doesn't mean that the models in this feature escape rules entirely — they are in fact quite chic and sophisticated in their clever styling of tutus and Birkenstocks. What they have achieved is a visual representation of their knowledge that the rules of the prom, like the rules of femininity, are not set in stone. Participating in a "send up" of the prom relies on the act of playing with textual codes, a sort of stylistic oppositionality. Will Straw has commented that the

subversivity of these types of "recontextualizations" is "less because of the specific signs involved and shifts in their meanings, than because the very activity of recontextualization opens up a realm of freedom within (and dependent upon) practices of consumption" (1993, 19).

So while dieting is viewed as a subordination to main stream beauty, wearing makeup and adopting certain clothing styles is much more ambiguous. There is a wider scope conceived in the possibilities of fashion and beauty within *Sassy*; they may be the instances of a "textually mediated discourse," but not all instances of applying eyeshadow or styling one's hair are "equal," they are largely dependant on how one does it and with what "attitude." *Sassy* continually foregrounds and in fact celebrates a linkage of explicitly feminist politics with what have been conventionally coded as the feminine concerns with appearance.

For instance, in "Supergirls" (November 1994), Margie looks at "funky, weird, challenging girl cartoonists." She dislikes one comic (*Anima*) because the heroine, who used to look like Courtney Love (from the punk band Hole) in the first few issues, is now "more conventionally pretty, unfortunately, and also thinner." She instead gives praise to another comic, *Girlhero*, because its social injustice fighting heroines "wear Docs and have normal little curvy bodies," and demonstrate that "cute clothes and social activism are not incompatible." In a similar vein,

Christina gives a good review to the female punk band Bikini Kill in her "Cute Band Alert" ("What Now," March 1992) for their "neo-feminist philosophy [which] allows them to wear bikinis and fishnets on stage, while simultaneously proclaiming themselves as the founders of Revolution Girl Style Now."

The convergence of a feminist discourse with the textually-mediated discourse of femininity is not entirely seamless, however. Through discussions in the groups it became clear that readers recognized that the discourses of femininity and feminism did not always sit well together, particularly when it came to advertising that seemed to contradict the magazine's anti-dieting message. What perhaps is most interesting is that all the readers were willing to "forgive" or explain away the contradictions, as in Group I:

- Avril: Are any of the ads different in Sassy?
 Jill: Sassy may have more music.
 Rebecca: In the back of Seventeen it's, "get the look that boys crave" or something.
 Jessica: See, they have those here too though, "Be a model or just look like one."
 Jill: Well, those are for money, no one reads them anyway.

In Group II, readers were sympathetic to this practice, viewing the contradictions as unavoidable because of the magazine's commercial status. They felt they "knew" that the writers hated being hypocritical, but also felt that their hands were tied.

Avril: And why do you say unfortunately that the ads aren't any different?

Lori: Cause they're bad.

Betsy: It just seems like -

Lori: - they're totally contradictory. Like they target the same ads that they run, when they're like writing their feminist articles, or whatever. They blame a lot of society's ills on the exact same kind of ads that they run. And they admit it. They say "our magazine sucks too but that's beyond our control." As far as ads for money.

Avril: Are you sympathetic to the magazine for that?

Betsy: I'm just getting sick of ads in magazines. It's becoming like more ads than content.

Lori: I don't care about the amount of ads, cause there's always enough content to satisfy me for the month usually but, just like looking at the disgustingly sexist ads takes away from it definitely. But I do sympathize with the writers cause that's why I read it, for the writers, not for like the publishers or whoever is responsible for the ads.

.....

Avril: What about a magazine like Seventeen, are there things it does better than Sassy does?

Suzanne: They're better at being, they're honest about it -

Lori: - they don't claim to be fair -

Suzanne: - yeah, cause see, Sassy does these things, like they go, "you should be happy about yourself" but then still use really thin models. That you shouldn't aspire to be a model but then three issues in a row they had articles about models. So in some ways, Seventeen and YM, even when they present things, false images, they don't claim not to present them, so they're not hypocritical at all.

.....

Lori: Like I said before, I can't blame the writers for certain things, so I just ignore it. Like, I don't like it but I have to ignore it.

Conclusion

If we consider all of the above examples, then the message in *Sassy* is that beauty and fashion are important and fun, but not when they are excessively regimented. You can line your eyes if you want to, but you should never feel you have to. Dieting is pointless, and doesn't do the world any good. These instances demonstrate a rejection of the imperatives of beauty when they are seen to be harmful, strict, and immutable. *Sassy* instead embraces beauty that is spontaneous, individual and "different." Here the linkage of conventional femininity with passivity (dieting as not eating) is rejected in favour of a potentially subversive femininity linked to activity (a comic-strip heroine).

If *Sassy* has a "neo-feminist philosophy" it is that wearing makeup is not incompatible with feminist ideals. On the one hand, *Sassy* conveys overt feminist politics as I demonstrated in the first part of this chapter. But it also attempts to disengage discourses of femininity from oppressive/patriarchal relations, and re-articulate them with feminism via the recontextualization of commodities. The pursuit of certain forms of beauty is articulated with a stylistic choice rather than a sublimation to patriarchy. Angela McRobbie writes of similar qualities in *Just Seventeen*:

it incorporates many of those 'structures of feeling' which emerged from the political discourse of feminism in the 1970s. But it also, and perhaps most powerfully, exists as the product of a highly charged consumer culture which in turn provides subject positions for girls and personal identities for them through consumption" (1993, 422-423).

Charlotte Brundson has noted that in feminist teaching, feminist identities are usually "understood as an identity for women which transcended -- and by implication, put an end to -- traditional femininity" (1991, 378). Clearly, this is not the case in *Sassy*.

Conclusion

As I noted in chapter two, *Sassy* was sold in November 1994 to Petersen Publishing in Los Angeles, the owners of *'Teen* magazine. Today, it bears little resemblance to the *Sassy* I began researching two years ago. Uninterested in what they called a "fringe publication, the new owners of *Sassy* say they wanted to bring *Sassy* to a wider audience while keeping the magazine cutting edge.

Few of the old departments exist in the new *Sassy* and overall, it is a different magazine. There is a much greater emphasis on fashion and beauty (including dieting) and on articles that profile the lives of designers, models, makeup artists, etc. There are fewer feature articles per issue and more entertainment news and gossip. But the most striking differences are the intangible qualities that cannot be ascertained through a quantitative analysis. The new *Sassy* is largely "anonymous" — the writing is not self-conscious and rarely do we have any glimpse of the editors or writers. Hence, much of the joking, self-referential tone of the old *Sassy* is lost. Also lost in this new, faceless tone of address is the conviction and spirit with which writers voiced their pet peeves against everything from the "evil" diet industry to exclusive sororities and artsy pretentiousness. The magazine is less "silly" or irreverent, rarely uses irony to signal disdain and is much

less inclined to address its readers in a sophisticated and knowing manner. The new *Sassy* is no longer opinionated, angry, biased, sarcastic, inward-looking, nose-thumbing, or even very "sassy."

Sassy was sold because, unable to make a profit on his investment and burdened by debt, publisher Dale Lang no longer wanted to finance the magazine. Why he couldn't increase its rate base of 800,000 (leaving it in fourth place) is up for speculation. One magazine consultant commented, "I think *Sassy* was a gem and had the potential of being one of the top two or three players in the marketplace but it never got the proper investment" (quoted in Carmody 1994a, D5). Lang also commented that he thought with the right investment he could "take it to the checkout counters" (quoted in Kelly 1994, 15), referring to an expensive move to buy prime retail selling space.

Lang's business decision does not, however, explain Petersen's makeover of the magazine's image. Clearly they did not think of it as possessing a winning formula only in need of the right backing, evident in comments like those of Petersen's 'Teen publisher Jay Cole: "In the last couple of years there was a darker side to *Sassy*, and I think they alienated part of their market" (quoted in Carmody 1994c, D19). Cole also suggests that the magazine's editorial practices were misguided, making it more of "a fringe publication than a cutting-edge magazine ... It missed a larger

part of the teen market and concentrated on a small number of teens that don't relate to the mainstream" (quoted in Carmody 1994c, D19). This seems to mischaracterize *Sassy* somewhat; its rate-base figures were not a "small number" and its content and advertising do not suggest it was a "fringe publication."

In fact, I have attempted to show in this thesis what Cole's statement misses, that *Sassy* was a negotiation between the mainstream and alternative, an oscillation between the familiar and unfamiliar in teenage girls' magazines. Informed by Christine Gledhill's understanding of meaning production in popular texts, I have sought to demonstrate this by looking at various "levels" of meaning in the production, mediation and reception of texts.

At first I examined the history of the magazine against a contextual background of mainstream magazine practices from the late 1980s to the present. In examining the nuances between the various practices of publishers, advertisers and editorial staff, I sought to avoid reducing these practices to a consensus of opinion or a simplistic economic reading of *Sassy's* production. It became apparent from the comments of magazine practitioners that, at the level of production, *Sassy* represented a number of things to different people. At the core of these

differences lay the demands of making *Sassy* mainstream and commercially successful, as well as hipper and less mainstream than the current magazines for teenage girls.

These demands took several forms. On the one hand, the magazine had roughly the same advertising, quality of production, categories of interest and content of its competitors. It looked like a typical magazine for teenage girls. On the other hand, its writers and editors (and to a certain extent, publishers) were committed to radicalizing the genre by amending many of its key tropes and themes. This included articulating a discourse of authenticity by infusing the magazine with references to feminism and alternative culture.

For example, by drawing on scholarly accounts of popular music, I have found the sense of authenticity attributed to *Sassy* stems from the magazine distancing itself from its commercial status and mainstream journalistic practices. A key means by which this is accomplished is through a mode of address that is informal, colloquial, intimate and irreverent. To paraphrase an earlier commentator, *Sassy* talks like your older sister, not your mother.

A further means by which *Sassy* subverts its status as a mainstream magazine is through its investment in non-mainstream culture and practices. Openly critical of many of the practices it must "endure" as a commercial magazine,

it problematizes and thereby exposes practices such as press junkets, celebrity boosterism and advertiser-imposed censorship. It also negotiates for readers the terrain of alternative music and fanzines, reproducing the claims seen in popular music discourses that this is a culture more authentic or interesting than mainstream culture.

Lastly, I have examined *Sassy's* feminism. As I stated in my introduction, I found *Sassy* notable at first for the way it took feminism seriously, and not just as a cursory "girls are as good as boys" approach. It assumed readers would be equally outraged as the staff by Miss America's subservience to corporations or the exclusionary practices of college sororities. It did all this at the same time it taught girls how to perfect "majorly made-up eyes" and how not to "look like a dork" at the prom. Again, the magazine negotiated discourses of feminism and femininity to suggest that not only are these discourses not incompatible, but in fact could logically work quite well together.

What might ultimately capture *Sassy's* difference from its competitors is its title. As opposed to addressing a fixed attribute such as age ("seventeen," "teen," "young and modern") "sassy" addresses an attitude — one of talking back — usually associated with male adolescent rebelliousness. Recalling Barbara Hudson's article on adolescence and femininity, "sassy" suggests a traditionally unfeminine attitude that girls should not aspire to leave behind as

they mature into women. While the titles *Seventeen*, *'Teen* and *YM* suggest a passive living-out of the inevitable teenage years, *Sassy* suggests an active choice of a disposition to carry one through and beyond adolescence. This difference was captured by the focus groups, who stressed that being "sassy" was a matter of self-definition, of "being yourself."

Towards the end of each group, I asked the participants, "Who is the 'sassy girl?'" and then, "Could you be the 'sassy girl?'" By this I was not referring to anyone in particular (including the winner of the Saggiest Girl in America contest), but was being deliberately ambiguous in order to evoke as wide ranging a response as possible. It is to these readers I give the last word.

Group I

Avril: Describe to me the "sassy girl." In terms of clothes, musical tastes, relationships, what is she like?
 Tracy: She doesn't do what other people think she should do just because she's a girl.
 Lynn: She has her own style, she doesn't like, succumb to fashion.
 Jessica: She's not a slave to fashion.
 Heather: Yeah, or super trendy.

.....

Jessica: I picture the "sassy girl" as Samantha Mathis' character in Pump Up the Volume. Like, she's very alternative, she knows what she wants and like, just she's the kind of person who everybody else always thinks, "oh, she's so cool."
 Jill: But she doesn't let popularity go to her head kind of thing.

Group III

Chris: I picture the girl that's independent, has an attitude, but a good attitude, not like she's mad at the world or anything like that, but she's not afraid to speak up, she's not afraid to voice her opinion, she's happy with herself, with the way she looks, her body, everything. I don't know. I picture her getting what she wants.

When I asked the participants if they thought they could be the "sassy girl," their answers displayed a negotiation between fantasy and reality, suggesting that this was both an attainable and unattainable ideal.

Group I

Rebecca: I think there are a lot of people who are kind of like her, but no one's exactly like her.

Jill: Well, I think that that's what the magazine's about, showing us that we are kind of sassy. If you just be yourself you're okay. Like, everybody here can relate to the stuff in the magazine, so it's saying we're all kind of sassy.

Group II

Avril: Is it an attainable ideal?

Lori: I think so. I think I am as far as my definition of it is. I can relate or agree to the things they say so I think that I am. Not that there's one sassy girl and that's me (laughs) but, just like, I think that if they knew me for some reason, if they had a little looking glass into my life, they'd be, "I'm glad that that person is reading Sassy" or whatever. I think me and Sassy are compatible.

Suzanne: I think "sassy" is definitely attainable because if it wasn't no one would read the magazine, they'd just go and read YM.

Group III

Avril: And do you think its possible to be her?

Danielle: I think it's too untypical.

Chris: I don't think its too untypical. I think if you're as cool as you can be, than you are. It's not fake. It's not Miss America. You don't have to be beautiful to be sassy.

Endnotes

1. Photo stories, previously hand-drawn picture stories, are set up much like a comic strip: each "cell" features characters "frozen" in action, and thoughts or dialogue are conveyed through a "bubble" above the characters' heads.
2. John Newsom's *The Education of Girls* (1948) insisted that young women needed a sound education "which prepared them for the socially determined roles they would play in 'civilized community'" (Johnson 1993, 81). He argued that there were a number of difficult skills young women needed to master if they were to have success in their careers as housewives and mothers. "All pupils," he wrote, "including those of very limited attainments, need the civilising experience of contact with great literature" (quoted in Alderson 1968, 2).
3. Leavisism, the legacy of F.R. Leavis, was a response to growing concerns in the 1950s about the education system in Britain. Leavisism argued that the role of the education system was to "distribute literary knowledge and appreciation more widely" (During 1992, 2). Leavisites saw little value in mass media, and believed culture should provide more than mere entertainment. Through the dissemination of a canon of artistic merit, literature would act as an uplifting and inspiring force.
4. Early works in this field have been important in reformulating ideas about what constitutes "culture," particularly the cultures of working class and "everyday life." McRobbie's work emerges out of attempts by feminists within this field to challenge the male-centred research of their colleagues. *Women Take Issue* by the Women's Studies Group (1978) is a key example of this challenge.
5. I suspect this has something to do with the "neatness" of analyzing formulaic narratives versus the "messiness" of trying to analyse a magazine as a whole. I argue that one of the reasons magazines are more difficult to analyse than other popular feminine forms — soap operas, melodrama, romance novels (what Charlotte Brundson calls "the new feminist canons of femininity" [1991, 365]) — is that they are not formalistically unified. There are practical

difficulties in locating a "centre" of meaning in magazines, which consist of bundles of varied and often contradictory signifying practices.

6. Aside from the now defunct "brother" magazine of *Sassy*, *Dirt*, there are no specifically teenage boys' magazines that I am aware of. Magazine-industry insiders credit this to a variety of reasons: "Advertisers and publishers say [it's] because teen-age boys read less than girls, buy less and wouldn't be caught dead contemplating such touchy-feely things as how they look or feel" (Crossen 1990, B1). Another magazine consultant answers: "There's a reason there are no other magazines in this category. Teenage boys don't buy anything, with maybe the exception of athletic shoes and records" (quoted in Loh 1994, 22). Janice Winship, on the other hand, offers the view that "young men, unlike young women, do not like the idea of a magazine which suggests that other men have the same desires and angsts" (1987, 154).
7. Fairfax also made a second American purchase in September 1987: *Ms.* magazine.
8. Also very much publicized were Yates' and Summers' make-over of *Ms.* magazine. Hoping to make the publication less "doctrinaire," the focus shifted to making the magazine more of a general-interest news magazine that discussed the impact of current events on women. Summers was also quoted of saying of the new *Ms.*, "'*Ms.* approaches the world with 'feminist' assumptions, but it doesn't mean we use the word in every sentence'" (quoted in Zackerman 1988, 77).
9. Lang also published *Working Woman* and *Working Mother*.
10. Seen as even more controversial was Lang's decision to publish *Ms.* magazine without advertising. The magazine was to survive solely on the revenues of increased circulation.
11. Prior to the sale of *Sassy* to Petersen, the research, qualitative analysis and focus groups for this thesis were already completed or were in progress. For this reason, my analysis of *Sassy* refers to the pre-Petersen magazine.
12. The SCIA contest is, in all respects, an "updated" beauty contest. Many teen magazines have annual model searches or "Miss Teen America" contests that judge readers' entries on the basis of their looks. *Sassy's* contest, however, is meant to honour qualities of

"sassiness" in female readers between the ages of 13 and 19. "Sassiness" can cover a wide range of qualities, but most of all it appears to be made up of intelligence, humour, political activism and artistic talent. Once a year the magazine brings seven finalists, out of hundreds of entries, to New York where one of them will be chosen the Saggiest Girl. The winner has her photo on the cover and all finalists are featured in a large spread with their photos and text about their "winning" qualities. To enter, contestants must write (although entries can take any form, and creativity is urged) on a particular topic. An ad for the contest (June 1993), for instance, tells readers:

Create a perfect society. That's right.
A totally righteous land to call your
own Tell us about the people who'd
live there. What would their value
system be like? More importantly, what
kind of music would they listen to? What
movies would they watch?

As this suggests, there is a utopian quality to the contest. Contests usually centre around a theme of "how would you make the world a better place?" but without being preachy. Each contestant must specify to what charity, if she won, she would donate her prize money to (the winner also keeps prize money for herself).

13. For this reason, I have chosen to refer to writers throughout this thesis by their first names.
14. The following commentaries demonstrate the way the readers imagined the ages of Sassy's staff:

Group I

Jessica: It seems like people who write for Sassy actually-

Jill: -they're real people-

Jessica: -care what we think. Whereas the other people, who write for Seventeen and stuff are just like, "oh well, blah, blah, blah, this is what you should do."

Kristin: Yeah, it seems like they're really old. They don't even understand what's really going on.

Group II

Avril: Overall, what is the sense you get from the magazine?

3 of/de 3

PM-1 3 1/2" x 4" PHOTOGRAPHIC MICROCOPY TARGET
NBS 1010a ANSI/ISO #2 EQUIVALENT

PRECISIONSM RESOLUTION TARGETS

Suzanne: A friend or an older sister.
 Avril: What about *Seventeen*?
 Suzanne: Your mom's friend.
 Betsy: I just picture an adult or something.

.....

Elissa: Well I think that just the style of writing that they have is a lot more readable. Well, not readable, but you can relate to it more, like it doesn't feel like it was written by a 40-year-old or something. Most of the writers I think are our, well maybe a little bit older than our age group.
 Avril: So you think the age comes out in the writing?
 Elissa: Yeah, I do.

Group III

Avril: What do you think about the writers, what do you think you know about them?
 Lindsey: They don't seem intimidating at all, you know. Like when you look at the others, *YM* and stuff, they look old, they look way too old.

15. Christina's dismay with current celebrities echoes Leo Lowenthal's seminal essay on celebrity, "The Triumph of Mass Idols" (1961). In his study of biographies published in popular magazines between 1901 and 1941, Lowenthal found a shift in emphasis. Earlier, biographies looked at "idols of production," "people interesting because they achieved something in the world, made their own way, worked their way to the top, were useful to society," (Dyer 1992, 45). Later, notes Lowenthal, emphasis shifted to "idols of consumption."

Almost every one ... is directly, or indirectly, related to the sphere of leisure time. Either he does not belong to vocations which serve society's basic needs (e.g. the heroes of the world of entertainment and sport), or he amounts, more or less, to a caricature of a socially productive agent. (1961, 115)

It is these figures, "who simply enjoy the fruits of the world" (Dyer 1992, 17), that Christina cannot bring herself to respect.

16. Traditionally, the focus of fanzines is on music, usually one group or artist exclusively, not covered in the mainstream music press. Frith has written of fanzines, "[they] accumulate rock facts and gossip not for a mass readership but for a small coterie of cultists, and they are belligerent about their music" (1983, 177). Fanzines emphasize a "do-it-yourself" ethic made possible by cheap photocopying and provide an informational network that can support a geographically diverse fan base.
17. Sassy has been praised for using models with unconventional looks in their fashion pages. But while I would agree that there is certainly more of an ethnic mix and models often have unusual facial features, I would hesitate to say they are any different in terms of height, weight and body proportions from conventional models. What can be stated is that quite often Sassy will bring in "normal" women to model clothes, such as young women they "found on the street," the staff themselves or friends of the staff.
18. March issues of most teen magazines expand in size with the huge influx of ads for prom dresses and accessories. Fashion and beauty spreads are devoted almost entirely to preparing one's hair, makeup, outfit and "outlook" for the prom. So extensive, and presumably lucrative, is this coverage, that YM came out with two issues for March 1995, one devoted entirely to the prom. Even *Modern Bride* created a special spin-off magazine in March devoted exclusively to this event.
19. A similar approach to the prom "look" is featured in the March 1994 prom spread. Called "Promalama Ding Dong," the subhead advises readers: "There's no reason you have to dress like a dork when you go to the prom — you can look pretty and still feel cool."
20. This is not the only instance of a "feminist take" on the prom. In "Prom night sure can suck" (March 1992) staff give accounts of why prom night can "suck." "We didn't recount these fatalistic tales to convince you that prom is a pointless exercise riddled with potential disaster It's just that the various pressures — to get asked, to find the perfect dress, to be able to pay for the limo and dinners and other accessories — all make you feel like you have a moral obligation to have the best time of your life. Our advice? Don't take it too seriously, don't be afraid to go without a date (contrary to popular belief, accompanying a jerk is worse than going alone), definitely don't go with a relative, and dance like a maniac."

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Appendix A
Issues of *Sassy* Consulted

1991	1992	1993	1994
		January	January
	February	February	February
	March	March	March
	April	April	April
	May	May	May
	June	June	June
	July	July	July
August	August	August	August
	September	September	September
October	October	October	October
	November	November	November
December	December	December	*

* no December 1994 issue was published.

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Appendix A
Issues of Sassy Consulted

1991	1992	1993	1994
		January	January
	February	February	February
	March	March	March
	April	April	April
	May	May	May
	June	June	June
	July	July	July
August	August	August	August
	September	September	September
October	October	October	October
	November	November	November
December	December	December	*

* no December 1994 issue was published.

Appendix B

Focus Groups

Time Period

All three focus groups were conducted in a one-year period during 1994/95.

Approval

The proposal to conduct focus groups and the focus group design were approved by Carleton University's Ethics Review Committee. A copy of the approval form is included in this appendix.

Participants

My design limitations for this research included that participants be female and Sassy "readers." By this I meant one or any of the following: that they consider themselves to be fans of Sassy, that they enjoy reading Sassy, or that they had read Sassy six or more times in the past year. Subscription to or regular purchase of the magazine was not a necessary criteria.

The other limitation was age. My feeling was that Sassy readers of different ages would have different things to say about the magazine. I targeted three age groups: 14 to 16 (early high school), 17 to 18 (late high school), and "university age," roughly 20 to 25.

Organization

Participants were gathered in a number of ways. For the first group, I was fortunate enough to be acquainted with a 15-year-old reader of Sassy who also had many friends who read the magazine. She was responsible for gathering the group together and ensuring that they met at the organized time and place.

The second and third groups took more planning to organize. I put ads in a local weekly paper (*Ottawa X Press*) and Carleton University's student paper (*The Charlatan*) calling for female readers of Sassy. Over a two-month period I gathered together readers who fit the last two age groups. There was difficulty in getting many participants, as they often had conflicting schedules or would sometimes lose interest in participating.

Locale

The first two focus groups were held in local community centres and the third in a classroom at Carleton University.

Confidentiality and Consent

All participants signed a consent form demonstrating that they understood and complied with the focus group as I had explained it to them. A copy of the consent form follows.

The focus groups were video-taped so that I could more easily transcribe them later. I promised the participants that no one would see the video tapes but myself.

None of the real names of participants have been used in my research. Each participant was given a pseudonym in the transcripts.

Focus Groups - Description

All participants were white, English speaking and came from in or around the Ottawa area. All attended public high schools.

Focus Group I

Seven participants met at the Glebe Community Centre in Ottawa.

Names and ages: Tracy (15); Lynn (15); Jill (15); Rebecca (15); Heather (15); Kristin (15); Jessica (16).

Focus Group II

Four participants met at the Gloucester Community Centre.

Names and Ages: Elissa (18); Betsy (18); Lori (18); Suzanne (18).

Focus Group III

Five participants met at Carleton University (one arrived near the very end of the discussion).

Names and Ages: Sara (24); Lindsey (19); Donna (19); Chris (19); Maryann (22).

Conclusion

The focus groups were, I felt, an overall success. Participants were eager to talk about *Sassy* and were forthcoming with their comments. Although many were shy at first, the discussions moved quickly and they rarely had a shortage of things to say (it helped that almost all the participants were there with at least one of their friends). I also feel assured that the participants enjoyed themselves and were quite pleased about being asked to talk about something they enjoyed so much in their personal lives.

I felt I learned a great deal about the way readers respond to the magazine and was constantly impressed with how sophisticated many of their comments were. They had very strong impressions of what made *Sassy* distinct from other teenage girls' magazine and were vocal in why they preferred it (at the same time, I recognize that many of these girls "still" like to read *Seventeen*, *Teen* and *YM*).

I also recognize the pitfalls of taking at face-value every comment made in these groups. The dynamics of group discussions became quickly apparent to me when I noticed shier girls simply nodding their heads in agreement with everything being said. Likewise, I recognize that the setting of these discussions was far divorced from the actual setting and practices these readers would typically use while reading *Sassy*; their observations may have little to with how they actually "notice" the magazine in the everyday. Finally, while readers offered scathing remarks about magazines like *Seventeen* and *YM*, I have no doubt that many of them still find pleasure in these magazines. Their comments were perhaps more a reflection of the direction of the discussion and knowing that they were representing "readers who like *Sassy*."

CONSENT FORM

I am a graduate student at Carleton University doing research for my Master's thesis and am currently looking at the appeal of *Sassy* magazine to female readers. Before beginning the group, however, I am required to attain your consent. You and your parent or guardian are being asked to sign this form to show that you have been informed about what my research entails.

While I don't expect any questions to make you feel uncomfortable, you may chose not to answer at any time in the discussion. The focus group will be videotaped, but only to help me transcribe the discussion later on. No one will see the video tape except myself. Also, your real name will not appear on the transcript nor will it be used in any of this research.

Avril Archibald, Researcher

Subject

Age

I have read and understand the basis of the research. I understand that my signature in no way constitutes a waiver of my rights, but that I am simply agreeing to participate in this focus group.

Parent or Guardian

Questions

The following are the questions I used in each group:

What do you like about having a magazine for teenage girls?

- why do you read them? do you learn something from them, or read them just to relax?
- would you be upset if there weren't any?

How is Sassy different from other teen magazines, like Seventeen, in the area of:

- fashion? music? relationships with boys? social issues? ads?
- are there things you get from Sassy that you can't get from other magazines?
- is Sassy a more serious or controversial magazine?
- are there things you like better in other magazines?
- if you could no longer buy Sassy, what would you read?

What part of Sassy do you read first?

- what other parts of the magazine do you concentrate on? what things mean the most to you?
- do you ever read the entire magazine cover to cover, or do you skip certain parts? What kind of things don't interest you?

When you read Sassy do you read it alone or with your friends?

- do you ever discuss the things you have read with your friends? What kind of things?
- do you ever do something else while you read it? (listen to music, watch television)
- do you read the magazine once, or several times looking at different things?

Who is the Sassy girl? Describe her:

- what kind of clothes does she wear?
- what kind of music does she listen to?
- what kind of relationships with boys does she have?
- what is her attitude to life?
- would you like to be her?
- do you think it's possible to be like her in real life?

Let's go through some of the articles from the latest Sassy.

- would you normally read this section?
- what are your impressions, what is notable about it?

Near the end, I asked the participants to look at and discuss three articles. Those were "Dear Boy" (September 1993), "How to Drink in College Without Puking Every Night" (November 1993), and "What Now" (February 1994).

DATE: January 4, 1995

TO: Avril Aronbald
Professor Eileen Saunders
School of Journalism & Communication

FROM: Anne Burgess
Director of Research Services

RE: Ethics Clearance

The University Ethics Committee has reviewed your application ("A Look at the Appeal of Sassy Magazine to Select Groups of Readers") and has found the project to be ethically acceptable.

Anne Burgess

AB/aw

END

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FIN