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An Examination of the Riot Grrrl Subculture

Lindsay Wright

The Riot Grrrl subculture emerged from the punk rock scene during the third-wave feminist movement in the early 1990s, uniting women and girls against capitalist and patriarchal cultural ideologies. Creative forms of protest including music, fanzines, and other do-it-yourself expressions have allowed Riot Grrrls to counter the dominant ideological narrative in the United States. Despite the Riot Grrrl movement's commodification by mainstream culture, it has evolved and expanded to continue to influence the world today.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, the initial Riot Grrrl movement formed out of the collaboration of women from Washington D.C. and Olympia, Washington, who were tired of having their female perspectives stifled by the punk rock scene. Not content with being silenced by the men in the punk subculture, Riot Grrrls emerged in the context of third-wave feminism, which united women and girls around the country. Separate from the male punk subculture, Riot Grrrls rebeled not only against the dominant ideological frameworks of capitalism and consumer culture, but also against the patriarchy that dominated American society (Huber, 2010). Rather than follow the "trend within contemporary society for women to become invisible and become forgotten when the past becomes 'history'" (Strong, 2011, p. 400), these women began a new punk movement fueled by the power of like-minded girls and their collective creativity. These key creative subcultural elements of music and do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic were instrumental in the formation and proliferation of Riot Grrrl identity in the 1990s. Despite its subsequent commodification by mainstream consumer culture, the Riot Grrrl movement has evolved and maintains a global influence today.

Riot Grrrl Identity

As a subculture, the Riot Grrrl movement was blatantly political in its message and resistant to the heteronormative and patriarchal standards maintained by the dominant culture (Huber, 2010). In an effort to give nonconforming women a voice in society, Riot Grrrls vocally opposed power structures that perpetuated limiting ideals of heterosexuality and traditional gender roles. Kathleen Hanna, the front woman of the Riot Grrrl band Bikini Kill, explicitly defined the mindsets and characteristics of a Riot Grrrl in her "Riot Grrrl Manifesto," published in 1991 in *Bikini Kill Zine 2*, one of the short, homemade publications used to promote Riot Grrrl ideology. Hanna pitted Riot Grrrls against dominant American culture: "BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits of being cool according to traditional standards." Hanna further described Riot Grrrls as "seek[ing] to create revolution in [their] own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things." Through their actions and group identity, Riot Grrrls worked against "racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism" (Hanna, 1991).

As Hanna (1991) explained in her manifesto, Riot Grrrls formed in opposition to the pervasive consumer capitalist culture in the United States. Whereas capitalism is the economic system under which the U.S. operates, Western culture is overwhelmingly rooted in consumer capitalism meaning that not only are resources privatized, but concepts, ideals, and bodies also gain exchange value within a cultural context (Riordan, 2001). More specifically, Girls' Studies researcher Sharon Mazzarella (2015) noted that Riot Grrrls opposed consumer capitalism because of how it can commodify women (personal communication). Commodification is the conversion of specific markers such as dress and music into mass-produced products (Riordan, 2011), and within the capitalistic system, women are repeatedly sexualized, objectified, and held to unrealistic, unattainable standards that commodify their existence. Furthermore, capitalism threatens to rob women of their individual authentic experiences by forcing them to operate in accordance with a culture driven by consumerism (Huber, 2010). Angered by this oppression, the Riot Grrrl narrative served to deconstruct consumer capitalism and its detrimental effects on women.

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As a subset of the third-wave of feminism, Riot Grrrls sought to create solidarity and raise a voice against oppressive societal institutions. Out of opposition to the traditional connotations associated with the word "girl," Riot Grrrls reclaimed "girl" to give their subculture a unique identity (Dunn, 2014). Hanna justified this choice in her manifesto: "BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak." Adding a growl-like spin to the spelling, the Riot Grrrl subculture of the 90s contrasted standards of femininity and social cooperation and redefined the traditional idea of what it means to be a girl. As Schilt (2003) explains, "The use of the word 'girl' came from a desire to focus on childhood, a time when girls have the strongest self-esteem and belief in themselves. The rewriting of the word as 'grrrl' represented the anger behind the movement; it sounded like a growl" (p. 6). Throughout the movement, Riot Grrrls have been intentional in their identification and representation of members as fiercely empowered women prepared to riot against injustices in society.

Riot Grrrls' Protest

One of the major ways in which Riot Grrrls expressed their ideas during their peak was through music. Music frequently has the power to unite subculturists, although subcultures consist of much more than a group of people with a shared taste in music (S. Mazzarella, personal communication, 2015). Subculturists, like Riot Grrrls, are members of subcultures who are united by their shared opinions and actions to oppose dominant cultural ideologies and discourses (S. Mazzarella, personal communication, 2015). For Riot Grrrl musicians, song lyrics were an extremely powerful tool to express their

standpoints on important issues. Songs by Riot Grrrl-affiliated bands such as Bikini Kill often included topics of "rape, domestic violence, incest, abortion, eating disorders, body image, and sexuality" (Riordan, 2001, p. 287), which have been construed differently by the mainstream media. Listening to Riot Grrrl music allowed women and girls to identify their experiences and struggles within the confines of society and politics (Schilt, 2003). Furthermore, the blunt, relevant lyrics presented in their music invited girls to engage their feminist agency (Riordan, 2001). Riot Grrrl-affiliated music has continually held the power to advance the movement by encouraging listeners to take an active role in their mission, perhaps by expressing themselves creatively.

To illustrate the music's influence, Huber (2010) identified evident countercultural themes in his analysis of lyrics from Bikini Kill's song "Rebel Girl" and Sleater-Kinney's song "Modern Girl." In "Rebel Girl," Bikini Kill encourages listeners to catalyze a gender revolution. While performing the song, they incorporated high energy "vocal styling and [a] militant drumbeat" (p. 74), which supplemented their message. The performance created an image of a "strong and powerful" woman, reflecting the idea of the Riot Grrrl as an empowered and independent individual who is capable of starting a revolution. Similarly, the lyrics of Sleater-Kinney's "Modern Girl" reinforce the negative effects of capitalism on women's self image. In the song, the band "invites listeners to view capitalism as creating distance between the modern girl and the reality of the rest of the world" (p. 75). Through "Modern Girl," Sleater-Kinney emphasizes the Riot Grrrl mentality that counters capitalism, while encouraging women to take control of life in the real world. These songs from Riot Grrrl-associated bands exemplify how lyrical content paralleled Riot Grrrl ideals and called listeners to action.

In addition to the content of Riot Grrrl songs, the actual performances and music festivals during the 90s played an important role in unifying Riot Grrrls as they encouraged audience members to contribute to a dialogue. These events were and continue to be safe spaces for women to share their experiences related to the difficult topics discussed in Riot Grrrl-affiliated music. Similar to standard punk shows, the microphone is often passed to audience members to share their stories alongside the musicians (Huber, 2010). In 2000, the Ladyfest music festival began its tradition in Olympia, Washington as a specific politically charged music and arts festival (Huber, 2010). Organized by women at the grassroots level, features such as live music, performance art, visual art, and spoken word continue to allow women to utilize their agency and speak out about their experiences in a safe setting (Huber, 2010). Not only have these festivals incorporated music, but they have also emphasized the DIY ethic that was integral to the Riot Grrrl movement at its peak.

Riot Grrrl music allowed women and girls to identify their experiences and struggles within the confines of society and politics

The Riot Grrrl DIY expression facilitated the exploration of broaching taboo topics and the vulnerability of sharing common experiences among girls. According to a self-professed Riot Grrrl in an interview with Rosenberg and Garofalo (1998), the movement was about "Riot [G] rrrls getting girls to do it for ourselves" (p. 818). Hanna's "Riot Grrrl Manifesto" also placed clear value on female-empowered content creation:

> BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways.
> BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other.
> BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings.
> BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo. (Hanna 1991)

Hanna's do-it-yourself mentality reflects the importance of girls' individual contributions to Riot Grrrl publications and music that challenged the common consumer capitalist and patriarchal culture.

Subculture members like Hanna predominately contributed to Riot Grrrl literature during its peak in the 1990s was through fanzines, or zines, which are "personal, small-scale paper ventures [that] tell the kinds of stories deliberately ignored, glossed over, or entirely forgotten by mainstream media" (Moore, 2008, para. 3). This uncommercialized platform provided girls a space to express themselves and contribute to the ideals of the Riot Grrrl movement. Girls who had experienced similar hardships produced zines that included a myriad of topics, similar to the taboo themes of Riot Grrrl music. As Schilt (2003) stated, "zine making offered many girls a forum in which to discuss the marginalization they felt in the predominantly male punk scene and to discuss sexism and harassment with other girls and women who shared similar experiences" (p. 6). Zines were identified as a form of communication that built trust among Riot Grrrls and provided an accessible way to distribute ideas (Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998). Due to the DIY format of Riot Grrrl zines, they were kept free of mainstream media influence and patriarchal perspectives, thus allowing for free distribution of untainted ideas.

According to Moore (2008), zines remain important in the 21st century because "messy, nonlinear, and unprofessional describe not only the way they are constructed, but also the reasons they are made" (para. 18).

Frustrated by the negative mainstream media coverage, the Riot Grrrl Press was born to publish zines on a larger scale as a response. The September-November 1993 edition of the Riot Grrrl Press Catalogue stated, "We need to make ourselves visible without using mainstream media as a tool . . . . we need to take back control and find our voices again" (as cited in Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012, p. 151). While Riot Grrrls felt it was important to share their message with society, they also abhorred inaccurate media representation of Riot Grrrl movement beliefs. In fact, the Riot Grrrl movement ultimately called for a "media backout" in 1993. Media outlets and interviewers were then directed to Riot Grrrl Press for information, which at that point had over 60 zines that addressed a broad range of topics (Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012). However, while the movement needed to distribute their message, the 1993 Riot Grrrl Press Catalogue explicitly warned against commodification of zines: "It would truly bum me out if this turned into a commodification of 'girl zines' where if you have the cash you can have access to whatever you want" (as cited in Leonard, 1998, p. 109). In order to authentically distribute these DIY artifacts on a large scale, the Riot Grrrl Press required contributions from girls across the country. Whereas white, middle class women typically had the financial stability, and thus leisure time, to devote to mass-producing zines, many girls who worked for the Riot Grrrl Press came from diverse backgrounds and working class socioeconomic status (Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012). The varied makeup of the Riot Grrrl Press reflects the movement's commitment to expressing the intersectional voices and perspectives of women from varying backgrounds.

Riot Grrrls contributed to creating an open feminist culture through various DIY self-expression outlets

However, the DIY elements of the Riot Grrrl subculture in the 90s were not limited to the zines published independently and/or by the Riot Grrrl Press. In interviews conducted by Rosenberg and Garofalo (1998), a self-identified Riot Grrrl stated that inherently, self-expression is "an act of feminism" (p. 824). She explained, "Creating your own culture is a feminist act . . . . It's an empowering act to create your own culture that has positive messages about you" (p. 824). Riot Grrrls contributed to creating an open feminist culture through various DIY self-expression outlets, including radio shows, public access television programs, spoken word performances, art, and film to communicate their ideals (Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012). The female body even became a tool in DIY culture. At protests, rallies, and shows, "Riot Grrrl bands engaged in actions to reclaim traditionally derogatory words (such as cunt, bitch, dyke, and slut)" (Dunn, 2014, p. 69). Many women painted their bodies with these words, often in lipstick, using their bodies as canvases to share important messages. Feminist rhetoric often appeared in graffiti on buildings and other public property (Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012, p. 141). The free-form, creative, and self-expressive nature of the various DIY projects provided an avenue for women to reclaim their agency, making them an integral part of the peak Riot Grrrl movement.

Evolution of the Riot Grrrl Movement

Because subcultures inherently function as outside noise that disrupts the structure of a hegemonic culture, commodification has the potential to weaken subcultural messages. Concepts associated with subcultures can become heavily marketed through broad media exposure to the detriment of their intended purpose because, upon receiving extensive publicity, they can often become diluted and part of the dreaded mainstream (S. Mazzarella, personal communication, 2015). When these subcultural objects and ideas are mass produced and appeal to the dominant culture, the movements become commodified and may lose their counter cultural traction. The commodification of the concept of "girl power" in the Riot Grrrl subculture overshadowed the values of the subculture, concealing the true message of the movement. In its entirety, third-wave feminism, of which Riot Grrrl was a subset, was—and continues to be—difficult to commodify given its many nuances. However, the concept of girl power, initially introduced by Riot Grrrls, was easy to market, and quickly became popular in hegemonic society in the mid 90s. As girl power became commodified, the Riot Grrrl rhetoric of empowerment and cultural resistance was diluted and normalized (Riordan, 2001).

Following the explosion of the Riot Grrrl movement, the commodification of "girl power" is best exemplified by the Lilith Fair movement that emerged in the mid to late 1990s. A traveling music festival, Lilith Fair featured popular female musicians such as Sarah McLachlan, Fiona Apple, and Alanis Morissette. While these artists spread the message of female empowerment, they performed in a way that was aligned with traditional, corporate ideals, which Riot Grrrls directly opposed (Huber, 2010). As such, although these female musical artists promoted female agency, they simultaneously remained captive to hegemonic standards for women (Riordan, 2001; Huber, 2010). The pre-packaged form of girl power they spread forced Lilith Fair musicians to stray from the radical, countercultural ideals on which the Riot Grrrl movement was founded. Riordan emphasized the detrimental commodification of girl power by saying, "This adoption of once-marginalized

pro-girl rhetoric compromises the more subversive form of feminism, Riot Grrrl" (p. 294), which highlighted the way that the subculture was undermined by the mainstream it rebelled against.

In addition to the capitalization of the concept of girl power, media misrepresentation played a considerable role in weakening the Riot Grrrl movement. Overbearing media coverage "both trivialized and exoticised the Riot Grrrl" (Dunn, 2014, p. 323). According to Dunn and Farnsworth (2012), media coverage "tended to be superficial, at best, and damagingly counterproductive, at worst" (p. 147). A pivotal moment came when a story about Riot Grrrl in *Spin* magazine used a stereotypically thin model to pose as a "Riot Grrrl." The model was portrayed with derogatory words on her body, similar to how real Riot Grrls adorned themselves with these words to make a statement. However, using a mainstream model to represent all Riot Grrrls contradicted the subcultural ideal of deconstructing the dominant culture's standards of beauty. Dunn and Farnsworth (2012) explained this as "appropriating [a] political act for a fashion statement" (p. 147), which weakened the overall logos of the Riot Grrrl movement. Given the misrepresentation of Riot Grrrl in the mainstream media as well as overselling the commodified concept of girl power, Riot Grrrl's momentum appeared to slow in the mid to late 1990s.

Riot Grrrls Today

Although the movement's most prominent time was the 1990s, Riot Grrrl remains an active subculture. According to Dunn (2014), "Today, there are established Riot Grrrl groups in Malaysia, Brazil, Paraguay, Israel, Australia and across Europe . . . . Moreover, there are Riot Grrrl-inspired bands, zinesters and activists around the globe" (p. 325). Riot Grrrls have made significant strides over the years, even as they continue to face inequality and discrimination in relation to the dominant cultures that are pervaded by capitalist and patriarchal ideals. Spread through a combination of human agency and globalization (Dunn, 2014), the Riot Grrrl movement has inspired individuals globally, illustrating the significance of the free flow of ideas and counter-cultural dialogue that Riot Grrrls emphasized in the 1990s and continue to reinforce today.

The Riot Grrrl movement was founded in opposition to capitalism, which has commodified and weakened their message over time. Despite this, the free flow of capitalism—in combination with publicity—has helped spread the movement around the world. Ultimately, "the global networks that spread and connect Riot Grrrls create a global community grounded in the practical expression of punk's ethos of DIY, resistance, and disalientation" (Dunn, 2014, p. 326). Although the movement may be seen differently now than at its beginning, the core elements of the Riot Grrrl movement are still present. In countries around the world, Riot Grrrls continue to challenge dominant and common cultures by voicing their opposition through their unique acts of self-expression.

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