

Leading the Charge and Facing the Consequences: The Role of Teenage Girls in Pop Culture

The interests of teenage girls are brushed off and often mocked, despite the demographic's large role in creating successful pop culture phenomenons. Negative reception to fangirls stems from fear of female sexuality and creates shame that turns into anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues as a woman ages. Normalizing ridicule towards young girls on the internet creates a society that's comfortable with making fun of women, meaning that internalized misogyny runs rampant in young girls today. Using posts from the social media sites Reddit and Twitter, I will display some of the comments being made and the reaction to them. Articles from Samantha Grindell and Tonya Anderson will give a history of girls in pop culture, as well as address why the impact of young women is so unknown in today's consciousness. By using medical and psychological writings, I can analyze how negative comments towards girls affect them in the long run, from mental health to how double-standards teach us to view feminine attributes negatively. Where is this treatment towards women coming from and how does it affect a young girl as she grows up?

To see the casual abuse of fangirls in the wild, one has to look no further than Reddit.com. The site has a majority male demographic, but the disparity is felt on some posts more than others. A post helpfully entitled "I hate fangirls" in the subreddit r/rant says "I hate them. Doesn't matter if they are obsessing over a band or a person they are annoying" (u/EmixEm). These vitriolic remarks that populate websites become normal and expected from faceless people on the internet, meaning that taking young women and their interests seriously

seems inessential. It's not just "fangirls" either. Under the subreddit r/Teenagers, a user complains about girls playing video games just because it became a trend and that most of them actually don't even play. A comment beneath the original post claims that following the crowd is "what most women do. They just jump on trends because they are naturally followers" (u/UltimateJuicyMemes). With each buried post and comment, there are likes and upvotes. Whether the sentiment has been seen by ten thousand people or two, generalizations begin to spread and reach the girls they're caviling about. A fan of the South Korean boyband BTS laments that she is not taken seriously just for being a fan, "I hate when people try to reduce [BTS fans] to nothing more than dumb fangirls!! I'm literally one semester away from getting my degree in bio with a focus in neuroscience and working at an internship with forensic medical examiners and investigators" (@yoonjns). Her tweet shows how many female fans are reduced to the media they follow and then degraded for it. Girls seem to be held secondary in a fanbase and "It is always assumed that they are attracted to a person for the 'wrong' reasons, that they are uncritical and stupid" (Anderson 250). Many fans are students, researchers, and members of the workforce, multifaceted people with complex lives. But girls aren't perceived as such once they invest in being a fan. Comments like these, made in jest or in seriousness, only encourage sexist thinking that degrades women and set the standard of gender inequality. Not to mention that while "The 'real' audience is assumed to be male", it's actually teenage girls that are the driving force behind many legendary pop culture icons, from Harry Styles to 19th century pianist Franz Liszt (Anderson 249).

Whether it be Britney Spears in the 2000s or The Beatles in the 1960s, young girls have been making waves globally in terms of creating 'the next big thing'. In a 2020 *Insider* article,

Samantha Grindell writes: “[Harry] Styles was once just a member of the boy band One Direction, beloved only by female teens and tweens when he entered the public scene in 2010. But by 2017 he set the record for best-selling first week for an album by a British male artist, and he's become a global fashion icon, serving as a co-chair of the 2019 Met Gala” (Grindell). Grindell wants to show that teenage girls are often underestimated in their passions, despite having time and time again proven themselves to be the kindling behind stardom. She illustrates the same point with The Beatles as an example. The British rock group was once thought of as silly and “for girls,” as they made up a great majority of the fanbase. My own father (born 1960) often pokes fun at One Direction and Little Mix fangirls, but when I asked him his favorite band of the 60s and 70s, he said The Beatles without hesitation. People like pop culture phenomenons that have the glitz of “legendary” coloring their names. It's considered cool to like The Beatles today, no matter your gender identity or age, because they're already known for being adored. But who loved them first? Who earned this small band from Liverpool the title of “most influential band of all time?” (Hasted). Grindell also mentions former Twilight star Robert Pattinson, recently cast as the next Batman, and beauty guru Kylie Jenner, the youngest billionaire in the world, to illustrate the power behind the teenage female demographic. While men mock them from Reddit and Twitter, teen girls shape culture for the coming decades.

Teenage girls are clearly making waves in terms of creating musical icons, so why are these blanket, negative statements being made towards them? In an *Inquiries Journal* article, Taylor M. Chapman works to understand the expectations surrounding girls. Rather than focusing on fangirls themselves, Chapman studies the portrayals of girls in media, which manifest into real life expectations. “[Girls] are seen a certain way, because they are made to be

seen that way” (Chapman), meaning that the men and boys who are uncomfortable when girls act differently than how they’ve seen on television or in movies, feel like these girls aren’t acting how they are supposed to. The sort of screaming, fainting behaviour surrounding Beatlemania stemmed from a side of female sexuality that men were not used to seeing, especially since they saw it being directed at men other than themselves. The way gender is represented in media is what society reflects, often handing women the short end of the stick. There are fine lines drawn for women to fill, and anything breaching them is perceived as freakish. If women are shown on TV and in movies as docile and for the pleasure of men, girls in real life who express love for performers and musicians are not adhering to the expectations of men around them, therefore breaking the status quo. Anderson touches on the thought “that the real reason behind the screaming was a subject that no adult dared to touch: female sexuality, a taboo subject for 1960s Western culture and a subject in which contemporary society is still not entirely comfortable...” (Anderson 252). Female sexuality, adolescent at that, is not an openly discussed topic. Historically, sexual inclinations exhibited by women were medically diagnosed as ‘hysteria’ and written off as sinful.

Today, words like “crazy” and “obsessed” are still easily thrown around to describe fangirls, to the point that “even fans refer to themselves pathologically” (Anderson 252). Anderson interviewed a batch of female fans of the group Duran Duran, and the women are clearly aware of how society sees them. One fan stated that being called obsessed or nuts “makes me frustrated. If I try to explain, I just get poked fun at even more” (Anderson 253). It’s incredibly hard, if not impossible, for a young woman to enjoy or even explain her interests without being ridiculed by someone, so much so that some fans attempt to be complicit in the

mockery, saying that they know it's "stupid" or "cringey"¹. The fear that men and older people have towards female sexuality is palpable, especially for the fans themselves. Men get nervous when women act outside of the standards, and sometimes "outside of the standards" means swooning over British rock bands. From unfamiliarity rises fear, and from fear, hate. Girls internalize this hatred and become ashamed of the very things they are passionate about.

Internalized shame is very damaging and can lead to deeper issues as the person grows. Shame stems from transgressing norms and being punished for it. Adolescents are already prone to feeling ashamed and the persistence of it leads to anxiety and depression over time. A *Scientific American* article says that women tend to feel humiliated more easily than men and adolescents feel it more intensely than adults, therefore "women and adolescents are more susceptible to the negative effects of shame, such as low self-esteem and depression" (Kämmerer). Grindell came to a defining crossroads in her college classroom when her male professor was unsure about her choice to write a scholarly paper about *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* series. Despite both of the books being incredibly relevant at the time, at the level of being household terms, they weren't "written for adults or boys, so they're often written off as frivolous and superficial" (Grindell). Thankfully, Grindell got lucky. Her professor could tell she felt strongly about the books and let her write the paper, which later was published in her university's academic journal (Grindell). Grindell contends that being able to write about her interests with the support of her professor led to her ultimate career decision. Most girls are not lucky enough to receive support in pop culture interests, especially from male authority figures. On the contrary, the shame cultivated from teenage interests has a link with depression that is

¹ On February 24th, 2013, Twitter user @Theleahslack tweeted "THAT WAS INCREDIBLE OMG! I know its cringey but I love them boys so much and they put on the best show EVER!..." after boyband One Direction's concert at the O2 Arena in London, England.

particularly strong, “for instance, one large-scale meta-analysis in which researchers examined 108 studies involving more than 22,000 [shame-prone] subjects showed a clear connection” (Kämmerer). More often than not, young girls are not encouraged to explore their interests like Grindell was, and any ridicule they receive for said interests only hurts in the long run.

With tendencies to feel shame already peaked in adolescent girls, the added guilt of being “a crazy fangirl” does not bode well for a young girl’s long-term mental health. Grindell, of the Business Insider article, notes that she is well past her teen years but still feels embarrassed to say she likes pop music, while “nearly every man I’ve gone out with thinks he’s a musical genius for knowing every lyric on a Radiohead, AC/DC, or Kanye West album” (Grindell). The musical interests of men are treated as gospel, most often by themselves, their genre preferences an exclamation of art that they resonate with. The same goes for sports. When the Philadelphia Eagles won the Superbowl for the first time in 2018, fans of the team took to the streets to riot. The same thing happened in 2011 when the Vancouver Canucks lost the Stanley Cups, costing millions of dollars of damage (Smith). The destruction is seen as collateral damage to the fiery passions of sports fans. If the same thing had happened when One Direction broke up in 2015, people would be quick to call the teenage fans emotional and rash, at the mercy of their female hormones. But the same would most likely not be said about the adult, mostly male demographic that follows the Patriots. They’re just called football fans. Contrary to destruction, South Korean band BTS donated one million dollars to the Black Lives Matter movement in June of 2020, amid global protests and outcry against police brutality towards African-Americans (Lampen). BTS fans, a demographic that is about seventy percent female, banded together and vowed to match the band’s donation, which they achieved and exceeded on June 7th, less than twenty-four

hours after BTS' initial donation hit the news cycle (Benjamin). What this example shows us is that even the astounding triumphs that result from young girls coming together are overshadowed by presumptions created by men long before the girls themselves could have any say. There's a disparity between the organization of predominantly male fans and young female fans, yet we see ridicule and "crazy" comments flow from former to latter.

That being said, criticism towards female interests does not stop at men. Teenage girls have learned to gripe at each other about the smallest things, like using the app Tik Tok or wearing scrunchies. Internalized misogyny is a major side effect of repressing female sexuality because "society has taught everyone regardless of gender that femininity is 'weak' and 'shameful'" (Acha). The evidence lies in how we raise our children. Girls who like to play rough and wear long pants are called "tomboys" and it's perceived as quirky, something she'll grow out of, cute even. But a little boy who wants to paint his nails or grow his hair long is a "pansy". Even growing up in a relatively progressive neighborhood in southern California, I remember hearing kids on the playground making fun of boys wearing makeup or nail polish, purely in the hypothetical. There weren't any boys that picked up seemingly feminine attributes in my elementary school class to be made fun of. But there were girls who preferred to make flower crowns to kickball and they were the ones taking the brunt of the teasing from other kids. In a 1996 episode of the show *Friends*, main character Ross hates seeing his toddler son play with a Barbie doll. He spends the length of the episode saying that boys shouldn't play with Barbie and tries to convince Ben that G.I. Joe is better². While the episode is a bit dated, the message that

² *Friends* - Season 3, Episode 4. *The One With the Metaphorical Tunnel*.

“girly” things are inferior to the interests of boys has continued into the twenty-first century, to the point that even major pop cultural phenomena led by young women fall on deaf ears.

Despite their key role in creating stars and selling out tickets throughout centuries, teenage girls are criticized and questioned for their interests across the internet. Mockery towards young women on the internet is rooted in a fear and unfamiliarity of female sexuality. The negative reception leads to shame and insecurity, which is a major cause of depression and anxiety, as well as internalized misogyny. Encouraging girls to explore and celebrate their interests could dramatically change the trajectory of educational decisions, career choices, and mental health states, as well as revolutionize the way young girls are treated by their peers and authority figures. There was never a reason to mistreat adolescent girls in the first place, but there are infinite reasons to change that behaviour now. If negative remarks stop being made towards fangirls and we start acknowledging the importance of female fan bases and the impact they have had on the music industry, girls will grow into healthier, more self-assured women.

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