

"I want to be just like Mary-Kate and Ashley": Young girls talk about popular teen icons in an after-school book club

by Mary Napoli

As I browsed the children's section of a major bookstore chain, I noticed two young girls, about nine years of age, in front of a towering cardboard display of Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen advertising their latest book in the "Real Books for Real Girls" series. While the girls enthusiastically talked about Mary-Kate and Ashley, I overheard the following conversation.

Girl #1: I absolutely love Mary Kate and Ashley.

Girl #2: Me too! Look! (pointing to the ad) You can win a birthday party.

Girl #1: Yeah I saw that on their TV show. Don't you watch their shows?
Everything they do is so cool!

Girl #2: I'm going to ask my mom to buy this book for me.
(Field notebook, 2001)

In an instant, they were off, giggling with excitement, book in hand, to ask their adult companion for purchasing power. Intrigued by this exchange, I became curious about the media's influence on young girls' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions.

More specifically, I wondered about the implicit messages that the Mary-Kate and Ashley brand sells to girls regarding the relationship of appearance to romance, happiness, and Success. Since I wanted to know how these products help young girls interpret and make sense of their world and themselves, I formed an after-school book club with a group of eight girls between the ages of 7-12. The book club convened over a period of four months during the fall of 2001 at a local public library. As a participant researcher, I facilitated book club discussions that provided insights about girls' desires to "be like Mary-Kate and Ashley." To present my findings, I will provide a brief overview of the brand and share data gathered through ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, interviews, and book club discussions.

The Mary-Kate and Ashley brand

In terms of media coverage, the Olsen sisters have been among the most popular female personalities for young adolescents. Since making their debut at nine months old, sharing the role of Michelle Tanner during the late 80's on the television series Full House, the girls have continued to be very visible to a growing fan pool. They have appeared

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on the cover of countless magazines, including *Seventeen*, *Teen People*, *Cosmo Girl* and their own short-lived magazine, *Mary-Kate and Ashley: Real Talk for Real Girls*. They are in control

of their billion-dollar empire, which includes direct holdings in their product line from fashion to movies. Mary-Kate and Ashley have been able to capitalize on their wholesome image by offering various products aimed at toddlers, preadolescent girls, and young adults. Each of their products is accompanied by the *Real Girl* slogan that silently communicates a particular subject position for the reader ... that of a girl and of a consumer. Similar to many other celebrity marketing campaigns, the Mary-Kate and Ashley products are advertised across their own media lines. For example, as readers examine the back of each book, they will notice advertisements and announcements about other products in the brand, including fashion (*Real Fashion for Real Girls*), cosmetics (*Real Beauty for Real Girls*), video games (*Real Games for Real Girls*), and dolls (*Real Dolls for Real Girls*). The products reveal patterns of socialization, body image, pleasure, and consumption and are accessible to many girls in Mexico, Germany, United States, London, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Their website, www.marykateandashley.com, receives over 270 million hits per year and features links which invite consumers to collect, read, and play with the various items in the brand. As Dan Hade (2001) indicated, "Brands represent ways of living. The brand does not represent the product, the product represents the brand and a book becomes one more kind of product that carries meaning" (161).

Upon close examination of Mary-Kate and Ashley as "texts," I noticed that the themes of beauty, romance popularity, self confidence, friendship, and empowerment intersect to offer particular messages about what it means to be a girl and, later, a woman. Given the importance of preadolescence as a period where girls are beginning to establish ideas about becoming young women, the implicit contradictions in the *Real Girl* message offered by this brand is curious. On one hand, the message celebrates girls by presenting empowering images of Mary-Kate and Ashley solving problems and winning competitions. Yet, the branding of fashion and beauty products reinforces a girl's desire for the ideal feminine image.

The Mary-Kate and Ashley after-school book club. In an effort to obtain insights about how the girls responded to the messages presented in the books, I established a community of readers with the girls who joined the Mary Kate and Ashley after-school book club. As a participant researcher, I also wanted to encourage the girls to begin to ask critical questions about the texts and to consider what the brand is selling to consumers. In the Mary-Kate and Ashley book club, the girls read eight titles from the comprehensive list of over 50 available books. The Real books for Real Girls series, aimed at preteen girls, offer formulaic structures with predictable solutions. The element of fantasy in these books offers girls an escape from the apparent contradictions of growing up female. Mary-Kate and Ashley present themselves as ordinary girls who struggle with the same concerns as the average teenager. Yet, Mary-Kate and Ashley live a 'fantasy'

lifestyle. They make their own movies, own their own fashion line and travel around the world. Even though they claim that they are 'real' girls, their lifestyle is not typical of most preadolescent and teenage girls who consume their products. The books present characters who are focused on being popular and on meeting boys. In this sense, the books reinforce female stereotypes, limiting girls' perceptions about what they should look like and what they should care about. As Valerie Walkerdine (1984) suggests, "Popular cultural texts directed at young women position them to look for a 'prince,' to look for an escape route from the tensions and contradictions of lived gender relations in a patriarchal society" (p. 175).

Girls constructing a sense of self

Throughout the after-school book club sessions, the girls shared various thoughts and perspectives about their sense of self and their ways of understanding their interest in Mary-Kate and Ashley and the brand. In the following excerpt, I invited the girls to consider the question, "What is a girl?"

Shana: Girls have to be popular like Mary Kate and Ashley. Everyone likes them and everyone wants to be their friend. I think that popular girls dress nice and have the latest fashions.

Chrissy: But what about us? We are girls who happen to like Mary Kate and Ashley, so doesn't that make us popular?

Amy: (Interrupted quickly) Yeah,

but that's a different kind of popular. I mean I don't have all that fancy stuff like some of the kids I know.

Tricia: Neither do I, but I think it would be nice.

Mary: So, are we saying that to be a girl you have to be popular and dress nice like Mary-Kate and Ashley?

Britney: Well, son of. I think that you have to be yourself, but sometimes if I have something really cool on, I feel really good about myself

Shane: I know what you mean. I think that wearing the latest fashions sort of makes you popular, but it's also other stuff too, like having the right friends and liking the right things. I don't know.

Chrissy: I don't know if it's really important to have the popular clothes to be a girl.

Shana: I know what you mean, but it just seems like it's really important in my class.

(Book club transcript 10/0 1)

In this exchange, Chrissy resisted the message of being popular solely on the premise of wearing the right clothing. Some of the girls wanted to dress like Mary-Kate and Ashley in an attempt to

become more like them and to become more popular. Research findings indicate a young girl's understanding of her place in the social world can be connected to the categories that are available to her in the contemporary discourse of girlhood (Gudgeon 1998). Moreover, young girls' interest in displaying the right clothing on their bodies can be defined within a discourse of owning a subject position and a culture, such as magazines, clothing, dolls, etc. (Driscoll 2002).

Scholars such as Beal (1994) and Brown and Gilligan (1992) have noted that socialization into femininity begins at an early age and that the transition from childhood to adolescence has been referred to as a "flight to femininity" where preadolescent girls become more focused on their appearance. Moreover, Brown and Gilligan (1992) have noted that girls begin to internalize cultural prescriptions for acceptable feminine behavior. "Feminine beauty" is held up as an ideal for which girls are to strive, but in terms of the lifestyle portrayed by Mary-Kate and Ashley, it is an ideal that few girls can ever hope to attain. As I worked with young girls who were interested in Mary-Kate and Ashley, I wanted to understand the nature of the phenomenon and how it operated to produce and regulate girls' construction of femininity. During a semi-structured interview, I had the following conversation with Ally.

Mary: So tell me why you like Mary-Kate and Ashley?

Ally: I like everything about them. They are the best and they help me to be confident.

Mary: Tell me one way that they help you to be confident.

Ally: Well, there was this one time I had to do chores around the house and I didn't really want to, so I thought about MK&A (that's what I call them for short) and I was like, well, what would they do?

Mary: So, you imagined that Mary-Kate and Ashley had to do chores and that helped you make a decision?

Ally: Yeah.

Mary: How do you know that Mary-Kate and Ashley do chores?

Ally: They do the same things that we do. It's on their television shows and sometimes in their books.

Mary: So, do you think that reading the books or watching the shows helps you to be confident?

Ally: Yeah, I do, My mom thinks that they are good role models, so I think I learn a lot of good things from their shows and books.
(Interview 12/01)

In this conversation, Ally uses her connection to the Mary-Kate and Ashley texts as a way to construct herself, especially in terms of an increased self-awareness. Ally views Mary-Kate and Ashley as positive role models for establishing her sense of self. I

wondered what aspects of Mary Kate and Ashley she viewed as empowering. In what ways do Mary-Kate and Ashley serve as role models for young girls? These questions needed further consideration, so I asked Ally to articulate her thoughts about my queries:

Mary: Ally, I'm wondering what you mean when you say that Mary-Kate and

Ashley are role models? Tell me what you think makes a good role model?

Ally: Well, in school, I learned that when people do good things for others, like if they are important, like my teacher or the principal that you can learn from them. I'm not sure what you learn, but I know that you do.

Mary: Tell me a little more about how Mary-Kate and Ashley are role models for you.

Ally: Well, they are successful. I mean they own their own fashion line and have been in lots of movies. And they are pretty, cool, and confident.

Mary: How do you think that they became so successful?

Ally: I think that they have to work really hard.

Mary: So, what can you learn from

them?

Ally: I guess to work hard and to do my best.

(Interview 12101)

This excerpt illustrates that Mary-Kate and Ashley have a powerful effect on the formation of this young girl's identity. As role models, Mary-Kate and Ashley have been described as "trendy, wholesome, and empowering." This is supported by Ally's earlier statement that her mother also views the twins as positive role models. Ally's idea that she needs to work hard to be successful may have been influenced by watching the television shows or by reading the books. However, she also links being successful to her interactions with individuals in her school and home environment.

"I want to be like, Mary-Kate and Ashley"

Providing the book club participants with various opportunities to discuss and respond to the books in the Mary Kate and Ashley series allowed the girls to consider their own world and its construction as they compared themselves to the world of the twins. As girls explored their own ideas about the books and their own topics of interest based on the readings, they acted as agents by expressing their own opinions and attitudes about the books.

In the following excerpt, the girls shared their responses to the movie novelization entitled, *Winning London* (2001). The book offers young female readers certain subject positions, ways to look and behave that make them "girl-like" as defined by Mary Kate and Ashley.

Trica: I liked the book, but I wish that I could be like [Mary

- Kate and Ashley] them. They always get to travel and go to parties and meet cute boys.
- Chrissy: Yeah, but we don't know if they are cute. We only know it 'cause of the movie. (Points to the video on the table).
- Britney: I think that it could happen because people go on trips all the time.
- Holly: But we are kids and we are not famous.
- Shana: I know what you mean, but I think it's still cool that Mary Kate and Ashley made a book about their trip; I learned a lot about London when I watched the movie.
- Ally: Me to. That why I love their books 'cause I can imagine myself being them, you know what I mean?
- Amy: Yeah. I think I know what you mean. I sometimes get my friends to play Mary Kate and Ashley with me and we pretend to live in a rich house and meet cute boys and stuff

This brief exchange serves as yet another example where girls expressed their individual ideas about the book and explored their connections to the twins. Each girl served as an agent in voicing

Her own opinion and offered important points about how she wanted to act and who she wanted to be. The girls identified with Mary-Kate and Ashley's social connections with families or friends. In short, this conversation became a good example to illustrate how fictional texts work to construct the girls' subjectivity. As the girls and I read several other titles within the Mary Kate and Ashley book series, I discovered that the texts fueled their fantasies. The blurring of the personalities of the popular teens with the literary creation of the characters. in the books remains problematic. The images and the story lines present a script of life, the way a girl's life could be and the way some girls would envision life to be.. The fluid and often contradictory identities that many young girls are constructing based on their response to reading the books illuminates Margaret Meek's (1983) statement that reading itself becomes a source of pleasure, play, and desire. Yet, within the context of the book club, I encouraged the girls to resist and challenge the implicit messages that were presented in the stories. Weedon (1987) noted that within social settings, readers operate as agents on their own behalf, while simultaneously being subjected to the powerful discourses and practices that construct them as subjects. In the next conversation, the girls responded to *School Dance Party* (2001). In this story, Mary-Kate and Ashley are twelve years old and want to attend the fall dance, but they are not able to find dates. The story explores their boy problems as they try to find dates to the school dance.

Mary: Do you think that it's important to have a school

dance when you are only twelve?

Britney: Well, I think that it would be fun, but I don't think that I would want to go with a boy.

Ally: Yeah, no way.

Shana: In my fifth grade class, they want to have a dance for us:

Chrissy: Yeah, my brother told me about it. He went last year and said it was dumb. I'm not sure if I want to go.

Tricia: Do all the boys go to the dance?

Chrissy: Yeah. Some of them go with girls. It's a big deal.

Mary: Shana, do you think that it's important to have a dance at school?

Shana: No. I think dances are for older kids like my babysitter who is in high school.

Britney: I think it would be fun, but not if boys go.

Mary: Anyone else? Okay. Let's talk about this some more. Why would Mary-Kate and Ashley write a book about going to a school dance then?

Holly: I don't know. Maybe they had a dance at their school.

Tricia: Yeah. Since they are popular and famous, they probably go to dances.

Mary: Okay, these are good ideas. But, if we think that going to dances is for older kids, then why do you think Mary-Kate and Ashley would write this book for younger girls?

Shana: Well, I'm not sure, but I guess going to dances are a big deal when you are a teenager. I know my babysitter talks about what she wants to wear and stuff like that.

Amy: Yeah, they [Mary-Kate and Ashley] talked about going shopping for new clothes and stuff in the book.

Britney: But, if you aren't old enough to go to a dance, then why did they write a whole book about it?

Chrissy: Yeah, why don't they write about stuff that we know about?

Shane: Yeah, that's a good idea.

Book club transcript (11101)

The girls exercised agency in order to critique themes of romance and beauty that are associated with going to a school dance. They considered whether going to a school dance was relevant to their own lives and Britney even questioned the intent of the book The

opportunity for girls to talk about the stories and situations in an after-school setting provided them with a site to negotiate their position in relationship to the dominant patterns of power, their environments, and their sense of self. Young girls need opportunities to enable them to understand, to engage with, and to potentially transform what limits and harms them (Basow & Rubin, 1999).

Final thoughts

As I continued to interact with the book club participants, I noticed that their discussions became webs of intertextuality. The girls became more cognizant of issues relating to class and wealth, commenting for example, about the teen icons' access to possessions while at the same time, expressing dreams of becoming famous or wanting to purchase items to be more "like" the twins. Many of their comments led me to consider how the marketing concept situates the girls as consumers. The Mary-Kate and Ashley phenomenon attracts a group of young girls who are

lured by their fashion line, by their popularity and by the fantasy of living out their lives. The ideological messages suggest that the products are created for real girls by real girls (who just happen to live fantasy lives). Creating a space for girls to discuss their interests is a powerful pedagogical tool to launch critical conversations that negotiate and interrogate the messages in the texts. Girls become socialized into gendered identities long before they enter school and/or join after school book clubs. In a media-saturated society, it becomes critical to encourage students, such as the girls in my after-school book club, to become more cognizant of the implicit messages embedded in cultural texts and to offer them opportunities to resist them. Educators can encourage students to examine how they are positioned by texts within a variety of contexts. When given the opportunity, children can be very critical in their interpretations of popular culture,

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