



“Frappés, friends, and fun”: Affective labor and the cultural industry of girlhood

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Abstract

In the cultural industries of girlhood, tween girls are almost always shown to be having fun. This article focuses mainly on tween retailer Justice, its corporate communications materials, the images in its online retail spaces, and the slogans on the T-shirts that the company sells. I argue that fun is a commercial epistemology that reaffirms the boundaries between the separate market segments of youth and legitimates market incursions into girlhood. As a result, fun becomes a political action that functions as a means to depoliticize girlhood. This article builds upon Sara Ahmed’s work on the happy housewife as a fantasy figure that obscures the unequal divisions of labor in patriarchal capitalism in its assertion that the tween girl is a fantasy figure of the 21st century consumer culture whose fun is a form of commodified, depoliticized girl-power that reifies girls as productive economic subjects.

Keywords

Tween, girls, girlhood studies, affect, fun, post-feminism

In 1983 Cindy Lauper declared that “Girls just wanna have fun.” Lauper’s song, which has become an anthem of female solidarity and playful politics, reminds us of how much fun is gendered and is specifically a prerogative of girls. Although I deeply admire the feminist politics of the song, the song exists within wider social pressures on all females to have fun, to be the fun girl. This pressure is particularly relevant for tween girls. The esthetic of fun is woven through much of contemporary tween culture. The tween girl that we often see in photographs in catalogs, magazines, stock photos, and corporate online spaces is repeatedly shown in a state

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of fun. Tween girls are seen laughing and smiling as they tell secrets to each other and feign surprise. They squeeze together to pose for selfies in such spaces as the beach, the bedroom, and the mall. The girls are in a perpetual state of fun. They are not just smiling but laughing, constantly, persistently, endlessly, often with their mouths fully open in an ecstasy of fun. Usually there is no reference to something happening; just being with other girls is cause enough to be photographed in an ecstasy of fun.

While this fun may seem like a benign component of a representation of girlhood, there is something much more political happening here than simply having fun. The fun of tween girls is not the feminist politics of Lauper's fun. Instead, as this article will argue, the fun of tween girls serves the needs of a contemporary neoliberal marketplace. These laughing tween girls play a central role in the marketplace in anchoring the activity of consumption as fun. At the same time, their *fun-ness* serves as an epistemological tool in legitimating the tween consumer as a separate market category. Drawing upon Sara Ahmed's (2010) work on happiness, this article will explore how the pressure on tween girls to be in a constant state of fun operates as a means to depoliticize girlhood and position tween girls as ideal neoliberal subjects. The goal of this article is to broaden the discussion of postfeminist culture by exploring how the cultural industries targeting tween girls channel the rhetoric of girl power through a discourse of fun and legitimize corporate articulations of girlhood. Nowhere is this constant barrage of *fun-ness* more evident than in the corporate imagery of the tween clothing company Justice. Since Justice is the preeminent retailer for tween girls, it provides a salient entry point into this gendering of fun. The research for this article is based on a critical reading of Justice's online catalog, its clothing, and corporate publications such as the annual report and articles in the trade press along with visits to the stores. The purpose of this article is not a commendation of Justice as a corporation, but instead to use Justice, as an example of the gendering of fun for tweens and the political implications of such gendering.

Justice and the tween

The tween consumer is a relatively new market segment, originating in the late 1980s but really coming into being in the mid-1990s (Coulter, 2014). In order to cater to this new market, companies had to demonstrate that the segment was a unique and separate niche of childhood that needed to have its own targeted retail spaces, separate from their older and young siblings. The tween, these companies claimed, was not just a large child or a small teen, she was a segment in her own right with her own unique set of desires and needs.

During the enormous growth of the tween market in the early 2000s, Justice launched its first store in 2004. Its parent company is the Ascena Retail Group Inc., headquartered in Ohio. Ascena owns many other retail outlets such as Ann Taylor, Lane Bryant, and the dressbarn, and describes itself as the largest "domestic specialty retailer... focused on the female consumer" (Ascena Retail Group, 2018).

Currently, Justice states that it is the “largest premier tween specialty retailer in the world.” With 900 specialty retail and outlet stores in the United States and Canada and 68 international franchise stores, Ascena net just over \$1 billion in 2017 (Ascena Retail Group, 2017). Ascena also owned Brothers, a sister company to Justice that catered to the tween boy, but the brand was discontinued in February 2015 due to underperformance.¹ Unsurprisingly, there is not much of a market for a separate store for casual, fashion-forward, male tween clothes.

Justice is heavily invested in knowing and catering to the tween girl. In 2016, Justice was slipping in the marketplace as it was struggling to compete with discount retailers such as Old Navy and Walmart, and so it hired Piper Jaffray, an asset management firm, for its expertise with retail analysis.² Using Jaffray’s research, Justice’s Chief Operating Officer, Brian Lynch, declared that it would be too difficult to compete with these retailers on price point – Justice could not “out-value” them. Instead, Justice would “out-tween” them (Lynch, 2016).

To out-tween the competition requires Justice to articulate to its customers what it means by “tween,” and perhaps the most literal articulation is the graphic tee. Each season the company produces close to 100 graphic tees. In the 2017 spring line, there were 107 graphic tees and very few of these had repeated statements. Seemingly benign T-shirt affirmations include “Everything is cool,” “Party like a Pineapple,” “Believe in your own magic,” “Pugs are my favorite,” “Watch me neigh, neigh” (with a picture of a rainbow unicorn, of course), “ok, but first emoji,” and “I love you a Latté.” There are also tees that call upon girl power: “You see a girl, I see the future,” “I am a powerful, brave, strong, confident, beautiful, fearless GIRL,” and “Power to the Girls.” And, there is a whole array of tees that highlight the fun, sparkle, and glitter of tweenness: “All you need is frappes, friends, fun,” “You are better than unicorns and sparkles combined,” “love to laugh,” and the creepy catcall, “Hey you, Smile.” These T-shirt slogans appear on other items such as towels, pajamas, underwear, and headbands, but the tee is the most ubiquitous. These tees can be read as text, and they provide a literal embodiment of Justice’s epistemological construction of the tween girl.

The tweens that are interpellated by Ascena Retail Group are not real 7- to 12-year-old girls. Instead, they are imagined constructs of an aged and gender-based consumer. They are what Cook (2004) calls “a figment of the commercial imagination” (p. 7) defined and framed according to the needs of the cultural industries of young people. Tweens, like all other market segments, are discursively constructed within the synergistic relations of the cultural industries of young people by marketing researchers who define the market segment, by media companies who define their audiences, and by retailers and manufacturers who define their customers. While, obviously, the tween is experiencing puberty, a specific physiological stage of development that exists outside the marketplace, it is the marketplace that discursively articulates this stage as tweenhood in ways that fit its logics (Coulter, 2014).

The tween girl is usually defined as being between ages 8 and 12, or sometimes 7 and 14. It is a category that has slippery edges molded according to the needs of

the institution defining the tween. The tween is largely a gendered category. Boys are rarely defined as tweens and when they are, they are not framed as consumers in the same way as tween girls, since consumption is usually gendered as a feminine activity (Lury, 1997; Nava, 1992). And since they experience puberty differently.

The tween is an age-based market segment, chronologically, biologically, and sociologically on the cusp of being something else (Cook and Kaiser, 2004). Essentially the tween occupies the liminal space between the child and the teen, where the tween is in a moment of becoming. The tween belongs to neither category completely but is embedded in both simultaneously (Cody, 2012). Kevina Cody's work provides a critical entry point into the liminality of the tween. Cody (2012) argues that liminal theory is an underutilized theoretical lens that can provide a means to understand the consumption practices of those "in-between." Cody shows that this liminality is not a movement toward becoming a consumer, as tweens have already entered into a very visible social relation with consumption. Instead, tweens mediate their liminal status of being *no longer* but concurrently *not yet* with consumer objects and practices (Cody, 2012: 60). The liminality of the tween is crucial to understanding the fun that saturates the cultural representations of girlhood. If the tween is in a liminal state of becoming, then the obvious questions to ask are: What is she becoming? What is she moving toward as she slowly inches away from childhood? And, what role does fun play in this becoming?

The link between the liminality of the tween girl and the expectations of girls to be fun is articulated by the now former CEO of Justice, Michael Rayden, in a 2012 interview with AdWeek (Klara, 2012). Answering a question on how the company draws girls into Justice's stores, Rayden stated:

Play is important—they're still kids. So, we encourage them to enjoy and play with the accessories. They need to feel like it's their little sorority. You also have to appeal to their senses. They love sensory overload—bright colors, music videos, a variety of merchandise, the tumult of all of that. Finally, there's affiliation, the feeling like they belong. They want to feel good about themselves, and we cater to that.

Rayden's quotation reflects the liminality of the tween as described by Cody above. The tween belongs to neither the child category nor the teen category completely, while being embedded in both simultaneously. According to Rayden, the stores cater to this liminality by acknowledging that "they're still kids" but kids who need to feel like they are part of a "little sorority," an overt reference to the teenage experience of being a college student. Rayden's description also highlights the affective nature of the liminality of tweenhood. The embodied experience of a Justice store for tween girls is designed as a "sensory overload," which is an experience of play and the "tumult" of sensations. In the discursive frames of Justice's corporate logic, the liminal spaces of tweenhood are affective spaces of play, happiness, and fun.

The corporate ethos of Justice is fun. In 2015 its parent company, Ascena, specifically aligned tween girls with fun right in the description of its mission:

Ever wonder what Being Tween (sic) is all about? Justice stores and around the globe. It's about celebrating the fun and adventures of life during the ages of 7 to 12 - the tween years. It's hot fashions. Cool prices. And extraordinary customer experiences. (Ascena Retail Group, 2015)

By 2018, the company ethos shifts slightly to incorporate more discursive frame of empowerment stating that the company's mission is to "enhance a tween girl's self-esteem by providing her the hottest fashion and lifestyle products in a unique, fun, interactive environment – all at a great value for mom" (Ascena Retail Group, 2018). While there are new tones here of empowerment through self-esteem that replace the notions of adventure, fun is still central to the mission of the company.

The esthetic of fun dominates Justice's corporate literature and promotional materials through countless images of girls in various states of fun. They are always laughing, mouths fully open with huge wide laughing smiles. Every image in the store's printed material and online promotional material portrays girls in this state of perpetual fun where everything is fun; standing beside another girl is fun, looking at a camera is fun, even wearing socks is fun.

As for the product itself, the T-shirt designs and slogans further reinforce the ethos of fun and happiness. In the summer 2015 catalog, the T-shirts are inscribed with such sayings as "Happier than a bird with a French fry" and "Happy girls are the prettiest" and "When in doubt. . . laugh." Other, less subtle shirts boldly state "FUN," while another exclaims "Think Happy Be Happy," and a third is simply inscribed with "HAPPY" in stark letters across the whole body of the T-shirt. Justice promises the tween girl that fun can be read as the embodied expression of happiness. In the tween universe, fun and happy are conflated into the same affective spaces.

The affect of Justice is not isolated to just the tween market; the marketplace is an inherently emotional space. Since the 1950s, advertising has sold the virtues of using products based on their emotional value and not simply on the prescriptive function of the good itself (Leiss et al., 2005). This was heightened during the 1960s with the growth of the youth market. Companies began catering to the tastes of young people by providing experiences and services that were designed to deliver pleasure (Jantzen et al., 2012: 150). Ordinary products were reframed as pleasurable by being remarketed as new or inherently emotional (Jantzen et al., 2012: 150). Since the 1960s, advertising has overtly articulated the ideology that the consumption of goods brings pleasure and joy.

Fun and the child consumer

The articulation of enjoyment in advertising takes many forms. For children it is often represented as fun and play. Consumption, children are told, is fun. Products

that are not designed to be toys are positioned as being fun and able to be played with. The most obvious example of this is the food industry where a simple cracker becomes an animal cracker complete with a box that looks like a train car for circus animals. The cookies are to be played with, not just eaten. Most scholars (Cook, 2011; Elliott, 2015; Kline, 2010) who analyze fun in the children's marketplace look specifically at the food industry where the intersections between consumption, play, and fun are most evident. Food becomes a play activity; the fun is located in the food as a toy.

In the food industry, fun and play function as a way to denote a consumer good as a children's product. It is a way to turn something as pragmatic as food into something that is specifically geared to children's consumption. Fun denotes belonging to a child's world. But, as Daniel Cook (2011) illustrates, fun is not benign: it is a political practice that the advertisers use to legitimate their right to market to the child consumer. Fun reminds us that the child is a competent social actor with specific needs and desires that are distinct from adults. The child that wants fun does not need to be protected from the marketplace, but is instead a consumer in his or her own right who requires that the marketplace address his or her specific subjectivities. Fun acts as a moral cover to defend against the claim that the advertisers and marketers are simply exploiting children. Advertisers, marketers, and retailers use fun to illustrate that they "get" the child and appreciate the child as a social agent with demands that are distinct from adults and who, therefore, have the right to have their own needs and desires met. Fun and play serve as portals into children's subjectivities and function as a means to legitimate the marketplace's incursion into children's lives (Cook, 2011).

Fun is used in a similar way by the Ascena Corporation to illustrate that the company "gets" the tween consumer, though the fun of Justice is different from the fun of the child described by Cook. Justice's fun is not about the childhood fun of playing with food or rebelling against adult rules by eating shocking foods that adults would find "gross." The fun of Justice is a particular type of tween fun that is unique to the liminal spaces of tweenhood. It is about the homosocial spaces of girlhood peer culture where girls giggle and laugh together. This is evident in the ubiquitous photos of girls laughing together in the Justice digital catalog, but it is also apparent in the texts of both the Justice materials and, importantly, on Justice clothes such as T-shirts and underpants.

On the Justice tee, friends are referred to as "besties" and "BFFs" (Best Friends Forever). Bright, garish clothes with sequins and sparkles shine as girls pose in exaggerated manners. Justice's fun-loving, social tween girl is summed up best by one T-shirt from the summer 2015 line that has a heart poised above a list of standard tween loves: "selfies, ice cream, puppies & music" – a combination of childlike desire of non-nutritious food (ice cream), feminized childhood desires (puppies), and the teenaged desires of popular culture (music) and peer culture (selfies). In another revealing example from the same collection, Justice "knows" the tween consumer loves "pizza, unicorns, cookies, friends, cupcakes, flowers, ice cream, glitter, and sprinkles." Slogans like these illustrate that Justice, as a

company, “gets” the tween consumer and understands her pleasures and joys, how she plays and has fun. In conjunction with corporate mission statements and CEO Rayden’s assertion that tween girls desire “sensory overload,” the messaging of the graphic tee helps to underscore how the tween girl is a distinct market segment, wedged in the liminal spaces between childhood and teenhood. Justice’s knowledge of tween fun also functions to legitimate both the existence of a tween market and Justice’s corporate knowledge of tween subjectivity.

Justice’s knowledge is an example of what Cook (2011) calls “commercial epistemologies” in which the industries of the marketplace – such as marketers, advertisers, market researchers, the media, and retailers – identify and articulate a market segment as a process of “knowing.” This “knowing” is deeply ideological as it both describes and constructs the market segment according to the needs of the industries. Framing tweenness as a moment of fun and play is a commercial epistemology that serves both the tween marketplace and the broader needs of consumer capitalism – an idea that will be more fully explored in the second half of this article.

Framing the tween girl as fun and unique, and as having needs and wants that deserve to be fulfilled, allows Justice to position itself as a company that understands the girl consumer in ways that other companies do not. It also legitimates Justice’s “right” to specifically target the tween girl. Justice reminds us how the fun of the tween girl is different from the fun of the child. Her fun is communal – laughing with friends – but she is not playing with toys. The basis of the fun and play is being with other girls, while wearing Justice’s clothes. The fun is “sleepovers,” “sprinkles,” and “selfies,” or as one T-shirt from the summer 2015 digital catalog reminds us, “Frappes, friends, and fun.”

The fun of tween girls works to segment girls as tween girls in two ways, first by distancing the tween girl from the teen and adult. Fun reaffirms the separation of the tween from the teen or adult female. The opposite of the fun girl is the serious girl who looks directly into the camera without a smile. This serious girl pose “adultifies” girls. The lack of a smile portrays girls as possessing a sophistication beyond their years, imbuing the child with the power and sophistication of an adult by blurring the line between childhood and sexual maturity (Boulton, 2007: 1–2). It is standard practice in the fashion industry for female models to avoid smiling, opting instead for sullen, brooding, or contemptuous facial expressions. The non-smiling model can be read as cool and in firm control of their emotions. The directness and distance imbued in these facial expressions can be read as seductive. In a content analysis of advertisements in upscale parenting magazines with images of girls and women, Chris Boulton (2007) demonstrates how the serious girl model invites the viewer to infer that the girl model will “unfold” into the sexy woman model, “symbolically promoting” the child to the adult, making sexualization possible.

The serious girl model that appears in Boulton’s upscale parenting magazines is not the girl that appears in Justice. The fun girl of Justice is divorced from the sexualized girl, rendering her wholesome and separate from the woman, reinforcing

the binary between woman and girl. Fun allows the tween marketplace distance itself from the sexualization of girls and instead maintains a perception of innocence that appeals to the middle-class parent.

There is also a commercial application of framing the girl as fun. Fun separates the tween girl from the women and the older teen as part of a commercial epistemology that reaffirms the liminal boundaries between the tween and the older stages of youth in order to justify the need for distinct and separate clothing lines that cater to the separate and unique stages of youth. The tween girl needs the Justice clothes that imbue fun and wholesomeness to maintain her separation from the more serious and sexual adolescent girl, reconfirming the need for a tween clothing line for Justice but also supporting broader ideologies of consumer culture that require market segmentation and planned obsolescence. Age-based market segmentation creates automatic obsolescence as the clothes become too childish. The teen girl can no longer wear the Justice clothes as they are too young for her; they may still fit physically, but they do not fit symbolically. Thus, fun simultaneously invokes the desire for Justice products while reifying teen desires as more mature and in need of specific teen cultural industries to cater to her unique aspirations.

Second, fun homogenizes the girl. Justice uses fun as a means to universalize the tween girl. Tweenhood, as the company stated in its 2015 corporate literature, is about “celebrating the fun and adventures of life” (Ascena Retail Group, 2015). Fun becomes the unifying force of girlhood; it is what ties girls together as gendered and aged subjects, separate from adult cultures. Moreover, this unity erases other ethnic, social, and cultural subjectivities, denying that girls are anything else but tween girls. Connected through their age, gender, and their ability to buy Justice T-shirts marks them as tween girls. Not surprisingly, the photos online, in the catalog, and in the store rarely show girls of color: the odd image that does appear is an image of a light-skinned Black girl, always shown in a group with all White girls is clearly an example of tokenism and shadeism. The fun tween universalizes the girl as an aged consumer subject, rendering a sameness³. This is part of the emergence of a globalized youth culture in which global capitalism homogenizes young people as gendered and aged consuming subjects to the exclusion of racial, ethnic, sexual, or regional subjective experiences (Buckingham, 2011; Wise, 2008).

Fun and happiness: Feminist perspectives

As we are told by Justice, the work of tweenhood is the work of fun. The positioning of tween girls as the “celebrators of fun” reveals much about the cultural expectations projected onto girls and girlhood, and it politicizes girlhood by depoliticizing girls. Fun operates as a political means of distraction from other issues. Charlene Elliott’s (2015) work on the marketing and packaging of fun food clearly articulates this point. Elliott (2015) argues that fun “functions as a powerful diversion in the promotional messaging of processed foods” that diverts attention from

the nutritional aspects of food (p. 350). Elliott (2015) suggests that the logic is that if food is “fun for you,” then it cannot be “bad for you” (p. 350). Fun is employed as a deliberate marketing strategy by food companies to distract from the bigger questions about nutrients, ingredients, and calories. Instead, the focus is on the sentiment of fun and the activity of play (Elliott, 2015: 356).

The fun promoted by Justice operates in a similar way. It provides a distraction from broader political issues surrounding the disposal of the clothes. It distracts from the actual real *injustice* of capitalism: the reality of the clothes production, for example, as an extension of Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism in which the meaning of the good is located in the semiotic values of the object hiding its means of production (Marx, 1976). The justice of Justice is not social justice, or any reference to actual justice at all. In fact, nowhere in the company’s public literature does there appear to be any explanation of why the store is called Justice. There must be a reason why, but the fact that this reason is not made public or even referred to in the corporate literature renders “justice” as a meaningless. It is an empty signifier that hides (1) the injustices of the means of production for the fashion marketplace that exploits cheap labor, often performed by young girls; (2) the environmental damage of that production; and (3) in today’s fast capitalism, the disposal of goods – old fashions end up in landfills, garbage incinerators, and oceans, only to be replaced by new goods.

The Justice girl performs the affective labor of fun. The girl as fun can be read through the lens of Sara Ahmed’s work *The Promise of Happiness*, which is a provocative critique of the cultural demands to be happy. Working from a feminist cultural studies position, Ahmed argues that happiness is promised to those who commit to living their life in an unchallenging way that does not upset the status quo (2010). Fun is an instant image of happiness. The outward expressions of laughing, smiling, and giggling are all performances of happiness in visual culture. The Justice models *are* fun and they are *having* fun, and the store is a space for fun; therefore shopping in the store or wearing Justice’s clothes is fun. Justice promises the tween girl fun as an embodied expression of happiness. In the tween universe, fun and happy are conflated into the same emotive experience.

Happiness, as Ahmed suggests, is gendered, as is fun. As a point of contrast, the boy models in the Brothers catalog are positioned in very different poses and there is little overt reference to fun. In the images, the boys are obviously engaged in pleasurable moments, but they do not have the vestiges of the ecstasy of fun. They do not giggle with each other; instead, they stand posing with one hand on their hips, often holding some sort of ball while smiling faintly for the camera. Their smiles are small and slight compared with the broad, large smiles of the girls. Boys are often shown engaged in activity but rarely shown laughing, unlike the typical images of girl models with wide, open-mouthed laughs. Boys’ pleasure comes from physical activity, which is reinforced by the T-shirts bearing such slogans as “Crushing it,” “Faster than fast,” “Just win,” “Can’t stop winning,” and “2 Fast 4U.” The Brothers’ friends aren’t “BFF’s” but “Bros,” a hyper masculine, heterosexual framing of boys’ friendships.

Such slogans are a direct contrast to the girls' apparel that proclaims "HAPPY" right across the entire T-shirt, or similar offerings such as "Everyone Loves a Happy Girl," "Choose Happiness," "100% Happy," and "Fun in the Sun," with a little sun poking out behind the words. Even beach towels remind girls of the performance of girlhood: "Every Cool Girl Needs a Fun BFF" and an opposing towel that claims "Every Fun Girl Needs a Cool BFF." The disjuncture between the boys' shirt slogans and the girls' is reminiscent of a long visual history in which females are shown in passive positions and males in active (Goffman, 1979). But there is more to it than simply passivity. There is politics in these figures of happiness. Happiness and fun are affective political tropes that function to justify social oppression.

To explore this idea I turn to Ahmed's critique of the 1950s' happy housewife. As Ahmed argues, the figure of the happy housewife is a "fantasy figure [that] erases the signs of labour under the signs of happiness" (Ahmed, 2010: 50). As a public fantasy of happiness, she validates the unequal division of labor under the guise of happiness. The housewife is happy; that is why she does the housework; and the housework brings happiness. This fantasy obscures the realities that her work is based on the devaluation of her labor. It also obscures the fact that unwaged domestic labor performed by women allows for waged workers to labor. This keeps the capitalist machine running on the fuel of the waged labor of its workers. By obscuring the realities of the unequal divisions of domestic labor and the necessary exploitation of women's domestic work, the happy housewife hides the realities that may threaten the status quo if they were revealed (Lourde as quoted in Ahmed, 2010: 83). The feminist who challenges the inequality of patriarchal consumer culture disrupts the fantasy of happiness.

To be political is to upset the happiness. As Ahmed writes, feminists "kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. . . ." They "disturb the fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places" (Ahmed, 2010: 65–66). The fun girl in the Justice catalogs would never disturb the happiness by being political. She is warned not to by being reminded that "Happy girls are the prettiest," as one 2016 T-shirt states. The warning here is clear: to upset happiness is to no longer be pretty. In such rhetoric, the implications of not being pretty, as girls are constantly told in consumer culture, are to not have value and to be invisible.

The Justice girl's role is not to seek social justice because that would demand finding injustice and that would lead to unhappiness. Instead, the girl is to perform the Justice of being happy and having fun, blind to the injustices, unhappiness, and pains of other girls within neoliberal consumer culture. Ahmed writes that "the freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to be affected by what is unhappy, and to live a life that might affect others unhappily" (Ahmed, 2010: 195).

The fun tween is part of a long history of the female subject performing pleasure under a system of patriarchal capitalism. Happiness is a duty for women (Ahmed, 2010: 61). The fun girl, like the happy housewife, is the antithesis of the feminist killjoy. Arguably, the tween girl is the early 21st-century version of the happy

housewife. She is a public fantasy and a “figment of the commercial imagination.” She is not a representation of a “real” girl, but an amalgam of girlhood designed to satiate both the demands of the cultural industries of girlhood – which need compliant, unquestioning consumers – and the assumed desires of young girls who consume this material culture. The tween girl maintains the illusions of the pleasures of consumer culture while easing feminist threats to the neoliberal marketplace.

Conclusion

Justice’s epistemological framing of the tween girl takes place within a larger context of early 21st-century post-girl power and post-feminism where gender equity has been assumed to have been found (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Primarily directed at younger, White females, postfeminist discourse rejects feminism as a political project and instead extols the empowerment of individual girls and women through the apolitical and capitalist activities of consumer culture (Keller, 2015). Fun is a form of commodified girl-power where the “fun” is located in the girl being a productive economic subject. As part of a larger neoliberal project, the postfeminist subject eschews the structural issues of inequality and instead is encouraged to solve her own problems through a “can-do” attitude (Harris, 2004) and through appropriate market choices (McRobbie, 2009) like buying a graphic tee from Justice. While on the surface it may appear that some of the graphic tees are empowering – calling upon the rhetoric of girl power, such as the 2018 spring line of tees that state “Justice girls can change the world” and “Girls can do amazing things” – this rhetoric is largely empty. None of the images of girls, for example, show girls doing activities to “change the world.” There is no support to guide girls to “do amazing things” or any attempt to change the socio-political structures that would give girls access to power, which is a shame because girls can be and are fierce.

Justice has reproduced postfeminist girlhood as an aspirational fantasy. One that is available to all girls, regardless of any systemic inequalities (Blue, 2013). Anita Harris argues that young people, particularly girls, are expected to manage the new socioeconomic order. There is a long history of young people as harbingers of the anxieties of contemporary social order. Harris argues that

[y]oung women have taken on a special role in the production of the late modern social order and its values. They have become a focus for the construction of an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient, and flexible. (Harris, 2004: 6)

Harris contends contemporary girlhoods function as idealized neoliberal citizens. They are “flexible, adaptable, compliant, enthusiastic, intelligent and energetic participants in commodity consumption, personal responsibility, and mobile work” (Harris, 2004: 6).

The Justice girl is just this: she is an ideal neoliberal citizen, and she is an unquestioning, energetic participant in commodity consumption. Her giggling

and laughing, while wearing the clothes from Justice, are the embodied affects of happily participating in commodity consumption without ever seeking “justice.” This is perfectly epitomized by the banner on Justice’s website in the spring of 2017. Hovering over an image of five girls of various body sizes wearing T-shirts that reference sports – “dribble, shoot, hoops,” “Gymnastics made me do it,” and “When in doubt, dance”—is the text stating:

She can change the world. She will be anything she wants to be. And it’s our goal to remind her of that. Every step of the way.

There is a weak reference here to agency and empowerment, to changing the world and being anything, but what needs to be changed? What systemic inequalities need to be addressed and what resources are available to help girls in this? Justice is mute on these questions despite its promise to “help every step of the way.” As a company, Justice may have “out-tweened” its competitors, but it has failed to politically engage its customers in any sort of justice. Instead it has contributed to a larger postfeminist marketplace that depoliticizes girlhood through reification of girls as productive neoliberal subjects in a perpetual state of fun.

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Notes

1. According to the company’s press release, Brothers had been operating at a loss since its inception. (Retrieved 13 August 2015) <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/ascena-retail-group-inc-closing-its-brothers-brand-2015-02-17>
2. While I am unable to access the research that the Jaffray completed, since it is proprietary, there is a transcript of a presentation that the Piper Jaffray made to the company’s shareholders available online.
3. One area that this sameness must be commended is in body diversity. Starting in 2016, Justice began to offer plus size options of the girls clothes. These options are integrated right in the main section of the website (and in the stores) and are not relegated to a plus size section. This is a refreshing approach to body positivity.

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