

EXPLORING SASSY MAGAZINE'S ROLE AS A PIONEER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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EXPLORING SASSY MAGAZINE'S ROLE AS A PIONEER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vi
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
ABSTRACT	viii
FOREWORD	x
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. BACKGROUND	3
III. LITERATURE REVIEW	13
IV. METHODOLOGY	23
V. RESULTS	26
VI. DISCUSSION	50
REFERENCES	69
VITA	74

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 4.1: Summary of Content Analysis of <u>Sassy</u> Magazine.....	23

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 5.1: <u>Sassy</u> Magazine February 1990, Saggiest Girl in America Contest	29
Figure 5.2: <u>Sassy</u> Magazine November 1989, Photo Contest.....	30
Figure 5.3: <u>Sassy</u> Magazine April 1990, Example of Editing Process	35
Figure 5.4: <u>Sassy</u> Magazine May 1988, Photo Editing Tricks Revealed.....	36
Figure 5.5: <u>Sassy</u> Magazine October 1991, Soliciting Ideas for Back Page Theme	39
Figure 5.6: <u>Sassy</u> Magazine March 1989, “Stuff You Wrote” Department	42
Figure 5.7: <u>Sassy</u> Magazine October 1990, “What Now” Department	43
Figure 5.8: <u>Sassy</u> Magazine April 1991, “On the Road” Department.....	48

ABSTRACT

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Social media are thought of as a product of the progression of users contributing more and more content to the Internet. Four characteristics of social media can be identified: user-generated content, feedback mechanisms, transparency and community. This research examines the possibility that social media have existed apart from and prior to the widespread use of the Internet. *Sassy* magazine was a magazine for girls that utilized user-generated content in every issue, and solicited, valued, and used the feedback and opinions of its readers. *Sassy* magazine is examined to identify the presence of the characteristics of a social media environment. Based on Katz and Blumler's uses and gratifications theory, this research looks at why girls read *Sassy*; then, through the use of feminist theory, it explores what motivated readers to participate in the magazine's

creation. Results show that *Sassy*'s creation of a participatory environment produced social media even before the Internet became a significant part of mainstream culture

FOREWORD

When *Sassy* magazine was first published in March of 1988, I was in junior high. It was my older, hipper sister who caught the magazine's debut and immediately subscribed to *Sassy*. I can remember swiping it from the mailbox before her, and running into my room to read this magazine that seemed completely cool and original, unlike anything I had ever seen "for girls" on the magazine racks at the grocery store. I specifically remember enjoying the tone in which much of the magazine was written; it was as if a group of my peers had gotten together to make a magazine for girls who didn't aspire to be a cheerleader or define themselves through a boyfriend. *Sassy* also sparked my interest in media: once I read an issue of *Sassy*, I couldn't understand how other teen magazines survived. In my opinion, most other teen magazines were filled with distorted, unattainable ideals about what girls should be. Nobody in those other magazines looked anything like me, and I did not see my reality reflected in their images. *Sassy* presented a different view of teenage girls, because it assumed the reader was intelligent and it encouraged her to consider the world from different perspectives. *Sassy* reinforced what I was raised to believe, which is that a girl can choose how to define and achieve her own ideals and success.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In March 1988, *Sassy* magazine released its first issue, proclaiming that its audience was “too *Sassy* to read *Teen* (magazine)” (Fabrikant, 1987). Published for American girls between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, *Sassy*’s creators had a goal to make the magazine be everything that mainstream teen magazines for girls at that time were not (Fabrikant, 1987). *Sassy*’s writers spoke to their audience in the same way teenage girls speak to their friends: using casual language, often inventing new words, and speaking to the reader in first person. With an informal voice, *Sassy* editors covered topics typical to teen magazines, including boys, fashion and relationships. However, *Sassy* also made an effort to include discussion about topics that extended outside the typical teen sphere, such as political and global issues. *Sassy* captured the trust and friendship of its readers by covering issues girls could relate to in a way that assumed the reader was intelligent, capable of original thought and able to make decisions for herself. To further enhance this novel “personal” relationship between reader and magazine, *Sassy* solicited content from its audience. Girls could submit artwork, story ideas and suggestions for publication in the magazine. Before the advent of advanced technology and the Internet, *Sassy* advanced the social media of its time by providing a space where people of like-minded thinking could exchange ideas through a medium with a national audience. *Sassy* appears to have forecasted the future of the blogs, personal websites,

message boards, and chat rooms that are so deeply embedded in American teen culture today. The purpose of this thesis is to better understand *Sassy*'s role as a pioneer of social media by exploring the ways in which the magazine encouraged and supported the involvement of its readers. This paper will look to feminist and uses and gratifications theories to interpret the underlying reasons for *Sassy*'s successful creation of a participatory culture for its audience.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents background information about *Sassy*, Web 2.0, social media, participatory culture and feminist theory. Chapter 3 is the literature review, discussing previous research on teen magazines, feminist media studies and the theory of uses and gratifications. Most of the data gathered for this chapter comes from journals and databases in the Alkek library at Texas State University-San Marcos. Chapter 4 summarizes the methodology utilized in this research and identifies the research questions, while Chapter 5 details the research and Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the results. Chapter 6 also discusses evidence of *Sassy* magazine online today and outlines direction for future research. An Appendix, with examples of articles mentioned within this thesis, References, and a copy of the author's Vita are included at the end of this paper.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the history of *Sassy* magazine, and to examine the terms Web 2.0, social media and participatory culture. This chapter also begins to discuss feminist theory.

As Elizabeth Woyke (2004) of *The New York Review of Magazines* wrote, “*Sassy* inspired a cult following that echoes today. *Sassy* inspired slavish devotion among teenage girls, a group with notoriously fickle taste.” *Sassy*’s subject matter included truthful coverage of the environment, teenage life, fashion, sex, politics, alternative lifestyles, the de-glorification of Hollywood celebrities, and the underground indie music movement. *Sassy* challenged young girls to think differently, accept themselves, question authority, reconsider stereotypes and become active participants. *Sassy* staffers made it a point to invite their readers to contribute content to the magazine, including reader-produced issues. Writers on the *Sassy* staff “spoke” to readers in an informal tone and made numerous requests for ideas and content. One department, called “Stuff You Wrote,” was solely dedicated to publishing artwork, poetry, stories, and even one-sentence thoughts submitted by readers. Another popular reader-produced department, “It Happened to Me,” called for girls to send in their true-life stories and even paid the published story’s author \$300. *Sassy* was able to connect girls across communities by giving them a unique space where like-minded people could gather and interact by

submitting their own original content. *Sassy* was in the process of defining its own form of social media and using it as a basis for a teen magazine.

The magazine was launched with a guaranteed rate base of 250,000 (Fabrikant, 1987). In 1988, advertising pages were selling well in *Sassy*—for the cost of one page in *Seventeen*, advertisers could buy five pages in *Sassy* (Daley, 1988). Then-publisher Helen Barr explained that “girls spend an average of \$65 per week on themselves, but less than one third of them currently read a teen magazine” (Daley, 1988). She also noted that there were more working parents and divorcees raising children, who gave their children more money than parents had typically done in the past, resulting in the creation of what Barr referred to as “the payoff generation” (Daley, 1988). This is also evidence of the emerging importance of the female teen consumer. By 1993, circulation of *Sassy* had grown to 745,245. The competition continued to surpass *Sassy* in total circulation: *Seventeen* magazine had a total circulation of 1.9 million, *YM* had 1.3 million and *Teen* held 1.2 million. From 1992 to 1993, of the four publications, *Sassy* saw the most significant increase in circulation, with an increase of 9.4 percent (Rosh, 1993). *The New York Times* reported that Editor-in-Chief Jane Pratt had succeeded in making *Sassy* a popular magazine for teenagers (*The New York Times*, 1993).

Sassy’s coverage in the media revolved around its controversial topics, the unique “tone” the magazine used to speak with its audience, its feminist connections, and *Sassy*’s noteworthy status as the first magazine to have “reader-produced” issues. *Sassy* differed from its competitors in its journalistic style, most notably in the way that the writers interjected their thoughts into articles and spoke directly to the audience. The news media seemed to have trouble deciding whether *Sassy*’s writing style was audience-appropriate

or immature. Articles referred to the tone of the magazine as having “frankness,” being “irreverent,” and using “teen-age jargon,” the “vernacular,” or “colloquialisms” (Fabrikant, 1987; Deutsch, 1988; Daley, 1988; Rothenberg, 1988).

Early on, it was reported that *Sassy* was founded on the hypothesis that “teenagers are more sophisticated than the magazines aimed at them” (Fabrikant, 1987). Naturally, the content to flow from such a theory had a good chance of being controversial. A marketing and communications executive remarked that *Sassy* would have trouble bypassing the “puritanical nature of the American mother” (Fabrikant, 1987). He went on to make the correlation between *Teen* and *Seventeen*’s success and those magazines’ respect for the “Protestant ethic and the nature of the country” (Fabrikant, 1987). *Sassy* editor Jane Pratt told *The New York Times*, “Other magazines have, like, a stereotypical or idealized vision of teenagers. Maybe what parents or teachers would like. Not really what teenagers are about, you know?” (Daley, 1988). This theory provoked the Moral Majority to organize an advertiser boycott of *Sassy*, which successfully pulled some big advertisers, such as Maybelline cosmetics, out of the magazine (Rothenberg, 1988).

Just over a year and a half later, *The New York Times* would report that Peterson Publishing was acquiring *Sassy* and all staff would be terminated (Carmody, 1994). The folks at Peterson Publishing did not think that *Sassy* appealed enough to the mainstream and decided to convert the magazine’s revolutionary approach to a more typical teen girl magazine format. The new publishers were not successful in retaining the existing *Sassy* audience, as their approach was exactly the opposite of *Sassy*’s original purpose and

appeal. As Lisa Jervis (1996), cofounder of *Bitch* magazine, commented about *Sassy*'s change in ownership:

It was as if a best friend, someone we used to go on pro-choice marches with, stay up late eating Mallomars and talking about vibrators, had turned up after a long trip with a bad case of amnesia—giving us blank looks when we started talking about ‘restrictive gender roles’ and blowing us off to go to the movies with her boyfriend (p. 1).

In December of 1996, Peterson folded *Sassy* into *Teen*, and *Sassy* was never produced again.

Although *Sassy* did not openly declare itself a feminist magazine, feminist undertones in the magazine were recognized in the news. In April 1988, *The New York Times* published an article about *Sassy* titled, “Sandra Yates: The Ms. on the Masthead Wants the Magazine.” The piece highlighted Yates as the new possible “arbiter of feminist thought for hundreds of women and girls” in reference to her acquiring both *Ms.* magazine and *Sassy*, thus recognizing *Sassy* as a feminist magazine (Deutsch, 1988). The article opened a discussion about *Sassy* and its role as a vehicle for the feminist movement. Yates said, “Feminism is not the property of the women’s movement. It is a state of mind. It is democracy in action. I’m going to prove that you can run a business with feminist principles and make money” (Deutsch, 1988).

Sassy was also the recipient of some positive media attention. In 1990, *The New York Times* ran an article that named *Sassy* as a “trailblazer” and gave the teen ‘zine credit for producing the “first ever reader-produced consumer magazine” (Rothenberger, 1990). The news media recognized that *Sassy* had new ideas to offer in the arena of teen

girl magazines, despite the controversies that at times seemed to outweigh *Sassy*'s positive qualities. It was this spirit of exploration and experimentation that gave young girls a voice in a world in which they often felt as if nobody was listening.

Sassy editors recognized an important gap in American teen magazines and sought to fill it by involving real girls in real discussions in order to make the magazine's innovative content engaging for its readers. The topics that *Sassy* writers brought to the table gave confidence to girls who did not identify with the mainstream, helping them believe that they could be destined for greatness even if they did not meet the expectations established by "other" teen magazines. It is apparent that the mass media did not understand *Sassy*'s audience as well as editor Jane Pratt and her staff. The reporters may have missed the real story, which was that *Sassy* had engaged its audience and established a network of like-minded girls in a truly revolutionary way.

A book published in March of 2007, *How Sassy Changed My Life: A Love Letter to the Greatest Teen Magazine Of All Time*, documents the rise and fall of *Sassy*. In the book, authors Kara Jesella and Marisa Meltzer speak to the *Sassy* audience, twelve years after the magazine's demise. "It's embarrassing and kind of geeky—the idea that, as adults, we still believed that people who read *Sassy* would be like us, would have similar values and interests, and that, long after high school, finding these people would somehow still be transformative and fun and important. But it was" (Jesella & Meltzer, 2007).

The book outlines what happened to the revolutionary magazine and addresses the readers with the same tone as *Sassy*: under the assumption that the reader is capable of making intelligent decisions when given the facts. The book delivers a confirmation that

if you read *Sassy*, you were a cool teen, and by default, you are now a cool adult. For the purpose of this research, this book provides a glimpse into the community that *Sassy* created. In their book, Jesella and Meltzer point to the content of other teen magazines of the time, such as *Seventeen*, and how those magazines were riddled with the conservative ideals of mainstream media and its definitions of what a girl should be (Jesella & Meltzer, 2007, p4-5). They point out that at the time of *Sassy* magazine, mainstream and underground were two separate entities. Grunge rock and alternative thinking were becoming widespread phenomena in the teen culture of the late 1980s.

Of course, the idea that girls who read *Sassy* were more hip and cool than their “teeny-bopper” counterparts was biased and enforced the idea that certain sectors of teens were “better” than others. Jesella and Meltzer interviewed one of the reader-produced issue participants, Lara Zeises, who recounted her experience as an outcast among the reader-produced issue staff: “I felt like *Sassy* was about celebrating individuality, but to those girls it was about conforming to some standard of nonconformity. I wanted to be cool enough to hang with the kids I considered cool. And I was hurt when those same kids rejected my attempts. At some point, the typical *Sassy* girl became a smugly superior alterna-chick” (Jesella & Meltzer, 2006, p85-86). This observation both recognizes the bond that readers had with one another as well as the potential for such a bond to become as elitist as any of the superficial cliques a true *Sassy* reader would be inclined to criticize.

The authors write, “For all its liberal leanings and efforts to show a more multicultural view of teen life, the magazine still celebrated a white indie culture whose priority was never about making ends meet. The irony of it all is that *Sassy* was begun as

an alternative to *Seventeen*'s blond, bland uniformity. But to some readers that nonconformity became a new uniformity" (Jesella & Meltzer, 2007). In fact, the other side of the spectrum that *Sassy* lived on was quite self-righteous and separatist, implying that girls who participated in mainstream media were destined to a life of conformity and blandness.

What this says about the *Sassy* community is that the girls who read *Sassy* were not that much different from the girls who read *Seventeen*. Each group wanted to identify with other girls, and have a reference point for important teen issues, such as dating, fashion, parents and health. So it is not surprising that the community of girls that read *Sassy* had similarities to the mainstream teen magazine fans. Both magazines needed to define "femininity" for their audience. These girls shared this view of being a woman—therefore, they were able to identify with one another. Despite such similarities, it is apparent that *Sassy* was the only magazine to actually utilize the voice of its readers in a forward-thinking way. Realizing that such an opinionated group, such as teen girls, had a strong voice with strong ideas about growing up and becoming independent, *Sassy* editors put audience contributions to work in a very positive way. *Sassy* magazine gave young women a setting in which to have discussions and share ideas with other young women who shared their ideals.

Web 2.0, Social Media and Participatory Culture

"Web 2.0" refers to the current trend of facilitating creation and collaboration of content on the Internet. Tim O'Reilly, who is credited with having coined the term, defines Web 2.0 as "the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the Internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new

platform” (O’Reilly, 2006). Web 2.0 emphasizes the user’s role as a creator and a contributor. It is thought to connect people, whereas Web 1.0 was more of a set-up stage for connecting computers and setting up information. According to Tim Berners-Lee, the Web was originally intended to connect people and create a collaborative space; therefore, the idea of Web 2.0 as a place for free exchange of ideas is not a new conceptualization of the Internet.

As more people have the ability to upload their own content to the Internet, there is an emergence of what is referred to as a “participatory culture.” MIT Professor Henry Jenkins defines participatory culture as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (Jenkins, 2006). The characteristics of participatory cultures include affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving and circulations (Jenkins, 2006). Participatory culture fosters an environment that spurs more user-created content. Jenkins sees the new relationship between producers and consumers as working together. He recognizes that not all consumers will participate at the same level (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p3). Consumers communicate messages through social interactions with others. Those interactions add to the knowledge base of the people involved. This dynamic forces the producers of media to continually reexamine how they communicate with their audience. Producers who do not recognize the power of participatory culture will see diminished revenues as the public culture of the future is undergoing convergence of old and new media (Jenkins, p24).

The term “social media” is used to describe the tools that enable users to share content. That may include emails, blogs, social networking spaces, video logs, photo sharing, podcasts and message boards (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). These tools facilitate communication between groups by allowing people to exchange content, news, information, stories, opinions, various media, and ideas. Social media represents a shift from broadcast media to media where people are not only receiving information, but also sending information, thereby creating a conversation. These social media carry certain characteristics, which include user-generated content, feedback mechanisms, community and transparency (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). While there has been significant research about why people create content, there has been little research into the precursors of user-generated content, such as magazines.

Feminist Theory

This study identifies the relationship between a teen girl’s magazine of the late eighties and social media of today, revealing that a mass media participatory culture existed before the inception of the Internet. The practice of exchanging information and communicating with like-minded people across geographical barriers was facilitated through *Sassy*. The magazine supported girls who went against the mainstream ideals of being a teenage girl, in much the same way as feminists recognized that women have battles to face in society.

Through its content and practices, a girls’ magazine constructs its own set of beliefs and values regarding what it means to be a female. Those beliefs and values create a definition of femininity unique to that magazine (Ferguson, 1983). Prior to *Sassy*, there were not very many magazines from which a girl could choose. Tuchman introduces the

idea of “symbolic annihilation,” which associates lack of women and women’s issues in the media as an indicator that women’s input is not valued, and women’s issues are trivialized (Tuchman, 1978). Tuchman studied women’s roles on television and found that the feminine role was most often limited to that of a homemaker, mother or sex object. *Sassy* had set out to make a magazine that spoke to girls who did not identify with mainstream teen magazines. Because girls’ magazines define femininity, a girl is drawn to the magazine that she feels is representative of the type of girl she wants to be.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to examine previous research on teen magazines, and women's usage of the internet. Most of the data gathered for this chapter comes from journals and databases in the Alkek library at Texas State University-San Marcos.

This thesis looks to four different classes of feminist thinking: radical feminism, which is centered around the idea that the gender system represses women; cultural feminism, which strives to assimilate women into society and build women's culture; liberal feminism, which focuses on women's rights and equality in society, and post feminism, which recognizes that women face different challenges based on their age, class and race.

Feminist theory supports women as a segment of the population that has been discriminated against because of biological, social and cultural differences. Radical feminists believe that "the sex/gender system is the fundamental cause of women's oppression" (Tong, 1989). Radical feminism supports the idea that girls should have a space where they can freely exchange ideas, away from the mainstream ideals of a male-dominated society. Radical feminists seek to transform the structure of society and build spaces where women are separated from men. Feminist Virginia Wolf writes about the importance of separate spaces in her essay, "A Room of One's Own,"

Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own (Schneir, 1972, p354).

The figurative room of one's own stands for the need for women to have a place of their own that allows free thought and increased independence from male influences.

Cultural feminism recognizes that women have different ideas, interests and values than men, and sometimes, they are more important (Schneir, 1972). Cultural feminism supports the idea of a space where a community of girls is brought together to exchange ideas and raise awareness of self and the world around them, and explore issues that affect and pertain to girls. Cultural feminism seeks to build a women's culture, and preserve the value of female attributes. While cultural feminism supports independence for women, it does not have the same view as radical feminism that spaces must be completely separate. Gloria Steinem writes about female camaraderie in her article, "Sisterhood:"

Whether we are giving other women this new knowledge or receiving it from them, the pleasure for all concerned is very moving ... We may share experiences, make jokes, paint pictures, and describe humiliations that mean little to men, but women understand (Steinem, 1983, p123).

Girls need an outlet for expression of their beliefs, thoughts and experiences. They seek out other girls for that exchange.

Liberal feminist theory is tied closely with political situations. Liberal feminists concentrate on creating equality in schools and in the workplace, and the overall integration of women into society is viewed as important. This theory works within the structure of mainstream society and strives to assimilate women into the current system. Liberal feminists encourage girls to be educated about political and environmental issues.

The late eighties ushered in a new wave of girls who embraced their femininity and rejected the negative stereotypes commonly associated with feminists. For the first time, the idea of “girl power” was brought to the mainstream media. Post feminism emerged in the early nineties and fragmented what was left of the feminist movement. Centered on the realization that different women faced different (and by some opinions more difficult) obstacles, post feminism was a reaction to the disappearance of an organized women’s movement. Teenage girls are a subset of females who have unique experiences as women, as a result of their age. These experiences are thought to be separate from those of adult, middle age or elderly women.

Feminist Media Studies

Research has been conducted that examines the content of teen magazines in relation to the feminist movement. Previous research has also explored why women use the Internet and what they are using it for.

One study examined a teenage girls’ magazine, *Seventeen*, from 1945 to 1995 to determine if the magazine’s content changed in response to the feminist movement. The research found that over the time period studied, the content in *Seventeen* showed only slight evidence of feminist influences. It was concluded that the content of *Seventeen* failed to represent the various roles of teenage girls (Caron, Haltzman & Schlenker,

1998). The study found that teen magazines often focus on physical attractiveness and the opposite sex, with many instances of stereotypical portrayals of females.

Another study focused on the presence of women on the cover of *Time* magazine, which features people as newsmakers on the cover. The research revealed that women were not extensively featured on the cover of *Time*, although there was an increase of women on the cover during the 1960s and 1970s women's movement (Christ & Johnson, 1988). This study is an example of how the women's movement may have influenced the content of a mainstream magazine, increasing the incidence of women as the feature story.

Kate Peirce examined fiction stories in *Seventeen* and *Teen* magazine and found that most of the stories in the magazines reinforced traditional socialization messages for teen girls (Peirce, 1993). Peirce's research found that more than half of the stories in *Teen* and *Seventeen* were about girls depending on someone else to solve their problems and almost half of conflicts in the content were about relationships with boys. This study helps to expose the content of teen magazines as unsupportive of females as independent individuals.

A paper by Marnina Gonick discusses the challenges of giving girls who are used to reading content that reinforces stereotypes, objectification of women and power relationships, a publication that is created around the topics that are truly important to girls. Gonick (1997) refers to the content in mainstream teen girls' magazines as representing a passive femininity that perpetuates stereotyping of women. The paper examines teen magazines and girls as readers. The author points out that girls are active as readers and are looking to create themselves through the discourses that are available

to them (Gonick, 1997). Gonick gave a group of Vietnamese working class girls magazines to review, including *Seventeen*, *Teen* and *Sassy*, with the idea that *Sassy* is a self-proclaimed feminist magazine and offers significantly less stereotypical representations of girls than *Teen* and *Seventeen*. The girls in the discussion group felt that *Sassy* was boring, and preferred *Teen*'s coverage of fashion, hairstyles and issues with boys. The author goes on to discuss other aspects of *Sassy*, concluding that the girls' disinterest with *Sassy* was fueled by the magazine's lack of recognition of the mainstream social ideals instilled in girls and supported by mainstream magazines such as *Teen*. Without this familiar content in place, girls did not find *Sassy* as appealing as *Teen*. Gonick reveals that the mainstream ideals represented in *Teen* magazine are dominant and therefore familiar and comfortable for girls. To ask girls to go outside of that comfort zone proposes that they rearrange their opinions about media that they have always been exposed to and have come to accept.

Today the Internet can be used as a separate space for women to express themselves. A blog can be created by women, free of outside influence, and used as an outlet for any number of topics. The Gendered Blogosphere (Harp and Tremayne 2007) used feminist theory to explore the Blogosphere to observe how men and women discuss politics in blogs. The study is primarily a discourse analysis. The researchers found that among the top thirty political bloggers, only three had primary writers who were women. The authors pointed out that women are traditionally placed into leadership roles in the private sphere, whereas men are thought of as leaders of the public sphere, which makes men the more likely bloggers. Harp and Tremayne pointed out that while the Internet does offer women a public sphere, an intellectual, patriarchal hegemony persists. This

study revealed that women are not blogging about politics, but failed to fully explore other uses women may have for the Internet. Radical feminists might suggest there be a completely separate Internet for women, in order to eliminate male influence to the fullest extent possible.

Other articles have explored the Internet as a tool for empowerment for women. The Internet is argued to be a voice for women's issues (Kennedy, 2000). Tracy Kennedy explored the experiences of women who host websites on the Internet. Using a pool of women, some of whom identified themselves as feminists, the author interviewed subjects online about their experiences. This research found that women use the Internet as a place where they construct communities and use those communities to exchange information, ideas and support (Kennedy, 2000). This study faced the limitations of online interviews. Kennedy's study fails to provide insight into the content of the websites, and how that content relates to the audience the websites attract. The study neglected to explore efforts of the site host to maintain the community and any incentives that may be offered for participation on the site.

Through qualitative research, another study examined the Internet as a place where women can become empowered (Harcourt, 2000). The research revealed that female activists use the Internet as a lobbying tool to support women's causes. One such cause is the prevention of violence against women; Harcourt explored several instances of women who use the Internet to research situations that are occurring around the world that are a threat to women's rights. This study examined how these liberal feminist goals are achieved online. The research concluded that the resources of the web break down geographical limitations (Harcourt, 2000). This is supportive of the idea that woman seek

to make a difference beyond their personal sphere of influence. It is a shining example of feminism serving as a connection across countries and empowering women who may otherwise be unable to physically travel beyond their sphere of influence. These women have a desire to communicate and share experiences with other women everywhere.

Nancy Worthington attempted to better understand the implications of how iVillage.com, a popular women's portal, used post feminism ideals to support arguments about wages and domestic labor. A yearlong analysis was conducted of the site's content. Ultimately, the author found that the site's seemingly pro-feminist stance on issues actually offered advice that discouraged women from acting collectively. Instead, the site encouraged woman to solve their own issues within their personal sphere (Worthington, 2005). Worthington's study did not include research of user-generated content and therefore neglected to take into consideration the incidence of females who may have protested the views of the site. Further research should be done to better understand the user-generated content on popular women's portals.

The goal of this thesis was to connect feminist theory to women's motivation to use social media. As radical feminists seek a separate space for women, cultural feminists want women to connect and create a women's culture, liberal feminists have faith that women and men are equal in every way, and post feminists realize that women face different challenges even among themselves based on race, class and age. This discussion of feminism illustrates the bond that women have together and how that camaraderie helps them navigate the patriarchal hegemony of society. These feminist views help to explain why *Sassy* was a fertile ground for creating a participatory culture among its young female audience.

Theory of Uses and Gratifications

To better understand why *Sassy* readers were motivated to become participants in the process of creating *Sassy*, the theory of uses and gratifications can be used. Simply put, the theory states that people use the media for gratification (Blumler, 1979).

It is important to review the framework for the uses and gratifications theory. The first principle is that the audience is active (Katz & Blumler, 1974). This is based on the idea that the audience has goals to achieve through the media source. The second assumption is that “in the mass communication process, much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience member” (Katz & Blumler, 1974). A third side to the theory is that the media are in competition with the audience’s other sources of need satisfaction (Katz & Blumler, 1974). This recognizes that people have multiple needs and multiple sources for satisfaction. A fourth aspect relevant to this research is that “many of the goals media use can be derived from data supplied by the individual audience members themselves” (Katz & Blumler, 1974). This implies that paying attention to the audience is beneficial to the media. Lastly, the theory of uses and gratifications assumes that the audience determines the value of the media by each member choosing to use the media (Katz & Blumler, 1974). People feel their time is valuable and carefully choose the media on which they spend their time.

Studies of social media have looked at gender differences and the uses and gratifications of males versus females. A Pew Study (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005) examined the uses and gratifications of the Internet for women and men. The results revealed that women are most likely to use the Internet for email, health information, support for personal problems, and to obtain religious information. The

study found that young women are more likely than men to be online. This supports the hypothesis that young women are looking to online communities to exchange information with other girls. The Pew Study also found that men are more likely to participate online with special interest groups. It may be that many women do not seek out feminist groups but instead may interject feminist theory into their discourse in other subject areas. Another finding was that men are more likely to maintain a blog than woman. This suggests that women are not blogging much. The limitations of this study are that the telephone interviews are conducted with secondary information. There is no real way to account for the actual identities of online chatters and bloggers. The responses were assumed to be made by people with no special interest in the results of the study and therefore it can be assumed that in most instances, participants gave their responses with little consideration for the facts. The Pew Study is limited to telephone responses and has no actual data on websites that are visited by the participants.

A December 2007 Pew study revealed that girls were more likely than boys to create content online. The article used the popular term “cybergirls” and explored the reasons these girls were finding online participation to be such a fulfilling part of their lives (Rosenbloom, 2008). The study looked at why girls may be more inclined to participate in social media. A girl’s tendency to create online content is attributed to the societal pressures she faces to be creative and express her emotions and thoughts. Researchers in the field of the Internet and online communication, such as Pat Gill, the interim director for the Institute for Communications Research and a professor at the University of Illinois, have commented on why girls are creating content. Gill says that “girls are trained to make stories about themselves, from a young age they learn they are

objects, so they learn how to describe themselves. Historically, girls and women have been expected to be social, communal and skilled in decorative arts. This would be called the feminization of the Internet” (Rosenbloom, 2008). This implies that a girl’s desire for an outlet for her creativity and emotions is actually a societal expectation.

The Pew Study revealed that boys surpass girls in posting online video. The study concludes that boys post more videos than girls because the videos are more about impressing others and less about personal expression (Rosenbloom, 2008). This suggests that girls are creating content on the Internet to share with others as opposed to boys, whose motivation is more egocentric.

This paper uses the theory of uses and gratifications as a basis for understanding why girls chose to put so much of their energy into reading and helping create *Sassy* magazine. It is plausible to assume that girls’ motivations to contribute online are similar to the reasons girls contributed to *Sassy*. This mass communication theory helps to identify the benefits that girls received from being an active part of the *Sassy* audience.

The next chapter will detail the research questions being examined in this thesis and outline the research methodology utilized to answer the questions.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research questions of this thesis and details the research methodology utilized in this study. Results are examined in Chapter 5.

Research Questions

Q1: In what capacity was *Sassy* a precursor to the trend of online social media?

Q1a: What evidence of user-generated content exists in the contents of *Sassy*?

Q1b: What evidence of feedback mechanisms exists in the contents of *Sassy*?

Q1c: What evidence of a community exists in the contents of *Sassy*?

Q1d: What evidence of transparency exists in the contents of *Sassy*?

Methodology

Using qualitative case study analysis, back issues of *Sassy* were examined to explore the magazine's role as a pioneer in social media by identifying the characteristics of social media that were prevalent throughout its run. Through this analysis the extent to which *Sassy* magazine was a precursor for the social media we experience today was determined. The findings are supported by feminist and uses and gratifications theories.

Back issues of *Sassy* magazine were purchased through EBay. The content analysis consists of seventy-three issues of *Sassy*, from March 1988 until its last issue under Editor-in-Chief Jane Pratt in November 1994. Initially, a thorough analysis of content was coded into categories, including calls for content and ideas, articles or

departments that were produced with reader input, reader polls, reader contests, and *Sassy*-branded items for sale. Next, this data was broken into two categories: calls for content and articles and departments written with user-generated content (See Table 4.1). Twice the author of this research reviewed each of the magazines and all data was recorded.

Table 4.1 Summary of Content Analysis of *Sassy* Magazine

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of issues examined/number of issues produced that year</i>	<i>Average number of calls for content/submissions</i>	<i>Average number of articles and departments produced with reader content per issue</i>
1988	9/10	6.34	6
1989	11/11	6.82	7.73
1990	12/12	7.08	6.33
1991	12/12	7.08	7.08
1992	10/12	6.7	6.1
1993	11/12	6.18	5.45
1994	8/11	6.38	6.25

When coding for calls for content and ideas, the criterion was defined as a request from *Sassy* writers to submit content, including artwork, photos, questions, stories, suggestions or critiques, with the premise that the submissions would be used to produce content in a future issue of *Sassy* magazine. This category included submissions intended for the reader-produced issue as well as entrants in the “Sassiest Girl in America” contest. It did not include any contests that did not suggest that the reader’s submissions or results of polls and surveys would be used to create content in future issues of *Sassy*.

Coding for the occurrence of articles or departments within the magazine that were produced with reader input included all instances where the content in the magazine could not have been produced without the readers’ input. Only content that involved

Sassy readers' input was counted for this category. This included instances where a particular article or department would not have been published without the reader contributions.

The last group coded included reader polls, reader contests, and *Sassy*-branded items advertised for sale in the magazine. This included occurrences in which reader information was collected by submissions of answers to questions put forth by the *Sassy* writers. Reader contests were classified as such if the contest involved more than the reader sending in her information for a drawing. Reader contests involved the creation of original content that was positioned and compared against other entries in order to determine a winner. Contests held in conjunction with *Sassy* advertisers qualified if the contest resulted in content for future issues of *Sassy*. Contests that chose a winner but did not publish all or part of that winner's entry of ideas, editorial, artwork, photos, or other original work were not included in the results. *Sassy* brand items for sale included *Sassy*-branded items that were advertised for sale in the magazine.

The coded material may have been classified into more than one category. For instance, the "Say What" department published readers' letters to the staff of *Sassy*, but it also called for more submissions. This department would fall into both categories, as it is a call for content and was created as a product of content submitted to the magazine by its readers.

The results of this analysis are detailed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

This chapter details and analyzes the results of qualitative case study analysis of seventy-three issues of *Sassy* magazine. Discussion of the results follows in Chapter 6.

After examining the seventy-three issues of *Sassy* magazine, the best and most organized way to present the findings was to group them into the elements that define social media. As discussed earlier in this paper, those four elements are user-generated content, feedback mechanisms, community and transparency.

This study explored the culture that *Sassy* created and how it meets the definition of a participatory culture. As noted earlier in this paper, Jenkins defined a participatory culture as having “low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (Jenkins, 2006). After examining the four elements of social media and how they are represented in the magazine, that information was used to identify the elements of the *Sassy* community that match the definition of participatory culture.

User-Generated Content

Sassy had a regular department called “It Happened to Me,” which paid a reader \$300 if her story was chosen to be published in the magazine. “It Happened to Me” first

ran in the August 1988 issue and asked for real life stories from the readers. The request in that first issue read, “We’re sure something really amazing, or sad, or funny, or horrible, or whatever has happened at some point in your life, and we’d love to hear your story.” All stories were published anonymously. This opportunity to read and share stories outside of the reader’s own immediate community provided a unique experience which empowered girls by exposing topics, such as abuse, pregnancy and suicide, that might seem more frightening if a girl did not have someone with whom to share her thoughts and experiences. Many times, the magazine featured stories that were written as a result of letters from readers; in the June 1989 issue, the article “Real Stories About Incest” was published as a result of the subject being a popular topic for submission for “It Happened to Me.” Sharing stories in a public forum allowed girls to identify with one another based on common personal experiences.

The departments in the magazine that were “question and answer” were a consistent, structured way for readers to communicate with the magazine. Just as submissions for “It Happened to Me” might become part of a feature story, sometimes the questions submitted for “Q&A” departments became a story. For example, a January 1989 article, “Why Your Body’s Going Wacko,” answered the six most common and embarrassing questions the staff had received from readers about their adolescent female bodies.

It was evident from the very beginning that the staff at *Sassy* both listened and responded to its audience. In June of 1988, the magazine contained an article about a reader who wrote in to profess her love for the magazine, explaining that she would do anything to get a first hand look at how the magazine was put together. That lucky girl

was invited to fly to New York City and spend the day at the *Sassy* offices. Pratt said that since this girl was the first one to ask the question, her wish to visit was granted. The article went on to describe her visit and included pictures, so that other readers could share her experience in much the same way friends might swap vacation photos and stories.

Only a month earlier, *Sassy* had announced the first of many “Sassiest Girl in America” contests. The winner would get to be on the cover of *Sassy* and would receive \$10,000. In addition, the winner would be able to allocate five thousand more dollars to the charity of her choice. This competition was not just about headshots; the entry form was a series of ten questions about life, beliefs and involvement in the community. Six finalists would be flown to New York City, and a full-length article about them and the winner would run in a subsequent issue. The cover of the February 1990 (See Figure 5.1) issue was a photo of the “Sassiest Girl in America,” accompanied by a headline reading, “You’re looking at the Sassiest Girl in America, 17-year-old Gina from Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin. She’s funny, brave, slightly nuts, loves to tap dance and wants to be a brain surgeon. That’s why she won our contest. More reasons inside.” This competition, and the way it showcased and honored the unique personal qualities of the winner, embodied the message behind the magazine: young people should know that they are not limited to the choices offered to them in mainstream ideals. *Sassy* also conducted a similar contest to determine the “Sassiest Boy in America,” further showing that a “girls’ magazine” did not have to be “girls-only.”



Figure 5.1 Sassy Magazine February 1990: Sassiess Girl in America Contest

Reader participation reached a new height upon the accomplishment of an issue of *Sassy* produced entirely by its readers. The announcement of this project in the June 1990 issue described the different positions to “apply” for. Jobs included writing features, writing fiction, taking pictures, working on layouts, fashion, hair or beauty stylist, model, and Editor-in-Chief. The winners would each receive a \$1,000 scholarship and spend three weeks in New York City actually putting the magazine together. December 1990 marked the debut of the first-ever “Reader-Produced” issue, and as the cover boasted, “Every single little thing in this issue is totally Reader-Produced.” This allowed girls to have a hands-on experience producing a magazine, as well as the unique opportunity to share “their” magazine with fellow readers, further expanding the possibilities that were open to girls.

In June 1989, *Sassy* ran its first photo contest, called “The Best Photo You Ever Took Contest.” Winning pictures were published in the November 1989 issue (See Figure 5.2). The magazine reported receiving 2,100 entries for the contest. In addition to featuring the “Best” winners, on the last page of the magazine, the staff published some of the “weirdest” entries from the photo contest. By offering recognition to submissions

that were creative and different from the other photos, *Sassy* showed readers that thinking outside of the box could also be valued and rewarded in their culture.



Figure 5.2 *Sassy* Magazine November 1989: Photo Contest

The *Sassy* staff used these contests to give readers an incentive to contribute to the content of the magazine. In many instances, the results of the contests were published in a future edition as a feature item. This created more opportunities for readers to share content with the *Sassy* community, and further strengthened the bond between the magazine and its readership.

Feedback Mechanisms

Sassy magazine included up to thirteen different departments that were created to allow for discussion through questions and answers. Six of the departments allowed readers to write in and ask questions about boys, health and beauty. The titles of these departments included “About Face,” “Help for Him,” “Zits & Stuff,” “Help,” “What He Said,” and “Dear Boy.” These departments created a conversation between the staff and the readers. This swapping of messages solidified the community and resulted in readers feeling as if they helped to make the magazine more interesting and more directly

relevant and useful to girls like them. *Sassy* writers answered reader questions in their usual direct, informal way, with a casual ease that made the exchanges seem like a telephone conversation. In the December 1988 issue, the “Help” department published a letter from a seventeen-year-old reader who had had intercourse without protection and then found out her boyfriend had AIDS. Elizabeth, the staff member who answered questions in this section, gave the girl advice on visiting Planned Parenthood for testing and provided an AIDS hotline number. She concluded her advice by telling the girl, “But from now on—and we’re saying this to everyone—use a condom. Even though it sounds like a bummer, if you’re having intercourse, it is the best protection against AIDS, not to mention herpes and other STDs.” The response was written using the approach of a friend with experience telling the reader what she should do. Rather than simply telling the reader to go talk to her parents, Elizabeth gave the reader the knowledge to take care of the situation on her own. *Sassy* directly and thoroughly answered the questions it was asked, and implicitly acknowledged the reality that not every reader might be able to talk to a trusted adult. After all, a girl who was comfortable talking to a parent about her situation probably would not need to write to a teen magazine for help.

The *Sassy* community began forming even before the first issue was published. The “Say What” department was present in every issue reviewed for this study. In the March 1988 premiere issue of *Sassy*, the lead for the “Say What” department explained that the editors thought it would be hard to run a “letters from our readers” section in the first issue without having established an audience. However, those who would become readers of *Sassy* were very outspoken, and the magazine had already received letters from girls who had heard that it was coming out. The first letter began, “One thing I am sick

and tired of is flipping through my favorite magazines and only seeing those ‘too-skinny’ models.” Even before the first issue hit the stands, the publication’s audience recognized and appreciated the unique goals *Sassy* had related to overcoming the stereotypes of girls’ magazines of the time and offering girls a more accurate reflection of the world around them. Another letter published in the first issue simply read, “I’ve got some really fantasmagorical info 4 U–Einstein failed math!” This is a great example of how the magazine promoted the expression of original thought and ideas by the members of the community, and how *Sassy* embraced a more casual and creative use of language within that community. This particular letter, referencing the fact that Einstein failed math, also emphasized *Sassy*’s constant message to girls that anything was possible, including having your letter published in your favorite magazine.

In the April 1992 issue, Editor-in-Chief Jane Pratt decided to dedicate her normal “letter from the editor” section, called “Diary,” to publishing “*Sassy*’s 1st and Only Staff Hate Mail Awards.” Jane told readers, “We get so much groovy hate mail from you guys it’s sometimes really hard to juggle our schedules between reading all of it and writing more stuff for you to hate!” Pratt reported on the four staffers that had received hate mail. The staff was also not shy about admitting to and discussing their mistakes and embarrassing moments. *Sassy* editors were often self-deprecating, and that is evident in the following “Say What” exchange, initiated by a reader inquiry: “Where on earth do you get your models? On page 82 [September] the girls look worse than Freddy Krueger...” The response from the writers was, “Ahem, those weren’t models. They were us–Jane, Karen, Elizabeth. P.S. No, we won’t take it personally.” The writers handled this situation just like a good friend would, by assuming the reader had no clue it was them,

acknowledging that they did not look like models, and moving on. They even reassured the reader that she should not feel bad, because they would not take the comment to heart. Once again, this illustrates the camaraderie and rapport *Sassy* writers maintained with their readers.

The October 1988 issue of *Sassy* included an article titled “What Do You Think?” The article informed the magazine’s audience that some of *Sassy*’s advertisers had received boycott letters from people who objected to the content in the magazine, demanding that the advertisers pull out of *Sassy*. The editors explained the situation to the readers, and directly asked the reader, “How do you feel about all of this—what we’ve been doing, the letters and the pressure that’s been put upon our advertisers? Let us know.” The readers’ response letters were then published in the December 1988 issue: “Remember back in October when we asked you guys to write in and tell us what you thought about the letters some of our advertisers had received objecting to *Sassy*? Well, your loads of letters (we’re talking 2,500, and still counting) were so great and supportive that we had a hard time choosing a few to print here. But here’s the idea...” The first letter began, “*Sassy* is the first and only teen magazine I’ve ever wanted a subscription to because it’s the only one that doesn’t treat teenage girls as though we’re mindless, superficial fluff.” In response to a mother’s objection to sex advice in *Sassy*, another reader wrote, “Sex and sexually related matters are very complicated and we girls need all the ‘help’ we can get. Just look at the increasing teenage pregnancies over the past few years.” The writers stayed true to their usual tone, treating their readers as intelligent human beings, and soliciting their opinions about a “business matter” that had the potential to adversely affect the community.

Transparency

Sassy editors were not hesitant to “tell it like it is,” no matter what topic was under discussion. It is not surprising that the writers would apply the same philosophy when it came to the magazine itself. The magazine’s writers addressed readers in an informal tone, and the teen audience reacted positively to that tone, as if someone had finally treated them with respect. Staffers often took the time to explain the process of creating a magazine, from copy editing to choosing a cover. Staffers used their knack for “pajama party” journalism (Brady & Zuckerman, 1988) to connect with the reader like a best friend, spilling the details that other teen magazines kept behind the scenes. This exciting new process of interaction between the reader and content was only the beginning of the transparency that was a hallmark of *Sassy*.

By encouraging reader submissions, and by incorporating and referring to reader content and input on a regular basis, *Sassy* showed girls that they could actively participate in something as remote and complicated as publishing a magazine, demystifying the process so that it became a real possibility. An example of this is in the April 1990 issue of *Sassy*, where the last page of the magazine was used as an educational tool to show readers the steps editors must go through before a story is complete (See Figure 5.3). Using an actual article that had run in the magazine, *Sassy* published a scan of what it looked like with all of the comments from all of the editors’ marks on it, including corrections and brainstorming ideas. *Sassy* had also included a similar piece in the September 1988 issue, in the “Diary” section: the editor’s letter in that issue was typed and marked up in red pen, and Pratt explained to the readers that that was what copy editing looked like. This was a very intimate exchange between the reader

and staff, especially considering that this was long before the idea of a “behind the scenes look” was a normal occurrence.



Figure 5.3 Sassy Magazine April 1990, Example of Editing Process

More behind the scenes information was delivered to readers in an article called “How We Make This Girl Gorgeous, (And other tricks magazines use to get teeth white, hips slimmer and breasts bigger).” The article was in the magazine’s third issue, May 1988 (see Figure 5.4 Sassy Magazine May 1988, photo touch up tricks revealed), and was honest with its readers in a way that magazines for females had never before been. The article admitted:

See, in order to make clothes and models look better, we, well, play around with the truth a little, you know what I’m saying? And frankly we’ve been feeling a little guilty about it. The last thing we’d want to do is lie to you. So here they are, all the tricks up our sleeves, all the ways magazines make things look a little better, thinner, brighter, whiter, whatever. Oh and it’s kind of inside information, so keep it to yourself, okay?

A marked-up picture of a model accompanied the article, as an example of what changes would be made to the photo before publishing. By revealing and explaining this process, *Sassy* editors gave their readers an opportunity to become knowledgeable about inaccurate portrayals of females in magazines. *Sassy* laid out the information girls needed in order to draw their own conclusions as to whether the ideals portrayed in teen magazines were realistic and attainable.



Figure 5.4 *Sassy Magazine* May 1988, Photo Editing Tricks Revealed

The reader had no shortage of information about Jane Pratt and the staff of *Sassy*. In fact, the reader was on a first-name basis with *Sassy* staff. It is not uncommon for the Editor-in-Chief of a magazine to have a “letter from the editor” section, but *Sassy*’s Editor-in-Chief included personal details about herself and individual staff members. For example, in the January 1992 edition of *Sassy*, Pratt explained in her “Diary” that Mary Kaye would be stepping in for her around the office because Pratt would be working on a new talk show for the Fox network. *Sassy* staffers were also not shy about sharing even more personal information, such as “secrets,” crushes, embarrassing moments or pet

peeves. In March 1994, *Sassy* celebrated six years of publication, and decided to publish pictures of the individual staff members when they were six years old.

This close relationship with the staff was a big part of the foundation of the *Sassy* community. *Sassy* staff members would reference each other by first name, and often inserted inside jokes or side comments into their own and each other's articles. An article called "How to Kiss," by staff writer Catherine Gysin, was featured in the May 1988 issue. In the first paragraph, Gysin told readers,

So I took a little walk around the office and discovered that we happen to have some major authorities on the subject right here at *Sassy*. After all Christina's been kissed by Johnny Depp [It was only on the cheek—Christina] And Karen's got a gorgeous boyfriend with long red hair and a foreign accent. In fact, except for Cheryl, who hid under her desk, everyone had a theory—or at least a few good ideas—to throw in. Neill even said he was available for research. So with tongue firmly in cheek (sorry, bad pun) and everyone's help (everything but Neill's research, that is) I've compiled the definitive guide, the one to live by, the official *Sassy* list of Dos and Don'ts for that fine art, that easily-honed skill, that all important topic, kissing.

Gysin's references to specific *Sassy* staff members, her use of humorous parentheticals, and fellow staffer Christina Kelly's interjection of her own response to Gysin's comment about Kelly's kiss with Johnny Depp, create an introduction that reads just like a conversation between good friends, right down to the use of informal tone and

unconventional grammar. Despite the personal references to and exchanges among staffers, however, the reader always feels included in the jokes and conversation.

Sassy writers often referred to personal stories in their articles, and sometimes the stories included more than one staff member. Sometimes, the whole staff might share personal information to produce an article. The May 1990 issue included a story by *Sassy* staff writer Kim France, called “How to Drive Your Mother Crazy.” To produce it, *Sassy* staffers shared stories about how they had annoyed their moms, and France then called the staffers’ mothers to discuss. The results were combined and laid out on a two-page spread for readers to enjoy. France concluded her piece by relating the stories to each other, showing that they were all about the same issue—independence. By sharing personal stories, and even publishing what their own mothers had to say, *Sassy* staffers made themselves even more transparent to the reader.

Furthermore, while it would not seem unusual to announce big changes for top-level positions in a magazine, Pratt kept readers informed with regard to anyone with whom *Sassy* had familiarized its audience. In February 1992, Pratt began her column, “It’s been a little like Grand Central Station here lately, with all the staff comings and goings. This turnover isn’t because I’m regularly and brutally beating employees or anything. Our lovely Karen, for example, left because she got a new job over at MTV, and Jessica quit to dedicate more time to her writing.” Coming from an Editor-in-Chief of a magazine, such directness and obvious consideration of the reader’s probable curiosity could only serve to further cement *Sassy*’s uniquely personal bond between staff and readers.

If changes were going on with the magazine, the *Sassy* staff wanted readers to know, and they often solicited reader ideas and suggestions for improvements. The March 1992 issue, which marked the fourth anniversary of *Sassy*, included a redesign, which Pratt discussed with her readers in her “Diary” section. She introduced the new Art Director, Noel, and outlined some of the changes in the magazine, as well as Noel’s reasoning behind the new design. She explained, “First off, Noel, Tracy, Julie and Clarence want us to use more funnier photos throughout, like these. They’ll also use more illustrations and cut-out photos (called ‘silhouetting’ by art types).” In October 1991, the staff asked readers what to do with the last page of the magazine by running a colorful ad that declared “Your Idea Here” in oversized type (see figure 5.5: *Sassy* Magazine October 1991, Soliciting ideas for back page theme). The notice read, “Wanted: Some incredibly cool way to fill this space.” Claiming that they had run out of creative ideas, *Sassy* staffers asserted that they needed audience participation to help them figure out what to do with the magazine’s final page. By offering explanations to help readers understand why staffers had moved on, or why the magazine suddenly looked different in some way, *Sassy* made the inner workings of the magazine less of a mystery to its readers.



Figure 5.5 *Sassy* Magazine October 1991, Soliciting Ideas for Back Page Theme

Community

A community is formed when like-minded people come together. One important theme underlying *Sassy* was that mainstream conformity equals ignorance and shallowness. This was empowering to girls because they could relate to the stories that addressed real questions they had, and learn more about themselves and other girls that were like them. *Sassy* thrived on the idea that the world that lives below the mainstream culture is where a young girl could discover herself and formulate her own definition of the meaning of life. There was a whole community of girls who did not relate to make-up, boys and shopping at the mall; they understood that there was a reality beyond all of that fluff, but had no outlet within their own communities to share this view and their experiences.

Sassy also invited celebrities to take part in the magazine, often males, who would take a turn hosting the regular departments “Dear Boy” and “What He Said.” Famous personalities such as Michael Stipe, Evan Dando and Joey Ramone answered reader questions about everyday issues like boys and life. These departments were useful in demystifying stardom for young girls, letting them see stars as real human beings, whereas mainstream magazines depicted celebrities as glorified and glamorous. The celebrities that contributed content to *Sassy* were seen as an exception to the rule of celebrities being “overrated” in the eyes of the community, and thus they were welcomed into the group. *Sassy* was all about giving a voice to those who did not otherwise have one in the mainstream media, and the magazine showed that even celebrities—people who happened to be famous—were no exception. This was another first for *Sassy*, as no other

media outlet at that time provided a space where celebrities could casually post personal thoughts and opinions about topics. Many of *Sassy*'s celebrity guest writers participated more than once. Today, celebrity blogs are very commonplace, and everyone from singers to comedians seems to have a blog or MySpace page where personal content can be posted at any time.

Another department, "Stuff You Wrote," consisted of poetry, limericks, "deep-thought" type questions, and artwork submitted by readers (See Figure 5.6). This section regularly published several reader entries, and acted as a community posting board for readers to express whatever was on their minds. "Stuff You Wrote" was a department included in almost every issue of *Sassy*, and its scope was uniquely reader-defined. In the March 1989 issue, the "Stuff You Wrote" section had five poems or statements. Siouxsie of Savannah, Georgia shared, "You can play the tune to the old 'Peter Gunn' show on push-button phones by pressing 3-3-63-93-#9." Becky Strout from Baldwinsville, Massachusetts pondered, "If life is a mystery, who are the suspects?" The November 1990 "Stuff You Wrote" section included a poem: "Almost Deaf, The Pain of Hearing a Mumble, Hesitation, Frustration, What Did You Say? The Sigh of Having to Repeat, 'Never mind' P.S. I wrote this in frustration about my hearing loss. Debra Nettles, Savannah, Georgia." This section of the magazine allowed the reader to share her life-changing experience with other readers who might be going through a similar situation, or know someone who was, without requiring her to write a full story, as she could have done for "It Happened To Me." The only requirement for the "Stuff You Wrote" department was that the work be original, and sent in by a reader. *Sassy* thus gave girls multiple opportunities to express and experience creativity in different forms.



Figure 5.6 *Sassy Magazine* March 1989, “Stuff You Wrote” Department

Another type of message board appeared in every issue: “What Now,” edited by senior writer Christina Kelly (See Figure 5.7). It was a two-page spread, most often with a solid color background and brightly colored text. Visually and effectively, it was a bulletin board of information, stories, contests, giveaways, concert reviews, pictures, random facts and announcements scattered across the pages. The section also included a “*Sassy glossary*” definition in each issue: the writers would define a current slang term, providing an example of its usage. The October 1990 issue defined “Drop Science” as a “verb, of rap origin. To give important information, to say something people should listen to. ‘I went to Yankee Stadium to see Nelson Mandela drop science on why it’s not cool to do business with South Africa.’”



Figure 5.7 *Sassy Magazine* October 1990, “What Now” Department

It was very common for the “What Now” department to announce or include small giveaways or contests. The April 1989 issue had a poster of Alex Winter and Keanu Reeves, of the popular movie “Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure,” inserted into the “What Now” section. In the May 1992 “What Now,” *Sassy* announced that it had 200 cassette tapes of a They Might Be Giants single. Readers were asked to write in and “explain which of the following you would choose: a date with John Linnell, a date with John Flansburg or death. Please include specific reasons.” In August 1988, another contest asked readers to send in the word of the day from the July 30th episode of “Pee Wee’s Playhouse;” the first fifty correct submissions would receive a poster for Pee Wee’s latest movie. In January 1990, a free R.E.M. cover of a Syd Barrett song was included between the pages of the “What Now” section. A message was positioned next to the inserted floppy record, letting readers know what a rare treat getting the song was: “That’s right, it’s so obscure it makes Nick Cave look mainstream—and I can’t even believe they let us have this rad ditty.” The privilege of getting such a celebrity bonus

gave credence to the idea that the *Sassy* community was recognized by society as a worthwhile group of individuals.

Other popular recurring topics in the “What Now” department served as publicity for new or underground bands and magazines. “Cute Band Alert” informed readers of lesser-known music groups to look for and listen to. The September 1992 “Cute Band Alert” was for “Velocity Girl,” a group described as “part of the burgeoning Maryland underground music scene.” “Zine of the Month” featured independent low-profile publications from around the country, giving small budget magazines some big business advertising for free, and reinforcing the idea that *Sassy* readers had options outside of the mainstream media’s offerings. The March 1993 issue “Zine of the Month” was a magazine from Hollywood, California called the *I Hate Brenda Newsletter*. The publication was described as “an eight page masterpiece all about the *90210* star we most love to revile. Produced in Hollywood by the sick young things that put out the fanzine, *Ben is Dead*, the newsletter keeps you up to date on all you need to know about the teenage Cyclops.” The 1990s’ popular teen show *90210* was part of the mainstream culture from which *Sassy* tried so hard to differentiate itself.

The “What Now” posting area was often where political messages and information about environmental or global issues were delivered to the audience. In June 1988, one sentence sent readers a thought-provoking message: “A half-hour walk in New York City is as good for your lungs as smoking a pack of cigarettes.” With no other information to back it up or provide context, the statement is simply meant to shock the reader into actively considering the true state of the air quality in New York City—hardly a typical “teen magazine” goal. In September 1992, “What Now” gave readers

information about the International Wildlife Coalition and its Adopt a Whale Project, accompanied by a drawing of a whale captioned, “Adopt a Whale, Why Not?” In September 1991, “What Now” delivered another one-sentence message: “One step closer to a fascist state: We mourn the retirement of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.”

Sassy provoked its teenaged, female readers—a demographic typically thought of as unlikely to be interested in or informed about politics—an opportunity to consider and develop their own views on significant political issues. The magazine accomplished this in part by recognizing that *Sassy* readers were also interested in, or at the very least informed about, the “typical” teenage perspective. *Sassy* used mainstream teen lingo and interests as a hook or bridge, then expanding the reader’s horizons into areas that might not usually catch her attention. The April 1991 issue announced a “Cute Activist Alert” for a twenty-seven-year-old director of the Washington, D.C. Student Coalition against Apartheid and Racism. The article gave a short description of the organization and a phone number for more information about volunteering. The same edition of “What Now” also had a paragraph titled “War is Not Nintendo,” which questioned the amount of censorship placed on the media trying to cover Desert Storm. The magazine suggested actions girls could take to affirmatively express their views outside of the *Sassy* community—for example, by writing political messages such as “Draft Neil Bush” on dollar bills and circulating them into the population. More conventionally, they suggested writing to the government, and did not gloss over the fact that such action might not have an impact, but was better than doing nothing at all: “Also, write to the following people (they probably won’t listen but it’s healthier than keeping your mouth shut).” The

magazine suggested writing to the President, Saddam Hussein, the Senate and Congress, and provided addresses. This was not only a call to action for readers, but also an informative toolbox for anyone who wanted to try to make changes in government.

In July 1989, “What Now” addressed censorship, and in September 1990, the section explained why plastic bags were not good for the environment. Both issues, censorship and the environment, are two topics that have since become everyday conversation. The fact that a teenage magazine was covering these topics in the eighties, however, was very progressive. It gave girls ideas to be interested in, issues to identify with, and tools to empower them to make change where they saw a system that was broken.

The *Sassy* community faced geographical obstacles for face-to-face meetings, although readers could share opinions and contribute content. To take readers outside of the magazine and into an real life setting, the magazine hosted several events in large cities, including New York, to allow fans to come together and meet each other. In the May 1990 issue of *Sassy*, an advertisement entitled, “Well, Dudes, *Sassy* Does it Again!” announces the “First-Ever-*Sassy*-Beauty-Expo-and-Career-Seminar,” a two day event which only cost participants \$20 to attend. The weekend included a celebrity panel discussion with well-known beauty industry professionals, to teach girls about everything from making perfume to writing about perfume, as well as a panel of recent college grads who would discuss their “first job” experiences. The seminar even provided a “parents’ coffee” for attendees whose parents drove them to the event.

The March 1993 issue encouraged readers to participate in a poll that would run in the following issue, informing them that the results would be used in discussion at a

summit to be held in New York. *Sassy* explained that leaders in the fields of education, science, the environment, racial politics, health care and international relations, would all value the readers input. The announcement goes on to tell the readers “that’s the *Sassy* way. SO if you have something to say, it’s time to put up or shut up.” The November 1990 issue advertised another *Sassy* sponsored event, in New York. This time, readers could participate in a sing-a-long contest, dance demonstration, beauty makeover, an information session on volunteering, or a fashion show.

A Participatory Culture

Signs of a participatory culture are evident throughout this analysis of the content of *Sassy*. The characteristics include affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving and circulations (Jenkins, 2006). “Participatory culture” is a term that recognizes the consumer’s role as a reviewer of products. The exchange that happens within a community, between friends and colleagues, is part of that culture. A department in *Sassy* called “On the Road” invited readers to send in information about the place they lived for a chance to be featured on a page dedicated to showing fellow readers how “cool” their town was (See Figure 5.8). In the April 1991 issue, the invitation read, “If you want to see your grubby mug on this here pagina, write down all the reasons your hometown is great, take a few pics and send them to Jessica.” The department would choose a city and publish several different entries, creating a one-page collage of *Sassy* readers in their hometowns and showing what readers did for fun. Submissions included facts about the cities and local fashion trends and slang, accompanied by pictures of actual *Sassy* readers. Readers also sent in suggested locations for *Sassy* staff to visit for the “On the Road” department, turning the reader into a producer.



Figure 5.8 *Sassy* Magazine April 1991, “On the Road” Department

Sassy regularly conducted polls, gathering detailed information about its readers in areas ranging from entertainment, food, hair and music, to “things you wouldn’t even tell your best friend,” and polls about sex, drugs and other “private” topics. Results were always published within a few months of the survey, so readers felt that their responses were valued and useful. Polls about popular culture, beauty and fashion gave readers reason to participate and voice their opinions to the writers. In July 1990, *Sassy* published a poll with a business purpose, and Jane Pratt was upfront with her readers: “Dear Reader, Hi. Can you do me a favor? It won’t be the most thrilling thing you’ll ever do, but if you can sit down for a minute and fill out this form and send it back to us, it will be a really big help to our newsstand people, subscription people, advertising people, and me. Hurry – the first 100 returned will receive a *SASSY* gift. Thanks a lot! Jane.” The questions on the form included where readers bought *Sassy*, or if they had a subscription; where they shopped, and requests for feedback on past *Sassy* poster and record inserts. *Sassy* was smart to try to collect that type of information on its readers to get more ideas on how to keep its audience interested. The more information the staff knew about their readers, the more the magazine could cater to its community. In addition to serving as a

gauge for the likes and dislikes of the *Sassy* community, these polls strengthened the connection between readers. Information sharing gave the community a chance to identify with each other based on these likes and dislikes.

Sassy actively engaged its readers in collaborative problem solving, perhaps most notably in the October 1988 issue, under the title “What Do You Think?” In that piece, which is also discussed in “Feedback Mechanisms,” above, Pratt spoke to her readers very honestly. She explained that, although there were many *Sassy* fans, there were also people who disagreed with *Sassy*’s content about topics such as “homosexuality, losing your virginity and kissing.” The staff published six letters to *Sassy* from adults expressing strong opposition to the “deplorable and distasteful” content of *Sassy* magazine, and requested reader feedback about the issue. *Sassy* spoke directly to its audience and decided to provide information and encourage discussion about the state of the magazine. The magazine let its community know about the external forces that hoped to censor the magazine and silence the free-flowing, atypical ideas and controversial topics that *Sassy* presented. The staff allowed the “audience” to be an active part of a real community, by assuming that the girls who read and liked *Sassy* would want to be informed and have a voice in the politics of managing the magazine. A discussion of these results follows.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

Choosing Media

As stated in the theory of uses and gratifications, the audience selects media based on its needs (Katz & Blumler, 1974). The audience is viewed as active, and the focus is on what the audience does with the media, rather than what the media does to its audience (Severin & Tankard, 1997). Media compete with other sources of need satisfaction (Katz & Blumler, 1974). Prior to the Internet, there was limited access to an audience outside of one's own sphere of influence. *Sassy* allowed for interpersonal communication among its national audience. The high levels of submission of user-generated content in *Sassy* magazine suggests that the audience wanted an outlet for personal thoughts, creativity and emotions. *Sassy* readers wanted to share beyond their sphere of influence. *Sassy* facilitated the gratification of that need by publishing a significant amount of user-generated content. *Sassy* solicited questions, suggestions, photography, artwork, poetry and any other type of original creation from its readers that could be printed in a magazine. The regular publication of a girl's personal story in "It Happened to Me" provided girls with a "stage" upon which to share their experiences with other girls. The numerous departments that allowed for questions and answers, such as "Help," "About Face," and "What He Said" fulfilled the audience's need for interaction with others who might be experiencing problems similar to their own.

The regular department “Say What” allowed readers to write in and give their reactions to *Sassy* content. Those reactions served as a feedback mechanism that the *Sassy* staff valued and used as a guide to creating future content. In several instances, the staff based feature articles on a subject about which they felt they were receiving a lot of mail. As a result, the magazine took readers beyond the limitations of the communities that they were born into, creating a new community outside of the individual reader’s sphere of influence. Because audience feedback was so valued, the content of the magazine was able to meet the needs of its audience.

As a girl’s magazine, *Sassy* also created a setting free from the male influence of society—a safe environment where readers could define femininity by discussing the problems and joys they dealt with as young females. *Sassy* was originally created for teen girls who did not identify with other mainstream teen magazines. *Sassy* defined its audience as “too *Sassy* to read *Teen* (magazine)” (Fabrikant, 1987). The girls who were drawn to *Sassy* were often those who felt like outsiders when faced with the mainstream ideals in their immediate community. These girls were empowered to become more in touch with a different definition of femininity through *Sassy*. The magazine covered topics that mainstream magazines did not and deliberately positioned itself as anti-mainstream, in response to and in anticipation of its readers’ needs—needs which were not fulfilled by the mainstream teen magazines of that time. As Katz and Blumler suggest, the audience influences the media more than the media influences the audience (Katz & Blumler, 1974). Just as radical feminism states that girls need to communicate free of a patriarchal society, *Sassy* magazine believed that girls needed a place away from mainstream media to discover alternative answers to typical teen questions. What the

Sassy staff observed was that user-generated content continued to come in as the magazine published more of what its audience actively communicated a desire to read about. The audience should be active participants in media, and the exchange of information creates a community of people who participate and contribute (Dewey, 1927). Psychologist John Dewey recognized that journalism is a forum in which people communicate (Dewey, 1927). In this scenario, the audience as well as the community reaps the benefits of a more informed society.

Community

Sassy identified mainstream teen magazines as the alternative to reading *Sassy*. Teen magazines in the late eighties catered to the traditional definition of how a female “should” be, presenting that ideal as the only choice for girls. *Sassy* catered to a spirit of antiestablishment, interested in trying new things and listening to new voices. This approach is reflective of radical feminist theory in that it strives to get women out of a male-dominated mainstream society and into an environment of all women. It is this premise of an alternative to the mainstream upon which the *Sassy* community was formed. Not only was the content *Sassy* published unlike that in mainstream magazines, but the way in which the magazine was created was also unlike anything that existed in mainstream media.

The ideals of the community are evident in the content of the magazine. The *Sassy* community contributed ideas and actual content to the magazine, again reinforcing the idea that there is an alternative to mainstream choices for girls. *Sassy* writers and readers saw conformance to the mainstream as a boring, bland way of life. The community was solidified by its desire for and exploration of alternative options. The

Sassy community did not just follow the advice of Editor-in-Chief Jane Pratt and her staff, but could listen to other girls in the community to get ideas and help, too.

People are more likely to participate in important conversations with friends, family members, and colleagues (Lazarsfeld, 1944). During the time before the Internet, it was almost impossible to capture a large audience. *Sassy*'s environment of camaraderie inspired girls to become involved in the process of creating content. The magazine was created with the help of user-generated content. From the first issue, which contained fan letters from girls who had heard about the magazine's premiere, readers were anxious to contribute. Each issue had recurring departments that allowed readers to write in and ask questions. The readers were able to exchange information on a monthly basis, and could view the pictures and work of other readers. The community of *Sassy* came to life as the readers shared a common goal of contributing to the magazine. *Sassy* thus fulfilled or gratified its audience's need to be heard by the like-minded people who made up the *Sassy* community.

This was a benefit for the relationship between the audience and the magazine as it created a gathering of like-minded individuals. With its feedback mechanisms in place, *Sassy* was able to listen to its audience and use that information to set and meet the goals of the audience, further solidifying the bond between reader and magazine (Katz and Blumler, 1974). As a part of being a member of the *Sassy* community, feedback mechanisms allowed readers to voice their opinion about how the magazine was serving the community. Girls sent in letters to the "Say What" department pointing out mistakes, praising a job well done, or requesting more discussion of a certain topic. As stated

earlier in this paper, feedback mechanisms are another aspect of social media and are valuable in meeting audience expectations.

Sassy's unique tone was an original way of respectfully speaking to its audience of teenage girls. The writers related to readers by talking to them with slang, helping to reinforce the community. *Sassy* strived to treat its readers as intelligent and independent. It is apparent through the content analysis that these two characteristics are not traditionally mentioned when describing a teenager. *Sassy* reinforced its community by writing respectfully. *Sassy* was upfront and transparent about its issues with advertisers boycotting the magazine, and reaching out to the audience for input about the situation further strengthened the communication and connection between the audience and the writers. It also unified the community as it identified the community's opponents. By giving the audience an inside look at the politics that occur between a magazine and its advertisers, *Sassy* involved its readers in a process to which they would not ordinarily have access from other media outlets. It also gave female teenagers a new topic of discussion: because advertisers objected to the magazine's coverage of women's topics such as pregnancy, abuse and sexuality, this exposed readers to female political issues.

In addition, *Sassy* often organized events in physical space, activities in which readers could meet up in person. While these events were mostly held in larger cities like New York and Los Angeles, they did serve to create a sense of physical community for all the magazine's readers, regardless of whether one was able to attend.

Of the four characteristics of social media identified in this thesis, community was the most challenging for *Sassy* to accomplish. The communication that went on between the staff and readers faced the realities of geography. Readers had to send in letters to

correspond and there would always be a delay in communication. The *Sassy*-sponsored events were the magazine's most successful attempt to have the readers meet each other, and even then, only girls living near New York or Los Angeles could really benefit.

Feminist Ideals and Community

The feminist ideals reflected in the mission and content of *Sassy* magazine are what reinforced the *Sassy* community. Cultural feminist theory states that women should create a culture based on their similarities as women and assimilate into society as a group (Schneir, 1972). *Sassy* gathered like-minded girls and allowed them to function as a community of females with similar interests. This represents the post feminist idea that women face different challenges because of race, class and age. The *Sassy* audience unified on the front that they did not agree with or relate to mainstream culture, and as young girls they wanted exposure to opportunities outside of where they lived. At the time *Sassy* magazine was produced, the Internet was not the tool it is today, and people still used postal mail to communicate outside of their area. Before the Internet, girls did not have access to firsthand information about how people in different parts of the country lived their lives. Today, women can go online and post on message boards, blog, upload photos and network—the choices of social media tools today are numerous.

The theory of uses and gratifications says that the audience uses the media source more than the media source uses the audience (Katz and Blumler, 1974). From the amount of user-generated content in each issue, it can be concluded that *Sassy* readers needed an outlet for their opinions, as well as a place where they could find a definition of femininity and relate to other young women. Cultural feminism identifies the need for girls to create a culture, and *Sassy* magazine worked with its readers to build culture

among these girls. Taking full advantage of the willingness of its audience to collaborate, *Sassy* put out issues that were solely produced by readers. Allowing regular girls to fly to the *Sassy* offices (or work remotely from home, if they could not afford the trip) and take over every aspect of the magazine for three weeks, *Sassy* staffers shared the fun and excitement of creating a magazine with their audience.

That *Sassy*'s audience viewed the writers as regular people with real first names and real opinions was part of what made the magazine's readers so comfortable sharing in return. It was much easier to share unique thoughts with, or ask embarrassing questions of, people the girls felt they knew on a first name basis. Pratt transformed her staff of writers into a cast of characters that girls could identify with. Girls looked to the writers as a picture of what they might be able to do with their own future careers. Once again, cultural feminist ideas are evident here, as the readers and staff are part of a community of equals. Furthermore, since liberal feminism takes concern with integrating women into society and supporting their equal rights, the advertisers' boycott of *Sassy* seemed to be an especially unfair judgment on a magazine with a large following of girls.

Ultimately, *Sassy* did achieve its goal to be everything mainstream magazines were not. *Sassy* readers needed a space to be themselves and be free and creative in front of a large audience. *Sassy* was successful because it had an efficient set of feedback mechanisms that were valued and utilized by the staff. The transparency in both the writing style and content of the magazine reinforced the spirit of honesty and trust between reader and staff. User-generated content was published and respected by *Sassy* editors. The user-generated content was a choice for the *Sassy* audience, allowing them to connect with one another and form a unique community of girls. *Sassy* magazine

embraced non-traditional forms of communicating with its audience and introduced an alternative to what the mainstream offered. Naturally, girls who did not identify with the mainstream in turn embraced *Sassy*, as it filled their need for an honest exchange of information in a female setting.

The ways in which the reader was able to contribute to the magazine allowed a monthly reaffirmation that the writers and readers of *Sassy* upheld feminist ideals. The desire to function free of male influence in a space specifically for girls upholds the radical feminist view that traditional society is patriarchal. *Sassy* readers realized that they faced different challenges as young women, and sought out the opinions of other girls their age, a practice supported by post feminist theory. Liberal feminist ideals in the magazine encouraged girls to have an active voice in their community, as *Sassy* supported young women taking an interest in politics and global issues. These feminist theories were evident in *Sassy* and served as the basis for cohesiveness in the *Sassy* community. Readers were active participants in the creation of the magazine and therefore established a participatory culture and defined social media, long before the Internet was a part of the mainstream culture.

Fans Are Online Today

The *Sassy*-related content currently observed online indicates that former *Sassy* readers go online today to give praise to the magazine and give the staff credit for inspiring them to write. Some women feel that *Sassy* gave them a sense of belonging; others looked up to the *Sassy* staffers because of their cool jobs in the big city. It is obvious that *Sassy* fans felt that *Sassy* was more than a magazine. Most people who made comments online did so in an effort to pay respect to something with which they closely

identified. Online, most fans are also in agreement that it is almost appropriate that a magazine like *Sassy* would fall prey to the very system it fought so hard to not be a part of. At the time of *Sassy*'s demise, Jane Pratt had already made a few failed attempts at branching into television; there was a *Sassy* board game, perfume, and even *Sassy* underwear. It seemed that despite its wit and intelligence, *Sassy* could not change the relationship between business and editorial interests at the magazine. Advertising sales combined with a steadily growing base of readers was what *Sassy* needed in order to stay in publication.

Sassy's Wikipedia entry is a strong indicator that the magazine's online presence has increased in the past three years. When the site was visited in January 2006, there was barely a paragraph written about *Sassy*, and only six external links. By 2008, the entry for *Sassy* had been updated and included information by category about the magazine, the staff, publishers, trivia, references and eighteen external links to *Sassy*-related items. The 2008 entry begins, "*Sassy Magazine* is a defunct cult fave teen magazine. It was founded in March 1988 by an Australian feminist, Sandra Yates, CEO of Matilda Publications, who based it on the teen magazine *Dolly*, which is still in publication in Australia" (Wikipedia, 2008). In contrast, the description from the 2006 Wikipedia entry simply read, "*Sassy* magazine was a monthly teen magazine for girls, founded by Matilda Publications (under CEO Sandra Yates) in 1987. It was based on an Australian magazine for teenagers called *Dolly* (still in publication). Its founding editor was Jane Pratt. The magazine was sold to Peterson Publishing in 1994 and then stopped publishing in 1996" (Wikipedia, 2005). Notably, the 2006 description did not label *Sassy* as a "cult fave," nor did it mention anything about feminism.

An online magazine, “Blairmag,” published the last issue of *Sassy* on its website, calling it “*Sissy*” magazine. The introduction to the piece speaks to the reader in a very familiar tone on a page titled “Dear *Sassy*, We will miss you.” The authors wrote, “For years, the BLAIR collective have worshipped *Sassy* as our inspirational mother. But as you may know, she’s dead—well worse than dead actually. *Sassy* was bought by Petersen Publishing, those who bring us TEEN magazine, and will undoubtedly be returning to us reincarnated as another Joey Lawrence drool rag” (Richard, 1996)

The final *Sassy* content included articles written by celebrities including Joey Ramone, Mayim Bialak and Mike D. of the Beastie Boys. The content is not complete, but it is the only attempt found online to publish that last issue, which the staff never had the chance to finish before being let go by Peterson. This assembly of a partial last *Sassy* seems to pay homage to the once famed teen magazine. The Blairmag.com authors wrote, “So in memoriam to our lost friend, we have collected a choice selection of articles and columns in a whopping retrospective” (Richard, 1996). They seem to attribute their own love for creating a magazine to *Sassy*, and feel the need to memorialize the magazine that inspired them. This is an example of the extreme adoration many fans felt for *Sassy* and all that it taught them.

It is evident that *Sassy*’s strongest influence was to inspire young people to write their thoughts out to share with their peers. Magazines are a fitting medium for such networking to take place. A magazine should be geared toward a niche audience with similar interests and opinions. Blairmag.com was able to get a copy of a revealing email between Richard, the editor of Blairmag.com, and Margie of the *Sassy* staff. Margie writes to Richard, “Sorry Richard, *Sassy* was sold to Peterson publishing. They’re in LA.

It's unclear what they intend to do with the publication. This address will be closed in a couple of days. Sorry. *Sassy* as we know it is no more! —Margie” (Richard, 1996). This is revealing of the mood of the *Sassy* staff, that they had been left in the dark as to the future of a magazine to which they had dedicated so much time and work.

The recent coverage of Jesella and Meltzer's book online provides more glowing reviews for *Sassy*. The Huffington Post published a review in May 2007, one month after the book was released. The author, Mike Attenborough, describes the backlash online as a result of the book: “it was like a bomb went off: Suddenly everyone and their sistah was falling all over themselves to praise *Sassy* and hearken back to the life-altering moment when they read their first copy.” Attenborough (2007) goes on to say, “Women of wit and intellect declared their everlasting fealty,” commenting on the bloggers who gave high praise to the magazine and therefore the book. He then stresses a point made by Jesella and Meltzer: that girls were not the only ones reading *Sassy*; boys were reading it too. Attenborough mentions that he had a male friend in college, who worked at the school newspaper and read *Sassy*. The review of the book is positive; although the author never read *Sassy* himself, he thinks that fans of the once famed magazine would be pleased. He summarizes the book thusly: “That's what the book is really about, the drama of how a handful of really young people who had no business running a magazine ran a magazine and did it pretty damn well by most standards, even weathering a boycott by Jerry Falwell (a mark of pride in these days).” Attenborough brings up another wonderment in popular media coverage of *Sassy*, namely, what would *Sassy* have been like today, with the World Wide Web such an integral part of teen life?

Jesella and Meltzer's website has a message board for *Sassy* fans, titled "How did *Sassy* change your life?" Only 17 posts were made in the section between March 23, 2007 and February 12, 2008. It would seem that the message board has been unsuccessful in its quest to be the official meeting ground for *Sassy* fans. The comments that were made on the board allow for insight into what *Sassy* fans feel the magazine did for them. One post, from a woman who was at an event for the book the night before Meltzer (2007) posted, reads,

Last night, the authors talked about how many of *Sassy*'s readers grew up having a hard time finding people like them (meeee!), and how now the Internet allows teens, and us too, to meet more of the right people. They also mentioned that many former Sassies are now in media/publishing (me too!). Though it's crossed my mind from time-to-time since the magazine (it was so much more than a magazine) folded, I didn't fully realize until last night how much my coming of age with *Sassy* impacts me even now. As I continue to find the right friends, figure myself out, and realize my potential, it's remarkable that a magazine I read 15 years ago still shines a guiding light in the right direction.

This post is yet another example of a woman who attributes her current career to *Sassy*. Another post reads, "I remember begging my ex-hippie mother to buy me a subscription to *Sassy*, noting it was obviously different from (slash better than) the homogenous pink and teal, pretty and tan pages of *YM* or *Teen*." This research did not find any negative postings about the magazine.

Sassy went away and left fans wondering what happened. Unlike people today with Internet access, girls back then did not have access to a huge spectrum of news resources. Atforumz.com is a general forum which claims to be mostly related to politics and music. One thread, entitled “What happened to *Sassy* Magazine?” was posted in October 2000 and includes 24 posts in reply to the comment. All were written in October of 2000. One member wrote,

But, yeah, I had a script to *Sassy* and I remember when they sold out-open the mailbox to find a sunny blond well-adjusted teen smiling at me and started hyperventilating (not really, but you know). That was the one thing I loved about them. They weren’t afraid of using models that weren’t manufactured at some freakish cheerleader factory. I remember and miss zine of the month, new slang of the month, the advice column where a guest boy would write, the short stories, cool makeup tips (beet juice for lipstick and teabags to repair nail fractures) the issue done by the readers, Jane, Andrea, Christina, Mary Ann...sniffle, sob! I miss those bitches! (Annabelle, 2000).

Readers felt close to the magazine, and still remember recurring sections and writers by their first names. The post quoted above also emphasizes that one of the many reasons girls identified with *Sassy* is because they appreciated that the magazine used “real girls” as models. Another post exemplifies the mystery surrounding the fall of *Sassy*, and the rumors that followed: “I loved *Sassy*! I had a subscription. I remember when Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love were on the cover...those were the days, man. And yes...it was bought by the people who own 17 magazine, I believe. When that happened

all the regular staff and writers quit” (Dead Man’s Girly, 2000). We know now, of course, that the writers did not quit; they were fired. Another post wonders, “I knew that *Sassy* disappeared, but I had forgotten how it got bought out first and completely changed, THEN dropped off the face of the earth” (Yosemite Bear, 2000). This is a common remark found in the online content—the perception that *Sassy* simply disappeared. In today’s environment of the Internet, readers would have known exactly what happened. They also would have been able to publicly voice their opinions about it.

Today, *Sassy* fans can create their own online tribute to the magazine. One such site, last updated on October 26, 1999, is the second link that emerges when “*Sassy* magazine” is searched on google.com. It is the personal website of a college student, a page of which is dedicated to her recollections of *Sassy*: “I read it cover to cover. I’d never done that with a magazine before – with *YM* and *Seventeen* too much of the stuff was boring or sappy or just plain dumb. I decided to subscribe. I felt silly about it at first. Me, subscribing to a teen magazine? But *Sassy* was different. I could tell.” She continues, “Reading *Sassy* was wonderful. It was formative. It was a major part of my life from seventh through tenth grade. But I have wondered if I would have had the same desperation to start my own zine, or seek out more underground ones, like BUST, if it hadn’t been for the death of *Sassy*...” (Kowalski, 1999). She also gives credit to *Sassy* for inspiring her to start her own magazine. The author of the site provides eight links to more information about *Sassy* online.

Another article found online, “The Selling of *Sassy*,” originally appeared in *The New York Press* in November 1994. Daniel Radosh (1994) wrote, “Started off as a spin-off of an Australian magazine called *Dolly*, *Sassy* broke into one of the most tradition-

bound magazine genres with a gleeful disregard for the rules. Its persona – clever, honest, feminist, and funny, like some way-cool big sister – was unmistakably original.” He characterizes *Sassy* as a “big sister,” implying that it acted as a role model for teens. Radosh provides some information about *Sassy*’s circulation, relative to that of other teen magazines in 1994: “*Seventeen* currently reaches 1.9 million readers. In the last three years, *YM*’s circulation shot up to 1.8 million. *Teen* is 1.2 million. Fourth-place *Sassy*’s circulation rose steadily from 250,000 in 1988 to 800,000, where it pretty much stalled. Bringing up the rear are newcomers *Mouth2Mouth*, *Tell*, and *Quake*, all of which are struggling.” It is obvious that the author is a fan of *Sassy*, as he goes on to compare the content of mainstream teen magazines to that of *Sassy*, pointing out how the latter far surpassed its competition. Radosh (1994) details events in the last days of *Sassy*, as it was taken over by Petersen:

The first new issue of *Sassy* is scheduled to hit the stands January 31. The December issue that the old staff had nearly completed – *Sassy*’s first celebrity-produced issue, with artwork by Liz Phair, an article by James Iha, and fiction with Naomi Campbell’s name on it – won’t be printed. The January issue is being put together by freelancers out of the *Teen* offices in L.A. The only holdovers are girly-girl Linda Cohen, serving as a consultant, and Betsy Hoyt, who formerly wrote promotional material and is now contributing editorial. Petersen has yet to name an editor, but the new publisher will be Jay Cole, who also publishes *Teen*.

Radosh even includes a quote from the publisher to staffers just before the sale of *Sassy*: “On September 27, Lang sent a memo to the *Sassy* staff. ‘It is with deep regret that I must

inform you *Sassy* magazine is being put up for immediate sale... I want all of you to know I've done everything possible to avoid this action. *Sassy* is a potentially great magazine and you are a fine young group of professional magazine people. You both deserve a chance that I can no longer provide.”

An article titled “A Beloved Mag’s Painful Lessons,” at businessweek.com, discusses what media companies can learn from the rise and fall of *Sassy*. Author Jon Fine (2007) discusses Jesella and Meltzer’s book, and obviously understands *Sassy* fans, as he writes, “*Sassy* came and went while a subset of young America remade media via indie music labels and photocopied ‘zines. Despite its glossy-mag garb, *Sassy* resonated with this culture, which gave the mag a similar secret-handshake signifier of status among its acolytes.” This resonates with the idea that *Sassy*’s fan base is still very alive and aware. Fine touches on the idea that what is culturally a great concept may make for very bad business. This relates to the idea that today, as users go online to create content, there is no overhead other than the tools used to create. Fine points out, as do most other articles about *Sassy*, that it existed before the web, when it was more difficult for people to find and connect with other like-minded individuals. He compares *Sassy* to a campfire, where teens could gather and mock outsiders to their group. Fine looks at *Sassy* as being too smart for the masses, and therefore destined to fail, as it would never be able to capture the revenue of its competitors. He makes a good point in comparing *Sassy* to *Wired* magazine and *Rolling Stone*, both of which were revamped over time from their original design and content to better fit a mainstream audience. Fine argues that if *Sassy*’s “new staff” of Petersen Publishers had handled the transition more smoothly, it may have worked.

Yahoo hosts a message board posting area called Answers, including a question about *Sassy* magazine and how to buy back issues, other than via ebay.com. The question begins, “I loved *Sassy* magazine in the 90s, it got me through middle and high school.” The posted response reads, “I loved *Sassy*, too and threw a fit when it went under. *Jane* is nowhere near the same as *Sassy*. The editors were the same for a while, but that’s where the similarities end” (Tai, 2008). Only one other response suggested the poster go read *Jane* magazine (a later publication, targeting a “twentysomething” female audience, for which Jane Pratt was also initially Editor-in-Chief). The poster replied that *Jane* was nothing like *Sassy*.

Sassy is mentioned in blogs, too. A blog authored by a female discussed *Jane* magazine and the fact that Jane Pratt was leaving in an entry from July 2005. The blogger wrote, “I still have all my copies of *Sassy* magazine and I will probably always keep them” (Nola, 2005), confirming the value of *Sassy* back issues to former readers. There is not much discussion in this blog entry, other than stating the news about Jane Pratt, and then inviting people to post their memories about *Sassy*. One post by “Lit/chick” reads, “I, too still have all those precious copies. That magazine truly changed my life.” This is a large statement to make without explanation, but a fellow *Sassy* fan would identify. There are six other posts on this blog; however, they are all about *Jane*, not *Sassy*.

There is no shortage of hip young writers who attribute their success to *Sassy*, and writer Michelle Orange is one of them. Her six-page article, dated September 15, 2005, discusses Jane Pratt and Pratt’s step down from *Jane* magazine. Orange also discusses *Sassy*, of course. She writes, “When I was 18 my dream was to be a *Sassy* intern.” Her article goes on to praise *Sassy* and identify its journalism as ground breaking and radical.

Orange (2005) writes, “*Sassy* introduced ... smart, ambitious women now working in the media and the arts—to pop feminism, proving that ‘mainstream women’s magazines didn’t have to be evil.’” This conception of “popular feminism” lends support to the idea that girls who read *Sassy* felt empowered because of their interaction with the magazine. The article goes on to discuss *Jane* magazine and why it did not do as well as *Sassy* under the leadership of Pratt. Orange seems sure that readers looked to *Jane* in the hopes that it would be as cool as *Sassy*. She writes, “*Jane*, because it held itself above that predictable sleight of hand, and because of its genuinely groundbreaking heritage, made itself a lightning rod for all of the women out there desperate for a magazine they could be proud of” Orange (2005).

While the writers of *Sassy* were busy commenting on the stereotypical prodding of other teen magazines, *Sassy* was in fact doing the same for its own audience, thereby establishing a group of like-minded young women who would rather not participate in the mainstream teen culture of the late 80s and early 90s. *Sassy* did a remarkable job of building a community and reinforcing a culture that lasted well into the twenty-first century, long after the magazine itself had ceased to exist.

Suggestions for Continued Research

Future research about the cult following of *Sassy* magazine should be conducted. After all, the *Sassy* audience is highly interested in creative outlets and interactive media. Through the brief study at the conclusion of this paper, many discussions of *Sassy* magazine were found. It would be interesting to identify the communities in which those discussions occur most often.

A study of *Sassy* readers today would be of benefit. The online discussions found online had several mentions of girls who gave credit to *Sassy* for getting them interested in journalism. Using the Internet as a tool, research could be done to conduct case studies on former *Sassy* readers to further understand what type of effects being a part of the *Sassy* community had on those girls.

A future study could compare other teen magazines to *Sassy* to determine whether, and to what extent, evidence of social media characteristics is present in those magazines as well. Finally, another way to expand on this research would be to look at online girls' communities today to see how—and how successfully—they do what *Sassy* had hoped to accomplish.

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