



“I Am So NOT a Princess”: A Third-wave ‘Girlie’ Feminist Reading of *The Princess Diaries*

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Abstract

Chick lit emerged in the mid 1990s as a popular literary genre featuring witty and independent female protagonists navigating careers, romance, friendships, and self-discovery. Although often criticised for its seemingly trivial portrayal of women’s lives and its associations with postfeminism, the genre has expanded into other media and literary forms, including young adult (YA) fiction. Teen chick lit generally falls into two categories; humorous novels modelled on bestselling adult chick lit, and more risqué narratives depicting the lives of wealthy urban teenagers. Like their adult counterparts, these novels have been criticised for promoting postfeminist values through consumer culture, materialism, and overt sexualisation of the teenage body. This paper challenges such readings by examining Meg Cabot’s *The Princess Diaries* (2000) through the lens of third-wave ‘Girlie’ feminism. It argues that such humorous teen chick lit novels embrace the contradictions central to third-wave and ‘Girlie’ feminism by presenting traditional feminine girly aesthetics not as indicators of female oppression but as potential sites of agency and empowerment.

Keywords: Chick Lit, Young Adult Literature, Feminism, Postfeminism, Third-wave Feminism.

Introduction

With the publication of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in 1996, the literary canon saw the explosion of a new genre for women, by women; chick lit. These novels chronicle the everyday lives of young women navigating careers, relationships, family, and self-image through humorous and relatable first-person narration. While plotlines can vary, chick lit novels generally follow a young female protagonist “seeking personal fulfilment in a romance-

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consumer-comedic vein” (Knowles, 2004, p. 2, as cited in Gormley, 2009, para. 1) and have racked up a great number of women readers who saw themselves reflected in such novels. As a result, chick lit has enjoyed great commercial success and has been called a ‘commercial tsunami’ (Zernike, 2004, para. 3), and the overwhelming positive responses to these novels have prompted publishers such as Harlequin and Pocket Books to create imprints specially for the chick lit genre (Ferriss & Young, 2006, p.1). Moreover, this popularity has since extended beyond the literary sphere into film and television. The *Bridget Jones* series, for instance, has been adapted into four films, with the most recent released in 2025.

However, the complex relationship between chick lit and literary and feminist critics has been observed. Writer Beryl Bainbridge, a four-time Booker Prize nominee, has denounced the genre as ‘froth,’ a view echoed by Nobel laureate Doris Lessing, who questioned why chick lit authors write such ‘instantly forgettable’ books (Ezard, 2001, paras. 1-4). Feminist critics, most notably Angela McRobbie (2004), have criticised the genre as a prime example of postfeminism pervading popular culture, where feminism appears to be ‘taken into account.’ While heroines seem to enjoy the benefits of feminism through their degrees and successful careers, it is also simultaneously emphasised that feminism is a ‘spent force’ (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). The chick lit protagonist’s relationship with material culture and her status as an avid consumer has often been the crux of the debate. At the same time, those defending the genre have encouraged a focus on the numerous issues chick lit attempts to address, such as identity, femininity and feminism, and self-image.

Although chick lit has attracted considerable criticism, its influence has extended into other literary genres, most notably the young adult (YA) scene, where the same debates surrounding postfeminism persist. YA chick lit, or ‘chick lit jr.’ as coined by Joanna Webb Johnson (2006), is a conflation of chick lit and young adult literature. These novels address classic YA themes of coming-of-age, identity, material culture, and romance. YA chick lit has similarly been critiqued for promoting a postfeminist sensibility, especially in novels which Christine Meloni (2006) categorises as ‘salacious’ for featuring scenes of casual sex, drug and alcohol use, and emphasis on physical beauty. The other category of teen chick lit, the ‘humorous’ type, tends to follow a similar plotline to its adult counterpart, with an emphasis on humour and relatability.

While these humorous teen chicks lit novels have often been read through the lens of postfeminism, I argue that they are better understood through ‘Girlie’ feminism, a strand of third-wave feminism that focuses on the intersection of popular culture and feminism. ‘Girlie’ feminists sought to demonstrate that feminists could embrace pink, traditional domestic crafts, and sexual agency without abandoning feminist politics, despite criticisms that such practices reflected postfeminist values. Through an analysis of Meg Cabot’s bestselling young adult chick lit novel *The Princess Diaries* (2000), this paper examines how humorous teen chick lit emphasises multiplicity and contradiction, significant values of third-wave feminism, and how its endorsement of ‘girly’ aesthetics attempts to reclaim girlhood as a site of agency, even as it remains entangled with postfeminist discourses.

Chick Lit

Chick lit, as a literary genre, is believed to have emerged in the mid 1990s, when critics noticed a new style of popular women’s writing. Typically, chick lit novels feature a single woman in her twenties or thirties living in a big city as she navigates the challenges of pursuing a demanding career while maintaining a fulfilling personal life. The heroine is often described as authentic and flawed, eliciting both compassion and identification from readers. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young in, *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (2006) contend that it is precisely the genre’s realism that has contributed to its commercial success; while romance is

a common element in many chick lit novels, it differs from romance novels as they tend to portray the everyday lives of young people, and appeals to readers who want to see their own complicated lives reflected in fiction (Ferriss & Young, 2006).

Chick lit's identification with its readers is further compounded by the narrative style of the novels, which are usually written in the first person, as though the protagonist is speaking directly to readers, incorporating forms such as diaries, letters, emails, and texts (Ferriss & Young, 2006). Moreover, humour has been considered a vital aspect of chick lit; Stephanie Harzewski (2006) claims that chick lit "deliberately aims for a humorous effect" (p. 38), often expressed through the protagonist's self-deprecating humour. The protagonist's willingness to laugh at her own mistakes can generate empathy from readers, who can then relate to their fictional counterparts. It is precisely this identification that allows readers to downplay their own real-life mistakes and embarrassments, finding comfort in the authentic voices of young women like themselves.

Chick Lit: A Postfeminist Construct?

Despite its widespread popularity and cross-media success, reactions to chick lit have been divided. Chick lit has been criticised as anti-feminist, depicting the shallow parts of women's lives, and perpetuating stereotypes that undermine earlier feminist achievements. In contrast, Ferriss and Young (2006) argue that such critiques often stem from the expectation that literature by and for women must advance feminist agendas by depicting women's struggles within patriarchy or by offering inspirational models of strong and powerful women. Instead, they suggest chick lit resonates with readers precisely because it reflects the lived reality of young contemporary women. Nonetheless, many critics have positioned chick lit as both a representation and endorsement of postfeminist sensibilities. Harzewski (2006) argues that the commercial success of chick lit is rooted in its having "worked in tandem with postfeminism" (p.37); both its heroines and its target readership belong to a postfeminist generation for whom key feminist gains have already been achieved, yet continue to experience pressures and desires for romance and family (Ferriss & Young, 2006).

Postfeminism is considered to have emerged in the 1990s, when US media began circulating the idea that feminism had achieved its goals and was no longer necessary. It appears most evident in popular culture, where femininity is defined by physical appearance and sexual attractiveness, with an emphasis on 'choice' that both leads to and defines personal empowerment, and a focus on constant self-surveillance and self-improvement (Gill, 2007). Feminist cultural theorist, Rosalind Gill (2007), observes that feminism is not explicitly rejected in chick lit, but instead it is "simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated" (p. 161). The chick lit heroine appears both empowered and constrained; she is assertive, values bodily autonomy, and embraces the freedom of individual choice. Yet, she is also subtly compelled to make decisions that reproduce normative femininity. In analysing *Bridget Jones*, McRobbie (2004) argues that Bridget is a 'product of modernity' (p. 261), exemplified by her successful career, her status as a single woman, and her participation in public social spaces such as pubs and restaurants. However, despite occupying this empowered position, Bridget remains preoccupied with the fear of loneliness and the desire to find 'Mr Right.' Although she recognises that such desires conflict with feminist ideals, postfeminism allows these longings to serve as a form of pleasurable escape (McRobbie, 2004).

Perhaps the main point of criticism lies in chick lit's overt engagement with consumerism. Postfeminist culture is characterised by its entanglement with consumer culture, as it promotes purchasing power with female empowerment and liberation. The heroine's obsession with shopping, fashion, and beauty has frequently been cited for endorsing consumer culture and unrealistic bodily and aesthetic standards, and critics such as Juliette Wells (2006)

have questioned whether a novel could be considered chick lit without scenes of excessive consumerism and material indulgence. As emphasised by Michelle M. Lazar (2011), postfeminism constructs consumer practices as sites of empowerment, positioning beauty procedures and consumption as expressions of autonomy and practising choice. Within this understanding, the chick lit heroine’s commitment to consumer culture presents her as a willing participant in postfeminist discourse that equates empowerment with the ability to choose and purchase.

At the same time, Ferriss and Young (2006) contend that such narratives do not necessarily endorse conventional beauty ideals but rather mock the extreme physical expectations that contemporary women are expected to meet. Referring to Bridget Jones’ obsessive self-monitoring as evident in her first diary entry, “129 lbs (but post-Christmas), alcohol units 14 (but effectively covers 2 days as 4 hours of party was on New Years Day), cigarette 22, calories 5424” (Fielding, 1996, p. 7), they argue that chick lit instead deconstructs these standards in depicting a woman’s self-struggle with real issues concerning physical appearance when facing unrealistic standards of beauty.

Third-wave Feminism

Composed of young feminists who came of age during the 1980s and 1990s, third-wave feminism proposed a new wave of feminism by emphasising diversity and individualism among women and aimed to redefine what it meant to be feminist. Central to third-wave feminism is an embrace of multiplicity and contradiction; as Jennifer Gilley (2005) argues, third-wave feminism celebrates the “power and possibilities of contradiction” (p. 189), and R. Claire Snyder (2008) similarly observes that third-wave feminists “accept the messiness of lived contradiction” (p. 177), resisting any singular or definitive definition of feminist identity. Third-wave feminism, therefore, strives to be inclusive of diverse identities and experiences, seeking to avoid exclusion based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

A defining feature that separates third-wave feminism from its predecessors lies in its position in the academy. Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford (2004) observe that third-wave feminism did not have a “comfortable position within the academy” (p. 168), and many third-wave feminists instead wrote for a popular audience. The style of third-wave feminist writing further reinforces this; many of these texts are autobiographical, memoir-driven narratives that blur the line between the personal and the political. The third-wavers believed the academy failed to consider the needs of those outside it and sought to address them through activism. In rejecting feminist theory, these essays by third-wave writers focused on women’s material needs, the media, and the knowledge needed to enact feminism in daily life.

Many features of postfeminism, such as its emphasis on choice, agency, and consumerism, are also shared by third-wave feminism, which explains the tendency to conflate the two. However, while postfeminism suggests feminism’s goals have been achieved and therefore unnecessary, third-wave feminism considers itself a continuation of the movement, advocating an intersectional approach while embracing expressions of female empowerment previously considered postfeminist. Generally, it is considered that despite the criticisms against the third-wave, which can depoliticise the feminist movement through their focus on inclusivity and at times, contradictory, political and social activism, the third-wave insists that while not always, “a link between... personal pleasures and political change can be forged” (Braithwaite, 2002, p. 339). Thus, third-wave feminists contend that a focus on individual lifestyle or consumer culture is not necessarily anti-feminist; rather, the third-wave recognises the contradictions posed by their feminism and attempts to navigate a feminist identity that allows for them.

‘Girlie’ Feminism

‘Girlie’ feminism is a strand of third-wave feminism that actively plays with femininity. Focusing on the “intersection of culture and feminism” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 36), the Girlies sought to utilise popular culture as a site of feminist expression and space for political struggle. In *Manifesta*, Baumgardner and Richards (2010) define the Girlies as follows;

A Girlie-girl can be a stereotypically feminine one – into manicures and hairstyles and cooking and indoorsy activities. Girlie is also a feminist philosophy . . . Girlies are adult women, usually in their mid-twenties to late thirties . . . whose feminist principles are based on a reclaiming of girl culture (of feminine accoutrements that were tossed out with sexism during the Second Wave), be it Barbie, housekeeping, or girl talk. (p. 398)

For the Girlies, femininity was the “very centre of an ideology of agency, confidence and resistance” (Gillis & Munford, 2004, p. 171). Through “tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 136) such as makeup, high heels, and fashion magazines, Girlies aimed to express their personal lives as ‘confident gestures.’

Credited as a pioneer of ‘Girlie’ feminism, Debbie Stoller, co-founder of *Bust* magazine and author of the *Stitch’n Bitch* series, encouraged women to embrace traditional domestic activities and crafts such as cooking, sewing, and knitting, practices that were rejected by second-wave feminists as symbols of female oppression. Reframed through a third-wave lens, however, Stoller argues that these activities could “actually be empowering, and [do not] have to be something that just represents women’s oppression” (Casey, 2016, para. 10). The Girlies understood their actions were not necessarily radical gestures capable of reconstructing society but rather aimed to demonstrate ‘pretty power’ and how feminism could be fun. Stoller also observed that although girlie culture has been viewed as frivolous and worthless in society, promoting things of interest to women could lead to serious discussions about women’s issues (Casey, 2016).

Critics were quick to denounce this form of feminism as “light on issues and heavy on vanity,” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 255) labelling it ‘lipstick’ or ‘babe’ feminism. Anna Quindlen (1994), a former New York Times columnist, criticised that the reclamation of words such as ‘girl’ and ‘bitch’ makes a mockery of the achievements of earlier feminists. In response, Baumgardner and Richards (2004) contend that ‘Girlie’ feminists do not reject their feminist predecessors but rather seek to subvert what they describe as a ‘mixed message’ inherited from second-wave feminism; that while girls may be powerful, ‘girly’ things are not. In embracing all things feminine and girly, ‘Girlie’ feminists attempt to redefine girlhood as a legitimate site of feminist power and identity.

However, one of the most persistent critiques of ‘Girlie’ feminism lies in its relationship to consumer culture. Baumgardner and Richards (2004) explain that young feminists who identify as the third-wave grew up with access to the “good parts of capitalism” (p. 62), and rejecting capitalism means to “choose to be marginalised” (p. 62), in that they cannot exercise their purchasing power. Furthermore, they point out that ‘Girlie’ feminists are aware that capitalism and clothing can be and are political, but the critique tends to be directed at the “young women espousing feminism while wearing Gucci” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004, p. 62) rather than the content of the person wearing it.

In reclaiming all things girly, ‘Girlie’ feminism aimed to demonstrate that one can be a feminist while loving to wear pink, engage in traditional crafts, and express their sexuality. Compared to other strands of third-wave feminism, Girlies are less political in their motivations; however, they discern the desires and anxiety of young women who grew up in a

generation where feminists already existed and were looked down upon for being ‘man-hating’ and ‘bra-burners.’ As Jennifer Purvis (1994) contends, while not all feminists can agree with the Girlies, many can identify with the everyday questions one might ponder on whether something makes them more or less feminist. The Girlies, by encouraging women to reclaim their ‘girliness,’ aspired to prompt young women to reconsider their feminist identities.

Teen Chick Lit

Teen chick lit, or chick lit jr., novels address classic YA themes of coming-of-age, identity, and material culture, where romance appears as “at least a subplot” (Johnson, 2006, p. 150). Adult chick lit and chick lit jr. share many commonalities, such as affirming flawed women, recognising physical insecurities, and negotiating interpersonal relationships. While both use humour to mitigate the protagonist’s failures and moments of embarrassment, it especially offers “an approachable path to understanding the challenges associated with leaving childhood and accepting adult responsibility” (Johnson, 2006, p. 147) for the teen protagonist.

Johnson (2006) argues that teen chick lit provides a useful way of speaking to a resistant teenage audience who tends to disregard adult voices, as the humorous undertones can be read as “positive and helpful messages concerning coming-of-age” (p. 146) in contrast to “preachy stories that point to parents being always right and suggest that all will end well regardless of circumstance” (p. 146). It also remains crucial that writers recognise that, while their adolescent readers are often aware of adult issues, such as maintaining romantic relationships and friendships, mental health, and financial pressures, these issues are usually encountered through pop culture rather than in real life, and that they are not prepared to deal with them. As a genre, chick lit employs humour to help readers cope with real adult life situations more effectively; YA chick lit attempts to do the same by acknowledging that adolescent issues that may seem trivial or embarrassing are not, and by validating teen girls’ insecurity and self-doubt.

‘Humorous’ and ‘Salacious’ Teen Chick Lit

Christine Meloni (2006) identifies two distinct categories within the teen chick lit genre; the ‘humorous’ and the ‘salacious’ type. The former aligns with Johnson’s (2006) description of relatable teenage narratives, whereas popular YA chick lit series such as *Gossip Girl* (2001) by Cecily von Ziegesar and *The Clique* (2004) by Lisi Harrison fall under the latter. Meloni (2006) cautions librarians against these texts due to their depictions of risqué behaviour. A key component of criticism against these types of novels lies in their overt sexualisation and commodification of adolescent female bodies. This is evident in the portrayal of fictional teenage girls, who are perpetually preoccupied with how they look and how they are perceived by men.

It is crucial, however, to note that titles such as *Gossip Girl* and *The Clique* are novels published by Alloy Entertainment, a book packaging and television production unit under Warner Bros. Television Studios and specialises in creating texts designed for cross-media adaptation. While president and founder of Alloy Entertainment, Leslie Morgenstein, claims these books feature ‘enduring themes’ for girls (Long, 2010, para. 7), it is apparent that these books and, by extension, the teenage girl audience, are used to promote Alloy’s marketing focus of ‘total immersion’ of brands in everyday life. These books, therefore, act as pseudo-advertisements, and the adolescent protagonist’s development is not the main focus of these novels.

Postfeminist Sensibilities and Consumer Culture in Teen Chick Lit

In her study of consumption and branding in best-selling young adult romance series, Naomi R. Johnson (2010) argues that teen chick lit novels “glamorise and reinforce a particular version of commercialised, heterosexual femininity” (p. 55), which is accomplished by promoting particular brands and products as integral to the heroine’s search for love. In commercially successful teen chick lit books such as *Gossip Girl* and *The Clique*, specific clothing and cosmetic brands are meticulously mentioned, especially in relation to romantic or sexual relationships, where female characters use branded clothing and cosmetics as leverage to gain male attention (Johnson, 2010). Elizabeth Bullen et al. (2011) argue that, similarly to its adult counterpart, YA chick lit also “explicitly appropriates and promotes a postfeminist sensibility” (p. 497). The teen chick lit protagonist is typically a “self-regulating subject who must actively choose and create the life she wishes” (Bullen et al., 2011, p. 507); while she may appear empowered, she is simultaneously subject to self-surveillance and held responsible for the consequences of her choices, as well as consistently expected to self-discipline, manage, and improve herself, aligning with the Gill’s (2007) concept of postfeminist sensibility.

While the adult chick lit heroine may similarly find “delight and consolation . . . in indulging herself, especially in consumer goods” (Wells, 2006, p. 49), her consumption is framed as a way to portray herself as an emancipated woman of the twenty-first century, whereas in salacious teen chick lit, commodified femininity tends to be directly linked to heterosexual desirability. Furthermore, while the adult chick lit heroine typically achieves empowerment by navigating her demanding career as a young professional while balancing her romantic aspirations, the same cannot be said of the adolescent chick lit heroine. Instead, the teen heroine becomes empowered through her material purchases, which enhance her attractiveness to male partners, and thus validate her extreme consumption practices (Johnson, 2010). This dynamic is especially evident in YA chick lit series produced by Alloy Entertainment, which portray the lives of wealthy, elite teenagers and are replete with references to luxury brands and expensive beauty practices.

Although less pronounced, similar patterns also appear in humorous texts. In *The Princess Diaries* by Meg Cabot, for example, the self-proclaimed socially awkward Mia Thermopolis undergoes a literal makeover after learning of her royal lineage. While she is initially dissatisfied with her new appearance, Mia discovers newfound confidence following her makeover, leading her to confront her school bully. However, unlike their salacious type counterparts, the humorous heroine’s obsession with her physical appearance and materialism is counteracted by the humorous tone and is not always associated with heterosexual desirability. While she may find joy in shopping and attempting DIY spa treatments to make herself appear more beautiful, many of these efforts often end in disaster and come off as a parody of adult femininity. For example, in *The Fashion Disaster That Changed My Life* (2005) by Lauren Myracle, seventh-grader Alli is obsessed with popularity and is elated when she is noticed by the most popular girl at school, Rachel. Upon being invited to Rachel’s house, Alli experiments with a nose strip to get rid of her pores, but she falls asleep with it on;

Saturday, September 30, 9:22 A.M.

Oh. My. God. I am deformed . . .

. . . I fell asleep with the one from last night still on, and by this morning, it had hardened into concrete. I am so not kidding. I had to use Mom’s rubbing alcohol to get it off, and even then, it left blobs of glue which clung to my nose. I had to pick at them one by one, and most of them came off okay, except for a bit on my left nostril that peeled away a layer of skin and left a red sore.

I tried covering it up with some of Mom’s foundation, but it stung too much, and anyway, it didn’t work. I can still see the rawness beneath.

I look like a leper.

Why do these things always happen to ME?!!! (Myracle, 2005, pp. 76-77)

As Johnson (2006) contends, while humorous teen chick lit novels “embrace, or at least acknowledge, the power of consumer culture” (p. 142), the focus is more specifically on affirming young readers and their insecurities through humour. While teenage readers may cringe, laugh, or both when reading such situations, the humorous tone allows for an optimistic reading and thus creates a reader who can “step back and laugh at herself when that embarrassing moment strikes” (Johnson, 2006, p. 148).

Unlike salacious teen chick lit novels, which promote a distinctly postfeminist sensibility, humorous teen chick lit novels endorse a perspective closer to that of third-wave feminism. While heterosexual desirability appears as a significant motivator in many humorous teen chick lit, there is a greater focus on traditional coming-of-age themes of self-discovery, psychological maturity, and personal growth, and thus the heroine achieves agency through a cultivated understanding of herself, regardless of whether a romance succeeds. Nonetheless, consumer and material culture remain important aspects of humorous chick lit, and the multiple scenes in which the heroine indulges in shopping and beauty procedures endorse the third-wave ideology of contradiction; one can identify as feminist while embodying traditional feminine ‘girly’ aesthetics.

The Third-wave ‘Girly’ Princess: Mia Thermopolis

The Princess Diaries series by Meg Cabot features all the hallmarks of humorous teen chick lit; witty, written in diary format, and focused on coming of age, including self-discovery and romantic development. The first instalment in the series, *The Princess Diaries*, was published in 2000 and was followed by 12 core novels, 4 novellas, and 4 companion novels. It was subsequently turned into a film by Walt Disney Pictures in 2001, with a sequel released in 2004, and a third scheduled for release soon. The series follows fourteen-year-old Mia Thermopolis, who unexpectedly learns that her father is the Prince of Genovia, a small fictional European principality, making her both a princess and heir to the throne. Reluctant to immediately accept her royal status or move to Genovia, Mia reaches a compromise with her father; she will remain in New York with her mother during the school term, but spend holidays in Genovia and attend ‘princess lessons’ from her grandmother, the Dowager Princess Clarisse Renaldo.

Until beginning her princess lessons, Mia considered herself a normal, if anything, socially awkward teenager and reacted negatively to learning of her heritage, as her understanding of what it means to be a ‘princess’ is initially grounded in appearance:

This is how NOT a princess I am. I am so NOT a princess that when my dad started telling me that I was one, I totally started crying . . . You never saw anyone who looked LESS like a princess than I do. I mean, I have really bad hair that isn’t curly or straight; it’s sort of triangular, so I have to wear it really short, or I look like a Yield sign. And it isn’t blond or brunette, it’s in the middle, the sort of color they call mouse brown, or dishwater blond. Attractive, huh? And I have a really big mouth and no breasts and feet that look like skis. Lilly says my only attractive feature is my eyes, which are gray, but right then, they were all squinty and red-looking since I was trying not to cry. (Cabot, 2020, pp. 49-50)

With her “really big mouth and no breasts and feet that look like skis” (Cabot, 2020, p. 141) on top of her ‘really bad hair,’ Mia does not believe her physical appearance aligns with conventional expectations of princess-like femininity. Moreover, having been raised by a self-certified feminist mother, Mia, too, identifies as a “feminist and environmentalist” (Cabot, 2020, p. 141) and rejects materialism and consumer culture.

At the beginning of the novel, Mia's feminist identity closely mirrors her mother, Helen, a free-spirited artist who had refused to marry Prince Philippe for her rejection of the "bourgeois more of a society that didn't even accept women as equals to men and refused to recognise her rights as an individual" (Cabot, 2020, p. 31), and chose to give Mia her last name to defy against the "cult of patriarchy" (p. 49). It is clear that Helen's feminist identity resembles that of second-wave feminism with her strong beliefs against patriarchy, marriage, and female sexuality. In her essay on postfeminism and tween fairy tale films in the twenty-first century, Melanie Kennedy (2017) contends that second-wave feminism appears in the form of mothers, and while daughters are expected to lend an ear to their teachings upon choosing a feminist path, they are not meant to be agreed with. Many tween fairy tales tend to portray the second-wave feminist mother as outdated and threatening their daughter's happiness and choices with such views.

However, this is not the case in *The Princess Diaries*; Mia maintains a healthy relationship with her mother throughout the series and considers her mother to be 'deeply principled', who does not "[inflict] her beliefs on others" (Cabot, 2020, p.134). As a result, Mia's original feminist identity takes after her mother's, and therefore she is initially uncomfortable with the princess makeover orchestrated by her grandmother and Paolo, a royal stylist, who refashions her in 'Gucci shoes or Chanel skirts or Christian Dior bras', dyes her hair 'plain old blonde', gives her fake nails, all the while admitting she "[doesn't] believe in using makeup or chemicals that might be harmful to the earth" (Cabot, 2020, pp. 141-142).

In contrast to the frumpy second-wave feminist mothers, Kennedy (2017) contends that grandmothers in tween fairy tales appear in the form of "pre-feminist fairy grandmothers" (p. 434). Through a pre-feminist voice, the grandmother leads the heroine to understand and appreciate the opportunities secured by second-wave feminism, whilst appealing to pre-feminist values (Kennedy, 2017). Clarisse symbolises pre-feminism and traditional femininity through her rigid views of gender. Not only does she occupy an all-pink penthouse at The Plaza, but she also constantly criticises Mia for her lack of femininity and oversees her princess lessons. She refuses to acknowledge 'Thermopolis' as Mia's last name and orders Mia to embody conventional femininity;

Tomorrow you will wear nylons. Not tights. Not kneesocks. You are too old for tights and kneesocks. And you will wear your school shoes, not tennis sneakers. You will style your hair, apply lipstick, and paint your fingernails—what's left of them, anyway. (Cabot, 2020, p. 122)

Mia begrudgingly obliges but initially cannot embody it properly, despite borrowing her mother's pantyhose and lipstick, which prompts her grandmother's intervention. Till this point, Mia remains resistant to traditional femininity, viewing it as a burden.

However, her views become destabilised following her makeover, as it marks a turning point in Mia's self-perception. Frustrated by the scrutiny she faces for her new appearance, Mia argues with her best friend, Lilly, who accuses her of looking like the popular cheerleader and bully, Lana Weinberger. Having had enough, Mia speaks back to her friend;

So, I cracked. I said, "Lilly, *shut up*."

I have never told Lilly to shut up before. Not ever. I don't think I have ever told anyone to shut up before. It's just not something I do. I don't know what happened, really.

Maybe it was the fingernails. I never had fingernails before. (Cabot, 2020, p. 150)

Following her fight with Lilly, Mia assumes a new level of confidence and assertiveness she lacked before. This is especially evident in the scene where Mia retaliates against Lana's bullying by throwing her ice cream at her; "Then a strange thing happened. I was sitting there . . . and then the next thing I knew, I'd taken my Nutty Royale and thrust it with all my might at the front of Lana's sweater" (Cabot, 2020, p. 176). Mia subsequently reflects that she is no

longer ‘unassertive’ and that her “self-actualisation is right around the corner” (Cabot, 2020, p. 176). Significantly, this newfound confidence emerges alongside her physical transformation, suggesting a direct link between her new, feminine appearance and internal empowerment.

Mia’s investment in her appearance intensifies after her royal identity is exposed in the press, and her crush, Josh Richter, invites her to the school dance. Not only has her makeover helped her achieve inner empowerment, but it has also made her attractive to men. In true chick lit fashion, Mia immediately becomes devoted to maintaining her feminine appearance. While it is later revealed that Josh had ulterior motives, Grandmère believes he likes Mia due to her new appearance;

Grandmère says, “Well, of course, the boy likes you. What wouldn’t he like? You are turning out very well, thanks to Paolo’s handiwork and my tutelage.” Geez, Grandmère, thanks. Like it would be impossible for any guy to like me for me, and not because all of a sudden I’m a princess with a \$200 haircut. (Cabot, 2020, p. 243)

In an entry titled “THINGS TO DO (I THINK, NEVER HAVING BEEN ON A DATE BEFORE, I AM NOT EXACTLY SURE WHAT TO DO)” Mia writes down a list of beauty procedures she wants done before her date with Josh;

1. Get a dress
2. Get hair done
3. Get nails redone (stop biting fake ones off) (Cabot, 2020, p. 252)

Despite her earlier rejection of makeup and environmentally harmful cosmetic practices, Mia’s shifting attitude indicates an increasing awareness that participation in commodified femininity affords her social and romantic leverage. Further details reveal she meticulously prepared for her date by purchasing a new dress and shoes, having her legs and underarms waxed, and her makeup done by a professional makeup artist. Although less overt than in the Alloy Entertainment-produced novels, *The Princess Diaries* nonetheless implies that femininity is tied to consumption and that, once beautiful, one can be attractive to men.

However, despite her now willing participation in conventional and commodified femininity, Mia remains truthful to herself and her morals, as depicted throughout her date with Josh. She refuses to eat meat or drink alcohol to appease him, and when forced into kissing Josh, which is revealed to have been staged for paparazzi exposure, she confronts him in front of all the students present at the dance;

I whirled around. “It wasn’t just a kiss,” I said. I was getting really mad. “Maybe that’s how you wanted it to look, like it was just a kiss. But you and I both know what it really was: A media event. And one that you’ve been planning since you saw me in the *Post*. Well, thank you, Josh, but I can get my own publicity. I don’t need *you*.” (Cabot, 2020, p. 289)

Mia’s confrontation with Josh is surprising, considering that a large portion of her earlier diary entries detailed her crush on him, and demonstrates her growing recognition of her own self-worth. Bridget Whelan (2014) describes Mia as a ‘third-wave princess,’ a modern heroine who “exchange[s] negative, traditionally feminine characteristics (i.e. passivity) for more positive, traditionally masculine traits, such as assertiveness and rebelliousness” (pp. 179-180), while maintaining traditional ‘positive’ female characteristics such as compassion and empathy. Thus, the third-wave princess does not appear as a ‘hero in drag,’ but a new kind of heroine that embodies third-wave feminist ideals of embracing multiplicity and contradiction.

While Mia’s assertiveness seems to accompany her makeover and new appearance aligned with conventional femininity, she maintains her moral ground and feminist identity. The novel does not end with a successful romance, and Mia’s rejection of Josh indicates that her empowerment is not predicated on appealing to the male gaze but rather on an agentic self, structured through a discovery of herself and femininity. *The Princess Diaries*, therefore,

reframes traditional femininity not as the antithesis of feminism but as one of the many ways adolescent girls can construct agency and self-worth while navigating their complex identities and pressures of growing up. Rather than presenting fashion and consumer culture as incompatible with feminist values, *The Princess Diaries* suggests they can become sites of self and feminist expression. Consequently, Mia is not empowered by consumerism, but by her ability to negotiate and coordinate femininity on her own terms.

As the first instalment in the series, *The Princess Diaries* introduces Mia's development into a young woman with two identities; Mia Thermopolis, feminist and environmentalist, and Amelia Mignonette Thermopolis Renaldo, Crown Princess and heir to Genovia. These two identities are shaped by the two women Mia sees as role models in her life; her mother, who embodies second-wave feminism, and her grandmother, who symbolises pre-feminist values. While Mia incorporates aspects of both feminist identities into her own, she chooses to become a third-wave feminist princess, both accepting and rejecting aspects of each role model. Her feminist identity is at times contradictory and embraces diversity, rejecting strict definitions of what it means to be a woman and a feminist. Through her mother, she inherits a desire for independence and resistance to patriarchal or monarchical pressures, while her grandmother introduces her to the power and pleasures of femininity and material culture. It is through reconciling these two identities that Mia emerges as a third-wave feminist 'Girlie' princess, celebrating the power of embracing traditional femininity while also striving for independence and agency.

Conclusion

Chick lit, despite criticism from literary and feminist scholars alike, remains an important genre within popular culture and contemporary literature. The witty and independent heroine, while often flawed and chaotic, elicits sympathy and identification from readers, allowing young women to see themselves reflected in the media. For the teen chick lit reader, humorous coming-of-age narratives that incorporate fashion, romance, and friendship help ease the anxieties of adolescence, a period often marked by insecurity and struggles with identity, appearance, and mental well-being. While chick lit is often dismissed as frivolous and trivial popular literature, it offers a unique lens for examining the everyday realities and issues that contemporary women and girls face.

Nevertheless, teen chick lit has been criticised for reinforcing consumerism and circulating sexualised images of the female body, similarly to its adult counterpart. However, this essay has attempted to demonstrate that a third-wave 'Girlie' feminist reading of humorous teen chick lit reveals that the teenage heroine's empowerment is not defined purely by her sexual desirability or male validation as a postfeminist reading might suggest. Rather, this essay argues that the protagonist of a humorous teen chick lit derives agency not from consumer culture, but from her ability to negotiate conventional femininity on her own terms. The teenage chick lit heroine is not empowered by consumer culture or her purchasing power; instead, these experiences serve as a means for her to cultivate an embrace of feminine identity without sacrificing or dismissing her agency or independence.

While a 'Girlie' feminist reading of *The Princess Diaries* demonstrates that girlhood and traditional femininity function as sites of empowerment and the development of a feminist identity, it remains clear that chick lit as a genre is entangled with postfeminist sensibilities. While a young adult chick lit novel allows for greater emphasis on the protagonist's internal and psychological growth from adolescence to adulthood, the references to consumer and material culture, and the repeated emphasis on heterosexual desirability, cannot go unnoticed. Nevertheless, a third-wave feminist reading of young adult literature highlights the importance of cultivating a feminist identity throughout adolescence, allowing young readers to see their

own evolving and often contradictory identities reflected in narratives that validate their desire for both femininity and agency.

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Bio-note

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