

A Study on the Correlation Between Third-wave Feminism and the Riot Grrrl Movement in the 1990s in the United States by Analyzing Bikini Kill and Bratmobile

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Abstract: The main goal of this paper is to dive into the 1990s and try to understand the interrelation between third-wave feminism and the musical and political movement, Riot Grrrl, through careful analysis of two representative bands of the movement. With the understanding established, the paper would then try to analyze the reasons why the movement was ephemeral. Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, two specific bands symbolic of the Riot Grrrl movement would be investigated to appreciate the values of the movement with an analysis of their songs' lyrics and live performances. Another close look at the mainstream media as well as male rock stars and listeners would be taken with the hope of gaining specific insights into the reasons and steps for the rapid decline of the movement. The result of the study shows a complex relationship between the Riot Grrrl movement and third-wave feminism that happened around the same period, in which neither one was fully dependent on the other and both promoted the improvement of the other. The ephemeral existence of the Riot Grrrl movement was also a direct cause of the young activists, weary of misinterpreted publicity, choosing their results not by their own will, but due to pressure from public media. In the intercorrelation of third-wave feminism and the Riot Grrrl movement, both movements affected each other in a way that feminism provided the foundation for which Riot Grrrl movement and Riot Grrrl reversely provided strength and intensity third-wave feminism with its distinct features of directness as well as auditory and visual violence. Despite similarities between the two, the Riot Grrrl movement eventually diverges away from third-wave feminism, withering away from history due to criticism that resulted in Riot Grrrl's rejection of the mainstream criticism and misrepresentation of their images while leaving remnants of their rebellious spirit and distinct music that people today still are affected by.

Keywords: Riot Grrrl, third-wave of feminism, Rock n' Roll, punk music, the 1990s

1. Introduction

Since third-wave Feminism and Riot Grrrl have similar dates of occurrence as well as main objectives, the connection between the two is profound and interesting. Because of this intriguing connection, the main purpose of this research paper is to use two specific Riot Grrrl bands, the Bikini Kill and the Bratmobile, to link to third-wave feminism, which gained momentum around the 1990s as females began to question the ideas of womanhood. Throughout the paper, our group will study the causes and impacts of Riot Grrrl and on American society, especially for the movement of third-wave feminism. Along with examining the relationship between the Riot Grrrl movement and third-wave feminism, our group will simultaneously investigate the reasons for the ephemeral existence of Riot Grrrl.

To understand the paper key terminologies needed to be explained. The third-wave of feminism appeared in the mid-1990s, which was led by people who were born in the developed world in the 1960s and 1970s and grew up in an environment of media saturation and cultural and economic diversity. Thus, the third-wave primarily sought to bring in those previously excluded from feminist goals and to recognize the intersectionality of oppression. It focuses on race and gender and stems from the second-wave of gender-positive debates. The third-wave of feminism focused on globalizing women's personal rights. Feminists advocated that women have the right to make their own choices about their bodies and say access to birth control and abortion is a fundamental right.

Riot Grrrl movement is an underground punk feminist musical style movement that emerged in the early 1990s in Washington, D.C. and Olympia, Washington. The term Riot Grrrl stems from Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman, members of the feminist punk band Bratmobile, who coined the phrase "girl riot." Early participants deliberately used "grrrl" instead of "girl" to remove the passive association with the word "girl" as well as to display the anger behind the movement, reminiscent of a growl. Most of the bands that originated during Riot Grrrl have split but the spirit and idea of Riot Grrrl have not completely vanished yet. Many of the women involved in Riot Grrrl are still active in creating politically charged music.

Rock music is a genre that naturally arose out of other popular music genres in the early 20th century. It evolved over time and developed a new sound in the postwar era of the 1950s. The post-World War II era was primed for new sounds, crucial to the popularity and spread of rock music. Rock and roll originated decades before music became popular on the radio. The sound of rock can be described as a unique fusion of black rhythm and blues music with white country music. The definition of rock music can be described as popular dance music that originated in the 1950s. Rock music is characterized by heavy beats and simple melodies. It was originally a fusion of rhythm and blues with country music. Generally, this type of music consists of instruments like guitar, bass, and drums.

The punk subculture emerged in the United Kingdom in the mid-1970s. People also suggested that the term "punk" was borrowed from prison slang, concerned with individual freedom and anti-establishment views. Punk spread as an ideology and aesthetic approach, becoming a type of rebellion. The punk subculture influenced other underground music scenes such as alternative rock, indie music, crossover thrash, and the extreme subgenres of heavy metal. A new movement in the United States became visible in the early and mid-1990s that sought to revive the punk movement, doing away with some of the trappings of hardcore. The 1990s offered the macro-scale picture of the historical background for the Riot Grrrl movement and third-wave feminism, which is the age of globalization along with the spreading of Western ideologies, mainly from the United States, to the whole world as the Soviet Union dissolved. Based on the textual analysis of the lyrics and the bands' promotion and presentation, our group will offer novel interpretations of how third-wave feminism led to the female rock revolution and how the idea was presented.

The two bands our group mainly studied were Bikini Kill and Bratmobile. Bikini Kill is an American punk rock band formed in Olympia, Washington, in October 1990. The group consisted of four people: a singer, guitarist, bassist, and drummer. Among them, there is an important figure that contributed a lot to the Riot Grrrl movement which our paper will address later, Kathleen Hanna. The band pioneered the Riot Grrrl movement, with feminist lyrics and fiery performances addressing issues such as rape, domestic violence, sexuality, racism, patriarchy, classism, anarchism, and female empowerment, which encouraged women to reclaim their agency and set their personal identification. Their music is characteristically abrasive and hardcore-influenced.

Bratmobile, a first-generation “Riot Grrrl” band from Olympia, Washington, was the second band we looked at in our research. They were a punk rock band from the United States that was active from 1991 to 2003. The band drew inspiration from a wide range of musical genres, including pop, surf, and garage rock.

Another goal of our paper is to highlight the changes and impacts on the society of the time that resulted from the interaction of the two movements –third-wave feminism and Riot Grrrl. Analyzing all the items above, it is also necessary to know the reasons for the short life of the Riot Grrrl revolution in the context of the times and the social environment.

2. Methodology

In this paper, two of the most influential Riot Grrrl punk rock bands in the United States in the 1990s – “Bikini Kill” and “Bratmobile” – are selected for the case study. Through the three observation paths of lyrical texts, music bodies, and visual images of the two bands, we analyze how the features of Riot Grrrl are presented, how the concepts of third-wave feminism are reflected in their songs and performances, and how it is conveyed to the audience through what forms and ways, and what impact it has brought to the audience.

The methodology of this paper is comprehensive literature research. Through the review of pertinent literature, our group collects global research literature on third-wave feminism and the Riot Grrrl movement to understand the current situation of this research field. The paper tries to find out the representative ideas and theories and sort them out to organize the general ideas and innovations of the research. The paper concludes the general discussion of the Riot Grrrl’s role in the promotion of third-wave feminism, the performance of conveying of Riot Grrrls, and the potential reasons for the end of the Riot Grrrl movement.

The second methodology is to conduct a theoretical study on the expression of Riot Grrrl rock music through textual analysis. By collecting the lyrics and music texts created by Bikini Kill and Bratmobile on the official website, the paper tries to analyze the feminist concept in the lyrics based on the understanding and interpretation of third-wave feminism, and how the creation of the music is accomplished in concrete terms. Uncover the special features and multifaceted nature of feminist expression in the Riot Grrrl movement. In addition, by reviewing and analyzing the commentaries and criticisms of the Riot Grrrl movement and the bands Bikini Kill and Bratmobile in the 1990s by critics in the American mainstream media and rock scene, as well as the state of the bands themselves, the paper tries to figure out the reasons for the short duration of the Riot Grrrl movement and the general attitude of the audience at that time and to see the potential obstacles to the development of third-wave feminism in the 1990s.

The third methodology is image study. Because rock music is part of popular culture, images are an important source of research. This paper examines and analyzes the music videos, live performances, and interviews of the band Bikini Kill and Bratmobile. The forms of female rock are certainly diverse. In the face of this rock revolution in the 1990s, Riot Grrrl bands showed the physical aesthetics of female physical characteristics and the literal appropriation of lyric texts as a means of resistance to male hegemony, which can be seen in the long-standing dominance of the male

perspective in the music industry, the male gaze in the lyrics and the male-dominated performers and audience at the performance, thus not only provoking male hegemony but also extending the idea of third-wave feminism to rock music.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Riot Grrrl's Promotion Role in Third-wave Feminism— Means of Promotion

Third-wave feminism, which also rose quickly in the early 1990s, is frequently linked to Riot Grrrl culture. Third-wave feminism placed a greater emphasis on personal identification than on legislation and the political system. The knowledge that women come in a wide variety of colors, ethnicities, nationalities, faiths, and cultural origins is considered to have given rise to the third-wave feminism movement. Although there had been multiracial feminist movements prior to the third-wave, networking across feminist organizations became simpler as a result of the early 1990s technology boom. The Riot Grrrls took advantage of media spectacle by creating art using counterculture technologies like zines, videography, and music.

The Riot Grrrl movement gave women their own platform to write songs and express their political views on the problems they encountered in the punk rock scene and in general. They expressed their opinions on topics including patriarchy, unfair treatment of women, rape, domestic violence, sexuality, and female empowerment through their music and writings.

Like other third-wave feminists, Riot Grrrls attempted to foster an acceptance of diversity within feminist expression. Through their use of lyrics, zines, and publications, as well as reclaiming the meaning of disparaging terminology, their connection to feminism is clear. Women in the movement were said to find empowerment in all three of these ways. In a punk culture dominated by men, the Riot Grrrl movement encouraged women to carve out a niche for themselves. Women could force their way to the front of the audience and into the mosh pit at punk shows, but they had to “fight ten times harder” because they were female, and sexually explicit violence like groping and rape had been reported.

For example, in the song *Rebel Girl* by Bikini Kill, lyrics such as “The Queen of the neighborhood,” “The revolution is coming,” and “Rebel Girl” fully reflect women’s strong self-esteem and confidence, and show their resistance, not only to the dominant ideological frameworks of capitalism and consumer culture but also to the patriarchy that dominated American society. Meanwhile, the role of Riot Grrrl Bands’ live shows in the movement cannot be ignored. For instance, the performers dressed only in Bikini and scrawled traditional derogatory terms such as “bitch”, “dyke”, and “slut” with lipstick on their bodies to express Riot Grrrls’ resistance to the traditional “ladylike” standard of women in society and politics. The Bikini Kill lead singer Kathleen Hanna shouted, “Girls to the front!”. The famous slogan encouraged all women to step forward and occupy the space at the front of the stage that had previously been permanently occupied by men. More bands are becoming alert to sexual harassment at their shows and encouraging women to speak up on the spot. Riot Grrrls, through creative expression, encouraged women to take an active role in their lives and take control of their lives in the real world, which undoubtedly led to a focus on female identity in the third-wave of feminism.

DIY is also an important element of the Riot Grrrl movement. An explosion of creativity in homemade cut-and-paste, xeroxed, collage zines that covered a wide range of feminist subjects and frequently attempted to draw out the political implications of intensely personal experiences in a “privately public” space significantly contributed to the momentum of riot grrrl [1]. The topics of sexism, mental illness, eating and body image issues, sexual abuse, racism, rape, discrimination, stalking, domestic violence, incest, homophobia, and occasionally vegetarianism were frequently covered in zines. Editors of Riot Grrrl zines engage in writing and writing instruction practices that

subvert conventional views of feminism as primarily an adult political activity and the author as a solitary, bodiless place. As Kathleen Hanna put it in the Riot Grrrl Manifesto, “Because we girls crave records, books, and fan books that speak to us, that make us feel included and understood in our own way, because we want it to be easier for girls to see and hear each other’s work, So we can share strategies, criticize and praise each other. Because in order to create our own meaning, we have to take over the means of production. Because if we want to figure out how we influence, reflect, perpetuate, or undermine the status quo, we have to connect our work to our friends, to politics, to real life.” [2]. “Take over the means of production” is one of the most significant parts of DIY, because, within the consumer capitalist culture which is pervasive in the United States, women are repeatedly sexualized, objectified, and held to unrealistic, unattainable standards that commodify their existence. Furthermore, capitalism threatens to rob women of their individual authentic experiences by forcing them to operate in accordance with a culture driven by consumerism. Thus, by making their own magazines and distributing them to all women at their concerts, Riot grrrls provided a space for girls to express themselves on a non-commercial platform. DIY mentality reflects the importance of girls’ individual contributions to Riot Grrrl publications and music that challenged the common consumer capitalist and patriarchal culture.

Thanks to their DIY format, Riot Grrrl magazines are free from the influence of mainstream media and patriarchal views, and thus free to spread uncontaminated ideas that challenge ordinary consumer capitalism and patriarchal culture. The free-form, creative and self-expressive nature of various DIY projects provided a way for women to reclaim their agency and became an important avenue for women’s independent creation in the third-wave feminist movement, which mainly focused on personal identification and the acceptance of diversity within feminist expression we have mentioned in the beginning.

3.2. Riot Grrrl Movement – Promoted by Ideas of Third-wave Feminism

One of the central purposes of the third-wave of feminism was to pursue more social rights and equalities for women, such as reproductive rights, while the occurrence of the Riot Grrrl seemed to coincide with this particular movement in terms of its central idea. This goal of the third-wave of feminism contemporarily promoted the movement of Riot Grrrl. Enabled by the third-wave of feminism, women in the Riot Grrrl movement characterized themselves as the symbol of freedom and the term “Punk Rock Feminism” [3]. As one of the Bikini Kill’s songs—Double Dare Ya—sang out that “Dare ya to do what you want; Dare ya to be who you will; Dare ya to cry right out loud”. Recognized as one of the most famous Riot Grrrl groups, Bikini Kill used these three phrases in their song to convey the meaning of pursuing freedom and speaking for women’s rights. What was considered more meaningful was the words Bikini Kill used after each “to” in the lyrics. The first “what you want”, declared that women wanted freedom; meanwhile, the second part “who you will” signified women wanted equal rights so that they could determine who they wanted to be; the third part “cry right out loud”, it summed up all the points and simultaneously revealed the indignation of women who pursued liberty. With all those thoughts conveyed, Bikini Kill announced self-sovereignty as the property and precondition for freedom, and this group, motivated by the third-wave of feminism, continued to produce other works that combined the idea of the third-wave of feminism [4]. Another typical example is the lyric of one of the Bratmobile songs—Cool Schmool—that sang out “I don’t wanna wonder if you’re gonna say hello; I don’t wanna wonder if you’re gonna walk away”. The hidden meaning within this lyric resembles the key feature of the third-wave of feminism. In other words, the phrase “I don’t wanna wonder” appeared as a sense of freedom and Riot Grrrl’s fanatical personality as “Punk Rock Feminism”, a term describing those who were playing Punk while also advocating for women’s liberty [3]. As a result, what was fascinating about the Riot Grrrl that appeared around the 1990s was that there were often some lyrics, just like the two

mentioned from Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, which implicitly pointed out the inequity women faced in society and seemed to resemble the main idea—freedom for women—of the third-wave of feminism, not to mention that the third-wave of feminism had practically promoted the movement of Riot Grrrl since its appearance had motivated those Punk musicians' minds about liberty for women and served as a catalyst for the Riot Grrrl movement.

3.3. Performance and Convey: Exerted Anger and Rebellion Through Words and Zines

Third-wave feminism, a continuation of second-wave feminism, inherited the legacy of second feminism's manifesto that "my body is mine" while embracing the diversity and individualism of women based on the progress of second-wave feminism. The concept of intersectionality was also introduced and valued in third-wave feminism. Riot Grrrl used multiple aspects of performance and conveyance to make a political statement. In conveying their message and context, body writing/word reclamation was one of the most crucial ways to resist the dominant social construction of femininity and the discipline of women in a patriarchal society, the dominance of male image and male gazing that related to sexualization in the rock n roll field. "At the end of Bikini Kill's first tour, in June 1991, in Washington, D.C., Kathleen Hanna, the creator of the band Bikini Kill, performed while displaying "SLUT" on her exposed stomach with a black magic marker. Slut, is the word usually used to shame women under the content of a patriarchal dominant society. Women who were subjected to violence, sexual harassment, or any other form of sexism or misogyny had somehow abdicated their responsibility for their lives and behavior and should be ashamed of it. Shame and shaming disciplined women [5]. The body writing/word reclamation's modus operandi is to challenge the word slut and other degrading words around sexuality and sexual assault in their current mainstream use and to appropriate the word slut to use it in a subversive, self-defining, positive, empowering and respectful way [6]. According to Bikini Kill, this way of conveying encourage [d] young girls to contest capitalist-patriarchal racism and sexism, precisely through acts of individual transgression against the implicit or explicit norms of "ladylike" or "girlish" behavior [5]. Additionally, Grrrl Zine was one of the most important ways deliver Riot Grrrls' idea to the world that born under third-wave feminism. "The third-wave because it is an expression of the feminism that grew up with it." The third generation of feminists emerged from punk rock, magazine, consumerism, and Internet culture, in contrast, to second-wave feminists, who grew up in a setting where politics and culture were entwined. Young women want to create new feminisms for themselves, whereas second-wave feminists stress that third-wave feminists are good daughters who should maintain the same feminism that their mothers fought for [7]. Emma of Riot Grrrl 5 explains, "Riot Grrrl is about not being the girlfriend of the band and not being the daughter of the feminist.....For this reason, we have created our zine and scene" [8]. One effective method by which Riot Grrrls developed and spread their own culture was through zines. In other words, this practice embodied third-wave feminism's new focus on individuality while also assisting young women in recognizing and connecting with each other. It also empowered girls to politicize what they previously experienced as only personal thanks to DIY culture, which enabled girls who were geographically distant to connect. It was intended to break the taboo among a supportive group of girls to catalyze widespread social action and political change [9]. The Riot Grrrl movement inspired all girls to boldly resist the patriarchy's oppression of them with shame, based on third-wave feminist influences, using Zines to express their creativity, bringing girls together, and contributing greatly to the development of feminist rock music.

3.4. New Coverages That Contribute to the "End" of the Riot Grrrl Movement

Riot Grrrl arose from the world of rock, which was male predominately and driven by people who challenged the traditional stereotypes of gender and sex. By the mid-nineties, the popularity of Riot

Grrrl had faded out from the public. People participating in the movement started to be misrepresented by the mainstream media. The ideas and beliefs were reversely delivered by press coverage back then, causing the political radical message to be spread dramatically. During the third-wave of feminism, one of the critics that Riot Grrrl faced was not being inclusive enough, claiming that as a feminist movement, but only focused on middle-class white females. Some other critics came from a report saying performers participating in Riot Grrrl movements should do more readings instead of doing meaningless punk on stage. Among all of these, Lucky's founding editor wrote in 1993 that "They do things like scrawl SLUT and RAPE across their torsos before gigs, produce fanzines with names like Girl Germs, and hate the media's guts". People back then tend to believe that Riot Grrrl is a negative activity and that people joined this movement because they live badly in their lives. In addition to the criticism Riot Grrrl endured, reporters often questioned their credibility. Often, reporters rendered Riot Grrrl in an "antagonistic" light. One key example of this type of discrimination against Riot Grrrl is through a story run by Washington Post about Bikini Kill. Reporters wrote that Kathleen Hanna had been raped by her dad, a false accusation, without interviewing Hanna or any members of the band. The prevailing message "girl power" has later been interpreted as a rational feminist saying among Riot Grrrl movements.

It is also by that time that most of the popular bands that originated in the Riot Grrrl movement had split. Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy, and Huggy Bear had split in 1994. Bikini Kill, one of the most popular bands, released their last records in 1996 and faded in 1997. However, Bikini Kill still remains active at different times, from 2017 and 2019 to the present. This tells us that the spirit of Riot Grrrl has not completely vanished yet, and still has a voice to stand for. Riot Grrrl isn't dead: the unapologetic and interrogative attitude lives on. Its legacy of empowerment is undeniable.

3.5. The Diminish of Riot Grrrl – Correlation with Globalization

Throughout the 1990s, globalization was the main motif of the world as multiple factors contributed to the rise of capitalism and its extension to the whole world. Arguably, the main cause of such rapid and wide-ranged interconnection between people was the collapse of the Soviet Union, the collapse of which allowed its rival from 1950 to 1991, the United States, to spread its influence in terms of political and social ideologies with little interference.

Both third-wave feminism and Riot Grrrl are the products of such a sociopolitical environment, where the ethos of diffusing ideas along with products is incorporated with their consistent fighting against the patriarchal societies that still existed predominately around the globe. While third-wave feminism managed to align its course with the globe, the Riot Grrrl movement rejected to open itself to the capitalist world, which in turn led to its ephemeral existence [10].

As described previously, the mainstream media was in denial of Riot Grrrl's distinct spirits and features, which caused the Riot Grrrls to believe that their central ideas expressed through their performances and songs were misinterpreted, twisted, and spread to a greater portion of the population. In the documentary Riot Grrrl Retrospective in 1999, one member of Riot Grrrl band Sleater-Kinney, Corin Tucker, described media coverage of Riot Grrrl at the time as deliberately making them look like "ridiculous girls parading around in our underwear" as well as refusing to do serious interviews with them. Tucker also expressed concern about the media taking Riot Grrrl's essays, fanzines, and articles out of context while neglecting the important concepts of anti-sexual abuses and assaults that the Riot Grrrls wrote extensively on [11]. The deliberate misinterpretation and misuse of Riot Grrrl's first-hand products like their writings by the mass media, therefore, has created a sound context for the rejection of mainstream media by Riot Grrrl with their distaste towards misrepresentation of their figure meant to inspire the young women to be, which ultimately led to their rejection to the mainstream [12]. The reaction to mainstream media's negative reports was a media blackout, where women identified as Riot Grrrls stopped responding to the press. Such a radical

response did not stop the media's misrepresentation but made it even worse, as the media remarked that Riot Grrrls "need to abandon their belief in the power of the subculture and start working with the media" to spread its form of feminism to the public people [13]. With diminishing reports made about the Riot Grrrl, the movement thus faded swiftly like shadows under clouds. The decline of the offer by the mainstream media was inevitable for the Riot Grrrl movement, with mass misinterpretations and wrong focus trying to evade spreading the intended rebellious and unrestrained images of Riot Grrrl, while the decision ultimately led to its decline with minimal effects of the movement been spread by the media.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Summary of Findings

This research suggests that the Riot Grrrl movement essentially was the unification of women and girls against the patriarchal and capitalist society, where Riot Grrrl movement provided ideas of powerful women that helped with the start of third-wave feminism that aimed for freedom and sovereignty across the world. The close analysis of the songs and performances of Riot Grrrl movement participants, including the famous bands Bikini Kill and Boatmobile, also allowed our group to identify how third-wave feminism prompted the Riot Grrrl movement, as the ideals of sovereignty promoted Riot Grrrl artists to redefine themselves away from the shades of patriarchy and labels by capitalistic consumerism. Lastly, our group reveals the reasons behind the Riot Grrrl movement's quick demise, which is that despite Riot Grrrl's effort to reveal their rebellious attitudes and ethics to the majority and mainstream, the misinterpretation by the popular media due to their prejudice ultimately forced activists in the movement to stop showing their images to the public, resulting their fadeaway from public's attention and sight.

4.2. Limitations and Future Direction

For not being inclusive enough, the "Riot Grrrl" movement has drawn criticism. Convey like body writing and word reclamation challenge legitimate gender politics while restoring white supremacy and class power. Black women lack the freedom and space to refer to themselves as "sluts" without endorsing long-standing ideas and persistent messages about what and who Black women are [14]. Because of the extreme sexualization and commodification of women of color, Riot Grrrl's individualistic advocacy cannot alleviate the long-standing intersectional oppression of patriarchal dominance. Riot Grrrl and the inability to fundamentally center the issues of women of color instead of exploiting them as feminist add-ons to increase privilege. Additionally, numerous women have also criticized Riot Grrrl for doing little more than stoking patriarchal hostility, failing to adequately critique the sex business and sexual violence against women from a systemic perspective, and for actively promoting structural change.

The impact of Riot Grrrl's lack of intersectionality was not examined in our research. Future studies should concentrate on the question of whether the Riot Grrrl movement is completely ineffective as a means of neoliberal feminist opposition for women of color in light of this restriction. Does the third-wave feminist movement's use of Riot Grrrl open up the possibility of other kinds of resistance? Can it be reimagined and used as a workable cool feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist protest by expressing the idea of punk? What are the alternatives if not?

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