Like, I’m sure if adults went out and talked to us, they’d go, “I guess girls are a lot smarter than we thought they were.”

Abby, “bad-ass-schoolgirl-business-woman” style

Before moving on to a discussion of how girls used style to construct and negotiate their identities in the school, it is useful to place the topic within a broader framework by asking an awkward question: How does girls’ style mean? In asking this question, I am hoping to move away from the customary question, what does girls’ style mean? As I noted in chapter 1, it is impossible to fix style within denotative values, determining, once and for all, what items of clothing indicate in a stable, pregiven form. Style must be read as a shifting system of signs that gains meaning only as it becomes meaningful within a given context. To suggest that explicit values or “maps of meaning” may be applied to this or any cultural practice only severs it from girls’ fluid and unpredictable expressions of identity.

Instead of asking what girls’ style means, then, I have chosen to ask a different kind of question in order to highlight girls’ style as a discursive construction that has been infused with meaning through a variety of academic, professional, and commonsensical discourses. In asking how girls’ style means, I aim to unearth dominant understandings of girls’ style and how those understandings have come into existence. How has girls’ style come to mean a set of truths that claims something about who and what girls are? And what do these meanings have to say about the way our society looks at, treats, and values girls?

In asking how girls’ style means, I am also working toward its resignification. While this book focuses on the ways in which girls engaged in
the practice of style at one particular school, my broader goal is to highlight the complexity of style by resignifying it as a cultural practice that has meaning in the lives of girls. By implication, I am suggesting that girls’ style has been and continues to be devalued. This chapter traces how this view came into being and questions why such a central feature of girls’ culture has been so readily and easily dismissed. After all, style is neither a marginal cultural practice, nor one engaged in by only a select group of girls. All girls practice style, even if they conceive of their styles as minimal, barely there, or under the radar. Yet when I explained the study to people at academic conferences, dinner parties, and social events, I learned to feel a little uneasy about their possible responses. “But it’s just style” was a common refrain. Reading between the lines, I felt that people were trying to tell me that I should be studying something more serious, something with more substance and depth. Sometimes, people would offer up possible topics that I might rather investigate, such as the “mean girls” crisis, bullying, or girls’ “plummeting” self-esteem in the teenage years.

Others took a more argumentative tone, suggesting that studying girls’ style was an exercise in futility. “Girls won’t be able to tell you anything about it. They’re clueless.” Or similarly, “Here’s everything you need to know about girls and style . . . they dress the way marketers tell them to dress.” And others still would let me know in no uncertain terms that I was misguided in my desire to construe style as important, given how “harmful” it was for girls to be dressing in ways that encouraged the “wrong” kind of attention. In such conversations, I heard real anger and frustration directed toward girls for their perceived naiveté and lack of awareness about what they were buying and how they were choosing to represent themselves in public. As one person casually noted, “I’m not sure what there is to learn about a bunch of girls who hang out at the mall all day.”

What surprised me most about these reactions was the bleak view some people had of girls’ cultural practices, particularly one so crucial to girls’ identities. It seemed to be an all-or-nothing proposition: either girls were doing something good or they were doing something bad; either girls were doing something positive or they were doing something negative; either girls were powerful or they were powerless. But such dichotomies do not make sense given the intricacy of girls’ engagement with cultural forms. Instead, I argued for a more nuanced and complex understanding of girls’ engagement with cultural practices. While I readily acknowledged that marketing, media, and global capitalism influenced girls, I questioned a view of girls’ experiences that so consistently and resolutely condemned them as negative. I wondered how this impression