

# Wilful Girliness

## Interrogating (Dis)Empowered Girliness through Qualitative Interviews

### ABSTRACT

Through qualitative interviews with eleven people who have investments in girliness, feminism, and fashion, the article centres around the concept of “wilful girliness,” understood as a constructed phenomenon, which focuses on ideas about girliness in relation to consciousness, and in relation to empowerment. This approach to the subject is proposed as a way of moving away from rooting (dis)empowerment within a person’s body, and towards seeing and acknowledging the embodiment of a (feministic) conscious girliness as a historical construction rather than a personal quality. It argues that a wilful girliness is temporarily stabilised through a set of contingent exclusions and should be understood as a consistent site of contest, an active process without origin and end, that takes shape within a specific context, deeply entangled and inseparable from existing power structures. The article highlights the importance of acknowledging the body and its abilities as a crucial starting point in the conditional activity of the negotiation of wilful girliness. It goes on and untangles the responsibility of embodying this fluctuating construction from the girly individual. The article concludes by suggesting the importance of interrogating the mere fact that a wilful girliness is sought after and used as a dominant reference point and criteria in regard to girliness *per se* and calls for a more varied understanding of girliness.

**Keywords:** girliness, girly, femininity, critical femininity studies, girlhood studies, feminism, (dis)empowerment, consciousness, intersectionality, Stockholm

“**WHAT IS YOUR** intention,” Aster asked bluntly. It was the beginning of March. The weather was invigorating and crisp. We had just met in a semi-crowded café in the centre of Stockholm. We were standing on either side of the table and had yet to sit down. The table was positioned such that it provided us with a sense of privacy amidst all the cinnamon

bun-eating guests. Although I did not give the other guests any significant attention, I felt their presence as their eyes targeted us. Aster, a twenty-four-year-old who identifies as gender fluid, stood out, wearing predominantly mint green and baby pink. With a pale and powdered complexion, big glasses with transparent arches, pink hair organised in two shoulder length braids: Aster expressed a confident precision and gave a sweet impression.

It was hard not to capitulate and accept the image of myself reflected in Aster's suspicious eyes when they continued by saying: "You know there are a lot of people who think that just because you dress like this you are a victim, that you only do it for the male gaze. Some feminists think I am oppressed, that I ought to be liberated." The words flowed past Aster's pink, painted lips like a mantra. Like running water. Spoken with a fluid rhythm. It was obvious that this was not the first time they uttered these exact words, in this precise way. Like they were answering to an unspoken accusation, caused by my presence, they defended themselves from the understanding of girliness as oppressed and in need of liberation. Like a sullen awareness that is in some cases requested from the (conscious) girly individual, Aster expressed this in order to demonstrate that their girliness had the "right" intentions and was done for all the "right" reasons. Aster expressed a reflexive awareness of how discriminatory structures are in place, and of how these structures affect different ways of doing girliness. Aster wanted to make sure that my intentions were right, that I had not come with an opposing agenda – that I understood that their doing of girliness was conscious, rather than imposed upon them. Aster's statement highlights the demanding pressure of being acknowledged as one who embodies a conscious girliness, while it raises urgent questions regarding whose embodiment of girliness is seen as oppressed rather than liberated. The question hung in the air throughout the interview, lingered between us, it never left my mind.

Through qualitative interviews, this article centres around girliness in relation to what I refer to as the concept of "wilful girliness," as a constructed phenomenon, which focuses on ideas about girliness in relation to both consciousness and empowerment. This approach to the subject

is proposed as a way of moving away from rooting (dis)empowerment within a person's body, and towards seeing and acknowledging the embodiment of a (feministic) conscious girliness as a historical construction rather than a personal quality, and thereby focuses on the cultural frames that structure our ways of recognising girliness as either wilful or not. By focusing on the concept of wilful girliness, this article demonstrates the conditional negotiation and untangles the responsibility of embodying this fluctuating construction from the girly individual. The first two sections, "Locating Imaginaries of Girliness" and "Weaving Girly Stories Together," situate the study. The analysis is divided in to two sections: "Being (Un)conscious and (Un)aware" and "Navigating Victimisation and Responsibility." I close this article with questioning the mere fact that being wilful is used as a dominant reference point and criteria in regard to girliness *per se*, and call for a more varied understanding of girliness.

### **Locating Imaginaries of Girliness**

In this article, my own inquiry on the subject matter will focus primarily on what I refer to as the concept of "wilful girliness." The two words – put together somewhat deceitfully – suggest that girliness is, or can be done, consciously, deliberately, and intentionally. This combination of words also suggests that girliness can be done in the opposite way – unintentionally and unconsciously. A wilful act can also be understood as a matter of being determined, as having one's way regardless of the consequences. This also suggests that a person who acts wilfully girly also bears the responsibility of the effects of that action. The concept is presented as a way to highlight how a wilful girliness is regarded as a dominant position and how the individual is held responsible for achieving this construction. I strongly believe that the ways we (do not) talk about girliness matter, and given that we routinely describe some doings as empowered and conscious and others as (dis)empowered and unconscious, the wilful girliness comes in to existence whether we intend it to or not. Thus, acknowledging that ideas about a wilful girliness exist should not be understood as equivalent to the repetition or consolida-

tion of a wilful girliness *per se* – one can speak about a wilful girliness without subscribing to these ideas.

I believe that the ongoing willingness to put girliness into question – to “emancipate” and “empower” girliness – opens up ways in which the concept can be imagined. The act of putting traditional notions of girliness under scrutiny is a process imbedded within contextual power structures that shape new paradigms and norms regarding the subject. The construction of the wilful girly subject implements both possibilities and limitations for which subject can embody this understanding at present. On one hand, drawing out the contours of the wilful girliness creates the subject position, while on the other hand, defining it isolates the subject position, and thus creates limitations for which subject can embody this understanding at present. Moreover, these movements around girliness and its alleged emancipation and liberation should be seen as “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (Foucault 1978, 45) and not as objective truths. Power and pleasure, and liberation and oppression, are always intermingled and are simultaneously present. Wilful girliness’ possibilities and limitations should be understood as conditional, but not absolutely repressive. I argue that it is important to critically examine and interrogate the limits of the concept’s inclusivity since the term is characterised by incompleteness – it is important to constantly be aware of its current instable shape, of its present inclusions and exclusions.

Girliness is a heterogeneous open-ended concept, an ambiguous and multiple contextual configuration that comes to matter in the intersection where gendered, raced, and classed identities are intertwined (Driscoll 2002; Gonick 2003; Aapola et al. 2005; Werner 2013). The concept’s instability makes it possible to shift away from viewing girliness as a natural and essential quality to being able to see it as created within discourses. In doing so, we see more clearly how “being girly” and embodying girliness are dependent on time and place and can be constructed and imagined differently in different contexts (Driscoll 2013; Rentschler and Mitchell 2016). In a similar way to the terms woman and girl, girly is a productive term open for reconstruction and re-

interpretation, where some understandings and associations stubbornly stick whereas others never seem to take hold (Butler 2007, 45). One could say that the term *girly* carries highly specific associations, albeit temporary and contextual, which makes it somewhat difficult to define even though its presence is present. Perceptions of what *girliness* is, are specific yet vague, where current ideas sometimes appear as unchanging and natural. A distinct example of this is how in the modern-day West the colour pink is strongly associated with *girliness*, whereas in the 1950s the colour was more commonly associated with masculinity and boyishness (Ambjörnsson 2011, 9–10). At present, being *girly* is commonly associated with being young or youthful, and female or feminine. But within these ideas about *girliness*, power dimensions other than gender and age may be at play, and while this drawing and redrawing of *girliness*' contours can come in many forms, being *girly* is often imagined in relation to certain stereotypes. Moreover, I think it is important to note that "being *girly*" is not a doing reserved for identifying with being a girl. Walter Lippmann (1965, 54–5) sums it up well: "[W]e do not first see and then define; we define and then see."

To complicate the *girly* matter further, it is necessary to state that every temporary stabilisation of *girliness* is marked by contradiction, where different ideas rely on each other to get their specific meanings. Various meanings, experiences, and understandings of *girliness* are always in conversation with each other and are not separated or produced in solitude. Moreover, different kinds of femininities and *girly* identities come to exist in relation to each other, where the definitions of, and distinctions between, a (dis)empowered, a grownup, a young, and a *girly* femininity are somewhat blurry, unclear, and shifting. However, the embodiment of *girliness* is often described in a derogatory way as a more timid and unobtrusive variant of a more mature and grown up femininity. *Girliness* is seen as a less sought after bodily conduct – a presence marked by absence, adorned in deficiency, it is the (unwanted) offspring derived from the multiple worlds of strong femininities. Furthermore, there may be a multiplicity of femininities and *girly* identities articulated in a certain context, but this does not mean that these expressions

exist on similar terms and that individuals have a myriad of choices of variants to assume – gender, age, class, race, functionality, and sexuality, to name a few factors, all play their part, and they constrain, as well as produce different doings.

To make myself crystal clear, girliness, in its variety of forms, appears by defining it, though that does not mean that just anything goes. There is, however, no untouched core to expose. There is no secret key that unlocks the door, guides us into the room where the “real girliness” gently awaits – untouched by sticky fingers and grabby hands – waiting to be discovered and brought in to light. Consequently, the question as to whether or not discourses on girliness reflect reality or are realistically portrayed is (in this article) somewhat irrelevant – instead my focus is on the discursive processes whereby certain expressions are framed as wilful – conscious, progressive, and emancipated, while others are perceived as unconscious – oppressed and outdated. There is no finalised version. Girliness is continually revisited and refashioned, but never found or forgotten.

### **Weaving Girly Stories Together**

The stories that guide this article are assembled from my master thesis in gender studies (Litzén 2017). The study was delimited in time and space to then present-day Stockholm in January to June in the year 2017. The empirical material was gathered through semi-structured ethnographic interviews with eleven people who had interests and investments in girliness, feminism, and fashion (Davis 2008). The interviews were conducted and audio-recorded in Swedish and then translated to English. The interviewees were selected through a strategic selection, which is a process of choosing someone as being suitable, though not necessarily representative, and were found through Facebook, Instagram, and word of mouth (Trost 2010, 138). The call for participants stated that I was looking for people who considered themselves to be someone who identified with a girly style and had thoughts on feminism, clothes, and girliness.<sup>1</sup> They were diverse in age (18 to 35) and had different gendered identities: eight identified as women, one identified as a man, one iden-

tified as gender fluid and one did not think in terms of gender identity at all. The majority of them were able-bodied and white. Furthermore, the selection of interviewees was not based on any criteria for statistical representativeness and the chosen people will validate some people's perspectives while leaving many other perspectives behind (Davis 2008, 109–10). The empirical material, generated through the interview process, was analysed through a discursive thematic analysis, which enabled me to examine how certain meanings have become authoritative and meaningful while others have become unthinkable, impossible, and meaningless (Braun and Clarke 2006, 95). All of the participants' names have been replaced with names of flowers, in order to achieve anonymity and to let their stories blossom.

It is not only the selection of interviewees that needs to be accounted for. In concurrence with Donna Haraway (1988), I take the epistemological position that I am a co-creator and a part of the world I am studying rather than a neutral observer. My involvement in the research is inevitable, and not simply a matter of choice or preference. Since I have co-constructed the empirical material, I am to some degree always connected to and part of the research. I am the spider in the web that merges these separate stories into a coherent study, vigilantly weaving girly memories and experiences together for others to read and absorb. As it is not possible to relive an "original experience," whether it be my own or someone else's, I employ the benefit of hindsight by retroactively and selectively writing about these experiences from my current positioning. As a white, twenty-seven-year-old, self-identified woman located in Stockholm – my experiences of embodying girliness are particular and limited, and come to matter in the intersection where categories are interwoven (Crenshaw 2006). My own investment in and relationship to girliness is a passionate and ambivalent one, filled with just as much certainty as doubt, with abundant pleasure, as well as with conflicting trouble. Despite, or perhaps because of, my contrary feelings towards the subject, feelings of being more or less forced to become familiar with the structural sexism<sup>2</sup> girly individuals find themselves faced with, while being privileged to be unrestricted by structural racism, homo-

phobia, and ableism, girliness has preoccupied me in an altering, yet specific way throughout my life. I am convinced, in line with Diana Mulinari (2005), that:

[O]ur biographies affect not only why we have chosen to study what we study, but also the conditions under which we get access to the field, what will be said and how our research will be interpreted and read. (Mulinari 2005, 116; my translation)

Position and personal experience are therefore of great importance and have enabled my particular point of view as well as my access to the participants' stories.

### **Being (Un)conscious and (Un)aware**

Despite my long preparation prior to the interview, Aster's suspicious attitude and revealing despondency, as described in the opening of this article, had me feeling unprepared. Even though I could understand it, I was caught off guard. I could not help but think, as I looked at Aster, "what if they think I am here to prove they suffer from a false feminist consciousness?" Judging from Aster's direct question, I understood that they were perfectly aware of the bad reputation of girliness, since this was something Aster mentioned before we even had had the chance to sit down – and here I do not refer to bad as in badass and rebellious, but rather as in conformist and obedient. The fact that Aster commented on this understanding of girliness reveals that there is a tenacious and lively persistence in viewing practices labelled as girly as a result of an oppression that imprisons subjects who lack critical consciousness (Lönn 2016, 50; Österholm 2012, 20–1). Aster's statement also indicates that there is a tendency to assume that indulging in fashion and the surface is incompatible with the feminist stance, and is burdened with negative connotations, and is the antithesis of intellectual depth (Dahl 2009; 2011; 2012).

I had somewhat optimistically hoped that Aster would understand that my intentions were *different* from other (femininity sceptical) feminists. That my intentions were coming from *another* feminist place. A



girly time and place. That my intentions, just like Aster's, were conscious, "good" and perhaps even the "right" ones. I remember feeling uncomfortable as I began to reflect on my own presence, my own intention, and doubted that my theoretical and emotional engagement and investment in the subject of girliness was visible. I became awkwardly aware of how doing research involves being both perceived and received – our meeting, then and there, was contingent upon our situatedness, which meant that I as a researcher received Aster at the same time as Aster received me. Earlier that day I had struggled to decide if I should apply red lipstick, and at that point, I was relieved that I had done so. I hoped it would reveal my history and baggage of "girly stories." As we had met solely to discuss girliness, feminism, and fashion, it would be a (fashionable) fabrication to say that I had not carefully considered my outfit.

Aster's statement put me as a (conscious) researcher in a position where I had to face my own agenda, interpreted through their eyes. I was perceived as potentially being "that type of researcher," that which I had intended to set me and my own research apart from. I had no desire to be the researcher who ruthlessly sets out to once and for all uncover the universal truth about femininity and girliness, by blaming individuals for structural problems and reducing all kinds of femininities to mere expressions of oppression. This sexist logic underlies Sheila Jeffreys' book *Beauty and Misogyny* (2005). Jeffreys (2005, 46) argues that femininity is the socially constructed expression of subordination. In a similar vein, Susan Brownmiller states in her book *Femininity* (1984, 2) that "femininity, in essence, is a romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations." She argues that, "to care about feminine fashion, and do it well, is to be obsessively involved in inconsequential details on a serious basis" (Brownmiller 1984, 81). Despite the sizable body of varied feminist work on femininities, Jeffreys and Brownmiller focus on a one-sided understanding of them. This stubborn and single-minded understanding has, however, endured much criticism, and should by no means set the tone for the blossoming heterogeneous subject. Nevertheless, I think it is important to acknowledge these obstinate trends, as they persist despite persistent criticism. The question is whether the

relationships between femininities, triviality, and oppression have ever been challenged enough, since there is still a strong tendency to value different expressions of femininity in terms of how wilful, aware, and conscious they are. Furthermore, the problematic “oppressed” core remains intact, and doing girliness becomes a matter of doing it in a “correct,” “strong,” “liberated,” and “conscious” way (Nilson 2013).

Aster’s attitude can also be understood as a positioning against a sexist, victimised, and infantilised attitude towards femininities in general and girliness in particular. As many of the other participants did, Aster differentiated their doing of girliness from a weak and oppressed version of it. Aster went on to explain how a girly way of dressing is always seen as the result of an external imposition, the result of pressure from an oppressive, male dominated society. A choice not seen as an active choice but rather as a passive compulsion, something one has to engage in entirely for someone else’s pleasure. Aster was fed up with the inescapable fact that the male gaze was something they felt obliged to define themselves and their girliness in relation to. Ulrika Dahl (2016) argues that few within contemporary gender and queer studies would,

contend that femininity is a property or an essence, or the visual expression of an authentic inner (heterosexual) core; even if many feminist traditions continue to understand it as an external imposition and oppression. (Dahl 2016, 13)

Following Dahl (2009, 65), I believe that we need to question the supposed natural link between femininity, narcissism, and self-objectification, and pose a series of question to the understanding of femininity as “a masquerade solely produced by, for and within a phallo-centric order.” However, like Dahl, I remain cautious to not reproduce dichotomisation, where one femininity becomes chosen and the another forced, one becomes natural and the other artificial (Dahl 2009, 48; 2011, 21; see also Mattsson and Pettersson 2007, 240). With this in mind, it becomes important to question the somewhat hopeful binary understanding of girliness. To illustrate what I mean, I move on to discuss the embodi-

ment of a wilful (feministic) conscious girliness in relation to two examples. Vinca, an eighteen-year-old, abled bodied, self-identified woman, explained:

To be ultra-feminine is then, as I mentioned, a kind of protest, because you are very feminine, but you are almost aggressively feminine. So, people get frustrated and confused by it. You do not fit in any more as the girl they were interested in, you do not become an object in the same way.

Vinca described how being ultra-feminine is a strategy – a way for her to resist objectification. She described dressing ultra-feminine as a strategy to refuse and oppose the idea that femininity and girliness are effects of patriarchy, and dressing in an “aggressively” feminine way is a statement to avoid being labelled as passive and accused of dressing to please men – “you do not fit in any more as the girl they were interested in.” Vinca’s statement shows how being ultra-feminine is a way for her to renounce the heterosexual norm and highlights how important it is to avoid the understanding of being girly as synonymous with being a passive victim. It is, however, also important to not set up a dichotomisation between normative and non-normative femininity or girliness since this could maintain a distinction between these as natural and hence maintain a deterministic order (Dahl 2011). The disruptions of conventional narratives of girliness are always in relation to a wider discourse, where structural inequalities are interwoven and enable as well as disable certain narratives as legitimate and illegitimate doings (Wilson 2003, 241–2). Furthermore, the separation of oppressed qualities and attributes from emancipatory qualities and attributes often appears to consolidate a type of rigid and immobile stance – a model that tends to reinforce those intractable binaries. One girliness untouched and one touched by patriarchy, one that breaks and another one that conforms to norms. As Vinca’s statement shows, being understood as wilful, conscious, and empowered is paradoxically coupled with an overwhelming fear of being perceived as unconscious and (dis)empowered. Nevertheless, in order to be understood as wilful, certain things must be in place.

To complicate the matter, we can see how the ultra-femininity that was associated with protest for Vinca is described as an impossible doing for Sedum, a twenty-nine-year-old, blind, self-identified woman. Sedum's positioning gives her a different set of possibilities for the negotiation of girliness in general and of ultra-femininity in particular. She embodies what she thinks people might refer to as a more "traditional girliness" rather than an "ultra-girliness." She explained to me that being blind puts her in a position of not being able to embody a doing where she would be perceived as one who questions girliness' norms:

To intentionally apply lipstick outside of the lip line, or to intentionally have a lot of something like that, I am aware that it would be interpreted as me not knowing that it was wrong. It wouldn't be seen as intentional. Consciously doing something wrong is easier to motivate if you can see.

In this example, Sedum pinpointed how an ultra-girliness is intimately connected to and gains meaning from the body performing it. Sedum was aware that her embodiment of an ultra-girliness would not be acknowledged as conscious. Even if applying lipstick outside of the lip line is understood as norm-challenging in the context of girliness, Sedum's doing would still be seen as "wrong" and unintentional. This shows that embodying norm-breaking attributes is not enough to meet the criteria for embodying a norm-breaking girliness. Ability and body type are also factors. As previous research on Western neoliberal societies and cultures has shown, strength and "acceptable activism" (Mulari 2015, 200) are frequently individualised and often relegated to white, middle-class, young, and able bodies (McRobbie, 2007). To put it another way, structural inequalities effect who can embody a wilful girliness and participate in these different notions of feminist resistance (Keller 2012; 2015, 280).

To be perceived as one who challenges girly norms, in a wilful manner, one must be able to access the construction of a wilful girliness in order for the embodiment to be seen as conscious. Furthermore, a wilful

girliness is a conditional doing dependent on what is already seen as in place. It is thus possible to understand how wilful girliness – being understood as embodying an empowered girliness – is a concept and a doing that focuses on some bodies more than others. A concept that makes certain bodies feel more at home and at ease than others. I argue that the experiences and embodiments from where the (feminist) critique emerges must be highlighted, rather than universalised. It is important to complicate what is recognised as a conscious doing in order to question who is given the possibility and means to perform this understanding at present. It is important to be aware of the subject who holds the problem formulation privilege – to examine which bodily experiences are the starting points for the feministic critique of an oppressive girliness – to be aware of what is made out to be the “problem” with girliness in the first place.

Despite differences in positioning and different forms of privileges and oppressions, these accounts paint a picture of how a person’s ability to achieve a wilful girliness is a conditional doing tied to discursive power relations. Developing an understanding of the frames that label these doings as different in the first place – the frames that label some doings as aware and conscious and others as unaware and unconscious – is important. The link between these statements is the present frames that require girliness to be seen and measured in terms of being wilful or not. In public discourses, achieving a wilful girliness is often described as a pressure, as if a wilful girliness is something that everyone should and could attain, and that any sort of compromise in its pursuit is seen as the individual’s own fault and failure (Werner and Nordström 2013). The girly individual should, with just the right amount of will and drive, strive to embody a more conscious girliness in order to redefine “oppressed girliness” – the phrase, and the lived and experienced reality – as something from a forgotten world and past. And as such, it postulates in principle that all girly individuals should (want to) strive to be seen as wilful. Ultimately, those who fail to live up to these dominant norms are held responsible for their own failure.

## Navigating Victimisation and Responsibility

The “problem” with girliness, I argue, is a “problem” concerning responsibility – when the dilemma of girliness is located at the subject, it is there the responsibility is then laid. At the heart of this understanding lies the problematic perception that the girly subject is the one who brings the sexism about. I argue that the effects of the girly subject’s actions are often outside the girly subject’s control. Just as many invested in the subject of girliness have learned the hard and often times lonely way, I would like to continue here by shifting the blame and shame elsewhere. Shift the responsibility away from the girly subjects.

Celosia, a twenty-eight-year-old self-identified woman, made an illustrative observation regarding age and empowerment when she expressed that she was able to embrace girliness without feeling inferior now that she is older. To her, being girly had exclusively negative connotations when she was under the age of twenty-five. She constantly tried to avoid being labelled as girly, but despite her efforts, people around her often accused her of acting, looking and being girly in her bodily conduct, due to her soft voice and short height (158 cm). She stated:

When you’re twenty-five you’re not a child any more, you’re really an adult, so it was then I felt I could start being more girly without losing power. Or I felt like I could shoulder that role and be cute without feeling inferior [...]. It becomes another thing [when you are older], like you’re fucking with the system rather than just being a product of it. Because you should not be girly when you’re over twenty-five, so it feels like a statement [*giggle*] actually.

In this example, Celosia explains how girliness can be a statement – in her case, in the embodiment of girliness when over a certain age. Furthermore, Celosia understands that there is a certain time and (bodily) place (in a cis-girl’s life) when one is expected to be girly. Thus, being girly when it was no longer expected of her was described as her making a statement and doing resistance towards a normative understanding of girliness. Furthermore, in Celosia’s statement the understanding of

girliness as being wilful, as being an act of resistance and empowerment, is described as possible when the person is conscious of what is expected of them. A wilful girliness relies on acting unexpectedly and not in accordance to current norms regarding what a (dis)empowered normative girliness is defined as. Behaving in accordance to a normative girliness (a young cis-girl) then becomes synonymous with being unaware and therefore (dis)empowered, while not behaving accordingly becomes synonymous with a certain type of illuminated (feministic) awareness and empowerment. Furthermore, the norm breaking girliness comes to exist in relation to the normative (Butler 2004, 42).

Many of the other participants also attempted to circumvent these assumptions regarding girliness and its intimate connection to the cis-girl – who was seen as a domesticated, dependent, immature and intellectually disqualified being (Hirdman 2002, 71), associated with passive roles and negative attributes (Magnusson 2013, 40). It was also important for the participants to claim girliness as something not necessarily connected to weakness and childishness, due to its history of infantilisation – the historical unwillingness to recognise one who is “being girly” as having the possibility of representing maturity and independence.

Azalea, a twenty-six-year-old self-identified woman, talked about how being a woman and expressing a lot of girliness is not always easy, as the expression of girliness and the embodiment of girly qualities are so often described as being clothed in effeminate shortcomings – girliness is seen as the younger, less independent and weaker sibling of the older, more mature strong femininity. She shook her head while stating that, “people think that you make yourself some kind of victim, because dressing girly has always been associated with being weak and fragile.” She explained how being girly signals to others that one is passive, and she described how people do not understand why she, “as a grown woman,” would want to be associated with “all of that.” Kajsa Widegren (2010) argues that insinuating that an adult is girly is often regarded as degrading and sexist in a culture that promotes adult professionalism. The reactions to Azalea’s embodiment show that the embodiment of girliness becomes the “problem” – that there is little room for girliness

to represent anything other than submission and oppression. That girliness has to be done in a specific way, a wilful way, in order to be seen as understandable. Azalea stated, “people don’t understand what I’m doing and sometimes I don’t really know myself.” In line with Heta Mulari (2015, 224), I argue that the “girly femininity” is only seen as subversive if the person “knows why” they are doing it – where the “right reasons” are not the result of oppression and manipulation. The criteria that the person “knows why” they are doing it becomes crucial, as well as having the physical capacity of embodying this understanding. Knowing why, and having the physical capacity to embody this wilful understanding of girliness, becomes the necessary conditions in order to be seen as one who embodies consciousness and empowerment. The difference between objectification and subjectification is made out to be a question of consciousness, where the individual is held responsible for their own ability to perform a wilful girliness.

Azalea talked about responsibility, about how people have questioned her and put the responsibility on her, and about how she has been accused of making herself a victim. The girly subject is positioned as the one who acts disobediently and unreasonably, and causes sexism – “why would you make yourself a victim?” This way of thinking puts the responsibility on the individual rather than on the structures that create the problem. The girly subject is seen as having or showing a stubborn and determined intention to do as they want, regardless of the predetermined sexist consequences. Not troubling this understanding of sexism is troublesome. As a result of this thinking, the problem with girliness is made to be girliness itself, the girly subject is made out to be the one who should take more responsibility, and the solution is that they must dress and behave differently. Ultimately, the individual is seen as being in need of being saved from girliness itself – girly things, behaviours, interests, colours, and clothes (Johansson and Österholm 2013).

The participants’ stories show that the embodiment of girliness is intimately associated with a certain type of awareness of a sexualised and objectified attention, in which the individual is held responsible for the behaviour of others. Being wilfully girly is seen, by others, as acting in



a stubborn and unreasonable way, and the girly individual can therefore be held responsible for the attention that is “attracted.” A wilful girliness becomes a doing that is seen as irrational and a doing where sexism becomes expected. The one who is responsible is the one who wilfully acted girly, despite the (expected) consequences. Sexist behaviour, intentional or not, is therefore not necessarily performed by an individual person, but instead functions as a shared assumption, a predetermined consequence of a wilful girliness. Furthermore, the understanding of the heterosexual male gaze is not just a located doing, done by a physical body, but is also a way of thinking that has reached overly deterministic outcomes (Egan and Hawkes 2008). The embodiment of girliness was described in the interviews as the taking of a (sexualised) risk that one needs to assume responsibility for, as not doing so would be naïve and would cause people to question the person’s judgement. Furthermore, in the participants’ stories, the objectification and sexualisation of girliness is described as an awareness that one must be aware of, otherwise one will be blamed for being unaware of the “signals” it sends. If one does not act according to this awareness, the consequences are the girly person’s own fault, and negotiating sexism and sexualisation becomes an individual project and responsibility. Girliness becomes the location of the problem. The location, the girly individual, becomes the site of responsibility. The girly position is interpellated into discourses on objectification and sexualisation. This interpellation and doing is something that is directed towards the girly subject. This is not something one can opt out of, it is not a matter of choice or a matter of seeing or perceiving the world. It is not a perspective, it is a person’s reality, a day to day life.

### **Conclusion: Thinking of Unthinkable Doings**

More ink must flow over the “problematic” story of wilful girliness. Questions such as: Must the girly individual be a conscious subject? Or must girliness be wilful in order for us to put up with its presence? I cannot help but wonder, is girliness only interesting and desirable if it is linked to agential and emancipatory qualities? The fact that a wilful

girliness is conditional is problematic as it is, but the fact that a wilful girliness is privileged and sought after *per se* is, as this article has argued, as important. In a similar manner to Alex Alvina Chamberland (2016, 125), who argues that we need to talk about the complex question of “passing” in relation to trans people as a privilege beyond the conditional, I strongly believe that we need to talk about wilful girliness beyond the conditional. The solution to the “problem” of girliness is not to be acknowledged and seen as included in the concept of “wilful girliness” – since inclusion is an embrace that enables simultaneously as it excludes, draws boundaries and thus creates divides, divides that entwine (bodies) – and because of this we need to talk about the wilful girliness beyond the conditional matter. We must interrogate the dominant position of the concept, the hegemonic strive to be seen as wilful – conscious and empowered. We need to be weary of the current conditions and cultural frames that render some bodies and doings of girliness as wilful. We must create room for alternate stories, beyond a wilful doing, where the constructive character of wilfulness is highlighted. Through the conditional recognition of the concept of “wilful girliness,” I believe that we can shift away from an individualisation of the structural problems and thus recognise and question the constructive quality of progress, stagnation, strength, weakness, (un)consciousness and (dis)empowerment.

This article has drawn the existence of a wilful girliness carefully enough to make it visible and thereby shown how its construction is both limiting and liberating, and how the concept can reproduce the same kinds of exclusions, it intends to critique. Being girly is limiting and liberating, it is a process of constant doing, with multiple starting points that repeatedly begin. It is a matter of constant doing where one’s positionality affects what is at stake. While I am convinced that the concept of wilful girliness is conditional, I believe that it is important to note that its limitations are not absolutely repressive. Moreover, I am sceptical towards the production of the wilful girly subject as an impossible feminist position and argue that although one should problematise who has access to this subject position. It is important to question the

re-emerging suspicion and unease towards girly engagements within feminist discourses. I attach investments and weight to the multiple girly subjects which are not yet known, and call for analyses and engagements that require a reflexive receptiveness of what constitutes a wilful girliness, and of who can embody this subject position at present. We have to keep our notions of girliness open to the tension that will always exist.

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## NOTES

1. I initially searched for participants online via Facebook and Instagram. On Facebook I posted a call for participants to two groups for people who identify with femininity. Friends also posted my call for participants to their walls on Facebook, and people in turn liked the post, which caused it to spread further. Two of the participants I interviewed contacted me via email after seeing the Facebook post. In order to find more participants, I then searched more directly. It was crucial that the people I contacted had expressed interest and investment in fashion, girliness, and feminism. I therefore contacted people I found on Instagram who wrote about these topics, and two of the people I contacted were interested in participating in the study. I came in contact with five of the participants through word of mouth. I was previously acquainted with only one of these five. The remaining two participants are people I was previously acquainted with, and they became involved when I contacted them directly to see if they were interested. All of the participants were given the same explanation of the purpose of the study, and the same ethical guidelines. The aim of the study was presented to the participants as the following: "The study aims at highlighting different people's experiences of dressing girly and therefore I am interested in hearing what thoughts you have about this subject."
2. Following Julia Serrano (2007, 14), I understand the concept of sexism as "rooted in the presumption that femaleness and femininity are inferior to (and only exist for the sexual benefit of) maleness and masculinity."

## SAMMANFATTNING

Genom kvalitativa intervjuer med elva personer som har investeringar i flickighet, feminism och mode, centreras artikeln kring begreppet "avsiktlig flickighet" [*wilful girliness*], förstått som ett konstruerat fenomen som fokuserar på idéer om flickighet i förhållande till medvetenhet och i relation till egenmakt [*empowerment*]. Detta tillvägagångssätt föreslås som ett sätt att förflytta sig från att befästa makt(lös)het [(dis)empowerment] inom en persons kropp och att se och erkänna utförandet av en (feministisk) medveten flickighet som en historiskt situerad konstruktion snarare än en personlig kvalitet. Artikeln argumenterar för att en avsiktlig flickighet tillfälligt stabiliseras genom en uppsättning kontingenta utslutningar och bör förstås som en pågående process under konstant förhandling, en aktiv process utan ursprung och slut, som tar form i ett specifikt sammanhang, djupt förankrat och oskiljaktigt från befintliga maktstrukturer. Artikeln belyser vikten av att erkänna kroppen och dess förmågor som en avgörande utgångspunkt i den villkorade aktiviteten i förhandlingen av avsiktlig flickaktighet. Vidare fortsätter artikeln med att utreda och belysa ansvaret och kravet att förkroppsliga den fluktuerande konstruktionen av avsiktlig flickighet från den flickiga individen. Artikeln avslutas genom att lyfta fram vikten av att ifrågasätta faktumet att en avsiktlig flickighet eftersträvas och används som en dominerande referenspunkt och som ett kriterium i frågan om flickighet i sig och kräver en mer varierad förståelse av flickighet.