

Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girl Culture, 1920–1945. *By Kelly Schrum*. New York: Palgrave, 2004. xii + 209 pp. Illustrations, figures, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 1-4039-6176-X.

Reviewed by Nan Enstad

What are the habits of the teenage girl? Ask the question this way, and you will likely invoke the advertiser's dream: a fashion-conscious girl, white and middle class, with a cell phone in her backpack, headphones pumping the latest music, who likes to instant-message her friends and go to the mall. She's exasperating, but we love her. How can we sell her something today?

The simultaneous emergence of teenage girls as a social group and a market niche in the United States is the subject of Kelly Schrum's innovative new book. Schrum argues that girls were the first teenagers. Until recently, most studies of teens have focused on delinquent boys of the post–World War II era. In contrast, Schrum argues that parents, professionals, and marketers recognized girls as the key “teens” from 1920 to 1945. The rising rate of high-school attendance was the crucial prerequisite for the emergence of teenagers, giving them a common location in which to develop strong peer affiliations. Schrum's study explores the ways that girls' culture developed inextricably from girls' *consumer* culture, as businesses targeted them for an ever-increasing range of products and as girls themselves consumed products in ways that sometimes exceeded marketers' anticipation or comprehension. Schrum conveys a fascinating story of the symbiotic interplay between youth culture and marketing, and argues that these years saw “a distinct teenage culture in the making” (p. 8).

Schrum traces the emergence of girls' culture through chapters on fashion; beauty and health products; music, radio and dancing; and motion pictures. Girls utilized the products and activities provided by consumer-culture industries in order to shape a group identity and separate themselves from adults. The fashion industry was the first to market specifically to “teens,” by which it meant exclusively girls. Ready-made clothing manufacturers created sizing for teens and addressed them directly in advertisements. However, the development of the teen market was slow and sporadic, as the industry

operated without the benefit of market research. Girls utilized fashion products to create fads and to experiment with sexual expressiveness, sometimes embracing items marketed to them, but other times avoiding women's sections altogether by wearing boys' and men's clothes. Schrum argues that teens consumed beauty products, music, and motion pictures before these industries recognized girls of this age as a market niche. By consuming products marketed primarily to adults in a distinctive "teen" way, girls led rather than followed industry developments. Nevertheless, Schrum finds girls' ventures into consumer culture to have mixed effects: they created fan cultures that allowed them independence from, and resistance to, adult authority, but they also encountered intense pressures to conform to gendered expectations mutually reinforced across the different popular-culture forms. The beauty industry, in particular, "indoctrinated teenagers into a world of appearance and consumption" and bequeathed to them an expansive insecurity (p. 96). Parents not only did not protect girls from unattainable beauty standards; they also accentuated pressures to navigate this gateway into the adult world successfully.

Schrum's wide range of sources allows her to bring both business leaders and ordinary girls into view as agents in the making of the category of "teens." The argument weaves information from corporate newsletters and advertisements together with girls' high-school yearbooks, letters, and diaries as well as academic studies of youth in the period. The result is an engaging read that stays close to girls' own experiences and yet never loses sight of the fact that powerful individuals and institutions sought to harness and shape girls' interests and longings in order to drive a new market. As such, this is a book that should interest both business and cultural historians. It is an excellent example of new business histories that attend to the role of ordinary consumers as well as business leaders in the development of capitalism, and to the relation between cultural and economic shifts. Likewise, it is a welcome addition to cultural history, because it shows that girls' culture is not simply their own expression but must be understood instead within a matrix of large, economic institutions in order to reveal historical shifts in daily life.

Schrum's argument is at its weakest when she makes a claim for a pervasive teen culture that crosses race. She includes among her primary sources yearbooks from high schools in the Baltimore, Maryland, area, including four African American high schools.

She finds that the African American school yearbooks, unlike the white ones, occasionally refer to race discrimination, but that the “main themes in relation to teen culture mirrored those in the broad range of high schools” (p. 7). Thus, though race is regularly addressed in the book, it turns out to make no real difference in girls’ teen culture. This claim is especially surprising in the chapters about beauty products and music, because production and marketing in both industries were highly segregated during this era. Schrum notes that white girls negatively associated “frizzy” hair with blacks and that some African American girls used hair straighteners, but she does not discuss the ways in which teens’ beauty culture drew on two parallel industries and was a location for the construction of racial hierarchies and identities. Similarly, in the chapter about music, Schrum acknowledges that African Americans innovated most popular dances, that jazz is “based loosely on African American musical traditions,” and that critics described swing in “racist language” as “animalistic,” but she focuses her entire discussion of swing and music fandom on Benny Goodman and, in the later era, on Frank Sinatra (p. 99). She ignores the great swing innovators wildly popular with black (and some white) audiences, such as Chick Webb, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and many others. In this way, she misses the opportunity to explore how capitalism responded to, and helped institutionalize, segregation nationally during these years of Jim Crow, and how its initiatives might have influenced both black and white teens’ racial identities, albeit in different ways.

Schrum has written a fascinating book that paves new ground in understanding the connections between business and youth culture; she also opens up opportunities for other scholars to explore the ways these markets and identities might divide as well as cohere.

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