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“There’s not going to be any more Hannah Montana”

Media negotiation and multicultural identity in pre-adolescent girls

How do girls with migration background use media culture to negotiate female identity? Though an increasingly popular question, few have considered how multicultural middle class girls grapple with media culture.

To pursue this question, we interviewed 16 pre-adolescent girls, ages 9 to 13, each of whom had either been born in a country other than the United States, or whose mother and/or father had. The families originated from diverse nations in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and South America. All currently live in an affluent suburb of Boston, Massachusetts, and their relative socioeconomic privilege allows us to examine how the girls we interviewed negotiate consumer culture while engaging in the developmentally appropriate task of identity construction, without – we hope – confusing issues rooted in socioeconomic status for issues of immigrant identity. We wish to give these girls a voice as we explore their use of media to in-

form their worldviews and personal identities.

We argue that our informants’ negotiations of a multicultural identity take 1 of 3 approaches. Some interviewees pursue competency in 2 cultures – both U.S. and the culture of their family’s origin. Some bear witness to

2 or more cultures and position themselves in between. Others ignore the non-American culture, asserting their identities as fully American girls. In this paper, we profile 1 girl for each approach, using their discourse about *Hannah Montana* star Miley Cyrus as a key unit of analysis. Identified as “queen of ‘tween’” Cyrus ranked #29 in the 2009 Forbes Celebrity 100 list; her success in music, television and film earned her \$ 25 million in 2008.² During her solo act at the August 2009 *Teen Choice Awards*, then-16-year-old Cyrus engaged in a controversial pole-dancing routine (see Ill. 1), which “set off a firestorm over whether her musical performance at the show – for which she wore short shorts and arguably straddled a pole – was inappropriate” (Umstead, 2009, p. 1). Her routine exemplifies U.S. culture’s broader sexualization of teen girls, which has been roundly condemned by critics including the American Psychological Association (2007), Durham (2008), Oppliger (2008), and Levin and Kilbourne (2008). As our broader study’s overarching aim was to learn how multicultural girls ne-

gotiate sexualized representations of girlhood in U.S. culture, we feel it important to attend to their discourse about Miley Cyrus.

Competency in 2 cultures: Gila (Israeli-American, age 12)

Gila³ moved to the U.S. from Israel when she was 6 and vividly recalls life in Israel. She missed her extended family when she moved to the U.S., but as she made friends, she adjusted so much that when she visits Israel, “it’s weird”. Still, she remains actively engaged with Israeli culture and is an avid reader of Israeli children’s magazines, including *Eyes* and *Young Journeys*. She spends several weeks in Israel every summer.

Gila seems confident in her mastery of both Israeli culture and U.S. culture, attained in part through her observant analysis of both countries’ media. During her visits to Israel, she experiences both Israeli media and imported versions of American media, which she is quick to critique.

Gila: “[...] In Israel, the only thing they have for older kids is the Israeli Disney Channel, so it has American shows, which are in English, but they write the Hebrew translation [...]. And they write the wrong words.”

Rebecca: “Oh, really?”

Gila: “[*The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*] is totally wrong. [...] If one person is saying, ‘Let’s go over to their suite’, because it’s in a hotel, or ‘Alright, let’s go down to the pool’, they just say ‘Come on, let’s go’. They don’t take the time to describe where they’re going, even. So, it’s really annoying.”

In this way, Gila often finds flaws in Hebrew translations that other viewers may miss.

A U.S. media text Gila currently favors is hit makeover show *What Not To Wear*. An important source of make-believe play for Gila, she often creates drawings based on it (see Ill. 2). She explains: “You know how you see, at the beginning, people – they show you the good outfit, and then, they show you the bad one? So, I get

ideas from that.” *What Not To Wear* has also become a way for mother and daughter to bond. They watch the show together, and with Gila’s help, her mother recently bought her first pair of high heels. Gila offers her mother regular wardrobe critiques, which her mom says she values, even though they are sometimes unsolicited. In this vein, Gila criticizes Cyrus for wearing outfits that do not reflect how “someone would actually dress for school at her age”. Upon seeing Cyrus dressed in a simple plaid shirt in a teen magazine, Gila expressed surprise and suspicion:

Gila: “Now I like her outfit. But, no, they’re probably – see – her agents probably want her to look all good and stuff, and like a goody, goody girl and stuff, so they dress her in plain clothes.”

Rebecca: “So you don’t think this is how she normally presents herself? You think it’s her agents?”

Gila: “Like, also now, it’s not actually fashion, but they show that – there’s this thing called *Disney Friends for Change* on Disney Channel, when they do, like for a whole year I think, like they say they’re gonna save the environment, and they try to encourage us to, and then they’re, like, on whatever the date, there’s gonna be – we’re gonna save water, and everyone’s gonna cut down their shower by 2 minutes and not gonna flush the toilet for a few hours. [Judi laughs.] And they show this thing. They have a song for it, and they have them sing facts in them. Like Selena Gomez – she’s like, ‘Did you know that water blah blah blah blah blah?’ And then guys like, ‘Really?’ And then Miley Cyrus is like, ‘Yeah. And guess what!’ And it looked like they so don’t care about it, [...] like their agents told them that it’ll make them popular.”

Gila’s faulting of celebrity spokespeople for insincerity offers another example of how Gila critically consumes media. A quest for authenticity seems to be central to Gila’s media use and identity development: being genuine, being accurate, being true while fitting in are of import. Gila’s mastery of the media gives her power in her own life, where she chooses to be the opposite of Miley Cyrus.



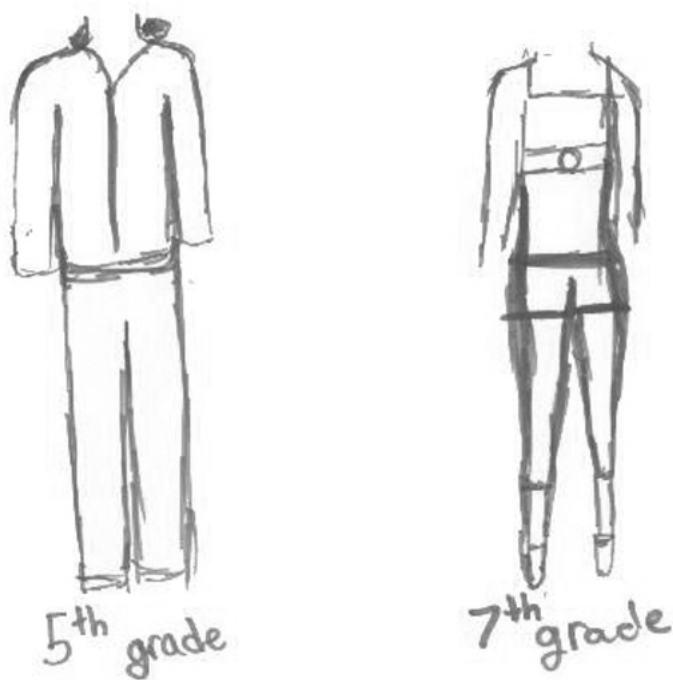
Ill. 2: Gila’s fashion drawing, inspired by *What Not To Wear*

Girl between cultures: Gabriela (Brazilian-British-French-American, age 11)

Although Gabriela was born in the U.S., her mother was born in São Paulo, Brazil, and her father was born in London, England and also has French heritage, with close family living in France. Gabriela travels regularly to all 3 countries, affording her a strong sense of their cultures. When asked about similarities or differences between her interests and those of her international cousins, Gabriela drew from her experiences in Brazil.

Gabriela: “Well, they’re really comfortable with, like, touching the ground and everything, whereas some people here [in the U.S.] are just, like, ewwww, when they see someone touching mud.”

This willingness to touch the ground – to be connected to the earth, to be real – seems a defining characteristic of Gabriela. With her seemingly grounded, thoughtful nature, Gabriela is our prime example of how some girls observe multiple cultures and



Ill. 3: Gabriela's drawing depicting the differences in the way 5th graders and 7th graders dress

position themselves somewhere in between.

*"Hannah Montana is
a bit fake"
(girl, age 11)*

Gabriela has paid attention to international women's sartorial differences. For example, she says, "I guess Brazilians dress more freely, like they can dress whatever they want to dress, so it's a big variety". In terms of beachwear, she notes the U.S. and England are most conservative: whereas Brazilians expose their bottoms, and the French go topless, the Americans and British "have to have, like, a wall in front of them". Gabriela's recognition of cultural differences positions her as an astute global girl, whose understanding of various cultures is grounded in experience and reality. Perhaps for this reason, Gabriela's objection to Miley Cyrus and *Hannah Montana* is on the grounds of realism.

Rebecca: "So, what do you think of Hannah Montana, overall?"

Gabriela: "A bit ... fake. I don't know.

She's always changing how she looks, and how she sings. It's very annoying." Rebecca: "What's annoying about the fact that she's always making those changes?" Gabriela: "It's just that you never really know when she's actually the person singing, or – because she just always has mascara on, and you never know – because sometimes it's mascara, sometimes it's not, and so, it's always something different. It's really annoying."

Rebecca: "Right. What do you think of the fashions and stuff that are shown on shows like *Hannah Montana*?"

Gabriela: "Umm, really shiny. [...] It's – I like plain. I don't really like all of that glittering, and [...] I like plain shirts, sometimes with things written on them."

Gabriela shared without prompting several other instances of behavior she seemed to find inauthentic. She complained that in Brazil, "a lot of the people act more American than the people here". They memorize pop songs and episodes of shows like *SpongeBob Squarepants* so that "if someone comes, they can just know everything by heart". She notices similar artifice at school, complaining that one of her fifth-grader friends "just acts a lot older than me" and is

obsessed with trying to "fit in with the older kids" in seventh and eighth grade (cf. Ill. 3). Gabriela, however, doesn't seem compelled to "fit in". She is content to have an identity that sometimes jumps borders; thus, Miley Cyrus – an ever-changing symbol of U.S. culture – makes too much use of masquerade to resonate with Gabriela, who would rather be herself than somebody else.

Being an American girl: Amanda (Chinese-American, age 12)

Amanda is a sixth-grader of Chinese descent. Her father, born in Hong Kong, moved to the U.S. at the age of 9. Her mother is a first generation American whose parents were born in Guangzhou, China. Amanda identifies as American; her family has raised her exclusively in the U.S. She reports no connection with other cultures, saying, "Sometimes I have trouble finding Beijing, like when I look at a map". She distances herself from Chinese culture and seems to want to avoid being reduced to a race or heritage.

Amanda seems on the cusp of leaving behind tweenhood for full-fledged teenhood. She comes across as bubbly, talkative, and happy to be evolving. Fully engrossed in media and celebrity culture, she has a serious crush on 15-year-old teen idol Justin Bieber; she keeps his posters in her locker and an article about him in her homework binder. She knows the story of his rise to fame by heart and boasts an insider-type knowledge, based on her memorization of small details about him. Bieber is an ongoing source of disagreements between Amanda and her mother, who thinks Bieber too old for Amanda to fixate on. Amanda's parasocial relationship (Horton/Wohl, 1956) with Bieber is quite strong and has an erotic attachment (Cohen, 1997); she wishes she could move to New York to be his girlfriend. Amanda gives Bieber an important role in her slightly early assertion of a teen identity.

*"I just don't like when people say certain things about certain stars that I know the answer to."
(girl, age 12)*

While looking at a teen magazine we shared with her, Amanda expressed glee that it included a photo of Bieber, and then pointed to a photo of Miley Cyrus. She commented, unprompted, that "Nobody really likes her anymore [...] because they think she's weird. She's 16 and then she did this *Teen Choice Awards* thing, her first performance of 'Party in the USA'. So I guess it was inappropriate to some people". When asked if she and her friends dislike it when stars act in sexy ways, like Cyrus did during her pole dancing routine, Amanda answered in a roundabout way supporting Cyrus:

Amanda: "I just don't like when [people] say certain things about certain stars that I know the answer to. I just like 'Argh! You people don't know the answer'. They'll get all like 'Oh my God!' when a star puts up the middle finger or something. David Henry has a tattoo on his back. It's like a bird thing, a cupid thing. So people are like 'Oh my god, he has a tattoo'. [...] So he stuck up the middle finger and everyone's like, 'Oh, he's a Disney Channel star, and he stuck up the middle finger!'"
Rebecca: "So it sounds like issues of if they're good role models, kind of."

Amanda: "[...] When I looked up 'Party in the USA' [on YouTube], there would always be videos like 'Miley Cyrus Party in the USA *Teen Choice Awards*' whatever. Some of [the commenters], they're just like, 'people, get over it. She used the pole for balance. She could have used something else but she chose a pole.'"

Mom: "I guess so many younger girls like her, too."

Amanda: "It's only because she was a Disney Channel star. She's growing up. There's not going to be any more Hannah Montana."

In general, Amanda takes the side of the celebrities whose world she wished to inhabit. Though her parasocial relationship with Bieber was

strongest, she had insider-type knowledge on many celebrities, truly adopting mainstream teen media culture as "her" culture.

By defending Miley Cyrus's right to grow up and engage in a sexualized performance, Amanda is also defending her own right to grow up, as expressed through her parasocial relationship with Justin Bieber. Just as there will soon be no more Hannah Montana, Amanda is quickly leaving tweendom to embrace a more mature teen identity.

Conclusion

Taken altogether, the 3 informants demonstrate the range of cultural identity negotiations we found among our informants. Gila is competent in both U.S. and Israeli culture, maintaining her interest in Israeli media products despite her immersion in her family's new home country, the USA. She uses her knowledge of both cultures to determine the rules of success – vividly demonstrated on *What Not To Wear* – while maintaining a sense of authenticity. Similarly, Gabriela embraces multiple cultures – American, Brazilian, English, and French – but with so many backgrounds, she cannot be all at once; it would be too fragmenting. Therefore, her quest for authenticity brings her to position herself between multiple cultures, feet on the ground – touching the earth – focused on maintaining integrity in her self-identity. On the other hand, Amanda stakes a serious claim to U.S. teen media culture as her own culture, keen on enhancing her parasocial relationship with American celebrities to demonstrate her competency in that mediated realm. For her, as for many young teenage girls around the globe, this fantasy world is most real, prompting acute and powerful feelings. ■

NOTES

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² cf. *Forbes* (2009). *The Celebrity 100*. Retrieved January 24, 2010 from http://www.forbes.com/lists/2009/53/celebrity-09_Miley-Cyrus_EB0C.html.

³ All informant names have been changed.

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