

Reading Celebrities/ Narrating Selves: ‘Tween’ Girls, Miley Cyrus and the Good/Bad Girl Binary

Tiina Vares and Sue Jackson

Abstract

Celebrities feature prominently in the media and popular cultural landscape of ‘tween’ aged girls. While there has been much speculation about the potential influence of celebrities like Miley Cyrus and Vanessa Hudgens on ‘tween’ girls, particularly with respect to ‘growing up too fast’ and becoming ‘sexy too soon’, research with tweens is lacking. This paper draws on material from a research project which explores the ways in which some preteen girls in two cities in New Zealand engage with the popular culture they encounter in their everyday lives. The focus is on the ways in which the participants respond to the image of Miley Cyrus on the cover of *Vanity Fair* (2008), in particular, their critiques of this previously popular celebrity. We explore the ways in which the framing of Cyrus as a ‘bad role model’ and ‘slut’ is used to regulate celebrity identifications, viewing practices and girlhood identities.

Key words: tweens, preteen girls, sexualisation, celebrities, Miley Cyrus.

Introduction

The question which fronts Maggie Hamilton's (2008) book: *What's happening to our Girls?* is also being asked by many parents, educators and academics. The focus on, and concern about, young girls and preteens or 'tweens' (aged approximately 8-12 years) relates to the 'sexualisation of childhood' and the notion that girls in particular are 'growing up too fast' and becoming 'too sexy too soon'. In the majority of popular and academic texts on the topic the increase in sexualised images of girls and women in the media popular culture is framed as a key contributor to this process (APA 2007, Rush and La Nauze 2006, Papadopoulos 2010). Diane Levin and Jean Kilbourne in *So Sexy So Soon* (2008), for example, argue that the 'blame' for 'the problem of sexualised childhood' should be put where 'it rightly belongs – squarely on the purveyors of these media and marketing messages' (p. 13).

Within the media, it is 'celebrity culture' in particular which has been criticized for 'promoting inappropriately hypersexualised clothing to grade school girls' (Durham 2008, p. 29), in particular, the repackaging of preteen idols in an adult form to increasingly younger audiences (Lamb and Brown 2006). Images of, gossip about, and interviews with popular celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Vanessa Hudgens feature in 'tween' magazines, television programmes, music videos, movies and on the internet. It is in the 'tween' years, Hamilton argues, that 'celebrity worship begins in earnest' and celebrities become 'an integral part of tween life' (2008, p. 32). Hence the focus of recent public and academic concern is the potential impact of an increasingly sexualised teen celebrity culture on pre-teen girls. While discussions around this are broad ranging, one issue appears frequently – that of preteen girls imitating or emulating the sartorial styles, language and actions of their favourite celebrities and thus rushing 'headlong into premature adolescence' (Niedzviecki cited in Hamilton 2008, p. 55). In the Australia Institute's study, *Corporate Paedophilia*, the focus on celebrities in 'tween' magazines is seen to encourage young girls to idealize a narrow selection of role models and also encourage them to emulate their styles (Rush and La Nauze 2006, p. 17). Levin and Kilbourne make a similar argument in relation to music videos, '[h]ot young stars like the Spice Girls and Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera wear very sexy clothing and dance provocatively while singing songs with very sexual sometimes violent lyrics. These "stars" are held up for our young daughters to emulate' (2008, p. 45). The

assumed 'effects' of girls' engagement with such sexualised images are broadly encapsulated in the language of 'risk' with respect to 'physical, psychological and sexual harm', for example: precocious sexual behaviour; pressure to adopt sexualised appearance; behaviour; and body image concerns (Rush and La Nauze 2006).

Such framings of the negative power of the media and the concomitant powerlessness/lack of agency of children inform most current discussions of the 'sexualisation of childhood'. Levin and Kilbourne, for example, argue that that children are 'assaulted' by an 'ending barrage' of negative media 'messages' which are 'firmly implanted in their brain' (2008, p. 31). They also have 'limited capacity ... to process information' (Rush and La Nauze 2006, p. 38), are 'more susceptible to suggestion', are unable to see 'how they're being manipulated', and pay 'close, uncritical attention to advertising because they have no sense of being pitched to' (Hamilton 2008, p. 31, 35, 36). In other words, young girls and preteens are assumed to be 'incompetent and unable to negotiate this new sexual culture because they lack the skills of critical media consumption that might enable them to resist it' (Bragg and Buckingham 2009, pp. 129-130).

There is, however, a body of research with children and young people which demonstrates that children can and do actively and critically engage with media representations in quite complex ways. For example, in their study on young people's (aged 9-17 years) interpretations of media portrayals of sex and personal relationships, David Buckingham and Sara Bragg argue that, 'children are "literate" and often highly critical consumers' (2004, p. 238). Although we are critical of conceptual frameworks in which girls lack agency and are seen as vulnerable to the 'powerful effects' of the media, we do not deny the cultural influence of the media. Rather, it is through attention to girls' engagement with, and readings of, the media they encounter in their everyday lives that we can take account of both media 'influence' and 'agency' and go beyond the active/passive binary.

While there has been a great deal of speculation about the ways in which preteen girls are influenced by the increasingly sexualised popular culture they encounter, there is relatively little research which explores their perspectives and understandings (see Duits and Van Romondt, 2009). In this paper we contribute to the debates about preteen girls, sexualisation and celebrity

culture through an examination of the talk of some preteen girls in New Zealand¹ about the celebrity Miley Cyrus who was, at the time of the study (2008), 15 years old and the star of Disney's Hannah Montana franchise. Given that celebrity culture 'now occupies an increasingly significant role in the process through which we construct our cultural identities' (Turner 2006, p. 499), we argue that participants' talk about Miley Cyrus and her appearance in *Vanity Fair* (2008), not only offers insights into the ways in which 'sexualised' celebrity images are read by some preteen girls but also the ways in which they construct and negotiate their gendered and sexual identities, and relationships with both Cyrus and each other. Given the relative paucity of audience or reception oriented research in celebrity scholarship, in particular research with preteen girls, this paper contributes to understanding not only the place of teen celebrities in the everyday lives of girls but also the influence of peers and the broader socio-cultural context (for example, the moral panic about the sexualisation of girls) on girls' readings of/ affective relationships with celebrities.

Since conducting the study, Miley Cyrus has continued to be the focus of extensive media attention and popular debate for her 'pole dance' performance at the 2009 Teen Choice Awards and her 'twerking' performance at the MTA Music Video Awards in 2013 (aged 21). For many child and teen celebrities, a career move or rebranding occurs around the age of 17 or 18 years and generally involves more sexual /sexualised performances (Lamb et al. 2012, p. 2). Placing music videos within their commercial context, Railton and Watson (2005) comment that 'the performance of sexual attractiveness and availability are imbricated in the genetic codes' of music video and that 'the display of the sexualised body and the potential for that body to be figured as an object of desire or fantasy are crucial to the economies of both pleasure and profit of the pop music video' (p. 52). Reading pop stars' sexual performances, then, can never be stripped from either a cultural context (i.e. sexualised culture) or a commercial one (sales, profits). Of particular relevance to this paper, is the transformation of Cyrus as a 'wholesome' 15 years old celebrity for pre-teen girl fans to a more 'sexy' figure. While a 'sexuality makeover' (Andsager and Roe 2003) is common for teen celebrities moving into young adulthood (around 17 and 18 years of age), it was both Cyrus' age and the age of her fans which contributed to the public furore over the *Vanity Fair* photographs.

Our focus in this paper is the responses of some of pre-teen girls to Cyrus' appearance in *Vanity Fair* magazine. It was one photograph in particular, in which Cyrus was shown with 'a bare back, turgid lips and suggestively tousled hair all while wrapped in nothing more than a piece of cloth' (news.com.au/entertainment, April 30, 2008), which provoked public debate and raised increasing concerns around younger female teen celebrities as a source of 'sexual trouble' for girls who are yet to be teens. Importantly, responses to Miley's photo-shoot occurred within a wider social context of increasing anxieties about the 'sexualisation' of young and pre-teen girls that became the focus of public attention and concern in 2006-2007. As a young teenage celebrity Miley Cyrus enjoyed a wide global fan-base, most particularly amongst younger and pre-teen girls. Her status as a 'role model' for her young audience, particularly as portrayed in her 'nice girl' Hannah Montana persona on Disney's Nickleodeon television channel, was an important factor in the shock waves that rippled around the world in response to her *Vanity Fair* images. In the majority of media reporting Cyrus was criticized for posing in a sexual or 'sexy' way. Concerns about the impact of this image on her fans generally assumed that they were at risk of being 'sexualised' by their engagement with this representation. The ABC article, 'Should "Hannah Montana" be sexy'? for example, quotes author Leslie Goldman who 'blames the media' and says, 'I think the danger is a young girl who looks up to Miley, sees the picture and thinks how sexy she looks and [how] beautiful she wants to be. The next thing you know, she and her friend have their photos on YouTube' (cited in James 2008).

In such public discussions of Cyrus' photo the conceptualisation of 'sexualisation' is informed by that articulated in two (also much publicized) reports on the topic: *Corporate Paedophilia* (2006) and the *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls* (2007), that is, as an unconscious response foreclosing any resistance or reinscription on the part of girls (Egan and Hawkes 2008, p. 303). The framing of girls as simply imitating 'sexy' celebrities (like Cyrus) not only denies that girls are capable of producing critical readings of popular representations, but also positions them as lacking agency, that is, no way of making 'choices' about how they act in the world. In this paper, we demonstrate that the preteen girls in our study produced critical readings of, and 'chose' to reject, Cyrus. Rather than admiring or seeking to emulate Cyrus' behaviour, as suggested in numerous popular and academic commentaries, the majority of participants framed Cyrus as a 'bad role model' and 'slut' and thus a celebrity they should no

longer like or watch. However, this framing also functioned to regulate and police the construction of norms of girlhood femininity (see Jackson and Vares 2011). Through our analysis of girls' talk about Miley Cyrus, we suggest that the framing of female celebrities as 'sexualising agents' is overly deterministic and ignores the complexities and nuances of girls' engagement with popular celebrities. We do not think that representations of celebrities are not problematic in a number of ways, but rather that a focus on girls' engagement with specific representations complicates the claims made about their assumed influence on girls (particularly with respect to being 'sexualised'). In the following analysis we explore how talk about Cyrus functions in a variety of ways, in particular, how girls' framing of Cyrus as a 'bad role model' or 'slut' is used to regulate celebrity identifications, viewing practices, and the construction of girlhood identities. We suggest that both the popular conceptualisation of 'role models' (in particular, as applied to female celebrities) and the popularisation of the 'sexualisation of girls discourse' (Renold and Ringrose 2011) have reproduced the binary of good, innocent girl and bad, 'sexual' girl (in which girlhood sexuality is 'bad').

Methodology

The research presented here is based on a three year research project, begun in 2008. 71 girls in Primary² and Intermediate³ Schools in two New Zealand cities - Christchurch (35 girls) and Wellington (36 girls) - were recruited for this study. The recruitment process involved gaining approval from school principals and teachers, and giving presentations about the project to Year 7 (aged 11-12 years) and Year 8 (aged 12-13 years) girls in five schools about the nature of the research. This was framed in terms of an interest in girls' media use in the context of growing concerns about girls 'growing up too soon'⁴. We explained that the research was designed to hear their own voices as those who were often positioned as objects of concern yet rarely heard in the debate. We aimed to recruit a diversity of participants, and were successful in doing so. The 71 participants included a diverse mix of self-described ethnicities: 38% Pakeha/ New Zealander; 14% English or British; 9.9% indigenous Maori/Maori-Pakeha; with the remainder spread across Samoan, Jamaican, South African, Australian, Sri Lankan, Indian, Tongan, Mexican and Malaysian Chinese ethnicities. The participants also ranged from lower-middle to middle-high socio-economic backgrounds (based on based on school decile⁵ rating).

The study involved three stages of data collection in both in 2008 and 2009: focus group discussions which explored girls' perspectives on what constitutes a 'tween' and 'tween' popular culture; the production of a video media diary or v-log by participants over a period of one month; and focus group discussions when the diaries were completed. In this paper our focus is on the material from 2008 (in which participants responded to the 'Vanity Fair incident'). With respect to the production of media video diaries (hereafter v-logs), participants were given handycam cameras and discs that they took home for one month (with the exception of Christchurch School 3 where participants had the camera for two weeks because of the ending of the school year). The v-log was discussed in the initial focus groups and participants were given written guidelines with the camera. V-logs were limited to home use and could not be used to film others except co-filming with other girls in the project or filming, with permission, family members.

The girls were asked to film their media video diary in ways that suited them. Some, for example, filmed regularly most days while others did their v-logs in one or two sessions. The total time for all v-Logs for 2008 was 40.5 hours. Individual v-logs varied from 2 minutes to 111 minutes with an average of 41 minutes for Year 7 participants and 32 minutes for Year 8 participants. There was also a range of filming styles. Of the 71 v-logs, 63 were analysed as one participant withdrew, four were disabled when returned, and three were under 5 minutes in length.

All focus group interviews and v-logs were transcribed verbatim. For the v-logs the video transcription programme Transana⁶ was used. Our analysis of focus group discussion and video diaries is informed by a feminist poststructuralist approach which, drawing on the work of Foucault, understands subjectivity or identity as constructed in discourse (see Gavey 1992 and 2005, Weedon 1987). Within this framework, the self is viewed as 'in process', fluid and shifting, yet also constrained by the effects of disciplinary power that require self-regulation and monitoring of compliance with dominant social norms. The approach we adopt in our analysis acknowledges the dual nature of subject positioning as girls are both positioned by and position themselves in relation to various discourses (Willett 2008, p. 426). Hence we are interested in the

ways in which girls negotiate discourses (particularly those that position them as uncritical and vulnerable readers of a ‘sexualised’ celebrity culture) while simultaneously interrogating ways in which they may be constrained by those same discourses.

We employ a form of thematic discourse analysis that identifies themes in the transcripts and sees language as constitutive of meaning and meanings as social (Braun and Clarke 2006). A substantial thematic category we identified in the talk of participants in the first year of our study (2008) was that of ‘celebrity culture’. Within this, key themes included: the celebrity as role model, the good celebrity ‘goes bad’, and the ‘bad’ celebrity role model as ‘slut’. Integral to participants’ constitution of Miley Cyrus as a ‘good role model gone bad’ was the good girl/bad girl or sexual innocence/slut binaries. In the following sections we examine: how the language of role models is used to categorize celebrities, in particular, the framing of Cyrus as a ‘bad role model’ or ‘slut’; the ways in which the good (innocent, passive, nice)/bad girl or ‘slut’ binary informs the rejection of Cyrus; and some of the ways in which participants who continued to ‘like’ Cyrus negotiated their admiration and/or viewing of Cyrus in a context of ‘slut bashing’ (Mikel Brown and Chesney-Lind 2005).

With respect to extracts from the focus groups and v-logs: the presence of three consecutive dots [...] indicates a portion of speech has been cut; pseudonyms are used for all participants; and the code following the pseudonym indicates the participant’s year (7 or 8) at school and whether they attend a school in Christchurch (C) or Wellington (W).

The Good Role Model Gone Bad

Female celebrities are commonly positioned as ‘role models’ for girls in popular literature, educational and sporting contexts (e.g. in magazines, by teachers and coaches). The girls in our study also used the role model terminology to talk about media celebrities and their relationships with them. Drawn from socialisation theorising certain people, like celebrities, are framed as modelling various behaviours that others (particularly children and young people) will potentially be inspired by and adopt. A good role model is generally one who adheres to dominant norms of gender, sexuality and so forth, while a bad role model disrupts these in various ways. A bad role

model is therefore a potential ‘bad influence’. It was this logic which informed much of the talk about Cyrus and other celebrities ‘gone bad’ and prompted participants to dissociate themselves from Cyrus - the ‘good role model gone bad’.

There was, for example, a general consensus across the focus groups that Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears were bad role models because they misused ‘drugs, alcohol, or both, and get into rehab’ (Ashley 8W). Both Lohan and Spears had previously been popular with many girls but had lost their good role model status by ‘doing something like real bad’ (Annabel 8W). The framing of Spears as a ‘freak’ (Rene 8W) and Lohan as having gone ‘crazy’ (Annabel 8W) supports Emma Bell’s (2008) argument that in the past decade there has been a significant reframing of female celebrity behaviours that transgress acceptable femininity. Rather than viewing ‘bad behaviour’ as ‘radical and empowered’ (even ‘feminist’), contemporary media constructions (including autobiographies by previous ‘bad girls’) re-present these as ‘symptomatic of mental illness’ (Bell 2008). ‘If “bad girl” hedonism is “unfeminine”’, argues Bell (2008), ‘then rebellious and uncontained female celebrities are, by default, somehow insane’ (p. 4). It is thus perhaps unsurprising that the participants in our study employed the language of ‘madness’ to describe the ‘bad behaviours’ of various celebrities, including Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears.

Unlike celebrities that participants identified as having ‘gone bad’ because of reports of their alcohol and drug use, Miley Cyrus plummeted into this category literally overnight with her appearance in *Vanity Fair* (May 2008) magazine. In this case, it was the photographic exposure of her bare shoulders and back which sparked media debate and discussion among participants in focus groups and v-logs. Lindsey (8W), for example, referred to the photo as an indication that Cyrus had gone ‘crazy’: ‘Miley Cyrus [...] was a, um, huge influence, until she started going crazy’. In this context, the language of madness refers to Cyrus posing ‘half-naked’ for a magazine. Prior to this Cyrus (like her fictional counterpart Hannah Montana) had been an icon of American girlhood femininity or ‘sweet as apple pie’ (Lindsey, 8W). The sexual connotations of the *Vanity Fair* representation of Cyrus not only provoked emotive responses from the majority of participants, it also prompted them to reject her as a celebrity they could admire or like. The following extracts (two from focus groups and one from a v-log) were typical of the majority of talk about Cyrus:

Nikita (8W): Hannah Montana's like, not, not –
Barhere (8W): Ugghhh.
Interviewer: Not cool.
Nikita (8W): It's like
Barhere (8W): [Hannah Montana] *used* to be in, but now she's sort of like
Nikita (8W): Now she's like, now she's like, 'ew, gross, ew, Hannah Montana.'
Barhere (8W): Ew!

Erica (8W): I don't like Miley Cyrus, anybody [*inaudible*]
Group: Noooooooo
Alisi (8W): Ew, I heard that she, I heard that she took her *clothes* off.
[...]
Vanessa (8W): She's trying to, she's trying to fit in, like
Alisi (8W): She wants to be Rihanna, Rihanna and that
Vanessa (8W): She's just trying to be a slut like everyone else

Enya (8C, v-log): I don't like Miley Cyrus at all. Like um like when she first started you would think she would be like a really good role model and stuff and like she did that photo shoot and she was like half naked and that is so gross and like yeah so now I don't think she is a good role model [...]

The expressions of disgust (ranging from words like 'gross' or 'yuck' to sounds like 'ew') and the constitution of Cyrus as a 'slut' illustrate strong responses to the *Vanity Fair* photo, whether actually viewed or heard about (Alisi) Rather than reading this image of Cyrus as appealing or attractive, participants were quick to express their disapproval and revulsion. The use of the term 'slut' functioned as a kind of shorthand for these emotive responses and as a way to address the potential sexual connotations of the image. Yet, as with some of the preteen participants in Elizabeth Charles (2010) and Melanie Lowe's (2003) studies who described Britney Spears as a 'slut', this label applied primarily to bodily displays and styles of (un)dress rather than sexual behaviour and practice (its more traditional associations). In other words, it is specifically the exposure of the celebrity body in clothing that is too skimpy which constitutes a 'slut' or 'bad role model' and is therefore a 'bad influence' (Ringrose 2008). This illustrates Feona Attwood's (2007) argument that the use of 'slut' is currently experiencing a revival and expansion, which includes its uptake by preteen girls. It also functions as a means of branding and exclusion (Attwood 2007). Once branded a slut, Cyrus is excluded from the realm of good role models and thus becomes a celebrity girls should no longer like (or at least admit to liking).

In Jackson and Vares (2011) we suggest that participants' discursive constitution of Miley Cyrus and other celebrities (such as The Pussycat Dolls, Vanessa Hudgens and Rihanna) as 'sluts' operates as both resistance to representations of 'sexualised' femininity (a counter to the position that girls admire and aspire to emulate 'sexualised' celebrities) and as regulatory of girlhood femininity through re-producing the good girl/bad girl binary. With respect to the former, participants were generally critical of celebrity clothes or poses which potentially connote sexuality. Rather than reading such representations within a postfeminist discourse of fun-loving, sexually empowered freedom (Gill 2007), girls, to the contrary, rejected such meanings through invoking the 'slut'. However, this use of 'slut' also works to regulate young femininities through invoking the good/bad girl binary. The expansion of 'slut' to representations of celebrities in skimpy clothes by the preteen girls in our study functioned simultaneously to limit the ways of doing girlhood femininity through girls policing others' celebrity identifications and viewing practices as well as their clothing styles.

In the following discussion we reflect on some of the ways in which some participants negotiate their relationship or 'affective connectivity' (Redmond 2006, p. 36) with Miley Cyrus in a context of 'slut-bashing'. 'Affective connectivity' is a term used by Sean Redmond (2006) to refer to the closeness and realness of the celebrity image to the viewer, that is, a relationship which is experienced as meaningful. While the celebrity 'slut' is positioned as bad and unacceptable, this label can also impact on girls who continue relationships with those celebrities categorized as 'sluts'. The girls, while not 'sluts' themselves, can nonetheless be targeted for derision and be seen as 'not normal'.

Given that the majority of participants in the focus groups framed Cyrus as a 'slut' and thus not worthy of 'liking', it appeared difficult for those who remained admirers and fans to admit this to other girls. Rohana, a year 7 participant in a Christchurch school who continued to 'love' Cyrus post-*Vanity Fair*, was silenced both verbally and physically (pushed) in a focus group when she attempted to defend Cyrus. Eilis, another Year 7 participant at a Christchurch school, also indicated in her v-log that she could not admit to liking *The Hannah Montana Show*, 'you can't tell [other girls] you like it otherwise you're afraid they'll say "oh no she's uncool. Did you hear about this girl, she likes Hannah Montana blah de blah"'. Annabel, a Year 8 participant in a

Wellington school, gives a sense of the dilemma for fans of particular celebrities when they 'go bad' with the following comment:

Interviewer: So obviously it's really disappointing if someone ends up going to rehab, and Annabel (8W): Especially if it's someone like, you like really admire and you think, one of the few celebrities that haven't done that sort of thing and then they end up doing something like, real bad, and it's like, oh, that's horrible, but like *now what happens?*

In the focus group discussion in which Annabel posed this question the conversation shifted topic and it was left unaddressed. However, in both focus groups and v-logs some girls discussed how they negotiated Cyrus' fall in status and their relationship with her following the furore around the *Vanity Fair* photo.

'Now what happens?'

Strategic use of the reality/fantasy binary

One discursive strategy used by several girls to justify their continued viewing of *The Hannah Montana Show* following Cyrus' *Vanity Fair* appearance was to draw a distinction between the 'real' Cyrus (a 'slut') and Hannah Montana (the character she plays on *The Hannah Montana Show*):

Melissa (7W): I like Hannah Montana. [...]

Debbie (7W): In real life, in real life she's a slut.

Research assistant: Oh, really?

Interviewer: What makes her a slut?

Debbie (7W): Well, some of these pictures she's had, and that [...]

Interviewer: So is that what you mean, is that the kind of thing that makes her a slut, because she wants to do that?

Riley (7W): Yeah – but then she like, she acts different on the show

Melissa (7W): Mmm, like, that's why it's cool on the show and stuff

Debbie (7W): Cos she, she's told what to do and how to do it

Melissa (7W): Instead of just being her normal self.

Debbie (7W): Yeah.

Rohana (7C): I watch Hannah Montana all the time.

Hedy (7C): Hannah Montana is an idiot.

Rohana (7C): Hedy!

Hedy (7C): I don't like her, I hate her. She is just a bad influence.

Renata (8C): I like the programme but I don't like her.

Rohana (7C): Miley Cyrus is not a bad influence!

Hedy (7C): Yes she is. Have you seen what she has done lately?

Rohana (7C): That was one photo.

Hedy (7C): That was not one photo.

Renata (8C): I like Miley Cyrus' songs and show but I don't actually like her because of what she has done.

Interviewer: Tell me a bit more about what she has done.

Hedy (7C): She took photos of herself basically practically nude.

[*overlapping argument between Hedy and Rohana*: No she didn't. She did. She didn't. Did not.]

Rohana (7C): She had a sheet around her.

In these conversations the good/bad girl binary informs the distinction between the fictional Hannah Montana character and the 'real life' Cyrus. Hannah Montana is the idealized 'good girl' while the potential sexual connotations of the *Vanity Fair* photo are used to constitute Cyrus as bad/ a 'slut'. Although a few girls did discuss Cyrus as a potential victim of media industries or as an agent who chose to do the photo shoot, the majority read this representation of Cyrus as reflective of her 'real' or 'normal self' (as above). While the difference between the celebrity image and the 'actual person' is acknowledged as central to the reception of celebrities (Duits and van Romondt Vis 2009, p. 42), for participants the issue was the shift from Cyrus being seen as similar to the character Hannah Montana (as an icon of ideal, good girl femininity) to Cyrus as different or 'slut'. Rather than reading the *Vanity Fair* photo as a representation or image, most participants associated it with the 'real' Cyrus. In fact, Melissa and Debbie seem to imply that the 'slut' identity is so powerful that it could surface in *The Hannah Montana Show* if Cyrus was 'not told what to do and how to do it'. It was assumed that the loss of (sexual) innocence which informed the constitution of Cyrus as 'slut' is irreversible. In other words, Cyrus was marked by most participants as beyond redemption.

Yet distinguishing between the 'good' Hannah Montana and Cyrus as 'slut' also allows Renata and Melissa to justify their continued viewing and liking of the show. They use this distinction to construct 'narratives of self' which 'tell something about themselves' and function as a 'means to find approval for the choices they make in their own lives', as with the 12-13 year old Dutch girls' discussions of celebrities in a study by Duits and van Romondt Vis (2009, p. 49). In other words, employing this distinction works to: constitute them as 'good' and 'normal' girls; distance

them from any association with Cyrus the ‘slut’; and position them as immune to Cyrus’ ‘bad influence’. It also enables them to avoid possible condemnation for their viewing of *The Hannah Montana Show*.

Rohana, however, continued to admire Cyrus as she indicated in the focus group, ‘I am obsessed with her’. The extract above charts a discussion triggered by Rohana’s comment that she watched ‘Hannah Montana all the time’. This drew a heated response from Hedy, in particular, who responded by shouting (and physically shoving) Rohana. By arguing with Hedy that Cyrus was not a ‘bad influence’ Rohana positioned herself, and was positioned by others, as outside the group norms of acceptable girlhood femininity. We found it interesting that in Rohana’s v-log (done after the focus group discussion) she stated, ‘I love Hannah Montana which is Miley Cyrus, they’re the same person’. While this could be read in a number of ways, it seems to us that Rohana is responding to the focus group discussion and by refusing to make a distinction between Cyrus and Montana disrupts the Cyrus (bad girl)/ Montana (good girl) binary and its implications for her as a fan of Cyrus. However, the fact that the few girls who admitted to being admirers of Cyrus generally did this in private v-log contexts (see below) indicates the regulatory force of the Cyrus as ‘bad’ or ‘slut’ framing employed by the majority of participants.

Negotiating the constitution of Cyrus as a ‘good role model gone bad’

Cory (a participant in the Christchurch focus group above) indicated that she continued to be a ‘huge fan’ of Cyrus in her v-log (she remained silent in the focus group context). Rather than accept Cyrus as a ‘good role model gone bad’, Cory explains why Cyrus continues to be a ‘good role model’:

Cory (8C, v-log): I don’t actually have any posters up but I’m a huge, huge fan of Miley Cyrus, Hannah Montana. I just think she’s awesome and like I know that people like they’ve kinda gone off her at the moment because she had that ‘scandal’ [*indicates scare quotes with use of fingers*] but you know I think she is fine because I think she is the best role model there is. She has hardly done anything, she just posed for *Vanity Fair* and everything and like it wasn’t like she was naked or anything, so I’m still a huge fan of her and everything but I haven’t got any posters of her, but I would.

This excerpt is taken from the first minute of Cory's first v-log entry. Participants were asked to begin their v-logs by giving a tour of their bedroom and Cory's comment on the lack of posters of Cyrus prompts her reflection on the *Vanity Fair* 'scandal'. She uses two strategies to support her claim that Cyrus is 'awesome'. The first is to problematize the notion of a 'scandal' with her use of scare quotes. This implies that the responses of 'people' have been somewhat exaggerated and thus lends weight to her assertion that Cyrus continues to be 'the best role model there is'. The second strategy Cory utilizes is similar – Cyrus is framed as being misrepresented because, for Cory, she 'has hardly done anything'. There is nothing wrong with celebrities posing for magazines, Cory implies, when they are not 'naked' and Cyrus 'wasn't like ... naked'. Here Cory may be responding to the focus group framing of Cyrus as posing 'basically practically nude' (Hedy, above). By asserting that Cyrus was not 'naked' Cory ignores, resists or perhaps does not read the image as 'sexual'. This enables her to justify her own continued fandom of a 'good role model' in a context where sexual or 'sexualised' representations are seen as 'bad'.

Possible parental and media condemnation of the *Vanity Fair* photo appear to inform many participants' understandings/framing of Cyrus as having 'done something bad'. For example, several participants' knowledge about the photo was gained through television news coverage (which they generally watched with their parents). The overwhelming media criticism of Cyrus, the photographer (Annie Leibovitz) and *Vanity Fair* magazine perhaps goes some way to explaining why so few girls positioned themselves as current fans of Cyrus in focus groups and v-logs. While Cory was one of the few who discussed her admiration for Cyrus in her v-log she also found it difficult to maintain her claim that Cyrus is a 'the best role model there is' as she went on to talk more about celebrities and role models:

Cory (8C, v-log): O.K. well I'm just talking about the celebrities I like and the celebrities that I think are bad role models and I don't really like. Um the ones that I do like are people who don't do anything bad just because they are a celebrity, people like Ashley Tisdale. I don't really like her that much but like she's a really good role model - she doesn't do anything bad she's a good actress and has a good life. Like she doesn't get us to like her and go do something bad. And like I like Miley Cyrus, I really, really like Mile Cyrus. [...] I still like [Miley Cyrus] just I so wish she hadn't done it. It annoys me because she was perfect, she was such a great role model.

Here Cory both draws on and complicates the way in which the conceptualisation of celebrities as either good or bad role models equates with liking or not liking them respectively. On one hand, she talks of liking celebrities ‘who don’t do anything bad’ and uses Ashley Tisdale as an example. On the other hand, she admits that she does not ‘really like’ Tisdale even though ‘she’s a really good role model’. The implication here is that one *should* like a good role model. Cory’s reflection that Tisdale ‘doesn’t get us to like her and go and do something bad’ is, in fact, a critique of Cyrus. This prompts a reassertion of how much she ‘still’ likes Cyrus but we also get a sense that she feels betrayed by Cyrus. This is followed by expressions of both regret and frustration because the *Vanity Fair* photo compromised Cyrus’ position as a good role model. It is interesting that Cory then switched to past tense when referring to Cyrus, that is, as having *been* ‘perfect’ and a ‘great role model’. It is as if she is unable to continue her defence of Cyrus given the constraints of the either ‘liking a good celebrity’ or ‘disliking a bad celebrity’ binary.

This highlights the strength of discourses of normative girlhood femininity within a context in which the constitution of ‘bad girl’ or ‘slut’ now includes celebrities whose sartorial styles potentially connote sexuality. Given that the majority of teen celebrities do adopt such styles of dress it does mean that, as Cory among others pointed out, ‘there is too many bad role models for us girls’. This results in a dilemma for several of the participants as they negotiate their celebrity identifications, as we have indicated. While there are moments of rupture in Rohana and Cory’s talk about continuing to admire Cyrus in a context of ‘slut bashing’ and wider public condemnation of Cyrus, their emotional attachments are put under pressure.

‘They’re not like my role model’: Problematizing the ‘celebrity’ – ‘role model’ connection

We identified one other strategy employed by participants to negotiate framing of celebrities as good or bad role models. While not related specifically to Miley Cyrus, this focus group extract articulates two participants’ unease with using the term ‘role model’ in relation to celebrities:

Lindsey (8W): [...] the parents are just so scared that, you know, [celebrities] *are* [girls’] role models, and even if they’re putting a bad example they’re still their role models [...]. I don’t really *have* any celebrity role models because I mean, everyone makes mistakes, they’re what makes, what makes us human, so you can’t just copy someone.

Annabel (8W): I do have like, a favourite – um. I do have a favourite celebrity but not necessarily like, they're not like my role model or anything, I just like the way they act.

Interviewer: Who's that?

Annabel (8W): Um, Amanda Bynes.

Lindsey begins by recognising that parents do worry about the 'bad examples' that some celebrity role models offer their daughters. She then discursively manoeuvres around this parental concern by saying *she does not* have celebrity role models, thus implying that her parents need not worry. To put this simply, if celebrity role models are problematic for parents – girls can opt not to have any. Lindsey then offers two insightful critiques of the role model approach which echo academic critiques. First, categorizing someone as a role model implies they excel in a particular area and simultaneously operate within dominant social norms, that is, they are worthy of attention and admiration. By highlighting the 'humanity' of celebrities as people who do make mistakes, Lindsey indicates what is problematic with a focus on a person who is supposed to be 'good' or a 'model' to others. It is thus not surprising that, as Cory said in her v-log, 'there are too many bad role models for us girls', given that a bad role model is one who transgresses dominant discourses of femininity and sexuality. Secondly, girls do not simply 'copy' celebrity behaviours – they are active agents who make choices about the celebrities they relate to. However, these choices are nonetheless constrained (above), for example, where it is difficult for participants to continue liking a 'good role model gone bad' (such as Cyrus) given the regulatory force of the good/bad girl binary and the sexualisation of girls discourse in the contemporary context.

In the extract above, Annabel follows Lindsey's argument by indicating she has a 'favourite celebrity' but she is not her role model. This similarly disrupts the celebrity-role model connection and potentially opens up other ways of thinking about the relationship between girls and female celebrities, for example, shifting the focus from 'good' and 'bad' role models to the 'affective connectivity' with celebrities that girls experience. This is not to suggest that the latter exists outside of contemporary gendered discourses of female celebrity, sexualisation and commercial culture, but rather some of the limitations of the popularisation of role model theorising in relation to celebrity-girl relationships. How might Cory (above), for example,

understand her dislike of a ‘really good role model’ (Ashley Tisdale) and her continuing affection for Miley Cyrus (a ‘bad’ role model) within Lindsey’s proposed approach?

Some final thoughts

Graeme Turner suggests that talk about celebrities can be understood ‘as an important social process through which relationships, identity, and social and cultural norms are debated, evaluated, modified and shared’ (2004, p. 24). Our examination of the talk of some preteen girls about Miley Cyrus illustrates Turner’s argument, for example: the ways in which participants’ relationships (with celebrities and other girls) and viewing practices were evaluated and regulated through the framing of Cyrus as a ‘bad role model’. Participants used the good /bad role model and good /bad girl or ‘slut’ binaries to simultaneously mark out and police the the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable displays of femininity and feminine sexuality in particular ways. For example, expressing admiration for a ‘slutty’ celebrity such as Cyrus was not acceptable in the focus groups contexts. Through critique and expressions of disgust, participants not only positioned themselves in opposition to ‘bad girl’ or sexual displays but also any association with ‘slutty’ celebrities. As we indicated above, a consequence of the celebrity ‘slut bashing’ which occurred in many focus groups was that participants who continued to like Cyrus and/or watch *The Hannah Montana Show* chose to remain silent (Eilis and Cory), found themselves being silenced by others (Rohana), or developed strategies to justify their viewing practices (Melissa and Debbie).

Although the number of participants who talked about continuing to admire Cyrus was small, it is possible there were other participants in this position who chose not to speak about Cyrus in the research context. This is in itself telling as it indicates how the figure of the celebrity ‘slut’ or bad role model is used by girls to regulate girls’ relationships with celebrities. The idea that one should only like a ‘good role model’, for example, limits the possibilities for girls’ connections and identifications with celebrities. The pressure to stop ‘liking’ and watching Cyrus (a ‘slutty’ celebrity) means that affective and other dimensions of relationships are ignored and negated. This creates tensions and dilemmas for those girls who either choose to maintain, or are unable to let go of, their relationship with a celebrity who is categorized as ‘bad’. We suggest that the

popularisation of theorising about ‘role models’, informed by a media effects approach, limits the possible ways for thinking about and experiencing girl-celebrity relationships.

It is important to note that while participants criticised a number of female pop celebrities for their ‘slutty’ clothes (e.g. Pussycat Dolls and Rhianna) they were generally not rejected in the same way as Cyrus. There was, for example, some enjoyment in other aspects of their performance, such as their music or their charity practices. This was also the case in Melanie Lowe’s (2003) analysis of the talk of 12-14 year old girls about Britney Spears in which she was framed as a ‘slut’ but also admired and celebrated ‘sometimes’. Why then did the majority of participants not find any redeeming features in Cyrus music or television programmes? While acknowledging that, in the context of this research project, girls may have taken an oppositional stance to adult anxieties around Cyrus and a sexualised celebrity culture (Willett 2008), the privileging of normative ‘good girl’ femininity also needs understood in the context of the extensive, largely negative, publicity that the photo shoot received. While most participants had seen the *Vanity Fair* photo of Cyrus, others had not and responded to the media hype about the photo. In fact, much of the talk seemed to echo the moralistic tone of media (and perhaps parental) condemnation of Cyrus, in particular, the framing of her as a bad role model and influence on girls.

When this is considered within the broader context of the popularisation of the ‘sexualisation of girls discourse’, which is informed by a media effects model, the responses and readings of Cyrus (and other celebrities) by participants can be understood in a different light. While the girls in our study are critical and strategic readers of celebrity culture they simultaneously draw on the terms of the sexualisation of girls discourse to reproduce often quite restrictive norms of girlhood femininity. Like the participants in Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose’s (2008) study, the girls discussed above are engaging in a critical heterosexualised politics yet are doing so in partial and somewhat troubling ways (p. 315). For us, participants’ constitution of a variety of images with potential sexual connotations as ‘bad’ raises some important questions which require further investigation: what are the potential implications of the current focus on and critique of ‘sexualised’ images of girls and young women *on girls*? In what ways does the ‘moral panic’ around the ‘sexualisation of girls’ reproduce the binary of good, innocent girl and bad, ‘sexual’

girl? What might some of the implications of this be for girls' relationships (with others and with celebrities) and the ongoing construction of their gendered and sexual identities?

Endnotes

¹ The research is supported by the Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Fund

² In New Zealand, Primary Schools have students from age 5 (Year 1) to age 13 (Year 8).

³ In New Zealand, Intermediate Schools have only Year 7 and Year 8 students.

⁴ The following excerpt is from the information sheet given to potential participants: 'Do you watch TV, read books and magazines, listen to pop music, go to the movies, use a computer, or play video games? These are just some of the types of media that many girls like to use. And in a lot of those media girls your age are being focused on more and more, sometimes showing girls in ways that make them seem older than they are. Although we know girls your age like to use media we don't know very much about what they think about the media they use or what they think about the way girls are shown. Also, we don't know much about how girls use media in their everyday life. So we are doing a research project to find out more about these things'. We made every effort to enable participants to talk about the popular culture that was meaningful to them and although we referred to the 'growing up too fast' discourse in general terms we kept the focus on participants' experiences and understandings. Celebrities were a topic of discussion in all focus groups and v-logs. Participants introduced talk about Miley Cyrus and *Vanity Fair* in both contexts as it had significant media attention at the time the research was being conducted.

⁵ The decile rating of schools (from 1-10) relates to economic and social factors of the community immediately surrounding it. Schools in decile 1 have the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, while schools on decile 10 have the highest proportion. A school's decile does not indicate the overall socio-economic mix of the school. Deciles are used to provide funding to state and state integrated schools. The lower the school's decile, the more funding they receive. (<http://www.minedu.govt.nz>)

⁶ Transana is software which enables researchers to analyse digital video or audio data. Transana enables one to transcribe the audio component of videos, identify analytically interesting clips, arrange and rearrange clips, create complex collections of interrelated clips etc.

Acknowledgements:

We wish to acknowledge the Royal society of New Zealand Marsden Fund for the financial support of the research project Girls, 'tween' Popular Culture and Everyday Life. We are immensely grateful to the girls who gave their time and energy to participate in this study.

References:

- American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls (2007). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. www.apa.org/pi/wpo/Sexualisation.html
- Andsager, J. and Roe, K., 2003. 'What's your definition of dirty baby?' Sex in music video. *Sexuality and Culture*, 7, 79-97.
- Attwood, F., 2007. Sluts and riot grrrls: female identity and sexual agency. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16, 233-247.
- Backer, R., 2008. Miley Cyrus controversial photos spark fierce debate among fans, parents. MTV NEWS, 30 April. Retrieved from <http://www.mtv.com/news/1586583/miley-cyrus-controversial-photos-spark-fierce-debate-among-fans-parents/>
- Bell, E., 2008. From bad girl to mad girl: British female celebrity, reality products and the pathologisation of pop-feminism. *Genders OnLine Journal*. 48.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Bragg, S. and Buckingham, D., 2009. 'Too Much Too Young'? Young People, Sexual Media and Learning. In F. Attwood, ed. *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualisation of Western Culture*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- Buckingham, D. and Bragg, S. (2004). *Young people, sex and the media: The facts of life?* Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Charles, E. C., 2010. Complicating hetero-femininities: Young women, sexualities and 'girl power' at school. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 23, 33-47.
- Duits, L. and van Romondt Vis, P., 2009. Girls make sense: Girls, celebrities and identities. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12, 41-58.
- Durham, M. G., 2008. *The Lolita Effect*. Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press.
- Egan, R. D. and Hawkes, G., 2008. Girls, sexuality and the strange carnalities of advertisements: Deconstructing the discourse of corporate paedophilia. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 23, 307-322.
- Gavey, N., 1992. Technologies and effects of heterosexual coercion. *Feminism and Psychology*, 2, 325-351.
- Gavey, N., 2005. *Just sex? The cultural scaffolding of rape*. London and New York: Routledge.

-
- Gill, R., 2007. Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10, 147–66.
- Hamilton, M., 2007. *What's Happening to our Girls*. Camberwell, VIC: Viking, Penguin.
- James, S., 2008. Should 'Hannah Montana' be sexy? ABC News. 29 April. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=4742597&page=1>
- Jackson, S. and Vares, T., 2011. Media 'sluts': 'Tween' girls' negotiations of postfeminist sexual subjectivities in popular culture. In R. Gill and C. Scharff, eds. *New femininities: Postfeminism, neo-liberalism and Identity*. London: Palgrave, 134-146.
- Lamb, S. and Brown, L., 2006. *Packaging Girlhood*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Lamb, S., Graling, K. and Wheeler, E., 2012. 'Pole-arsed' discourse: an analysis of responses to Miley Cyrus's teen choice awards pole dance. *Feminism and Psychology*, 23, 163-183.
- Levin, D. and Kilbourne, J., 2008. *So Sexy So Soon. The New Sexualised Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect their Kids*. New York: Random House.
- Lowe, M., 2003. Colliding feminisms: Britney Spears, 'tweens', and the politics of reception. *Popular Music and Society*, 26, 123-140.
- Mikel Brown, L. and Chesney-Lind, M., 2005. Growing up mean: Covert aggression and the policing of girlhood. In G. Lloyd, ed. *Problem Girls: Understanding and supporting troubled and troublesome girls and young women*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge Falmer, 76-88.
- Papadopoulos, L., 2010. *Sexualisation of Young People Review*, Commissioned by the Home Office UK. Retrieved from <http://www.generationnext.com.au/pdf/sexualisation-young-people.pdf>
- Railton, D. and Watson, P., 2005. 'Naughty Girls and Red Blooded Women': Representations of Female heterosexuality in Music Video, *Feminist Media Studies*, 5, 51-63.
- Redmond, S., 2006. Intimate fame everywhere. In S. Holmes & S. Redmond, eds. *Framing celebrity: new directions in celebrity culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 27-43.
- Renold, E. and Ringrose, J., 2008. Regulation and rupture: Mapping tween and teenage girls' resistance to the heterosexual matrix. *Feminist Theory*, 9, 313-338.
- Renold, E. and Ringrose, J., 2011. Re-theorizing Teen Girls' Sexual Cultures in an Era of 'Sexualisation', *Journal of Sociology*, 47, 389-409.
- Rush, E and La Nauze, A., 2006. *Corporate Paedophilia. Sexualisation of Children in Australia*. Discussion Paper No. 90. Retrieved from www.tai.org.au/documents/downloads/DP90.pdf

Turner, G., 2004. *Understanding celebrity*. London: Sage Publications.

Turner, G., 2006. Celebrity, the tabloid and the democratic public sphere. In Marshall, P. D. Marshall, ed. *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.

Weedon, C., 1987. *Feminist and poststructuralist theory*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Willett, R., 2008. 'What you wear tells a lot about you': Girls dress up online. *Gender and Education*, 20, 421-434.