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## Miracles Happen: An Exploration of Girlhood and Celebrity

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Miracles Happen: An Exploration of Girlhood and Celebrity

Sarah Thompson

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Submitted to the faculty of Ursinus College in fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the  
Media and Communication Studies Department.

**Abstract:**

Throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, many children's programs were about fame and featured female protagonists while being written and produced by men. Despite being written by men, these shows clearly interpellate a young female audience. "Miracles Happen" explores this media and considers what girlhood is and what this media is teaching its audience. The first chapter looks at Disney's studio and its history on how it inserts itself into the private lives of children. This chapter also analyzes this history and makes connections to how these traditions are carried into shows meant for girls on the Disney Channel. It also considers the value of friendship, post-feminism, gender as a performance, and balancing a life of normalcy and fame in Disney's programs. Chapter two then looks at Nickelodeon and the exceptions of content meant for young boys about the life of celebrities. Instead of focusing on separating the child from fame, Nickelodeon suggests that there is no hiding your stardom. While these Nickelodeon programs are products starring boys, they are about boy bands which draws in a young female audience too. This chapter also discusses technology and its relationship to children and specifically to girls. The conversation of technology will also serve as a transition to chapter three as the chapter focuses on real life child celebrities, their "authentic" lives as working children, and social media as a new way of producing stardom. Overall, the project explores television programs and films targeted toward tweens in the way that they are fascinated with how to be famous, stay famous, and yet live a "normal" life as a celebrity (mainstream or online), even though we all know that celebrities live a life that is anything but normal.

While growing up in the early 2000s, children had plenty of media to consume. With channels like Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, and Disney Channel there was something for every child to enjoy. I remember my brother and I sitting down on the floor of our living room in front of the bubbled glass television screen which could make our hair stand up if we got too close to it. While we could often watch shows together, there were many arguments when it came down to who got to choose what we were watching. Our disagreements would often happen because one of us just simply did not want to watch whatever the other put on, while other times it was clear that the show was not meant for both brother and sister. Even to us, who were five and six at the time, we could tell which shows were meant for both of us, just him, or just me. When thinking back to my childhood, it is hard to come up with a children's show that my brother put on that I did not also enjoy. But, when we talk about this the other way around, my brother absolutely hated every time I put on *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011), anything relating to the Jonas Brothers (such as their music or the Disney Channel movie that they starred in, *Camp Rock* (dir. Matthew Diamond, 2008)), and pretty much anything that he could tell that was meant for "just girls." Although *Hannah Montana*'s marketing was strictly toward girls, I would argue that the show itself was for anyone to watch. This is because of the many boy-centered sub-plots of most of the episodes that feature Miley Stewart's dad, brother, and her friend, Oliver. In spite of the immature male characters, the show interpellates girls with the pinks, purples, glitter, and of course of the young girl star of the program, Miley Cyrus whose face and glittery outfits are featured in every aspect of the show's marketing materials. Since this program is meant for young girls, we can then begin to think about what the show is teaching its audience.

Although these shows are not intended to be educational, there are still things that children learn from watching them. One of the most glaring and concerning of these lessons revolves around the idea of celebrity. While daydreaming of becoming a celebrity can be considered a healthy and normal part of imaginary play for children (as it was for me and my friends), the idea of celebrity is complex and multifaceted. So much so that in *Hannah Montana* Miley Cyrus's character, Miley Stewart, wants "the best of both worlds" as both a celebrity and a normal child. This is where the problem lies. The chance that children can become celebrities and continue to live a normal life is an idea that is present in many children's programs from the early 2000s to early 2010s. This is an issue because it allows children to dream that this life is possible, when in fact the life of a celebrity is fabricated and complicated. On top of this lie being sold to children, we must also acknowledge that almost all of this media is meant for or starring female children. This then brings up important questions regarding what childhood and girlhood are, how the idea of celebrity is being promoted, and if there are any repercussions of encouraging this lifestyle to children.

With the rise of children's social media use and very young internet influencers, the problem of celebrity being promoted to children is even more concerning than it had been in the past. While I consumed programs about celebrities as a child, and embarrassingly dreamed of being rich and famous one day, today's children have even more and different types of this content in the world telling them that they can be famous. I grew up with *Hannah Montana*, a show about a young female celebrity who still yearned for a normal childhood. Today's children are growing up seeing real life people go viral online and become influencers and celebrities. Children today do not have what is considered a "safe" way to explore and imagine celebrity, as I

did with the scripted Disney sitcom, *Hannah Montana*, but instead can turn to TikTok and YouTube to become the next Charli D'Amelio.<sup>1</sup> While there is no harm in children daydreaming about becoming a celebrity, I would argue that the idea of going viral and becoming a celebrity consumes their minds much more intensely than when programs like *Hannah Montana* were popular. In doing research to see if this is the case, I first began tracing the idea of childhood and celebrity and how it relates to girlhood.

Chapter one goes through the history of Disney's studio in relation to its production and promotion of their child celebrities. This analysis begins by following one of Disney's first child stars, Annette Funicello, who was a fan favorite on *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1955-1959). On top of the analysis of Funicello, we can also see that there is a fascination with the lives of girls and their friendships. At the core of all of this are post-feminist perspectives and pressures on how to style one's body in order to be a successful celebrity or person with power. I argue that the way Disney promotes celebrity has to do with girlhood and how girlhood is distinctly different from childhood altogether. This chapter focuses on all Disney products such as *Hannah Montana*, *Shake it Up!* (2010-2013), and *The Princess Diaries* (dir. Gary Marshall, 2001). These products would have all been deemed by my brother as just for girls. While my brother often tolerated watching these shows with me, there was little to no media designed for him to daydream about being a potential celebrity.

I begin chapter two by pointing out the rare exceptions of content created for boys during the mid 2000s and 2010s that promotes the idea of becoming a celebrity. I begin to lay this idea

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<sup>1</sup> Charli D'Amelio went viral for dancing on TikTok and was one of the top earning TikTok creators in 2019. She now has a Hulu reality show, *The D'Amelio Show*, (2021-) and is very popular amongst young girls as a role model despite the fact that she is a seventeen-year-old girl who does little else than dance in front of her phone camera and receive millions of views and likes. For D'Amelio, becoming viral was an accident and something she probably wanted as a child who grew up with the internet.

out by discussing Nickelodeon shows, *Big Time Rush* (2009-2013), and *The Naked Brothers Band* (2007-2009). Even though Disney found success through the Jonas Brothers and their scripted television show *Jonas* (2009-2010), the show was made with a young female audience in mind. The same goes for Nickelodeon's *Big Time Rush* and *The Naked Brothers Band*, however these shows focus on how to become famous as a young boy. While the boys of these Disney and Nickelodeon shows are a main focus of the beginning of this chapter, the way Nickelodeon promotes celebrity is vastly different from the way Disney does. In this chapter I argue that Nickelodeon does not promote the idea of separating the celebrity from a child's normal everyday life and instead focuses on the fact that there is no hiding your stardom. Chapter two will also discuss technology and its relationship to children and specifically girls, which will serve as a transition to the discussion that will take place in chapter three that is mainly focused on real-life child stars, such as Miley Cyrus, and Charli D'Amelio.

At its core, chapter three explores what it means to work as a child celebrity and the process of production of celebrities with social media. Disney and Nickelodeon never frame their child celebrities as working children when in fact the networks have so much control over the stars' lives in ways that gives them little to no agency over their image on and off screen. While they always acknowledge the talent that makes them famous (singing, comedy, dancing, etc.) is a passion of theirs, they never mention how they are in fact working. *Shake It Up!*, surprisingly, is the only show that mentions any type of wage that the protagonists earn. This chapter will also focus on the difference between on-screen stars and what their lives are like in "real" life. As much as documentaries and reality TV want to promote a version of celebrities' reality, we all know that almost all aspects of their life are dramatized for the camera. In addition to this, there

is a popular narrative that says a lot of child stars live normal lives, but are found because of an extraordinary ability they possess. Television programs targeted toward tweens are fascinated with how to be famous, stay famous, and yet live a “normal” life as a celebrity (mainstream or online), even though we all know that celebrities live a life that is anything but normal.

### **Chapter I: Friendship, Fashion, and Fame for the Young Girl as Presented by Disney**

When I was growing up I was obsessed with *Hannah Montana*, and not just the show. I loved the character of Hannah Montana, Miley Cyrus herself, and everything that Disney decided to market as a product of Hannah Montana’s (clothing, toys, etc.). One of my fondest memories surrounding my obsession with *Hannah Montana* is the time my friend got the Hannah Montana tour bus. I remember her coming to school and telling me all about it, and we came up with a plan for me to go over to her house after school to play with it. I remember begging my mom to go over, and she finally said yes. The tour bus was purple, surprisingly boxy, and featured Hannah Montana’s face plastered onto almost every surface. Almost every side of this doll-sized pop-star’s tour bus opened in some way so that you could play and pretend that perhaps you were on tour with Hannah. It also came with a shirt you can dress your Hannah doll in that reads “teen idol” on the front. You were supposed to play with your Hannah Montana singing doll in it too, of course. While I did not have the bus myself, I always wanted one. But I can not complain too much because my parents got me the Hannah Montana singing doll. Having this doll gave me the opportunity to relate to all of the other little girls in my class who loved Hannah Montana just as much as I did. And I am sure that this shared fan culture amongst my childhood friends was fueled by the products Disney Channel was selling to us. If anything,



being consumers helped girls make and maintain our friendships. It is interesting to think about these products because they only focused on Hannah's celebrity and there were significantly fewer products of just Miley Stewart. Even if the product was supposed to be Miley Stewart, a hint of Hannah would still be present (i.e. a costume and a wig, a Hannah Montana poster for the doll). The idea of living a normal life while being famous was, for some reason, a fantasy that was compelling to me. While looking back on this, at first I did not see any harm in this fictional narrative that Disney was selling. But recently, I noticed that this double life narrative persists in many other television shows and films produced at the time, even if it may not always be as obvious as it is in *Hannah Montana*. While these texts are interesting in regard to fame and normalcy, it is also important that all the protagonists are preteen girls. Even though the audience of this media can be any age, it leaves us to wonder what this narrative is teaching young girls in particular. Is it saying that fame is attainable? Is it suggesting that the fantasy of fame is an essential part of girlhood? Or is it suggesting that there is something intrinsically fascinating about young girls' lives that means that *every* young girl could be famous, as my friend and I imagined we were when playing with Hannah's bus? And as a bigger and broader question these shows are asking: what exactly is girlhood?

The value of girlhood is evident in these programs. They suggest that girlhood is something inherently different than childhood altogether. They do this by making the protagonists of the shows tween girls and make the boy characters seem different. This is effectively done by making the boy characters somewhat dumb and funny. We know that these shows are specifically about girlhood because if they were about childhood in general, both boys and girls would have a somewhat even playing field. I experienced girlhood in the ways I

interacted and consumed shows like *Hannah Montana*, and the way my friends and I interacted with one another. In this chapter I will answer these questions by examining the Disney Studio products *Hannah Montana*, *Shake It Up!*, and *The Princess Diaries* through a post-feminist and gender studies lens. I will contextualize my analysis by considering Disney's history with television, the theme of friendship throughout its programs, its representation of young female actors, and its relationship to the star system.

To start, it is necessary to define what girlhood is. One might think girlhood is defined as the period of a woman's life when they are growing up; a combination of the word girl and childhood. Yet the reality of girlhood is very complex. Is it because girlhood is different from childhood? If so, what about being a girl makes childhood so different? Is it the products marketed to girls? The fantasies their media is selling to them? While it is easy to think of shows for girls in the contemporary moment, for the longest time (starting with the radio in the early 1930s and into the 1950s with the integration of television into American homes), most media was marketed to the whole family or just to boys. Rebecca C. Haines, Sharon R. Mazzarella, and Shayla Theil-Stern write about their study of fifteen adult women who were born between 1935 and 1944.<sup>2</sup> These women were teens in the 1940s and 1950s and recalled the types of media they consumed during this time. Most of the women remember almost all the programs being geared toward the family, or specifically toward boys. The programs they recalled were from radio, television, films, comics, and magazines. Some of the women remembered liking some of the stories that were meant for their male peers, but oftentimes the women who enjoyed these stories

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca C. Haines, Sharon R. Mazzarella, Shayla Theil-Stern. "We Didn't Have any Hannah Montanas': Girlhood, Popular Culture, and Mass Media in the 1940s and 1950s." in *Mediated Girlhoods New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, ed. by Mary Celeste Kearney. (Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 113-132.

eventually got sick of them. This is because they grew tired of only hearing stories about women who needed saving.

For example, one woman in Haines, Mazzarella, and Theil-Stern's piece said, "I think mostly I would imagine being a hero! I was, you know, like Robin Hood; but I didn't like the helpless girl characters."<sup>3</sup> Another woman named Leslie recalls ads for women that were about objects and topics that women and girls were supposed to be involved in, like washers and stoves. Leslie also points out that all of the on-screen women were always in dresses with their aprons on, and had their hair and makeup done.<sup>4</sup> These stories were, of course, the center for a lot of the media in the 1940s and 1950s. Some of the women remember adoring Wonder Woman when her comic finally came out. But other than Wonder Woman and a few other strong female leads (one woman loved Judy Garland's films because she was always the protagonist in them), almost all media containing women from this time was centered around a woman who needed saving. A lot of the women interviewed also mentioned that their role models were from real life, and were rarely from the media they consumed.

From these interviews the authors can confirm that "being a girl" was not being marketed as such back in the 40s and 50s. This can be seen when the authors write about *Seventeen* magazine, which existed when their interviewees were teenagers in the 1950s, yet they were not aware of it.<sup>5</sup> Today, it would be incredibly difficult to not know about girl culture due to the sheer number of products that are being marketed to girls. For example, *TeenVogue*, American Girl Dolls, and all of the shows discussed in this chapter are all products marketed toward girls. There are a few other examples of strong female leads from the 1940s and 1950s, but a majority of the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 120.

time, women in media were supposed to behave politely and were always portrayed as societally beautiful. Although the term teenager was being used at the time and images of girls in puffy poodle skirts come to mind, the media landscape of the 40s and 50s was not targeted to girls. Hains, Mazzearella, and Theil-Stern's chapter is essential in understanding the media discussed throughout this paper because the media landscape has changed. The chapter ends with a quote from one of the participants that reads, "We didn't have Hannah Montanas. We weren't as clothes-conscious as they are today. Which in my mind is a good thing. We stayed young. We stayed teenagers instead of growing up before our years."<sup>6</sup> This quote has some truth behind it because of the way that girlhood is presented in girls' media: glitzy, pink and purple, glittery, and excess, just like Hannah's toy tour bus. Girlhood as a concept is marketable, powerful, and multi-faceted. As I discussed in this section, there is no doubt that girlhood is separate from a general childhood, especially in the way that specific texts are meant only for girls.

### **The Wonderful World of Disney's Studio**

While *Hannah Montana* and shows like it allow girl and teen viewers to remain young, the shows emphasize a consumerist lifestyle for the girls which forces an early maturation of these young female characters. The adultification of young stars on these more contemporary shows can be seen throughout Disney's history. For example, Annette Funicello was one of the original Mouseketeers on *The Mickey Mouse Club*. She was one of, if not the most, adored Mouseketeer and was often sexualized on the show as she was going through puberty and developing breasts. While she was popular for those reasons, she was also a talented young girl,

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<sup>6</sup> Hains, Mazzearella, Theil-Stern, "We Didn't Have" 130.

so talented that Disney himself made sure that Annette followed a certain strict standard so she would become a household name.<sup>7</sup>

Annette Funicello's name set her apart from all of the other Mouseketeers on *The Mickey Mouse Club*. From the very first episode, fans of the show were drawn to Annette because her name was not like the other children. Sarah Nilsen argues that all of Funicello's co-stars had very basic names, such as Judy, Bobby, and Tommy, but Annette's name stood out because it sounded like a real person. In fact, Annette wanted to change her name so that people could pronounce it more easily, but Disney would not have it. Disney insisted that Funicello keep her name so that it would stand out and be the most memorable. On top of this, Funicello was expected to perform as this perfect star in terms of Disney's standards. This included only taking roles as the good girl, and making sure that everything she said in interviews matched the persona she put on as a Mouseketeer. For example, in the third season of *The Mickey Mouse Club*, Annette has a serial on the show titled *Walt Disney Presents: Annette*, where she plays an orphan from the country who moves into town with her aunt and uncle. In the episode titled "The Farewell Letter," Annette writes a goodbye letter to her aunt and uncle because she feels that she is ruining things for them and her friends. While Annette is writing the letter we hear her narrating the past events that are causing her to run away. We can also see that she is not the one causing any issues, but it is instead her female classmates causing conflict because they are jealous of the attention that Annette is getting as she is the new girl at school. In putting the blame on Annette's classmates, the show absolves Annette from any guilt and makes her the good girl that she always portrays for Disney's studio. From this example we can see that Disney created roles for Funicello that

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Nilsen, "All-American Girl? Annette Funicello and Suburban Ethnicity," in *Mediated Girlhoods New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, ed. by Mary Celeste Kearney, (Peter Lang Publishing, 2011) 45.

had her acting as the gentle, quiet, and kind girl that she then portrayed in interviews as well. In an interview from 1993, Annette mentions how she never imagined that she would have become a role model for so many little girls.<sup>8</sup> From this example which was filmed many years after *The Mickey Mouse Club* aired, it is clear that Funicello recognizes how playing a Disneyfied version of herself on television influenced how she lived her private life.

Annette's conflation of public and private personae is mirrored in how Walt Disney felt when his television programs became popular in the 1950s. Nicholas Sammond writes on Disney's persona as it was integrated into television: "...Walt Disney's public expected him to demonstrate a harmony between his private self and the external, public persona that took shape in the interplay between the company's public-relations organs and its audiences."<sup>9</sup> This quote is interesting especially when one considers what Disney had Annette doing. Both on and off screen she was expected to play a certain character and everyone was expected to anticipate that her private life was just like it was broadcasted in the media. While Walt did this to Annette, he also did it to himself in order to become the embodied voice of the company. While Annette did not have agency over her on-screen portrayal as herself, Walt Disney had the agency to perform in any way he wanted. In doing so, Walt Disney was able to make himself the embodied voice by showing himself when explaining new technologies, and inviting cameras (and therefore an

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<sup>8</sup> TheMMChannel, "Mickey Mouse Club Annette Funicello Interviewed by Lindsey Alley (1993)," YouTube Video, 6:35, April 9, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4k4cL1yYl6g>. In this interview Funicello clarifies that she thought that she would not be a role model for so many children because she was simply a Mouseketeer. She goes on to explain how the show aired only for an hour during the fifties in black and white, and how no one imagined that it would become such an influence on society and children's programming. We can assume that she thought that the show would not become as popular as it did and continue to be rebooted two additional times after its initial 1955-59 run. Funicello's comments also solidifies that she thought of herself as a normal everyday girl (aka a real person) which was a different image than what Disney imagined for her.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Sammond, "Disney Maps the Frontier" in *Babes in Tomorrowland Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child 1930-1960*. (Duke University Press, 2005) 321.

audience) into his personal office.<sup>10</sup> Because Disney allows audiences into his office, the audience can feel as though they know Walt more personally. This is important because Walt situates himself in an environment that feels more personable and private, which allows the audience to recognize his authenticity as a person while still being famous. This also shows that Walt is a family-friendly and trusted person to leave their children with on screen even though he sells ads and products to them.

Disney created a personable characterization of himself so people would recognize him as a famous person with little to no private life. Much like Disney's decision to welcome audiences into a version of his private life, the studio also had a lot of control over the private life of its child stars. This is important because as television was being integrated into suburban homes in the mid-to late 1950s, Disney the studio began to position itself in a way that helps children understand the world.<sup>11</sup> According to Sammond, Disney completed this process by marketing specific products to children, such as Mattel toys and Vicks Cold Medicine as seen in many episodes of *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Disney also inserted itself into children's private lives when the studio created guides for teachers and parents to integrate both *Disneyland*, and *The Mickey Mouse Club* into their learning. These guides gave teachers specific questions they could ask their class before and after watching the program.<sup>12</sup> In addition to these guides, the show itself also attempts to teach lessons. The episode "Anything Can Happen Day," which originally aired on October 5th, 1955, starts with many informational news clips from all over the world. At the end of the episode, one of the hosts, Jimmie, attempts to teach the audience a

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<sup>10</sup> Disney often invited audiences into his office in the television show, *Disneyland* (1954-1958), which took its viewers around the park and showed the newest innovations and attractions at the new Disney theme park.

<sup>11</sup> Sammond, "Disney Maps," 323.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

lesson about helping people. The example Jimmie gives is about helping the audience's parents with the dishes after dinner so that they can all sit down and watch the program, *Disneyland*, together as a family. This is important to note because Disney continues to insert themselves into the private lives of children through their family and their education.

This practice carries over to the end of almost every episode of *Hannah Montana*, in that there is some greater lesson to be learned after all of the crazy events of the past twenty two minutes. For example, the lesson at the end of the very first episode of *Hannah Montana* revolves around friendship being more valuable than fame and popularity. This lesson is seen throughout the majority of the show but it is still a lesson for children and tweens to know nonetheless. It is fascinating to see how Disney started doing this rather purposefully at the beginning, with *The Mickey Mouse Club* and is continuing to do this in subtle ways in contemporary media. Although "lessons learned" seem to be a traditional aspect of the sitcom, the lessons in the majority of Disney sitcoms have to deal with growing up and becoming mature. Some of the lessons that Miley and her friends learn include, being honest with your parents, telling someone with authority if you are being bullied, and various lessons on how to be a true friend. With these lessons, Disney also begins to blend the traditions of sitcoms with its programs. This structure has been carried from *The Mickey Mouse Club* all the way to contemporary Disney shows. While these lessons are important for tweens to understand, what makes Disney different from the traditional sitcom is the way in which from *The Mickey Mouse Club* on, adults behave immaturely which makes the shows adult-free zones. The lessons at the end of Disney's sitcoms also operate under the assumption that teachers and parents will reinforce the lessons so that the characters on screen do not have to teach these lessons as adults.



The only adults a child will be learning from are outside of the program so that the shows are kid-only spaces with little to no authority.

The immature adults are mentioned by Sammond: “*The Mickey Mouse Club* presented a world in which adults behaved more like larger and older children.”<sup>13</sup> Here, Sammond is discussing the hosts of *The Mickey Mouse Club*, Jimmie and Roy. While they were adults hosting the show full of child Mousketeers, their immature behavior allowed children to enjoy their shows without any adult supervision. The adults in modern Disney shows behave like their children in several ways. For example, Miley Stewart’s dad, Robby Ray, is the epitome of the child adult. While he is the sole guardian of both Miley and her brother, Jackson, he still acts immaturity. One can see this in the episode titled “Good Golly, Miss Dolly.” In the episode Miley’s Aunt Dolly visits the Stewart home and redecorates to make everything pink and covers the home in flowers, giving the house a feminine touch. Even though Robby Ray is not upset with this redecoration, he feels like he is losing his manly influence. In order to reclaim the home, Robby and Jackson decide to get all sweaty so the house smells like body odor and thus, more manly. Since Jackson and Robby do this together, it furthers the childlike qualities of Miley’s father. After they come back drenched in sweat, both Robby and Jackson can not stand the smell of themselves and are swayed into using Dolly’s nice florally scented body washes and sprays. They even argue over who gets to use what products. The points in this episode highlight Robby Ray’s immaturity because he decides to behave like a child to get what he wants instead of having a mature conversation with another adult. Disney makes Miley’s father act this way so the fun and immature events can happen in every episode. If Robby Ray acted like a real-life

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<sup>13</sup> Sammond, “Disney Maps,” 345.

adult in front of a camera, I doubt the events of *Hannah Montana* would ever take place. His ability to behave like a child allows him to be authoritative over his own children, but in a way that lets them still have fun in their fantasy version of reality.

This works because one of the goals of the Disney Channel, according to an ad for the channel in 1983, was to bring the magic of Disney into your home.<sup>14</sup> The ad starts with the clip from *101 Dalmations* (dir. Wolfgang Reitherman, Hamilton Luske, Clyde Geronimi, 1961) of the puppies gathered around the “telly” watching one of their favorite programs. In the original clip, their television show goes to commercial, but instead of it going to the usual commercial it then turns into an advertisement for the Disney Channel. The dalmations’ television screen then takes over ours and we are left with a montage of all of the programs set to air on the channel. We first see an exercise program called *Mouercise* (1982), which features people in 1980s workout gear, running in place and clapping with children. We then see clips that do not even last a second from the shows *Welcome to Pooh Corner* (1983-1984), *Zorro* (1957-1959), and *Gumby* (1957-1969). The ad continues to show all other Disney Channel original shows and movies, as well as highlight some of their shows about amusement parks. Another initial aim of the Disney Channel as seen in the advertisement, was to serve as a safe place for families to sit down and enjoy entertainment together. While these goals were set for the channel before its premiere, Disney has held to both statements. This can be seen in *Hannah Montana*. Even if the show is not meant for an older audience and its messages are meant for children, I remember my father laughing at some of the jokes when I was watching the show as a child. Before the release of the Disney Channel, there was plenty of family oriented programming for the entire family. Since

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<sup>14</sup> Wwodtv, “Disney Channel promo- September 1983.mp4.” YouTube video, 1:01, March 23, 2010, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XauuC\\_9qibk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XauuC_9qibk).

there was only one other children's network (Pinwheel, later known as Nickelodeon), it makes sense as to why Disney would want to make a channel all on their own.

In 1983, the president of the Disney Channel, James P. Jimirro, said that another of its goals was to stimulate the brain because he felt that families were "turned off" by the repetitiveness of R rated films that appeared in their local theaters."<sup>15</sup> While I doubt many families were going to see R rated films together, it is clear that a specific channel designed for family entertainment was wanted in many homes: Jimirro anticipated 2 million users of the channel by the end of 1984.<sup>16</sup> This aspect also shows that in order to have a safe space meant for the entire family, there must be corporate control over what is shown and what ideals were represented by its shows and actors. This is why some of the highlighted programs in the ad for the channel were the Disney classics such as *Dumbo* (1941), Mickey Mouse animated shorts, and of course, *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Since these shows are slated to air on the channel, these programs are deemed mentally stimulating and safe for the entire family. By making the channel a safe space for children, the network needed to have control over its stars so that it remained one hundred percent family friendly.

Although stardom in general is the topic of chapter three, here I want to note how valuable Annette Funicello was for establishing the family friendly Disney star system. Both Funicello and Hilary Duff are examples for how Disney studio wants to build its stars in a way so that it has complete control over them and its image as a studio. Lindsay Hogan writes about the tactics Disney uses to create and author their stars, focussing on Hilary Duff and her

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<sup>15</sup> Sally Bedell, "Disney Channel to Start Next Week," *New York Times*, April 12th, 1983, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

franchise and legacy left to Disney Channel after her success<sup>17</sup>. After Duff abandoned her contract to make the second season of her show, *Lizzie McGuire* (2001-2004), Disney instead shifted its focus from the character of Lizzie (meaning she never had to perform on stage as Lizzie and instead was always Hilary Duff when not on *Lizzie McGuire*) and decided to fully support Duff with her music career. They of course had her sign contracts with recording studios that were affiliated with Disney so the studio could expand its resources for more up and coming stars, but also so Duff would not be separated from being a “Disney star.” Hogan uses Duff as the main example in this piece to show how Disney is constantly making new stars in their machine. Hogan also makes sure to note that when Disney is creating their stars, they are very clearly following the classical Hollywood star system which involves people recognizing celebrities for certain personality traits, the films they star in, and the types of characters they portray so that people have an idea of who this person is without actually knowing them. This can be seen in both Disney himself and Funicello. This also helps Disney’s business model and makes it very easy for the studio to author and manage their stars' images in order to keep the standard for family friendly content. Hogan also goes on to describe how Duff often lacked her ability to make her own decisions because she was a minor, listening to both her mother and Disney. Disney was also successful in making Duff famous through television, film, and radio while she was under contract, further proving that their stars are authored and controlled by the company for financial gain. As pointed out with the comparison of Duff and Funicello, we can also see the continued authorship of the star of *Hannah Montana*, Miley Cyrus.

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<sup>17</sup> Lindsay Hogan, “The Mouse House of Cards: Disney Tween Stars and Questions of Institutional Authorship,” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 296-313.

## Friendship and the Fulfilled Childhood

In the first episode of *Hannah Montana* Miley's best friend, Lilly, does not know that Miley is Hannah Montana. Lilly comes skateboarding in the front door of Miley's family's home with two tickets to Hannah's show for that night. (It is important to note that Lilly's skateboarding is supposed to be a contradiction to what Disney considers a proper part of girlhood). Miley, obviously, cannot let her friend know her true identity right then and there because the rest of the episode would not exist since there would be no conflict. As the episode goes on, Lilly eventually finds out Miley is Hannah by accident. This causes a fight between the girls because they are supposed to tell each other everything as best friends. Miley does not want anyone from school to know about her life as Hannah Montana because her life of normalcy will be gone forever. *Hannah Montana* suggests that friendship ties one to an adolescence of normalcy.

Friendship is the central idea for *Hannah Montana* and the rest of the media discussed in this chapter because that is how it is for children in real life. I remember when I was starting grade school, I was worried about making friends. By the time I was seven years old, however, I met one of my best friends who is still a part of my life today. She is not the only one though, I am still best friends with almost all of my friends from grade school. I remember being in high school and my peers were surprised that we were all still as close as we were in third grade. But why was I worried about making friends in the first place as a five-year-old? I knew I was capable of making friends because I played with kids my age at every park and playground I went to as a child. Making friends is not easy either; there are plenty of people who have been in and out of my life. I think part of the reason why friendship is so necessary for children is

because when one has friends they feel like they are a part of a community. Other than a child's role in the family, the only other community one is a part of is at school. All children, regardless of their gender, feel the desire to make friends, so why is it framed as an integral part of girlhood? *Hannah Montana*, *The Princess Diaries*, and *Shake It Up!* all suggest that friendship is essential to have a fulfilling childhood as a girl. We do not need to look at just these shows either.

Think of books series like *Nancy Drew* or *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Even though *Nancy Drew* is for a younger audience and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* is a Young Adult novel, both are centered around girls trusting in each other as friends. The girls in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* even call their friendship a "sisterhood," which is something that I feel with my close friends. The novel follows a group of high school best friends who are spending their first summer apart from one another. Despite being away from each other, a pair of magical pants fits each of the girls regardless of their size and they mail the pants to each other throughout the summer. Even though the concept of this novel and its sequels is very strange, it highlights that friendship (and a pair of pants?) is something strong enough to last across many miles. The theme of friendship in media for girls can be seen as early as 1930 with the release of the first *Nancy Drew* book. *Nancy Drew* is one of the earliest examples of teen friendship being the ultimate goal for childhood. It is clear to see that this theme has persisted throughout media about and for tween girls. In discussing the cultural significance of *Nancy Drew* for girls, Melanie Rehak writes, "We also learned how to dress properly for the events at hand, to make tea sandwiches and carry on polite conversation, and to be good friends to both those we love and those in need."<sup>18</sup> We can see that *Nancy Drew* and her friends were and still

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<sup>18</sup> Melanie Rehak, "Introduction" in *Girl Sleuth: Nancy Drew and the Women Who Created Her*, (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005), XV.

are valuable examples of what friendships should look like for girlhood. Without her friends, Bess and George, Nancy would not be able to solve all of her mysteries. For example in *The Sky Phantom*, Bess and George help direct Nancy to a plane that was about to go down. Not only is Nancy Drew flying a plane at the beginning of this tale, but she can see Bess and George in a field on horseback signaling to her (yes, the story opens like this and we are just supposed to think this is normal). On top of her pilot skills and supervision, she can also ride on horseback, do ballet, arrange flowers, but most importantly, she is a sleuth. Without Bess and George's help at the beginning of this Nancy Drew tale, Nancy would not have been led to the mystery that needed to be solved for the story to exist. The girls trust in and help one another which lets them have fulfilling childhoods as teen detectives.

While I obviously did not have friends that helped me solve mysteries, I did have many friends that I would say are my sisters like the teens in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. As someone who does not have a sister, the companionship of having one was something I always dreamt of as a child. My friends and I wanted to pretend we were sisters so badly that we would plan to wear matching or coordinating outfits to school so that we could "twin." So what is with this feeling of sisterhood amongst young girls? One Disney film that made me think of sisterhood a lot is *The Parent Trap* (dir. Nancy Meyers 1998). While I grew up watching the 1998 remake, the original 1961 version of *The Parent Trap* (dir. David Swift) tells the same tale of friendship and the doubling theme so central to *Hannah Montana* and other Disney products. The two twin sisters, Annie and Hallie, were separated when they were babies because their parents got a divorce. After eleven years of not knowing each other existed, the twins finally meet at summer camp and devise a plan to get their parents back together. I wanted a sister even

more after seeing this film. The idea of having a secret twin who was also a built-in best friend is a common fantasy for young girls. I think the theme of friendship is so important to girlhood because friendships that are as close as sisterhoods guarantee that someone will always be there for you. Friends will be there to keep your secrets, to be a person you can always rely on, and so that one has a memorable childhood. These aspects are appealing to Disney because they know that every child has friends or wants them. This is important because this suggests that the lack (in terms of feminism) for girlhood, is not having genuine, lasting friendships. Disney wants to push this message because it makes their shows relatable and valuable to children who want to know what characteristics make a good friend.

According to Tyler Bickford friendship is the ultimate goal for childhood fulfillment. One can see this argument when Bickford writes, "...friendship is the role most characteristic of 'essential' or 'authentic' childhood."<sup>19</sup> Miley wants to have "The Best of Both Worlds," as the theme song of the show says, and Bickford suggests that in order to have a normal life she needs sincere friendship. As the first episode continues, Lilly comes around and accepts the reasons why Miley kept her secret from her. According to Miley she does not want people finding out that she is Hannah Montana because she will begin to be treated differently. Even though Miley shares her fear with Lilly, after Miley shows Lilly her fabulous "Hannah Closet," that exists behind her "normal girl closet" (the weirdness of this closet will be talked about a bit later), Lilly slips and accidentally calls Miley, Hannah, thus confirming Miley's concern surrounding people finding out who she really is. Of course, by the end of the episode, the girls make up and the secret is kept safe between the two best friends.

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<sup>19</sup> Tyler Bickford, "Tween Intimacy and the Problem of Public Life in Childrens' Media: 'Having it All' On the Disney Channel's 'Hannah Montana,'" *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 43, no. ½, (2015): 71.



Just like the best friend duo in *Hannah Montana*, *Shake It Up!*'s Chicago teenagers CeCe and Rocky are best friends from the very first episode of the show. Like the other best friends, we receive little to no backstory on how they became friends, we just know that they are, and that they have been friends for "forever." Lasting friendships are also something that Disney likes to promote to their young female audience because of the fact that in order to have a fulfilling childhood one must have friends. The pilot episode follows the adventures of these best friends as they continue to audition for their favorite dance show, but only Rocky makes the cut. Rocky, being one of six people that got a spot on the show, handcuffs herself to CeCe so she has no other choice but to get on stage with her best friend the next time the show airs. From this aspect of the first episode, we can see that these two girls will do anything for one another. *Shake It Up!* is again proving that friendship is the key factor in childhood and especially girlhood. As the show continues another episode titled "Add It Up," is centered around authentic girlhood through friendship and secrets. In this episode we learn that Cece has been keeping her dyslexia a secret from Rocky for many years at this point. While this part of the show is a lesson to the audience about what dyslexia is, the other aspect of it is to show that your friends will be there for you when you are upset and struggling. Despite the fact that the secret in *Shake it Up!* did not have to deal with power and fame, it shows that authentic friendship is an essential part to girlhood. Both *Shake It Up!* and *Hannah Montana* define friendships as a bond between two people in which they share their deepest secrets.

In addition to the best friend narrative seen in the other media we have discussed, we can also notice this authentic friendship that Bickford suggests in *The Princess Diaries*. In *The Princess Diaries*, Mia, and her best friend, also named Lilly, have the ordinary life of two outcast

and somewhat nerdy girls at their high school. Everything seems normal until one day Mia's distant grandmother meets her at the (fictional) Genovian Embassy (conveniently located blocks away from her home in San Francisco). While having tea together, her grandmother reveals that she is queen of Genovia and Mia is the next in line, making her a princess. Mia, shocked, runs away from the embassy and does not want anything to do with this pretty princess lifestyle. The next day her grandmother shows up at her home where Mia, her mother, and her grandmother make a deal that Mia will do some "princess classes" to see if she would potentially like being a princess. The choice Mia has to be a princess or not is justified by the post-feminist perspective of the film. Like any other fashion choice that Mia and Lilly, or any other tween girl in these shows make, post-feminism suggests that you make this choice for yourself and not for anyone else. *The Princess Diaries* is interesting in this regard because as much as Mia's choice is hers, she justifies her decision to be a princess at the end of the film in terms of selflessness just as her father did. In her speech Mia says,

I'm not so afraid anymore...no. My father helped me. Earlier this evening, I had every intention of giving up my claim to the throne...But, then I wondered how I'd feel after abdicating my role as Princess of Genovia. Would I feel relieved? Or would I feel sad? And then I realized how many stupid times a day I used the word "I"... But then I thought, if I cared about the other 7 billion out there instead of just me, that's probably a much better use of my time. See, if I were Princess of Genovia then my thoughts and the thoughts of people smarter than me would be much better heard, and just maybe those thoughts could be turned into actions. So this morning when I woke up I was Mia Thermopolis. But, now, I choose to be forevermore, Amelia Mignonette Thermopolis Renaldi: Princess of Genovia.

During the speech Mia glances around the room to everyone who has helped her make this decision including her mom, grandmother, and her best friend. Even though Mia never knew her father and he is briefly mentioned in the entirety of her speech, it is still clear to see that his

influence on her choice is strong. While Mia's decision up until this justification is her own and calls to post-feminism, the choice to frame it as something her father wanted is problematic.

The choice to be a princess however, also complicates Mia's relationship with her best friend because she does not want anyone treating her differently. However, when Mia eventually must tell Lilly, Lilly is beyond happy for her friend. Even though Lilly is happy, her happiness only comes off as in the sense that Mia will have a lot of power one day. *The Princess Diaries's* Lilly is somewhat like *Hannah Montana's* Lilly in the sense that they are both super happy to know someone who is rich and famous. The fact that Lilly in *The Princess Diaries* is only happy because Mia will have this power potentially questions her authenticity as a friend because she treats Mia terribly for almost all of the film. One can read this as tough love though because by the end of the film Lilly is there at the ball when Mia makes her speech and declares that she will be a princess, which proves that she is the authentic friend that makes Mia's normal teen girl life worthwhile.

### **The Post-Feminist Choices of Girlhood**

We might look at contemporary films and programs for women to understand the post-feminist aims of tween media like *Hannah Montana*, *The Princess Diaries*, and *Shake it Up!*. Angela McRobbie claims that in the 1970s and 1980s feminism began to include language centered around empowerment and choice.<sup>20</sup> McRobbie's definition for post-feminism reads:

In actuality the idea of feminist content disappeared and was replaced by aggressive individualism...and by the obsession with consumer culture which...I see as playing a vital role in the undoing of feminism. It is arguably the case that the self-definition as decisively post-feminist gave to the world of young women's magazines a new lease of life, as though they became unburdened through this transition.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Angela McRobbie, "Introduction: In Exchange for Feminism" *The Aftermath of Feminism* (London: SAGE, 2009), 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

The word “unburdened” in this quote is important here. The word choice suggests that the introduction of empowerment and choice into feminism caused women to feel as though that they are no longer burdened with the responsibility to fight for equality since it has been reached. This definition is essential to understanding this tween media targeted toward girls in its relation to post-feminism because it shows how this hyper consumerist and individualistic lifestyle that is being sold to women is dismantling feminism. This is because women and people in general believe that women have gained equality and now have the freedom to choose how they live their lives. McRobbie also writes about the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* (dir. Sharon Maguire, 2001) to show the contradictions of post-feminism. In *Bridget Jones's Diary* the protagonist, Bridget, is worried about whether she will ever find a husband. Throughout the film, according to McRobbie, she ignores her success in other facets of her life, and views marriage to be the ultimate success. This is a contradiction to feminism because the women in this film and others are continuing to situate themselves in a male-centered world. The women of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*, enjoy their sexual freedom yet are always looking for “Mr. Right.” When discussing this dilemma McRobbie writes, “These popular texts normalize post-feminist gender anxieties so as to re-regulate young women by the means of the language of personal choice.”<sup>22</sup> While McRobbie’s piece discusses post-feminism in media that is for and about adult women, this quote helps us understand post-feminist ideas in *The Princess Diaries*, *Hannah Montana*, and *Shake it Up!*. In all these shows, as we can see specifically in the makeover sequences, there are definitely anxieties surrounding these young girls' gender expressions when they are supposed to be performing a specific role. The makeover allows the girls to become the

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<sup>22</sup>Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* (November 2004): 262.

version of themselves that is societally pretty so we have no choice but to look at them. For example, even though Miley Stewart is considered to be societally pretty as an ordinary girl, her change to Hannah allows her to look like a hyperfeminine popstar so that she can properly perform on stage. We can also see this in *The Parent Trap* when the twin sisters are giving makeovers and teaching each other essential things about themselves and their parents in order to successfully switch lives to live with the opposite parent. Whether it is to become a popstar, princess, or doppelganger for your twin, the makeover scenes in tween media define a change in the girls lives so they can perform as a proper girl in their role.

Just like the twins in *The Parent Trap* and Miley's transition to perform as Hannah Montana, Mia in *The Princess Diaries* also experiences a makeover to perform her role as a princess. At the beginning of the film, Mia is not supposed to be a stereotypically beautiful girl. Her hair is a big puff of dark brown curls, she wears big chunky black shoes and glasses, and the film clearly makes it a point to show that she does not want to be like the other girls. However, her grandmother does not think that Mia's look is appropriate for a princess in training. The training montage is often seen in films about and for men. Oftentimes they are either training for a sport, competition, or are a superhero. In *The Princess Diaries*, the makeover scene that follows the queen's disapproval over Mia's look seems to suggest that young girls' training comes in the form of beauty. This is interesting because the training montage happens so that the man can perform whatever task is at hand, while the woman "trains" so that they fit a certain societal standard. This is exactly what happens to Mia. Mia is transformed from being the typical awkward looking teenager, into a high glam version of herself, with no glasses, new shoes, and pin-straight hair. After this makeover scene, Mia tries to hide her new style to keep the secret of

being a princess away from her best friend and the rest of the school. However, once Mia reveals her secret to her best friend after she sees her straight hair, and it gets leaked to the school that Mia is a princess, she begins to be treated differently. The popular people start inviting her to parties, but she eventually learns that the reason they are inviting her places is because they want the attention from the media as if they are her friends. Her popular classmates at school also seem to be doing this so they too will eventually be famous. From this film we can see that the stylization of the body not only has to do with gender as a performance, but also with the way these girls can perform as friends, and in the roles that they hold.

When it comes to children's shows, Bickford's article points out how these shows deal with post-feminism, "having it all," and how it relates to girlhood.<sup>23</sup> While Miley and Lilly essentially "have it all" by being each other's best friends, the term itself refers to a post-feminist idea surrounding making choices between personal and professional life. For shows about adult women (like *Sex and the City* and *Murphy Brown*), these personal choices and pressures are often centered around marriage and motherhood. Since *Hannah Montana* is about tween girls, the creators of this show cannot make Miley and Lilly's choices surrounded by the same thing, so they center the personal life around friendship and its sincerity and the professional life as still a job, even though no one in the show recognizes that Miley does work when she performs as Hannah. Despite the fact that no one recognizes Miley's performance as Hannah, other than the blonde wig that she must put on, there is a clear uniform she must wear so that she can successfully perform as a teen idol pop star. This uniform can be seen in the first episode when Miley introduces the audience and Lilly to the ultimate celebrity walk in closet fantasy.

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<sup>23</sup> Bickford, "Tween Intimacy," 66-82.

The closet as seen in the first episode of *Hannah Montana* and throughout the series is an interesting metaphor for gender as performance through the clothes that one puts on their body. In the pilot episode of the show, after Lilly learns Miley's secret there is a scene of the two best friends standing in Miley's closet with her normal everyday clothes. Lilly, confused, asks Miley what is so special about being in her closet. Miley then separates the rack of hanging clothes down the middle to reveal a set of double doors with the initials "H.M." on them. Miley dramatically opens both doors and turns on the lights to reveal Hannah Montana's wardrobe behind her everyday closet. Lilly then screams "Woah!," and we receive a point of view shot from her perspective with her eyes flying around the room looking at the shoes, accessories, and clothes. The closet has a revolving rack of clothes, three shoe racks that extend out from the wall, and other accessories and clothing items scattered on tables. The plethora of clothes and accessories in Hannah's closet suggest that it is all necessary for Miley to perform as a tween celebrity. The fact that Hannah exists in the back of Miley's closet is interesting too because it suggests that in order to be Hannah, Miley must literally come out of the closet as her. The normal closet that Lilly and Miley must walk through to get to the more elaborate closet is very normal for a tween girl in 2006. This closet has t-shirts, skirts, and pants that any young girl at that time would have worn. The whole closet seems very casual. Miley's other closet for Hannah is anything but casual. It is filled with dressy blouses, sparkly shoes and dresses, necklaces, bracelets, and the smallest handbags that would be unable to fit anything in them.

It is clear that Miley's closet for Hannah is supposed to be hyperfeminine so she can properly perform as her. This hyperfeminine gender performance then points to styling oneself to perform a certain role as a woman. Not to mention the metaphor of keeping Hannah hidden in

the closet is an interesting move for Disney because it suggests that gender performance comes from the clothes that you wear, and that one can change who you are by dressing differently.

Another pretty obvious choice that Miley makes throughout the show is to whom she will tell her secret, and how she presents herself as Hannah. Miley's caricature as Hannah is a hyper feminine version of herself complete with every accessory imaginable. This performance as Hannah as a super feminine and blonde version of Miley, suggests a lot about gender as a performance and the role she is performing as Hannah. Judith Butler writes, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."<sup>24</sup> This stylization that Butler is writing about happens all the time in this media about girlhood. As mentioned in *Hannah Montana* she literally styles her body in a way so that it looks like a tween pop star with glitter and everything else imaginable. Despite not being completely famous the girls on *Shake it Up!* also dress similarly to Miley when she is on stage as Hannah. This stylization of the body is vital to both shows mentioned, and also in *The Princess Diaries* when Mia has her makeover to properly learn how to be a princess.

The girls on *Shake It Up!* definitely participate and perform in their gender roles as young girls. However, they do not participate in a different way than most of the other female protagonists discussed in this chapter. The way Cece and Rocky dress is similar to the excess as seen in the closet from *Hannah Montana*. Instead of the plethora of clothes existing in the closet, however, Cece and Rocky have a plethora of clothes on their body at all times. They often layer shirts, wear a jacket, have two different kinds of socks on, wear pants under their skirts, and don

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<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire" in *Gender Trouble*. (New York: Routledge, 1990). 45.



tons of large accessories. While the girls on *Shake It Up!* are dressed like this from the very first episode of the show, the host tells them they get on “Shake it Up! Chicago” for merely having the right look. This is a compelling suggestion for the show to promote because unlike the character of Hannah Montana, Cece and Rocky do not have to come out, they want to be seen. I find this interesting because while we saw a makeover sequence happen for Mia, Cece and Rocky do not have any form of makeover or training sequence so that they can successfully perform as dancers on “Shake It Up! Chicago.” The training sequence also suggests that men complete tasks or do things, while girls and women are simply seen. If this was a show centered around boys who wanted to dance, there may be a training sequence, but with *Shake It Up!* the show starts with the two girls already knowing how to dance.

To continue this discussion of gender as a performance, let us return to *Hannah Montana*. Morgan Genevieve Blue explains how *Hannah Montana* constructs girlhood in a stereotypical feminine way.<sup>25</sup> Blue argues that the show depicts its female characters as performing as women in ways that give power to their bodies since they are choosing to participate in socially and culturally accepted feminine ideals. Blue makes the claim that if that is the case, then the female body is central to femininity, and that the power of choice is emulating popular culture. Hannah Montana and Miley Cyrus, according to Blue, are participating in this feminine empowerment through fashion and consumerism. Blue argues that Lilly’s tomboy and active aesthetic has more to do with the fact that they are young, pubescent girls, rather than her being a stand-in for the “typical girl” as a foil to Miley’s version of regular girl in the show. Blue also mentions that in the third episode of the show where Miley gives Lilly a make-over to get the attention of her

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<sup>25</sup> Morgan Genevieve Blue, “The Best of Both Worlds? Youth, Gender, and the Postfeminist Sensibility in Disney’s *Hannah Montana*,” *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no 4. 2013.

crush, the phrase “teach me to be like a girl” is centered around fashion, which furthers the idea of performative femininity.

So far everything I have discussed is central to understanding what these shows are teaching girls about femininity and what girlhood should be. All these main female protagonists participate in their femininity in very extreme ways so they can sell an amplified version of girlhood to their audience. While it was briefly mentioned previously, what Blue and McRobbie are suggesting about post-feminism is necessary to further the discussion in this Disney media about girlhood, fame, and a double life. So far in all these shows, all of the girl protagonists have many choices to make: who knows their secrets, what they wear, how they look, and whether or not they continue to hold the power they have. All these choices have to deal with post-feminism. When talking about the choices involved in a post-feminist world, Bickford writes that there is, “...a conflict between feminist empowerment and feminine authenticity.”<sup>26</sup> From this quote we can see how post-feminism is somewhat contradictory in its beliefs. As much as it is about women and their choices, there are conflicting beliefs in how women present themselves and participate in femininity. Bickford continues to argue *Hannah Montana* is an example of this conflict for tweens in how it approaches its representation of femininity and consumerism. This can then be tied again to the makeover sequences in both *The Princess Diaries* and *Hannah Montana*. Both makeovers happen because one character feels like they are not feminine enough to participate in a certain role as a girl. For Lilly in *Hannah Montana*, she needed a makeover so that she can take a crush on a date. For Mia in *The Princess Diaries* her grandmother thinks that she does not present herself in the correct way to be a princess. While

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<sup>26</sup> Bickford, “Tween Intimacy,” 72.

Mia had less of a choice over her makeover, it is clear to see that she likes how she looks post-makeover. On top of the makeovers, Bickford would agree that the girls on these programs must be hyper consumerist to participate in girlhood.

In my analysis of *The Princess Diaries*, *Shake It Up!*, and *Hannah Montana*, it is clear to see that the double life narrative that these shows promote is a necessary part of girlhood. It suggests that in order for girls to perform as girls they must be hyperfeminine consumerists. Without hyperfemininity, Mia would not become a princess, and Miley would not have “the best of both worlds” as Hannah. On top of this, this hyperfeminine consumerist lifestyle allows the girls watching this media to see a clear distinction between what is considered everyday and what is considered socially acceptable in terms of the stylization of one's body for attention as potential celebrities. Since these programs are all Disney products, we can also clearly see that the studio promotes this narrative. These young female Disney stars are showing their girl audience that in order to be considered a girl they must wear lots of accessories, glitter, and makeup. It also shows that other than a school uniform (as seen in *The Princess Diaries*) one has choices on how they style themselves in order to look like a famous girl. As seen in *The Princess Diaries*, as soon as Mia changes her look, the popular girls immediately want to be her friend, thus gaining Mia some sort of fame at school. Because of the stylization of their bodies we can see that the girls of these programs want to be seen. The girls of *Shake It Up!* crave the spotlight on stage. Miley also wants to be put on display on stage as Hannah, but have her private life separate from her life as a celebrity. And Mia wants to be seen as a beautiful, powerful leader. While the girls on *Shake It Up!* choose to audition to be on television, Miley and Mia have more

of a choice on what they do with their lives, and who knows their secrets. Although Mia is not able to keep her secret for long, Miley has the option to only let certain people know her secret.

These choices of how one styles their body and who knows their secrets is reminiscent of the choices that are discussed in post-feminist thinking. It is clear to see that the post-feminist choices that these girls have allows them to have their double lives as normal girls and girls who are seen on stage, on tv, and as a girl with power. On top of this, friendship also allows these girls to maintain a normal lifestyle. Even though they all have some form of fame, their friendship allows their childhoods to be normal and fulfilling. This is the whole premise of *Hannah Montana*. If Miley did not have Lilly, her life would not be fulfilled as a normal everyday girl. Disney wants to promote girlhood friendship because it is relatable to their audience. Friendship, post-feminist choices, and the way Disney creates these stories are all key in interpreting the double life fantasy that is shown in *Hannah Montana*, *Shake It Up!*, and *The Princess Diaries*. Without one of these factors, this media would not be successfully promoting fame as an attainable future career to their young female audience.

## **Chapter II: But What About the Boys?: An Analysis of the Boy Band, Producers, and Nickelodeon**

As you can tell from chapter one, I was obviously invested in anything and everything that was meant for young girls on Disney Channel. While thinking through the last chapter of this project I realized that Disney shows seem to be just focused on the fame aspect of the shows and often do not show what it takes to be stars. But that is not the only children's network I had access to. Nickelodeon was the middle ground for my brother and me. There were cartoons,

some live action shows, and almost everything seemed like it was meant for all children, not just one specific gender. My brother and I would often take turns choosing what show we were watching in order to keep our parents sane and prevent each other from fighting. While taking turns was our parents' idea, it seemed to keep us from arguing about every thirty minutes. Oftentimes, I would finish watching the most wonderfully glittery episode of *Hannah Montana*, and then it would be my brother's turn to pick what we are watching. He would easily flick the channel button on our staticky television one forward and we were left watching, you guessed it, Nickelodeon. Most often, Nickelodeon would be showing yet another marathon of *Spongebob Squarepants* (1999-), and we could almost always agree to watch that together and not start an argument. From his squeaky shoes, to his dolphin-like laugh my brother and I could not get enough of *Spongebob*. My parents often joked that my brother and I had seen every episode of the series, and this was probably true up until our high school years.

Even though Nickelodeon played marathon after marathon of *Spongebob* because of the show's success, the network continued to make new programs that pushed the limits of the kinds of shows they produced for kids. Unlike Disney Channel, Nickelodeon focused on cartoons and the juvenile fun of childhood. This fun is often seen through "icky" humor with the network's signature green oozing slime, and shows like *The Ren and Stimpy Show* (1991-1996) which prided itself in its gross humor and overly detailed drawings. Even though Nickelodeon was praised for the success of *Spongebob*, the network still dipped its toes in the creation of live action sit-coms like Disney Channel. For a short period of our childhood, my brother and I enjoyed the show *The Naked Brothers Band* (2007-2009). The show is about two brothers, Nat and Alex, who are in a band with their best friends. The band consists of all boy members, with

the exception of one girl. The show also highlights that the band's fan base is made up of almost entirely girls, with the exception of a few boys here and there. One could make the argument that Nickelodeon was trying to copy Disney Channel in their attempt at making a show about famous kids, but unlike *Hannah Montana*, *The Naked Brothers Band*, and by extension Nickelodeon embrace the idea of fame and never hide from it. On Nickelodeon, the focus on becoming a star is often highlighted in the first episodes of their programs about fame. *iCarly* (2007-2012) and *Big Time Rush* (2009-2013) are prime examples of this. The characters on both *Big Time Rush* and *iCarly* are comfortable in their lives as both up-and-coming celebrities and regular pre-teen kids still attending school (in one way or another). What is even more interesting is that the tweens who are stars still lead a fairly normal life, but there are a few exceptions to this. Nickelodeon focuses on the production of tween celebrities, both in boy bands and online, and their lives embracing their fame. Nickelodeon seems to be selling to their child audience that there is no need to hide the private life from the public life. On Nickelodeon there is no option of having a double life; there is no hiding your stardom. This is very unlike the plot of *Hannah Montana*. So why is Nickelodeon promoting this kind of fame to their tween audience? Is it suggesting a more realistic way to achieve fame via the internet? Or is it that the realism comes from the fact that if you are a famous singer there is no way you could ever lead a normal life again? On Nickelodeon, the adult producers of these shows imagine what childhood ought to be through the ways the network promotes its child stars and their characters.

### **Fame Front and Center: The Life of a Boy Band on Nickelodeon**

Despite Nickelodeon's attempt at making the life of a child celebrity seem normal to its audience, it is still highly produced, and produced by adults. It is also important to note that for

the most part, when boys are the center of a program about fame, they must be in a band. This becomes evident in *The Naked Brothers Band* because the show suggests that if it were not for the band they would not have any individual success. The boys who started the band are brothers after all. The show's plot is often structured around the band being separated during the episode, so that they come together to learn a lesson and perform a song at the end of the episode. *The Naked Brothers Band* is a mockumentary style sit-com that follows the life of young celebrities mostly on tour with their band. The members of The Naked Brothers Band are more than just a singing group, they actually play their instruments. The show and the band were created at the same time by their mother, Polly Draper. Draper also positions the band as already famous at the start of the show, despite the band just being created by her to make this show. This is evidence that Nickelodeon is perhaps building off the model of Disney's *Hannah Montana* since the first episode of that show also opens with Hannah being a well known celebrity too. Draper claims, however, that she wanted to make *The Naked Brothers Band* so that her boys and their friends would appear to be "as big as The Beatles."<sup>27</sup> For example, the first episode of *The Naked Brothers Band* begins with the band already famous and attending the MTV Music Video Awards.

In addition to this, the show highlights how the band is liked by both boys and girls, and this can be seen in an episode titled "The County Fair" when one of the little boys who is flirting

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<sup>27</sup> Gumbowriters, "Nat & Alex Wolff of The Naked Brothers Band Interview with Jeff Rivera of the Huffington Post," YouTube Video, 3:51, September 16, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJOMihUOPm8>. This quote was taken off The Naked Brothers Band Wikipedia page. Even though wikipedia is not a reliable academic source, I attempted to find the original interview that this quote was taken from, but unfortunately I can no longer access it without Adobe Flash Player. Instead I was able to find an interview that was uploaded to YouTube of Nat and Alex Wolff (the brothers of the band), in which they mention that the Beatles are a big inspiration for them wanting to start a band and write music.

with one of the boy band members disguised in a dress and wig, recited the band's song lyrics as if they are his own poem. The reason why one of the boy members of the band is dressed up as a little girl is because in this episode they must wear disguises much like Hannah Montana in order to have a fun day at the fair without hoards of people running after them. Their first disguised attempt does not go as planned as the paparazzi leaked that the band would be attending the fair in full bunny costumes. Since their plan of being bunnies at the county fair did not work, they instead decided to dress up as girls in Antebellum-era clothing. While it adds to the childishness of the show, the members of the band then also understand the hardships of being the opposite gender. The boys who dress up as girls understand what it is like for boys to pester and flirt with them all day despite not being interested in talking to them. This is very much unlike *Hannah Montana* because if this show were to take place in the mockumentary style of *The Naked Brothers Band*, people, and especially the paparazzi would notice that Miley's dad, Robby Ray Stewart, is the father of both Miley and Hannah. Miley does not even do anything to her voice to disguise her on-stage persona. Any person would know that Miley and Hannah are the same person; she would be missing school for months at the same time that Hannah had to go on tour.

This matters because this would never happen on Nickelodeon. As we see in "The County Fair," the famous members of The Naked Brothers Band only disguise themselves so they can have one normal day, not an entire normal life. On Nickelodeon, being famous is embraced and bragged about, while on Disney it is something that must be hidden in order to have a normal adolescence. This difference matters because these children's networks teach kids how to discipline themselves in order to be child citizens.<sup>28</sup> As noted in the first chapter, Disney

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, "'Panopticism' from 'Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison,'" *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 1 (2008): 1–12. I cite Foucault's famous text because this essay explains how media is part of a network of social control that causes us to monitor our own behavior, and this begins in



himself would enforce specific standards on his stars such as Annette Funicello. Nickelodeon still controls its stars, but it does so in a way that makes it seem that the children do it to themselves.

Even though *Hannah Montana* and its craziness is held near and dear to my heart, it is not realistic whatsoever. *The Naked Brothers Band*, while silly, is still somewhat realistic in its representation of life as a celebrity. While this episode is strange in concept, it shows how Nickelodeon wants children to still behave like children despite being famous. After all, the members of the band want to attend this county fair because they just want to have fun, and they even learn a lesson along the way. Even though they cannot attend the fair as normal kids because of their fame, this aspect of the episode shows that Nickelodeon is attempting to understand the life of its child celebrities in that kids just want to have fun. One could argue that Miley's disguise as Hannah is so that she can have fun as a normal kid, but her disguise is necessary for her to survive everyday life. The members of The Naked Brothers Band do not mind their lives as celebrities, they simply want a disguise so they can have one day of unsupervised fun at a fair, not a complete double life like Miley Stewart. The show also promotes their life of fame and wants its child fan base to think that the life of a celebrity is fun, with or without a disguise. Nickelodeon is promoting the fact that there is no alter ego in your life as a celebrity; one is always a celebrity and can only hide for a single day. This is important because it fits the network's perception of what childhood is: a time where children are learning about their worlds and still having fun along the way. By accepting their lives as celebrities, the band is learning how to embrace the fact that they will never have a normal life as a child star but

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childhood. With this in mind, children's television networks, and the ways that these networks imagine an ideal childhood, teach children how the world works, and how they should behave.

they are still capable of having fun. Nickelodeon is also suggesting that childhood is not gendered and that children can like whatever they want. The sole female member of The Naked Brothers Band, Rosalina, is showing girls that they can be a part of a band and play the bass, which is an instrument that is most often played by boys and men. Even though Rosalina's character serves as Nat's love interest, her placement in the band shows girls that being in a band is technically an ungendered activity. This enforces the idea that children can like whatever they want. And even though the boy recites the lyrics to try and win a girl over because girls obviously have to love boy bands, it still demonstrates how The Naked Brothers Band have fans of both genders and that boy bands themselves do not have to only be liked by girls. This is a harder argument to make about *Big Time Rush*.

The very first episode of *Big Time Rush* opens with hoards of girls chasing the boys down the street. While this scene is very similar to the opening of "The County Fair" with a group chasing the band in their bunny costumes, it is soon revealed that the boys are being chased by their school's field hockey team after they turned on the field's sprinklers during their practice. The first episode (which aired as an original hour long special on Nickelodeon) follows the boys on their road to becoming the next big boy band. The boys, Kendall, Logan, James, and Carlos, all agree to audition to be the next up-and-coming singer so that James does not have to do it alone. It is important that James is not alone because just as we saw in *Hannah Montana*, genuine adolescent friendship is the saving grace of fame for the teens on these programs. In *Hannah Montana* Miley's genuine friendship with Lilly makes her pre-teen life normal, but in *Big Time Rush*, friendship is important so one of them can attain fame. The most fascinating thing about the first episode of the program is the depiction of the audition itself, in which we

realize that the initial goal was for James to become famous rather than start a boy band. The boys are embracing their friendship in order for James's dream to come true because, after all, being famous is his biggest goal in life. However, once the boys get to the audition they realize that the producer, Gustavo Rocque, is extremely mean to everyone auditioning. After Carlos and Logan audition, it is finally James's turn to which Gustavo is super rude and tells James that he never wants to see him again. Kendall, obviously, stands up for his friend because he knows how much this means to him.

After Kendall sticks up for James and they are forcefully removed from the audition's venue by the security staff, Gustavo shows up to his house and offers Kendall the opportunity to be the next singing teen heartthrob. Kendall says no to this offer because he knows how much it would hurt James. Instead, Kendall makes a deal with Gustavo that he will agree to do it if he and his friends are in a band. Only two of the four boys have amateur singing skills, and the rest of the episode follows the boys being trained and styled to be the next boy band. This aspect of the episode shows that boy bands, their creation, and upkeep are all highly produced. However, as the first episode goes on, Kendall continues to stand up for himself and his friends so that they can be in a band as themselves, without all the hair gel, tight pants, and only singing songs about girls. Despite these efforts though, their songs obviously are about girls and mostly all of their fans in the show and real life are still girls.

Nickelodeon promotes their shows in ways that make it seem that children, especially the boys in these bands, have agency over their image and fame. As much as Nickelodeon wants to promote this idea, it has only a loose relationship to reality. For instance, Matthew Stahl writes

about two overly produced boy bands that span across generations.<sup>29</sup> Nickelodeon positions the boys in these bands similar to that of Stahl's analysis in that boy bands are inauthentic expressions of music production. The boy bands Stahl discusses are The Monkees, and O-Town. He claims that what is interesting about both of these boy groups is that they were produced with television in mind. The Monkees had their very own TV show called by the same name, and were looking to recreate the success The Beatles got with their film *A Hard Day's Night* (dir. Richard Lester, 1964). They were looking to produce a group of boys who were witty, goofy, and ultimately good looking to make the newest boy band craze. As Stahl points out, O-Town was created on the 2000s reality television show, *Making the Band* (2000-2001, 2002-2009). Stahl argues that in order for a televised boy band to be successful, they must be overproduced. Both Stahl's analysis and the first episode of *Big Time Rush*, suggest that boy bands must have stylists, and producers to make up the band's history, image, and style. The Monkees were a group of boys who were on television first and a boy band second.<sup>30</sup> They appeared to be an "authentic" band like The Beatles who have a history as friends and the production of the band was not seen by an audience. *Making the Band* obviously was all about the drama of the behind-the-scenes politics of creating the next hit boy band.

While Stahl focuses mainly on these two bands, a combination of both *The Monkees* and *Making the Band* are seen in *Big Time Rush*. The first episode shows the boys individually auditioning to go to Hollywood so their friend, James, does not have to do it alone. The fact that the boys must be in a band also suggests that boys cannot have individual stardom. The first episode also discusses the production and marketing of the band and how unprepared these boys

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew Stahl. "Authentic Boy Bands on TV? Performers and Impresarios in The Monkees and Making the Band," *Popular Music* 21, no. 3 (October, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Their television show titled, *The Monkees* ran from 1966-68.

are to be pop stars. This is similar to *The Monkees* and *Making the Band*. Because the boys are anything but prepared, a lot of silly teenage boy hijinks ensues and thus there is even more of a need to teach these boys how to be stars. Similar to the opening of *Big Time Rush* and *The Naked Brothers Band*, the opening scenes of *A Hard Day's Night* shows The Beatles being chased by numerous groups of teenage girls. For the rest of the film, there is little to no plot, and the only thing that someone could argue has anything to do with the plot is Paul's grandfather who is joining the band on their way to a television studio for a performance. Other than the goofy antics of Paul's grandfather, the only other consistent thing that happens throughout the film are the performances. Throughout *A Hard Day's Night* The Beatles perform in the oddest places including the storage compartment of a train, and an empty field as they frolic about. This film paved the way for how young male stars should be presented in boy bands on screen. The boys of *Big Time Rush* and *The Naked Brothers Band* are always performing their own songs throughout the episodes or often in closing. In addition, the boys of the bands always seem up to no good before they must perform. But why is this? Is it saying that boys are too goofy to be serious stars and need to be produced? Or is it saying that adult men must be in charge of any musical star production?

*A Hard Day's Night* solidifies a style for shows about famous boys that has been carried on to the programs about boy bands. The brothers of *The Naked Brothers Band* mention The Beatles's influence on both the band and show's creation. And even though the boys of *Big Time Rush* do not say outright that they want to be as big as The Beatles, their show borrows aspects that were seen in *A Hard Day's Night*. Considering that The Beatles started out as friends and became the biggest and most influential boy band, it makes one wonder what is being said about

the band's authenticity. The Beatles clearly gave up some of their rights as musicians in creating *A Hard Day's Night* because it was scripted. *The Monkees*, *Big Time Rush*, and *The Naked Brothers Band* all emphasize the inauthentic version of The Beatles as seen in their film because just like the film, these programs are also scripted. The film also heavily suggests that the friend-first boy band that was The Beatles needs to be produced because without a male producer they would be off running in a field, singing, and trying to flirt with girls. Even though Big Time Rush tries to take control of their band's image as another framed friend-first band, without their producers, they too would get nothing done throughout the day. Despite these boys on the shows clearly needing managers and producers, they are not the only kids who are being inauthentically produced.

#### **“The First Kids’ Network”: Nickelodeon, Agency, and Production**

Nickelodeon has a rich history in foregrounding the rights of children in the content they want to see. As the first children's network Nickelodeon (originally named Pinwheel), wanted to ensure that children are seeing what they should.<sup>31</sup> Since the integration of television into homes, as discussed in chapter one, parents were worried about what their children could be seeing on screen. Programs, and eventually networks like Nickelodeon, were created to ensure that children were watching content that is appropriate for them in terms of themes and education. Because of this, Nickelodeon's content ranged from silly cartoons all the way to a news program. In this sense, Nickelodeon created programs similar to *The Mickey Mouse Club*, since the network was creating both an entertainment and educational space for children. The catch with Nickelodeon, however, is that this network is meant only for kids, not the entire family like

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<sup>31</sup> I am not discussing the relationship between this and educational programming mandates because they lie outside the scope of this paper. Instead, I am explaining Nickelodeon's thoughts regarding what themes and ideas children's programming includes.

Disney Channel, and is showing children the power in the choices they have. By being a child fan of Nickelodeon, one is in control of the content being produced and consumed which is a suggestion of the network's framing. Nickelodeon is telling its fans that they have agency.<sup>32</sup> The network also promotes children to be agents of change and think about, as youth and consumer culture scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser puts it, "...rights, belonging, group membership, and perhaps political action."<sup>33</sup> Children are also acting like adults on this network, and adults are acting like children; an exaggerated generational conflict which we see in *iCarly*. On *Hannah Montana*, Miley's father serves as a fun-loving mediator, whereas on *iCarly*, Carly's older brother who is her legal guardian, does not discipline her and thus creates a parent-free zone. While Disney Channel also placed its adults in childlike roles, Nickelodeon does this so that the network is a kid-only space, not one for the whole family.

In doing so, Nickelodeon is creating brand loyalty by acknowledging its child audience as people who can make mature decisions. Banet-Weiser points out, the Nickelodeon "Bill of Rights," creates irony and a joke atmosphere, while also being effective in terms of creating brand identity because it is taking their audience seriously by siding with children and addressing their concerns.<sup>34</sup> The Nickelodeon's Declaration of Kids' Rights is a document similar to that of the U.S. Constitution's bill of rights. The Nickelodeon version of this document emphasizes that kids have their own rights as citizens of the world, an environment that is not spoiled, and the right to equal and fair education so kids will be able to effectively run the world one day. This

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<sup>32</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, "'We, The People of Nickelodeon': Theorizing Empowerment And Consumer Citizenship," in *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*, (Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 29-30.

empowers children to feel important as consumers because the network is telling them that they are important enough to have a network of their own.<sup>35</sup>

Nickelodeon's president, Geraldine Laybourne, was bound to honor what it means to be a kid. According to Laybourne and thus Nickelodeon, navigating the world as a child is hard. Everything is new to you, and every good parent wants to give their child a well-rounded view of the world. However, as a children's network, Nickelodeon has a lot to balance when it comes to meeting parents' expectations and what kids want to see. When asked about the duty and negotiation to serve both kids and parents Laybourne responded,

We never did. We believed our duty was to kids, and we didn't compromise that very much. We did in news, but that was because they were going to be watching with their parents. We were a network for kids; we were on their side. My basic belief was that parents would like us if their kids were in better shape after they watched us. I think parents loved us because their kids were happy and funny, and maybe a little sassy...<sup>36</sup>

Even though this interview took place in 2002, six years after she left her presidential role with the network, contemporary Nickelodeon shows still honor the "just for kids" branding of the network.

Even though Nickelodeon is honoring the kid-only space with its shows that lack actual parental supervision, we must also consider why young boys are often portrayed in bands, when girls are portrayed as singers, potential monarchs, and more recently internet celebrities. *iCarly* is first and foremost a show about a fourteen-year-old Carly Shay, and her two best friends, Sam and Freddie, making a web show together. The first episode of the show revolves around the accidental creation of the web show. The plot consists of Carly taking the blame for her best

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 32. Paraphrased quote from Geraldine Layborn, the former president of Nickelodeon.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Interview With Geraldine Laybourne," in *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*, edited by Heather Hendershot, (NYU Press: 2004), 144.



friend Sam after she hung up posters that consisted of her least favorite teacher's (Ms. Briggs) head on the body of a rhinoceros. Carly takes the blame for Sam because if Sam gets in serious trouble one more time, she will be expelled. Because of Sam's heinous act, Carly must hold and film all of the school's talent show auditions. Of course, Carly makes Sam attend the auditions with her because after all she must also be punished for her actions. Since they must record the auditions and the girls do not have a camcorder, Carly asks Freddie to join them too. Freddie, obviously, already has thousands of dollars worth of equipment for no good reason other than to just have it for a hobby. This is important because Sam, Carly, and her legal guardian older brother, Spencer, all do not own any kind of media making equipment. This demonstrates that as a young boy in 2007, Freddie has access to this expensive equipment because it is socially acceptable for him to have it.

Mary Celeste Kearney claims that boys have easier access to media making equipment because it is often the job of the man of the house to take care of this kind of equipment. Kearney writes, "Thus children have long been socialized to believe that 'femininity is incompatible with technological competence' and that 'to feel technically competent is to feel manly.'"<sup>37</sup> Kearney is explaining the work of Cynthia Cockburn and her analysis of media making tools being gendered items. This can clearly be seen in the ways that toy cameras are marketed and sold to children. In her article, Kearney explains how Mattel's Barbie Wireless Video Camcorder is simultaneously opening the door for girls' experimentation with media making while also restricting them into only making media in the home. She argues that boys' toys are easier to use without parental help or supervision. Because of this gendered stigma as seen in the toy industry, Sam makes fun

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<sup>37</sup> Mary Celeste Kearney, "Pink Technology: Mediamaking Gear for Girls," *Camera Obscura* 25, no. 2 (2010): 8.

of Freddie because, even though they are both Carly's best friends, they do not like each other and she thinks his technological knowledge makes him nerdy. This is one of the recurring jokes over the series until Sam and Freddie eventually start dating in a later season of the show. Throughout the series, Carly and Sam also always give little attention to Freddie when he is explaining a new tech device, and Carly and Sam rarely have any say in the technological production of their web show. They write their jokes and skits, but other than that the show suggests they are meant to be in front of the camera and that is it. This suggests that boys should be in charge of the production of shows and girls must be the desirable subjects in front of the camera.

During the auditions, Sam and Carly are behaving like normal fourteen-year-old girls, making fun of the teacher who forced them to film the talent show auditions, and just acting silly overall. Once the auditions are over, Freddie tells the girls that he will upload the video to "splashface.com," the show's version of YouTube. When Carly checks the website for the audition footage, the video Freddie uploads is one that contains random clips of them saying extremely rude things about Ms. Briggs. The video is of course taken off the website after their teacher, and 27,000 other people already saw it. When Carly and Sam finally have to approach Ms. Briggs and apologize, she does not accept their apology or their recommendation of who should be in the talent show. The girls obviously are furious, not at Freddie for uploading the wrong footage, but instead, of "adults like her controlling what kids do and see." This is the inspiration for their web show *iCarly* that the television show is named after. This quote is important in understanding what *iCarly* is saying to children and the ideas that the network is trying to promote. Even though Nickelodeon makes its adventurous protagonists the voices for

kids' media making, the network is still after all run by adults. As much as the kids on *iCarly* want to make a web show about and for kids, their plans are ultimately unsuccessful because their web show is not real. While *iCarly* was still airing on Nickelodeon, kids could actually visit a network produced version of "icarly.com." This website was supposed to be just like the one in the show. Kids could view extra clips that did not air on the television show, read Carly, Sam, and Freddie's blog, or play games. Like the show, the website promotes the idea that kids have agency over what kids do and see. This obviously ties back to the network's history in that Nickelodeon is supposed to be a kids-only network.

This mentality is problematic because once you reach adulthood one can never really understand what it is like to be a child again. Jaqueline S. Rose writes about this in the context of *Peter Pan*.<sup>38</sup> She argues that since adults are no longer children, they can only write children's literature as they imagine childhood. One can see this when Rose writes, "There is no child behind the category of 'children's fiction,' other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes."<sup>39</sup> *Peter Pan* is weird to Rose because the character is situated as a boy who never wants to be an adult. Peter, the forever boy, does not know what life as an adult is like, so how does he know that he does not want to be one? Since the author is an adult, this novel for children is instead about adult desires. It is an imagination of what childhood ought to be: full of innocence, imagination, and magic, but it is from the mind of an adult. For example, the scene where the children fly over the streets of London after their bedtime with the magic of pixie dust. This point of both the book and the animated film are examples of how adults fantasize about childhood imagination. I can

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<sup>38</sup> Jaqueline S. Rose, "The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 58-66.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

remember not wanting to go to bed and wishing something magical would happen if I laid awake past my bedtime. Can I accurately remember what exactly my imagination was like from ages three to eight? No, but I wish I could. This exact same problem exists in the first episode of *iCarly*, and, in fact, in the entirety of the program. As much as Carly says that she wants to create the web show in order to have no adults controlling its content, this is ultimately a made-up idea since the show is produced by adults who can now only imagine and recall the frustration of being a fourteen-year-old girl.

Other than the issue of adults writing a show that is supposed to not have any adult control over it, there is another issue with the first episode of *iCarly*. The show implies that the only way for Carly and Sam to accept their fame is to have the approval from boys. Not only is Freddie uploading the content of them without their approval, but boys continue to be the drive for the continuation of the web show. In the first episode of the web show they have all of the rejected talent show kids as guests on the show and their premiere broadcast is seen by 37,000 people. To celebrate the success of their first episode they have a crazy hat party where Sam and Carly both give autographs to some of their fellow classmates and guests. Carly then starts thinking about whether or not she's going to like having internet stardom, but ultimately decides she likes it because two guys come up to them and ask to dance after the boys admit that they like *iCarly* and think the show, and ultimately they, are hot.

For obvious reasons the opening episode of this show is problematic. It is encouraging young girls to accept attention based on boys' approval, and on top of that the show starts because Carly's adolescent male best friend uploads an edited video to the internet without her consent. While *iCarly* suggests that boys upload more content online, in actuality girls partake in

this activity more than boys. As previously discussed, one would expect boys to upload content more often than girls because the media making tools that are marketed to young males do not require as much supervision to use them. In her study of these gendered media making toys, Kearney argues that girls' toys are tied to supervision and therefore the home because of traditional gender roles that tie women to domesticity. Kearney writes,

...parents have long socialized girls to see their homes as their primary site of leisure, because such domestication keeps them safely from the various dangers of the outside world and prepares them for their future roles as mothers and homemakers. The indoors-oriented design of the Barbie camcorder set reinforces these traditional beliefs and practices.<sup>40</sup>

Because of this one can start to see that girls' and their products are oriented in the home. So much so that at another part of the article Kearney mentions that the cords of the Barbie camcorder are like the umbilical cord so that parents do not have to worry about their daughters wandering too far away from the safety of the domestic home.<sup>41</sup> This then makes one think that because girls spend more time in the home they would create more content similar to Carly and Sam on *iCarly*. Even though the girls of *iCarly* do not create their videos in their bedroom, Carly's studio space and apartment are an adult free zone since her silly young adult brother, Spencer, is her legal guardian. The camera of the *iCarly* web show does not even belong to Carly or Sam which communicates that there is no safety in this camera. The safety cords of the Barbie camcorder are no longer there to protect the girls which then leads to Freddie being the sole producer of a web show starring his two girl best friends. However, the fact that their studio is still in Carly's home suggests that girls' video production is tied to a more domestic space

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<sup>40</sup> Mary Celeste Kearney, "Pink Technology," 13-14.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

regardless of who is producing the video and who is legally responsible for her as a parental figure.

Despite their best efforts, Nickelodeon is attempting to tell children that they are in charge of the content they consume, create, and maintain, when this is not the case. One can see that even though the network has a history in telling children that they are in charge, their shows are programmed by adults who can only imagine what childhood is like. They can no longer fully understand the frustrations that come with adolescence. I consumed these programs as a child but I can never again have the same mindset of the seven-year-old girl who was watching *iCarly* or *Hannah Montana* for the first time. Even though I will never be able to access this version of my brain again, I can remember finding these shows to be relatable in the lessons that they teach about friendship, education, and being true to yourself.

While both Nickelodeon and Disney Channel are teaching the same types of lessons, Nickelodeon always puts their kid audience first. Their delivery seems more honest than the Disney Channel. This may be due to Nickelodeon's foundation of being the first kid's network, and the Nickelodeon "Bill of Rights." Even though the network is run by adults who are imagining children's frustrations, they attempt to actually understand what it is like to once again be in a world in which they know nothing about. This helps teach children these life lessons about friendship and responsibility, but it also is confusing because this media is created with adult desires about childhood in mind. Nickelodeon positions itself as not giving into these desires even though *Big Time Rush*, and *The Naked Brothers Band* features adults heavily influencing the bands' images and production. This is not just Nickelodeon's fault though as the history of the boy band is built on inauthenticity. One can see this in the styles of *A Hard Day's*

*Night*, *The Naked Brothers Band*, and *Big Time Rush*. This false production does not only happen with boys though as *iCarly* and its web show of the same name are created by males. In the program, Freddie is the same age as his two girl friends but he produces a viral video that causes the friends to create the webshow. Carly and Sam are also unsure of whether or not they want this life of internet fame until they receive approval from their male peers. In this case the inauthenticity comes from the fact that boys are the motivators for Carly and Sam to put themselves on display in front of a camera.

Like the boys on *Big Time Rush* and *The Naked Brothers Band*, Carly, Sam and Freddie all embrace their fame too. Like the boy bands they are able to still balance their silly lives as pre-teens while still maintaining a large online presence. Even though the web show's studio is located in Carly's home, which is a stereotypical space dominated by women and girls, video production is emphasized as being a male dominated sphere in the sense that Freddie is the technological producer of the show and Carly's brother allows them to use the space in his apartment. Despite the fact that Nickelodeon is saying that boys and men will be the producer of boy bands and web content, *iCarly* attempts to push against this narrative by emphasizing that the girls can be viral sensations online by writing their own jokes and skits for their webshow. Because of this, some may think that girls are influenced to attempt to make their own content when in fact, according to a 2018 interview on tweens and teens' media consumption, "...creation accounted for roughly 3% of their media use."<sup>42</sup> This statistic is surprising because as we will see in the next chapter, kids and specifically girls are often creating content in hopes of being discovered online. The audience of *iCarly* and *Big Time Rush* see the creation of these

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<sup>42</sup> Rafael Heller and Michael Robb, "The data on children's media use: An interview with Michael Robb," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 99, no. 6 (2018): 25.

stars' fame in the way they become discovered. As much as these Nickelodeon programs are showing children that fame is not as problematic as it is on the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon still has issues in the way it presents the agency over its stars' image production.

### **Chapter III: Social Media as Mode of Child Star Production: YouTube, TikTok, Tabloids, and the Implicit Promise of Discovery**

Picture this: it's 2008 and you are watching funny cat videos on YouTube. The website is only three years old and the platform consists of short mindless videos. Nothing is monetized like it is in 2022, and people are using the site as a place to document their lives through film. After your silly cat video ends you look at the suggested videos on the right hand side of the screen and notice a video titled, "i kissed a girl." The video is of two white American, twelve or thirteen year old girls dancing and singing along to teen idol Katy Perry's song "I Kissed a Girl" in their bedroom with pink blankets, toys, and books strewn about the background.<sup>43</sup> The girls are clearly having fun as they are giggling, but Sarah Banet-Weiser writes about her concerns surrounding youth culture and feminism in videos such as these. This video is one of the 100 videos she observed on YouTube that would come up under searches of terms like "girls dancing," "girls singing," and other popular tags that young girls often use online so their videos get more views. Banet-Weiser does this in order to better understand the ways that young girls present themselves, and more importantly their bodies, online. This study, which was published in 2011, gives a different impression than the 2018 statistic that was mentioned in the last chapter

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<sup>43</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Branding the Post-Feminist Self: Girls' Video Production and YouTube," in *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, ed. by Mary Celeste Kearney, (Peter Lang Publishing: 2011) 277.



regarding that only three-percent of adolescent's internet use is attributed to creation.<sup>44</sup>

According to Banet-Weiser, the videos she viewed were a small portion of the thousands of videos that she came across on YouTube. These videos are telling because they show how children are essentially sponges for media culture and want to make themselves appear like their favorite celebrity. On top of that, according to Banet-Weiser, children use media to help discover themselves.<sup>45</sup> While this is somewhat of a good thing for children to discover, making and posting these videos puts girls' bodies on display in a way to brand themselves. This branding is interesting because it is promising fame unrealistically. This is because YouTube has an implicit promise that you will go viral, someone will "discover you," and eventually make you famous. Some of these girls that Banet-Weiser writes about already have stage names, are dressing in ways that put their bodies on display, and make them seem as if they were a celebrity. In this article we can see how girls are using YouTube and video production to engage in their gender identity, and self discovery, but this oversaturation of young girls online causes worry because they are branding themselves as if they are something that can be bought, sold, and consumed.<sup>46</sup>

*Eighth Grade* (dir. Bo Burnham, 2018) opens with the exact online tween girl moment that Banet-Weiser discusses in her essay. The film begins with an extreme close up of fourteen-year-old Kayla giving advice to what we later learn is her laptop's camera. After we see this advice video we eventually see her YouTube channel that consists of her sitting in the center of the frame and giving advice on different topics like how to be confident, make friends, and be true to yourself. Like most middle schoolers who upload videos onto YouTube, the videos get

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<sup>44</sup> Heller and Rob, "The data," 25.

<sup>45</sup> Banet-Weiser, "Branding the Post-Feminist," 285-288.

<sup>46</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Branding the Post-Feminist Self: Girls' Video Production and YouTube," in *Mediated Girlhoods New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, ed. by Mary Celeste Kearney, (Peter Lang Publishing: 2011) 277-294.

very few views. Some videos show a red line across the bottom of the thumbnail meaning that the video was watched on her own account and one and only view on the video was her own. As the film goes on, we see Kayla using YouTube as a tool to learn about applying makeup, and other social media to be like her fellow peers. It is important to note that Kayla is not a popular girl in school. She is so unpopular, that she wins the yearbook superlative for “most quiet.” This is disappointing to her because, as we see in her YouTube videos that serve as affirmations to herself, she is trying really hard to be herself even though her peers think she is a weird, quiet kid. This film and young celebrities who come-of-age with the world watching them, show that growing up with social media is difficult. Social media causes adolescents who are coming of age, be it going into high school or adulthood, to constantly compare themselves to their peers.<sup>47</sup> And, even though this is not said directly in the film, it suggests that if one uploads videos of themselves online they have the potential to become famous like their favorite celebrity who is similar to them in age.

But why does this matter? So far this project has focussed on the agency children have as famous people. And while the programs that these tween stars are on control their image, most of the shows frame them as having a say on what the children do and look like. But, as I discussed in the last chapter, this is not the case. The audience knows that the programs are in fact not created by kids, and their participation in these networks are authored for them by adults. These

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<sup>47</sup> Nicole Daniels, “How Does Social Media Affect Your Mental Health?,” *New York Times*, October 1, 2021. This *New York Times* opinion article mentions Facebook’s delay in the creation of an Instagram app meant only for kids. They began developing this app since there were many children not following the age requirements to have a regular Instagram account. This article also takes into account how many children under the age of thirteen have Instagram accounts and were shown harmful content relating to eating disorders, body checking, sexualized content, and self harm. From this article alone one can understand how children and teens's social media use is discussed in many different disciplines and perspectives. For the purpose of this project, the analysis of social media use will come from a media and communication studies perspective since this topic is so widely discussed.

shows and their networks are simply a mode of production when it comes to stars. The newest way for this mode of production is social media. Whether it is YouTube, Instagram, or most recently, TikTok, these social media sites allow child stars to author themselves with little to no direction from their parents or managers. Sure, there are posts that must be made as advertisements to promote the child's career, but regardless social media allows young celebrities to have agency over their image in ways that Nickelodeon and Disney Channel would never allow.

On top of this, some celebrities become celebrities solely because of their popularity on social media sites. Take Charli D'Amelio for example: she went viral for dancing on TikTok and ended up being the highest paid content creator on the app in 2019. She has received so much attention that she now has her own reality show on Hulu. (*The D'Amelio Show* (2021-) will be discussed in greater detail later.) Like Kayla in *Eighth Grade*, D'Amelio was posting on social media for the fun of it all, and for the potential of gaining a small following. As the most followed creator on TikTok with 137.9 million followers at the time this paper is being written, D'Amelio got what most of these children who post online want, acceptance and the power of a following.

I also want to make clear that the purpose of this project is not to say that things are more threatening to children today because of the ways celebrity authorship on these shows is promoted. Children's agency has always been challenged and troubled. Sometimes it feels like the world is all terrible, but it is not, things are different and always changing. Instead what I am saying is that the production of child stars is very different with social media in mind. This is because of the mode of production that these stars are discovered and produced in. As we saw

with Annette Funicello in the first chapter, she was discovered by Walt Disney himself and held to a strict standard that created the mode of production for what Disney stars should look like. We can see some of these practices being carried into today's stars especially with Miley Cyrus. As for Nickelodeon, the network produces its stars in ways that make it seem that the children on their programs have agency over themselves because Nickelodeon positions itself as a "kids only" network. Social media has changed this mode of production for child stars now. Shows like *Big Time Rush*, and *iCarly* may have increased children's hopes of being discovered, but as we see with Charli D'Amelio and Justin Beiber, posting online can actually lead to people being discovered and lead them to be the next role model for children as a celebrity. With this in mind, we can also consider what teen celebrity access to social media does to the production of celebrity. Does it allow for more agency over their image? A closer relationship to fans? Does it allow for celebrities and fans to overshare? What does this freedom of image production do to a star? And most importantly, is social media as a mode of star production actually different from that of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel?

### **The "Extraordinary" Child**

Let us begin our journey of child star production with a quote from childhood studies scholar, Jane O'Connor. She writes, "...children are born, celebrities are made..."<sup>48</sup> Throughout her chapter O'Connor explores what childhood is and how child celebrities are able to exist within it. She argues that when children were working in terrible conditions in factories, labor laws were put in place to make sure that children were protected, and so that children only existed in the home, family structure, and school. It was not until people started recognizing

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<sup>48</sup> Jane O'Connor, "Childhood and Celebrity: Mapping the Terrain," in *Childhood and Celebrity*, ed. by Jane O'Connor and John Mercer, (London: Routledge, 2017) 6.

children for their “extraordinary” talents that they were once again brought into the workforce, but this time it was for stardom.<sup>49</sup> O’Connor opens the chapter with a quote from Shirley Temple that reads: “I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was six. Mother took me to see him in a department store and he asked me for my autograph.”<sup>50</sup> From this quote one can understand the complexity of life as a child star. When a child is a star there is no opportunity for childhood but the screen suggests otherwise. In addition to this childhood is stifled when some of these star children succeeded so much that they were financially supporting their families. This carried on for a lot of child stars and begs the question of what kind of power child stars have. These stars are clearly loved and adored and seem to enjoy what they are doing, but when the child grows up and “behind the scenes” secrets are brought to light, there are almost always issues with parents or management. For example, Jennette McCurdy, who portrayed Carly’s best friend Sam on *iCarly*, has been very honest about the child abuse that would occur behind the scenes while working as a child actress. Having worked through these issues after working for Nickelodeon, McCurdy declined the offer to reprise her role as Sam on the *iCarly* reboot that premiered on Paramount+ in 2021.

Despite the clear issues that arise for child celebrities, Ana Jorge and Lidia Marôpo begin their chapter on childhood and celebrity with the example of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie selling a photo of their twins for fourteen million dollars to *People* magazine.<sup>51</sup> Jolie arranged for the money to be donated to charity, but this still then leads the authors to ask questions about children’s rights and what should and should not be shared about a child’s life even if their

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ana Jorge and Lidia Marôpo, “Born To Be Famous?: Children of celebrities and their rights in the media,” in *Childhood and Celebrity*, ed. by Jane O’Connor and John Mercer, (London: Routledge, 2017) 28.

parents are famous. I know if my baby pictures were sold to a tabloid as a child without my consent that would make me upset. Regardless of this though, the fact that the celebrity parents sell pictures of the children prove that celebrities must be made. The only reason why the tabloids wanted the pictures of these twins was because they are Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt's children. Their power and influence as celebrities is being passed down to their children. Sure, they may not be able to ever disassociate themselves from their parents' image, but it still begs the question of what we mean by "extraordinary." Babies in general are pretty extraordinary when you consider them from a scientific lens, but just because a child is born into the life of the celebrity does not make them extraordinary. The best contemporary example of this is Kim Kardashian and Kanye West's child, North West. As an infant she was simply the child of two of the most famous and wealthy people in the world, but her actions did not make her extraordinary. Now that North is eight-years old, her parents are positioning her as a phenomenal artist with a bunch of unique interests including having multiple reptiles as pets. This is unique because when one thinks of a childhood pet, most often people think of dogs, cats, or some soft and cuddly animal with fur. Since her parents are giving her unique talents and pets at such a young age, her parents are setting North up to be an extraordinary child so she will have fame, just like them.

But now let us consider her TikTok account. North's TikTok page shows that she has the interest of any other eight-year-old girl who has access to the internet. She plays with slime and fidget toys, and even annoys her mom while she lounges in bed watching television. From these examples that can be seen all over her page, if North did not have two very wealthy parents, would she even be famous? Is North actually an extraordinary child, or are her celebrity parents setting her up to be a celebrity? Her TikTok account, which is monitored by her mother, Kim, is

similar to the YouTube videos that Banet-Weiser observes in her study. While TikTok and YouTube are very different platforms, they both optimistically promise discovery. In this scenario, discovery is when children post online in hopes of becoming famous because it has happened to celebrities in the past. We see this in Kayla's character in *Eighth Grade* and almost every video that is discussed in Banet-Weiser's article. But this causes one to question again why it is that young girls are most often trying to become famous. Is it so they can be like Hannah Montana or the girls from *iCarly*? To be fair, while my generation has grown up with the internet, we have seen person after person become famous via the internet. Justin Beiber is one of the first people that comes to mind when discussing being discovered online.

The concert documentary film, *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never* (dir. Jon M. Chu, 2011), reveals that Justin Bieber was signed to record producer Scooter Braun's label after Braun saw Bieber singing a Ne-Yo song on YouTube. When Bieber signed his contract he and his mother moved to Atlanta to work on his singing career and soon caught the interest of Usher, and the rest is history. Bieber was noticed by an industry professional because there is something that Scooter Braun thought was extraordinary about his voice and persona. For the most part, Bieber's story of discovery follows a pretty traditional storyline, but it also reinforces the idea that perhaps anyone with some kind of talent can attain fame via the internet.

Social psychologist Orville Gilbert Brim, was concerned with how people thought about fame. In Brim's study which was published in 2009, four years after YouTube was created and a year after Justin Bieber was discovered on the site, Brim found that one to three percent of Americans rank being famous as their top goal in life.<sup>52</sup> Some of these surveys asked very broad

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<sup>52</sup> Orville Gilbert Brim, "Millions of People Want Fame," in *Look at Me! The Fame Motive from Childhood to Death*, (University of Michigan Press: 2009), 23.

questions while others asked specific ones. For example one survey asked something along the lines of “have you daydreamed about fame” and about fifty five percent of the American participants replied yes.<sup>53</sup> However, when Americans are asked about the most important life goal when things are listed (ie. happy life, having a family, fame, money, sex), the survey results almost always had people answering with fame being the top response only two percent of the time.<sup>54</sup> This statistic calls back to Sigmund Freud when he writes, “It is impossible to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurement — that they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate what is of true value in life.”<sup>55</sup> This quote from Freud is important to understand because Freud wants to show that the problem with civilization is that it makes us unhappy. People attempt to become rich, famous, and powerful quite often and tend to forget that being famous will not bring them ultimate happiness and success. There will always be someone with more power over you. Brim also takes into account that Americans are not the only country whose culture is fascinated by fame. For many people around the world, fame is thought to be America’s biggest export.<sup>56</sup> By also looking at other countries, Brim came to the conclusion that the US is not the only country obsessed with the idea of fame. With these findings, one can see that fame is something that many Americans dream of. Since these results were published in 2009, it makes one wonder if these results have changed with the increase of social media sites.

As we can clearly see with YouTube and the discovery of Justin Bieber, social media allows for stardom to be constructed in a completely new way. The most recent example of this

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>55</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, (1930), 1.

<sup>56</sup> Brim, “Millions,” 27.



is Charli D'Amelio. In July of 2019, D'Amelio posted to TikTok using the “duet” feature that is often used on the app. This feature allows you to post your own original video, while a video you would like to critique or simply give credit to, will appear next to you. Essentially there are two videos in one post, one that you created, and another that a different TikTok user created. TikTok, is also known for its simple, viral dances that creators will post again and again on the site. This is how D'Amelio became famous. After she posted her duetted video, she gained over 2000 followers in an hour, and the increase of followers has not stopped since. D'Amelio went viral and was thrust into the spotlight as the first celebrity made entirely by TikTok. D'Amelio is the highest paid and followed creator on the app, has a reality television show and has been to multiple red carpets.

The first episode of the reality show titled *The D'Amelio Show* (2021-), discusses Charli and her sister's rise to fame on TikTok. While the pilot episode of the show features the sisters joking around with one another and messing around with their parents, the show also has very serious undertones. Both Charli and her sister, Dixie, are interviewed about the pressures of being “TikTok famous.” At the time of filming this episode, Charli was sixteen years old. One of her concerns was still being able to have time to be a kid and do competitive dance. Charli also says that her social media use was the same as any other person on the planet and she just so happened to be liked by 100 million people.

However, Dixie is constantly compared to Charli online and often receives “hate comments” saying that the only reason why she is famous is because of her sister. Toward the middle of the episode, Dixie admits that she has always struggled with anxiety and depression. She says she is experiencing a lot of anxiety because of the potential hateful comments posted

under a YouTube video she agreed to make with Vogue. By the end of the episode, the video is posted and the show abruptly cuts to a video of Dixie having a panic attack as her parents try to comfort her. While sobbing she discusses how poparazzi and hate comments pick everything she does apart and that she is trying to do the right things for herself but is always met with hate. The episode ends with this scene, and abruptly cuts to black with white text fading in that says, “If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health issues, you are not alone. Visit [www.hulu.com/damelios-resources](http://www.hulu.com/damelios-resources) for information and resources.” While this may be helpful to viewers who share the same mental health struggles as Dixie, it makes one consider whether or not social media celebrity is a good thing, whether children and young adults should be able to get to this level of stardom online, and if the producer of this show has the right to be filming her in a state of distress. Is the end of this episode oversharing? Does sharing this event make Dixie look more like an authentic person? I know if I were Dixie I would not want cameras shoved in my face after paparazzi found me looking sweaty after working out at the gym and then proceeding to tell me that I am “musty.”<sup>57</sup> I would also be incredibly disappointed in my parents because they allowed me to move to Los Angeles to pursue a career that will ultimately get me hate. Dixie and Charli both receive a lot of hateful comments because both sisters primarily post dancing videos on the app. Some feel that there is nothing extraordinary about these girls and they simply got lucky.

The fact that the girls and their parents have a reality show also questions their authenticity as celebrities. In the first episode of the show one little girl who is a fan of the D’Amelio sisters says that she likes them because they seem “real.” By this, one can interpret

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<sup>57</sup> This is another situation that Dixie describes during her mental breakdown as she sobs to her parents.

that Charli and Dixie are authentic creators online who share everything with their fans. As a young adult who does not know much about the D'Amelio's outside of the context of this paper, I can understand how some people take Dixie's vulnerability in front of cameras as her being her authentic self. As problematic as it is to forcefully film Dixie in the midst of a mental breakdown, the creators of the show are attempting to show the same authenticity that the girls present on their personal TikTok accounts.

Authenticity online and on reality television is a complicated topic to analyze. This is because once someone becomes famous, their image and content is controlled so that there is a disconnect between who they really are and who they portray in the media. A content creator that I am a fan of who has not clearly changed as a result of her fame is Emma Chamberlain. Chamberlain began her YouTube career in 2016 when she was fifteen years old, and like most teens who post online was imitating the video styles of creators that she liked. Her account took time to grow its following, but since she has gained a following she is becoming more and more famous, so much so that she has her own coffee company, is a Louis Vuitton ambassador, and has attended multiple red carpets. Her social media influencer status has clearly given her many traditional celebrity opportunities. Chamberlain has gone from being a teenager posting online to being *Vogue's* correspondent at the Met Gala. But why are people attracted to Emma?

Similarly to Charli and Dixie, she was just posting on YouTube for fun, but rather than dancing in front of a camera like the D'Amelio sisters, people speculate that Chamberlain is so likable because she is so relatable. She curses, shows her face without make-up, lets her hair be a mess, and often makes self-deprecating jokes. She is like all of us and does not pretend to be a different person in front of the camera now that she has more traditional fame. She has no shame

in not being perfect because no human is ever perfect. And like the D'Amelio sisters on their reality show, Chamberlain is open to talking about the negative effects social media can have. Unlike the D'Amelio sisters, however, Chamberlain also promotes the idea of deleting social media accounts especially if they need a mental health break. Chamberlain has been open about her decision to delete her TikTok account and often tells her audience that your life will be fine, if not better, without social media on your phone. As a matter of fact, at the time of writing this Chamberlain has not posted on her YouTube channel since December of 2021. She continues to post on her Instagram every once and a while, and still uploads an advice podcast weekly that she records in the comfort of her bed.

I am not trying to put these young influencers against one another in saying that one is better, but rather demonstrate through their actions that perhaps a good definition of “celebrity authenticity” comes through what would be considered oversharing. Like Chamberlain, we all do not look our best when lounging around our homes; her fame and authenticity is framed through the lens of “she is just like us.” Chamberlain is also the one who is approving and posting almost all of her content. She is also considered extraordinary because she is a very creative person in the ways that she films and edits her videos. Similar to traditional celebrities, the D'Amelio sisters often appear to be perfect while on camera, both on TikTok and on their reality television show when Charli is shown getting up in the morning and when Dixie is crying. Like a traditional celebrity who is ambushed by celebrity photographers while grocery shopping or taking a stroll in the park, the D'Amelio sisters' authenticity occurs when they share aspects of their personal lives. But, they most likely do not have a say in what is kept in their reality

television show. By having this show the girls lose some of their agency since they do not have a complete say in what is released into the world.

Even though they do not have complete agency over their image, audiences want to believe that stars are authentic like everyday people. When writing about stars, film scholar John Ellis writes, “The stars are presented both as stars and as ordinary people: as very special beings and as beings just like the readers.”<sup>58</sup> This is an interesting paradox to consider especially when discussing the production of internet celebrities. Audiences want to imagine the lives of celebrities as normal as possible because they too, are just like us in a way, despite the fact that this is obviously false. Being famous holds power, and this power is something that everyday people can only imagine. Other than celebrities who start their careers online, audiences rarely see what their everyday lives look like, which complicates the narrative of extraordinary yet still a “regular” person.

### **Celebrity Agency, Appropriateness, and Coming-of-Age Online**

When discussing the narrative between ordinary and extraordinary, my brain obviously goes back to where this project has all started, the girl who wants “the best of both worlds,” Hannah Montana. In the first episode of the program, Miley is seen in her blonde Hannah wig, and being styled for her upcoming concert. From this opening scene, her style is being controlled by both her father and her stylist. Not only is her image being controlled this way as a child celebrity on the show, but her finances are also controlled. The *Hannah Montana* episode titled “Debt It Be,” shows the financial control Miley’s dad has over her, and the aftermath once she has financial freedom. One of the very first lines of this episode is, “My very first credit card.

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<sup>58</sup> John Ellis, “Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon,” from *Visible Fictions*, in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford University Press: New York) 541.

Today I am a woman!”). Even though her father says that the card is for emergencies only, when Miley is at a flea market and rips her pants, she is coerced to use the credit card and buy many expensive items claiming that it was a “really big emergency.” Miley realizes the mistake she made, and immediately regrets her consumerist behavior. The previously quoted line of dialogue, and Miley’s behavior at the flea market suggest that in order to be a woman you must have a credit card to buy the material things that every woman “needs.” To try and pay off the bill before their father finds out, Miley and her brother, Jackson, decide to sell Hannah Montana memorabilia. This is interesting because Miley is a celebrity and should be able to pay off a high credit card bill without her father’s involvement. This aspect of this episode is thought provoking because it suggests that Miley’s father is potentially pocketing all of her earnings. Considering that Miley is famous by performing as Hannah Montana, she should be able to afford anything, and not even need a credit card from her dad for “emergencies only.”

This episode then makes one consider whether or not what Miley does as a celebrity is considered work especially if she is not getting a cut of any of the money that she earns. The moral of this episode is to be honest with your parents, even when you make a mistake. The morals at the end of every episode also drive home the fact that Miley is also the ordinary girl that needs to learn these lessons just like the audience. Even though this is a worthwhile lesson for the child audience, the suggestion that Miley is not making any money herself is troublesome and makes one consider her agency as a child celebrity in the show.

Similar to her financial agency in the scripted television show, when Miley Cyrus eventually ended her contract with Disney Channel, she finally had agency over herself. Feminist culture and film scholar, Melanie Kennedy examines Miley Cyrus’ diversion from her character

on *Hannah Montana* to her more scandalous and “authentic” version of herself as an adult. In the title of this essay she claims that Miley Cyrus has ‘murdered’ Hannah Montana. During this time, I remember Cyrus refusing to autograph, or even acknowledge the character of Hannah Montana because she despised the character so much. Kennedy begins this chapter with a similar example of Cyrus wearing a t-shirt that read “R.I.P. HANNAH MONTANA” backstage on her concert tour.<sup>59</sup> According to Kennedy, Cyrus’ image is constantly scrutinized and Cyrus eventually admits that she was ‘out of control’ with all of her new freedom as a young adult.<sup>60</sup> Cyrus was once a pure and “age appropriate” role model for girls, but her new found sexual and explicit behavior on stage and online, concerned parents and the media because of what her new image is possibly promoting to children. This is problematic because the media discusses Cyrus’ coming-of-age as inappropriate, which problematizes female sexuality, and suggests that kids are too vulnerable to consume her new image.

When thinking about the appropriateness of stars’ coming-of-age, Sarah Baker, a childhood studies scholar, discusses ethnographic research that she performed with five pre-teen girls at their Catholic school in Australia. Baker mainly explains two different websites that two of the five girls often visited. The first was Britney Spears’s official website and the other was a pornographic website that the girls discovered accidentally. Baker writes how the photos the girls would view on Spears’s website were often met with criticism as to whether or not she was being feminine in the “correct way.” While the photos of Spears would not be overly sexual, the girls would make comments on her body being too fat in certain areas and would theorize if she actually got breast implants. From these comments Baker makes a conclusion that the femininity

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<sup>59</sup> Melanie Kennedy, “Miley Cyrus and the ‘Murder’ of Hannah Montana: Authenticity and Young Female Celebrity,” in *Childhood and Celebrity*, ed. Jane O’Connor and John Mercer, (London: Routledge, 2017): 82.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 85.

that is seen on pop star websites is often struggled over since the girls theorize what is an acceptable portrayal of womanhood.<sup>61</sup> This struggle is also seen in the girls as they “play” online since the girls are exploring the different ways one is a woman. While spending time online, girls explore femininity and the different contexts it exists in. In exploring and commenting on Spears’ website, the girls also almost accept that Spears is meant to be a celebrity to critique.

Even though this study was posted in 2011, it is also interesting to think about how Cyrus’ depiction of Hannah Montana is a sterilized concept of celebrity in the early 2000s. Hannah Montana is rarely caught by the paparazzi in the show, and it always seems like perfect timing and she often does not attempt to hide from them. In addition to this, Hannah Montana is never sexualized because the show is meant for children. Since *Hannah Montana* is focused on the life of a celebrity, one would imagine that the life of a celebrity was similar to the character at the time the show was produced. This is not the case. Britney Spears was one of many young female celebrities who was practically stalked by paparazzi when she was coming of age in the early 2000s. Spears is known for her childlike portrayal of femininity, as it is seen in the music video for her song “...Baby One More Time,” where she styled in braided pigtails and a school uniform. Her portrayal of innocence is also seen on the cover of her first studio album where she is wearing a stylish yet age appropriate outfit while sitting on her knees on the floor looking up at the camera. This pose makes her seem like the small innocent teen that she was. Spears became famous when she was around sixteen years old and despite attempting this innocent look for as long as possible, as soon as she turned eighteen, there was a quick transition from somewhat pure

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<sup>61</sup> Sarah Baker, “Playing Online: Pre-Teen Girl’s Negotiation of Pop and Porn in Cyberspace.” in *Mediated Girlhoods New Explorations of Girls’ Media Culture*, edited by Mary Celeste Kearney, (Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 178.



teen into overly sexualized young adult. This hypersexualized version of Spears is most likely what the girls were viewing around 2011.

Baker continues her study of these girls playing online by then discussing the other pornographic website the girls accidentally discovered. This site made the girls discuss what it means to be “grown up,” since these sexualized bodies are naked and do not hold the same fame that Spears does. When exploring the pornographic website, the two girls would often giggle and make jokes about what they were seeing. According to Baker this is considered play because the media they were consuming did not feel real to them and it felt like just playing and exploring a new part of femininity. Baker also says that the girls then took the sexual moves they saw on the pornographic website and incorporated it into their dancing, which was also met with giggles. This is interesting to consider in the context of *iCarly* and the girls’ decision on that show to dance in front of the camera. While it is not sexual, this program is showing girls that they can be famous if they move their bodies certain ways in front of a camera and broadcast it online. The D’Amelio sisters also exist in this way online in that they too dance in front of a camera for views and attention.

To continue this discussion on what is considered appropriate for kids, Annabeth Bels, Hilde Van den Bulk and Nathalie Classens argue that analyzing gossip sites such as “JustJared” and “JustJaredJr” will “...create a better understanding of how media and audiences use celebrity behavior to negotiate childhood and maturity, age-appropriateness, transgressions and ‘(un)successful’ age transitions.”<sup>62</sup> They also take into account how coming-of-age stories are

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<sup>62</sup>Annabeth Bels, Hilde Van den Bulk and Nathalie Classens, “Blossoming Beauty or Unhinged Teen?: Media and audiences discussing celebrities coming of age,” in *Childhood and Celebrity*, ed. Jane O’Connor and John Mercer, (London: Routledge, 2017): 69.

interpreted by young audiences.<sup>63</sup> With this in mind the authors also consider children as both needing safety and protection so as to not corrupt traditional family values, and also as “little savages who need control and discipline.”<sup>64</sup> Social constructs of a well-behaved child are determined by adults. In addition to this, childhood is also determined by race, class, and gender which also lead to different childhood experiences. Because of these factors, the acceptable reality that adults are the guardians of safe childhoods, the acceptability of doing certain things is based on age. For example, when One Direction member Zayn Malik (at the time aged 20) got engaged he and his fiance were met with criticism from the media for being too young. Being “too young,” and transitioning into a young adult with absolute agency may also be the reasons why Miley Cyrus was scrutinized for her new mature content.

The authors also argue that appropriateness is ‘morally good behavior,’ and the ways that child celebrities come of age are not behaving appropriately. This is because when a child is coming-of-age they are gaining agency over their image. Celebrities coming-of-age are also media consumers, and creators of culture and meaning.<sup>65</sup> This can also be tied to Foucaultian thought that all media teaches people how to be people. One can understand this when Foucault writes about the organization of power and the influence these structures have on people. Foucault writes, “It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition centers and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, work-shops, schools, prisons.”<sup>66</sup> From this quote one can understand

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault, “Panopticism,” 9.

the structure of celebrity as one of power similar to structured institutions. With this in mind, the authors are concerned by the ways that child celebrities come-of-age in the public eye because it may poorly influence children to grow up in the same ways that these celebrities do. By saying this, the author is implying that a young celebrity's choices are dangerous and not socially acceptable. Even though celebrities like Miley Cyrus and Britney Spears met backlash to their explicit coming-of-age, social media allows for celebrities to come of age on their own terms. Unlike the media and paparazzi harassing Cyrus' and Spears' growing up in the public eye, social media gives child celebrities agency over their newly adult and "legal" image. Take Millie Bobby Brown for example. As a twelve-year-old she portrayed Eleven in the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. The show was one of the most popular Netflix original series to date and obviously established Brown and the rest of the child cast as celebrities. As Brown was going through puberty she was sexualized similar to Annette Funicello going through puberty on *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Even though this, unfortunately, happens to many young female celebrities, when celebrities like Brown turn eighteen, they lean into their new mature young adulthood in which it becomes socially appropriate to dress more provocatively. For her eighteenth birthday celebration, Brown embraced her sexy new life as a young adult woman. Brown wore a silver glittery floor length gown with a slit to show off her legs. In addition the dress was low cut and showed off her cleavage. Even though Brown has a stylist that helps her pick out her clothes for public events, like most celebrities, by choosing this dress and posting herself in it for her birthday she is taking control of her image as a newfound adult.

While this may be alarming because it is potentially showing child fans that they have to embrace a sexually active and sexy version of themselves when they turn eighteen, these actions

are not as destructive as guardians of childhood might think. Sure, some may be influenced by the actions of their favorite celebrities and embrace a lifestyle of complete agency, but this lifestyle is not inherently bad. It definitely problematizes female sexuality and gender expression, but not every young woman will embrace this provocative lifestyle and dress similar to that of a celebrity. I am not attempting to say that celebrity's coming-of-age online will corrupt every child, but rather some will lean into this lifestyle because of the implicit promise of wealth and fame as social media is a new way of child star production.

Celebrities may have power over popular culture and trends, and social media only heightens their influence over society, and specifically children, but this is not a completely terrible thing. With every new media there are always worries about what its influence will do to children and the way they interpret the world. This was seen when television was introduced into the home and eventually with the rating system that lets audiences know what media is appropriate for what ages.<sup>67</sup> And just like the introduction of television into American homes, social media is now the thing the guardians of childhood are worrying about. Like Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, social media platforms also produce child stars. The difference is that social media allows stars to have more agency over their image. Disney and Nickelodeon set up a strict structure for their child stars which allow children to believe that these stars are just like them. However, social media allows the child stars (whether they are famous because of their social media use or because they have stardom from these networks) to produce a seemingly authentic version of themselves with little to no structure. Because celebrities have influence over their fans, some children may be inclined to aspire to have the same fame that the stars their

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<sup>67</sup> Jonathan Bignell, "Writing the Child in Media Theory." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 32 (2002): 127–39.

age have, but this is not a bad thing. This analysis of celebrity production and girlhood is centered around white, affluent celebrity culture. If I am to ever expand on this research, I would continue my analysis to consider how race and class effect tween star and power production. I would analyze media like, *The Cheetah Girls* film franchise and *True Jackson, VP* (2008-2011), to understand how these characters and their influence as stars compares to other shows about girlhood and celebrity that feature a white protagonist. As I have shown throughout this project, the mode of production for stars, and specifically child stars, changes as time goes on. Social media makes an implicit promise to children, and specifically girls, that they do not need to be born into fame to become a celebrity. The D'Amelio sisters and the girls on *iCarly* behave in certain ways in front of cameras that eventually lead to their stardom. Miley in *Hannah Montana*, and the real life Miley Cyrus are born into wealth, but without the structure of the Disney Channel and being a child of a celebrity, the celebrity of Miley Cyrus would not be the star that we know today. The promise of celebrity based on social media stardom that is being sold to children is problematic, but miracles happen, and there will always be a system in which children have the opportunity to become stars.

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