

California Stylin': Anticipatory Fashion in Tween Virtual World

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Abstract

This study analyzes how children use online virtual worlds as a form of anticipatory socialization into teenaged identities. Anticipatory socialization can be described as the adoption of attitudes and values of a group to which one does not belong, facilitating a move into that group and easing the process of adjustment after becoming a member of it (Merton 1957). Fashion is a particularly important medium for the exploration of anticipated teen identities. Through fashion these tweens anticipate teenage identities as skaters, heart-throbs, heroes, and busty beauties. Tweens index hip-hop culture, Hollywood style, and popular marketing campaigns to enact more sophisticated teen identities. However, club-members must discursively bring these identities into being through practices of distinction, authentication, individuality and denaturalization. Examining the language and images that adolescents use *online* to create fashionable identities, as well as the language they use *offline* in the space of the club to co-construct what is desirable, illuminates the role of language in mediating social identity.



Figure 1. Club-members experiment with sophisticated teen looks online

Research Questions

How do tweens use online virtual worlds to practice teenage roles, values and beliefs?
 How do tweens co-construct what is desirable fashion and what styles are undesirable?
 How do the diversity of voices and styles present in California shape wider discourses about fashion and identity online?

Methodology

Field site - an after-school computer club in Los Angeles
 Population- multi-cultural group of tweens
 Virtual World Whyville.net, an online space where users can play games, chat, and style their avatars
 17 hours of participant observation
 25 hours of transcribed video
 Field notes, screenshots

Distinction

Following Bourdieu's (1984) notion of distinction, Bucholtz (2007:378) notes that discernment, or the ability to distinguish between what is desirable and what is not, is fundamental to linguistic research on consumption. In the following section, Lucetta demonstrates her ability for discernment in a conversation with one researcher.

1. CMT: ((looking at hair that Lucetta has chosen on Lucetta's computer screen))
So if that is not *emo*? how would you describe it?
2. Lucetta: Rockish?
3. CMT: Rockish? that's cool.
4. Lucetta: more than (xxx)(2.5). *Emo* is more of a groupie.
(3.1)Rockish is someone who is actually *in* the band while *emo* is just someone who listens to it (1) and are like depressed but still like it.

*Negative assessment
in-group authenticity*

Out -group as inauthentic



Figure 2. Sam's "Rockish" look

Ties to Celebrity

Students were drawn to fashion that they had seen on celebrities from hip-hop and Hollywood. In the following segment Matthew finds some "shutter shades" popularized by Kanye West in his music video "Stronger." Because of the tie to the music icon, the glasses caused quite a stir in the club.



Figure 3. Matthew's Glasses

1. Matthew: Are those Kanye West Sunglasses? *References celebrity*
2. CMT: Yes.
3. JCH: They a:re?
4. Matthew: ((Excitedly))Yes.
They have Kanye West Sunglasses. *References celebrity*
5. Ben: Really? For how much? *Indicates desirability*
6. Matthew: For thirty clams.
7. Sam: Oh I'll buy it. *Indicates desirability*

Conclusion

Through fashion these tweens anticipate teenage identities as skaters, heart-throbs, heroes, and busty beauties. In doing so, they index a particular Californian aesthetic influenced by both hip-hop, and Hollywood. Yet language plays a critical role in mediating these anticipated social identities. Club-members co-construct what styles are desirable, while characterizing others as marked and inauthentic. Furthermore, because this study takes place both in the online global world of Whyville, as well as at a local level of the after-school club in Los Angeles, it speaks to how the diversity of voices and styles present in California can shape wider discourses about fashion and identity online.

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