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**Screening Girls in *High School Musical*:
Identity, Femininity, and Empowerment**

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Abstract

Screening Girls in *High School Musical*:
Identity, Femininity, and Empowerment

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Released in the era of third-wave feminism, postfeminism and “girl power,” *HSM* causes such a sensation, especially among the girl audience. Girls in *HSM* complicate the traditional understanding of femininity and what it means to be a girl. This thesis focuses on the gender representations in the *High School Musical* trilogy, explores Disney’s ideologies of representing girl characters through different sites like romantic relationship, intellectual ability and fashion style, and analyzes the influence of postfeminism and consumerism on the construction of girls’ identity and femininity.

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Chapter 1: *Introduction*

When considering of the Disney Channel, one might think of the entertaining animation and kids' programs which are targeted towards young preschool children. Since 2003, when the first musical movie, *The Cheetah Girls*, was released on the Disney Channel, an increasing number of original musical movies broadcast by this cable have drawn young teenagers' attention. The intended target audience of the Disney Channel has expanded from preschool kids to tweens and adolescents. *High School Musical* (*HSM*), first released in 2006, is one of the most successful hits that Disney Channel Original Movie (DCOM) has produced (Nielsen ratings, 2006). The movie won the 2006 Emmy Award for Outstanding Children's Program (Emmy, 2006), the Teen Choice Award for Choice Chemistry (CBS News), and the soundtrack album won the Billboard Music Award of 2006 (Billboard.com). Following the sensational success of the first *HSM*, *High School Musical 2* was released on Disney Channel in 2007, and in 2008, the third *High School Musical: Senior Year* debuted in U.S. movie theatres.

The *HSM* trilogy features the musical and romantic journey of Troy Bolton, a white basketball team leader at East High, and Gabriella Montez, a science genius Latina. The first *HSM* starts with an encounter between Troy and Gabriella at a karaoke contest, and shows how they discover their mutual interest in music. When they get a chance to be in the audition for the school musical, the school "drama queen," Sharpay Evans, who has long wanted to have the lead role, and her brother Ryan, attempt to stop Troy and Gabriella from getting lead parts. Other minor characters in the films include Chad Danforth, Troy's best friend, Taylor McKessie, Gabriella's best friend, and Kelsi Nielson, a pianist and composer. Troy and Gabriella's romantic journey continues in *HSM 2*, in which a talent show is organized in a country club owned by Sharpay and

Ryan's father, where Troy, Gabriella and their friends are all working during the summer break. Due to Sharpay's manipulation, Troy's relationship with Gabriella and his other friends is complicated by loyalty issues. Summer vacation does not turn out to be a happy and romantic time for the couple. The last *HSM* film is set in their senior year, when everyone is faced with decisions about college and careers. But before graduation, everyone still has the prom and a final musical performance to attend. Troy and Gabriella's love faces crisis and challenges again.

My interest in the study of *High School Musical* and its sequels started in November 2010, when I went to a friend's house for a karaoke party at Houston, TX. To my surprise, my friend's sister, Kyla, probably just 12 years old, started the party with the song "Start of Something New" from *High School Musical 1*. It is one of the hit songs in the movie, a duet sung by Troy and Gabrielle when they first meet each other. Following a couple of other songs also from the movie, Kyla performed a mini "*High School Musical* concert." Later, I came to know that she bought all three of the albums for the *High School Musical* films released by the Disney Karaoke series. As a Filipino American girl, Kyla said she had no difficulties in understanding characters' decisions in the films, and she did not feel any discomfort in identifying herself with any ethnic characters. Her enthusiasm for the songs and confidence in performing them made me question why this Disney-produced musical series is popular among girl audiences of different racial backgrounds, and what messages are conveyed to the girls who usually take Disney's ideologies of representation for granted.

Disney's *High School Musical* is not simply a movie featuring catchy songs and attractive performers. Combining the genres of musical and fiction, *HSM* creates what Frederic Jameson (1979) called the "Utopian fantasy" of mass media culture (147). According to Jameson, such mass culture productions have no practical purposes in the

“real world” (131). It is a “superstructural reality” that mass culture is based on, in which social concerns, anxieties and “blind spots” are repressed by fantasies of harmony and easy resolutions (139, 141). He argues that international corporations who distribute these productions have ideological manipulation over the mass culture. Different from Jameson’s argument, most media studies scholars today do not agree that media corporations have the power to totally manipulate audience, but believe that audiences have certain agency in terms of their interaction with films and television shows. However, since the younger generation of audiences has less critical ability, the ideologies of media companies for children and teenagers such as Disney still have significant influence on the construction of young media consumers’ identities. Thus, as one of Disney’s popular musical film series, the themes of *HSM* along with the characters constructed in the films, to a large extent, mirror Disney’s historical and present ideologies in girls’ media culture.

The reason why I study a film series from the Disney Channel is not that few scholars have conducted research on gender issues in Disney movies, but that Disney films in the early twenty-first century, such as *High School Musical*, have not drawn enough attention from academics focusing on postfeminism and girls’ studies. Very few scholars have studied girls’ representations in *HSM* and its sequels. My research mainly focuses on representations in the *High School Musical* trilogy, especially the gender representations of the girls and girl culture. I argue about Disney’s ideologies of representing girl characters through different sites like romantic relationship, intellectual ability and fashion style, and analyze the influence of postfeminism and consumerism on the construction of girls’ identity and femininity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Girls in *High School Musical*

In this section, I give a brief review of scholarship related to the *HSM* films. Although little research has been found concentrating on *HSM* in particular, issues of gender and race discussed in these works are valuable for me to delve into further studies of representations of girlhood and identity in the trilogy. According to Scott Thomas' *Unofficial Story of High School Musical* (Thomas, 2007), *High School Musical* is a musical version of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet". It provides young people "an excuse to sing, dance and rejoice" (6). Unlike other teen movies in the twenty-first century that feature adolescent problems about "underage drinking, drug experimentation, or teen sex," the *HSM* films incorporate the themes of "fun and cheerfulness," identity and status quo, by featuring "wholesome" teenagers engaging in "wholesome" activities (Hyman, 2007).

Although the *High School Musical* trilogy brought Disney's original movies to a new level of success and gained substantial popularity among tween/teen girls, criticism exists about both the narrative and representations presented through the movies, particularly with regard to issues of realism and authenticity. In his article about Disney, Hoi F. Cheu disagrees that characters in *High School Musical* reflects "real kids in real-life." Instead, he sees the film as simply another "modernized fairy tale" (56) from Disney, just like *The Princess Diaries* (2001) and *Ella Enchanted* (2004). In the *High School Musical* films, the heroine's dream is revised from marrying a prince to becoming a star, and a girl's fashion and style become the new magic, as represented in the "ultra-rich" and hyper-consumption image of Sharpay (56).

The issue of gender representation in *HSM* movies has also been criticized by scholars. Henry Giroux, in his book *The Mouse That Roared*, comments that "[i]ssues of

gender, race, class and sexuality are completely ignored in this Disney high school” (80). The East High School in *HSM* is the “ideal school” (79) created by Disney, which presents a “fantasy world for middle-class viewers” (80). However, Thomas has argued in *The Unofficial Story of High School Musical* that the female characters are positive as well as diversified. For example, Gabrielle is a good-looking girl, but also a little bit shy and nerdy. He also notes that Gabrielle is a perfect role model to show that “it is cool to be smart for a girl” (Thomas, 2007). Appearance is not all that matters for teenagers to identify themselves and their peers.

In Shiri Reznik and Dafna Lemish’s study of girls’ perceptions of romance scenes in *High School Musical*, most of the girls speak highly of the character of Gabrielle as a realistic and attainable role model. They feel empowered by her transformation from a nerdy, shy girl to “one that discovers her talent and also wins love and social popularity” (162). Although the storyline still follows the traditional “Cinderella myth,” Reznik and Lemish agree that the quality of being both “smart/successful” and “attractive/girlish” goes with the notion of “girl power” (164). According to them, girl power makes the co-existence of strength and femininity possible. By strength, they mean girls being brave, successful and independent, while by femininity, they refer to stereotyped characteristics of a female as being innocent, gentle, emotional and sensitive (164). “Girlishness” is traditionally associated with childishness and immaturity. However, being girlish here is more related to young girls’ pursuit of being feminine.

Through the examination of girls’ media representation in *High School Musical* and its sequels, this thesis intends to contribute to scholarship on new meanings of girlhood as represented in original Disney movies, how *HSM* films negotiate girls’ representation between classic Disney ideologies and contemporary mainstream popular

culture, and how this shift of femininity in Disney films complicates the notion of empowerment in the mainstream U.S. media culture.

Girls in Disney Films

With regard to girls in early Disney films, such as *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Janet Wasko (2001) provides a close analysis of the characteristics of classic Disney films in her book *Understanding Disney*. She concludes that five themes and values are represented in such films, including "individualism and optimism," "escape, fantasy, magic, imagination," "innocence," "romance and happiness," and "good triumphing over evil" (117). She argues that Disney's early female characters are physically too predictable (beautiful, lean, sexual attractive heroines versus ugly, fat female villains), and also points out that the personalities of heroines in classic Disney films are depicted as "innocent, naive, passive, domestic, and submissive" (116).

Disney's over-emphasis on physical slimness and gendered stereotypes is marketed to girls via the company's "Princess" films and ancillary products. Girls' passion today for these princess images, such as Snow White and Cinderella, is referred to by Peggy Orenstein as "princess mania" (4). Though some of the modern Disney princesses are much more independent and intelligent than the early ones, they are "still living in male-dominated worlds, and ultimately find fulfillment through their romantic relationships with Prince Charmings" (Orenstein, 116). This pattern corresponds to Hoi Cheu's (2008) analysis of Disney ideology, in which "classic Disney male heroes fight for survival and success, while the female protagonist is preoccupied with love and marriage" (52).

Cheu points out that classic Disney films are "white-male centered" (52). The plots rarely depict characters from other ethnicities and cultures, and the few people of

color who are represented appear mostly as stereotypes. He summarizes the ideologies reflected by Disney's classic animation as the American dream, patriarchal gender division, white domination and compulsory heterosexuality (52). Although contemporary Disney films tend to provide diverse racial representations by portraying similar protagonists from non-white ethnic backgrounds, such as in *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998), the stories still follow the "old rescue fantasy," and the female characters are shaped in the typical "thin and pretty package" (Orenstein, 180).

Do these ideologies appear in the Disney Channel's original movies, including the *HSM* trilogy? How do girl characters in Disney Channel original movies challenge or conform to the ideologies of classic Disney in terms of gender representation? Does the representation of *HSM* break free from stereotypical gender roles, especially traditional expectations of femininity, just as in the theme song in the film, "Breaking Free," encourages young people to follow their heart regardless of peer pressure and social stereotypes?

Girls in Contemporary Mainstream U.S. Media

Conventional femininity for girls, according to Dawn Currie, Deirdre Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz, is "an appearance-based femininity rooted in girls' preoccupation with gaining boys' approval and sexual interest" (293). Stereotypical representations of girls appear frequently in contemporary U.S. mainstream media, which has increasingly drawn feminists' attention to the construction of girls' identities and girls' media culture. The media representation of girls' physical femininity is often about "size and weight"—the ideal of "perfect bodies" (Correa, 119). However, mainstream images of girls in contemporary films, to a certain degree, reflect a shift in the definition of femininity. For example, in her article on the Hollywood teen film *She's All That* (1999), Sarah Gilligan

argues that the transformation of the image of Laney, the protagonist, signifies her different "styles of femininity" as well as her performance of "postfeminism identities"—possessing both beauty and intelligence, independence as well as attraction to a man (177). This combination of different styles of femininity is labeled by Douglas as the “new girliness,” which she defines as “a fusion of female accomplishment and girliness” (124).

Rosalind Gill, in her book *Gender and the Media* (2007), also discusses the changes of femininity in a postfeminist era. She argues that postfeminism should not be perceived as a backlash to feminism, but should be understood as a sensibility. According to her, postfeminist rhetoric privileges female bodies that have been produced as sexually attractive via acts of self-discipline (such as grooming and exercise) as well as through consumerism, especially by consuming beauty and fashion products (255). This postfeminist media culture’s emphasis upon the sexy body is particularly reflected through female celebrities’ body images and dressing styles. In addition, it also privileges white, cis-gendered, young female bodies.

Angela McRobbie describes postfeminism in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) as “a kind of substitute for feminism” or the “undoing of feminism” (8), which uses the notions of “empowerment” and “choice,” especially in media and pop culture (1). She argues that individuality and subjectivity are important factors to differentiate postfeminism from feminism: feminism is the study of “We,” while postfeminism is the study of “She” (13). McRobbie notes that the discourse of “empowerment” and “choice,” driven primarily by capitalism and consumer culture, make young women feel invited to pursue new freedoms, including “seemingly autonomous pleasures and rituals of enjoyable femininity” (3). This empowerment of

individualism and consumerism is well marketed in media culture, especially via representations of the younger generation of girls in the new millennium.

Also focusing on the overwhelming empowerment of girls in the mainstream culture, Susan Douglas, in her book *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism* (2010), examines how media present overwhelming images of girls by providing "fantasies of power" (8). As a feminist who observes the "persistence of female inequality," she refers to the phenomenon of the overwhelming female power presented on TV as "enlightened sexism" and the new generation of young women as the "F-Girls." This new generation advocates ideologies of both feminists and anti-feminists by arguing for equality in professions as well as enjoyment in sex appeals. Their complex ideologies further complicate the notion of femininity in twenty-first century media.

Douglas' analysis of enlightened sexism is closely related to another notion about girls that is widely used in contemporary U.S. media—*girl power*. "Girl power" is one of the popular slogans advocated by female punk and rock musicians who initiated the Riot Grrrl movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Riot grrrl bands address such issues as sexism, racism and female empowerment (Meltzer, 2010). Since riot grrrl signifies a subculture that endorses DIY, political actions and feminist activism, girl power at that time was mostly associated with a political concept. By the 1990s, the discourse of girl power had been used in different ways in popular culture and mainstream media, which does not relate to girls' "political subjectivity" (Taft, 69). In her article about girl power politics, Jessica Taft summarizes four meanings of girl power in popular culture, which are: 1) "girl power as anti-feminism"—here, girl power is softer and sexier than feminism and emphasizes the commodification of body, style and beautification (71); 2) "girl power as postfeminism"—girls have gained all the power they want and have achieved equality in the world (72); 3) "girl power as individual power"—every girl is a powerful individual

who can achieve personal success, which has less relevance to social and cultural factors (73); and 4) “girl power as consumer power” — girls as consumers possess great purchasing power (74).

I agree with Taft’s interpretation of girl power. Taking equality for granted and believing that no feminist activism is needed serve as the foundations of both postfeminism and mediated girl power. Being feminine, which was often rejected by second-wave feminists, is highly endorsed in a postfeminist era. Girls as the consumers of media culture are empowered by the representations of powerful women. In her book *Kids Rule!* (2007), Sarah Banet-Weiser discusses the gender politics and consumer citizenship reflected by children’s television programming. She argues that the tween programs created by Nickelodeon incorporate the concept of postfeminist and girl power politics, especially empowerment for tween girls. According to her, Nickelodeon empowers its audience by featuring strong girl characters and addressing girls as “powerful players in mainstream consumer culture” (107). Not only do its programs target at the commercial market of empowered girl consumers, but the network itself is the producer of girl power ideology (Banet-Weiser, 2007). Similarly targeting at girl consumers, Disney has created its original and contemporary films featuring girl characters in the 21st century in order to develop its market among young audience. Banet-Weiser’s analysis of Nickelodeon is useful to examine the discourse of gender and girl power produced by Disney.

Situated within the context of postfeminist and consumer culture, girl power, as noted by Emilie Zaslow (2009), has generated an expansive media culture. This "girl power media culture" encourages girls to decide when to be girly or powerful, to become a housewife or professional, and when to be sexy for males or their own delight (3). Girl power is widely deployed by mainstream media, like magazines, films, television and the

Internet (YouTube, blogs etc.). Celebrities who celebrate this power in their performances, such as the Spice Girls and Madonna, disseminate the appeal for girls' empowerment in popular culture. In addition, Zaslow also emphasizes that girl power culture is fully diffused into all kinds of media rather than limited to any individual pop star, character or celebrity (4). Growing up with this concept of empowerment, young girls' perception of femininity and girlhood is constructed differently by postfeminist media culture. My study of girls in the *HSM* films analyzes how Disney incorporates the notion of girl power in the girl characters, and how girls' identities are shaped by postfeminism ideology, consumer and celebrity media culture.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

One of the major theoretical perspectives of this thesis is third-wave feminism which emerged from feminists involved in punk-rock, hip-hop, zines, and the Internet, as well as academics and activists. In the 1980s, third wave feminists, as a response to the second wave, began to study gender from a poststructuralist perspective. However, there is no single definition of what third-wave feminism is. According to their book *Catching A Wave: Reclaiming Feminism* (2003), Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier argue that third wave is typically considered as a younger generation of feminists, who recognize the differences among women and the multi-faceted nature of female identities as shaped by “technology, global capitalism, changing national demographics and declining economic vitality” (14). Emphasis on complex identities and femininities is one of the most significant ways to distinguish the third wave from second wave feminism. They also note that, as influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist theories, third-wave feminism is closely associated with pop culture and media representations of femininity.

Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, in their work *Third Wave Agenda* (1997), argue that third wave is not opposed to second wave feminism. Third wave feminism, on one hand, includes second wave's critique of "beauty culture, sex abuse, and power structure." On the other hand, third wave favors the "pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures" (Heywood & Drake, 3). They point out that third wave emphasizes "coalition-politics activism" (7) and contradictory characteristics, which, in a sense, corresponds to Dicker and Piepmeier's argument that the third wave endorses multi-layered identities.

Most previous research on Disney films takes a second-wave feminist standpoint, which focuses on gender inequality, social oppression and the media's objectification of female representations. Girls' representations in Disney films are rarely associated with empowerment in the second-wave feminist perspective. Individuality and empowerment are greatly emphasized by third-wave feminists. According to Shelley Budgeon, "empowerment is a crucial theme diffusing through third-wave discourse, which also closely relates to debates on postfeminist discourses" (282). Therefore, I ground my study of Disney's *HSM* films with a third-wave feminist approach and concentrate on girls' subjectivity, femininity and individuality and empowerment.

From these theoretical perspectives of third-wave feminism, this thesis also uses girls' studies theories to disentangle the complexities of gender and femininity. It is difficult to separate girls' studies from feminist studies, since they share overlapping theories of gender. Especially, scholars who study girls agree with third-wave feminism's recognition of the multiplicity of identities and the significant influence from media and consumer culture. Beyond these similar concentrations, girls' studies also have unique themes. For example, social institutions are considered as playing an important role in shaping girls' identity and femininity. The girls in the *HSM* films are specifically set in a

high school, in which issues like popularity and peer pressure are important to consider when examining the films' constructions of girlhood.

With a methodological focus on girls' media representation, I intend to explore media representation of girls in the twenty-first century, and how these representations map out a postfeminist girlhood in contemporary mainstream culture. The concept of a girl, as a "diverse and dynamic" population which does not have an exact age range to define, is being continuously constructed through the media (Harris, 2004, xxiv). Contemporary mass media provide significant ways to shape girls' studies and girls' media culture. "Girl culture" and "girl power" (Spice Girls, 1997; Karlyn, 2003; Banet-Weiser, 2007; Douglas, 2010) are two of the key concepts in girls' studies. Girl empowerment, as constructed through a convergence of postfeminism and neoliberalism, has challenged traditional studies of gender. The notion of girl power disseminates through my study of girls' media representation in the *HSM* trilogy.

Based on the theories of girls' media studies and the discourse of girl power, this thesis deploys multiple methods to analyze girls' representation in the *HSM* films. Starting with a historical study of the Disney Channel, I examine other scholars' studies of classic Disney films, particularly studies of gender representations. I use different approaches of textual analysis to study the *HSM* movies. I examine the narrative plots of *High School Musical* and its sequels and also conduct a deep analysis of the characters in the movies, mainly focusing on the role of heroines and their relationships with male characters. Along with analyses of the characters' relationships as developed in the movies, I examine the discourse of romance, exploring what role gender plays in terms of teen romance narratives. Combined with a narrative study of the films, analyses of the female characters' physical appearance and distinct personalities are useful to explore the contradiction shaped in these films between femininity and feminism as well as

relationship versus career. I also conduct a textual analysis of girls' intelligence as presented in the films by discussing traditional expectations of female success and different types of smart girls in teen films. A detailed look at the girls' clothing and dressing styles is necessary to understand their roles in shaping the identity of the girls and their femininity in the movies. In addition, the lyrics of girl characters' songs are analyzed in the thesis, since songs in a musical, just like clothing styles, are major methods of constructing character identity and representation.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

In the first chapter, "Start of Something New," I provide an overview of other scholars' studies of the gender representation of girls in classic Disney movies, especially focusing on the romantic relationships between the girls and their male partners. As a comparison, I move on to the examination of romance scenes in the *High School Musical* films, such as the relationship between Gabriella and Troy, Troy and Sharpay, and Chad and Taylor. Situated in traditional "Cinderella myth" and "happily ever after" resolution in classic Disney films, the discourse of heterosexual romance plays a significant role in *HSM's* three original movies. Reznik and Lemish's discussion of myths of romance and analysis of girls' reception of romantic love in *High School Musical* are fundamental to my research. Their study of gender roles as presented in romantic relationships provides a valuable theoretical basis for my study of femininity in the *High School Musical* films. They point out that females on screen are usually portrayed as submissive characters that need to be rescued by the heroic males. However, Reznik and Lemish, also note that *HSM* projects new images of girl power as "independent individuals with agency and self-worth" (153). It is the contradiction between independent images and submission in heterosexual relationships that I try to explore in this chapter.

The second chapter, "Gotta Go My Own Way," mainly focuses on the representation of girls' intelligence in the movies. The contradictions of femininity created in contemporary media representation are mostly embodied in issues about female's smartness or success (Budgeon, 289). In terms of intelligence, traditional male characters are concerned with career and achievement, while women are concerned with feelings and domestic sphere. In teen films, "instead of being goal oriented, female characters are relationship oriented" (Shary, 2002, 236). According to Timothy Shary's analysis of media representations of unconventional girls, nerdy girls are those who exhibit a "gawky appearance, social discomfort, and personal confusion" (236). However, there is another kind of girl in the films who is intelligent but has a better outlook as well as social communication abilities: the "non-nerd smart girl" (237). Girl characters in this category possess active agency, independence as well as beauty, which are crucial issues I intend to look into by examining girls' representations in the *High School Musical* trilogy. By examining the images of the four main girl characters—Gabrielle, Taylor, Sharpay and Kelsi—I intend to compare the different styles of femininity and intelligence in these films. How do the girls in the *HSM* films negotiate between being feminine and smart? What transformation do the girl characters go through in the films, and what do the transformations mean with regard to the definition of femininity? Specifically, I compare the smartness of the four girls with regard to how they pursue personal careers and success, how their images conform to or break from the "nerdy/smart/pretty" stereotypes, and how much agency and power the girls have when they face dilemmas between career and relationships.

The third chapter, "I Want It All," focuses on the analysis of girls' fashion styles as well as performance as presented through the movies. In contemporary cultures, style and appearance are important ways to construct an individual's identity. The female

pursuit of fashion and style has been constantly related to the construction of femininity. My research questions for this chapter are: What roles do fashion and style play in the making of girls' identities in the *HSM* films? How do girls pursue power by dressing themselves in the films, and what does this fashion packaging mean with regard to the construction of girlhood in the postfeminist era? With a specific focus on the character Sharpay Evans, I take a detailed look at her pink fashion style and compare it to the different meanings of the color pink as deployed by other mainstream girls' movies. Then I move on to an examination of Sharpay's musical performance in the movies, such as the lyrics of her songs and the costumes she wears when she sings. Situated in commodity and celebrity cultures, Sharpay's style provides a glimpse of what Peggy Orenstein (2011) calls the "girlie girl culture." Orenstein draws her focus on girl consumers' power and its importance in framing the postfeminism girl culture. Throughout this chapter, girls' styles as presented in the *HSM* films are compared with girls' representations in classic Disney movies and the fashion trends led by contemporary celebrities. In this way, I disentangle Disney's negotiation between its nostalgia for a fairytale style and its attempt to innovate popular looks for girls in its films.

In the conclusion of the thesis, I provide a brief review of the representation of girls in *HSM*, summarize the ideologies of femininity and girls' identity that are conveyed through the films, and point out what stakes and limitations exist in this research of girlhood and Disney films. *HSM* and its sequels, as Disney's most popular musical series, aim to provide a joyful and carefree media experience for tweens and teens. Musical TV seems to cater to its audience with visual and audio pleasure, but the ideologies behind the representations have been continuously complex and problematic in mediated postfeminism. The trend of presenting a musical on TV is interesting to me as well. *HSM* as Disney's musical TV films brings the genre of musical series to a modernized and

commercialized level. In addition, I also discuss the globalization of *HSM*, especially about how the representation of girlhood in Disney films might impact its global audience. In this way, I intend to draw academics' attention to the study of Disney's contemporary films in a global scope.

Chapter 2: “*Start of Something New*”

“I thought you were my fairytale
A dream when I'm not sleeping
A wish upon a star
That's coming true”

--Lyrics from Gabriella's solo in *High School Musical*, "When There Was Me and You"

From Jane Austen's novels to Disney's fairytale movies, from romantic TV dramas to Taylor Swift's "Love Song," the genre of romance has entered into every form of contemporary popular culture in the U.S. An increasing number of teen romance films have been produced in the U.S. in the past three decades, including *Grease* (1978), *Footloose* (1984), and *Hairspray* (1988) in the late twentieth century and *A Walk to Remember* (2002), *Ella Enchanted* (2004), *Twilight* (2008) more recently. This high visibility of films featuring young love is historically owing to the dominant popularity of romantic fictions among female audience (Radway, 1894). Girls, similar to young women, are generally drawn to romance occurring in the cinema (Tally, 2005). As one of the biggest fairytale factories, the Disney company is renowned for its re-creation of classic children's romances via animation, such as *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). In order to attract more potential girl audience members and expand its market in non-animated romance films, Disney started to create its own modern, live action fairytale movies, for instance, *Princess Dairies* (2001), *High School Musical* (2006), *Camp Rock* (2008), and *Prom* (2011).

Romance is one of the major themes throughout the three *High School Musical* films. Troy and Gabriella first meet at a karaoke contest, and become fond of each other after they perform a song together. Their romantic relationship develops as they prepare

for a musical audition at school, and the romance reaches its climax when Troy and Gabriella eventually perform a lovely duet on stage, regardless of various obstacles. In *HSM 2*, the couple works at Sharpay's dad's country club during summer vacation. However, their relationship is threatened by Sharpay's intervention. In *HSM 3*, Troy and Gabriella have to face another challenge to their romantic love. Because graduation is approaching, their pursuits of college and careers in the future might force them to be thousands of miles away from each other. The other storyline of love in the *HSM* films follows the romantic relationship between Chad and Taylor. They start dating at the end of *HSM 1*. Their relationship continues in *HSM 2*, and in *HSM 3*, Chad and Taylor go to prom together in their senior year. My initial questions for this chapter are: how is romance constructed in *HSM* compared with classic romantic trajectories? How do girls in the films perform gender roles and identities in heterosexual relationships?

THE NARRATIVE OF ROMANCE

Romance is one of the genres that has had a long legacy in the world of fiction. Since the seventeenth century, romances and literary fairytales were written specifically for, about, and even sometimes by women (Ross, 2004). In her book about female and romance literature, Deborah Ross comments that romance and fantasy fiction in the eighteenth and nineteenth century both celebrated and punished women's imagination and self-expression (55). She also mentions that older romance fiction usually focuses on "a beautiful heroine, beloved by the perfect man, whom after trials and separations she marries, presumably to live happily ever after" (56). Jane Austen's depictions of female characters also reflect this social expectation of women's romance. Young ladies' romantic dreams in early novels always involve a happy marriage with the perfect gentleman, such as Jane and Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1831). Romance

allows women readers to believe that “true love” leads to marriage and family; meanwhile it also allows women to "escape from the realities of female inequality by escaping into a fantasy world" (Wilson, 2011).

In *Romance Revisited* (1995), Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey discuss how the narrative of romance transforms in the 1990s. They identify the romance fictions in the 1800s as the “classic romance narrative” which shares common characteristics such as compulsive heterosexuality, patriarchal domination and universal whiteness (15, 22). Pearce and Stacey argue that fictive romance in the 1990s undergoes “variations and deviations” within the narratives of classic romance (19). One significant transformation is that interracial love and lesbianism start to surface in romantic fictions, as exemplified in lesbian romance *Desert Hearts* (1985). However, since mainstream representations of romance in the 1990s still mainly follow the classic romantic trajectories, they emphasize that rewriting romance in a transformative and postmodern way is crucially important to the “heart of feminism and romance” (34).

Romantic fictions in the late 1990s and the early 21st century continued changing in forms and challenging feminist studies of female representations. In their article about rewriting romance, Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff (2006) examine the narrative of romance and the representation of femininity in 24 chick lit novels published between 1997 and 2004. They find that most heroines are depicted as a financially more independent and sexually more assertive than their forebears in (498). Gill and Herdieckerhoff argue that new romantic elements of chick lit in this period reflect new femininities in a neoliberal era where they refer to as a “postfeminist sensibility” (487). Female protagonists with a postfeminist sensibility are characterized as independent women who possess “empowered sexual body” and “individual free choice,” but also need the caring and rescue from their heterosexual “true love” (500).

The fantasies of an empowered body and desired heterosexual romance resonate with Jameson's discussion of "utopian fantasies" that the narrative of a musical is constructed within an idealized world in which complex issues are resolved in an easy and singular way (147). Based on the classic romantic narrative, the *HSM* films construct romance in these utopian ways. In the following sections, I analyze how romantic love is fantasized in the films and how girls' femininity and identity are represented in Disney's "modernized fairytale" (Cheu, 56).

THE MYTHS OF ROMANCE

As teenage girls are presented on screen much more frequently today than before, the study of the myth of romance in girls' media and culture has drawn feminists' attention. Mary Lou Galician (2004), in her analysis of romance in mass media, mentions that popular culture is a major factor in creating girls' "unrealistic expectations about romantic relationship" (119), and she categorizes the romantic myths reflected in the love stories of youth media. She identifies "love at first sight" as one of the most dominant myths, which implies that "initial attraction is an extremely powerful component in a relationship" (122). However, she also argues that the media representation of this initial attraction skips over the complexity of romance and love in reality. Characters are depicted as being in fast-paced romantic relationships in general within the media culture.

This myth of love-at-first-sight is reflected in the beginning of the first *HSM* film, when Troy and Gabriella meet each other for the first time at the karaoke party. Both Troy and Gabriella feel insecure and uninterested in social activities. However, they are chosen by accident to perform a song together on the karaoke stage. Not expecting much, Troy starts to sing a few lines and decides to leave the stage since he thinks that Gabriella is too shy to sing a word. To his surprise, she starts to sing the female part of the song.

Troy is attracted by Gabriella's soft voice. Physical appeal seems not to be the first factor that defines this relationship. During the first half of the song, both of them are too shy to look at each other in the eyes. Then they start to peek at each other and try not to be noticed by the other person. Finally, at the moment of the lyrics, "Now looking into your eyes, I'm feeling my heart of starting something new," their gazes meet, and it seems that they find each other in their eyes. In the second half of the song, Troy and Gabriella feel comfortable enough to look at each other and fully loosen up, enjoying this collaborative singing. Troy starts to show off his charm by leaning down with the microphone and posing as a pop star. There is one moment when Troy begins to walk closer to Gabriella while locking his gaze on her. Gabriella is slightly intimidated and loses her balance when she is forced to move backward. Troy's overwhelming move suggests male heterosexual power in pursuing the female.

Another myth of romance as described by Galician is "love is forever," which promotes the idea that each person has a predestined soul mate and, with faith in each other, love can conquer all, which consequently results in easy resolutions in romance stories. This destined love is depicted in the *HSM* films also. For example, after Troy and Gabriella have a small chat and exchange phone numbers, Gabriella escapes from the party and leaves Troy wondering where he can find her again. This scene of their short encounter and rushed departure resembles Cinderella's first dance scene with the prince in *Cinderella*. Cinderella's sudden flight and her mysterious background leave the prince full of curiosity and expectations. We all know that the prince and Cinderella re-encounter in the fairytale. Troy, in *High School Musical*, meets the girl of his dreams who has transferred to his school and coincidentally goes to the same class as him. The coincidence of this re-encounter reflects the theme that romance happens by accident, and

one is destined to meet one's soul mate again even if they lose contact with each other after the first encounter.

Both of the myths noted by Galician, love-at-first-sight and love-is-forever, are widely used in teen romance literature. In her work on the *Twilight* book series, Tricia Clasen (2010) examines how the myths of romance are exploited in the love tale of Edward Cullen and Belle Swan. The initial attraction between them is depicted in such a mysterious way that even the characters barely have a clear idea why they feel attracted to each other. The "meant-to-be" feelings depicted in the film reflect the deployment of the "predestined soul mate" myth. In the *HSM* films, romance comes to Gabriella and Troy naturally and easily. They become fond of each other after their first duet at the karaoke party. Music here seems like the powerful magic that bonds them at the first place. Because of this magical connection, Troy and Gabriella will always get back together no matter what happened to them.

ROMANCE OF THE OTHER

This "meant-to-be" romantic narrative also applies to the other heterosexual couple (Taylor and Chad) in the *HSM* films. However, the magical connection is not mysterious attraction or mutual interest in music, but rather seems to be their similar racial background. Taylor McKessie is the only African American female character in *High School Musical*. Her romantic pair-up with Chad Danforth, who happens to be the only African American male in the film, is presented as both natural and inevitable. In addition, no racial backgrounds of Taylor and Chad are emphasized in the films. They both have extremely mundane Anglo names: Taylor McKessie and Chad Danforth. Similarly, though played by Vanessa Hudgens, a half Hispanic and half Asian actress,

Gabriella's racial background in the films is barely visible except her typical Hispanic name, Gabriella Montez.

In her article "This Tween Bridge over My Latina Back," Angharad Valdivia discusses the significant role of Hispanic girls in the media as a racial bridge between white and black girls. Her argument, though insightful, is not very applicable to Gabriella in the *HSM* films. As the leading heroine, the role of Gabriella is not to support other characters, but to be an ideological signifier who indicates *HSM*'s diverse representation of race, and a mediated tool to help eradicate the traditionally white dominated ideology produced by Disney classic films. On the contrary, the roles of Taylor (African American) and Sharpay (white) are to support Gabriella's uniqueness. Although Disney attempts to present diverse racial identities in *HSM*, the main cast members in the films are still predominantly white. The absence of racial information of the ethnic characters reifies the universal whiteness in the *HSM* films, which also resonates with and reproduces classic Disney's ideology of white-dominance. Imagine the thousands of tweens and teenagers that have watched the films, some of them even becoming big fans like my friend's sister Kyla. Without realizing the racial ideology produced by Disney, the young audience might be reaffirmed the normativity of white supremacy in the U.S. and abroad, as exemplified in the Clark Doll Experiment that children choosing white doll instead of the African American one (Clark, 1947). This has significant stakes for girls of color both here and abroad in terms of pride in their non-white identities, and non-white girls might struggle to refashion their bodies and identities as white.

Although Taylor and Chad's romance is not the main storyline in the film, their romantic relationship reflects Disney's ideology of easy resolution. Taylor's attitude toward romance and her romantic partner is very different from Gabriella's. The first encounter between Taylor and Chad in the first *High School Musical* is their secret

scheme to "destroy" Troy and Gabriella's audition plan. After this collaboration, Chad asks Taylor out at the very end of the film, which paves the way for their romantic storyline for the next two sequels. However, in the second film, there is barely any plot devoted to their relationship. The last *HSM* film, *Senior Year*, has more scenes about their relationship, one of which is when Chad attempts to ask Taylor to go prom with him by saying, "Do you mind if we go pick up my tuxedo after school?"

Taylor's attitude towards Chad's implicit invitation to prom is extremely negative. She immediately rejects him in front of everyone, because she thinks that Chad is too cocky and does not know how to woo a girl. Taylor demonstrates that a girl does not always say yes to a guy's romantic invitation. Taylor has self-determination and refuses to be a passive sleeping beauty. The next day, when Chad comes to Taylor with a bunch of flowers in his hands, Taylor does not give him a quick response, but forces him to declare his intent clearly and loudly in public, which makes it seem like her power is dominating over the boy. However, after Chad asks her out again in front of all the students in the cafeteria, Taylor has a little discussion with the girls, and she responds, "I'm honored to go to prom with you," which suddenly makes her earlier toughness fade away. Chad seems very relieved, and everyone else cheers for his success. This scene indicates that even if Taylor wants to go out with a boy, she should not say yes too easily, but needs to claim the power first, by "playing hard to get" with Chad. But it seems that Chad still needs to overcome Taylor's domination and win her love in the end. This relationship between Taylor and Chad also suggests that sometimes romance needs effort, which is different from the love-at-first-sight romance of Troy and Gabriella. They feel attached to each other the first time they meet, and later on, Troy does not have any difficulties to approach Gabriella or ask her out. No scheme of "playing-hard-to-get" occurs for the predestined couple.

Another minor romantic storyline in the *HSM* films is about Sharpay Evans, the most self-centered drama queen at school. She is depicted as the “evil other” who tries to separate the “pre-destined couple.” Her destructive behavior to Gabriella and Troy’s relationship testifies the myths of “love-is-forever” and “love-conquers-all.” Sharpay’s romantic journey begins in the second movie when she decides to pursue Troy, the most popular boy at school and Gabriella’s boyfriend. However, her way of pursuing love is just a showcase of her vanity and struggle for power. In order to get close to Troy, Sharpay uses her family’s power and connection in sports to provide Troy an opportunity to work for Sharpay’s family business --a five-star country club. She asks the manager of the club to hire Troy as her personal golf coach. In addition, Sharpay also invites Troy for a family dinner to meet her parents and introduces Troy to a few academic professionals. Lured by professional promotion and accessibility to celebrities in sports, Troy does not give as much attention to his friends and Gabriella as before. As a result, Sharpay drives Troy and Gabriella apart temporarily; however, she cannot win Troy’s love. The way Sharpay pursues her romance toward a guy is depicted as the evil manipulative way, which cannot win against Troy and Gabriella’s true and destined love. No one can truly separate the predestined couple in Disney’s ideal romantic films.

APPEARANCE MATTERS?

Feminist scholars who study the politics of romance in Disney films mostly focus on gender roles, stereotypes and representations of femininity in female characters. In a 20th century feminist study about gender images in Disney’s classic animated films, four themes are related to what it means to be a girl in such films: 1) a girl’s appearance is more important than her intellect; 2) girls are weak and in need of rescue and protection; 3) girls are family-oriented and aim to marry to become women; 4) overweight girls are

not feminine and are unlikely to get married (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund & Tanner, 2004). Disney films that reflect all of the four themes are *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Little Mermaid*. Women in these films are mostly portrayed as beautiful, dependent on men, and engaged in domestic responsibilities. Does the portrayal of girl characters in *HSM* follow this format? What is the factor that fosters the love of Troy and Gabriella in the first place?

In a love-at-first-sight story, an attractive physical appearance is one of the most important factors that make a young girl and boy fall in love with each other. For example, in *Cinderella*, due to a fairy's magic spell, Cinderella shows up at a royal ballroom with a stunning outlook, which instantly draws the prince's attention and affection. Cinderella's outstanding appearance is the key reason that the prince approaches her in the first place. In teen films, most of the representations of teen romantic characters are either very pretty or handsome. Troy and Gabriella in *High School Musical* are no exception. Troy, the most well-known basketball star on campus, enjoys great popularity among all the students. Though Gabriella is not as much of a star at school as the drama queen Sharpay, her innocent looks, perfect body shape and feminine clothing build up her image as a modern princess. However, in contrast to *Cinderella*, the initial reason that Troy is drawn to Gabriella is not because of her appearance, but her amazing voice.

Within classic Disney films, an extreme example of a woman falling in love with a man who does not have a charming appearance is *Beauty and the Beast*. Though Belle is afraid of the Beast in the first place, she falls in love with the Beast eventually regardless of his appearance and brutality in the beginning. She sees his weakness and his needs of love deep inside. Belle is looking for someone who understands her and shares her interests (Ross, 2004). She decides to marry the Beast instead of the handsome and

masculine Gaston (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund&Tanner, 2004). As for *HSM*, the reason that Gabriella falls in love with Troy is not based on the judgment of his appearance either. The idea that a boy's looks or popularity is not that important is clearly stated in Gabriella's comments about Troy. "You are a cool guy, not in the way that your friends name it, but for your bravery of showing the other side of you, the real you."

By "the other side," Gabriella refers to Troy's musical talent that none of his basketball teammates ever notice or appreciate. It is interesting how Disney presents that boys think differently about the importance of sports and musical activities. Compared with "manly" sports, according to the stereotyped representation, music is indicated as a "girly" activity in the films. A boy who participates in a musical performance is considered less masculine, which reflects a conventional gender division of masculine and feminine activities. Janice Radway (1984), in her work on romance literature, argues that an ideal romantic hero is always characterized by masculinity, such as possessing muscular body and participating highly competitive sports. However, she also notes that this masculinity is always accompanied by a small element of "softness" into the overall manliness (128). As exemplified in *HSM*, Troy is portrayed as the manly basketball team leader with a hidden talent in musical performance. Besides physical manliness, Troy also possesses personalities that are not traditionally considered as masculine. In this case, *HSM* follows the ideal construction of a romantic hero in heterosexual relationships.

A GIRL'S LOVE NEEDS SACRIFICE

In classic Disney films, the heroine is portrayed as passive, powerless and sometimes needing to sacrifice self-expression in the pursuit of love (Craven, 2002). For example, in *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel sacrifices her voice and even jeopardizes her life to pursue the love of a human (Ross, 2004). In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle gives up her

freedom and is totally under the control of the Beast. Her self-determination is largely ignored, and she is objectified as the prize of the battle between the Beast and Gaston. Also focusing on *Beauty and the Beast*, Laura Beres (1999) argues that a man's control and power over a woman are romanticized, because the abusive behavior of the Beast is misread by the female audience as a sign of his power to take care of Belle.

As for heroine in *HSM*, does Gabriella sacrifice everything for the destined love of Troy, as Ariel and Belle do? The answer is no, to a great extent. Gabriella, a new transfer student at East High, has no friends or social activities at first. When she meets Troy, she starts to feel like a girl, deciding to become who she really wants to be--a nerdy girl who dreams of leading a school musical. Her name becomes known at the school because of her participation in the audition with Troy. Gabriella becomes an overnight musical diva and the lucky girl who has a romantic relationship with the most popular basketball star, Troy Bolton. Basically she has nothing to lose, and achieves all the self-esteem and popularity that one could ever want. In contrast, Troy is the one who sacrifices for love. His professional career of basketball is jeopardized and his relationships with his father and teammates are endangered by his love for Gabriella. In this sense, Gabriella is not the one who has to make any sacrifices to achieve romantic love. However, this fact does not necessarily suggest that she is powerful and full of agency throughout her relationship with Troy. In the next section, I will further analyze the representation of girls' power and agency in the *HSM* films.

THE RESCUED HEROINE

Another common theme reflected in much romance fiction is "female-being-rescued" (Flanagan, 2008). When life is endangered, princesses in classic Disney films, such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, are always saved by their prince charmings.

One rescue moment in *High School Musical* is when Troy and Gabriella both stand on stage and are ready to sing for the final audition, but Gabriella is scared by the intense stares and attention from the audience. She is so terrified that she cannot sing even a word: "I can't do it, not with all the people staring at me." In order to encourage Gabriella and relieve her nerves, Troy holds tightly onto Gabriella's hands and says, "Now look at me. Imagine just you and me." With Troy successfully distracting Gabriella's attention from the audience, Gabriella forgets about her issue of confidence and expresses herself freely by singing together with Troy, just as it says in the lyrics, "Your faith gives me strength, strength to believe, we're breakin' free." Although it is not as typical a rescue moment as that in *Sleeping Beauty*, when the prince has to fight against a huge dragon to save the princess, Gabriella is constructed as a comparatively weak female character that needs the hero's strength and encouragement. Disney represents this rescue in an inexplicit way in which the weak female character gains spiritual support from the male protagonist's gaze of love. This powerful gaze symbolizes the chemistry or "spark" between a couple in love (Martin & Kazyak, 2009).

The rescue scene is important in romance narratives because it also signifies the moment when female characters find their "real femininity" in front of their heroes, just as Gabriella says to Troy, "I was a freaking math girl. Singing with you, I just feel like...a girl." Apparently, Troy is the one that brings out the true side of Gabriella. Therefore, this scene brings up the question: what does it mean to be a girl? Though not explicitly mentioned in the film, it seems that being a girl with traditional feminine characteristics in a heterosexual relationship is what Gabriella really wants, and it is the hero that makes this magic happen. Gabriella's performativity of femininity in front of Troy reflects a stereotyped gender order between female and male, which corresponds to Robert Connell's (1987) notion of "emphasized femininity" (183). He argues that women

perform femininity that is subordinated to and marginal of the hegemonic masculinity. Many women comply with this hierarchy of gender roles and accommodate men's interests and desires (183). This "emphasized femininity" is commonly depicted in Disney's movies. For example, in the Disney movie *Mulan* (1998), the boyish heroine finds her feminine characteristics when she is with Captain Li. Though she is brave and tough in the battle field, *Mulan* behaves more like a feminine girl when she falls in love with the hero. This depiction of tomboy characters performing traditional femininity and heterosexuality is also noted in Mary Kearney's "Girlfriends and Girl Power" (2002). She argues that young boyish girl characters start to pay attention on boys and care about being feminine when they become adolescents. In most films featuring such protagonist, the emphasis on girl's pursuit of heterosexual romance signifies their transformation from teenagers to women-to-be and the traditional expectation of female femininity.

In *HSM* films, romance to Gabriella is represented as a way to find her true identity and a reason to perform within a traditional feminine gender role. However, does romance mean the same to the boy protagonist in the film as well? No implication is depicted in the films that Troy finds his "true self" or masculine side through the romantic relationship. Rather, romance to Troy is characterized as the obstacle driving him away from the manly career path. Troy's father, also the coach of the basketball team, "accuses" Gabriella of being the reason that Troy got detention and was distracted from regular practice. "Making you miss practice doesn't make her look really nice." Troy defends Gabriella saying that it was not her fault. "She is just a girl!" "Just a girl" does release Gabriella from being responsible for Troy's mistake, but it also decreases the position of a girl in a relationship. A girl is just a girl, who has nothing to do with the decisions in a guy's life. Troy's father argues, "But you are not just a guy! You are a team leader." Compared with "just a girl" statement, this guy is not "just a guy." A male hero

has more important things to do than hang out with "just a girl." Later, Troy is touched by his teammates' spirit and says, "She is just someone I met. Gabriella is not important. I will forget about her. I will forget about the audition. I will go out and get the championship!" Compared with the boy's career potential, girls are portrayed as objects that distract male characters from attaining professional success, which, in a sense, reflects one of the ideologies endorsed by Disney's classic films: patriarchy.

ROMANTIC SETTINGS

In this section, I will dissect the romantic settings in the *HSM* films, and explore how love is presented means to the construction of girls' fantasy and femininity. Karin Martin and Emily Kazyak (2009) discuss the relationship between romantic setting and heterosexual love in Disney films. They examine seventeen Disney films and find that hetero-romantic love is the major storyline of most of the movies. Among those, romantic relationships are portrayed as "a special, distinct, exceptional form, different from others" (324). Characters in love are surrounded by music, flowers, candles, fancy dresses, dim lights and dancing, which all suggests the uniqueness and specialness of a romantic relationship (325). This "magical, special and exceptional" romance is well depicted in the *HSM* films.

A well-decorated balcony, a private golf club field having a lovely picnic and a late night date in the pool are all indispensable romantic spaces in *High School Musical*. One of the prototypical romantic settings is the "Romeo and Juliet" balcony, where Romeo sneaks into Juliet's backyard and tries to approach her through the balcony. Gabriella has a similar balcony and a tall tree that Troy climbs to enter her bedroom. A tree is also a good place to get away from the crowd and create a secret place for love birds. In the beginning of the third *High School Musical* movie, Troy and Gabriella

escape into a tree house from a celebration party. They sit on the edge of the tree house, chatting, singing and then playing around inside the house. The exclusive terrain is a perfect romantic setting, and this romantic atmosphere increases dramatically when the windows on the roof of the tree house suddenly open, which shows the starry sky above the heads of the couple. Hand in hand, Troy and Gabriella look up toward the sky, and the whole picture on screen is like the image of a "happily-ever-after" scene as seen at the end of Disney's *Cinderella*.

All the romantic scenes in *HSM* happen in secret spaces that are out of the public attention. By creating a private space, Disney situates the romance in a separate and special world. This construction of a secret romantic setting suggests that romantic love is a private emotion between two people, instead of an exhibitive relationship open to the public's judgment. These exclusive settings of romance, such as the tree-house scene mentioned above, are usually accompanied by lovely music, picturesque scenery, or sometimes dramatic fireworks. An ideal, fantasized and exclusive place signifies Disney's perception of romance as utopian, and only the couple exists and communicates in this surreal world, which, to a certain degree, mystifies the being of romance.

In the third sequel of *High School Musical*, the senior year, Gabriella teaches Troy how to perform a ballroom dance on a garden-like roof. Troy lifts Gabriella up and down, supporting her from side-to-side. When the lyrics "we are meant to be" come in, Gabriella and Troy are spinning around as if there are no other people in the world. Then the sound of thunder comes in, and rain pours from the sky. The scene turns out like the moment from *Singing in the Rain*, when Don, Kathy and Cosmo sing and dance happily in the rain. Rain or water is a symbol that shows up frequently in the *High School Musical* movies, and most of the time the rain pours on the romantic moment when the couple are dancing and singing. The plot about rain could be interpreted as a climax point

to show that the couple's love is strong and solid no matter whether it is a sunny or rainy day. They go through storms together and will support each other regardless of any changing of the environment. It is also connotatively suggestive of sexual orgasm.

However, the films' use of rain theme in every romantic scene is very repetitive and predictable, which might cause visual boredom among viewers. For example, in *High School Musical 2*, Troy and Gabriella are having a wonderful time at the golf course. When it comes to the moment that they approach each other in an intimate face-to-face position, an almost-happened kiss is disturbed by the spray from the field's sprinkler system. Instead, they start singing and dancing in the joyful water spray. Using spray here to prevent the couple from kissing reflects Disney's classic ideology of wholesome programming. Identified itself as tween-oriented and family-friendly entertainment, *HSM* avoids displaying any physical or sexual contact between the couple. Even though Troy and Gabriella finally successfully kiss each other at the end of *High School Musical 2*, the moment of intimacy is distracted immediately by the water spraying from the sprinkler, again!

CONCLUSION

In Shiri Reznik and Dafina Lemish's reception studies of *High School Musical* movies fans, most of the girls identify Gabriella as a positive role model of "girl power" because of her transformation from an "unpopular geek" to a talented singer who is attractive to the most popular boy in school. Resnik and Lemish regard Gabriella as a "liberated and empowered girl who is not a passive object posing in order to please the male gaze," which demonstrates the "co-existence of strength and femininity" in her character (164). Through my detailed examination of the female characters in *High School Musical* movies, girl power as related to romantic relationships is not

straightforward or strongly demonstrated through Gabriella. It is a mixed and complicated female image as constructed through a romantic story. Gabriella still needs to be rescued by Troy, the hero in the film, just as in the typical romantic theme deployed by the Disney's classic films. A male's power still dominates in the heterosexual relationship, and an "emphasized femininity" is performed by the female protagonist of the *HSM* films. Romantic scenes are depicted in a traditional and fairy-tale mode in these films, suggesting that love is magical, special and predestined. Love happens accidentally and magically, and other people's interruptions are powerless and harmless. In addition, Gabriella finds the feminine side of herself, "being a real girl," through the encounter of romantic love. Femininity is discovered magically by the myth of heterosexual romance instead of one's own agency.

However, Gabriella is not totally based on the portrayal of female characters in Disney classic films. She is not depicted as a domestic figure or as a family-oriented figure in *High School Musical* movies. Her self-determination is represented through Gabriella's behaviors in certain moments, especially when she decides to go her own way instead of being ignored by Troy or being treated as "just a girl." In comparison, Taylor's and Sharpay's attitudes toward love showcase the notion of girl power in a more direct way. They are not portrayed as traditional images of fairytale princesses, but young girls who do not easily conform to patriarchal domination and take initiative steps to pursue their desires.

Chapter 3: “Gotta Go My Own Way”

“I don’t want to be this school’s freaking genius girl again.”
“Don’t worry. Just be Gabriella.”

--A conversation between Gabriella and her mother in the first *HSM* movie

Genius, a marvelous word that describes someone who has intellectual abilities or exceptional creativity, is the least desirable label to which Gabriella wants to be attached. Why do many intelligent girls consider themselves, and are considered by others, to be freaks at school? The previous chapter covers the traditional expectations of girls’ romance in U.S. mainstream films, focusing on the *HSM* films. This chapter will mainly focus on the representations of intelligent girls and the complicated relationship between female success and femininity in the *High School Musical* films.

The traditional definitions or professional expectations of success for men and women have been different. Men are supposed to be concerned with career and achievement, while women are supposed to be concerned with feelings and the domestic sphere. “Instead of being goal oriented, women are relationship oriented” (Shary, 236). Historically, a girl or woman did not gain femininity through her intelligence and accomplishments, but by exhibiting the well-bred manners of a fair lady and eventually marrying a gentleman. Princesses in early classic Disney movies, such as *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), conform to this traditional gender role.

The depiction of girls’ intelligence and ambition are not rare in U.S. film history. Historian Georganne Scheiner, in her book *Signifying Female Adolescence* (2000), analyzes girls’ representations in films from 1920 to 1950, specifically focusing on film melodramas of the 1920s, youth musicals of the 1930s, and coming-of-age comedies of

the 1940s. She mentions that few examples of smart girls, mostly adapted from popular novels, were presented on screen. Two of these girl-oriented series were excessively popular at that time, and both of them have been adapted into many film versions at different times. Jo March, a very smart and independent girl, hones her writing skills and eventually becomes a writer in *Little Women* (1933), which was adapted from Louisa May Alcott's novel published in 1860s. In the fictional *Nancy Drew* series (which first appeared in 1930 and was adapted to film in the 1990s,) Nancy, a brave and intelligent detective, can solve seemingly impossible cases by herself. In both stories, the heroines place their romance second to the pursuit of their careers, which, in a sense, foreshadows certain aspects of second-wave feminism.

Sandra Conaway (2007), in her analysis of media representations of smart girls in U.S. teen shows, points out that female adolescents' intelligence and ambition are socially undervalued and rarely presented in teen television series before the 1950s. Though focusing on smart girls on television, her argument of the invisibility of smart girls in the early twentieth century corresponds to Scheiner's findings in general. Conaway further maps the historical development of smart girls on teen shows in the 1960s and the 1970s. She argues that brainy girls are presented in shows like *The Patty Duke Show* (1963) and *Gidget* (1965), but none of the smart girls are depicted in a central role. According to Conaway, girls who are worrying about school work rather than being popular were too "perky" to attract the audience at that time (69). Smart girls became a recurring theme in TV shows of the 1980s and the early 1990s. An increasing number of teen series during that period featured smart girls as protagonists on screen. However, Conaway argues that most of the smart girls suffer pressure from their peers and struggle to become popular. They have to go through a certain physical transformation to gain acceptance, as exemplified in the nerdy girl Carol Seaver from *Growing Pains* (1985-

1992) and the tomboyish girl Jennifer Keaton in *Family Ties* (1982-1989). Both Carol and Jennifer undergo physical changes later on in the series.

Although Conaway focuses on TV series, the representation of smart girls in mainstream U.S. films basically shares the same smart-girl paradigm produced by teen shows. Timothy Shary, in his article “The Nerdy Girl” (2002), gives a brief introduction to the evolution of “smart girls” in U.S. cinema. Similar to Conaway’s discussion of teen girls on TV, Shary notes that girls with intellectual ambitions in the 1970s’ films appear mostly in minor roles and are troubled with negative issues, such as sexual and familial anxiety. Teen films in the 1980s, according to Shary, exhibited an obvious shift in gender politics since more girls were represented as protagonists. Nerdy girls, however, were still marginalized in teen films. It was not until the 1990s that nerdy girls were gradually depicted as the main characters on screen. Nerdy girls were featured as geeks who have “a gawky appearance, social discomfort, and personal confusion” (236), as exemplified in such movies as *Born to Be Wild* (1995), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1996), and *She’s All That* (1999).

Different from the stereotypes of nerdy girls in the 1990s, girl protagonists with high intelligence are frequently depicted in fantasy films of the early 21st century. One of the smart girl icons in 21st century cinema is the well-known witch from *Harry Potter* films (2001-2011), Hermione Granger, who challenges herself with excessive course work and is always ready to answer professors’ questions at school. Similarly, fantasy TV shows today also tend to create smart girl characters. For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) features its heroine Buffy as an intelligent and kick-ass girl who fights against evil to save the world. Traditionally, girls in films who possess extraordinary talents and abilities are characterized as boyish with masculine personalities. However, modern smart girls like Hermione and Buffy not only exhibit

strong intellectual abilities, but are depicted with desirable bodies and a perfect appearance. This possession of both intelligence and a feminine outlook signifies a new form of femininity in the era of postfeminism.

According to recent studies of postfeminism, new definitions of femininity are largely produced through media representations of women (McRobbie, 2000; Shary, 2002; Gill, 2007). In contemporary media culture, female success has been bound up with the new meanings of femininity (McRobbie, 2000). As a result, the notion of femininity has become increasingly complicated and ambiguous (Gilligan, 1999; Harris, 2004). Thus, this chapter mainly focuses on the contradictions between female success and femininity, as well as intelligence and girl power in the *HSM* films. First, I will look into scholars' categorization of representations of smart girls in U.S. films. Based on these former studies and theories, this chapter moves onto an analysis of the representations of four girls in the *High School Musical* films, and how their characters represent the complexity of new femininities and girls' empowerment in a postfeminism era.

Before moving on, let me briefly introduce the four smart girls in the *HSM* films. **Gabriella Montez** (Vanessa Hudgens), a Latina, is a new transfer student who is used to being the "freaking genius girl" at her former school. In the first *HSM* film, she does not want to be a science geek anymore and starts to explore a new side of herself by attending an audition for a musical. Her struggle between her old and new identity is one of Gabriella's major storylines. Later on in the third movie, *Senior Year*, this struggle turns into a tough decision between an early orientation at Stanford University and a last musical performance with friends at East High. **Taylor McKessie** (Monique Coleman), Gabriella's best friend, is a smart African American with great ambitions. She is the captain of the school science team called Scholastic Decathlon in *HSM 1*, and in later movies she decides to study political science at Yale University after graduation from

East High. **Kelsi Nielson** (Olesya Rulin) is a nerdy white girl with a talent in music writing, who composes a song for Gabriella and Troy's audition in *HSM 1*. In the two sequels, her composing talent is fully shown through summer performances at a country club (*HSM 2*) and the last musical "Senior Year" (*HSM 3*). Finally, **Sharpay Evans** (Ashley Tisdale), a rich white girl from East High, is characterized as the most self-centered and career-oriented of the *HSM* girls. Paired with her brother Ryan Evans, she tries to beat Troy and Gabriella in the musical audition (*HSM 1*), attempts to increase her popularity by persuading the basketball star Troy to perform with her (*HSM 2*), and also tries to steal Gabriella's leading role in the last East High musical (*HSM 3*).

CATEGORIES OF SMART GIRLS

Most previous studies of smart girls in film are inattentive to the difference between being nerdy and being smart, which is what I intend to explore further in this chapter. In the media, people labeled as "nerds" are usually physically unattractive, socially awkward, and intelligent in a specific area. Shary points out that there is another image of smart girls appearing in teen films. He calls it the "non-nerd smart girl," such as Cher in *Clueless* (1995), who is intelligent but has a better outlook as well as social communication abilities than the nerdy girl (247). In this case, those who are labeled as smart have a more positive image than those labeled as nerdy.

How do the *HSM* films represent "nerdy" girls and "non-nerd smart" girls? Do the four girl characters fit either of Shary's categorizations of smart girls? Among the four introduced earlier, Kelsi Nielson best exhibits all the characteristics and stereotypes of a nerd. Dull clothes, circle-shaped glasses, and old-fashioned hats all symbolize her physical unattractiveness. She is not savvy in science projects, yet is extremely talented in music composing. In addition, Kelsi is extremely shy and afraid to voice herself

openly. This is true when she faces Sharpay. As presented in the beginning of *HSM 1*, Kelsi's personal confusion is seen through her lack of confidence and her doubts about her ability. On the contrary, Sharpay and Taylor definitely do not belong to this stereotypical category of nerdy girls. Sharpay's outfits, composed of fancy clothes, a princess-like hair style and glittering accessories, are overwhelmingly fashionable and glamorous. She is a celebrity-like girl who is not hindered by social discomfort. Taylor, as the leader of East High's Student Association in Science, proves to be a very capable girl at social activities. In the films, she always shows up with a bunch of friends. Both Sharpay and Taylor are represented as excessively goal-oriented and no personal confusions are shown in their lives. Taylor's neat school uniforms along with her well-combed hair indicate she pays attention to fashion practices. Similarly, Gabriella's physical appearance is not gawky or appalling at all. She is a good-looking science genius, indeed. However, as Gabriella describes herself in the film, she has the "social discomfort" that Shary mentions about nerdy girls (236). Gabriella's discomfort reveals in her dissatisfaction of being labeled as a brainy girl. In *HSM 1*, she complains, "I'm the freaking math girl." Being intelligent to Gabriella is similar to being a geek who is isolated from regular social activities, such as cheerleading or glee club. However, discomfort with being smart is not sufficient to put Gabriella in the category of "nerdy girl," nor is it an accurate label to describe Taylor and Sharpay.

Comparatively, "non-nerd smart girl" is more precise to identify intelligent girls like Gabriella, Taylor, and Sharpay. According to Shary, the non-nerd brainy girl on the 1990s' screen is typically featured "as a neurotic overachiever who cannot enjoy herself" (244). In this case, smart is associated with ambition over pleasure. Shary notes that non-nerd intelligent girls in these films usually confront difficulties, such as confrontations with patriarchy or conflicts between beauty and intelligence. In *HSM*, Gabriella is

depicted as such an overachiever who only concentrates on fulfilling academic achievement. However, she hates to be treated as a smart girl, as exemplified by her complaining, “I don’t want to be this school’s freaking genius girl again,” when she first transfers to East High at the beginning of *HSM 1*. In addition, Gabriella is depicted as an overachiever. When Gabriella and Troy are talking about their future in their senior year, Gabriella wants to postpone her classes at Stanford University to stay with Troy in the same city for one more year. Troy disagrees with her idea and tells her going to Stanford is the right thing to do. However, Gabriella responds that she always does the “right thing.” She complains that her life is always “full speed ahead,” which indicates the tiresome nature of overachieving academic success. Maybe this time she can be “a little bit crazy.” “The right thing” here refers to her past achievements and conformity to the “can-do” model for middle-class girls (Harris). In contrast, the “crazy thing” can be understood as the joy that she has missed in her life. She also blames her intelligence for taking away her time from participating in performance and social activities. However, this unhappiness from pursuing an intellectual education is nothing like suffering any serious social problem or torments from peers, school, or society.

Sometimes a girl’s intelligence even leads to moral corruption in teen films. By corruption, Shary means that girl protagonists in some 1990s’ films abandon their social morals in order to pursue intellectual success. Sharpay in the *HSM* films is a good example to illustrate this point. Sharpay has a keen interest in performing, and she will do anything to achieve her dream of becoming a musical star. Her career ambition is so overwhelming that she drives herself to behave “immorally.” She deliberately changes the date of an audition so that it is impossible for Gabriella to make it. She attempts to alienate Troy from his friends so that she can perform with Troy on stage. She also takes advantage of Gabriella’s absence and steals her leading role in the senior musical.

Although he mainly discusses how intelligence brings girls “discomfort and resistance” in the 1990s’ teen films (248, 249), Shary also mentions a few teen films that offer positive representations of smart girls, including *The Unbelievable Truth* (1990) and *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995). In *HSM* films, being intelligent means greatly different things to the four girls. Gabriella complains that she is tired of just being a smart science girl. Sharpay, as noted earlier, behaves manipulatively and immorally because of her ambition. However, Taylor is proud of being the captain of the school science team and is happy to pursue greater knowledge in politics and leadership. As for Kelsi, her extraordinary intelligence in music not only creates such positive attitudes as confidence and self-importance, but also establishes Kelsi’s talented reputation among her peers. Therefore, the positive depiction of smart girls in *HSM* is minimized only to the secondary characters.

TRANSFORMATION OF SMART GIRLS

In both his article about nerdy girls and his book (2002) about the images of youth in contemporary U.S. cinema, Shary mentions that many of the teen films that feature nerd girls follow a “transformation narrative,” by which he means that an unattractive smart girl (usually played by a pretty actress) undergoes a physical transformation to become attractive, as exemplified in the film *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1996) (39, 40). According to Shary, girl protagonists in such films lack fashion sense in the beginning and some of them are even depicted as resentful feminists who strongly go against being attractive or dressed in a popular way. Later, their transformation, either resulting from self-realization or other people’s help, magically happens to the girls and turns their nerdy world upside down. As a result, acceptance and approval from boys are presented as the best pay-off of these nerdy girls’ transformation, as shown in *She’s All That* (1999),

in which nerdy Laney successfully develops a romantic relationship with the popular boy Zach. It seems that affection from male characters plays an important role in unattractive smart girls' transformation. For example in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, longing for a boy's love is the initial reason that stimulates nerdy girl Dawn's determination to undergo physical changes.

Although Shary analyzes what physical differences nerdy girls in the films achieve after the transformation, he does not directly discuss what role femininity plays in the representation of smart girls' transformation. This absent discussion of femininity can be seen in his analysis of the character Laney, the brainy girl in the film *She's All That*. Shary mainly emphasizes how passive Laney is in the process of transformation because she is told to transform and only succeeds with the help of another person (Zach) instead of relying on her own self-determination (40).

In another analysis of *She's All That's* Laney, Sarah Gilligan emphasizes the significance of the role of femininity in the film. She uses the "make-over narrative" to define the transformation and argues that the re-making of the image of Laney signifies her different "styles of femininity" and her performance of "postfeminist identities"—possessing both beauty and intelligence, independence as well as attraction to a man (169, 177). This combination of different styles of femininity is defined by Douglas as the "new girliness," "a fusion of female accomplishment and girliness" (124). She also points out that Laney's makeover combines the transformation narratives of *Pygmalion* (1938) and *Cinderella* (1950) (168).

Similarly, Peggy Tally (2005), in her study of girlhood and tween girl film market, discusses the representation of girliness in both Hollywood and Disney's films. She argues that influenced by the mediated concept of girl power, tween girls are attracted to films featuring strong heroines with intelligence as well as a Barbie-like

body, such as Elle in *Legally Blonde* (2001) and Mia in *Princess Dairy* (2001). Although the heroines in these films are young female adults instead of teenage girls, Tally notes that tween girl viewers identify themselves with the feminine and successful female icons. She argues that these new female images seem to raise a “feminist attitude” of empowerment, however, it is the messages of “freedom to consume and self-transformation” that are actually conveyed to the audience (317, 318). In addition, this attitude of empowerment, according to Tally, is reflected through the depiction of heterosexual romance in these films. Different from completely concentrating on romantic relationships, as depicted in traditional romance fictions, “girl characters with postfeminist girlishness in these films are featured as more ambitious in professional success.” The role of heterosexual relationships to them does not “overshadow the importance of their personal career or professional success” (317). For example, in *The Princess Dairy*, the depiction of Mia’s crush on a boy is less emphasized than her mission to become a princess. In *Legally Blonde*, Elle chooses to be an excellent lawyer instead of getting back with her ex-boyfriend. The girl protagonists’ concentrations on social responsibilities and professional success are highly valued in these films.

Another neglected point of Shary’s argument is that while bringing up different reasons that cause a smart girl’s transformation (self-determination or others’ help), Shary limits his argument about transformation to only the nerdy girls, since they are the unattractive ones who ostensibly need obvious physical transformations. In contrast, Gilligan discusses the transformation of over-fashionable smart girls in contemporary teen films also. Based on her categorization, films featuring non-nerd smart girls are called “made-under,” as exemplified in *Mean Girls* (2004), and those that depict the transformation of unattractive nerdy girls she calls “made-up,” as exemplified in *She’s All That*. According to Gilligan, “made-under” refers to the transformation narrative of over-

attractive smart girls to a more “natural” feminine style by erasing the multiple layers of makeup and by switching off their sexually-appealing clothes (169). Though “make-under” is comparatively less common in the “make-over” narrative films, Gilligan emphasizes that it is important to explore the relationship between femininity and “real beauty” by examining representations of over-attractive smart girls.

The trajectory of makeover is also narrated in the *HSM* films. Although girls’ purposes of this transformation are different, their decision in altering clothing and appearance reflects the concept of ideal femininity emphasized by Disney. The role of Kelsi in the *HSM* films seems to follow the pattern of a nerdy girl’s transformation. Kelsi is first introduced in the film by Miss Darbus, the musical teacher, as a pianist and a song composer. No further information is offered about her background story. She wears a dark purple jacket, khaki pants, and a pair of bookish glasses. Her hair is all wrapped under an old-fashioned cap in the first and second *HSM* films. The unstylish cap not only conceals Kelsi’s hair but also hides her feminine side, since hair is traditionally considered as one of the indicators of a female’s femininity. It is not until the third *HSM* that Kelsi appears on screen without any hat. The audience finally sees her pretty curly blonde hair.

Kelsi’s transformation is not initiated, however, by the problems of boys’ affection or isolation from the majority. Kelsi’s physical changes result from her increased confidence in her musical intelligence. Her transformation suggests that confidence can be reflected by a girl’s appearance and style. Confidence in her intelligence brings out her fashion sense and reveals her feminine side. However, as Shary argues, the successful revelation of a smart girl’s femininity is not achieved by the nerdy girl’s self-discovery, but rather relies on other people’s enlightenment about her talents. For example, in *HSM 1*, when Kelsi first attempts to give Sharpay suggestions to

improve her performance, she is warned by Sharpay that she has no right to comment on any of Sharpay's performances. Kelsi is intimidated by Sharpay's aggressive attitude and thus loses confidence in her music composition. When Troy tries to tell Kelsi that she should not be afraid of Sharpay because she is the composer of the show, who is as important as the "playmaker of a basketball game," Kelsi's confidence in her talent increases as a result of Troy's encouragement. Later on her self-esteem increasingly builds up as more and more boys and girls recognize her amazing talent.

Gabriella, on the other hand, seems to believe that intellectual achievement cannot bring out the true femininities of a girl. Instead, she believes that transforming from a genius to a person who engages in typical social activities and musical performances will make her finally feel like a girl. Through Gabriella's longing for "true femininity," the films seem to propose that intelligence has nothing to do with a girl's femininity. However, at the end of *HSM 1*, although Gabriella successfully steps up to perform on the stage and finally discovers her musical talent, the film does not show that she gives up her interest in her science studies. Instead, Gabriella tries to balance her time between math competitions and music rehearsals. In order to possess intelligence and "true femininity" at the same time, she figures out a win-win strategy to solve the conflict between her nerdy side and her feminine side by making full use of every second and becoming an over-achieving "can-do" girl. In this case, Gabriella's intelligence does not totally give into the pursuit of femininity, unlike what Sharpay finds in the 1990's teen films. Indeed, neither Kelsi nor Gabriella completely follows the typical pattern of a smart girl's transformation. Intelligence to them is never a simple factor that relates to their femininity. In order to dissect the contradictory femininity, a third wave feminist perspective is necessary to analyze the representations of smart girls in *HSM* films, which

advocates subjectivity over objectivity, multiplicity over simplicity, and complicit interpretations over traditional stereotypes of femininity.

However, not all of the smart girls in the films have to undergo this transformation. Sharpay is depicted as the most attractive girl among all the smart female characters. Does she go through the “made-under” or any other type of transformation? Based on my observation, Sharpay does not go through any noticeable physical changes throughout the trilogy. Her exaggerated appearance does not show even a slight hint of understatement. Sharpay’s outlook is packaged in the same glamorous way in the three films. This representation of extreme physical perfection alongside intelligence reflects an ideal of postfeminist femininity.

Similar to Sharpay, Taylor’s physical appearance does not go through any change in *HSM* and its sequels. She always wears a skirt and a headband no matter where she is or who she stays with. Although her way of dressing is traditionally labeled as girly, Taylor’s attitude toward other girls’ feminine characteristics tends to identify her as a feminist. For example, she sniffs at Sharpay’s girly appearance, and mocks cheerleaders’ hysteria over boys. The contradictory representation of the feminine look and feminist sensibility differentiates Taylor from the other three smart girls, and it also projects a possibility of a new femininity influenced by both postfeminism and feminism.

SMART GIRLS AND POSTFEMINISM

As opposed to being viewed by feminists as a political effort to achieve equality, female success from the perspective of postfeminism creates a new understanding of femininity (McRobbie, 2000; Harris, 2004; Gill, 2007; Bugeon, 2011). In her article about intelligent females and third wave feminism, Shelly Bugeon (2011) argues that the emergence of a new femininity, a “successful femininity,” is produced by wide-spread

images of intelligent women in the new millennium's cinema. "Postfeminism focuses on female achievement, encouraging women to embark on projects of individualized self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices" (281). Due to women's increased independence and educational success, the discourse of female success has resulted in more attention to and interpretations of femininity. However, Bugeon argues that contradictions of this "successful femininity" raise challenges to the studies of postfeminism femininity at the same time (284).

Similarly, Susan Douglas regards this individualized female success as "postfeminist triumph," the achievement of the compatibility between female intelligence and femininity (103). However, she also agrees that there exists ambivalence and contradiction in this new postfeminist subjectivity (108). "Contradiction" in Douglas' argument refers to the conflict between being successful and being extremely feminine.

Unlike Shary's descriptions of "nerdly girls" who have to undergo transformations to achieve femininity, a postfeminist image of smart girls can be overwhelmingly feminine. Sharpay Evans in the *HSM* films is one of the girls who try to achieve this "postfeminist triumph." In *HSM 1*, Sharpay overhears Gabriella and Troy talking about how impossible it is to try out for a musical audition. She disrupts their conversation and starts to brag about herself, saying, "I wouldn't think 'impossible' is even in my vocabulary," which declares her overwhelming ambition to succeed in everything. In addition to the fact that she is ambitious about achievement and good at manipulating people, Sharpay's extremely feminine appearance is depicted through her daily extravagant style. However, Sharpay's combined characteristics of ambition and feminine appearance are not highly valued by the films. Her unhealthy obsessions about her career lead to the degrading of her personal morals, and her ostentatious behavior and

style isolate her from her peers. Other *HSM* girls like Gabriella, Taylor and Kelsi, all enjoy a feminine appearance and respect from their friends. In this sense, they are the ones who really achieve “triumph,” the empowerment of being a successful and feminine girl.

In her book about girls in the twenty-first century, Anita Harris (2004) also relates her analysis of girls’ success with empowerment. Basing her argument on the theoretical framework of third wave feminism, Harris categorizes young intelligent females as “can-do” girls, who are “individualized, resilient, self-driven and self-made” (16). A desire for professional success and consumerist femininity is one of the remarkable characteristics of the “can-do” girls.

As for the four girls in *HSM* films, most of them fit Harris’ description of “can-do” girls as well. Sharpay and Taylor possess the combined characteristics of being both feminine and career-oriented. However, for Gabriella and Kelsi, this combination needs some effort, but they do not have to completely give up their original intelligence. Gilligan uses “power feminist” (174) to describe Laney’s effort to transform in *She’s All That*. Power here not only refers to a postfeminist image of Laney after transformation, but also indicates Laney’s freedom to switch between the makeover style and her original look. Her ability to choose between two looks suggests that she has free agency. Although Gabriella and Kelsi do not switch between their original and new looks, their senses of agency come from not completely replacing the original characteristics. Transformation to them is a process to embody different types of femininity, and to incorporate them into a more powerful and versatile postfeminist image. Their achievement of this new, combined and powerful identity signifies their ability to use their feminine appearance and intelligence in order to become empowered “can-do” girls.

CONCLUSION

Different types of smart girls have been depicted in contemporary teen films. Traditionally, girls with intelligent ambitions have been represented as nerdy and unattractive, and their intelligence has been usually featured as an obstacle to being feminine. In addition, most 1990 U.S. movies with smart girl characters follow a transformation narrative, in which nerdy heroines are told to transform physically in order to achieve popularity. However, as more and more U.S. teen films present non-nerd smart girls, a heroine's intellectual success does not necessarily cause difficulties in her pursuit of femininity. Indeed, a new femininity is represented on screen—the “successful femininity.” “Can-do” girl characters who are both attractive and intelligent achieve this triumph of empowerment.

By comparing the four girls in the *HSM* series with smart girls in earlier films, and analyzing representations of their intelligence from a third wave feminist perspective, I have demonstrated that *HSM* and its sequels partially break through the narrative patterns of smart girls' films in the 1990s. Largely, the *HSM* series present female characters as “can-do” girls, who are empowered by both their intelligence and feminine styles. However, some important and complex issues of girl's intelligence are still neglected or over-simplified in the *HSM* series. For example, there is no depiction of studying in the films. Being intelligent seems so natural for Gabriella and Taylor that they do not have to work at it. They never confront any academic problems in the films. Unrealistic and oversimplified depictions of intelligent girls indicate an illusionary agency to achieve this “successful femininity” and omit the difficulties in becoming a “can-do” girl who is empowered by the “postfeminism triumph.” Contextualized in its classic ideology of producing “carefree” entertainment, the fantasized illusion of girlhood

in Disney's *High School Musical* is not hard to understand. Girls in this utopian world of fantasy enjoy the triumph of "having it all"!

Chapter 4: “*I Want It All*”

“I want it all!

“I want it, want it, want it...

The fame and the fortune and more...”

-- sung by Sharpay from *HSM 3*

It is common for a girl to grab her mom’s arm, point at a dress in a store, and declare, “Mom, look! It’s so pretty. I want it. Can you buy it for me?” In recent years, the girlish desire for clothes and accessories has increased, and the number of goods produced for young girls have expanded, ranging from Disney’s Princess collection products to clothes that mimic Britney Spears’ provocative costumes (Pomerentz, 2008; Orenstein, 2011). Girls desire products with different styles to decorate themselves and express their identities. Their pursuit of consumption is increasingly noticeable nowadays (Griffin, 2001). “Having it all” has become a celebrated slogan of girl power (Harris, 2004; Douglas, 2011).

As discussed in the previous chapters, girl power is reflected through girls’ attitudes towards romantic partners as well as their persistence in the pursuit of careers. Although success in romance and intelligence also belong to the postfeminist concept of “having it all,” achievement of materialized power in consuming goods is the most obvious and direct area among the three. This chapter will focus on the fashion styles of girls in the *High School Musical (HSM)* films. By examining the representation of these styles in detail, I intend to explore what roles fashion and style play in the making of girls’ identities, how girls pursue power by dressing themselves, and what the relation is between this fashion packaging and commoditized popular culture in the postfeminist era.

STYLE AND IDENTITY

Dress is a mode of signification, a form of non-verbal language. Through fashion style, individuals announce who they are, who they want to be, or how they expect others to interpret their identity (Pomerantz, 2008). Appearance has been a crucial means for constructing and transgressing identities, such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, social class and personal interests (Gregory Stone, 1965). Joan Jacobs Brumberg, in her book *Body Project* (1997), relates the femininity and female empowerment to the body. Because of women's role in biological reproduction, girls have been encouraged to see their bodies as a major site of power. From a historical perspective, Brumberg argues that the appearance of a girl's body has long played a crucial role in expressing her identity (Introduction xxi). By "appearance," she not only means the physical shape of the body, but also refers to the clothes which decorate the body. The female pursuit of fashion and style is associated with the social construction of femininity (Evans & Thornton, 1991; Berry, 2000; Hollows, 2000).

In close relations to body beautification and consumer culture, mainstream fashion has been criticized by scholars for its objectification of the female body (Piper, 1994; Wilson, 2003). Third wave feminists, on the other hand, consider fashion style as a manifestation of power and an expression of agency as well as subjectivity (Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz, 2009). This emphasis upon subjectivity and empowerment resonates with Gill's notion of "postfeminist subjectivity." She argues that femininity is undergoing a shift from "objectification to subjectification," with more of a focus on individualism, empowerment, consumerism and commodification of differences (258, 259). By analyzing women's media representation in different sites, Gill notes that postfeminist media culture today emphasizes the "promotion of a sexualized body." According to her, fashion magazines and advertisement are filled with sexually desirable images of young

women. In this postfeminist media culture, women are excessively depicted as sexually active subjects (5). Gill also points out that empowered by this free agency and subjectivity, young girls presented in the media are using beauty to “please themselves” by visiting luxury stores, beauty salons or even surgery clinics (260). However, she questions the relationship between subjectivity and female representations as free agents, since using mediated beauty constrains female’s choices of appearance which results in the same ideal look for all women.

In her article about style and girl culture, Shauna Pomerentz argues that style can be anything related to the body, including clothing, shoes and accessories. To put it simply, an individual's style is his or her overall look, and this overall look contributes to a person's social identity (63, 64). As the performance of identity, a girl's style conveys messages to others about how she wants to be seen and treated (65). Studying girls' style in contemporary cinema is an important way to discover new trends of girlhood, femininity, as well as mainstream girl culture.

Pomerentz divides contemporary girls' fashion styles into four categories: "preppy," "alternative," "comfortable," and "sporty" (93). Pomerentz notes that “preppy” in her discussion shifts from its historical meaning, which describes wealthy elites who go to expensive private schools (95). Instead, she uses “preppy” in a broader way which describes young girls as dressed in an "expensive and popular" way, just like the image of famous female performers Britney Spears and Jennifer Lopez. By “alternative”, she means girls who identify as "goth and punk." The outfits of the "goth and punk" style are represented by dark attire, makeup and a brightly colored hairstyle. This style also includes body art, like piercings in uncommon areas such as the nose or eyebrows. Pomerentz notes that the color black is omnipresent in goth and punk (102). One of the alternative girls she interviewed stated that the color black provided a secret and

mysterious look (127). The “comfortable” style is associated with girls who dress in a proper and decent fashion. In comparison with the preppy style, the girl with a comfortable style will choose less expensive clothes, without brand names, which are still considered to be attractive. Another difference between the comfortable style and the preppy style is that preppy style is associated with being “easy” and “slutty” because it shows more skin in an attempt to attract boys. Finally, a girl with a “sporty” style is someone who dresses in a masculine way. Usually, sporty girls are depicted in sweat pants and sporty shirts, and they usually play a sport.

Pomerentz notes that no matter which style is deployed by school girls, individuals have the freedom and power to choose how they want to dress and what they want to be identified with (122). Although it does not refer directly to postfeminism, Pomerentz’s argument of “dressing the way I feel” (121) corresponds to Gill’s postfeminist sensibility. Women who have this postfeminist sensibility dress themselves for their own pleasure instead of to please men (259). Due to this notion of “pleasing oneself,” women in the media culture are depicted as empowered consumers with free agency of choice and determination. (259)

As a result of the influence of consumer culture, fashion and style have become important elements in mainstream teen films. Disney, as a part of the mainstream film industry, is usually critiqued by scholars for its stereotypical, monotonous and fantasized depiction of girls’ styles. Such scholars note that girls in Disney movies are usually depicted as innocent, beautiful, and feminine (Orenstein, 2011). In the classic Disney movies, the princesses have well groomed hair, beautiful dresses, and flashy shoes, as well as fancy accessories. An example of this can be seen in *Cinderella*. When the fairy godmother casts a spell on Cinderella, she becomes a beautiful girl with her hair styled up and is dressed in a beautiful gown and a pair of shiny shoes. Similarly, Snow White,

Sleeping Beauty, and Princess Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* all have a similar dressing style. Different from the royal styles presented in the earlier fairytale films, girls in contemporary Disney movies and TV shows model themselves after pop superstars, as exemplified in *The Cheetah Girls* (2003), *Camp Rock* (2008) and the *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011) series. Girls' appearances in these movies are very flamboyant as signified by their stylish outfits, glittering jewelry and flawless makeup.

In the rest of this chapter, I analyze what styles the *HSM* girls exhibit, and how their styles relate to their identity, agency and "postfeminism sensibility?" Pomerentz's categorizations of style do not completely apply to the girls in *HSM* films. Among the four styles, alternative and sporty girls are completely absent from the films. Instead, the girls in the three *High School Musical* films present a combined style that blurs the boundary between "preppy" and "comfortable." I name this in-between fashion the "princess/celebrity" style which is not too sexy or too cheap, but sexually acceptable and materially flamboyant.

Sharpay's image in *High School Musical* is the best demonstration of this complex princess/celebrity style. In the three *High School Musical* films, Sharpay's appearance is the most exaggerated, which separates her from the other characters. When she first shows up in the first film, Sharpay is walking down the hallway in a nonchalant fashion wearing a bright pink blazer, a sparkling sequin skirt, a luxury handbag and a red pair of stilettos and catching the attention of the high school boys. Some boys are gawking, their eyes following Sharpay from one side of the hallway to the other. She keeps walking as if there is no one else around her. The male gaze has long been a heated topic in feminist studies. Dressing to win male acceptance is usually critiqued by second-wave feminists, because it objectifies the female body to cater to a male's pleasure. However, Sharpay is not concerned with a boy's opinion of her clothes. In fact, even

while the boys ogle her, Sharpay does not pay attention to anyone's opinion at all. Sharpay's ignoring of other people's gazes indicates that she is dressing for herself, which is, as mentioned earlier, closely related to Rosalind Gill's (2007) discussion of "postfeminist subjectivity" (258).

Even when there is a crowd of students walking toward her, Sharpay's aggressive walk does not change for anyone. She looks like a royal princess parading down the street, and everyone has to move backward to open a lane for her highness. Accompanying the parade are "bling-bling" sounds coming from her earrings, bracelets and stiletto heels. The basketball boys call her the "ice princess." "Ice" describes her arrogant attitude towards others, and "princess" refers to her wealthy family and luxury dressing style.

Compared with Sharpay's arrogant celebrity/princess style, Gabriella often shows up in a comfortable style by wearing casual pants or shorts. Pants have been traditionally considered as masculine outfits. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kelsi who wears pants all the time is characterized as a less feminine role. Although frequently depicted in casual attire, Gabriella is dressed up for certain occasions in the films. In *HSM 2*, when she is practicing a new song with Troy, Gabriella wears a tight white dress with a blue bow between her chest and waist. In another scene when she has a picnic with Troy on the golf course, she wears a strapless peach dress decorated by a white belt. On both occasions, Gabriella wears flat shoes and her hair is down. Meanwhile, in *HSM 3*, Gabriella shows up in a white silk gown with her hair done up and dances in a pair of high-heeled shoes, which closely resembles the image of Cinderella. Gabriella's style complies with Disney's classic ideology about the female image—"innocent, naïve, fairy-like-style" (Wasko, 2001). In addition to creating an innocent princess image, the white dresses she wears in the two scenes mentioned above signify the white supremacist

ideology of Disney. As discussed in the previous chapter, the character Gabriella is identified as a Latina in *HSM* films due largely to her typical Hispanic name. However, by dressing Gabriella in white for special occasions like romantic dating and climatic performance in the films, Disney inexplicitly indicates the superiority of whiteness through the heroine's fashion style. As a result, Gabriella's original ethnicity is concealed under the whiteness and unable to be identified through her outfits.

One of the obvious differences in style between Sharpay and Gabriella is accessories. Throughout the three *HSM* films, there is rarely any depiction of Gabriella's accessories. She does not wear any jewelry, handbag, or other personal decorations. The absence of personal decorations may communicate that Gabriella is a low-key girl who cares less about fashion, but it may also refer that she comes from a lower-middle-class family. Style, as a performance of consumption, also marks an individual's social class (Hentges, 2006). Sharpay's excessive accessories in the films indicate her wealthy socioeconomic status. Shiny bracelets, super-sized earrings, famous-brand handbags, and stylish hats are Sharpay's luxury signatures. She drives a convertible Ford Mustang which has a private parking place on campus. There are carwash boys waiting to clean the car when she arrives. In the third film, Sharpay's multi-layer closet is fully disclosed for the first time on the screen. It has two pink doors. Everything inside is decorated with pink accessories, including her jewelry, perfume, and hair decorations. This pink closet also has a mirror on the top self and a mirror hanging on the side, as well as a picture of Sharpay and her puppy. Of course, the most important thing is the silver princess crown that Sharpay puts on her blonde hair. To fully express her celebrity/princess style, she even hires a personal assistant, who runs errands for her and obeys every order. It is worthy to mention one of the reasons Sharpay hires this assistant is that she thinks it is charming to have an assistant with a British accent.

In addition, Sharpay in the films has a Yorkie puppy, named Boi. A cute puppy is another fashion accessory landmark of princess-like girls. For example, in *Legally Blonde* (2001), Elle, who wears pink at all times, has a Chihuahua named Bruiser. Such puppies are treated as babies, and dressed as glamorously as their female masters. Some of them are taken good care of by nannies, and some of them have their own personal stylists to design their dresses and hairstyles. A well-dressed pet becomes one of the indispensable necessities of a wealthy and fashionable lady.

“PINKED”

Pink is a signature princess color, and Sharpay is the only girl who consistently shows up in pink throughout the *High School Musical* films. Not only does she have a pink closet, her whole wardrobe is full of pink attire; she drives a pink car and uses a pink cell phone. This pink style is exceedingly common in “chick flicks,” such as *Legally Blonde*, in which Elle, the main protagonist, uses a pink laptop and pink pens, and even turns in her homework on pink paper covered with fragrance. The color pink has become the most significant symbol to represent feminine girlhood in mainstream U.S. media. Peggy Orenstein notes that pink is repeatedly used to represent the young female’s identity and appearance. It celebrates girlhood in a singular way. Due to the media’s influence, girls’ pursuit in everything pink is, according to Orenstein, “a singular lack of imagination” (34).

High School Musical tries to contradict the traditional meaning of pink through different girls’ styles in the movie. On one hand, Sharpay is obsessed with every pink product. Thus, the color pink in this movie is associated with flamboyance and arrogance. On the other hand, Gabriella is rarely seen in pink attire and does not possess pink products. In fact, Gabriella’s attire is mostly light blue and white in color. The colors of

white and light blue symbolize innocence and purity. Characters associated with this color, such as Gabriella, are low-key and do not stand out. Pink is traditionally considered as a stereotyped feminine color. However, related to Sharpay's assertive and over-confident characteristics, the color pink is given a postfeminism sensibility and subjectivity.

The classic connotation of pink, which highlights innocence and purity, has been altered in *HSM* films. Assigning pink to Sharpay, the female antagonist in the *HSM* films, symbolizes a shift in the image of "bad girls" in contemporary teen films. In classic Disney films, female antagonists are usually pictured as bad witches in dark robes or as evil ugly step-sisters who are either too fat or too skinny to fit in their clothes. "Bad girls" in contemporary teen films are stylish and fashionable beauties rather than ugly girls. Instead of the traditional evil witch wearing black, Sharpay is a witch who wears pink. To further understand the shift in meaning of the color pink, we need to consider the ideologies of contemporary pop culture and their influence on girl power and girls' style.

THE AURA OF CELEBRITIES

The Disney Company has been recently renowned for its production of superstar fantasies. In 2006, Hannah Montana, a young teenage superstar character created for television, started singing in tight jeans and a blonde wig. The *Hannah Montana* show highly emphasizes the popular trend for young girls to pursue careers as celebrities. *High School Musical 1*, released in the same year as *Hannah Montana*, added fuel to the fire. Sharpay, the teenage star of the movie, always dreams of being in the spotlight on stage. She constantly insists on walking in front of her brother Ryan, who is also her musical partner. Her pursuit of becoming a superstar reflects the influence of celebrity culture. As Douglas mentions, celebrity culture has moved from the margins of mass media to the

center stage of U.S. mainstream cinema, and its disseminating influence provides the girls with a fantasy of “having it all,” especially on a material level (243).

The rest of this chapter explores how girls’ styles in the *HSM* films are associated with notions of power, popularity, consumption and sexuality. In *High School Musical 1*, Sharpay’s first performance, “She’s the Music in Me,” is a duet with Ryan for a musical audition. Her glittering silver jacket and diamond-decorated microphone signify her “shining-star” style. In *HSM 2*, Sharpay’s celebrity style becomes more obvious and exaggerated. Paparazzi scenes are depicted many times in the film, such as when Sharpay is chased by a group of reporters and dazzled by flashbulbs from their cameras. In *HSM 3*, the song “I Want It All,” performed by Sharpay and Ryan, fully reflects the influence of celebrity culture on girls’ fashion styles. Sharpay, dressed in a tight silver dress, with bold red lips and a blonde curly wig, is walking down stairs in front of millions of crazed fans and camera-equipped journalists. She flourishes a luxury fur robe and sings, “Red carpet, rose bouquets, invitations, standing ovations...” and suddenly throws the robe to the audience while singing, “Photographs, fan club... Yes please. Gotta be a celebrity!” In the next scene, Sharpay’s outfit becomes a black leather jacket and a shiny black skirt, when the musical suggests that she moves from an airplane to a Hawaiian resort and then stops at a nightclub stage. While wiggling her body up and down, Sharpay continues singing, “I want it all! I want it, want it, want it! Radio City Music Hall. We want it all!” The last scene of this song is set in a grand theater. Sharpay shows up looking like Lady Gaga, dressed in a provocative white suit and a short blonde wig. While Ryan is dancing with tens of backup dancers in pink cat-ear wigs, Sharpay is performing a solo on an upper tier in front of a huge poster of the Statue of Liberty, which signifies the power of freedom and Sharpay’s national identity. Her ambitions for glamour power increase dramatically when she is singing “Paris, London, Rome, Toronto, L.A., Sydney, Tokyo,

Moscow, Bollywood... I want the world. We want it all!” Starting from the national statue to the major metropolises around the world, Sharpay’s performance indicates commercialization and universalization of girl power culture and celebrity culture.

Celebrity girls on screen, like Sharpay’s exaggerated performance, are admired for their irresistible attractiveness as a result of their luxury packaging. However, Douglas argues that this fantasy of celebrity power is an illusion of female privilege. She criticizes the media’s over-representation of female’s empowerment and achievement, since women in reality are still struggling with issues of gender inequality and objectification. Contemporary teen films tend to feature the girls’ desire to walk on the red carpet, and Sharpay is one of the girls who is deeply rooted in “red carpet mania” (Douglas, 242). By exhibiting this performative style on-screen, Disney attempts to infuse its products with the trends of pop culture and thus attract a large audience. Since Sharpay’s role is only a sideline in the *HSM* trilogy, her glamorous fashion is merely the eye candy of the films. However, this overwhelming representation of her wealthy stardom might result in viewers’ fantasizing of power achievement in reality.

STYLE AND SEXUALITY

Girls’ fashion styles as presented by the media have always been a heated topic in feminist scholarship. Scholars are concerned with what clothes girls wear on screen, even engaging in a kind of “moral panic” (Hentges, 2006; Pomenrantz, 2008, Douglas, 2010). Pop culture and media representations are critiqued by scholars as the major source of this moral crisis (Piper, 1994; Orenstein, 1994, Douglas, 2010). They argue that girls today are endangered by what they listen to and what they watch in this mediated “poisoning culture” (Piper, 1994:12). Through the overwhelming sexual images

disseminated in this culture, girls' access to sexuality is happening at a much earlier age than girls in the early 1990s.

Initiated by the pop stars of the late twentieth century, such as the Spice Girls, Madonna, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, the "slut" look started to surface in girls' media and culture (Pomenrantz, 2008). (The latter two stars are still making an enormous impact in the twenty-first century.) Features of this "slut" look, according to Pomenrantz, are "midriff-revealing tops," "tight low-rise jeans" and "hardly there miniskirts" (173). In the past decade, this hyper-sexual dressing style of pop stars has been exacerbated and become more provocative, as exemplified by Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Rihanna and Nicki Minaj. As a result, the media representation of high school girls on screen has been following these overtly sexy trends, as can be seen among the girl protagonists in *Mean Girls* (2004), *Gossip Girls* (2006-ongoing), *90210* (2008-ongoing), *Jennifer's Body* (2009) and *Easy A* (2010). Due to this influence of pop celebrities' styles in mainstream media, girls being dressed in a traditionally glamorous way on screen is not enough to catch an audience's attention.

As the "safe and wholesome" channel for children, Disney does not explicitly associate girls' fashion in its films with the hyper-sexual style of female pop stardom. The *HSM* films walk a middle ground between girlish purity and consumerist spectacle. Girls' clothing styles in *HSM* films are lingering on the border between pretty and sexy, between "preppy" and "comfortable." Nevertheless, as discussed above, a fantasized celebrity-like style is represented by the same girls' clothing in the *HSM* films. In *HSM 1*, for example, Sharpay and Ryan perform a hot cha-cha dance titled "Bop to the Top." Opening with typical Brazilian music, their performance is embedded in a joyful and upbeat South American style. Sharpay wears a long-tailed blue dress. She sashays along with the music and shows her long white legs during the performance. The revelation of

legs is treated as “acceptably” sexy in *HSM* films. Sharpay’s perfect legs are further shown in the next sequel.

The most sexually-appealing dress in the *HSM* films is probably the one shown in *HSM 2*, in which Sharpay wears a platinum bathing suit, which fully exposes Sharpay's legs. However, she also wears a glittering pink robe to cover her arms. There is one scene at the end of the "Fabulous" performance in which a waiter looks at the iced tea inside of a glass cup. To his surprise, he sees Sharpay is lying on a lotus leaf in the middle of the water, without the pink robe on top this time. She is waving her arms and moving her legs on the green leaf. Different from films featuring overtly sexy girls, the *HSM* films depict girls’ “sexiness” mostly through understatement, focusing on their overall styles instead of highlighting specific parts of their bodies, such as hips and cleavage. In the earlier teen films, overly sexy girls are usually labeled by their peers as “sluts.” However, due to the fact that style is sexualized in an inexplicit way, no negative comments from other girls are depicted in the *HSM* films. Through this understated sexual style, Disney is trying to convey that girls can be dressed as glamorous as celebrities, but have to relegate the sexual appeal of their clothing to an acceptable level.

STYLE AND POPULARITY

In teen films, appearance is a marker of a girl’s popularity among peers (Hentges, 2006). In their book about “girl power” which links power and popularity, Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2009) analyze two types of popularity among girls in high schools: “good popularity”—being nice and liked by others, and “bad popularity”—being mean and manipulating others to like them (83). Although mainly focusing on “bad popularity” in their study, they agree that popular style empowers a girl to achieve social acceptance. In mainstream teen films, popularity, power, and personal style are highly related to each

other. Girls in these films always dress up to be labeled as popular and trendy as exemplified in *Heathers* (1988), *Jawbreaker* (1999), and *Mean Girls* (2004). Heroines in these movies are very fashionable and popular, and they all possess dictatorial power over other students at school. However, most of the films maintain a negative attitude to this manipulative power by suggesting awful consequences occur to the “Queen-bee” girls (Wiseman, 2002).

In *HSM* films, Sharpay’s fashionable style does not bring her “good popularity” among her peers. Her overwhelming superstar style makes her stand out from the rest and builds up her self-centered personality. Other students seem to feel intimidated by her perfect outfits and arrogant self-esteem. In fact, Sharpay’s flamboyant style not only makes her stand out from her peers, but also isolates her as a tyrant princess. She dresses herself in the way of a royal princess and seriously thinks that everyone else should consequently treat her like one. Sharpay attempts to dress herself in a powerful way in order to communicate her privilege to manipulate others. As a consequence, her punishment for manipulating others is her assistant’s betrayal by stealing her role in the senior musical.

The power of popularity also reflects an individual’s success in achieving attention from the opposite sex (Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz, 2009). A fancy fashion style in the *HSM* films indicates female empowerment over boys. In *HSM 3*, Sharpay’s first appearance starts from her driving to campus and parking in her private parking lot. Her pink leather skirt and high heeled boots are the highlights of her outfit. There are many close-up shots of the skirt and the boots. Boys in the hallway start to faint because of Sharpay’s outlandish style and irresistible charms. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Sharpay’s neglect of boys’ attention refers to Gill’s argument of postfeminist subjectivity, which focuses on dressing for the pleasure of oneself instead of others. In *HSM*, Sharpay

cares more about the spot-lights on stage and flash bulbs from cameras rather than the gaze of the opposite sex. This obsession with being identified as a superstar reveals that dressing for personal desires plays an important role in postfeminist culture, and the girls' choices of styles are highly influenced by the pursuit of being a celebrity.

Since Sharpay's overwhelming style does not bring her good popularity, do the fashion styles of Gabriella, Taylor and Kelsi lead to positive acceptance among their peers? Dressed in moderate styles, neither too fancy nor too unkempt, Gabriella and Taylor usually show up in the hallway with other members in the science club. When they walk down the hallway, no one is particularly attracted to them and no sensational responses arise from their peers. Although Taylor plays a leadership role in the club, her popularity is only limited within the science group. Gabriella achieves social acceptance among her peers only after she leads the school's musical and starts dating the most popular boy Troy. As for Kelsi, her nerdy glasses and dull colored alternative clothes estrange her from the mainstream fashion trends at East High, and she is usually seen alone in the music room composing and playing piano. Therefore, Kelsi's unusual and outcast clothing (small-size brown suit and Chaplin-like hat) to a certain degree signifies that she is ostracized from the majority of students.

CONSUMING POWER

As mentioned in the Introduction, one of Taft's definitions of girl power is consuming power. She emphasizes that girls, as consumers, have possessed an increasing power of consumption since teenagers emerged in the marketplace as consumers even before World War II (Schrum, 2004; Taft, 2004). In mainstream media culture, female fashion practice has long been connected to a luxury shopping habit, as exemplified in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Gossip Girl* (2006-ongoing), and *Confessions of a*

Shopaholic (2009). Influenced by these images of young female consumers, the amount of contemporary teen films featuring girl shoppers has increased greatly in recent years, as can be seen in *Mean Girls* (2004), *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen* (2004) and *The Clique* (2008).

The *HSM* films depict young girls' consumption through the representation of Sharpay's lifestyle. In *HSM 1*, when Sharpay is walking past the basketball players on campus, one of the boys, Chad, comments on her lifestyle as "only limited to shopping for mirrors." They seem to agree that girls like Sharpay are addicted to consumption and only pay attention to their images in public. Sharpay's consuming power is fully revealed in *HSM 2*, in which she visits her dad's country club for vacation. This scene starts with one of her signature performances in the *HSM* films, titled "Fabulous," located in an outdoor setting—a swimming pool. Sharpay walks into the pool area joined by her three girlfriends. All of them are dressed in swimming suits. The song begins with one of the girls' rhetorical question, "There's a guacamole facial and a seaweed body scrub on the menu. What could be more FABULOUS?" To further fantasize the dream of being fabulous, Sharpay continues to brag about the products she possesses, "Iced tea imported from England; lifeguards imported from Spain; towels imported from Turkey; and turkey imported from Maine." The lyrics indicate her wealthy social status as well as her pride in having excessive consumption power. Continuing to show off their luxury lifestyle, Sharpay and her three backup girls are dressed in pink sunglasses and big European style hats, while singing, "Fetch me my Jimmy Choo flip-flops. Where is my pink Prada tote? I need my Tiffany hair-band." Later on, they lie down on the chairs by the pool, enjoy the sunshine, and kick their legs in the air. Meanwhile they keep singing, "Fabulous!" together: "I want fabulous. That is my simple request. All things are fabulous. Bigger and better and best." The exaggerated performance of being fabulous gives a full illustration

of stylish girls' consumption ideology in the *HSM* films. However, this consuming power seems limited only to Sharpay and her three backup girls.

Sharpay's material abundance depicts an upper-middle-class girl's life in a fantasized and empowered pattern, which, in a sense, traces back to Disney's stereotypical narrative of fantasy and imagination. However, the depiction of the lower-middle-class in the *HSM* films is much less exaggerated. Although Gabriella has moments of being dressed in a princess style, her style is comparatively more understated than Sharpay's, especially in the first *HSM* when Gabriella shows up in a plain shirt and a pair of blue jeans. In this way, Sharpay's image of a hyper-materialized lifestyle and excessive femininity gets balanced to a certain degree. It seems that *HSM* highly emphasizes the empowerment of "have it all" by featuring Sharpay's abundant possessions. However, Disney sets a limit on this power by not letting Sharpay obtain other valuable things like friendship, a romantic relationship and loyalty from other people. As for Gabriella, "having it all" is not as easy as a popular slogan. As discussed in the previous chapter, Gabriella makes every effort to have a perfect romance, academic achievement and traditional feminine characteristics. After certain struggles, she finally accomplishes all the goals. The construction of girl characters in *HSM* is similar to the film *Cinderella*, in which two evil sisters seem to have everything in the beginning but cannot win the Prince's love. Meanwhile, Cinderella has to go through difficulties and fulfills a happily-ever-after life until the end. No matter it is classic or modernized fairytale, Disney still follows the trajectory that it is the heroines that always harvest everything in the end.

CONCLUSION

Style is a marker of identity, the “social skin” that represents an individual’s personality, social class status, and cultural influence (Pomerantz, 2008, 16). From the traditional passive girls that need to be saved to contemporary “Girls Gone Wild¹,” girls’ images in contemporary media have been changing along with the trends of popular culture. Girls’ styles in the *HSM* trilogy are no exception. However, the fashion style associated with girls in the *HSM* films is neither a completely passive and powerless style, nor a totally overt sexy style. Disney attempts to negotiate the representation of girls in a postfeminist era. In response to criticism of passive girl characters in Disney films, a new message of girl empowerment is emphasized. Girls are empowered through the performance of their styles in the films. The notions that “girls can have it all” and “girls can be anything” are greatly depicted in such films. Especially, Sharpay’s identity in *HSM* films is significantly influenced by celebrity and consumer culture. Her style exists beyond unattainable consumption, which might result in young viewers’ illusion of girls’ identity and consumption activity.

In addition, girls in the *HSM* films do not completely get rid of the shadow of classic Disney movies’ representations of girlhood. Just as Cinderella is mostly remembered in her fancy princess gown after magic spells, Gabriella’s occasional dressed-up for a date (princess-like style) or for on-stage performance (celebrity-like style) is usually depicted in the climax scenes of the *HSM* films. Disney’s highlighting of girls’ glamorous looks in its films might explain girl audience’s craze for princess/celebrity-like images and it might also lead to a false perception that girls need to pursue a fabulous look to be beautiful and be admired.

¹ Girls Gone Wild is a video series created by Joe Francis in 1997, featuring young attractive female’s involvement in sexual activities, such as girl-girl kissing, breasts and buttock exposure and other sexual behaviors.

Chapter 5: *Conclusion*

- All together
- Makes it better
- Memories that last forever.
- I want the rest of my life to
- Feel just like a
- Hi-gh Scho-ol Mu-si-cal!

-- Lyrics from the last song performed by the cast in *HSM 3*

I have watched the *High School Musical* trilogy more than ten times, and almost every scene from the films is inscribed in my brain, from the first karaoke scene when Gabriella and Troy meet, to the last scene at East High where everyone is dressed in academic robes celebrating graduation together. At the end of the last *HSM*, everyone is singing, "I want the rest of my life to feel just like a High-School-Musical." While I am not sure if the films make every teenager feel like "high-school-musical-forever," the success of the *HSM* films in both the domestic and international box office is obvious and powerful. The first Disney Channel original movie, *High School Musical* had over 225 million viewers on a global scale (Nielsen Ratings, 2006). *High School Musical 2*, its sequel released a year later, broke the record of ESPN's *Monday Night Football*, to become the "most-watched basic-cable telecast in history as well as the largest audience of any program in the 2007 summer television season" (*USA Today*, 2007). The third *HSM* film, *Senior Year*, which was released theatrically, broke the all-time box office record for a musical film, with an opening weekend of more than \$42 million in the U.S. It also achieved world-wide success with a \$40 million opening internationally (Stephen Farber at Reuters, 2008).

Contemporary media representations of girlhood in the U.S. range from traditional expectations of a girl's innocence, purity and docility, to celebrations of a girl's aggression, sexiness and meanness. Girls' identities and images in mainstream

media have never been this complicated and multi-layered. Released in the era of third-wave feminism, postfeminism and “girl power,” *HSM* causes such a sensation, especially among the girl audience. Girls in *HSM* complicate the traditional understanding of femininity and what it means to be a girl. In this thesis, I do not intend to discover a new image of girlhood that goes against conventional images on the U.S. screen. Instead, I am more interested in how Disney incorporates its classic ideology with a postfeminist perspective to construct a modernized and the widely accepted identity of teenage girls.

My analysis of one of the most popular original film series, the *High School Musical* trilogy, presents an ambivalent expectation of what a girl should be. On one hand, the influence of classic Disney movies can still be seen in the romantic narratives and girls’ fashion styles of the *HSM* films, which also have the classic fairytale packaging--protagonists with charming outlooks, traditional depictions of heterosexual romance, and predictable narratives with a typical happy ending. As discussed in the previous chapters, the depictions of idealized love and girls’ flawless appearances reflect Disney’s nostalgia for fantasy and fairytale princess style.

On the other hand, the *HSM* films attempt to endorse the empowerment of young female identity by depicting successful and independent girls on screen. Girls can be, or at least have the power to become, both feminine and intelligent, like Gabriella and Kelsie. Meanwhile, girls can also be extremely career-oriented and possess power over boys’ affections, like Sharpay and Taylor. According to the *HSM* films, girls can be anything, and girls can have it all! However, this “having it all” power is highly individualized and commercialized in the films.

Girl identity has its own uniqueness, but in the meantime it is also potentially limited (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz, 2009). This “limited potentiality” is mediated by the cultural definition of girlhood and femininity (183). Celebrity culture, one of the

dominant factors that influences contemporary pop culture, has infused girls' representations in mainstream teen cinema. Glamorous actresses on screen that possess beauty and great consuming power are the new images of the young female in the era of postfeminism. "Having it all" seems as easy as swiping a credit card to purchasing a pink handbag. However, Disney's "having it all" has its limitations such as Gabriella's struggle between educational success and romance, Sharpay's imbalanced possession between material life and personal relationships, and Kelsi's transformation in self-confidence and appearance.

HSM is one of the few trilogy series Disney has produced and released to the date (the other three are *The Parent Trap*, *Santa Clause* and *Toy Story*). *HSM* is the pioneer of the new generation of Disney's original movies. Similar movies with elements of musical performance and celebrity culture have been produced by the Disney Channel on a large scale, as exemplified in *The Cheetah Girls: One World* (2008), the *Camp Rock* films (2008, 2010), the recently released *Lemonade Mouth* (2011), *Sharpay's Fabulous Adventure* (2011), *Radio Rebel* (2012), and the upcoming *Let it Shine* (June, 2012). All of these movies feature girls with stunning appearances and extraordinary musical talent. Heroines in these films have enough agency and power to achieve both success and independence. However, their dreams are limited to becoming celebrities. I hope that my research on the *HSM* films will shed light on the study of Disney musical movies and girls' popular culture in the twenty-first century.

The musical is a performative form with a long history. Starting with live stage performances, like Broadway musicals, to more recent blended styles on the screen, the musical has become an energetic genre in both the cinema and broadcasting industries. The Disney Channel's teen musical format is not alone in the new millennium. In 2009, Fox started to broadcast its musical drama, *Glee*, featuring a glee club in a high school

setting. Produced for young adult audience (an “adult version” of Disney’s *HSM*), *Glee* deals with serious issues, such as racism, disabilities, peer pressure, teenage sex and homosexual romance. It negotiates teen life within a more complicated and realistic high school than Disney’s idealized “fairytale kingdom” (Beltran, 2010). *Glee*, like the *HSM* films, follows the pattern of a musical narrative, and enjoys a large audience, with a peak of 39.5 million viewers for an episode aired in February 2011. Unlike *HSM*, which features original songs, the songs performed on *Glee* are all covers originally performed by popular artists, such as Madonna, Britney Spears, and Lady Gaga. The imitation of these celebrity styles is obviously demonstrated through the actors and actresses’ outfits and song selections. Performances in musical films and TV shows borrow from the trends of popular music and dance in mainstream culture. I believe further study of the performance styles of teen musical films and TV shows, such as *HSM*, will contribute to the analysis of girls’ consumption of music and culture, and young female’s gender performativity in mainstream U.S. media.

In addition, by concentrating on girls and girlhood, this thesis does not cover topics related to boys and boyhood in the films. For example, it is worthwhile to analyze the boys’ masculinity as expressed through sports and negative attitudes toward musical performance, which, in a sense, reflects and reproduces the social expectations of what it means to be a high school boy. Furthermore, topics on different forms of romance other than heterosexual love might open up a new discussion about sexuality in the Disney films. For instance, Ryan Evans’s gender in the *HSM* films is an arguable topic. Though not officially identified as a homosexual person, Ryan’s dressing style and behaviors in the movies are constructed to indicate a suggestive homosexuality. For example, he wears pink attire for a couple of times, enjoys doing yoga which is traditionally labeled as a less masculine sport, and he is the only main character not to have a heterosexual interest.

Since the Disney Channel has never openly depicted a non-heterosexual character, just like it has never explicitly depicted a girl's sexual body, the representation of homosexuality still is implicit, blurry and ambivalent.

Finally, further studies on the audience and reception of the *HSM* films would also be very helpful. Surveys from fans and non-fans would demonstrate if girls feel empowered by the representations of the girls in the films. Just like other Disney films, *HSM* has its own substantial ancillary market in such products as music albums, karaoke-themed games, and other interactive software. Thus, ethnographic research on the *HSM* consumers and their purchases might enrich the study on girls' consumption of pop culture and *HSM* specifically.

In addition, Disney is expanding its target audience to an international scale, by increasingly exporting its films and products to other countries. The company has been busy with establishing new landmark Disney resorts outside the U.S., including one in Europe and three in Asia. (The one in Shanghai will be the largest Disneyland Park after construction.) Disney theme parks as an expanding franchise have been reaching rapidly to the growing audience all over the world. The expanded Disney market beyond the U.S. draws the increasing attention of media scholars. For example, Reznik and Lemish conducted an audience study on Israeli girls' reception of the *HSM* films, and focus their analysis on how romance is depicted in the films. More research on Disney's international films and products is necessary to further explore how Disney universalizes its girl characters through casting, plot, music and costuming to meet the challenges of cultural differences in other countries.

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