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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Matthew: Are those Kanye West Sunglasses? References celebrity
2. CMT: Yes. References celebrity
3. CMT: They are? Indicates desirability
5. Ben: Ready? For how much?
7. Sam: Oh I’ll buy it.

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

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Figure 1. Club-members experiment with sophisticated teen looks online
Figure 2. Sam’s “Rockish” look
Figure 3. Matthew’s Glasses

References