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The authentic conservative Wonder Woman: Israeli girls negotiating global and local meanings of femininity

Einat Lachover[a], Shosh Davidson[b] and Ornit Ramati Dvir[c]

[a]Communication Department, Sapir Academic College, Sderot, Israel; [b]Media Education Department, Gordon Educational College, Haifa, Israel; [c]aChord Social Psychology for social Change, Shefayim, Israel

ABSTRACT

Girls in Western societies are increasingly exposed to feminist ideas, often led by women celebrities. The current study explores how Israeli girls negotiate feminist concepts such as 'girl power' and 'feminine success' by examining their responses to *Wonder Woman* – a film that is part of this 'feminist zeitgeist' – and its Israeli actress, Gal Gadot. The paper documents the voices of hegemonic Israeli girls aged 13 to 15 in ten focus groups, and shows that girls take pride in the presence of a strong female character and an Israeli representative in Hollywood. The girls position themselves around a model of success represented by strong global and local feminine images. The global elements reflect neoliberal postfeminist discourse advocating authenticity as the ideal for self-actualisation. The local elements reflect a relational sentiment of loyalty to both the state and the family. We argue that the authenticity myth plays a key role in reinforcing the existing gender order and the conservative definition of good citizenship through the perception of a successful woman. We conclude that the local cultural features and national belonging are meaningful categories for studying girls' encounter with celebrities.

Introduction

The visibility of feminism in Anglo-American popular culture has increased considerably in recent years (Banet-Weiser 2018, Keller and Ryan 2018). The feminist climate is largely led by women celebrities (Hamad and Taylor 2015), including Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Amy Schumer, and others. Contemporary 'celebrity feminism' is clearly directed at and appeals to girls, often even centering on them (Keller and Ringrose 2015). As a result, girls are currently more exposed than ever before to feminist ideas through popular culture and public discourse (Keller 2016).

In light of this feminist zeitgeist and the role of celebrities as pedagogical agents (Marshall 2010), a fertile public and theoretical debate is taking place over the 'good' and 'bad' of celebrity feminism (Renninger 2018). Critics are rethinking key feminist concepts, such as 'girl power' and post-feminism, in terms of their relevance and mutual affinities (e.g. Gill and Orgad 2015, Banet-Weiser 2018, Keller and Ryan 2018). This study examines girls' encounter with celebrity feminist voices and notions by focusing on the girls' point

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of view, a perspective that has thus far received little attention. We join feminist scholars who question the transformative potential of girl power media culture and more specifically celebrity feminism (Zaslow 2009, Keller and Ringrose 2015, Keller 2016). Girlhood research tends to be grouped under the less-diversified term 'girl-culture' (Rentschler and Mitchell 2016, p. 1), with no explicit reference to space or place. We seek to contribute to the developing global body of knowledge on girlhood in the age of celebrity feminism by providing specificity around the term 'girl' and shedding light on Israeli girls in particular. We explore how girls embedded in the Israeli hegemony understand, reflect, and negotiate feminist ideas in this time of feminist zeitgeist by examining their response to the film *Wonder Woman* and Israeli actress Gal Gadot. By examining the girls' observations of Gadot as-image and as-real-person (Dyer 1991), we discuss the authentication of the global and local star and her social role.

In the context of feminist ideas, the Israeli case is especially interesting because it follows two conflicting trends: Israeli society is high on the development index, with rising trends of individualisation, but it is also increasingly conservative, family oriented, and militaristic (Fogiel-Bijaoui 2016). Examining the way current feminist ideas in global popular culture are disseminated and constructed in a local context can provide insight not only into how a situated population of girls interprets these ideas, but also into the pedagogical role of celebrities in this process.

Wonder Woman (2017; henceforth: *WW*), an American movie directed by Patty Jenkins, can be seen as part of the new celebration of feminism in popular culture, just one example of the many current films and books relating to girls' agency (Driscoll and Heatwole 2018). Not surprisingly, many reviews of the movie refer to its gender politics, most describing the film as an important step towards portrayals of strong independent female characters on the big screen (Jones 2018). The film was a smash hit, tenth highest-grossing film of 2017 (Box Office Mojo 2018), earning Gadot worldwide fame. In 2018, she was included in *Time* magazine's annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world (Carter 2018).

The public discourse around the movie often blurs the line between the character of Diana, the heroine of *WW*, and the actor Gadot (e.g. Carter 2018). The public relations campaign for the movie highlighted Gadot and her Israeli identity. Accordingly, she sometimes uses Hebrew words in interviews (e.g. Hollywood Now 2017) and often mentions Israeli symbols (e.g. Holocaust Remembrance Day, hummus). This tactic is surprising given Israel's controversial image in the international arena (BBC World Service 2017) and in particular given the political and cultural critiques of Gadot's nationality (Al-Mahadin 2018). Gadot's identity seems to have served the movie's narrative, bringing to it the reality of a trained soldier and the experiences of a woman linked to a highly tense region of the world, where personal and collective losses are internalised components of everyday identity (Virginás 2018). The conflation of the strong female character with the actress playing her correlates with Geraghty's (2007, p. 101) category of 'star-as-professional', which she uses to refer to stars who are marked by their professional career or artistic achievements. This category relies on continuity between the star's public image and their role in film that made them famous (Luzón-Aguado 2008), as is the case with Gadot.

In view of the popularity of the movie and Gadot's status as an international star,[1] combined with the fact that she is the most popular Israeli in the entertainment industry (Spiro 2017), this study explores the discourses of Israeli girls around the concepts of 'girl power' and 'feminine success' in the context of *WW* and Gadot's celebrity. We define

discourse as specific collections of meanings that make some ways of thinking possible and others impossible (Foucault 1976). While discourses are always competing, some come to dominate and constitute our social reality, while others remain marginal and shape the views of only a few. We draw on earlier studies of media audiences that demonstrate how people interact and make meaning from cultural texts within the context of their everyday lives (Hall 1980, Radway 1984, Ang 1996). Similarly, we perceive adolescent girls as active meaning-makers and social agents; they engage critically, and sometimes ambivalently, with media and culture (Zaslow 2009). Hence, our aim is to investigate how Israeli girls negotiate the meanings of girl power and feminine success.

Our study assumes that young people use celebrity as a resource in their identity play, embodying tensions and contradictions that arise from dominant discourses of the self and society at a given historical moment (Lemish 1998, Mendick *et al*. 2018). In order to understand the girls' views, we conducted ten focus groups with female members of the Israeli Scouts Movement, girls aged 13 to 15 years old, addressing the movie and the actress, and analysed what they said using interpretive analysis.

Our study identified three discourses among the girls: The first is liberal feminism and national belonging; the second is post-feminism and authenticity; and the third is a minor critical voice. Our argument is that Israeli hegemonic girls relate to strong femininity and feminine success grounded in the global popular culture context of meritocratic values and post-feminism, but also in local conservative and relational sentiments of nationalist and familist values.

The celebrity culture of girls, girl power, and post-feminism

Feminist studies has long been interested in the messages directed to young women, as well as the ways girls use popular culture to form their identities, values, and relationships (Kearney 2011). A great deal of research has focused on the significant role of female celebrities from the perspective of both fans and girls in general (Duits and van Romondt Vis 2009).

The term 'girl power' is prominent in celebrity culture (Harris 2004). Although it can indeed connote girls' solidarity and community, agency, and DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos, Western society is mainly obsessed with the aspect of individual female subjectivity (Kapurch and Smith 2018). According to Harris (2010), girl power, embedded in a post-feminist era, encapsulates the narrative of the 'can-do girl': a new young woman who is self-inventing, ambitious, confident, and strives for success. This neoliberal discourse of girl power therefore promotes the notion that young women are expected to make the right personal choices to become productive successful adults. Such individualisation downplays the structural social and cultural barriers, including race, class, and other inequities, that actually limit girls' choices (Harris 2010, Driscoll and Heatwole 2018).

Feminist scholars discuss the celebrity culture of girls from two angles.

The first is cultural critique, where critics often claim that celebrities not only promote post-feminist attitudes in the lives of women and girls (Banet-Weiser 2012), but also produce a commercialised, white form of feminism – a sense of individual autonomy in line with the neoliberal individualist project (e.g. Horeck 2018, Seidl 2018). Scholars argue that the popularity of feminism in contemporary celebrity culture becomes an even

greater problem when it protects the exploitative practices of cultural appropriation under the guise of individual empowerment and choice (Johnston 2019). In contrast, other feminist voices recognise that no single or real feminism exists beyond its celebrity manifestations. These critics suggest a complicating nexus of feminism and celebrity culture that may require more nuanced critical thought (Hamad and Taylor 2015).

The second approach considers the perspective of the active audience, examining how girls respond to celebrities to make sense of society and themselves (Duits and van Romondt Vis 2009). Zaslow (2009, p. 54) critically argues that what is missing in the study of girls, media, and identity is research that combines an analysis of the cultural with the social. From this perspective, we address our efforts to the complex relationship between media culture and how girls interpret and use media – that is, the real-life experience of Israeli girls. In a pioneer study also applying this approach, Keller and Ringrose (2015) demonstrate the conscious and complicated negotiation of British high-school girls who are feminist activists. While many of them recognise the benefit of visible feminist messages in popular culture, others doubt the motivation of celebrity feminism. Adopting the same perspective, the current study attempts to understand how Israeli hegemonic girls negotiate contemporary feminist ideas by examining how they relate to the narrative and image of *WW* and the figure of Gal Gadot the person as global-local celebrity.

The Israeli feminist scene and Israeli girls

In terms of economic, scientific, and technological criteria, Israel is a post-industrial nation with a high per capita income and a high rating on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2015). But although to a certain extent the country is experiencing the individualisation that typically accompanies the 'postmodern family revolution' in a democratic society,[2] family continues to play a crucial role, with Israel recording the highest fertility rate among OECD countries (Fogiel-Bijaoui 2016). Moreover, despite the progress made by Israeli women in several fields, such as education, in practice Israel is a strongly gendered society in which women have yet to achieve equality in almost all social domains (Tzameret-Kertcher *et al*. 2017). In addition, neoliberalism in Israel, especially since the turn of the twenty-first century, has had tremendous impact on Israeli women, exacerbating their social inequality (Herzog 2008). Yet, despite the deeply rooted patriarchal structure in Israeli society, the feminist scene is gaining a foothold in the third millennium (Fogiel-Bijaoui 2016). This is not to claim that it has become popular: indeed, critical-feminist commentaries on politics, economics, or culture are still systematically marginalised or even silenced (Sa'ar and Gooldin 2009).

While the current study does not seek to portray the development of girls' identity as a universal and monolithic process, we note that Israeli girls are influenced by global processes, such as neoliberal economics and ideology, through their exposure to international television, movies, books, music, digital platforms, and social media (e.g. Lemish 1998, Reznik and Lemish 2011). Studies analysing these girls' feminist perspectives indicate that they indeed demonstrate an interplay between conflicting discourses: feminism, post-feminism, and anti-feminism (e.g. Lachover and Vaisman 2014, Davidson and Ribak 2017). Against this background, the question we examine is how Israeli

hegemonic girls negotiate the meanings of girl power and feminine success as they relate to the film *WW* and the Israeli celebrity Gal Gadot.

Method

Research involving girls are a priori located within power relations (Morgan 2002). These power relations are based on age and education gap between the researcher and the participating girls, and sometimes on their differing classes. We hoped that focus groups would address the built-in power relations between a researcher and the girls (Wilkinson 1998, Eder and Fingerson 2002), and therefore conducted ten focus groups from May to June 2018.

In order to further minimise the power relations, we carefully designed the setting: we operated the focus group at a location the girls meet on a regular basis; we were conscious of our appearance and tried to avoid symbols that might be associated with power (jewelry or formal clothing); and we sat on the same level as the girls, usually on the ground in a circle. Focus groups also allow participants to interact with each other. This makes them especially suited for girls, who often 'loosen' their voices in power-relations settings; they encourage each other to speak up, to enhance and support, or disagree and argue (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999, Darbyshire *et al*. 2005). Focus groups are also particularly well suited for feminist research because they encourage researchers to focus on the multivocality of participants' lives and articulations (Zaslow 2009) and therefore enabled us to capture variety of girls' voices (Zaslow 2009).

Each of the focus groups in the study consisted of five to fifteen participants, all girls who were members of the Israeli Scouts movement. This is the largest national youth movement in Israel (Sheleg Mei-Ami 2010) and its primary stated mission is the self-development and education of young people (teenagers) for social activism (Shefer 2010). Its troops are co-ed and meet regularly twice a week. Troops are geographically based; therefore, its members usually have similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. We attended one meeting of each of ten troops, convening only the female members of the group. The girls were ages 13 to 15 and can be considered members of the social hegemony: they come from secular Jewish, upper middle-class families and live in four cities in the center of the country.

Informed consent for the study was obtained in advance from the Israeli Scouts executive. Before introducing the research to the girls, a written consent was sought from their guardians. Once the guardians agreed, we met the girls and presented the research, its objectives, and their part in creating new knowledge related to girls and girlhood. The participants themselves also agreed to take part in the study after being told that participation was not mandatory and that they could stay silent or leave the session at any time. Discussions were facilitated by one or two of the authors and took place in the presence of the troop leader.

The focus groups were semi-structured, employing a schedule of questions but allowing flexibility to explore unexpected themes. It consisted of questions exploring the girls' views of both the film and Gal Gadot. Because of the strong sense of identification many of the girls felt with the actress/character (Geraghty 2007), the two aspects were intertwined in the discussions, which also included the girls' opinions and descriptions of their lived experience. On the whole, each conversation lasted about an hour. The atmosphere was informal, and the girls were enthusiastic and eager to talk

about the subject and about themselves. We adopted a feminist approach and extra sensitivity to the participants' experience throughout the entire research. We were constantly conscious of our preliminary commitment and responsibility to the girls' well-being; we were alert to make sure that each girl was entitled to be heard (or to keep silent, if she preferred); and we also were careful to ensure no one was offended or insulted by any aspect of the process. The group discussions were recorded and transcribed in full.

We integrate reception studies and discourse theory in order to shed light on how the girls relate to hegemonic and non-hegemonic discourses. We follow Carpentier *et al*. (2019), who argue that 'discourse theory takes a middle position between structure and agency' (p. 6). They prioritise discursive structures but do not ignore the role of the material that allows audiences multiple identification points; hence, they acknowledge human agency in their analysis. In our study, we perceive the girls as subjects within discourse but at the same time as having the freedom to individually position themselves in relation to the different discourses. We analysed the discussions by means of critical discourse analysis (CDA). This method was particularly appropriate for our purposes, as it can demystify the complex ways in which hegemonic assumptions about gender and power are produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged. Each of the authors read all the focus group notes and transcripts separately, closely, and critically in an effort to identify hegemonic and non-hegemonic conceptions of femininity, gendered social order, and the diverse subjective meanings of being a girl. More specifically, we were looking for indications of the theoretical concepts that were the focus of our research: girl power and feminine success. At the same time, we were sensitive to the girls' language and to their 'definition of the situation' (Goffman 1967) in order to inductively comprehend their subjective understanding of moral and social questions. In addition, the analysis was located in our subject positions as middle-aged Israeli women, second-wave feminists, and mothers of teens.

Results

We identified three distinct discourses in the girls' talk – liberal, post-feminist, and critical – that were intertwined and co-exist simultaneously.

'I wanted to be strong and prove to everyone that i can be strong': liberal feminism and national belonging

The first discourse encompasses the girls' aspirations for dominant female participation in the public and cultural sphere. Many of the girls were impressed by the imposing presence of the female superhero and the fact that the main character in the movie was a woman. As one girl stated: 'I remember how I felt after the movie. Suddenly I wanted to be strong and prove to everyone that I can be strong. She is very inspiring' (Group 6). Even girls who claimed that they were not generally attracted to films about superheroes were curious about the figure of Wonder Woman and followed her closely. They were thrilled and excited that the focus of the narrative was a woman. In their words:

> One participant: Usually they're only men [superheroes], and then all of a sudden we see a woman as the main character in the movie and it's great.

> Another participant: Yep, they've always showed us that it's the men who are stronger, they're the superheroes, they can do anything. And then for the first time a woman can be a superhero and do cool, wonderful things and save the world. (Group 5)

The presence of Wonder Woman on the big screen appears to have given the girls a sense of pride and gave them access to a genre previously reserved mainly for boys and men.

In an attempt to identify the source of pride the girls described, we found that many of them saw in the character of Wonder Woman a combination of femininity and power. One girl explained exactly why this female superhero was so unique:

> People always look at superheroes and say 'Wow! He's so strong and he always triumphs'. Girls also want a role model. Once, the role model was a princess because she's beautiful. In this movie they present a woman who's not only beautiful but also strong. (Group 4)

When speaking of the movie's story, many girls used words like 'power' and 'feminine strength'. The meaning they attributed to these concepts was not confined to physical attributes alone, but also included mental and emotional strength, saying, for example, 'She has inner strength, not just physical strength. It's like that's our power, inner strength' (Group 4). Moreover, they regarded feminine strength as superior to the masculine variety. As one girl put it, 'There's something in us that makes us care much more about our surroundings. In my opinion, that adds to her strength' (Group 9). Another girl spoke of the social responsibility of women that derives from this unique strength: 'A female superhero has more meaning, not like the other [movies] that are just about fighting. It had real meaning, and it had a moral – that you can change the world if you want to [with] courage, feminine strength, commitment to the welfare of the world' (Group 1).

The eagerness we found among the girls for the increased presence of women in the public cultural and political space can be explained by the social and political reality of contemporary Israel. Not only has the wide gender gap[3] remained stable (Tzameret-Kertcher *et al.* 2017), but lately women, and particularly young women, have had to cope with growing conservatism in the school system – such as a dress code that discriminates against girls (Remez 2017) and growing gender separation (Kashti 2015) – as a result of pressure from religious factions.

In addition to the girls' appreciation of the strong female character, they also took pride in the fact that Gadot is Israeli, stating, for instance, 'For us especially because the leading actor is Israeli'; and 'It's Israeli pride' (Group 4). To illustrate Gadot's national identity, they referred to her appearance, particularly her dark hair and brown eyes, and noted that she 'looks typically Israeli' (Group 5). The girls regarded her gender and nationality as challenging starting points, and therefore viewed her international acclaim as an extraordinary accomplishment. As one girl said, ''It's great to see an Israeli being so successful worldwide, and she's a woman too!''(Group 9). For Israeli girls, the character of Wonder Woman as portrayed by Gadot seems to symbolise the combination of a local feminine role model and the Hollywood shrine of success. They assumed the local star's international achievements, seeing themselves as partners in her success.

Furthermore, in light of the oft-voiced criticism of Israeli policies, they were pleased to see their country presented positively on the world stage. In the words of one girl, 'It's giving our country a good name' (Group 6). Similarly to the way African American girls draw agency from Beyoncé (Taylor 2017), some of the Israeli participants were inspired by Gadot's success, demonstrating the realm of opportunities available to them. This attitude

is reflected, for example, in the comment, 'It's nice to see a woman who made it … [who's] not from a big place, the way each of us could start out, and how she developed and showed that even a woman from a small country surrounded by enemies can make it in the world' (Group 6). Thus, Gadot's fame is seen as the success of 'the girl next door', and she is perceived as someone who paved the way for young women in general, and Israeli girls in particular.

'You can do whatever you want. just believe': post-feminism and authenticity

The girls' analysis of Gadot's success was based on meritocratic logic and neoliberal values, as revealed in the following remarks:

> [She's] Israeli, a strong woman, a woman who made it by herself. Not at home, not in her safe place … She had to work hard for it. (Group 4)

> She's a strong woman. We can learn from her … that you can succeed if you want to and get wherever you want to go. (Group 9)

Several girls referred to the fact that Gadot began her career as a model, eventually becoming Miss Israel. But, because of her hard work and the right choices she made along the way, she developed into an actor and a star. Many also recognised this neoliberal notion in the movie itself, saying, for example, 'It's simply a movie that conveys the message that you can do whatever you want. Just believe and you can do it. And she wins in the end, and that's awesome' (Group 4). Gadot the actor and Wonder Woman the character thus merge in the girls' eyes into the model of the 'can-do girl', the product of neoliberal values that stress personal responsibility, making right choices, persistence, and effort (Harris 2004).

We asked what features of Gadot and her constructed celebrity image the girls saw as enabling and promoting success In other words, what do they consider the key components in the technology of self (Gill and Orgad 2015, 2017) of a successful woman? One major component is confidence (Gill and Orgad 2015, 2017). As one girl explained, 'She has a lot of followers. Those are her opinions and she's not afraid to express them' (Group 2). Similarly, another girl stated, 'What makes her a hero [is that she] … isn't afraid of anything … She doesn't care what people think' (Group 6). Phrases such as 'she doesn't care', 'she does what she wants', and 'she goes her own way' appeared repeatedly in the girls' comments, cited as a major characteristic of a strong woman. Musing out loud, one girl remarked, 'I'd like to ask her how she does it and doesn't care what people think of her' (Group 2).

Another significant feature of Gadot's appeal for the girls is her perceived authenticity. Authenticity is a social construct (Marwick and boyd 2011) often related to a public display of the hidden, inner life (Trilling 1972). According to Richard Dyer (1991) authenticity is 'both a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work, and also the quality that guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies'. Within meritocracy, authenticity refers to the moral imperative that we know and express who we really are through our actions. Young people are strongly invested in authenticity, tracing a celebrity's 'real' self and shaping their own individual aspirations in relation to it. Successful celebrity practice suggests intimacy, disclosure, and connection, revealing to us seemingly banal, candid, and authentic aspects of their lives (Marwick and boyd 2011,

Mendick *et al*. 2018). In other words, young people actively and critically evaluate celebrities for their authenticity, praising those who they feel have stayed true to them-selves'. The participants interpreted Gadot's conduct in the public space as an expression of her 'truth', principles, and values. Celebrity culture can be understood as an endless quest for the sincere and the authentic (Dyer 2004). The girls detect authenticity in the 'natural' pictures she posts on social media. In the words of one girl: 'She takes selfies for Instagram without photoshop and shows her natural self because she really believes in it and in the message' (Group 6). They regard personal and supposedly natural pictures as a glimpse into the star's 'real life', revealing her 'private-public self' (Marshall 2010) and earning their admiration for this anti-commercial act. As one girl remarked,

> After everything that happened with the movie and the storm it raised she suddenly posted a picture of herself without any makeup, and what's really unusual is that a woman the whole world idolises suddenly shows herself with no makeup and ungroomed eyebrows. It was just awesome to see. (Group 4)

Thus, the girls admire Gadot for the way she 'accepts herself' and presents herself as someone who is not trying to change or to create a false image in the public space. In their opinion, remaining faithful to yourself would therefore appear to be an elemental feature of a strong successful woman.

Another aspect of what the girls consider authentic and sincere behaviour relates to their perception of Gadot's modesty. The girls were impressed by her ordinariness (Bennett and Holmes 2010). As one participant stated, 'She has two feet on the ground. She doesn't live in the movies' (Group 1). To 'live in the movies' is Hebrew slang for people who are overly pleased with themselves and do not refrain from boasting about their own abilities even though the reality they imagine themselves in does not exist. Although Gadot actually appears in movies, the girls do not see her as 'living' in them. That is, they perceive her as remaining humble, in contrast to the image of a glamorous Hollywood celebrity. As one participant put it,

> I really like that she stays who she is. She's very modest, doesn't show off a lot. She doesn't talk too much about how famous she is … She talks more about how much fun she's having now and how she misses Israel … She radiates modesty. (Group 7)

This characteristic of the global celebrity is perceived by the girls as a local expression of the sincerity that the girls associate with a peripheral, Israeli component.

The girls identify the way Gadot maintains and publicly presents her national identity as a sign that she remains faithful to her values. In particular, they note her reference to her military service; her telling the story of her grandfather, a Holocaust survivor; her use of Hebrew words in interviews; and so on. The decision made by *WW*'s public relations department to highlight Gadot's 'exotic' origins and 'militaristic' background (Virginás 2018) is interpreted by the girls as an expression of integrity and honesty. This is evidenced, for instance, in the remarks, 'That's something I very much admire about her, that she doesn't try to hide it and she speaks in Hebrew' (Group 5); 'I like that she mentions Israel everywhere. It makes me happy' (Group 6); and 'She doesn't forget where she comes from' (Group 1). Thus, the girls regard the fact that Gadot does not downplay her origins and actually draws attention to Israeli symbols as an act of authentic patriotism.

The girls' perception of Gadot's authenticity is also promoted by their interpretation of her social and public activities. The girls perceived Gadot's participation in the celebrity feminist campaign (Cobb and Horeck 2018) and popular public causes as radical actions that could jeopardise her career. Many attributed her public stance in the #MeToo campaign to her commitment to women, saying, '[She] uses her celebrity to benefit other women' (Group 3), and

> I respect her for refusing to take a role in a film by a producer who harassed women. That's an act very worthy of admiration. It was a very desirable job … and she was willing to give [it] up because it was against her values and her opinions. (Group 2)

The girls valued Gadot's public activities in the national context, referring, for example, to her support for the Israeli entry in the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest, Neta Barzilai, when she called on her followers on Instagram to vote for her. Here, too, in their opinion, Gadot 'used' her social capital to promote Israel's status in the international arena.

Finally, the girls see authenticity in Gadot's public display of her family's intimate moments (Bennett and Holmes 2010). These elements of a woman's identity – wife and mother – are central to the social construction of femininity in general, and in Israel in particular (Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rutlinger-Reiner 2013). The participants saw her regular exposure of her husband and daughters (Feasey 2012) as an authentic expression of the importance she associates to her family. As one girl remarked, 'She's a career woman and she has a very impressive career, but she still has two daughters … and she stays home with her family. It's very important to her. I think that's admirable, in general. For all mothers' (Group 2). Thus, Gadot embodies a combination of individualistic achievement, feminine success, and the maternal ideal, on the order of the 'yummy mummy' (Littler 2013). For the girls, the fact that she is often photographed with her husband and daughters symbolises her realisation of the post-feminist notion that women can have it all: stunning well-publicised success in the public space, pro-social involvement and promotion of her principles, and, no less important, devotion to the institution of the family and her feminine-maternal role in it.

Mothers were mentioned prominently at the end of each focus group when we asked the girls to name a woman in their life who was worthy of the title 'Wonder Woman'. We expected to learn from their answers about their role models and their perception of girl power and feminine success. Many of the participants declared proudly that the strongest female figure in their life – the woman of greatest innate and moral strength – was their mother. They explained their choice in terms of her ability to cope with multiple tasks both inside and outside the home, and to provide for the needs of each member of the family. As one girl stated, 'A mother can do everything simultaneously … my mother, too, because she's always watching out for the family and helping with everything and taking care of us' (Group 5). Another girl explained that she sees her mother as a Wonder Woman not only because of her devotion to the family, but also because of the strength she sees in her, her job, and her success in a 'man's world':

> My mother is like that … after giving birth three times she's not as thin as Gal Gadot, but she's the strongest person in the world. She works for a company where she's the only woman there … She displays feminine strength. She's the ultimate Wonder Woman. (Group 6)

The girls' comments, therefore, reveal that they perceive feminine strength in a woman's aspiration to excel in each of her identities. In the case of Gadot, she is active in the public

space, has a career and does what it takes to succeed in it, is socially involved and committed to promoting the values she believes in, supports other women and contributes to her country, and is a wife and mother who gives her family pride of place in her life.

She's too perfect: a minor critical voice

Alongside the view of the film's main character and the celebrity Gadot as symbols of feminine strength and authenticity and role models of a successful woman, critical voices were raised on the margins of the discussion around the message of the movie and the rhetoric of girl power. The criticism related both to the liberal feminist perspective and to the post-feminist notion that sanctifies meritocracy. Several participants expressed doubts as to the ability of a movie of this kind to bring about a change in the social order in general, and in their own lives in particular. As one girl put it, 'They made this movie about a female superhero and all that, so everyone immediately says 'Wow, that's great. Finally, they appreciate a woman, and she's even strong.' But I say that it's not going to change everybody's opinion in the world' (Group 3). Hence, for some of the girls, the message of girl power wrapped up in the glitter of a Hollywood movie was mere lip service. Another participant pointed to the contradiction inherent in the message of empowerment, claiming that the rhetoric of girl power itself perpetuates the inferiority of women. Following her friends' praise of Gadot's accomplishments and her contribution to women's empowerment, she raised an oppositional position:

> One participant: It's nice to see a strong woman as a superhero. It empowers girls, especially young girls, at the age of seven and eight … .
>
> Another participant: I see it differently … It annoys me that people refer to a strong woman and say 'Wow, she's a woman. How did she do that?' … I wish people would be impressed by what she is doing as a human being, not as a female (Group 5).

Some girls, therefore, expressed the sense that the message of empowerment in the movie reinforces the existing balance of power between the genders, so that in reality the film works against them (Harris and Shields Dobson 2015).

In addition, some girls noted that the choice of a slim attractive actor sustains the tyranny of slenderness and the beauty myth (Bordo 1993), reinforcing the policing of the female body. In the words of one participant, 'It's obvious they were trying to convey the message of a strong woman and show this equality, but I'm not sure she's really the right person to send that message. It's like she's [too] perfect' (Group 3). Some girls mentioned Gadot' model-like figure as a false symbol of the neoliberal rhetoric associated to the film of 'it is all up to you' and 'just believe in yourself'. Thus, while many girls referred to Gadot as 'the girl next door', other realised that her unique bodily characteristics were central to Gadot's success as an actor and to the character she played. While some girls embraced the girl power notion that 'you can do whatever you want. Just believe', other girls identified this message as fake and a social construct. One of the girls argued: 'she is so perfect … it is obvious they chose her … and it's not just in the movie, it's everywhere … to be appreciated you have to be really perfect … in all aspects … this is how it works today … and it's unfair' (Group 6). Some girls suggested that the film would be more convincing and reliable with an 'ordinary' actress in the cast – someone who is not that perfect: 'I think that maybe the

film could be more convincing and reliable with a little [physically] bigger actress' (Group 5). These girls rejected the idea of a perfect female – one who excels in all aspects – and preferred bringing a 'real' woman to the forefront.

And so, while they remained limited, nebulous, and largely marginal, critical voices were revealed by our data. The girls questioned the efficacy of conveying the message of female empowerment by means of a popular movie, as well as the ability of a slim, attractive, heteronormative actor to be a role model.

Discussion: girl power as a conservative and relational mode

Analysis of the attitudes of Israeli girls to the movie *WW* and its star, the Israeli celebrity Gal Gadot, revealed that girl power is a dominant concept in their world. Participants' discussion of Gadot's international fame also allowed us to examine their perception of the successful woman (Marshall 2010). It appears that the girls negotiate with and position themselves in respect to a model of success represented by strong global and local feminine images characterised by a striving for 'authenticity' (Banet-Weiser 2012).

The global aspects are associated with the conceptualisation of girl power and neo-liberal feminism, which stresses the responsibility and aspiration for personal success, self-confidence, and a physical appearance that emphasises strength and beauty, along with an active presence in the public space. In this sense, Israeli girls, who are part of globalised popular culture, are similar to girls in other Western societies (Zaslow 2009).

Furthermore, the meaning of feminine strength and success in their eyes is expressed through a combination of individual success that relies on personal aptitudes and conservative manifestations of 'authenticity' – in terms of both gender and nationality – that are anchored in the hegemonic Israeli identity. Authenticity here adds a local, relational mode of patriotism and the traditional feminine role within the family. In other words, in the eyes of Israeli girls, Gadot's figure successfully 'authenticated' the social value she embodies (Dyer 1991, p. 137) – a strong Israeli woman. Comparing our findings with those of Keller and Ringrose (2015), we find that the Israeli girls were much less critical of celebrity feminism. While Keller and Ringrose interviewed high-school feminist bloggers regarding feminism, we talked with younger girls – non-activists who do not necessarily identify themselves as feminists. Furthermore, while Keller and Ringrose invited the girls to refer to celebrity feminism our discussions did not address the topic of celebrity feminism directly.

The girls drew a straight line between feminine success and signs of patriotism and perceived Gadot's success as breaking the glass ceiling both as a woman and as an Israeli. As we have seen, they saw Gadot's public display of her nationality and activities on behalf of her country as key practices in the 'technology of self' of a laudable and successful Israeli woman. The concepts of loyalty and commitment that shape the connection between the citizen and the country are echoed in the emotional construct linked to the private sphere. In other words, loyalty and devotion also characterise the other Israeli dimension in the girls' definition of a strong woman: that is, the conservative maternal role. Their profound appreciation of and identification with the institution of motherhood reflects the dominant discourse in Israel around the family and the role of mother (Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rutlinger-Reiner 2013). Apparently, Israeli girls have internalised the notion that motherhood is an essential and instinctive component of their feminine identity, and

that the proper model is the 'good mother' who is devoted to her children (Weiss 2002) while participating in the job market at the same time (Berkovitch 1997).

Thus, in the Israeli context, an interesting connection seems to exist between the two local features of feminine success: commitment and caring for the country (Ben-Amos and Bar-Tal 2004), and commitment and caring for the family. Both indicate a conservative attitude that Gadot aptly represents. The perception of familism is echoed in patriotism, so that just as a strong woman is devoted to her family and her role as a mother, she is also devoted to her nation and her role as a good citizen. Support for Israelis' expectation that celebrities should be loyal to their homeland and refrain from criticising it can be found in the story of another noted Israeli, Noa. Unlike Gadot, the internally acclaimed singer frequently voices harsh criticism of the country's policies, and is consequently shunned in the local cultural space (Kubovich and Arad 2015).

The current study focused on the views of hegemonic Israeli girls on the movie *WW* and its Israeli star. This approach allowed us to examine the meanings the participants attribute to the concepts of girl power and feminine success in their world as an inter-section between local society and images from global popular culture. Our analysis indicates that these concepts are expressed as a combination of nation and family: of global celebrity space, patriotic loyalty to country, and devotion to family and the maternal role. Neoliberal cultural thinking, which stresses striving for authenticity as a tool of self-branding and success (Banet-Weiser 2012), serves as fertile ground for the profound internalisation of and identification with the global and local features of what the girls consider a strong, successful woman.

Gadots' stardom is perceived and constructed as grounded in her authentic, true self. However, endeavour towards authenticity plays a key role in reinforcing the existing gender order (Schwarz 2016) and promoting a conservative national pattern of good citizenship and femininity. Gadot's figure captures for the girls a hybrid of global individualist success, while reproducing both a nationalist and a familist conservative ethos. Thus, the girls' admiration of the Israeli celebrity who has succeeded in the global arena relies on and contributes to their perception of the hegemonic gender and national narrative in the local sphere.

The research on celebrity studies and girls is dominated by Anglo-American perspectives focusing on global celebrities. We argue that the encounter of girls and celebrity is always situated, and therefore studying this encounter should consider not only categories such as gender, class, and race (Mendick *et al.* 2018), but also the girls' national belonging. The Israeli girls in our study, situated in a peripheral location, celebrate the local and the global visibility of Gadot and appreciate her 'authenticity', which embodies their fantasy of success.

Notes

1. Before Wonder Woman, Gadot was known by the Israeli public as Miss Israel 2004 and as an actress based on her role in *The Fast and The Furious* 2009.
2. The Israeli family is becoming more a private concern, since it is more and more normative for adults to be entitled as autonomous individuals to shape their destinies in both the private and the public spheres (Fogiel-Bijaoui 2016).
3. The gender gap is based on an index that evaluates gender inequality in Israel across a spectrum of fields over time: education, the labour market, gendered segregation of professions, poverty, power, media and culture, health, violence against women, time, and family status.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Einat Lachover (PhD) is a communications scholar at Sapir Academic College, dedicated to critical analysis of the encounters between gender and a broad range of media forms and contexts. Her areas of interest include: gender construction of news production; gendered discourse in news media; gender ideologies in popular media; and girlhood and media.

Shosh Davidson (PhD) is a lecturer at the communication department, Gordon Educational College, Haifa. Her areas of interest are youth, children and mothers in consumer culture.

Ornit Ramati Dvir (PhD) is the Employment Program Director at aChord. Among her areas of research are women in the workplace and female adolescents, with particular interest in the meaning of the body in the social space.

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