Revealing Photo Threatens a Major Disney Franchise

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LOS ANGELES — Fifteen years old and suggestively wrapped in what appears to be a satin bedsheet in the June issue of Vanity Fair. Did [Miley Cyrus](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/miley_cyrus/index.html?inline=nyt-per), with the help of a controversy-courting magazine, just deliver a blow to the [Walt Disney Company](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/disney_walt_company/index.html?inline=nyt-org)’s billion-dollar “Hannah Montana” franchise?

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Vanity Fair

The cover of the June issue of Vanity Fair and the photograph of Miley Cyrus, inset.

Some parents reacted with outrage over the weekend when the television program “Entertainment Tonight” began showing commercials promoting a scoop: Ms. Cyrus, the star of the wholesome Disney Channel blockbuster “Hannah Montana,” had posed topless, albeit with her chest covered, for the Vanity Fair photographer, [Annie Leibovitz](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/l/annie_leibovitz/index.html?inline=nyt-per).

Screen grabs of the photo quickly popped up online, sparking a blogosphere debate. “Bonfire anyone?” wrote Lin Burress on her marriage and parenting blog, Telling It Like It Is, referring to the mountain of Hannah Montana retail items — makeup, shoes, clothes — in the marketplace. “Parents should be extremely concerned,” Ms. Burress said in an interview. “Very young girls look up to Miley Cyrus as a role model.”

It is doubtful that one photograph — especially one that is tame in the context of an Internet awash in nude photographs of other starlets — could dent the Hannah Montana machine, said several Wall Street analysts. Retail sales for the franchise are expected to total about $1 billion in 2008. A motion picture is in the works for 2009 and Ms. Cyrus signed a seven-figure book deal with the Disney Book Group last week.

But keeping a teenage entertainment franchise on track in an age when stars are monitored around the clock by bloggers and paparazzi is extremely difficult, even for a company with the experience of Disney. Executives are constantly battling to keep minor slipups from growing into full-blown controversies.

Last week, the public relations problem du jour was a green bra; photos online showing Ms. Cyrus pulling away her tank top to flash her underwear.

Ms. Cyrus and the “Hannah Montana” series have been championed as one of the few entertainment sanctuaries for children, complicating matters. Last month, Ms. Cyrus was chosen favorite television actress at Nickelodeon’s “Kids’ Choice Awards.”

More than 3 million viewers regularly watch “Hannah Montana,” most of them age 6 to 14.

Media outlets, in particular the rabid celebrity-focused tabloids, have been pushing to capture new angles of the ubiquitous Ms. Cyrus. After popping up everywhere from the Academy Awards to [“American Idol”](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/a/american_idol/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier)in recent months, the only photos of her that are assured of selling are controversial ones.

A Disney spokeswoman, Patti McTeague, faulted Vanity Fair for the photo. “Unfortunately, as the article suggests, a situation was created to deliberately manipulate a 15-year-old in order to sell magazines,” she said.

The article, written by Bruce Handy, seems to support that claim, quoting Ms. Cyrus as saying, “Annie took, like, a beautiful shot, and I thought it was really cool. That’s what she wanted me to do, and you can’t say no to Annie.” She also said of the photo, “I think it’s really artsy. It wasn’t in a skanky way.”

Ms. Cyrus had a different view in a prepared statement released on Sunday:

“I took part in a photo shoot that was supposed to be ‘artistic’ and now, seeing the photographs and reading the story, I feel so embarrassed. I never intended for any of this to happen and I apologize to my fans who I care so deeply about.”

Beth Kseniak, a spokeswoman for both Vanity Fair magazine and Ms. Leibovitz said, “Miley’s parents and/or minders were on the set all day. Since the photo was taken digitally, they saw it on the shoot and everyone thought it was a beautiful and natural portrait of Miley.”

At the very least, Ms. Cyrus and her advisers do not seem to be on the same page as Disney. The company learned of the photo only when “Entertainment Tonight” started showing its promos.

Last week, Gary Marsh, the president of entertainment for Disney Channel Worldwide, was quoted in Portfolio magazine saying, “For Miley Cyrus to be a ‘good girl’ is now a business decision for her. Parents have invested in her a godliness. If she violates that trust, she won’t get it back.”

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: April 29, 2008*** *A headline and an article on Monday about a Vanity Fair photograph showing the actress Miley Cyrus in a suggestive pose left the incorrect impression that she was bare-breasted. While the pose was indeed revealing, she was wrapped in what appeared to be a bedsheet; she was not topless.*