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ABSTRACT

This document presents an executive summary of a study that examined messages sent to adolescent girls (ages 10 to 17) across 6 types of media most heavily used by adolescent girls: television, movies, magazines, music videos, television commercials, and magazine advertisements. The study asked what messages are sent about gender roles--primarily about the importance of appearance, relationships, and careers. The summary presents findings and highlights of the study, which illustrate the dual role media play. Results indicated: media often offer girls strong, positive role models; and media often reinforce female stereotypes, with appearance shown as more important for women than for men, and with the message that relationships are more important for women than occupations or careers. The study provides evidence of the mixed--sometimes limiting--messages that media are sending to girls. It demonstrates that the messages sent in even one television show, movie, magazine, advertisement, or music video do not stand alone, but become part of a larger sphere of influence in girls' lives, and thus have the power to reinforce--or the potential to challenge--all other messages girls are sent. (Contains 15 notes.) (SR)

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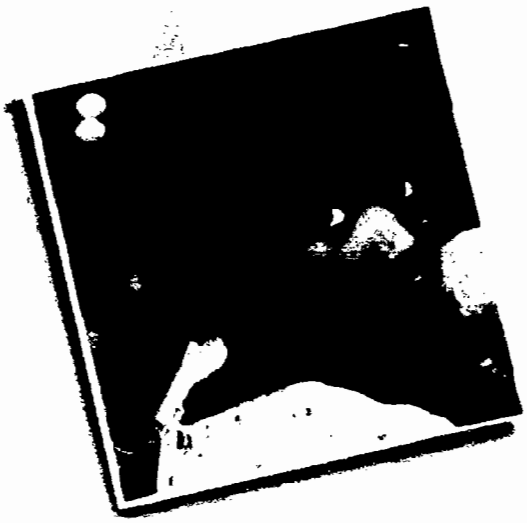

Reflections of Girls in the Media

A Content Analysis Across Six Media

An Executive Summary

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Conducted by Nancy Signorielli, Ph.D., University of Delaware

for Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation

April 1997

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THE HENRY J. KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION

A CONTENT ANALYSIS:
Reflections of Girls in the Media

A Study of Television Shows and Commercials, Movies, Music Videos, and Teen Magazine Articles and Ads

An Executive Summary

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April 1997

A CONTENT ANALYSIS ACROSS SIX MEDIA

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION: *THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF MEDIA*

As they move from childhood to adolescence, both girls and boys begin to redefine themselves. Developing their identities as adults requires them to challenge and reconstruct their childhood conceptions of themselves, their relationships and the ways in which they interact with the world around them. During adolescence, teenagers develop their moral and ethical code, learn to handle their emerging sexuality, refine their problem-solving skills, construct a new self-image to conform to their changing bodies, clarify their gender role conceptions, and prepare for their future occupational roles.[1] Adolescents look to many sources for guidance throughout this process. Parents, teachers, religious leaders and peers all play important roles. Research has shown that the media -- particularly given its accessibility and representations of reality -- also play a powerful role.

The adolescent world has been described as "an electronic community of rock music, television, videos and movies."[2] From a very young age, girls are active participants in this community. Studies have shown that they watch over twenty hours of television a week,[3] see 20,000 television advertisements a year,[4] listen frequently to the radio and CDs,[5] watch hours of music videos, [6] read fashion magazines[7] and newspapers,[8] and play video games.[9] It is estimated that by the time an 18-year-old girl graduates from high school, she will have spent more time watching television than in a classroom.[10] Researchers have suggested that the cumulative impact of this media may make it one of the most influential forces in this adolescent community.

Research has shown that media influences children's beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions.[11] Dr. Aletha Huston, an expert on media's effects on children, says that girls get messages from the media by seeing how and how often women are portrayed. The media grant legitimacy to social groups [e.g., women or minorities] through two aspects of its portrayals: recognition and respect. "In the mass media, recognition of social groups occurs when they appear in programs," which signifies that the group has value and is worthy of the viewers' attention. The media conveys respect for a social group by showing its members in favorable and positive roles, enabling viewers to identify with them. "Conversely, respect is denied when social groups are portrayed in stereotyped or negatively valued roles."[12] Media's power to increase recognition and to confer, or deny, respect makes the portrayals it offers children particularly important.

Media's portrayals contribute to girls' perceptions, helping them define what it means to be a girl and later a woman. Adolescent girls form ideas about their own lives by observing how girls and women in the media look and behave, their motivations and their goals, what they do with their time and with their lives. This power to influence children also gives media the potential to inspire them. Media can offer girls strong female role models whose behavior, attitudes and goals broaden their concepts of future possibilities. Alternatively, media can reinforce female stereotypes, limiting girls' perceptions about what they should look like, what they should care about, and who they should strive to become.

To understand more about the messages that young women get from the media, Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation commissioned a content analysis of the media most heavily used by teenage girls. We hope that this research will stimulate a collective dialogue by highlighting those areas where media often plays a positive role and exploring those areas where its potential is not being realized.

A UNIQUE STUDY OF MESSAGES TO GIRLS ACROSS SIX MEDIA

This is the first study ever to examine messages sent to adolescent girls across a range of media: television, movies, magazines, music videos, television commercials and magazine advertisements. Previous content analyses have focused on one type of media teen girls watch, most often television, or one aspect of the messages being sent, primarily about gender roles.[13] This study is the first to look across a range of media at several messages sent to girls -- about the importance of appearance, relationships and careers -- analyzing the extent to which these messages are reinforced across the different media.

The study examined six types of media that are among the most heavily used by teenage girls. In order to get an accurate sense of the total messages girls receive during a specific period, the media were sampled during the month of November 1996 to the extent possible. The sample of media included:

- Top 25 television shows favored by girls 12-17 for two weeks in November 1996;
- Top 15 movies released in 1995 seen by girls 12-17 in movie theaters [available for rental in November 1996];
- 4 issues each of the top four teen magazines [September - December 1996];
- Top 20 music videos ranked on MTV for the first three weeks of November 1996;
- Television commercials shown before, during and after the sample of television shows; and
- Magazine advertisements from the sample of teen magazines.

The study was conducted for Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation by Dr. Nancy Signorielli of the University of Delaware, a noted researcher in the field of children and the media, with a strong background in gender roles and portrayals of women in the media. Dr. Signorielli sought to determine:

- What messages do media send girls about the importance of appearance and the relationship of appearance to romance, happiness and success?
- What messages are girls sent about goals and how they should achieve them?
- What messages are girls sent about the importance of having a boyfriend and the relationship of appearance to this goal?
- What messages are girls sent about the importance of having a career?
- What messages are girls sent about how they should behave and what behaviors they should use to achieve their goals?
- Are there differences in the frequency and intensity of the messages girls receive across the different media? Are the messages that girls receive reinforced across all media?

FINDINGS

The results of the study illustrate the dual role media play. The media offer girls many positive role models, independent women who rely on themselves to solve their own problems. Women are shown being self-reliant and using intelligence, honesty and efficiency to achieve their goals. Teen magazines reinforce these messages by encouraging their readers to rely on themselves and resolve situations in honest and direct ways.

The study also shows, however, that this same media favored by teenage girls often contain stereotypical messages about appearance, relationships and careers. Findings in the study confirm previous research which shows that appearance is shown as more important -- and more uniformly idealized -- for women than for men. Teen girls' favorite television programs and movies continue to under-represent women.

In addition, the priorities and activities of women in the media may send girls the implicit message that relationships are more important for women than occupations or careers. Women are portrayed as spending much of their time dating and talking about the opposite sex while men are more often seen working and concerned about their success. These messages are often reinforced -- and, at times, stereotypes are perpetuated -- across the range of media girls watch.

This analysis leads with the findings from television, as it is the most heavily-watched media by this age group and thus may well be the most influential. Furthermore, media such as television and movies offer the greatest depth of portrayal by giving a sense of the motivations, activities, behaviors and goals of female characters. Findings from the other media serve a complementary role -- showing the different ways in which these signals are sent and the extent to which the messages girls receive from their primary media source are reinforced across the other media to which they are exposed.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE STUDY:

MEDIA OFTEN OFFER GIRLS STRONG, POSITIVE ROLE MODELS

In the media favored by teenage girls, women are often portrayed as strong positive characters -- offering girls role models to emulate and imitate.

- **Women in the media are often shown as independent, depending first upon themselves to solve their own problems achieve their goals.**

  This message is sent in a variety of ways across the different media. The study examined whether characters on television shows and in movies first relied on themselves or others to resolve their problems and achieve their goals. The findings showed that a greater proportion of both men and women rely on themselves more than on any other person.

  -- On the television programs studied, over a third of women [35%] and almost as many men [32%] rely on themselves to solve their problems. Both depend on themselves to an even greater extent to achieve their goals [39% for women and 38% for men.]

  -- The finding is similar in the sample of movies although the proportions for men are slightly higher. In movies, over a third of women [35%] and about half of men [49%] solve their own problems, while 62% of women and 67% of men depend on themselves to achieve their goals.

  -- More than a quarter of magazine articles [28%] suggested that the reader solve her problems by herself. Very few articles encouraged young women to seek the help of men or their male romantic partners.

  -- Television commercials targeted at women were more likely to appeal to them as "being in control" [29%] than commercials targeted at men [2%] or gender-neutral [12%] ads.

- **Women are shown as honest and direct in their dealings with other characters.**

  The study examined behaviors exhibited by characters in the media and then analyzed whether the character used that behavior to achieve their goals. By far, the single most common way that men and women dealt with their problems was with honesty.

  -- On TV, both women [46%] and men [52%] are frequently shown acting in an honest and direct way. [Note: This is not to suggest that the other characters are dishonest, only that one of the variables coded for in the study was an explicit depiction of honest behaviors.]

  -- The situation is similar in movies with 58% of women and 47% of men seen as behaving in a frank and honest manner.

-- This message is also reinforced in magazine articles, where 'being honest and direct' is the only specific behavior that is referenced somewhat frequently [in 16% of the articles.]

- **Women are often portrayed as intelligent and frequently use their intelligence to achieve their goals.**

  -- About a third of women [34%] and men [30%] on TV are shown behaving in a intelligent manner. Almost a quarter of women [24%] are seen using their intelligence to achieve their goals [compared to 14% of men.]

  -- This is even more pronounced in movies with about 7 in 10 women [69%] and men [71%] seen as behaving with intelligence.

MEDIA OFTEN REINFORCE FEMALE STEREOTYPES

This research also demonstrated that the media favored by teenage girls often send them limiting messages about their priorities and their potential. The media reinforce troubling stereotypes about the relative importance of appearance and relationships to girls' lives and relative *un*importance of careers.

- **Women continue to be underrepresented in most media, which limits opportunities to portray women in a full range of roles.**

  As previous studies have consistently found, women are underrepresented compared to men in almost all media. Among media that is not specifically directed at women :

  -- TV has the highest proportion of women, with 55% men and 45% women.

  -- Television commercials follow, with 58% men and 42% women.

  -- Movies have almost two men [63%] for every woman [37%].

  -- Music videos have almost four men [78%] for every woman [22%], although much of this difference may reflect the composition of popular music groups.

  The only media that has more women than men were magazines directed at teen girls. Magazine articles have 70% women to 30% men, and magazine advertisements have 82% women to 18% men.

  Researchers have long suggested that, in addition to limiting the number of role models, media's under-representation sends girls subtle messages about the value and importance of females as compared to that of males.

- **Media's female portrayals send girls messages emphasizing a woman's ideal appearance and the importance of this appearance to their lives.**

  Women in media often conform to an idealized image of body weight.

  More than half the women on TV, movies and commercials are portrayed as being of at least 'average' weight. However, a substantial number of women in each media are portrayed as 'thin' or 'very thin' -- which is particularly noticeable when compared to the proportion of men thus portrayed. Across the media, between 26 and 46% of women are portrayed as 'thin' or 'very thin' compared to between 4 and 16% of men.

  -- In television programs, 46% of the women, and 16% of men, are thin or very thin.

  -- In movies, 39% of women, and 4% of men, are thin or very thin.

  -- In TV commercials, 32% of women, and 6% of men, are thin or very thin.

  -- In teen magazine articles, 34% of women, and 6% of men, are thin or very thin.

-- In magazine advertisements, 26% of women, and 8% of men, are thin or very thin.
-- Music videos are an exception with 43% of women and 44% of men, thin or very thin.

Media also send clear messages about the importance of appearance in girls' lives.

-- Women are much more likely than men to make or receive comments about their appearance in all three media where this could be measured. On television, over 1 in 4 women [28%] receive comments about their appearance compared to 1 in 10 men [10%]. In movies, almost 6 out of 10 women [58%] received comments about their appearance, compared to 1 in 4 men [24%]. And in commercials, appearance-related comments were directed at 26% of women compared to 7% of men.
-- Women are also seen spending their time in appearance-related activities such as shopping and grooming. On television, three times as many women [10%] as men [3%] are seen grooming or 'preening' [combing hair, deciding on clothes, looking in a mirror, etc.] In films, this difference grows to 31% of the women compared to 7% of the men. TV commercials show a similar trend with 17% of the women seen grooming themselves compared to less than 1% of the men.

Ads on TV and in magazines also emphasize the importance of a woman's appearance.

-- The vast majority of advertisements [81%] in teen magazines are for appearance-related products such as makeup, clothes and toiletries. In addition, 70% of all TV ads targeted towards women were for appearance-related products, compared to 9% of the ads targeted towards men and 14% of the ads targeted toward a wider audience [both men and women.]
-- Both TV and magazine ads targeted towards women are much more likely to make use of appeals to beauty, self-improvement, sensory images and youthfulness than ads targeted towards men.

The topics of teen magazine articles send the same message to adolescent girls:

-- 37% of the articles include a focus on appearance;
-- 32% of the articles include a focus on fashion;
-- 18% of the articles include a focus on makeup; and
-- 16% of the articles include a focus on hairstyles.

- **Women's lives are most often portrayed in the context of relationships while men's lives are most often seen in the context of careers.**

Men are seen working while women are seen dating.

Occupational status:

-- While their occupation could not be determined for many characters of both genders, almost one half of men [46%] on television and 40% of men in movies were portrayed as having either professional or blue-collar jobs, while less than one third of women in either TV [30%] or movies [27%] were portrayed as having either of these occupations.

What characters are seen doing:

-- When measuring activities, men are seen spending their time "on the job" far more often than women in all media where it could be measured. On TV programs, 41% of men, compared to 28% of women, are seen "on the job" while 60% of men in movies are seen working compared to about a third of women [35%]. In commercials, almost twice as many men [17%] as women [9%] are seen working.

-- In contrast to men seen in professional settings, over a quarter of women [27%] are seen doing "gender-stereotyped chores" [such as doing dishes, cooking and cleaning] compared to 1% of men seen doing chores.

-- In addition, women are more likely to be seen in activities related to romance and relationships, such as dating. More women than men are seen dating across a range of media -- 23% of the women compared to 17% of the men on television, 27% of the women compared to 16% of the men in movies, and 9% of the women compared to 4% of the men in commercials.

What characters are seen wearing:

-- This message is also reinforced in more subtle ways. Men in almost all media are much more likely than women to wear business clothes or a work uniform. On TV, 35% of men are seen in business clothes compared to 23% of women; in movies, 44% of men wear business clothes compared to 23% of women; and in TV commercials, 30% of men wear business clothes compared to 12% of women.

-- In contrast, women are much more likely than men in most media to be seen partially clothed or wearing underwear. On TV, 15% of women wear underwear compared to 5% of men and in movies 42% of women wear underwear compared to 11% of men.

Women in media are motivated more by relationships; men are motivated more by their jobs.

This study, where possible, measured the motivations of characters in TV shows and in movies. In those cases where a character's motivations could be determined, the two most frequent motivations are "obtaining or succeeding in a job" and "having a romantic relationship." The findings showed that men are motivated more frequently by the former and women by the latter.

-- On TV, 32% of men and 24% of women wanted to get or succeed in a job. In movies, this difference is more pronounced -- over half the men [53%] were motivated by their careers compared to less than a third [31%] of the women.

-- In contrast, in both TV and movies, women are somewhat more likely to be motivated by the desire to have a romantic relationship -- about a third of women [32% on TV and 35% in the movies] wanted to have a romantic relationship compared with 2 in 10 men.

-- In both TV and movies, women were significantly more likely to talk about romantic relationships than men [63% of women compared to 49% of men on TV; and 65% of women compared to 38% of men in movies.] On TV, men were more likely [52%] than women [40%] to talk about work, but in the movies equal proportions of men [58%] and women [60%] talked about work.

Magazine articles reinforce this message by talking about "dating" in 35% of their articles and "sex" in 9% of their articles, while only discussing "school" or "careers" in about 12%.

Furthermore, magazines send girls messages about the centrality of males to their lives by featuring three articles about successful or famous men for every two articles about famous or successful women [20% vs. 14%.]

- **Both men and women are sometimes seen acting in stereotypical ways.**

For the most part, men and women are seen behaving in similar manners; the three behaviors most often exhibited by characters of either gender are honesty, joking, and intelligence. However, beyond that, the findings show that characters often behave in ways which conform to traditional stereotypes.

-- Women on TV and in movies are often shown crying and whining [on TV, 34% of women to 20% of men; in movies, 44% of women vs. 24% of men.]

-- Men are more likely than women to use brawn and physical force, particularly in movies. Men use force 53% of the time, compared to 19% for women. On television, 11% of men, compared to 7% of women, use physical force.

-- Three times as many women [9%] as men [3%] are seen 'promising sex' on TV. In movies, women are the only characters seen promising sex.

When narrowing the examination to those behaviors used to achieve goals, this same pattern exists. Women and men are similar -- they both use honesty, intelligence, and flirting to accomplish their objectives. However, women are more likely than men to use flirting, crying and the "promise of sex" to achieve their goals while men are more likely than women to use brawn and physical force.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the media's ability to influence behaviors and shape attitudes, UCLA Professor Patricia M. Greenfield said, "Television can do more than reinforce stereotypes. It is so powerful a medium that, with careful planning, it can also be used to break down social stereotypes."[14] This influence gives media enormous power -- and therefore tremendous potential. By using its power to break down stereotypes, media can broaden children's views of themselves, their world, and their place in that world.

As girls leave childhood, enter adolescence, and begin to develop into the women they will become, they look to the media for ideas. In this period of change, they will determine their goals and priorities as they set their sights on their futures. This study provides evidence of the ways in which media are sending mixed -- sometimes limiting -- messages to girls. In many cases, media offer girls strong role models to emulate -- women who are independent, confident, honest and intelligent. By observing these women, girls are taught to depend on themselves, take matters into their own hands and solve their own problems. These women are not shown as being less intelligent or less capable than men; in fact, they are often portrayed as more willing to use intelligence, honesty and efficiency to achieve their goals.

The study also shows that media can send girls limiting messages, reinforcing stereotypes about their priorities and their possibilities. Media often portrays ideals of appearance and stresses the importance of this appearance to the lives of women and girls. In addition, they see women in the media more concerned about relationships than about careers -- and these priorities can be observed across a range of media girls watch. Both relationships and careers are important to girls' lives but to present one as more compelling than the other may limit a girls' perception of her own potential.

Research suggests that these messages may influence girls' ideas about their own futures. As one study concluded: "Images formed from mediated precepts become part of a woman's conception of herself... Never seeing women in certain roles and seeing women play other roles poorly reduces the likelihood that a woman will attempt such roles herself... Images shape her plans for life."[15] The findings show that some of these limiting images are reinforced across the entire range of media to which girls are exposed. This means that adolescent girls cannot just change the channel, turn off the TV, go to a different movie, or read another magazine.

This study demonstrates that the messages sent in even one television show, or movie, or magazine, or advertisement, or music video do not stand alone. They become part of a larger sphere of influence in girls' lives and thus have the power to reinforce -- or the potential to challenge -- all other messages girls are sent. Our hope is that this study -- by highlighting media's potential to offer girls role models and showing how well it is sometimes done -- will encourage the creation of even more positive female portrayals throughout media.

NOTES

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[8] "Tuned In or Tuned Out? America's Children Speak Out on the News Media," Children Now Poll, 1994

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[11] "Television Images and their Effects, " in Aletha Huston *et al* (American Psychological Association), Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992] pp. 21 - 34

[12] Ibid., pp. 21 - 22

[13] Dr. Signorielli, who conducted this study, has previously examined television programs, television advertisements and MTV advertisements -- but never as one integrated study. One of the only studies similar to this analysis is a 1986 content analysis by Silverstein *et al.* which examined body representations and the preoccupation with thinness in various media: (a) television shows and their characters; (b) magazine advertisements and articles; (c) photographs of women in two women's magazines; and (d) photographs of female movie stars. More recently, a 1994 study by Englis *et al.* examined different beauty ideals in both fashion magazine advertising and music videos.

[14] Patricia M. Greenfield, Mind and Media: The Effects of Television, Video Games, and Computers [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984] p. 39

[15] M. Butler and W. Paisley, Women and the Mass Media: Sourcebook for Research and Action [New York: Human Sciences Press, 1980] pp. 49-50