Sexy Socialization

Today's media and the next generation of women

By Stacy L. Smith, Cynthia Kennard, and Amy D. Granados

The next generation to enter the American workforce is growing up today bombarded with numerous media choices. As Susan Douglas details in the preceding chapter, "Where Have You Gone, Roseanne Barr?" the media present skewed portraits of women and work. Here, we turn to the influence the media exert on children and teenagers and what that may mean for the next generation entering the workforce, particularly the media itself.

The typical 8-to-18-year-old spends roughly six and a half hours per day with various media.[1] Whether looking at animated films approved for general audiences, R-rated blockbusters, or innovative video games, girls and women often appear as eye candy. These ever-present idealized portrayals may be inescapable for female viewers, whether they are 8 or 18 years of age. Of equal concern is what boys and young men might be learning about girls and women and how to relate to them. All this will inform the future workplaces of America.

Let's start with content delivered in traditional formats and move to new media platforms. The first message young Americans may extract from the media is

that girls and women are missing in action. Analyzing 400 films released between 1990 and 2006, one study found that males appear on screen 2.71 times more frequently than females.[2] Assessing popular video games, this gender gap can widen to as much as five males to every one female in some games.[3] Television is closer to presenting a more balanced picture,[4] with prime-time women occupying 37 percent to 40 percent of all roles.[5] Despite significant gains, the American woman today remains noticeably absent across media watched by kids and teenagers.

When females are present, storylines often reveal that women are valued more for how they look rather than for who they are. This is the second message children and teenagers may glean from the media, particularly in animated content. Looking across 100 popular G-rated films, a recent study found that 33.1 percent of females are thin, 34.6 percent possess an unrealistically small waist, and 16.3 percent have an unattainable hourglass figure.[6] Such disfigured dames have little room for a womb or any other internal organ.

Storylines often reveal that women are valued more for how they look rather than for who they are.

Children's media diets do change with age and maturity. Music, magazines, websites, video games, and mobile media may become more or less important in late elementary school and early adolescence. Music videos have been heavily criticized, with concern emanating from depictions of that objectify women, explicit lyrical references to sex, and highly suggestive "bump and grind" dance choreography.[7] One study shows that women are more likely than men to be shown in provocative outfits in music videos.[8] Roles in this genre also vary by gender: Men are more likely to be shown as "sex animals" and women are more likely to be shown as "sex objects."[9]

The fashion-centric media only add to the succession of sexy images seen across other platforms. Beauty magazines, corresponding websites, and reality shows— think "Project Runway" and "America's Next Top Model"—may be particularly important agents of socialization for adolescent females. *Elle*, *Vogue*, and *In Style* feature no shortage of thin, waif-like women. Some of these haute couture models have been criticized for their slim, "heroin chic" looks.[10]

UNFASHIONABLY EMACIATED. High fashion models with unhealthy bodies are a threat to the young women who emulate them. {ANA LAURA CASTRO}

One investigation found that models working in high fashion became taller but their weight remained unchanged across most of the 20th century.[11] More than 25 percent of these women between the 1930s and the 1990s met the standard set by the American Psychological Association for anorexia nervosa. In stark contrast, the typical 18-to -29-year-old American woman became taller and heavier— thereby widening the discrepancy between what is a real and a quixotic body size.

As adolescent females turn to fashion, many young males may seek out and play video games. Such content is the breeding ground for the construction of many gals with improbable features, among them Lara Croft from the "Tomb Raider" series and Helena from "Dead or Alive 4." Studies show that females in top-selling video games are more likely than their male counterparts to be clothing challenged, adorned in sexualized attire, and wearing garments inappropriate for the task at hand.[12]

What impact does repeated exposure to these types of portrayals have on viewers? Before answering this question, it is important to underscore that media messages are factors among many that may contribute with other influences to the actual socialization of youth. Research also reveals that not all children and teens are affected by the media in the same way. But here we will outline several possible outcomes that may be associated with viewing skewed, sexy media portrayals on the next generation of American women—those who may one day dominate the workforce.

First, the media may affect perceptions of self-worth of girls and teenagers. Second, the media may affect girls' thoughts and feelings about their bodies.[13] Third, the media may affect how females construct their identities virtually in the public sphere. This last point is particularly relevant as girls continue to dominate some elements of online content creation,[14] such as blogging and social networking, which means they may become attracted to media industries as they enter the workforce.

> Models working in high fashion became taller but their weight remained unchanged across most of the 20th century.

When girls and young women become their own producers and distributors of online content they may look to women in the media to inform their personal branding style. Isn't it ironic, then, that real narratives about women and girls are marginalized in fictional media while the sexual conquests, materialism, and globetrotting of ingenues and reality stars are deemed newsworthy across print, broadcast, and online sources?

These mixed messages could have serious career implications. A recent survey of 3,169 professionals revealed that over a fifth have used social networking sites to help inform their hiring decisions.[15] Among those turning to such sites, a third has disqualified potential applicants based on what they saw or read on personal profiles. Just after drug/alcohol use (41 percent), the study showed that the second highest reported "area of concern" among managers (40 percent) was seeing "provocative or inappropriate photographs or information" online about a potential employee.

So, what is to be done? The main hope lies on females working behind the scenes across media platforms in production, distribution, and exhibition. Research demonstrates that when women direct films, write/produce TV shows, or even cover the news, the way in which females are presented changes dramatically.[16] Yet there may be a long wait for complex and wide-ranging portrayals of females, as breaking into decision-making media positions has proven difficult for many women.

Female decision-makers in the entertainment industry are the exception and not the rule. Few executive studio positions have been filled by women and the number of females working as directors, writers, and producers of film is low and

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE. Young women in the fashion business may one day deliver more real presentations of women. {FRED R. CONRAD, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*}

has not changed meaningfully over the last decade. Fewer than 10 percent of all films are directed by a female auteur.[17] While near financial parity exists in television, a substantial wage gap prevails for writers of film. This is evidenced by the approximate $40,000 discrepancy in median salary for men and women screenwriters in 2005, the last year for which complete data are available.[18]

In the digital world, a profusion of stories about girls and women in new media may be easier to accomplish over time. This may happen despite the fact that only two women reside in the president or CEO positions at technology companies—Carol Bartz at Yahoo! Inc. and Gina Bianchini at Ning Inc. Perhaps early socialization to technology focusing on relationship building and interpersonal connectivity will attract more teen- and college-aged females into careers involving blogging, online newsgathering, reporting and dissemination, and webisode construction.

Future female media content creators may well have the opportunity to tell a multitude of stories about girls and women across the lifespan. To achieve this end, we need to sensitize the next generation of American citizens to current media biases surrounding the prevalence and portrayal of females. Such educational efforts could also target areas where women may have less direct experience than men. For instance, webisodes or fictional narratives addressing salary negotiation, management training, and long-term career planning could instruct and may help to narrow the wage gap between males and females in some professions.

These types of stories may also help to populate—over time—the executive suite of major media and digital corporations with females. Surely these attempts could harness the prosocial potential of new and old media and may even take a step toward inoculating some of the next generation of males and females in the workforce from perpetuating what has been the status quo.

By Stacy L. Smith, Ph.D., faculty fellow, Center on Communication Leadership and Policy, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California; Cynthia Kennard, senior fellow, Center on Communicational Leadership and Policy, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California; and Amy D. Granados, doctoral student, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California.

ENDNOTES

1 Kaiser Family Foundation, "Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8–18 Year-Olds" (2005).

2 Stacy L. Smith and Crystal Allene Cook, "Gender Stereotypes: An Analysis of Popular Films and TV" (Los Angeles: Geena Davis Institute for Gender and Media, 2008).

3 Children Now, "Fair Play? Violence, Gender and Race in Video Games" (2001); Edward Downs and Stacy L. Smith, "Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis" (Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Communication Association to the Mass Communication Division, New York, 2005); Dmitri Williams and others, "The Virtual Census: Representation of Gender, Race, and Age in Video Games," *New Media Society* 11 (5) (2009): 815–834.

4 Smith and Cook, "Gender Stereotypes: An Analysis of Popular Films and TV."

5 Jack Glascock, "Gender Roles on Prime-Time Network Television: Demographics and Behaviors," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 45 (4) (2001): 656–669; Martha. M. Lauzen and David M. Dozier, "The Role of Women on Screen and Behind the Scenes in the Television and Film Industries: Review of a Program of Research," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 23 (4) (1999): 355–373; Nancy Signorielli and Aaron Bacue, "Recognition and Respect: A Content Analysis of Prime Time Television Characters Across Three Decades," *Sex Roles* 40 (7/8) (1999): 527–544.

6 Smith and Cook, "Gender Stereotypes: An Analysis of Popular Films and TV."

7 Kathy SaeNgian, "Researcher Cites Negative Influences of Hip-Hop," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 13, 2008, available at http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08165/889550-51.stm; Nekesa Mumbi Moody, "BET's 'Uncut' exposes plenty of female flesh," *Star-Ledger*, April 13, 2004, retrieved September 25, 2009, Lexis-Nexis.

8 Christine Hanson and Ranald Hanson, "Music and Music Videos." In Dolf Zillmann and Peter Vorderer, eds., *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of its Appeal* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000), p. 183.

9 Hanson and Hanson, "Music and Music Videos"; Kate Conrad, Travis Dixon and Yuanyuan Zhang, "Controversial Rap Themes, Gender Portrayals and Skin Tone Distortion: A Content Analysis of Rap Music Videos," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 53 (1) (2009): 134–156.

10 "Skinny Models Banned from Catwalk," available http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/09/13/spain.models/index.html (last accessed September 2009).

11 Carol Byrd-Bredbenner and Jessica Murray, "A Comparison of the Anthropometric Measurements of Idealized Female Body Images in Media Depicted to Men, Women, and General Audiences," *Topical Clinical Nutrition* 18 (2) (2003): 117–129.

12 Berrin Beasley and Tracy C. Standley, "Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing As an Indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games," *Mass Communication & Society* 5 (3) (2002): 279–293; Downs and Smith, "Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis."

13 Shelly Grabe and others, "The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns among Women: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental and Correlational Studies," *Psychological Bulletin* 134 (3) (2008): 460–476.

14 Kate Spicer and Abul Taherreport, "Girls and Young Women are Now the Most Prolific Web Users," *The Sunday Times*, March 9, 2008, available at http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/the_web/article3511863.ece.

15 "Employers Using Social-Networking Sites to Research Job Candidates," available at http://www.marketingcharts.com/interactive/employers-using-social-networking-sites-to-research-job-candidates-5998 (last accessed September 2009).

16 Cinny Kennard and Sheila Murphy, "Characteristics of War Coverage by Female Correspondents." In Philip Seib, ed., *Media and Conflict in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005); Lauzen and Dozier, "The Role of Women on Screen and Behind the Scenes in the Television and Film Industries: Review of a Program of Research"; Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, Amy D. Granados and Sarah Erickson, "Asymmetrical Academy Awards: A Look at Gender Balance in Best Picture Nominated Films from 1977–2006" (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication, 2008).

17 Martha M. Lauzen, "The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 250 Films of 2008" (San Diego: Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, 2009).

18 Darnell M. Hunt, "Whose Stories Are We Telling? The 2007 Hollywood Writers Report" (Los Angeles: Writers Guild of America, West, 2007), p. 20.