

Literature Review of Media Messages to Adolescent Females

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Abstract

Research shows that media play a dominant role in influencing females' perceptions of the world around them, as well as helping them to define their sense of self. This paper examines the influence that media has on adolescent females' feelings towards their place in society, sexuality, self-esteem and body image. Areas for future research and possible solutions to some of the problems mentioned are also addressed.

Time of Adolescence

Adolescence can be a confusing and unsettling time for young adults. Changes to their bodies, their interests, and their social relationships cause them to question who they are and how they fit into the dynamic and confusing world around them. They question their place in their family, with their friends, with their teachers, and with others around them. This is a time of increased self-awareness, self-identity, self-consciousness, preoccupation with image, and concern with social acceptance (Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). Adolescents are trying to discover and solidify their senses of self and their roles in society.

Adolescence can be a period marked by severe psychological and emotional stresses (Durham, 1999). It is during this time that gender identities, values of self worth, and sexual attitudes become topics of relentless and serious contemplation. Adolescents are moving from childhood into adulthood. They want to understand their new roles, their new ideas, and their new feelings. This exploration of self and new found independence can result in feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Now while these changes are occurring in both males and females, it has been found that females experience a more difficult time with this transition than males (Block & Robins, 1993). Adolescent girls are more apt to experience decreased feeling of attractiveness and self-esteem. Girls are more likely to feel ashamed and distressed by the

changes in their body and appearance. They become more insecure and self-aware of the changes that occur. Boys, however, find the progression of adolescence to be a more positive and reassuring time. They tend to experience improved feelings of body satisfaction and self-assurance. While both are increasing in size and changing in shape, boys welcome this change and girls dread it.

Adolescence is a time of extreme introspection. And more than their male counterparts, females look to media to help them define and explain the world around them (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliewer, and Kilmartin, 2001). Females seeking information about their current developmental tasks will take that information from any available source (Granello, 1997). Mass media is one of the main resources to which they turn.

Media

Media is a pervasive and ever present entity in the lives of North Americans. It is a strong influence for constructing meaning in our everyday lives. Social Comparison Theory posits that “people will [at some point in their lives] compare themselves and significant others to people and images whom they perceive to represent realistic goals to attain” (Botta, 1999, p. 26). We look to the media to help us define, explain, and shape the world around us. Without always knowing it, we make automatic comparisons of ourselves, those close to us, and situations in our lives after seeing images in the media. And as a result, after these comparisons we are motivated to strive for, and achieve, new found goals and expectations. Adolescents, because they haven’t reached the cognitive level to critically analyze and determine reasonable levels of *realistic goals*, are more vulnerable to media images (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003). They are more likely to take at face value all images and scenarios portrayed in the media.

Because they tend to see most everything as realistic and attainable, adolescent girls are more likely to emulate the images portrayed in the media. They will attempt to model themselves, both physically and through their actions, after the images viewed. They look to the media to define how they should look, act, and feel.

Pop culture, more than current events, is what adolescent females look to in the media to help them define their role in the world around them (Durham, 1999). Arnett (1995) says that “media consumption gives adolescents a sense of being connected to a larger peer network” (pg. 524). Adolescents look to television, magazines, and movies to help them find and define their station and place in society.

Now while adolescents are developing an increased cognitive capacity to process information (Botta, 1999), critical evaluation skills are not fully matured. This is especially true for adolescents in the 13 to 14 year range (Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999). For these early teens, media have a stronger influence on their view of reality than it does on those even two years younger or older. Those younger are more indifferent to media messages and those older are more critical of the messages presented. It was found that girls in the thirteen to fourteen year age range are the most susceptible to the messages presented through the media.

Granello (1997) found that girls at the ages of 12, 17 and 21 looked to the media to help them define social meaning in different ways. All three age groups looked to television programs to help them construct meaning into their lives. How this meaning was created varied at each developmental level. 12-year-olds looked to the media to define how their lives will be. They looked at the characters and situations presented on television and believed that if they modeled themselves in the same manner they would be able to achieve the same status and rewards as those characters presented. 17-year-olds looked to the media as a way to see how

their life could have been given different circumstances (e.g. had they lived in a different geographical location or had a different socioeconomic status). They looked to characters on television as role models and strived to achieve the same experiences. They were however, cognizant of the fact that there was no guarantee that their lives would turn out exactly like those portrayed; television characters simply exemplified the ultimate goal. 21-year-olds were able to distinguish the difference between their *real* lives and the fantasy lives portrayed on the television shows. However, they used the circumstances portrayed on television as a way of initiating dialogue with peers. Through this interaction they were able to collectively construct social and personal meaning.

No one type of media can be held more responsible for the messages presented to adolescent females. Each form of media plays a crucial role in influencing adolescent females in different ways. Although television viewing is related to body dissatisfaction, there are no strong correlations linking this channel of communication to proactive drives for thinness or eating disorder behaviors like there are with magazine consumption (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). And within television viewing, different types of programming are more influential than others (Borzekowski, Robinson, and Killen, 2000; Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Seidemen, 1999). So in order to understand the overall role that media have on female adolescents' perceptions of self and society, all genres must be examined.

Pipher (1994) states that pervasive media messages have a strong influence on an adolescent girl's self image. Adolescent girls, in their search for self identity and social acceptance, are quick to model themselves on the images and messages presented in the media. Their sense of personal identity and ability to interact socially is not yet developed. They look to the media to help them find meaning in their lives, rules for social interactions, and definitions of

self. Adolescent girls are heavy consumers of media. The images and messages presented in the media have a strong influence on how an adolescent girl views the world and her role in it.

Place in Society:

More than anything, adolescents want to feel like they belong to, and that they are accepted by, a community. This is especially true for adolescent females. While adolescent males are striving to construct their own sense of individuality, and develop their position in the hierarchy of the world around them, adolescent females are searching for relationships and attempting to build strong networks (Granello, 1997). It is for this reason that adolescent females look to the media to define their place in society and help them develop interpersonal skills.

Television is an important part of North American culture. As of 2003 it was estimated that 99% of Canadian households owned at least one color television; 61.2% owned at least two (Statistics Canada, 2005). Because of its prevalence in everyday life, television is an important source for sociological analysis (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). Murnen & Smolak (2000) found that television, more than any other form of media, plays an important role in shaping adolescent females' attitudes and views about society and social interactions. It is through television that adolescent girls are given a connection to the expansive social world. Girls look to television to define normal and appropriate roles and behavior for men and women.

Vessy, Yim-Chiplis and MacKenzie (1998) found that television tends to portray girls as more passive than boys. They are concerned about grooming, clothing, and dating, not intellectual endeavors. It has also been found that on television soap operas, women are more likely to be acted upon (raped, abandoned, misunderstood) than males (Granello, 1997). While

women strive for fulfillment through relationships and ties to society, men take more active roles and are less tied to relationships.

Television can also distort and make light of serious societal issues. Montemurro (2003) looked at a total of 56 episodes from five prime-time situational comedies. Across all the programs there was an average of 3.5 incidents of gender or sexual harassment per episode; 33% of all episodes contained some form of harassment. While harassment is not necessarily a main topic in situational comedies, it is used often for humor. The use of a serious societal issue for humor belittles the impact of the problem and reinforces stereotypes and negative perceptions surrounding the issue. This sends out the message that sexual harassment is funny; it is not meant to be taken seriously. Often sexual harassment is presented without being named (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). By not labeling the actions, they are seen as trivial and dismissible. This leaves adolescent females with the impression that such degrading and male-empowering actions are inconsequential and worthy of nothing more than a laugh. It is not something that is meant to be taken seriously or should be pursued further.

As well, women portrayed on television are generally depicted as less serious employees (Murnen & Smolak, 2000). They are less competent, more emotional and reactionary, and less reliable than their male colleagues. Even though women may be portrayed in established and important positions, their accomplishments are often demeaned by their flighty or irrational actions. This gives adolescent females the impression that although women can work hard to rise to positions of power and prestige, they will never fully be taken seriously or be able to maintain their level of authority.

Music videos, more than any other genre of television programs, have been found to have the strongest influence over adolescent females when portraying how women should look and

behave (Tiggeman, & Pickering, 1996). Borzekowski et al. (2000) found a positive relationship exists between music video viewing and the onset of drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and sexual promiscuity in adolescent females. Music videos portray high levels of tobacco use, and overt violence and weapon carrying (Rich et al, 1998). Eroticism, sexism, and sex role stereotyping are common themes in many music videos (Hansen & Hansen 1988; Tiggeman & Pickering, 1996). Adolescent females are emulating many of the actions portrayed in music videos.

After analyzing sixty hours of music videos, Seidemen (1999) found that all domestic cleaning persons, fashion models and prostitutes were females. One third of all women portrayed wore revealing attire or undergarments; compared to only seven percent of men. Males were shown as more aggressive and violent than women. And women were 40 times more likely than males to be shown as passive, dependant, and emotional. Seidemen also compared these results with United States Census data to find that:

The workplace shown on MTV was still more gender stereotyped than really existed in some respects: For example, 28% of photographers are women (whereas on 7% of music-video photographers were females in the present context analysis) and 13% of the police force is female (not the 5% on MTV). However, women (as were minorities) were under-represented in many occupations (e.g., manual labor) and over-represented in others (e.g., household cleaning) in ... both the workplace and on MTV. (p. 13)

If watching music videos has been found to be positively correlated to health harming actions, such as tobacco use and sexual promiscuity, in adolescent females (Borzekowski et al, 2002), it is not a far stretch to imagine that seeing distorted and questionable images of a woman's *place* in society could also affect how an adolescent female develops her sense of

identity and perceive her role in the world around her. It has already been found that viewing objectifications of women's bodies found in music videos can lead to feelings of body image dissatisfaction (Borzekowski et al.). It is therefore also possible that the continued viewing of women in subservient roles could result in adolescent females believing that they are naturally meant to take a subordinate status in society.

As well as defining social roles and interactions, media also increase adolescents' exposure to violence. Now while social conditions such as poverty, racial discrimination, substance abuse, and family conflict and dissolution, all contribute to an environment that fosters violence, media is responsible for increasing exposure to, and desensitizing empathy towards, violence. And as found by DuRant, Treiber, Goodman & Woods (1996), previous exposure to violence is the strongest correlate to subsequent violent acts and weapon carrying.

But for females, as well as potentially increasing their propensity towards violent acts, exposure to violence can also result in heightened feelings of disempowerment and self-devaluation. Bohner et al. (1993) found that women who read reports about sexual harassment experience a lowering of self esteem. The prevalence of screen violence on television and in the movies has been found to have the effect of desensitizing viewers to the horror of violence and reducing sympathy for victims (Reid & Finchilescu, 1995). If the victims of violence and aggression are women, adolescent females could identify with them and begin to accept this persecuted role.

In a content analysis study by Rich et al. (1998) it was found that "14.7% [of music videos] contained one or more scenes of overt interpersonal violence ... with a mean of 6.1 violent acts in each music video that portrayed violence" (pg. 670). 78.1% of aggressors were male; reinforcing the stereotype of male forcefulness and antagonism. While women were

aggressors only 21.9% of the time, they were portrayed as a victim more than twice as often at 46.3% of the time. And although males and females were represented as victims somewhat equally (53.7% and 46.3% of the time respectively), this does not engender a scenario of equality. It lends to the fostering of the perception that nobody is safe; both genders are equally at risk. But because men are more often the instigator, they are more likely to be seen as in control while females are seen as acquiescent.

Sexuality

In the past two decades, sexual content on television and in the movies has become more pervasive and explicit. Being sexy and engaging in sexual intercourse is depicted as a normal part of a popular, exciting, and glamorous female's life. Very seldom are consequences of sexual engagement addressed; most sexual encounters, unless relevant to the immediate story line, have no lasting effects. And when consequences are included, they are generally limited to physical, rather than emotional or social, consequences (Kunkel, Cope & Biely, 1999). Concerns and preventions of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy have only recently started to become addressed.

As well, in an examination of sexual consequences on teen programming, Aubrey (2004) found that there was a double standard with regards to the events that led up to and precipitated a detrimental outcome. She found that "negative consequences were more common in scenes in which female characters initiated sexual activities than in scenes in which males characters initiated sexual activities" (p. 505). 84 episodes of one-hour, prime-time, dramas that contained characters between the ages of 12 to 22 years were examined. It was found that if a male initiated sexual activities, 70% of the time there were no negative consequences. However, if a female initiated sexual activity, 60% of the time there were negative consequences. As well,

females were the receivers of these negative consequences 65.7% of the time while males received negative consequences only 34.3% of the time. This double standard leaves adolescent females with the impression that bad things will happen if they initiate sexual activity. It is safer to simply follow the male's lead. As well, it was found that males initiated sexual activity 60.5% of the time. This, along with the messages of perpetual danger from female sexual initiation, perpetuates the stereotype that it is socially normal, acceptable, and even desirable for men to approach sex in a more proactive manner while women should remain more passive and reactive.

Teen magazines also present over-sexualized images and messages. Pierce (1990) found that images in *Seventeen* portrayed girls as being “neurotic, helpless, and timid beings who must rely on external sources, usually men, to make sense of their lives” (p. 372). Evans, Rutberg, Sather, and Turner (1991) found that teen magazines perpetuated the belief that the ability to achieve successful interpersonal interactions occurred through the use of sexualized manipulation. Girls are taught that seductive poses, pouts, and stances are acceptable and necessary ways to be successful and attain fulfillment.

However, teen magazines present a conflicting message. Magazines provide young girls with instructions on how to attract and please men (Pierce, 1990). They teach girls the power and persuasiveness of their sexuality, yet at the same time, warn them that they are not to give into, or even acknowledge, their sexual desire (Durham, 1998). Their sexuality is to be used as a manipulative tool, not as a means for social interaction or personal pleasure. Through the use of provocative, yet innocently child-like, images, poses and dress, girls are taught to use their sexuality for gain but to resist all urges to follow through with sexual interactions.

In her study, Durham (1998) found many direct and indirect messages promoting adolescent girls to develop, maintain, and use their sexuality. Words such as “hot”, “sexy”, and

“kissable” were displayed prominently on the cover. Articles on exercise promoted the achievement of sexy and touchable bodies, rather than health and fitness. Fashion and beauty articles also focused on pleasing males, and then ways of using that approval to their advantage. Images of females in teen magazines portray girls as sexy, yet reserved; passionately desirous, yet coy. The sexual images presented to adolescent females in teen magazines were acute, while at the same time mixed and conflicting.

Self Esteem and Body Image

The media is an ever-pervasive influence, which helps to present, enforce, and maintain the perception that ultra-thin, non-average body forms should be the desired goal of all women. The portrayal of over-glamorized models presented in fashion magazines, television, and movies sends the message that in order for a female to be successful and accepted, she must be attractive and thin. It is ironic that:

[Our] culture’s obsession with thin ideals is played out in the media via models and actresses who may have eating disorders themselves, who may have personal trainers to help them maintain a thin body, and whose bodies, as portrayed through airbrushing and camera-angle techniques, may not even be their own. (Botta, p. 23)

This representation is not only reinforced in magazine articles, and television and movie story lines. These thin, beautiful bodies are used as commodities to sell everything from alcohol to cars. Directly, or indirectly, media send the message that character, personality, and social contribution are less important than appearance.

This is a negative message to send to any female. But it has a more devastating effect for adolescent girls. Because as Pipher (1994) says:

Girls have strong bodies when they enter puberty. But these bodies often soften and spread out in a way that our culture calls fat. Just at the point that their bodies are becoming rounder, girls are told that thin is beautiful, even imperative. (p. 55)

So at the point when girls' bodies are naturally changing and evolving, the media is telling them that their new, fuller bodies are unacceptable. The bombardment of these messages, compiled with emotional changes due to hormones, can result in a confusing and troubling time for adolescents.

Adolescent females are particularly vulnerable to the thin-promoting messages of the media because they are at a time in their lives when they are seeking outside information to form their self-identity (Botta, 1999). The conflict between their changing body and the media's message of acceptable body image can result in a lowering of self worth and acceptability. Pipher (1994) found that a negative perception of body image is positively correlated to a decrease in self-esteem and confidence of adolescent girls. When they believe that their body image does not meet the accepted ideal, adolescent girls' assessment of self and self-assurance becomes devalued.

This is supported by research done by Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2003). Adolescent females, between the ages of 13 and 15 were shown either 20 commercials containing images of idealized, thin females or 20 commercials with no idealized female forms. Those who viewed the thin ideal commercials reported relatively greater body dissatisfaction than those who viewed the non-idealized commercials. As well, the girls were later asked to partake in a word-stem completion task. Those who viewed the idealized commercials generated more appearance-related words than those who did not. This heightened responsiveness to appearance related cues indicated an increased beauty/thin schema activation. This demonstrates that for adolescent

females “one brief exposure to 20 images of the thin female ideal (of only about a 10-minute duration) can result in increased body dissatisfaction, and maintain a negative effect for at least 15 minutes after the exposure” (p. 372). And it needs to be pointed out that this is less exposure than a female would normally encounter while viewing an hour long program.

However, this reliance on the media for defining societal standards of beauty is not limited to young females. Rickins (1991) found similar results with a study of college students. In this study it was found that exposure to idealized images in advertising raised women’s comparison standards for attractiveness and lowered their satisfaction with their own attractiveness. Even the emotions and self-esteem of educated, young adults can be covertly manipulated through media visuals.

This acceptance of the media’s presentation of the ideal body image can result in more than just lowered self-esteem and confidence. Attempts to achieve the media’s vision of the ideal body form can lead to dangerous and health harming actions. In order to maintain this standard, adolescents can go to extremes. Some research states that two-thirds of high school females are either currently on a diet or intent to start one (Garner & Kearney-Cooke, 1996). Body dissatisfaction is the single strongest predictor of eating disorder onset (Phelps, Johnston & Augustyniak, 1999). And females who do diet are much more likely than non-dieters to later engage in more health risking behaviors and develop an eating disorder, such as bulimia or anorexia nervosa (Lowe et al, 1996).

Further studies has stated that there is an association between this damaging dieting behavior in women and the messages presented in mass media, especially women’s magazines (Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). At least 50% of all teenage girls are regular readers of fashion magazines (Nichter, 2000). A content analysis of Seventeen found that 50%

of all editorial copy was dedicated to physical beauty (Pierce, 1990). Is it any wonder that both anorexia and bulimia nervosa typically have their onset during late adolescence and are highly prevalent in this age group? Thomsen, Webber and Brown (2002), found that there is a positive correlation between the frequency with which high school girls read beauty and fashion magazines and their use of appetite suppressants, skipping two meals a day, intentional vomiting and laxative use. They also suggest that this problem takes on a dangerous, cyclical nature.

[A]s adolescent females make comparisons between themselves and the models in magazine photos, they come to accept these beauty ideals as realistically attainable goals. The more they desire to attain these goals, and, in turn, the more they read beauty and fashion magazines, the more they may be willing, or feel pressure, to try shortcuts or potentially harmful measure to attain them. (p. 15)

While magazine reading is more strongly correlated with eating disorders than television, television does contribute to body dissatisfaction (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Images of bodies of men and women shown on television are primarily thin and perfect (Van den Buick, 2000). Non idealized bodies are underrepresented and when they are portrayed it is usually because there is a connection to the story line. Overall television viewing is not significantly related to body dissatisfaction and a drive for thinness. However, certain television genres are more correlated to body image concerns; these include viewing soap operas, and music videos. Tiggemann and Pickering (1996) found that high music video consumption is a strong predictor of a high school girl's drive for thinness. Borzekowski et al. (2000) also found that the hours an adolescent girl spends watching music videos is related to how she perceives the importance of appearance, and body size and shape. Frequent music video viewing is a risk factor for increased perceived importance of appearance and increased weight concerns.

Other Issues

Little research has been done to look at the correlation between media exposure to, and influence on, academic achievement. It has been shown that the ever-present images of beauty, thinness, and sexuality have a profound influence on adolescent girls' beliefs and actions. Could the exclusion of other images also effect their perception of the importance of academics and careers? Adolescent girls have been found to emulate the destructive and health-harming behaviors portrayed on television. Is it possible that the absence of positive portrayals is resulting in the devaluation of such endeavors? If adolescent females are not shown images and portrayals of smart, academically motivated peers, could this influence them into believing that such accomplishments are unimportant and not worth striving for? More research could be done in this area.

Most research into adolescents' reaction to media has been done with middle class, white females. Very few studies take into account the influence of race, culture and class. Durham (1999) did look at how social context and ethnic background affect girls' interactions with media. Her findings showed that although race and class influenced who in the media the girls found iconic and worthy of emulation, overall themes and issues were similar. Girls had similar concerns about beauty and social acceptance; they just looked towards different celebrities and entertainers or genres of music and television programming to fulfill and influence their choices.

Much of the literature reviewed focused on the negative implications that media has on adolescent females' belief and interpretation of self. It was shown that certain media messages can have damaging consequences when adolescents use these ideas to view relationships, establish beliefs about their role in society, and set standards for their own attractiveness and self-worth. However, media can also be a source of invaluable information for adolescent girls.

By presenting contrary values and opinions, girls are exposed to new and innovative ideas. It gives them the chance to truly explore who they are and what they believe. It gives them the opportunity to delve into issues and topics that may previously have been presented as on-sided and absolute.

When experiencing difficulties or conflicts, adolescent girls can sometimes find examples and possible resolutions in the media's offerings. Although it has been shown that not all portrayals are accurate or beneficial when emulated, some portrayals of situations can show positive approaches to resolutions. Or females can be presented with exemplars of the consequences of negative actions; possibly discouraging them from undertaking the same actions. As well, as the media is becoming more inclusive with the characters and situations they portray, adolescent girls may be able to find positive role models and examples that may not be present in their daily lives. Homosexual teens, girls suffering from eating disorders, or victims of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse may find that they are not alone. More needs to be written on critiquing positive media messages.

Solutions

Research shows that the media can have a strong effect on how adolescent females view and interpret the world around them. Girls are looking to find their place in society and they use the media as a means to help define and explain their roles. Not all messages are positive, appropriate, or advantageous for adolescent girls. Many of the messages presented give adolescent females the impression that they naturally are expected to take a subservient and submissive role to men. The message is often given that women are not meant to be taken seriously. And their outer image and stature is more important than their character and inner strength.

Parents and teachers need to take an active role in helping adolescents understand and interpret the messages portrayed in the media. They need to engage in active, critical viewing to mediate the negative effects of media. Open dialogue can help adolescents gain a better grasp of realistic and attainable goals. As well girls are more likely to make positive choices if they are informed about the dangers associated with attempting to attain unrealistic body images.

Van Evra (1990) found that adolescents who have outside, competing information will be less vulnerable to influencing effects. This is especially true if they are taught to not perceive all incoming information as realistic and attainable. If adolescent do not perceive thin ideals on television as realistic, and they have outside information telling them they do not need to live up to those ideals, they will be less vulnerable to negative effects on body and self image. Open communication and realistic expectations will assist adolescent girls from falling prey to negative media influences.

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