

A study of media's influence over women identity essay



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The media has had a vast effect on the female-perception of identity over the past 50 years. Drawn to this topic by personal experience, we have each found that the media's influence over gender roles and the female identity is evident in our every day lives. Whether in television, advertising, the music industry, press, or pornography, our goal is to bring light to the different avenues used to influence the American-perception of the female identity in regards to beauty, role, and expectation. Thesis Statement The media's influence over the " American female identity" is made evident in the areas of:

Television - Television has been a staple-point of American society since the first TV's hit the market. In the early days of TV we saw women portrayed as the house wives, with shows such as, Leave it to Beaver, and Brady Bunch. Nowadays we have shows like Cougar Town, 16 and Pregnant, and Jersey Shore that show women in a much different light. Advertising - In the early 1900's the concept of bad breath was developed as a way to sell mouthwash. Our goal as a group will be to show what advertisements communicate in order to tell Women what they should look like, and/or how they should act.

We will look into magazine, television, and Internet advertisements. Music - From Janis Joplin to Katy Perry, women in music have had a strong influence over the female identity. As a group, our goal is to trace the subtle projections of gender roles in music, and the influence it's had over generations. Pornography - Pornography in western society has changed over the years in that women are portrayed in different ways than they were 60 years ago. Compared to the 1950's, where pornography still involved <https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-medias-influence-over-women-identity-essay/>

some amount of clothing, women of today's adult films wear next to nothing if anything at all.

This has changed the way that women have viewed their bodies in that women are so objectified in these films that modesty no longer exists.

Magazines - Images of female bodies are everywhere. Selling everything from cars to food. Women's magazines are full of articles urging to lose twenty more pounds so that they will have it all: the perfect marriage, loving children, and a great life. The high standards made by these magazines impose a harsh reality for women that you need the perfect body. Theories

Social Constructivism - the concept that one's perception, understanding and acceptance of surroundings is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978).

Whether in regards to beauty, gender roles or identity, the female identity is at the very least socially influenced, if not constructed. Sexual Objectification

Theory - Sexual objectification occurs when a person is identified by their body or gender and their worth is determined through such boundaries.

(Fredrickson, B. , 2007). In regards to beauty and the emphasis placed on the female body, the concept of becoming " de-humanized" and objectified comes up frequently in our study.

Representation - the notion of semiotics and representation as ways in which we can deconstruct the regimes of truth communicated to us through

ideological apparatuses. (Hall, 1997). The media's representation of the female identity -no matter how unrealistic- is accepted as reality. Cultural

Identity - Cultural Identity is the particular character of the group

communication system that emerges in the particular situation (Collier,

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1997). The evolution and presentation of the female identity is made evident through various mediums, and driven home by choice examples.

Literature Review Music There are a few aspects to consider when discussing why women are portrayed in music the way they are. Rap, and rock music plays a large role in the image women are given in society. However important aspects to consider are who is buying the music, and further perpetuating the stereotypes. I will go over who is responsible for that as well as, alternate solutions for women. The first article I came across about rap music was " Rap Music: Gender Difference in Derogatory Word Use" by Elizabeth Monk-Turner and D'Ontae Sylvertooth.

This article examines the origin of rap, the gender concerns, the perceived stereotypes, who listens to the music, and then the language used by the male rap artists versus female rap artists. This article was really helpful in that it was sort of an all encompassing article. Originally rap started on the streets of New York as a means of storytelling through the eyes of lower income minority groups trying to get their voice out. This is a stark contrast to the lyrical choices of rap today, which is more focused on how much money they have, or often sexually abusive language.

The article says there is much concern over the effect rap music may have on the sexism in not just relationships, but family life, and community. Female rap artists are recognized for their sort of counter culture and movement towards feminism. This was particularly interesting because this article puts a positive spin on female rap which often is very sexual, while another article I read which I discuss later doesn't seem to agree with the notion of sexual

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women being positive. Some of the stereotypes with rap music is that people will hear the lyrics and act out on what they hear.

However heavy metal music the violence and attitudes are seen to be brought on by the person listening to it. Which is an interesting racial aspect to consider, but that is a whole different paper altogether. They also find that males tend to listen to rap music at a much higher rate than women. Very interesting to consider when looking at who is perpetuating the stereotypes, and the sexist behavior. Lastly with the study conducted about language used by females as opposed to males " Specifically, female rappers were less likely to use the word ho, nigga or fuck in their music compared to male rap artists.

We did not find significant gender differences in the use of the words bitch, shit, or dick in the lyrics of male and female rap artists. " This was a bit surprising to me, and the authors of the article. Rap music continues to be one of the highest selling genres of music for people under the age of 20(Monk-Turner, 2006) And according to (Calvin Mcgee, Corbin & Klinger, 2003) " Representation not only means that advocates re-present something semiotically as a sign, it also means that they are representing as in a representative assembly.

So we can look at this to mean that, not only are these rap artists representing themselves, but they are representing their race, their culture, and even their socioeconomic class. So people will see this, and automatically stereotype and associate a particular group of people with having more of a misogynistic attitude. Also, young people will hear them

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talking that way, identify with them, and start acting that way themselves.

Which leads right into identity theory. " the human need to identify provides a rich resource for those interested in joining us or, more importantly, persuading us. (Quigley, 1999)

There are two important aspects of this to consider, those making the music, and those selling/buying the music. Those who are making the music don't fully grasp the impact that their image they are putting out has. Rappers will acknowledge that kids from the hood identify with them, but don't change their lyrics to more positive and gender equal. According to the Bell-Hooks video white suburban males are the largest buyers of rap music. The record executives know this, and like the theory says helps use it to persuade those particular youth into buying the records.

The simple solution would be to have the record executives stop producing misogynistic music for the mainstream, and to have rap artists produce gender equal music. The article looked at for a positive aspect of women was called " Alternative Feminist Media On The Airwaves: Radio and Women's Music" written by Julia Engstrom gives an overview and some insight into where women are in music today. The article begins with a brief history of music, and the hateful lyrics in rock music during the 70's. Then the article discusses female music, and different positive messages that come from it.

This is important for identity theory because it helps to gain an idea of what a positive feminist view is. Often times the problem is having something that can be identifiable. Lastly the article talked about the feminist radio shows.

These are shows produced by women, play music by women, and are

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(surprise) hosted by women. All of these are on alternative stations, which means they aren't on the mainstream radio. The shows will make announcements about feminist events in the area. There is a split between some of the feminist radio hosts. Some of the radio hosts won't even play women music if there are male members of the band.

However on a whole they play only music that portrays women in a positive light. The article doesn't mention artists like Katy Perry, so I am curious if they don't believe she puts women in a positive light. Overall this article gave good insight into a small subculture of women on the radio. This article works well with the theory of representation and identity because they are creating an identity of "positive feminism", but also to an outsider representing what they believe feminism should be. This alternative feminist radio is a bit of a double-edged sword as they say.

It's good that women get their own station, and have a chance to stand on a soapbox and promote feminism, but by having their own stations that only plays women music it says that women are not equal to men. It puts a message that the only way that they can get their music played and their voice across is if it's done on a small station that nobody listens to. The other problem with this article is that it puts feminism in a very old frame. The women of today might be more open with their sexuality and by not allowing them to voice that side of them to, it creates another inequality of women to men.

Back to the theory of identity, it tells women that they can't be sexually promiscuous, otherwise they are not being a good feminist. "the power and

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magic of women's music to communicate a feminist message, create awareness about women's issues, or simply to exist as an alternative to the dominant culture holds much potential for making real change" (Engstrom, 2008). While rap music continues to be one of the most popular genres of music, this year we saw four of the top artists were female. Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry are four very different artists that send out very different messages.

Lady Gaga is kind of weird, creative, and does whatever she feels, often sexual. Taylor Swift plays off of her being a "nerd" but all in all has a clean image. Miley Cyrus just turned eighteen recently, and is the Disney starlet who is suppose to represent the wholesome girl but is often found doing sexually inappropriate acts for her age. Lastly there's Katy Perry who isn't afraid to show off her body, sings about kissing a girl, often has some sexual lyrics, very creative and innovative, but ultimately never caught doing anything crazy. Why is this important?

According to (Calvin Mcgee, Corbin, & Klinger, 2003) " So representation, especially in a liberal state, always already has a political cast to it. You do not simply make a film, or tell a story, you make a representation, and in so doing, you represent someone, some group, some cause, or some history" With the exception of one of the artists above, most of these girls unintentionally or not, are promoting high sexuality amongst girls. Someone like Miley Cyrus who the young girls have seen and identified with at a very early age especially has an impact because she almost acts as an older sister.

Lady Gaga was the most googled item, and has the youtube video with the most amount of views ever. Katy Perry has had two of the highest played songs already this year. Perhaps the sexual promiscuousness of women is not a negative representation of women, but a different representation. Fifty years ago, this may not have been acceptable, and that is why there is a backlash against these women. This is actually a sign of the empowerment and equality of women in the music industry.

Playing devils advocate, one might question why it's acceptable for those artists to throw around their sexual drive, but it's a bad thing when rap music does it. To that I would counter, in terms of gender equality, it's much more acceptable to see a woman doing it on her own creative terms as opposed to a girls seemingly sexual zombies in some of the rap videos. Magazine From the earliest moment in time, women have been represented in the world of magazines. The world of magazines is known for the social changes that are made and is the main form of mass media today.

When you consider the role of the media and its representation concerning women, there is a serious problem with not only fashion models, but also women in every walk of life. For instance, the new technology in Photoshop has the most beautiful women into even more unrealistic forms of " perfect. " Magazines give a statement to women readers about what it truly means to be a woman in this culture. This ideal beauty that these advertisements display gives a message to women about the importance of how they look on the outside. These images of skinny models turned into objects create a struggle for women to identify themselves as well.

Women in their middle ages go through an identity crisis because they compare their bodies with the women in magazine and advertisements. Woodward describes “ identity crisis are conflicting ethnic and national identities to re-emerge to break down existing identities” (Woodward, 1997). The representation of thin women leads to serious eating disorders ranging from anorexia or bulimia. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. In the eyes of society, women like Pamela Anderson, Tyra Banks and Carmen Electra are the epitome of perfection. What girl would not want to look like them?

As Aronson mentions how “ both visually and verbally, between and within departments, and even between editorial and advertising, the women’s magazine has offered multiple, and sometimes conflicting, images and ideas” (Aronson, 2010). Unfortunately, a number of girls want to be just like them. Every year, millions of people are hurting themselves trying to be carbon copies of these sex symbols. The media presents society with unrealistic body types promoting people, especially women, to look like them. Through TV shows, commercials, magazines or any form of advertising, the media enforces a certain body type which women emulate.

The so-called ideal perfect body type causes many negative effects on women in the US. Women who focus on unrealistic body images tend to have lower self-esteem and are more likely to fall prey to eating disorders. The media has a dangerous influence on women’s health in the United States. “ Women’s magazines are full of articles urging that if they can just lose those last twenty pounds, they’ll have it all—the perfect marriage, loving children, great sex, and a rewarding career” (Gerber, 2003). The magazine racks in

any local store are saturated with magazines highlighting beautiful women adorning the covers.

Women's identity is misconstrued through the many headlines and advertisements the media portrays. Commercials on TV feature tall, thin women promoting a certain product. The media presents an unrealistic body type for girls to look up to. Their self-identity does not reflect on images from everyday life, but instead media has created confusion for young women overtime to learn their own cultural identity. " When the groups also have a history and begin to hand down the symbols and norms to new members, then the groups take on cultural identity" (Collier, 1997).

When walking around in any place, very few people look like the women in commercials, most of them thin. Because flawless images appear so often in daily life, it's hard to remember they're not real and often many girls don't. They hold themselves up to these images and feel the only way they can live life to its fullest is to look like these people. Younger women especially feel that others will ascribe to their looks and compare them to what the " norm" for what is a real woman supposed to look like. These ascriptions are " the process by which others attribute identities to an individual.

Even if someone is at their perfect weight, it's easy to feel like a failure when comparing to a movie star or to Seventeen's cover girl. Advertising Age International concluded that the incident " made clear the influence wielded by advertisers who remain convinced that only thin models spur the sales of beauty products" (Gerber, 1997). We believe that these women need to have awareness of their own identity. Their identity is a " social

construction that gives the individual an ontological status of a sense of “being” and expectations for social behavior ways of “acting” (Yep, 1998).

Television “The Elastic Body Image: The Effect of Television Advertising and Programming on Body Image Distortions in Young Women”, an article published 2006 in a Journal of Communication, describes a study where women were exposed to differentiating types of commercials, and their varying “self-perceived body image”. In essence, women felt better about themselves when watching commercials featuring more “realistic”-looking women, and felt more depressive when exposed to air-brushed, photo shopped women.

This range of self-esteem, in relation to body, is called “elastic body image”. This concept of an “elastic body image” can be seen over history, in regards to the ever-changing presentation of the female identity in television.

Women respond differently to different stereotypes presented. As stereotypical female characters are presented, society subconsciously accepts and constructs related gender roles and expectations. Adversely, women feel a need to match, or live-up-to, what is presented as desirable in the media.

The theory of “social constructionism” supports this seemingly inescapable phenomena: the female identity (be it beauty, work-ethic, role, or degree of modesty) is socially constructed and perpetuated by the media. In a 1998 article dubbed “Role of television in adolescent women’s body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness”, published in the the International Journal of Eating Disorders, a controlled group of 94 young women

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(adolescents) were given a series of questionnaires, regarding the amount of television watched in the past week.

Also monitored were their individual degrees of " body dissatisfaction" and the desire to be thin. As results were analyzed, it was found that the amount of time spent watching television was not as relevant, but rather the " type" of show was found to be tied to the levels of body dissatisfaction and thinness-drive. As more TV movies, soap operas, sports programs and other similar shows were watched, body dissatisfaction increased, while watching MTV (music videos) generated an increase in the drive for thinness.

Another article from the Journal of Feminism, entitled " What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s" , describes a study based on the correlation between conscious-gender roles of the 1950's, and the media's perpetuation of such in the presented characters of daytime television programs. Namely, the female identity is explored. As the article goes on to describe everything from style to lesbianism, I feel the most relevant presentation can be seen in the well-loved character of Lucy (Lucille Ball) from I Love Lucy. While adventurous and relatively unpredictable, Lucy's character presented a modest view of women.

Following the Baby Boomer-era of expectations, Lucy was a homemaker, respectfully dressed, and subservient to her husband. Obviously, gender roles and expectations have changed dramatically since then. Let's look at some examples of this dramatic change and the media's presentation of the female identity: June Cleaver; Loyal. Trustworthy. Home-cookin'. Soft-spoken. Hard worker. Modest. These are some adjectives that may come to mind

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when you think of the wildly popular mom from the 50's sitcom, "Leave It To Beaver". At the time, Mrs. Cleaver symbolized the (then) ideal and classic female identity.

Now let's flash forward forty years or so (1996). Intro: Ally McBeal. Loyal? Sure. Hard working? You better believe it. Modest? Not quite. Soft-spoken. Never. Stay at home? Wrong time-period. The TV character, Ally McBeal, represents the modern-day female role -the "I can take care of myself" identity... and rightfully so! Historically, much had changed since the 50's and the June Cleaver-character simply wasn't culturally relevant. Whether consciously or sub-consciously, the network's presentation of McBeal served as a sign of the times.

Simultaneously, shows like Friends and ER were also being aired, featuring similarly presented female characters. Another example of the inherent change of the female identity in the media can be seen in regards to beauty. In the 1950's, Marilyn Monroe was considered to be one of the most remarkably beautiful women in the media. Blonde and blue-eyed, she was also considered to be somewhat "scandalous", in regards to modesty. Looking back, however, the most popular photo made public by Monroe, featured her classic "my dress is being lifted by a gust of wind, but I'm going to hold it down because I'm modest"-pose.

Again, flash forward roughly 50 years. Through a bit of research, it was discovered that one of the modern-day equivalents of Marilyn Monroe is none other than pop-sensation, Katy Perry. Blue-eyed and naturally blonde, the majority of Katy's promotional pictures feature her dressed in cleavage-

bearing outfits, bikinis... or cotton-candy (as seen on a recent cover shoot). Needless to say, the acceptable presentation of beauty in the media has intensely shifted since the days of Marilyn Monroe. While television might simply act as a representation of an ever-changing female identity, it's not unreasonable to see the perpetuation therein.

As demonstrated by the "social constructionist" theory, beauty and identity are elusive ideas that can be powerfully constructed, based on public perception and expectation. As media/television networks present different outstanding female "characters" (with the "perfect" body, and "perfect" creed) as the norm, the public subconsciously accept it as such. It is in this manner, that the media has utilized television as a means to broadcast the "evolving" image and identity of women in America.