Adolescent Perception of Female Representation in Television and its Impact on Adolescent Views on Female Gender Roles

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ABSTRACT

With recent increases in the number of women represented in television, changes have occurred in the way women are depicted on screen. The changes in representation provoke the question of the accuracy and stereotypes the women contain. Research has found that though women are beginning to be found more frequently in the workplace or school-life, they are mostly found to be depicted in a traditionally stereotypical manner with their storylines revolving around family, romance, home-life, and physical appearance. As adolescents are at an age where their gender identities are being formed, it is pertinent to investigate how humans at the adolescent stage of life are influenced by television, especially due to the increased access to technology with recent generations. Studies in the field have used the theories of Social Cognitive Theory and Cultivation Theory in order to assert that the more individuals consume television, the more their thoughts, behaviors, and actions are impacted by these representations. However, in contrast, researchers have also found that viewers are able to resist messaging in television to prefer their own values, rejecting the influence of television. The following paper will look into how adolescents specifically perceive female gender roles. Through an analysis of three focus groups, a qualitative study was conducted to collect data on how or if adolescents are impacted by the female representation they see on screen and what they believe the current state of representation for women on television is.

Introduction

In an age where access to television has become increasingly prevalent, more people are being exposed to female representation on television. From 2021-2022, females represented 50% of major characters on streaming programs, a recent historic increase from the previous year, with 48% (Lauzen, 2022). This increase in representation is significant when compared to the first year in which this study was done, 1999, where women made up only 25-36% of all characters in film (Lauzen & Dozier, 1999). Depictions of women are important because they may provide humanizing examples that serve as a basis for more socially tolerant attitudes (Brock & Green, 2005). The existence of recurring female characters increases the social tolerance of those watching media with little or no female representation, showing the impact of representation on one's beliefs (Garretson, 2015). Furthermore, representation has an impact on an individual's behavior and sense of self, making analysis crucial (Chan et al, 2010). Adolescents are specifically important to investigate as the media has an especially strong influence over individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors for those just beginning to form their identities and opinions (Gonta et al, 2017). Because of high pressure during middle childhood to conform to gender stereotypes, gender roles play a large part in self-identity (Ey, 2014). This paper will conduct a study in order to analyze how the perception of gender roles in adolescents has changed as a result of television, as well as how adolescents themselves perceive the women they see on television. In other words, the paper aims to investigate the question: how do adolescents perceive female representation in television, and how does this impact the way they view gender roles for women? For the purpose of this paper, gender roles are defined as "expectations designated by society relating to behaviors, interests, presentation and activities

pertinent to one's sex" (Ey, 2014, p. 147). The hypothesis proposed in this paper is that television influences adolescents by leading them to believe that women's representation in shows reflects that of real life.

Literature Review

Influence of Television Representation

When looking at the already existing literature on this topic, there are many interpretations of the stereotypes on television about gender roles. The importance of these stereotypes is that as they teach attitudes and behaviors, children who prefer these shows can conform to the norms set in the shows (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). However, some audience-focused studies have also claimed that viewers often resist the dominant messaging of television, and instead interpret it in ways that suit their own interests (Dow, 1996). The theory that audiences resist messaging on television in order to fit their own views opposes the previously mentioned idea that the media plays a large role in shaping the perceptions of its viewers. Contrastingly, it has been found that shows tend to exaggerate real-life circumstances and assumptions so realistically to the point where viewers are unable to differentiate between the real world and the on-screen one (Kumari & Joshi, 2015). Consequently, research has indicated that television may interfere with traditional gender ideology formation processes, ultimately resulting in different beliefs than what one's physical environment would produce (Coombe & Davis, 2013). This is consistent with the ideologies of Cultivation Theory in which television leads to viewers perceiving on-screen depictions as synonymous with reality (Hughes, 1980). Though Cultivation Theory is widespread, some analysts have criticized it for its ambiguity and lack of empirical support, stating that due to the initial absence of specificity in the claim, it appears weak in contrast to other media effect theories (Potter, 2014). Alongside cultivation theory, another theory that is typically used when analyzing media is Social Cognitive Theory which states that human behavior is learned and modeled through events and social input such as those seen on television (Bandura, 2002). Both theories indicate that representations of women in media will influence the thoughts and actions of the viewers, supporting the previously stated hypothesis of this paper. As a result of the aforementioned theories, analyzing viewer perceptions is a tool complementary to the routine content analysis of behaviors and demographics that are typically researched (Glascock, 2003).

Representation of Women in Media

Women are characterized on television through a multitude of stereotypes and norms, both positive and negative. Media can either reinforce gender-based discrimination through stereotypes of women or address gender bias in a way that empowers women (Kumari & Joshi, 2015). However, women are typically shown in stereotypical ways, such as being defined solely on their appearance or their behavior in relationships, while having limited personality traits and roles (Ward & Grower, 2020). Television tends to depict more traditional gender roles such as women at home with children while men work to earn money for the family (Coombe & Davis, 2013). These traditional roles are reinforced by the idea that female characters must ultimately concede to the conventional narrative of family and heterosexual romance that is depicted in many television series (Rabinovitz, 1989). Additionally, it was found that marriage, home, family, and romance, were all considered important aspects of how female characters are portrayed, and these ideas were much more developed in them compared to their male counterparts (Signorielli, 1982). While some television does characterize women as powerful, "even when women are presented as power holders, the patriarchal context is unmistakably present" (Kaul & Sanhi, 2017, p. 15). Female stereotypes are made to cater to the male gaze in response to the subconscious influence of patriarchal social structures, explaining the stereotypes that represent the majority of televised female characters (Mulvey, 1975). Alongside traditionally stereotyped representation, women are underrepresented in media as well, leading to a lack of diverse female role models on television (Collins, 2011). However, as television has evolved, so have depictions of women. Along with the increase in female characters in general

on television, there has been a shift in how women are represented from a private familial sphere in the home to a larger one consisting of work and employment, expanding the range of female characters (Garretson, 2015). Still, even though women are getting more diverse roles, when they are depicted as competing with men in a professional setting, they are outnumbered and considered deviations from the norm (Kaul & Sanhi, 2017).

Gap in Research

The gap that is addressed by my research is that there is a lack of research regarding how television impacts the way gender roles for women are perceived by adolescents, specifically of generation Z. Similar research has mostly been on different age groups, such as Kaul and Sanhi, who research a similar topic on portrayals of women in television, using thirty-five to fifty-year-old married couples as participants (Kaul & Sanhi, 2017). Additionally, research has also been conducted on children's beliefs as a result of television, specifically looking at elementary-aged students (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). Studying adolescent perceptions provides a new perspective on how television portrayals impact views on female gender norms. Studies that focus on adolescents' perceptions have typically focused on a wider range of media, rather than narrowing down their scope to television. They discuss high schooler perception of gender norms based on content such as television, music videos, sports programming, and movies (Ward & Friedman, 2006; Ward, 2005). Additionally, the research on women's representation mostly consists of textual analysis on how the media presents women, rather than the way viewers perceive that portrayal and how that impacts their own views. Lauzen and her colleagues provide an example of this as they examine one-hundred twenty four prime-time television shows in order to analyze gender stereotypes in them (Lauzen et al, 2008). Another form of research on this subject is a specific analysis of one show, such as a study done by Garcia-Muñoz and Fedele where they examined the show Dawson's Creek's representation of gender (Garcia-Muñoz & Fedele, 2011). Rather than choose specific shows to investigate their representation, I will be looking at how adolescents are shaped by the television they see, specifically when it comes to female gender roles, providing a different perspective than previously researched work.

Methodology

Procedure

The method which will be used in this data analysis is qualitative research utilizing focus groups to research my topic. Focus groups/interview format studies align with researching perceived norms as they offer insight into individual, but also adolescents as a group's, viewer perception, therefore, previous analyses regarding Cultivation and Social Cognitive Theory have utilized this format as mentioned above. The lack of personalization and elaboration makes using a questionnaire format for my research difficult as it wouldn't provide the same amount of details that in-person meetings can provide. Attitudes, feelings, and beliefs are more likely to be revealed in a social focus group setting than in other forms of data collection (Gibbs, 1997). Using three one-hour focus groups of around three to four adolescents, I will run a qualitative study on the way television shapes how adolescents view gender norms for women. During the focus groups, six questions as well as any required follow-ups were prompted to the group. Participants were told that the questions were a tool for group discussion rather than individual interviews, allowing for the participants to discuss with one another while the researcher facilitated the conversation. The group was first asked to speak about the type of television they watched as well as how the women are characterized in those shows. Then, the group was prompted to discuss more specifically women's roles and jobs in shows they have seen. Lastly, the groups were asked to explain how/if their thoughts on women's roles had changed as a result of the shows.

Participant Pool

The focus groups consist of a total of thirteen participants over the course of three sessions. The focus group was targeted toward any high school student, with its only criteria being that they fit the age range of adolescents in order to get objective and varied results. The participants were required to fill out a prerequisite questionnaire in order to confirm that they were in the demographic necessary for the focus group. All participants were ninth to twelfth graders from the same high school, with the majority being ten eleventh grade participants along with one student from each other grade. Though the selection of participants did not take into account race or gender, 30% of participants were male, 15% were non-binary, and 65% were female. The racial makeup of the participants consisted of a majority of Asian participants, 54%, followed by 38% White, and 8% Black. These racial groupings were divided according to the US Census Bureau and do not account for ethnic breakdowns. Additionally, the questionnaire was a tool used in order to acquire parental consent for all participants.

Analysis

The focus group allowed the participants to speak about any television series that they had seen that felt applicable to them. Therefore, a multitude of diverse television was mentioned. However, some shows were common across groups, with many participants having watched them. The shows many participants have seen were given more importance in the study as they show a broader impact on the focus group.

The data was analyzed through descriptive codes. These common phrases were seen through many of the responses as to what the participants see on television when it comes to gender norms. The codes were drawn from responses to six questions posed to the participants throughout the course of the focus group.

The exact questions asked to the participants are listed below:
1. What are some television shows that you have watched or are currently watching?
2. What draws you to the shows you watch, and what overall messages do you learn?
3. What do you notice about the female characters in the shows you watch?
4. What are the activities that these women typically do during the shows you watch?
5. What are some commonalities among how women's labor is represented in the shows you watch?
6. How have your thoughts on women's roles changed as a result of television?

Across all six questions, the participants were asked to elaborate on the actions of the female characters as well as how they are characterized by the television that they watch. In the table below, the codes are written along with the frequency that they were mentioned by focus group participants. The codes have been divided between observations the participants made about shows they watched and changes they saw in their personal views.

Elaborating on the first code, Independent, a common subject that focus group participants discussed was the representation of women as strong, independent characters in the television they viewed. Examples were Kim Wexler from the show *Better Call Saul* and Hori from the animated Japanese series *Horimiya*. Participants found both characters to be strong independent characters who were firm in what they believed and wanted. Horimiya was brought up as an example of a female character who was strong as she took care of her brother all alone and was an outspoken individual in all her relationships. One participant mentioned the fact that Hori's character was the more dominant person in her relationship with the male lead of the series, Miyamura. Other shows mentioned by participants as showing strong female characters were *Attack on Titan* and *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*. Participants explained that they saw these characters as fighters who were powerful.

Codes	Frequency
Codes on Participant's Observations	
Independent	2
Burden	3
Kind	3
Sexualization	2
Need to be Helped	3
Codes on Personal Views	
Unchanged	8
Limiting	2
Normalized Behaviors	3

The second code Burden was shown in the participants finding many instances where women had the burden or responsibility in various scenarios. Participants found that female characters ended up doing the brunt of the work when compared to their male counterparts, whether it be emotionally, or physically. For example, one show discussed was SpyXFamily, a Japanese animated series centering around a spy who gets married and adopts a child to go undercover. Participants pointed out that the character of the wife, Yor, played into traditional household roles of cooking, cleaning, and caring for their daughter, even though she was secretly an assassin. The group furthered that regardless of women having strengths, they saw that they ultimately had to play into the "housewife" role. Another group of participants brought up similar themes but focused on that of mothers in American television. They discussed how in the Disney show, *Good Luck Charlie*, the mother was always carrying or folding laundry among other housekeeping activities. Participants found that in the shows they watched, women were always doing something, with one participant citing that they were "never allowed to be idle". They gave examples of women getting groceries, doing laundry, cleaning the house, and cooking, whereas male characters were permitted to "sit around on the couch with a beer watching tv". This contrast was highlighted in a single example stated by one of the participants in which they spoke of a scene they saw frequently in shows where a male character would make breakfast in bed for their female significant other. They explained how when the man cooked for his partner, it was viewed as a huge favor and extremely romantic, but it was just an expected norm for the female characters. Another factor that participants found contributed to female characters' burdens was the emotional ones they carried in their relationships. Many shows depicted mothers as the ones who played a nurturing role in their families such as Ginny and Georgia or Grey's Anatomy, where participants noticed women being single mothers and caring for their kids alone. Participants expressed how they felt as if women were involved if there was an "emotional moment" between two characters, whether it be romantic or maternal. The participants also found that in their opinions, the representation of women varied based on the genre of television they were watching.

The third code, Kind, expressed how participants found the female characters in shows they watched to be valued for being nice and happy. The show that was mentioned was *Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse* where participants

found that there was a sharp contrast between the two characters Barbie, the main character, and Racquelle, the antagonistic character. Participants stated how they saw that Barbie was portrayed as always being overly kind and sweet whereas Raquelle was villainized, being shown as snarky and angry. Racquelle's character showed how female characters feeling emotions other than being nice were seen as evil or annoying characters. Another show that participants found similar themes was the show, *Gilmore Girls*. The protagonist Rory Gilmore was portrayed as a sweet girl who was adored by everyone while her rival Paris Geller was a workaholic. Both of these characters were viewed by participants as having one-dimensional roles with Rory being very popular with men and dating frequently whereas Paris was never presented that way and rarely found love. This was similar to the idea presented by Barbie that the antagonistic, annoying character that rivals the main character was viewed as not what women should be, instead that they should be kind and happy. Another place that participants saw this idea was in kdramas, or Korean dramas. A kdrama mentioned was *Agency,* a show where the main character, a woman who runs a company, is a cold and unloving workaholic. Though these characteristics are also found in her male counterparts, they are perceived as driven whereas she is viewed as being a rude person. The idea that women needed to be kind to be valued was furthered by the shows. Participants found that female characters were portrayed as submissive, overly emotional, and childlike, which they found inauthentic. Depictions of women were shown as conceding to men in social and professional settings rather than standing their ground or challenging the status quo. Shows also, as participants expressed, gave female characters childlike traits, such as having them act naive and younger than their age. This behavior was perceived by participants as unlike how women would act in real life. They characterized this as "bad representation", as it did not reflect how women at the age they were cited as being in the shows acted and talked. Alternatively, another argument was made that there was a stereotype for a strong female character as being snarky, witty, and cool. A participant claimed that this led to a very one-dimensional idea of feminism with characters having to behave a certain way to be the "feminist version of a character". However, some participants also thought that certain characters did a very good job of showing the multitudes of female characters' personalities, specifically using the character of Faye Valentine in *Cowboy Bebop*. One participant cited Faye Valentine's range of character by explaining how though she was portrayed as a strong character, she also struggled with a gambling addiction coupled with an identity crisis due to memory loss, making her dynamic in contrast to other female characters that felt flatter due to only being positive.

Another topic touched on by focus groups was their observation of the fourth code, Sexualization, of female characters in television shows. Participants found that women were dressed in less clothing even in times that would require more protection, such as battle scenes. They cited animated series that portrayed women as having small and ill-made armor whereas their male counterparts were given full body protection. Another way participants saw a discrepancy in the amount of clothing, as well as body proportions, characters were given was in designs of animated characters such as in Winx Club, where female characters were found to be extremely skinny, have small waists, and wear tight clothing.

Additionally, focus group participants also spoke about the idea that women Need To Be Helped or saved, the fifth code, in the shows they watched. Participants pointed to the relationship between Barbie and Ken, her boyfriend, in *Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse* as an example of female dependence on male characters. Despite Barbie having had many jobs and experiences, her boyfriend Ken was the one who would do all the construction work for her. Anything related to the building of the house was delegated to Ken, and so was the making of Barbie's car. Dramas such as *True Beauty*, a kdrama, and *The Rational Life,* a Chinese drama, or cdrama, were brought up to show the idea that female characters always had to have men save the day for them. Ultimately, their plots ended up revolving around the male leads in the story. In the case of *True Beauty,* participants expressed how the story was originally about a girl who put on makeup after being bullied but eventually led to her main story being around two prospective love interests. This idea was similarly brought up in *The Rational Lif*e where participants explained how even though the female lead was the boss of her company and her love interest was an intern, he was always solving her problems. They saw this as pushing the narrative that "men are better than women" by showing that the smartest

woman at the company couldn't solve the problems her male love interest was able to. This idea was further illustrated by the example that in conversation, her love interest always had to "one up her and be smarter".

Lastly, after being asked about what they saw in the television they watched, the participants were asked how that television impacted their own perceptions of women's gender roles. The responses varied from no change in perceptions to having an influence on their character. The majority of participants, however, explained that they felt as if the representation of women on television did not change their perceptions of women's role in a household. They explained that their idea of gender norms in a household was already set and therefore unchanged by the media they consumed. Their reasoning was that as they grew and consumed media, they learned to "take things with a grain of salt" and realized that not all characterization is accurate. However, participants found that in their youth, the television they consumed impacted them much stronger than what they watched as adolescents. Some female participants explained that the strong female representation of characters in their youth inspired them to be stronger and fight for what they wanted. Contrastingly, others concluded that the television they watch reinforced patriarchal values in childhood. Though many participants felt as if their thoughts on gender roles were already set, others felt that the media they watched influenced how they viewed women to a larger extent. Participants commented on how female characters being only strong can lead to "putting yourself into a box" in terms of feeling like in order to be strong like one character, you cannot show emotions or feel things. They added that it made them feel like showing those feelings would prevent them from being like a "character that people wanted to be". One participant expressed that the portrayal of women in television led to them feeling a dislike for women as a result of the way they were presented as having a limited range of emotions compared to their male counterparts. They added that this led them to prefer male characters because they were more "dynamic and relatable" whereas they viewed the female characters as "cringe". Due to this aversion to female characters, they internalized and agreed with the idea of women being unlikeable and felt that this representation led them to reject the idea of femininity as a whole. Additionally, some participants fell in the middle of both sides and thought that the media they saw influenced their views by normalizing the behaviors presented on television for women. Some participants explained that though their views themselves didn't change as a result of representation in television, seeing that depiction of women made them more aware of those stereotypes. In that way, they expressed that the representation of women they saw normalized that behavior for women in their eyes, but they refuted these norms based on their personal beliefs regarding gender roles for women.

General Discussion

When cross-examining the data collected of the participants' perceptions contrasted to the depictions of women in media that researchers have found previously, it can be seen that many similar themes arise. Participants noticed representations of women typically doing housework or in inferior roles to men. This was supported by the data found earlier through other studies. Additionally, the findings somewhat affirmed Cultivation and Social Cognitive Theory by expressing that adolescents felt impacted by television viewing in the context of appropriate social behavior for women. Moreover, the findings added complexities by presenting the idea of gender conformity struggles and rejection as a result of representation presented on television. However, many participants also supported Dow's conclusion that viewers were able to resist messaging in media in preference to their already formed social values. All results of the study conformed to similar theories published in the 1980s reflecting the longevity of these themes in the treatment of women in media.

Conclusion

In conclusion, adolescents perceived television as portraying women in a variety of primarily negative ways. The participants found that female characters were sexualized, portrayed as weak or needy, having the majority of burdens in relationships, and needing to be overly kind. Though some participants pointed out positive examples of female

strength, citing female characters as being portrayed as independent, they concluded that this was out of the norm and breaking stereotypes, making it evident that in their perceptions, female characters were typically portrayed unlike the examples they gave. Adding on, participants found that television either did not affect their perceptions of gender roles as they were able to resist messaging, they were influenced by their stereotypes when they were younger, or that female representation normalized behaviors depicted on screen for women in their lives. The majority of participants fell into the category of viewers who believed that though they are able to resist changing their beliefs as a result of television depictions of gender roles now, they played a role in normalizing typically stereotyped actions for women in their lives, whether it be in childhood, or in the shows they watch in the present day. Implications of this research include the reinforcement of the importance of increasing diversity in representation. The study also offers a model to those in the television industry of how certain characterizations are perceived by adolescents. Additionally, the research finds that even with the recently increased diversity in women's representation, many characters are stereotyped depictions that adolescents view as inaccurate to real life. While many participants explain that their views have not changed as a result of television, their responses highlight the impact of gender norms in television on normalizing that behavior in their eyes, further reinforcing that increased caution and effort should be made in terms of what representation of female gender norms gets depicted on television for adolescent audiences.

With the conclusion that though television impacted many adolescents' views on gender roles for women by normalizing behavior, but they resisted that messaging, it can be seen that further research should be done on how television is impacting adolescent viewers on a larger scale. The validity of both Cultivation and Social Cognitive Theory should continue to be studied in order to further analyze their accuracy. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of portraying women in a more authentic fashion on television, one that reflects the diversity of women that exist as many participants cited many stereotypical female depictions. It is important to discuss how television will continue to depict women, but also how to mold positive and diverse characters for the future. A topic touched on in this paper that could be elaborated on is the impact of female stereotypes on non-binary individuals, especially those who were assigned female at birth. This is a topic with room for further research as it opens the door to discussion on feelings on gender identity as a result of female gender norms, especially restrictive ones, depicted on television. The results also indicate that further research should be conducted on not just how adolescents react to messaging in television shows, but also, how younger children react to them. Many participants expressed feelings that when they were young, they were more susceptible to influence from the female representation in television, showing that even before adolescence, research should be done on the impacts of television representation and stereotypes. Contrastingly, further research should also be done on resistance to messaging on gender norms by adolescents. Participants in this study explained that in their view, they felt as if no change to their beliefs had been done by television. However, this does not account for subconscious influences, something that could potentially be investigated further by using sample depictions of women, to test not just for what the participants think their views are, but to gain deeper insight into their internal thoughts.

Limitations

The implications of this study are limited by the fact that the focus group had only thirteen students from one area. The participants also were all attending the same high school, further limiting the sample diversity. The sample also had a lack of range in terms of age breakdown, with the majority, 62%, of participants being seventeen years old. For further research, a larger sample size would be preferred to find larger implications that represent a wider pool of adolescents.

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