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The Sexual Image of Women in Television:

The Effect on Young Women in America

Amanda Reed and Rachel Rogers

The purpose of this study was to look at the portrayal of the sexual image of women on television from 1970 through 2000 by rating the main female character on an appearance and communication score, which was done by the two experimenters. We hypothesized that the stereotypical appearance and communication score would increase from 1970 to 2000. However, the trend analysis showed that the appearance score decreased, implying that the stereotypical appearance of women has lessened through the years. The communication score increased from 1980 to 2000, implying a more stereotypical portrayal of women. If future, more thorough research finds the same communication trend, then this could potentially imply that adolescent women's self-esteem is negatively affected by the media.

“Self-esteem is defined as an individual's global positive or negative attitude toward him or herself” (Bush, Simmons, Hutchinson, & Blyth, 1977, p.463).

The media has had an increasingly important role over the last few decades in the lives of adolescents. Teenagers have been exposed to more media through the advancement of technology such as Internet, cable television, and a greater distribution of magazines and other printed materials. These forms of media have played a large role in the self-concept of many teenagers, especially young women. The following studies have shown that an increased amount of exposure to television sit-coms for young females has a negative impact on their self-esteem.

The purpose of this study was to show the influence of changing gender roles in the media, and how that change affects young women in America. We wanted to know if the negative sexual image of women portrayed in the media is related to a lower self-esteem rate of young girls. We believe that the image of women in television has changed over the last fifty years. While opportunities have increased for women in the media, our hypothesis is that the negative sexual image of women has also increased.

Society's attitudes towards young women that are portrayed in the media can have a large effect on a young girl's self-esteem (Galambos, Peterson, Richards, & Gitelson, 1985). Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1994) came up with the term cultivation theory to describe how repeated exposure to television shows can lead viewers to adopt the situations as a reality. From this we can gather that if a young girl were to repeatedly view a certain situational comedy, she would begin to think of this as its own reality, possibly causing her to compare herself to the other female characters. According to Galambos et al., women tend to base their self-concept on society's attitudes about their gender. In a study by Harter (1999), the link between positive perceived appearance and self-esteem had a correlation of .65 in the United States among adolescents. According to Champion and Furnham (1999), self-esteem can either come from an internal or a societal ideal; however, both actually result from what society's attitude is about the perfect physique.

Festinger's social comparison theory says that people tend to compare themselves to others either by downward or upward comparisons (as cited in Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004). For example, some people look to the wealthy for style trends and feel badly about him or herself because one cannot afford the name brands. However, another person may choose instead to look at how little poorer people have, and feel better about him or herself.

Downward comparisons usually produce high self-esteem and upward comparisons usually produce low self-esteem (Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004). A study by Morrison et al. found that socially comparing oneself to celebrities such as found in television and magazines had a negative impact on the self-esteem of adolescent girls. Therefore, it is important to see how women are being portrayed in the media.

The concept of the self-esteem of adolescent girls being affected by the media is not a new phenomenon. Studies have concentrated on this topic for years. For this particular study, we focused on the period of the 1960s through 2007. According to a study done in 1977 by Bush et al. young women tended to base their self-worth on interpersonal relationships and how society views those relationships in 1968; however, in 1975, more young women placed value on competence rather than interpersonal relationships.

The ideal woman portrayed by the television media is practically impossible to obtain. A study done in 1986 by Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly found that women in the media on average are thinner than the actual female population. In a study done by Champion and Furnham (1999), 75.9% of women rated their bodies as slightly overweight or obese after viewing images of models on television; however, only 32.6% of these young women were actually overweight. The women portrayed in the media are unrealistic to the point of being unhealthy. Fouts and Burggraf (2000) found that 76% of female characters in television sitcoms were below the average weight of a woman. In the same study done by Fouts and Burggraf, it was shown that negative comments by other characters in the program were directed towards heavier female characters, while the thin idealistic women gained social mobility for their appearance. Wiseman, Gray, Moismann, and Ahrens (1990) also found that many of the female actresses on television were thinner than the criteria for

anorexia. Eggermont, Beullens, and Van Den Bulck (2005) found that during periods in which women in the United States media were the thinnest, such as the 1980s, there was a coinciding epidemic of eating disorders. Eggermont et al. also found that the more time spent watching television, the lower the body satisfaction of adolescent women.

The self-esteem of young adolescent women not only rests on the appearance of female characters in the media, but also their perceived intelligence, such as their education and career choice. Bush et al. (1977) found that while young girls are thinking about their future roles in education as well as occupation, society's attitudes of minimal opportunities may lead these young women to feel negatively about their gender as well as to focus primarily on interpersonal skills rather than occupational goals and aspirations. Galambos et al. (1985) stated that society's traditional attitudes towards women hinder the process of occupational selection because of a preconceived notion of women's roles in society due to a lack of self-esteem felt by adolescent women.

To complete our study, we acted as the sole coders to rate episodes of television programs that were high on Nielsen's rating system from 1960s to present. The Nielsen's rating system is used to determine the composition and size of audiences of specific television programs. We then conducted a trend analysis of the coding data to find the relationship between decades and stereotypical appearance and communication scores.

Method

Materials

The study was held in the researchers' dorm rooms (Blanton and Rauch Memorial) at Lindenwood University. Being an archival study, the experimenters were the only ones involved in data collection. The clips chosen for this project were taken from the following:

The Brady Bunch episode “Brace Yourself” (Radnitz & Rudolph, 1970), Saved by the Bell episode “Breaking up is Hard to Undo” (Sachs & Barnhart, 1989), Friends episode “The Morning After” (Kauffman & Crane, 1997), and Gilmore Girls “The Wedding Bell Blues” (Sherman-Palladino, 2005). We chose these shows based on top five Nielsen ratings for their decade. Each clip was a well-known break-up episode of the programs main characters. Each clip was comparable in length. In the Brady Bunch episode, Marcia gets braces. She believes that she is now ugly, and her fears seem to be confirmed when her boyfriend cancels a date on her. Saved by the Bell is a scene where Zack breaks up with Kelly because she is going to dinner with an ex-boyfriend. Rachel and Ross break up in Friends after Rachel finds out that Ross cheated on her during their 24 hour “break”. In the Gilmore Girls episode, Luke breaks up with Lorelai after her ex-beau Christopher drunkenly humiliates him at Lorelai’s parents’ vow renewal.

Both experimenters acted as coders when viewing episode clips. Experimenters each obtained 4 coding sheets (one for each episode clip viewed) and an ink pen. The coding sheets (see Appendix A) asked for the following information regarding the show each particular clip is of: name of the show, episode number, season number, year episode aired, Nielsen’s rating of the episode. Other information answered on the coding sheets include: facts about the actress (age, height, weight) and facts about what is actually going on in the clip. The experimenters were able to be the only coders for this project because the questions were straightforward (fact-based) and in “circle-what-applies” format. The researchers constructed the questions on the coding sheets based on stereotypical societal viewpoints. Therefore, the researchers were able to discuss what the operational definitions of each item meant. The researchers viewed the clips in random order; not in the order of the decades of

the show. The clips from each series were of a break-up scene with a main female character in the scene and her significant other. The questions regarding what was going on in each clip were about the appearance of the female character involved and the communication styles of the couple (i.e. did he yell when they broke up). The television programs were provided on DVDs and played in a Sony HD DVD player and watched on a Panasonic television.

Procedure

First, the researchers independently viewed a clip of an episode from four different situational comedies spanning four decades, each dealing with the break-up of one of the main female characters and her boyfriend: *The Brady Bunch* (“Brace Yourself”, Radnitz & Rudolph, 1970), *Saved by the Bell* (“Breaking up is Hard to Undo”, Sachs & Barnhart, 1989), *Friends* (“The Morning After”, Kauffman & Crane, 1997), and *Gilmore Girls* (“The Wedding Bell Blues”, Sherman-Palladino, 2005). These television shows were chosen based on their high Nielsen’s rating during the time period aired.

While viewing the clips, the researchers completed the coding sheets. The researchers then used the numerical data to quantify the directionality of the image of American women in television. The numerical data was based on an appearance score, which stated whether the actress wore a skirt or pants, sleeves or no sleeves, heels or no heels, and whether or not she showed cleavage in the selected scene. We assigned a score of 1 to each stereotypical element, and a 0 to the non-stereotypical element. Since each element’s score was added, the higher the score, the higher the stereotypical appearance or communication. The trend analysis also used a communication score which consisted of whether or not the female or male character cried, yelled, called one another, begged, or initiated the break-up in the

selected scene. Higher scores represented more stereotypical actions of the female lead character. For a separate trend analysis, the experimenters looked at the age of the character and the age, height, weight, and hair color of the actress. The information about the actresses was simply obtained from the internet at imdb.com.

Results

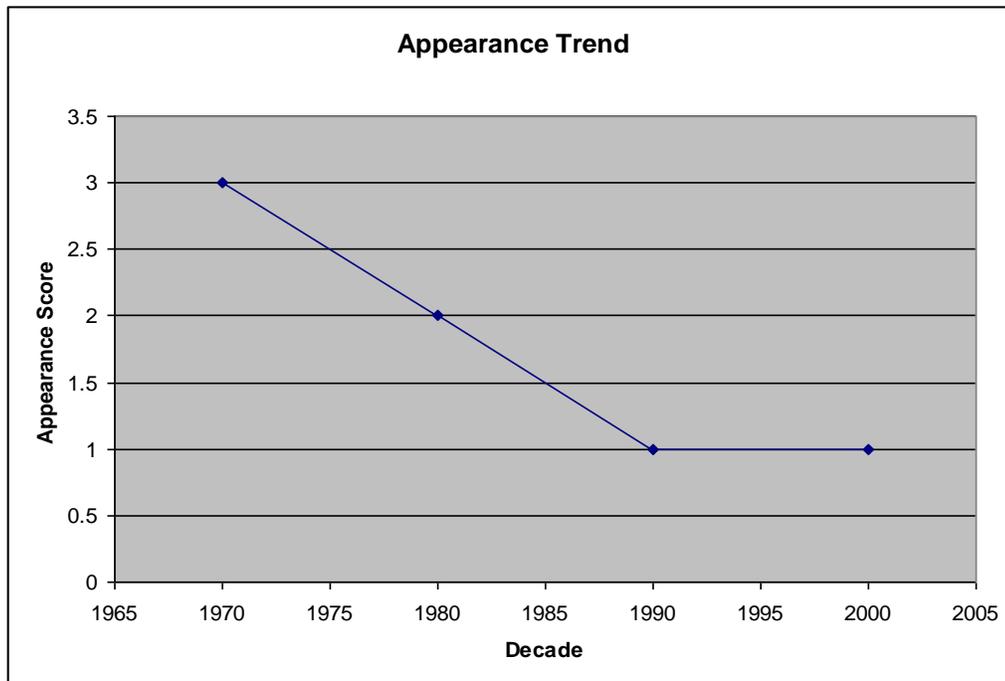


Figure 1. The appearance trend spanning 1970-2000 based on stereotypical appearance scores for the actresses of each decade's episode; where, higher scores mean more stereotypical.

The interrater reliability of this experiment was 100%, so we used only one set of data for the analysis. As shown in Figure 1, the trend analysis shows that the stereotypical female appearance in television has declined from an appearance score of 3 in 1970 to an appearance score of 1 in 2000. The appearance score was compiled of whether the actress wore a skirt or pants, sleeves or no sleeves, heels or no heels, and whether or not she showed cleavage in the selected scene. The trend analysis in Figure 2 showed that the communication score went

from a 6 in 1970 to a 2 in 1980-90, and then increased to a 7 in 2000. The communication score was based on whether or not the female or male character cried, yelled, called one another, begged, or initiated the break-up in the selected scene. The trend analysis also showed that the age of the main actress in the television series increased. The age of the character also increased; however, a majority of the characters were played by older women than the role the actress played. The height of the actresses ranged from 63-69 inches. The weight of the actresses also increased from 1970-2000. Two of the actresses were blondes, and two of the actresses were brunettes.

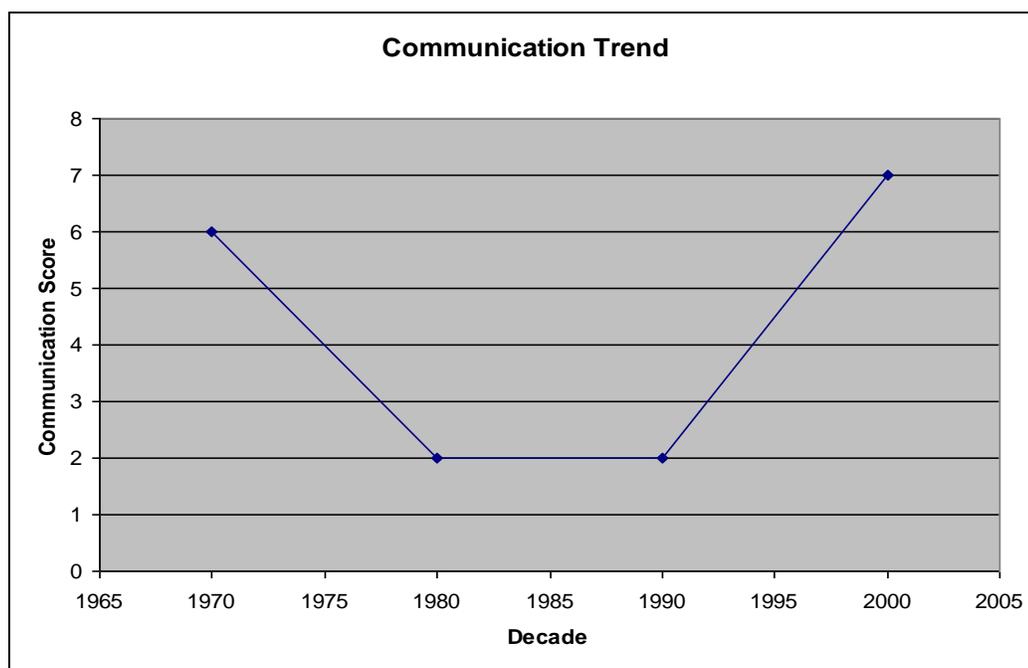


Figure 2. The communication trend spanning 1970-2000 based on stereotypical communication styles.

Discussion

We hypothesized that sexual image of women in the television media has become more stereotypical in appearance and communication skills with their male counterparts. The trend analysis we conducted showed that the stereotypical appearance for women that is

displayed in television has actually decreased from 1970 to 2000. However, the communication score showed an interesting pattern. In 1970, the stereotypical score for female communication skills was very high (6). It decreased to a 2 in 1980 and 1990, which showed an improvement in the equality of gender roles. However, the television media took a step down. The communication score in 2000 was 7, which was one point higher than in 1970. With further, more in-depth research, this could possibly show that although there was a breakthrough for women in the 1980s and 90s, stereotypes have come back stronger than before regarding women in television.

The age of the actress playing the role increased from 1970 to 2000. We selected television shows that were high on the Nielsen's rating scale at the time they were aired. It seems that older actresses are becoming more popular with the changing times. Because the ages of the actresses increased, the age of the characters did as well. However, it was interesting to note that three of the characters were played by women that were older than the specified age of the role. For example, Maureen McCormick (15) played Marcia Brady (13) in *The Brady Bunch*.

The abovementioned experiments have shown that the more television an adolescent female watches, the lower her self-esteem tends to be. They also showed that the weight of female actresses was below the normal weight range for their height, which made adolescent girls feel inferior to the thinner female actresses because they were trying to obtain an unachievable goal weight. Previous studies stated that because of the social comparison theory, adolescent females compare themselves to actresses on television not only in appearance but also in behaviors such as intelligence and communication skills.

Our study differed from previous research because we found that the stereotypical appearance of women has actually decreased from 1970 instead of increased. This could be due to the fact that we only viewed one television show from each decade, and the selected shows were high on Nielsen's rating system, but that does not necessarily mean that the program is popular with adolescent females. We also found that the weight of the actresses in the programs that were viewed are considered healthy for the height of the actresses. Previous studies had shown that the actresses were too thin for their body type. This could be because of our minimal sample size or the selected programs.

The communication trend that we found showed that the stereotype of female communication skills was very large in 1970, but it decreased greatly from 1980-90; however, in 2000 the score skyrocketed again. If the social comparison theory holds true, it is very dangerous for adolescent females to be viewing these programs because they would then feel that they would have to act dependent upon their male counterparts.

Future studies would benefit from using a larger sample size of television programs across the decades. This would help to ensure that the trend analysis is more reliable. It may also benefit future studies to use participants to either rate the programs or their self-esteem before and after viewing the programs. It may also be interesting for future studies to see if there is a cohort effect in program choices as well as stereotypical material in these selected programs. For example, those that grew up watching the Brady Bunch may have contributed to the success of Gilmore Girls, which could explain our findings in the communication score. It is important to continue this research because the media shapes how adolescent females view themselves, which affects their self-esteem.

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Appendix A

Coding Sheet

Show Series: _____

Episode/Season/Year: _____

Nielsen's Rating of Show: _____

Name of main female character in scene: _____

Information about Actresses:

- 1) Age of Actress at time she played the role: _____
- 2) Age of character (in said episode) the actress plays: _____
- 3) Height of Actress: _____
- 4) Weight of Actress: _____
- 5) Hair color: Blonde Brunette Black Red Other: _____

Questions about the clip: All questions are regarding a break-up scene involving the character listed above and her significant other. Coders understand the intended meanings of the questions.

Appearance (circle what applies):

- 1) Wearing: Skirt Pants
- 2) Shirt has: Sleeves No Sleeves
- 3) Showing Cleavage No Cleavage
- 4) Wearing Heels No Heels

Communication (circle):

- | | | |
|------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 1) She calls him | He calls her | No phone call |
| 2) She cries | She does not cry | |
| 3) He cries | He does not cry | |
| 4) He yells | He does not yell | |
| 5) She yells | She does not yell | |
| 6) He dumps her | She dumps him | |
| 7) He begs | He does not beg | |
| 8) She begs | She does not beg | |