

Portrayal of Teenage Women in Popular Media

State of the Art Essay

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## ABSTRACT

This state of the art essay examines past and current research, including quantitative, qualitative and critical/rhetorical research, on the topic of the portrayal of teenage women in popular media. It takes into consideration the strengths and value found in the current research as well as the gaps and questions that still need to be filled and asked, leaving room for further research inquiry on this topic. This essay ends with suggestions for further research and three important questions pertaining to the topic that should be explored in future research endeavors.

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## The Portrayal of Teenage Women in Popular media

“These findings and others that followed over roughly the past 25 years have moved women-oriented media genres from the margins of respectable scholarship to the center: soap operas, romantic fiction and women’s magazines are now recognized as significant social projects deserving rigorous intellectual attention. And not only has this body of work foregrounded women’s engagement with media as pivotal to broader understandings of society and culture. It has contributed to the politicization of theory and critique from subaltern and minority perspectives.” – Durham, 2003, p. 24

From television to movies to magazines to popular culture in general, teenage women are portrayed in a variety of ways in popular media. From beauty to social aggression to femininity, popular media depicts a wide-range of messages regarding teenage women. Past and current research has delved deeply into the many aspects and perspectives related to both the messages and the portrayals of teenage women in popular media. In this essay, the research related to the topic of the portrayal of teenage women in popular media will be discussed including three themes that are evident throughout the research collected in the three annotated bibliographies. Limitations and gaps, as well as strengths in the research, will be provided. This essay will conclude with suggestions and questions for future research.

Overall, past research has looked at magazines, advertisements, female characters in movies and television, the messages these images portray and how all of these affect teenage women. Present research has done much of the same. Present research has also expanded to look at new communication advances such as websites and reality television shows as well as movies

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and traditional advertisements in magazines targeted towards the teenage women audience. The ideas of “girl power,” feminism, and femininity have also been addressed in the present research. Feminist theory and social cognitive theory have been used as critical lenses while examining this topic. Research has explored popular media and advertisements depicting women, not specifically teenage women, but popular media that teenage women are likely to see and/or watch. Three emerging themes across the past and present research developed throughout the course of the three annotated bibliographies. Those three themes were body image, consumerism coupled with image portrayal and messages and mixed messages presented in the portrayal of teenage women in popular media.

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### **Body Image**

Body images and ideals of teenage women and women in various media forms are a popular concern and research topic amongst the portrayal of teenage women in popular media. From magazine advertisements to television to movies to teen romance novels, the ideal female body image is being pushed out and targeted toward different and several audiences including adolescent, teenage, young and older women. Not only are these messages being presented to audiences, but research has also concluded, along with other factors, that they are affecting girls' attitudes and images of themselves and others. Disney characters, teen magazine advertisements and reality makeover shows are just three areas of past and current popular media that portrays an idealized female body image (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007; Lacroix, 2004; Wainwright, Nagler & Serazio, 2007). This research relied on content analysis and critical analysis of movies, television and magazine advertisements in relation to how the ideal female body image is presented and communicated to the audience.

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The research concluded that the images of animated Disney female characters, both White and colored, “will lay a groundwork for young children’s understanding of themselves and others that will most assuredly articulate with field of image of both women of color and White women in popular culture” (Lacroix, 2004, p. 227). Both the research by Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert (2007) and Wainwright, Nagler & Serazio (2007), revealed that in both teenage magazines and reality shows, the need to reach and maintain a normalized idea of the perfect female body is an imperative and to-be-desired goal. In a content analysis of three popular teen magazines, *Teen People*, *Seventeen* and *CosmoGirl!*, Wainwright, Nagler & Serazio (2007) examined “the portrayal of women and young girls in the advertisements of teen magazines over a 12-month period” (p.10). This research revealed that “of the 418 ads...almost one third (29.2%) portrayed women or girls who were thinner than average” (p. 18). In relation to reality makeover shows including *A Makeover Story*, *What Not to Wear* and *Extreme Makeover*, “These idealized discourses of beauty are so embedded in our culture that we often do not realize they are at work in the media products we consume” (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007, p. 75).

Not only are these messages being portrayed to an adolescent and teenage girl audience, they are having an affect on the viewing audience. Botta (1999) utilized social comparing theory and critical viewing “with a sample of 214 high school girls to predict adolescents’ body-image disturbance and thin ideal endorsement” (p. 22). This research helped to reveal that popular media images of a thin ideal impacts “both directly through body image processing and indirectly by encouraging adolescent girls to endorse a thin ideal and by establishing what they see as realistic ideals” (p. 36). Clark & Tiggemann (2006) found similar results in their research and their research also revealed that media coupled with peer behavior and interaction can have an affect on girls’ body image.

“Race” in terms of body image, messages and the affects on young girls has also been researched. Duke (2000) and Gentles & Harrison (2006) have conducted research specifically on how race, primarily African American and White, differ in relation to body image expectations and the female ideal. Duke (2000) looked specifically at why girls read magazines, how they read them and “how does race influence the way these middle-class girls interpret teen magazines’ images and texts?” (p. 374). This study revealed that African American girls had little desire to mimic the ideal beauty images found in the magazines. They found a lot of the featured products not targeted towards them such as the cosmetics. Interestingly, Duke (2000) discovered that “African American girls tended to evaluate themselves and others on character and personality rather than appearance” (p. 382). In terms of White girls, they focused on the importance on appearance including the use of cosmetics and the desire to emulate the ideal beauty images portrayed in teenage girl magazines. Gentles & Harrison (2006) asked the research question, “How will exposure to ideal-body television be related to perceived expectation of body size for smaller-bodied African American girls?” (p. 44). Their research also looked at the relationship of mass body index, ideal images and how young African American girls’ same-sex peers expect them to look. The study revealed that larger girls expected their peers to expect them to be smaller and the same was true for the reverse effect on smaller girls. Unlike White girls, smaller African American girls felt the expectation to be larger. Furthermore, Gentles & Harrison (2006), “help[ed] to dispel that African American girls are impervious to media-communicated body ideals,” in other words African American girls are also affected by ideal body images portrayed in the media (p. 49).

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The research discussed above and similar research relating to body images of teenage women and women in general in popular media, has made great strides in what images are being

portrayed through specific mediums and how the images are being received by the intended audience. This research contributes in helping researchers understand how cultural, societal, and media norms can play a large role in helping or hurting how a specific audiences or group of people see themselves and measure themselves up to the perceived public norm. This research can also benefit those striving to either change the message that is being presented to teenage women or educate young women to view portrayals in popular media through a critical lens and not accept all they see at face value. Ideal body images are part of the everyday culture and cannot often times be avoided, so research about body image specifically in teenage girls is a viable and valuable topic.

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### **Consumerism coupled with image portrayals and messages**

Consumerism coupled with portrayals of teenage women in popular media is another theme that emerged throughout the research on this particular topic. From teen romance novels to beauty teen magazines' websites to popular television shows, teenage women are being fed images of either other teenage women or older women with a message promoting consumerism (Johnson; 2010, Johnson, 2008; Labre & Walsh-Childers, 2003; McRobbie, 2008). A general idea that emerged from this research was that the message of an ideal female was to be obtained from using particular products, which in turn leads to the promotion of consumption. Johnson (2010) studied teen romance novels, *Gossip Girl*, *A-List* and *Clique*, and in those novels the relationships between consumption, romance, and sexuality. This research revealed that in teen romance novels there are specific instances that are promoting brand name products. According to Johnson (2010), not only are they promoting brand name products but also they are presenting these brand name products, including cosmetics, clothes, shoes and lingerie, as necessary to gain a male's attention and to be able to engage in romantic relationships. Johnson (2010) concluded,

“Cosmetics and spa treatments are also important in the mission of obtaining boyfriends and creating sexual allure” (p. 65). Johnson (2010), from her research, claimed that the brand products and consumption in relation to sexual and romantic relationships “promoted a culture of consumption that normalizes the highest levels of upper-class lifestyle in which buying is a competitive advantage and route to romance” (p. 69).

In analyzing the websites of teenage girl magazines, Labre & Walsh-Childers (2003), studied how the beauty content including the images and messages of female beauty was “disseminated to the target audience of teenage girls” (p. 380). Labre & Wash-Childers (2003) discussed girls as an ever-growing consumption audience. From the results of the research, three distinct themes in these websites emerged. Those themes were, “Beauty is a requirement, beauty is achieved through products and we [the websites] can help you find the right products” (p. 387). The website content writers positioned themselves more as friends or older sisters offering advice on what cosmetics and various beauty products they should get to obtain an ideal beauty image, rather than coming across as a brand or salesperson. Through this research, Labre & Wash-Childers (2003) concluded that these websites portray the idea that girls are not good enough on their own and that to be beautiful is the road to success, girls can gain insight on how to achieve physical perfection through the products and techniques offered by the beauty experts on the websites.

Johnson (2008) examined MTV’s *My Super Sweet 16* and discovered the rise of the petite celebrity and argued, “Consumption provides the constitutive link between gender performativity and the petite celebrity lifestyle represented in the mediated rituals displayed on *My Super Sweet 16*” (p. 3). Ordinary girls, for their sixteenth birthday, on the show attempt to emulate celebrities by buying expensive dresses and spending mass amounts of money on lavish parties including

everything from the transportation to the invitations. McRobbie (2008) in her research argued that there is an “accelerated and expanded...effort that commercial values now occupy a critical place in the formation of the categories of youthful femininity” (p. 532). The author focused on magazines and television to make claims and provide evidence. She made a claim that *Sex and the City* “is based on the ability to control excess to femininity by reconciling it with more normative cultural practices, i.e. shopping and consumption” (p. 542).

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The research relating to the theme of consumerism coupled with portrayals of teenage women in popular media is relevant and up-to-date with current popular media and messages that are being transmitted to specific target audiences. This research helps to examine the growth of the teenage women as a viable consumption market for brands and companies to target. It also helps to draw the relationship between consumption and popular media and the idea of how messages in popular media are affected by the concept of the consumption audience.

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### **Mixed Messages**

The third major theme that emerged from the three annotated bibliographies and research on the topic of the portrayal of teenage women in popular media is mixed messages within these particular portrayals. Within magazines and primarily television shows depicting teenage women, mixed messages of what it means to be a teenage woman are presented to the targeted audience (Banet-Wesier, 2004; Durham, 2003; Hains, 2007; Nice, 2007). Banet-Weiser (2004) and Hains (2007) both studied and researched female identity within the context of the popular children’s network, Nickelodeon. Banet-Weiser (2004) in a critical essay looked at the idea of Girl Power and consumption. She stated her purpose of this essay was to “theorize how the often contradictory media representations of girl power function as a kind of feminist politics” (p. 120). Banet-Weiser (2004) examined three shows involving female characters as the lead aired

on Nickelodeon. Those shows were *Clarissa Explains It All*, *As Told by Ginger* and *Nick News*. The author concluded that the female characters in the television shows “maybe understood as a lucrative market strategy to capitalize on the cultural fade of girl power...nonetheless provide a different cultural script...that challenges conventional narrative and images about what girls are and who they should be” (p. 136).

Hains (2007) examined the Nickelodeon show, *My Life as a Teenage Robot*. Using this television show as evidence, Hains (2007) argued “Jenny’s (main character) failed efforts to perform normative femininity and thereby to gain acceptance suggest that girls cannot be strong and feminine at the same time” (p. 193). Jenny’s job is to help save the world and when she is focusing on saving the world, her success in achieving femininity declines and vice-versa. Hains (2007) also discusses girl power: “negotiating strength and femininity, girls power’s messages often seem contradictory” (p. 198). Durham (2003) took a critical stance on the teenage girl heroine portrayed in such shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*. Durham (2003) noted that the heroines in the shows were usually young, white, petite body shape and blonde. The mixed message represented is the idea that “the girl heroines’ challenges to patriarchal interested are subsumed within a powerful discourse of complicity with dominant norms of femininity, sexuality, race, class, and the disciplining of the female body, all in the interest of capitol” (p. 30).

Southard (2008) in a critical essay examined the popular television and now movie series, *Sex and the City*. In this essay, Southard (2008) “committed to highlighting the multiplicity of gendered meanings and women’s experiences” (p. 151). One arising contradiction in *Sex and the City*, noted by Southard (2008) was that while individualism is a component of postmodern feminism, the characters in this show rely on friendships for support, comfort and

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guidance. There is also the struggle of feminism and femininity represented in the show.

According to Southard (year), (as cited in Dow, 1996), it could be concluded that this show “complicates the media’s portrayal of postfeminism by resisting a ‘dualistic worldview’ and suggesting that postfeminist texts can be read for more feminist meanings” (p. 164).

This research provides the groundwork and understanding that there is not a single message or specific portrayal of teenage women in popular media. Rather the messages and portrayals are often contradictory and confusing in themselves and how the target audience

perceives the messages and portrayals. This research primarily has taken a critical lens to examine the mixed messages and contradictions. This research has taken into account, though

not always, the implications of the mixed messages and portrayals. It has looked at a wide variety of mediums, from prime-time television shows to animated shows geared towards a

younger audience, to what mixed messages are being disseminated to the audience.

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Overall, the research and critical examination of the portrayal of teenage women in popular media contains a large amount of valuable and viable information and findings. It is evident that quantitative, qualitative and critical research and examination have all contributed to the understanding of this particular topic. Various theories and critical lenses, from feminism to social cognitive theory, have helped to develop further research and insight into this topic. In terms of philosophy, this topic is being looked at as having mixed messages and negative affects on the targeted audiences. It is also being understand throughout all mediums that teenage women are becoming a vital consumption audience through marketing messaged delivered in popular media. In terms of methodology, both qualitative, surveys and numerical content analysis, has proven and will continue to prove to be useful. Quantitative research can be most

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helpful in this topic in terms of the actual medium and to gain a general view of how teenage women feel about the images being portrayed. Qualitative research is valuable in determining and analyzing the meanings behind the messages and images being portrayed. It was and will be useful to gather rich data on teenage women's experience with popular media and the direct or indirect affect it has or could have on them. Critical and rhetorical analysis provides different perspective on the images and messages. It provides the use of different theories to explain why the messages and images are the way they are.

While past and current research has been helpful in developing this topic, information and understanding on the topic of portrayal of teenage women in popular media, there is still more to be researched and accomplished. The research that is currently available needs to take its finding into a deeper view on this particular research topic that is relevant to communications, society and culture. This research topic is important to explore, understand and gather data because popular media images of teenage women are everywhere and almost impossible to avoid. It is important to understand these messages and why these particular messages are portrayals are being disseminated to the public as opposed to other or more realistic messages.

Though the past and current research is in abundance with valuable information, there are still gaps and questions needing to be filled, asked, and answered. A large gap in the research is how these messages and image portrayals of teenage women affect and/or influence the young male population. Research should look at how these images are affecting how the male population view women and teenage women as a people. The expectations that these media images instill in males of women and teenage women should be examined to understand the gender relationship as it relates to this particular topic. Further in-depth analysis should be done on how girls are specifically being affected. While this has been researched, it is evident that

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further and richer data collection could be useful in providing insight and add to the existing literature pertaining to this topic. In relation to the critical and rhetorical evaluation of this research, building upon the existing essays and theories, to create solutions or models to help educators, parents and the targeted audiences to interpret and understand these messages would also be useful to add to the existing literature. It would also be beneficial for this research to dig deep into the impact that these media images and portrayals have on interpersonal relationships within a teenage girls life's, not just her friends, but the male population, peers, parents, teachers, themselves, etc. In conclusion a few questions to consider for further research inquiry: What larger impact do these image portrayals and messages of teenage women in popular media have on society and culture? Can these images and messages be changed or altered? What does this say about the every day use of media, influence and the targeted audience?

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