



The Significance of 21st-Century Media in Defining Female Identity

Carissa Ellen; 50249485

Eva Santyoso; 50249534

Glenard Kyoko; 50250332

Nur Arina Binte Ayub; 50250621

Or Yong Fang; 50250506

Tharane Alagesan; 50099457

Veren Tantry; 50249518

University at Buffalo

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, we live in a sinister reality - the reality that as the creator defines their creation, so does the creation define who creates it (Lagemaat, 2016). The media we consume can have much say in the way we define who we are. This is because media, loosely defined as the many platforms by which ideas and information can be disseminated to a large group of people, is one of many socialization agents that may influence the behaviours we choose to portray, as well as the values we choose to uphold. As the term 'socialization agent' implies, the media does this by depicting social groups, thereby exposing and perhaps pressuring a person to conform with idealized versions of the groups they identify with.

One social group to which the role of media in identity construction has been heavily studied is women. A by-product of the popularization of feminism towards the end of the twentieth century (Carter & Mendes, 2008), this subject would eventually become a thriving field of research, calling for constant revision due to the ever-changing landscape of media-consumer interactions and the forms and ways of media itself. This paper aims to contribute to this revision by investigating the role of media in defining feminine identity, particularly in the 21st century. The social and personal implications of media in identity construction will also be examined, to which a commentary on media ethics and use is pertinent.

Literature Review and Methodology

In the 1970s, as feminist ideas began seeping into all manner of intellectual discourse, the movement introduced a number of revolutionary ideas to sociology research: a) that it is insufficient to generalize social trends based on male-oriented studies alone, and that b) gender is a crucial element in the way media is created as well as received (Carter & Mendes, 2008). These ideas spurred the creation of a number of works in the disciplines of sociology and media studies, as well as the newly-recognized disciplines of gender and feminist studies (Dodds, 2014). Today, the wealth of literature produced by this academic fad has yielded certain patterns in research methodology.

One of the more prominent patterns refers to the researcher's chosen approach to investigating the role of media in defining femininity. According to Carter & Mendes, approaches to gendered-media studies can be categorized in three ways: text type, audience and production-based approaches (2008). With each chosen approach, researchers appear to lean towards a preferred research methodology as well. For instance, gendered-media studies which focuses on audience reception tended to use interviews, whereas studies employing the text type approach tended to use case studies as a basis of research (ibid).

Considering that one of this investigation's aims is to contextualize twenty-first century media's role in defining feminine identity, this investigation adopted the text type approach, as text types would have more clearly reflected the rampant changes in media over just the last few decades alone. Furthermore, the text type approach would still have factored in audience and production to a certain degree, allowing for a more holistic investigation. The case-study methodology adopted in line with this approach were built upon relevant cases of feminine portrayal in advertisements, magazines, social media platforms and cable television, effectively

encompassing a broad range of cultural perspectives and content in addition to text types. Due to time constraints, as well as the emphasis on abundance and diversity when collecting these case studies, a number of them were obtained from secondary sources; otherwise, it would have been difficult to personally collect case studies from beyond the local vicinity, and collecting a large sample of studies in a given time in order to validate the investigation would have been even more of a challenge.

Feminine Portrayal in Advertisements

In today's context, advertisements can come in the form of both traditional and new media. Traditional media includes the newspaper, television and magazines, whereas for new media, there are electronic billboard, social media and websites. The advertisement as a form of rhetorical media is unique in its prevalence; in the sociological context, people are influenced by environment through the constant exposure of countless advertisements daily, and this has become increasingly apparent with media convergence. Advertisements today also tend to use subliminal forms of rhetoric, meaning that individuals can be affected by it knowingly or unknowingly.

Women today are exposed incessantly to a near-universal standard of beauty, which may have been derived from models depicted in advertisements. Common characteristics of the notion "beauty" that run rampant among women consist of slim waist, slim legs, fair skin and good curves. This phenomenon lends itself to an increasingly restrictive idea of beauty and, by extension, the notion that women must earn the right to feel happy about their physical identity;

according to a study done by Edelman across 19 countries, only 2% of 3000 women felt that they were beautiful. (Bahadur, 2014).

Advertisements as a tool for the prompt dissemination of content also benefits from stereotyping, and gender is not exempted from this pattern. Men are stereotyped to be traders and business folks whereas women often play the role of the seductress or household workers; this can be seen in the fact that advertisements intended to promote cleaning tools or cosmetic are mostly catered to women. The prevalence of such stereotypes in an already-prevalent text type such as ads converts these mere generalizations into societal expectations, pressuring women to conform to these standards of perfection. This influences a lot of women as they try to relate to them even if they do not have anything in common. For example, many images of women seen in Pakistani advertisements are portrayed to have restricted their representation to satisfy the men and are often seen as objects of desires (Shahwar, 2013). Furthermore, the western culture which appreciated plus size women and considered them as the epitome of beauty in the past, have now regarded the slim and lean build as the exemplary women instead (Mapgaonkar, 2005) Advertisements, regardless of culture and history, seem to function by promoting the notion that women are only accepted if they meet what society deems as the ideal women which brings about.

Feminine Portrayal in Magazines

It can be said that women in the realm of media have experienced treatment akin to that of objects. This was seen in this investigation when considering case studies in advertisements,

and in other examples such as in diet programs where women are likely to be their intended audience. In the world of journalism, too, this condition is banal.

In magazines, women serve as cover models or endorsement figures. However, these figures often conform to unattainable and exclusive standards of beauty; these women often have symmetrical faces and fit bodies, often to the point of appearing unnaturally flawless any. When a celebrity displays a tiny bit of belly fat or her thighs do not look ideal in one picture, the magazine is likely to rank her on the worst-body list. Similarly, if the models do not have a flat stomach or thigh gap, this media would consider them as too plump and give off unpleasant comments about their body, often stating that they are required to go on a diet. Indeed, these may create negative effects too. In multiple cases, it is shown that this phenomena has had significant influences in the way women construct their identities; for instance, female celebrities have been seen trying to please their fan following by attempting to conform to these physical standards of beauty by resorting to drastic measures which may lead to life-threatening conditions such as anorexia and bulimia. However, mainstream media has adopted a nonchalant stance to these issues; the objectification of women are increasingly palpable in the image that the media does not care (Ekelund, 2012).

In today's world, the magazine as a text type has become massively prevalent. Some of our society's most important messages are conveyed to the public through magazines, and a large selection of zines are known to encompass a wide range of interest groups. For example, some of the popularly known magazines are sports, fashion, business and even educational magazines. Sports and fashion magazines provide a particularly unique case study into the objectification of women in magazines.

For the most part, be it a sports or fashion magazine, men are presented on the cover page (Susan, 2013). If we were to take hollywood as an example, men do outnumber women (ibid), and where sports are concerned, men do dominate the role of being image representatives of the sports field as they are illustrated to be tougher and more tenacious compared to women. Even if women are on the cover page of these magazines, they are presented in such a lustrous manner, giving the impression that the content they represent are lesser in meaning (Nicole, 2011). Although women have become more competitive over the years and are considered equal to men, the media continues to misrepresent women. Hence, it is safe to say that magazines can either have positive or negative effects on its viewers.

Feminine Portrayal on Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms such as Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr have been fondly received by third-wave feminists as a tool for women to broadcast and share their gender-related issues with other women around the world. With the open culture and near-universality of the social media platforms, women may construct a shared gender identity of solidarity, which may enable them to better fight for gender equality across borders and at a low cost.

Social media platforms are home to a number of female-empowerment campaigns, support groups for gender-relevant issues (e.g. support groups for female rape victims or those with body insecurities). Take the case of the The Women's Media Centre's 'Women Under Siege' programme. In 2013, this non-profit organization aimed to document and raise awareness on the prevalence of female rape cases in war-torn Syria; to do this, they employed the use of a twitter map to create a visual representation of the severity of the issue they were fighting against

(Sanusi, 2013). Moreover, the universality of their chosen media (i.e. Twitter) allowed them to gain widespread spiritual and monetary support (ibid). These case studies attest to how powerful social media platforms can be in the empowerment of the female identity.

There are more cases that even go so far as to postulate that social media platforms can be used as a tool to construct a positive female identity through its most diminutive functions. The ‘emoji’ or ‘emoticon’ is a fairly recent addition to our collective linguistic sphere. It is the means by which social media users can express themselves via pictorial representations. In 2016, google introduced 13 new emoticons depicting women in a multitude of professional settings including as farmers, business women, teachers and scientists, arguing that these new emoticons will allow women to better represent themselves online (‘Google designs ‘empowered women emojis’, 2016). Most female users of social media platforms corroborate this belief; a study by networking corporation Proctor & Gamble suggested that of the 82% of girls aged 16 to 26 who use emoticons on a daily basis, more than half believed that these emoticons did not adequately represent them, the lack of representation lending itself to the risk of stereotyping women (ibid). Perhaps the potential of social media’s components in becoming instruments of female empowerment stems from social media’s status as a new media, still pure in form and easily alterable to suit the social expectations of a modern, global culture striving towards progression.

Nonetheless, the novelty of this platform also carries with it the risk of becoming the grounds by which further gender stratifications may occur. According to Pew Research Centre, while users of some social media platforms such as Tumblr are equally divided between men and women, “Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest all are more popular among women... [while] men are slightly more likely than women to use Twitter.” (DeSilver, 2013). This may have

transpired as social groups in real life translated their society's stratifications online, and may hamper the creation of a gender-inclusive community online.

Feminine Portrayal on Cable Television

Cable television, which includes television films and drama series, are a source of entertainment to some cultures and a dying media form in others. As a result, the portrayal of women in television films and dramas are either outdated as a reflection of an underlying, regressive cultural influences, or rarely portray rationality as a reflection of the media's role in entertainment.

On television, women are often associated with homes and families. Women are also mostly associated with romance, often so portraying a submissive and caring figure with a lack of women empowerment and a strong personality in their characters. Taking one case study, women's portrayal in the traditional Malaysian television scene displays the way women are recurrently played as the benign gender, frequently embodying characteristics of an acquiescent individual, uneducated and are usually reliant on support, often so from a dominating male figure in her life. This may be reflective of the regressive cultural take on gender roles within the society, which is not necessarily wrong, but does illustrate a certain feminine identity nonetheless. By comparison, modern movies pandering to more progressive ideas of gender depict more empowered women; some women played the lead roles of working mothers or as bosses in the working industry. However, this does not fully dismiss the fact that women are still

portrayed negatively as they are frequently represented as sex-objects, often seen to be easily manipulated, used and made fun off by men (Ibrahim, Yunus, Shah, Ilias & Mokhtar, 2017). In the hollywood scene where its movies are commonly viewed worldwide, women are portrayed as aesthetically pleasing objects and sex symbols (Dutt, 2016). Generally, actresses are not given adequate opportunities to play the role of a capable or dominant, decision-making character such as doctor or business executive. Only 34% are played by women in the acting industry are given significant roles in comparison to the 61% of men who are usually given such roles instead (Cipriani, 2015). This may reflect the fact that progressive notions of gender have only surfaced recently, not necessarily to the culture where the movie was created, but to the global culture as a whole, the typical audience such movies target.

As TV shows are greatly affected by cultural context, tv shows also plays a huge part in imparting cultural values and expectations to children. Constant exposure of concepts like boys are smarter than girls, certain jobs are best for men and others for women, and even that girls are responsible for their own sexual assault are constantly shown in the television. These messages stick to the young audiences' minds so easily because it were timed at a very crucial moment of kids' development whereby they are the most receptive to their influences (Knorr, 2017). Preschoolers, for instance, they are just starting to identify gender identity. With the continuous appearance of superhero's big muscles or princess' feminine dress in the television and the associated traits that comes with it, young audiences will absorb the idea as that men should always be strong while women should be fearful and weak. The media has been showing stereotypes that can undoubtedly affect their future career choices, relationships and self worth.

Additionally, television is the main platform to diffuse commercials. In traditional commercials, women are often stereotyped, frequently commercialising women in commercials that involved cleaning and showcasing products (Matthes, Prieler, & Adam, 2016). There was a lack of diversity in the representation of women in commercials. However, the perception of women beauty and roles has changed over the years and there are a wider range of diversity in the portrayal of women in commercials today. Dove Real Beauty Campaign commercial showed the acceptance of women, despite their different ages and skin colour, representing every women fairly with no specific stereotypes of women projected. This commercial was indeed captivating and caught the attention of many due to the wide range of the different definitions of beauty that was portrayed, making it a successful commercial as it widens the perception of beauty (Liffreing, 2017). However, in spite of an increase in showcasing the diverse acceptance of women shown in the television commercials today, the quantity of such commercials existent in the market is still not as common, which proves that there is still a lack of diversity in women's representation in the media today.

Conclusion

As a whole, the role of media in shaping feminine identity in the 21st century varies depending on the type of media, on account of the nature, purpose and trends respective to these text types. It is reflective of cultural values and can be the tool by which society - intentionally or otherwise - strains or expands the room for women to explore their personal or shared identity. These findings have much implications to the ethics and use of media. It demonstrates that media, may serve as a powerful and potent instrument of social change. However, it is important

to stress that the will of media creators to promote female empowerment must precede the empowerment of females through media. This initiative can be achieved in a number of ways; for instance, women can be encouraged to make crucial decisions in the creation of media so that the media industry itself can be more inclusive. Cultures looking to promote female empowerment may also expand as opposed to dispose existing, regressive notions of gender identity, by promoting attitudes of tolerance and open-mindedness. Media can shape our identity, but as a socialization agent, it must be stressed that we, the creators, still have a choice in what we want the media to say about our girls. The idea that we are active consumers of media is one that must not be exercised without conscience.

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