Tween girls’ evaluation of gender images on media: a qualitative study

Kara Chan

Hong Kong Baptist University, karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

This document is the authors' final version of the published article.

APA Citation

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by HKBU Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in HKBU Staff Publication by an authorized administrator of HKBU Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact repository@hkbu.edu.hk.
Tween girls’ evaluation of female images in the media: A qualitative study

Kara Chan
Hong Kong Baptist University

International Communication Association
May 28, 2011
objectives

- Tween: be-tween childhood and teenagers
- To examine tween girls’ understanding of the process by which female images are created in the media as well as the intentions of the media creators
- To investigate if tween girls are satisfied with the current portrayal of female images in the media
- To examine what kind of media images tween girls would construct if they were media producers
Tween market segment

- Defined as 8-12 years-olds
- We examine the older part of the tween segment
- Salience of sexuality during this phase, for the young girls, as well as for the adults who impose all sorts of disciplinary measures on them
Literature review

- Gender is constructed socially
- Through socializing agents, including parents, teachers, peers, and the media
- Use of mass media was woven into girls’ construction of their gender identities. Themes of media messages attracting to them include body image, aspiration to be brides and mothers, homophobia, and iconic femininity (Durham, 1999)
Literature review

- Gender stereotypes in mass media, and in particular, in advertising
- Thin body images for females
- Girls in US struggled with media representation that were restrictive, unrealistic, and over-emphasized on physical beauty
- The need for media literacy program to help girls to read the media images critically
Gender status in Hong Kong

- Hong Kong: East meet West
- Chinese culture: paternal, narrowly defined roles for females
- Western culture: individualistic, independent; gender equality
- No formal media education in primary school, begin to have some media literacy education in the new senior secondary curriculum
Method

- Conducted in March 2009 in Hong Kong
- Qualitative study of 16 girls aged 10-12
- Please take 7-10 photos a day for 7 days about “what girls or women should or should not be; and what girls or women should or should not do”
- From the media that you use (newspapers, mag, TV, internet, books)
Interviewees and procedure

- 10 studying at local schools, 6 at international schools
- 3 are Caucasians, others Chinese
- Lower to middle class
- 5 has Christianity background
- Face to face interview
- Data analysis: identify themes by systematic comparison and by repetition
Show the images taken by an interview
Questions asked

1. From these pictures, what do you think about what girls or women should be or should not be?
2. From these pictures, what behavior(s) do you think are appropriate or inappropriate for girls or women?
3. Who create these images and why do they create them in this way?
4. Are you satisfied with the way the images of girls or women are created now?
5. If you were a media owner and/or a media producer, what would you do in constructing images of young girls or women?
Gender roles and identities

- Perceived gender roles were based on a mixture of traditional and contemporary role models
- Conservative attitudes towards sexuality
- Concern about global as well as domestic social agendas

Who create these messages?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who (frequency)</th>
<th>why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers and magazines producers (5)</td>
<td>To catch audience attention; to sell pdts; to advice what girls should look</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image designers (3)</td>
<td>To show fashion trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographers (3)</td>
<td>To catch attention; to show beauty of women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisers (2)</td>
<td>To sell pdts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls (2)</td>
<td>To catch attention; to promote social causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporters, editors, bloggers (2)</td>
<td>To tell girls what is good and what is bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God (1)</td>
<td>God gave people imagination to create images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad guys (1)</td>
<td>(pornography) to promote illegal business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intentions of image creators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why female images are created in this way?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generate sales or promote a product: to sell media products such as cosmetics, slimming services, clothing, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting the reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malevolent intention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some artists’ managers signed contracts with models and movie stars and arrange some functions for them to attend. They helped them to dress up. Sometimes artists’ managers ask them to wear sexy clothes because if the artist dresses in sexy clothes, more people will pay attention to her and she will have more advertising or movie jobs. Then she will have more money (a Chinese student, age 12)
Image designers help us to make ourselves pretty. They help us to know how to put make-up on and how to get looking nice (an international school student, age 11).
A critical view from an interviewee

- I have watched the Dove real beauty campaign thing. And I saw how the magazines use computers to generate and go over things, like the eyes are bigger or some of them probably have a lot of make-up and lighting and different techniques to make them look better. So I think these images are not completely truthful.
Who create these images

- Some interviewees were able to identify some of the individuals and the institutions involved in the creation of female images in the media.
- Some girls demonstrated an understanding of the process of creating trendy images of media celebrities in order to encourage idol worship that leads to consumption and profit.
- None of the quotes showed deep structural insight into the complexity of the media production process itself.
Are you satisfied with the female images in the media?

- One satisfied
- Nine partly satisfied: satisfied with images that are active, natural, healthy, and caring
- Not satisfied with images that are unnatural, too sexy, taking drugs, or pornographic
- Six not satisfied: slimming ads are misleading; images are “too perfect and unreal” in physical appearance
I am satisfied with those images of girls that are healthy and active. I do not like the images of girls just sitting or dressing up. It is boring (an international school student, age 11).
I am not satisfied with the images of girls in the media. Because when photographers and people make posters for magazines, they usually computerize people to make them look better than they actually do in real life, which is not showing the real person. And then people who read those magazines and think they should look like that person when they actually can’t be like them. Because nobody can be perfect, as I said before, it’s a matter of liking how you look. If you don’t like how you look, you will never be satisfied with who you are (a student from an international school, age 11).
What images of girls will you create?

- More images of girls that are sporty, active, natural, and healthy
- No more computer edited images
- More brave girls
- More stylish and trendy girls
discussions

- Interviewees were able to understand the dual perspectives of themselves and the media producers in the creation of media images.
- They understood that image of celebrities have sales functions.
- One interviewee expressed dissatisfaction of manipulated female images after exposure to a particular “Dove real beauty” campaign. She thought that media lied and girls should be confident of her physical appearance.
discussions

- Girls want more assertive and active images. They did not endorse traditional femininity of passivity and yielding to male authority
- If they were media producers, they would like to produce diversified and contemporary female images
conclusion

- Girls are making evaluation of the female images in the media
- Girls have limited understanding of the complex process of media creation
- In general, they are not satisfied with the female images currently portrayed in the media
Thank you