

Escaping from Worries or Facing Reality

A Survey Study of Adolescent Attitudes about Sexist and Homophobic Stereotypes in Mainstream US Media

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We examined the influences of being exposed to gender and sexual orientation stereotypes in the media on US-based adolescents aged 12-18. Departing from wishful identification theory, our study allows adolescents to report how TV characters resemble them, rather than whom they emulate, coming from a place of agency. We recruited 639 participants (85% female, 82% heterosexual) to take an online survey. Our findings demonstrated that girls and sexual minorities were less likely to see their gender and sexual orientation reflected in favorite TV characters. Girls and sexual minorities felt more personally affected by stereotypes about women and girls and were more likely to believe that sexism and homophobia needed to be addressed in the media. Across all groups, those who tend to escape their worries through watching television reported feeling more upset at TV content and being more personally affected by negative stereotypes centered on women, girls, and sexual minorities.

Adolescents consume media for coping and identity formation as much as for entertainment (Arnett, 2005). Television is the most common medium consumed by adolescents (Callejo, 2013), thus it is critical to understand how a televised world that disproportionately favors male and heterosexual characters affects developing identities and gender roles in adolescents (APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Signorielli, 2001; Strasburger, 2012). Despite the potentially disenfranchising aspect of mainstream media images, Jackson and Vares (2013) found that media did not have a wholly negative effect on their young girl (aged 10-12) participants in New Zealand; girls interact with media in complex ways, both positive and negative. These young viewers question the reality media portray, often doubting how attainable the images are or expressing awareness of its fabricated, idealized reality. Regardless of how attainable the reality, viewers still used media images to shape their ideal image on themselves. While Jackson and Vares focus on pre-teens, our study broadens the age range to include 12-18

year olds; with this age group, we can see how responses to media portrayals affect social identity formation (particularly gender and sexuality), and how individuals interact with media images before they transition into young adulthood.

Gender stereotypes

The theory of *wishful identification* is the desire to be like or behave in a similar fashion to TV characters one identifies with (von Feilitzen & Linne, 1975), and is used to analyze how popular media representation directly affects the audience and influences which traits they deem desirable and undesirable. Previous studies have demonstrated that television viewers more readily identify with characters of the same sex (e.g., Reeves & Miler, 1978; Williams, LaRose, & Frost, 1981). Additionally, some studies have noted that male characters are more often selected as role models by girls compared to boys selecting female role models (e.g., Albert, 1957; Reeves & Miller, 1978), which is somewhat understandable due to the history of far more exciting roles played by males than females. This argument held decades later, despite the expansion in the TV offerings for children, when Hoffner (1996) found that less than half of young female study participants identified with female characters, while almost all young male participants identified with male characters, a finding attributed to more diverse representations of males. Young girls who wanted to be like favorite female characters were primarily motivated by physical attractiveness. Boys, on the other hand, identified with male TV characters who exemplified physical strength and high activity levels. Prior research has demonstrated that although girls viewed female TV characters as intelligent (even more intelligent than the male characters), they realize that strong successful female characters on TV can also be ridiculed for their competence or ambition (e.g., Hoffner, 1996; Signorielli, 1993).

Adolescents' desire to emulate their favorite characters causes them to focus on their own perceived deficiencies (Anderson et al., 2001). Physical attractiveness is an almost universal characteristic of individuals represented across major types of television programming (Anderson et al., 2001). Even ostensibly progressive media often reinforce dominant cultural ideas of sexuality and femininity (Carpenter, 2001). Prior studies on media effects of gender-role stereotypes have focused on how the viewing of particular genres, such as video games and sports shows (Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005), talk shows and situation comedies (Rivadeneira & Ward, 2005), or rap videos (Bryant, 2008), have been strongly associated with endorsing more gender-role stereotypes and attitudes.

Groesz and colleagues (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of 25 experiments on the effect of the thinness ideal in the media on women's body image. They found that women who are exposed to media depictions of the thin ideal have lower body satisfaction, and the effect is *stronger in teenagers younger than 19*. Nanu, Tăut, and Băban (2013) surveyed 250 girls and 226 boys ages 15-20 to study how appearance esteem and weight

esteem differ by age and gender. They found that consumption of media messages can often lead adolescent girls to internalize the “ideal body image” of thinness. The higher girls’ BMIs, the lower their appearance and weight esteem. Younger girls are more likely to internalize the body ideal portrayed by the media, signaling a need to further understand girls’ perceptions about media portrayals and gender identity.

Sexual orientation stereotypes

Media can be a major tool of socialization for LGBTQ teens who are often marginalized. If these youth lack LGBTQ role models during their coming out process, they may seek media role models to guide their identity formation (Padva, 2007; Raley & Lucas, 2006). While media representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals have improved in recent years, inclusiveness remains a serious problem in terms of the quantity and diversity of representation. According to GLAAD (2016) projections, 4.8 percent of regularly appearing characters on scripted broadcast television series in the 2016-2017 season were LGBTQ. This is a 0.8 percent increase from last year’s 4 percent, which was a 0.10 percent increase from 2014’s percentage (GLAAD, 2015). On both broadcast and cable networks, more than half of all LGBTQ characters are male, though on streaming television only thirty percent of LGBTQ characters are male. Most bisexual characters on broadcast and cable networks, in addition to streaming online television, are female, and male bisexual characters are heavily underrepresented. At the same time, most trans characters are female, leaving trans men severely underrepresented. This lack of diversity and/or invisibility could have a significant impact on LGBTQ teens who are looking for role models.

Bond (2015) notes that most studies examining the role of media in the lives of sexual minority youth have primarily asked adults to reflect back on their adolescence (e.g., Houseman, 2010; Kama, 2002). For instance, Kama’s (2002) 45 gay adult male interviewees reflected on how media’s representations of gay men were crucial in shaping gay identity, especially for those outside of the gay community. While many of the participants agreed that the existence of LGBTQ characters in mainstream media is important, even more so are the *kinds* of images that get represented. Freymiller (2010) interviewed 22 adults to gain a better understanding of their thoughts on the representation of gay people in the media. She reports that many participants felt that existing media lacked a representation of the gay *community*; while shows may have had one or two gay characters, these characters did not interact with the gay community at large and could not form a gay community because there were so few of them. Participants also noted that these television characters did not engage in activism. However, participants believed that subscription-based media offered more diverse and three-dimensional representations of gayness, though viewers must pay to access this content. Participants recognized that gay characters were very isolated from the “straight” world.

Examining the contribution of *individual characteristics* that shape media choices and behaviors, we highlight the *Media Practice Model* (Brown, 2000) which explains that users actively select and interact with media based on who they are and who they want to be. A 2015 study (Craig, McInroy, McCreedy, & Alaggia, 2015) found that LGBTQ youth often use offline and online media to cultivate resilience. LGBTQ youth often use media to escape from their problems, feel “strong,” cultivate a community, and resist. Some LGBTQ youth deliberately seek out diverse LGBTQ televised content in order to insulate themselves from potentially negative content about LGBTQ people or invisibility within mainstream media. In addition, they often will “rewrite” negative storylines about LGBTQ people on personal blogs or other sites to resist stereotypical representations, or use social media to comment on homophobia in the media. They tend to use television as a launching pad to create dialogue about social issues and a sense of community, for instance, by talking about a television show in person with friends or other peers (Craig et al., 2015). This shows that LGBTQ youth often feel frustrated with media representations of LGBTQ communities, even turning to other forms of media to critique, or in some cases, alter it. Although the research was conducted with young adults aged 18-22, it has implications for younger LGBTQ teens who may not have the cultural capital to subvert mainstream media in ways that older emerging adults can tap into.

The *Uses and Gratifications Theory* (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) posits that in order to understand the impact of a medium, one must consider the users’ motives, such as using television as pure entertainment as opposed to escapism from stressful realities. The current study allows teen participants to report how TV characters resemble them, rather than whom they emulate or wish they could be themselves. This research question differs from prior studies in that we ask adolescents to assess whether their favorite TV show characters match their gender and sexual orientation identities (rather than asking if they map onto favorite TV show characters). Our approach starts from a place of agency: TV shows can and should represent who teens are, rather than teens finding fault within themselves for implicit TV messages showing what they are lacking. Prior studies often correlate high media consumption with higher levels of stereotypical gender and sexual beliefs (Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Our assumption is that adolescents are not only exposed to media stereotypes and are inevitably shaped by them but we must also understand their attitudes toward such media stereotypes and how it affects them. Our participants were asked about how strongly they think media should change for the better, in terms of sexist and homophobic stereotypes. In addition, we examined which types of television viewers (e.g., adolescents who escape from worries through TV vs. those who do not) are most prone to reacting negatively to these stereotypes.

Methods

Participants and procedures

The Media & Identity Project (Chan & Charmaraman, 2014; Charmaraman, 2016; Charmaraman & Chan, 2013; Charmaraman & Richer, 2014; Charmaraman, Chan, Price, & Richer, 2015) is a mixed-method study of over 2300 individuals in Wave 1 recruited in 2013. It included (a) a purposive online survey that targeted hard-to-reach adolescents and emerging adults across 47 U.S. states and 26 countries; and (b) 60-120 minute follow-up in-depth interviews with 44 participants from the larger survey. The survey contained items regarding beliefs and attitudes about televised media, social media networking, and civic engagement through media. We recruited the sample from schools and community organizations through electronic and traditional recruitment methods (e.g., flyering), and repeated efforts one week later. Before starting, participants read and electronically signed study disclosures and informed consent, a process approved by Wellesley College's Institutional Review Board. Duplicate surveys were identified by tracking IP addresses with multiple entries in a short period of time and were discarded, as were incomplete submissions.

For our analytical sample, our focus was on the experiences of U.S. residents who are exposed to U.S. mainstream media (therefore we removed people living outside of the U.S. (n=103). In order to have enough power to understand gender differences, we needed to remove transgender participants (n=37) to focus on the dichotomous categories of male and female. In addition, we removed participants with any missing data on the psychological health items, gender, or sexual orientation (n=329), and restricted the age of participants to 12-18 giving us a final analysis sample of 639. The

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mor%	SD
Female	639	0	1	85%	
Heterosexual	639	0	1	82%	
Escape from worries	639	0	1	40%	
Mother's Education	637	1	5	3.66	1.28
Age	639	12	18	17.08	1.36
Time spent watching TV	618	0	4	1.29	1.36
Favorite TV show (gender)	513	1	4	2.51	0.83
Favorite TV show (sexual orientation)	486	1	4	3.14	0.96
Upset while watching TV	277	1	4	2.68	0.90
Frustrated while watching TV	279	1	4	2.88	0.87
Affected personally: women and girls	280	1	4	3.06	0.89
Affected personally: sexual minorities	279	1	4	2.89	0.97
Sexism should be addressed in the media	538	0	1	30%	
Homophobia should be addressed in the media	538	0	1	42%	

sample was mostly female (85%) and heterosexual (82%). The average age was 17.08 and the average participant level of mother's education was between "some college" and "finished college." Forty percent of the sample reported using TV to escape from their worries. (See Table 1).

Measures

Media escape. Media escape was measured using a single item about participants' desire to escape their worries through media ("I escape from my worries by watching TV"). This item was originally measured using a four-point scale (1=Not at all like me and 4=A lot like me); however, to assess group differences, we dichotomized this item where 0=not escaping worries and 1=escaping worries through media.

Gender and sexual orientation. Participants were asked to report their gender by selecting male, female, or transgender; however, transgender respondents were removed from the analysis due to small (n=37) sample size. Respondents indicated whether they would define their sexual orientation as heterosexual or not heterosexual.

Covariates. Participants self-reported their age and their mother's highest level of education (ranging from 1=Some high school or less to 5=School beyond college).

Time spent watching TV. Participants were asked how much time they spent watching TV between 6pm and midnight; responses ranged from 0=No time to 4=3 or more hours.

Demographic similarities of TV show characters. Demographic similarities of TV show characters were measured using two items asking participants to rate how similar their favorite TV show characters were to themselves in terms of gender and sexual orientation. Responses ranged from 1=not at all to 4=almost all of them.

Negative Responses to TV media. Participants were asked to indicate how often they became upset at what they were watching on TV or frustrated at stereotypes while watching TV on a 4-point scale ranging from 1=never to 4=often.

Affected by stereotypes while watching TV. Items about the degree to which respondents felt affected by stereotypes presented on TV were included. Specifically, we were interested in items related to stereotypes about women and girls and sexual minorities. Participants were asked to report how often they were affected by each of these categories of TV stereotypes on a 1 (never) to 4 (often) scale.

Beliefs about sexism and homophobia in the media. We asked whether participants' endorsed that the media needs to raise awareness of the negative societal impacts of sexism and homophobia.

Data analysis

For this study, we used generalized linear regression models to estimate means of gender, sexual orientation, and psychological health on TV- and media-related outcomes. For each TV and media outcome, we compared males to females, sexual minorities to heterosexuals, and not using TV to escape worries and to using TV to escape worries. Participant's age and mother's education were entered as covariates for all models. Wald tests show whether there were significant differences between groups (e.g. gender, sexual orientation or escaping worries through media) on outcome variables (e.g. time spent watching TV).

Results

Gender

Analyses showed many differences between males and females for our TV and media outcomes. Boys reported watching more TV than females. Girls felt their favorite TV show characters were less similar to them than boys. Girls felt more personally affected by stereotypes about women and girls. Lastly, girls reported more often than boys that sexism and homophobia needed to be addressed in the media.

Sexual orientation

Sexual minorities were compared to heterosexual participants. Results show sexual minorities feel more similar to their favorite TV characters in terms of gender, but less similar in sexual orientation when compared to reports from heterosexuals. Sexual minorities reported more often becoming frustrated with stereotypes while watching TV. Sexual minorities compared to heterosexuals reported being more personally affected by stereotypes about women and girls and sexual minorities. Lastly, sexual minorities reported more often than heterosexuals that both sexism and homophobia need to be addressed in the media.

Escaping worries through TV

Results show adolescents who escape their worries through watching TV reported spending more time watching TV, and felt their favorite TV show characters were more similar to them in their sexual orientation. Participants who escaped their worries through TV also reported feeling upset more often with what they are watching on TV and being more personally affected by negative TV stereotypes centered on women, girls, and sexual minorities. Lastly, people who escape their worries through TV also reported that sexism needed to be addressed in the media.

Table 2. Linear regression models of gender, sexual orientation, and psychological health in televised media (adolescent sample=639)

Likelihood Ratio Chi-square (df=5)	How much time did you spend watching TV yesterday? (N=618)			Are the main characters of your favorite show similar to you in terms of gender? (N=513)			Are the main characters of your favorite show similar to you in terms of sexual orientation? (N=486)			While watching TV- Feel upset at what you are watching on TV (N=277)			While watching TV- Feel frustrated at the stereotypes that you see on TV/movies (N=279)		
	B	SE	Wald (df=1)	B	SE	Wald (df=1)	B	SE	Wald (df=1)	B	SE	Wald (df=1)	B	SE	Wald (df=1)
	1.83	0.09	96.11 ***	2.44	0.06	26.16 ***	3.46	0.06	162.63 ***	2.92	0.08	23.94 ***	2.93	0.08	11.11 *
Male (vs female)	0.47	0.14	10.28 ***	0.31	0.11	7.84 **	-0.06	0.11	0.29	-0.23	0.16	2.03	-0.20	0.16	1.51
Sexual minority (vs heterosexual)	-0.09	0.13	0.45	0.31	0.09	11.09 **	-1.33	0.10	183.15 ***	0.30	0.15	3.81	0.43	0.15	7.95 **
Not escaping worries (vs escaping worries)	-0.97	0.10	87.19 ***	-0.04	0.07	0.33 -	0.17	0.07	5.24 *	-0.47	0.10	20.53 ***	-0.15	0.10	2.22
Age	-0.11	0.04	7.47 **	-0.06	0.03	4.65 *	0.04	0.03	2.09	-0.01	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.69
Mom education	-0.03	0.04	0.40	-0.03	0.03	1.23	0.02	0.03	0.37	0.02	0.04	0.18	0.02	0.04	0.23
Predicted values	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean
Male	1.76	0.14	2.88	0.11	2.65	0.11	2.60	0.16	2.60	0.16	2.87	0.16	2.87	0.16	2.87
Female	1.30	0.07	2.57	0.05	2.71	0.05	2.83	0.08	2.83	0.08	3.07	0.08	3.07	0.08	3.07
Sexual minority	1.48	0.13	2.88	0.10	2.02	0.10	2.87	0.15	2.87	0.15	3.18	0.15	3.18	0.15	3.18
Heterosexual	1.57	0.08	2.57	0.06	3.35	0.06	2.57	0.08	2.57	0.08	2.75	0.08	2.75	0.08	2.75
Not escaping worries	1.04	0.09	2.70	0.07	2.60	0.07	2.48	0.11	2.48	0.11	2.89	0.11	2.89	0.11	2.89
Escaping worries	2.01	0.11	2.75	0.08	2.77	0.08	2.95	0.11	2.95	0.11	3.04	0.11	3.04	0.11	3.04

* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Note: The overall model fit statistics were significant for each TV- and media-related outcome. Likelihood ratio chi-squares ranged from 11.11 to 162.63 (df=5), and were all significant (p-values range from <.05 to <.001). Only means with significant Wald tests are presented here.

Table 3. Linear regression models of gender, sexual orientation, and psychological health on televised media (adolescent sample=639)

Likelihood Ratio Chi-square (df=5)	Affected you personally while watching TV or movies- women and girls (N=280)			Affected you personally while watching TV or movies- gay/lesbian/bisexual people (N=279)			Which should be addressed in the media?- Sexism (N=538)			Which should be addressed in the media?- Homophobia (N=538)		
	B	SE	Wald (df=1)	B	SE	Wald (df=1)	B	SE	Wald (df=1)	B	SE	Wald (df=1)
Intercept	3.26	0.08	45.97***	2.97	0.09	25.34***	-0.78	0.15	32.36***	-0.57	0.15	49.59***
Male (vs female)	-0.71	0.15	22.31***	-0.31	0.17	3.43	-0.73	0.35	4.31*	-0.82	0.31	6.80**
Sexual minority (vs heterosexual)	0.44	0.15	8.86**	0.61	0.16	14.10***	0.91	0.23	15.35***	1.37	0.24	32.93***
Not escaping worries (vs escaping worries)	-0.28	0.10	7.92**	-0.22	0.11	3.96*	-0.40	0.20	4.17*	0.08	0.19	0.19
Age	0.10	0.03	8.17**	0.05	0.04	1.48	0.15	0.08	3.41	0.02	0.07	0.07
Mom education	0.07	0.04	3.48	0.10	0.04	5.63*	0.14	0.08	3.18	0.14	0.07	3.34
Predicted values	Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Percent	Mean	SE	Percent	Mean	SE	Percent	Percent
Male	2.62	0.15	2.84	0.17	22%	2.84	0.17	22%	3.11	0.12	34%	34%
Female	3.32	0.08	3.15	0.08	37%	3.15	0.08	37%	3.11	0.12	43%	54%
Sexual minority	3.19	0.15	3.30	0.16	40%	3.30	0.16	40%	3.11	0.12	43%	61%
Heterosexual	2.75	0.08	2.69	0.09	21%	2.69	0.09	21%	3.11	0.12	43%	28%
Not escaping worries	2.83	0.10	2.89	0.11	25%	2.89	0.11	25%	3.11	0.12	43%	45%
Escaping worries	3.11	0.11	3.11	0.12	34%	3.11	0.12	34%	3.11	0.12	43%	43%

* p<.05, ** p<.01,***p<.001

Discussion

The findings of the current study suggest that our adolescent participants, particularly girls and sexual minorities, are concerned with the negative impact of sexist and homophobic stereotypes in mainstream media. Questions still remain about whether these participants want better representations of themselves in order to internalize more healthy ideals or whether they want to limit the cultivation of negative stereotypes within broader audiences (Gerbner et al., 2002) who are both in the in-group (e.g., girls and sexual minorities) and out-group (e.g., boys and heterosexuals).

Bond (2015) demonstrated that sexual minority youth who are more committed to their sexual minority identities tend to have more positive well-being when exposed to both mainstream and gay/lesbian-oriented media. They argued that any exposure to gay and lesbian-oriented images validates the existence of sexual minorities in real life, therefore is preferable to no images at all. Adolescents in our study who use televised media to escape from their worries tended to be more emotionally reactive to what they watched, including negative stereotypes of women, girls, and sexual minorities. Self-discrepancy theory argues that a difference between a person's ideal self and their actual self can lead to significant emotional distress (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985). Since frequency and amount of exposure can have a negative impact on self-discrepancy, it is possible that exposure to stereotypical media can have a negative impact on adolescents. In our study, we found that sexual minority adolescents who use television to escape from their worries also tend to gravitate toward television characters who are also sexual minorities, suggesting that the potential harm from negative depictions can hit too close to home.

Scharrer (2012) argues that the field of media psychology should investigate the complexity of individuals' responses to media, for instance how media use patterns shape one's response to media representations of gender and sexuality. In the current study, we found that adolescents with a pattern of escaping from their stressful lives by watching televised media were particularly vulnerable to negative media portrayals, particularly of disenfranchised groups such as sexual minorities. Investigating factors that shape how television portrayals can impact self-perceptions can be useful in the development of media messages intended to produce attitude and behavior change (Hoffner, 1996).

Collins (2011) argues that there is a major gap in the literature on the audience effects of inequitable representation of gender and other minority identities. McDermott and Greenberg (1984) found increases in self-esteem when people of color saw themselves in the media. Future direction would be to understand how girls and sexual minorities might be psychologically affected (e.g., self-esteem) by seeing more diverse images of themselves represented in mainstream media.

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