

Media gender stereotypes and interpretations by female Generation Y

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Abstract

Contemporary media representations surrounding gender often accentuates emerging stereotypes while affirming existing stereotypes around the post feminist and hegemonic female with manifest constructs of what is normal and natural. These stereotypes often reverse historical gender roles both in the home and workplace. Young females also have no qualms about the body beautiful and resultant gaze especially if it represents success or celebrity status and ultimately empowerment.

This paper will focus on a Generation Y female perspective and will explore the influences of media gender representations and stereotypes on young female attitudes and individuality. It will analyse how these stereotypes affect student perceptions and articulation around gender portrayal within the context of self-expression. The discourse centres round media constructs of third wave feminism and how messages within popular culture are encoding and decoding. Lastly the paper will investigate the changing role of gender hierarchies.

Introduction

The topic for this discourse has simmered for a number of years and was triggered by a class discussion round gender stereotypes and media representations. A class of mainly female, year three university design students were asked to describe their perceptions round gender attributes and traits. The response from the female students described men as idiots, wastes of space, incompetent and fools; women were in control, savvy and could do anything. This discussion, coupled with observations over a ten-year period identified a shift in how many young female design students referenced women in their evaluations and resultant creative executions. Referencing female physicality in their executions seemed to hold no barriers for them be it a position of hegemony or sexualisation. In referencing masculinity they often take the popular media position of mockery, “Suddenly, masculinity is not made by men, but is determined by women. Women define it, women chastise it” (Salzman, Matathia and O’Reilly 2005, 120).

This paper will explore these perceptions and will examine the role the media plays in gender identification, representation and resultant performance. It will also investigate a New

Zealand perspective. The paper uses societal constructs of masculinity and femininity and references young females from Generation Y, born 1980-1994. The term 'media' refers to magazines, newspapers, television sitcoms and soaps, reality and light drama shows, film and advertising.

The media and how it constructs and influences societal stereotypes and norms

The media contains a predominance of popular cultural images, often reinforcing gender stereotypes and defining societal constructs. These stereotypes influence constructs around education, identity, leadership and ultimately how we define ourselves and ultimately the establishment of cultural norms and biases around what is "normal and natural" (Kruse and Prettyman 2008, 452). The connection between media constructs round gender identities and emergent stereotypes are well documented. Gender stereotypes and media representations within popular culture have a significant influence on how young females identify themselves. Futurists and trend spotters, Salzman, Matathia & O'Reilly (2007), examined the changing roles of gender representation in the media. They argue that young females establish their attitudes, viewpoints and how they measure themselves from media representations, "We become what we consume, media-wise" (Salzman, Matathia and O'Reilly 2007, 124). They suggest that certain magazines and shows "appeal to the demographic that has the highest percentage of readers and viewers: in other words, women" (Salzman, Matathia and O'Reilly 2007, 128). Generation Y are high consumers of media, especially young females. The authors also suggest that women have taken the high ground and often determine gender portrayal within the media whether directly or indirectly. They are the main audience and so play a pivotal role around notions or constructs of gender. These constructs have become rather potent in establishing gender stereotypes, "Media representations tell us who we are, who we should be and who we should avoid" (MacKinnon 2003, 24).

Situation comedies (sitcoms), soap operas and reality shows are deemed "mainly light parody, and thus far less subversive" (Hanke 1992, 89), therefore any serious analysis or decoding by audiences is either minimal or absent. Comedy in sitcoms is not so much about consumption of parody and analysis as it is about entertainment. The humour, laughter or jokes in sitcoms dispels any sense that there might be any serious readings on offer. Sitcoms are dependent "upon a consumer culture for its very existence" (Hanke 1998, 75) but exclude

any analysis of it. Laughter and how it is achieved is the aim, any resultant fall out is expendable. The nature of sitcoms is such that they are “an institutionalised form of joking, are not funny in themselves; they require a third person, the audience for their completion” (Hanke 1998, 89). In essence, a laugh track or cue is provided to ascertain “the funny moments” (Hanke 1998, 90). The importance of this is, who is the third person, a female or male? It is argued that this then sanctions both existing and emergent stereotypes.

Producers argue that they only set out to parody these stereotypes for audience analysis and therefore a resultant challenge or rethink of gender representation. A complication exists around decoding in that the intended encoding or representations of gender can be corrupted, as it is not always clear what is required to decode them. Basically audiences cannot always decode overt attempts at encoded narrative, they do not always understand parodic narrative. Media representations are often taken at face value, further reinforcing stereotypes. Kenneth MacKinnon (2003) explores the ramifications of different readings around gender representations by the media. He argues that rather than the decoding intended by media producers, multi readings or meanings are common. He states that the decoded meaning could be “negotiated or even oppositional” (MacKinnon 2003, 24). MacKinnon also suggests that overt encoding is sometimes “turned back against the encoder” (MacKinnon 2003, 24).

It is obvious that gender stereotypes established in mainstream television results in further engagement or copycat performances in advertising. If complications arise round the inexact science of decoding in television shows what is the case for advertising. The nature of advertising like the sitcom is in the main, an [under the radar] experience. It is just an advertisement; therefore no serious scrutiny is required. Again audiences are unable or unwilling to decode in a desired context. The usual filters to block or analysis controversial gender stereotypes are disabled, again audiences are unable or unwilling to decode in a desired context and are therefore at risk of missing the more complex layers of meaning.

So where are things now and where are they heading?

The motivators for young females seem to be freedom and choice. The mantra of the feminist movement is barely audible. Angela McRobbie (2004) investigates what she sees as the demise of the feminist movement. Young females are throwing off what they see as the

shackles of feminism. The author argues that although feminist values are embedded within a broad range of institutions, law, education, medicine & the media, female students don't seem to identify with feminist leadership. McRobbie also sees a decline in female's studies within academia. The long fought for rights seem to have been rejected. "female individualisation is embodied in the figure of the ambitious 'TV Blonde'" (McRobbie 2004, 257). What has caused this rejection of "those who put them there" or as the author terms it a "kind of ritualistic denunciation" (McRobbie 2004, 258). She suggests this disempowerment comes from young female's belief that the feminist movement has passed its used by date. A telling quote from a qualitative study that interviewed university aged students identifies a growing number a young female viewpoints in response to the historical feminist doctrine, "I feel like we almost think of feminists as the Ku Klux Klan... like people think that feminists think that women are the best thing in the world, you know we don't even need men" (Leavy, Gnon and Ross 2009, 274). We have now entered the third wave of feminism.

Improved education for young females and the resultant increased earning power, along with contemporary consumer identities has influenced a shift around the perception of the feminist. These perceptions have in part been constructed and reinforced through media representation and affirmations. The media focus is now on the female as individuals not as a group philosophy. Young females are free to compete and consider all options and opportunities. There has been a shift away from "prime time feminism" like LA Law to "niche feminism" (McRobbie 2004, 258). This shift is significant for the media, institutions like education, more importantly the young females themselves. There has been a "sigh of relief" and a shift away from "political correctness...and the tyrannical regime of feminist puritanism" (McRobbie 2004, 259).

It is now acceptable to enjoy looking at and being the body beautiful. Young female Generation Y viewers are educated and are visually literate. They understand irony, they get the joke, "many college age women have internalised cultural notions of femininity as body drive, a view that is reinforced by societal institutions and the ideology of advertising" (Leavy, Gnon and Ross 2009, 263). A 1994 billboard advertisement for Wonderbra in the United Kingdom with the headline 'Hello Boys', featured model Eva Herzigova in a revealing pose wearing the bra and admiring the effect is an example of the shift in acceptance if not an embrace by young women of the gaze. This billboard and advertisements

like it, both suggest a burlesque of the object of the gaze while seemingly to empower the women as the object. McRobbie states, “Feminism is ‘taken into account,’ but only to be shown to be no longer necessary” (McRobbie 2004, 259). It is common for female models and celebrities to appear in advertisements. Claudia Schiffer, a recognised international fashion model, featured in a European vehicle television advertisement, slowly removing her clothing as she approached the car. Seemingly it was her choice and for her entertainment, there was no coercion involved. An obvious interpretation suggests if it is good enough for Claudia, it is good enough for young females. In fact to disapprove could risk mockery.

McRobbie suggests this is a “movement beyond feminism” (McRobbie 2004, 259) a space and a place where young females have freedom to decide their own futures. There is a normalisation and approval, in fact a desire for the body beautiful and resultant gaze. Soft ‘porn’ has almost become mainstream and even ‘hard core’ pornography seems to have the sanction of Generation Y females. They wear with pride clothing with lettering stating “porn star” or “pay to touch across their chests...we are witness to a hyper-culture of commercial sexuality” (McRobbie 2004, 259). Not only is this considered cool, the expected condemnation, even from young female journalists, is absent (McRobbie 2004). Maybe the result of this normalisation and acceptance is a requirement of this newfound freedom or as McRobbie suggests a “quietude and complicity” (McRobbie 2004, 260).

There appears to be confusion around societal norms & gender roles for young females, requiring them to “invent their own structures” or “life plans” (McRobbie 2004, 260). These new structures and freedoms expose anxieties and fears around loneliness and remaining single. This is well illustrated in the film ‘Bridget Jones’s Diary’. It seems these anxieties can be balanced out by the freedoms round self-expression and sexuality. They don’t need men but don’t go without them either (McRobbie 2004). Young females are at the vanguard of the new “gender regime” (McRobbie 2004, 262). Expressions like enjoyment, relaxation and abandonment seem a mantra. The media has lapped this up and exploited it with a vengeance. The characters from the American cable television series ‘Sex in the city’ in fact claim them as a right.

Kehily & Nayak (2008) have argued that the consumption of global media has offered “opportunities for the emergence of new femininities” (Kehily and Nayak 2008, 325). They

suggest that “young women have been positioned as the ideal neo-liberal subjects for post-industrial times, taking centre stage in the reconfiguration of labour patterns, consumption practice and gender roles” (Kehily and Nayak 2008, 325) therefore freeing women from masculine constrictions. They describe a pivotal role “in the new girl order” (Kehily and Nayak 2008, 325). What is not clear is the affect of these changing roles and perceptions have on young women. The authors also suggest that education has a role in framing “young women’s encounters with the products of cultural globalisation” (Kehily and Nayak 2008, 326) especially against the backdrop of freedoms and opportunities suggested by “celebrity culture” (Kehily and Nayak 2008, 326). The relevance of this is how young female students present themselves and reference their own gender. Parental influences have declined. Young females now recognised as high consumers explore other sources of influence for identity - the media and its resultant characters, celebrities and stereotypes. Soap operas in particular have resonance for young women around how they view and reference themselves and their “moral and ethical judgements” (Kehily and Nayak 2008, 332).

Researchers suggest parallels between media constructs and resultant stereotypes and the “great potential for influencing student identity and artistic production” (Freedman 1994, 163). Female students in a number of research questionnaires “desired to emulate the apparent power and status” (Freedman 1994, 164-165) of characters, celebrities or models from advertising, magazines and television shows like soap operas. They merged “their personalities with their idealised conception of the characters, creating ideal identities for themselves” (Freedman 1994, 164-165) helping them to create meaning in their own lives. Although young female students are aware of feminist judgements around objectification of women and the gaze they often replicate it verbatim, “students make sexist or other offensive image in art classrooms under the guise of free expression” (Freedman 1994, 167). The television advertisement featuring Claudia Schaffer explains why young female students feel it is acceptable, in fact empowering to reference females in a highly sexualised and hegemonic regard. The combination of both the desire for freedom of expression and imitation of their role models has created a blurring of messages especially in the media. The body beautiful, the gaze and celebrity status seems to equal empowerment.

Hegemony and the constructs of feminine leadership

Another shift within media constructs are the emergent representations of female leadership and hegemony and the perceptions of power and status. Although researchers have suggested that gender does not “determine leadership or performance” (Kruse and Prettyman 2008, 454), resistant patriarchal stereotypes still affect perceptions. Cultural and societal contexts also play a role around perceptions of female leaders and their values and how media stereotypes are decoded. Australian researchers Wilkinson & Blackmore (2008) stated that “women [leaders] being hailed as the harbinger of change, a ‘dominant motif’” (Wilkinson and Blackmore 2008, 128). Leavy, Gong & Ross (2009) state that the “hegemonic feminine ideal” (Leavy, Gngong and Ross 2009, 265) prescribes both appearance and behaviour with media constructs around stereotypical comprehensions of the feminine being the most influential followed by parents and peers. Again the media dictates to young women the how and what around dress, performance and expectations. The authors argue that these constructs are in “constant contradiction” (Leavy, Gngong and Ross 2009, 272) and read like a script but young females are still “acutely aware of what they needed to do in order to perform within this system” (Leavy, Gngong and Ross 2009, 272). In order to be powerful and to succeed, especially in business, young females understand there is a balancing act between the contradictory gender constructs around the masculine, self assured, emphatic and forthcoming and the feminine, beautiful, in shape and compliant resultant (Leavy, Gong and Ross 2009).

So what of a New Zealand perspective, how has the consumption of globalised media coupled with cultural stereotypes influenced New Zealand women? New Zealanders have accepted, in fact embraced women in leadership positions around politics, business and the home (Wilkinson and Blackmore 2008). The norms and freedoms expected and embedded within Generation Y females internationally are very evident in contemporary New Zealand society. The country was founded on a pioneering spirit and the resultant stereotypes applied as much to the women as it did to the men. The New Zealand media have a presumption around women in leadership and power often demonising men. Advertising also positions women in the role of hegemony, especially in the home and business again men are often portrayed as subservient and unnecessary. In 1893, New Zealand was the first country to grant women the vote. Political power for women has increased dramatically since, with women occupying the key roles of Prime Minister, Governor General and Chief Justice in 2002 (Fountaine and McGregor 2002). New Zealand has had two women Prime Ministers

along with female leadership of oppositional political parties over the last twelve years (Ministry of Education 2009). In a February 1st 2002 newspaper survey, women scored 46% in political news stories against their male counterparts compared to 18% in the United Kingdom, 11% in Australia and 9% in America (Fountaine and McGregor 2002, 4). New Zealand researchers have stated that female leaders and role models, especially within politics, are respected and highly regarded as news sources (Fountaine and McGregor 2002). Female numbers in New Zealand universities have increased more than males in the last ten years, occupying approximately 50% of teaching positions from 1999 – 2008. Female students outnumbered males by 136,000 to 101,000 in 2008, a trend seen globally. Females completed 97,000 degrees versus 71,000 for males in 2008 (Ministry of Education 2009).

Conclusion

In summary, the plethora of images and narratives within popular culture around female representations and stereotypes offered by the media results in a “blizzard of signs” and a blurring of boundaries between “image & reality” (Kehily and Nayak 2008, 336). Baudrillard termed it “hyper-reality“, a mediated reality of “endless floating signifiers, artifice and affective intensities” (Kehily and Nayak 2008, 337). This is ample justification for ongoing analysis round media gender representations and the resultant emergent and existing stereotypes. The ramifications are considerable especially round how women identify and measure themselves and the resultant performative aspects of the feminine and “what they are supposed to be and how they are supposed to act” (Salzman, Matathia & O’Reilly 2005, 124). The impact is not confined to women only; men also garner their attitudes and viewpoints around the feminine as well as the masculine from media representations. Salzman, Matathia & O’Reilly conclude that while biological metamorphosis maybe slow, psychologically it can be rapid. The bombardment of conflicting media stereotypes on Generation Y females impacts not only on self-identity and performance but is then reflected on and referenced in their outward expressions, “The media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. It casts judgement and establishes the rules of play” (McRobbie 2004, 258). This generation feel they are free to express their femininity in highly sexualised and objectified ways that counters everything their feminist forebears would find repugnant. Access to the ‘third screen‘, as Kevin Roberts CEO of advertising giant Saatchi and Saatchi describes screen-based technology like computers and cellphones, has opened up further opportunities and freedoms, “Young women are, as a result, now

‘dis-embedded’ from communities where gender roles were fixed” (McRobbie 2004, 260). Posting images and video clips of themselves onto online sites and social networks like YouTube, Facebook and Bebo not to mention texting or emailing has given them a false sense of self, notoriety and empowerment. It is not only acceptable but also coveted.

As the education industry is endeavouring to keep abreast of the major changes round content and delivery relevant to a rapidly evolving client base, outside influences, especially those around media gender constructs that both heighten expectations and impact on identity, must be kept uppermost, “Educationalists are having to respond to the media in ways that were unimaginable two decades ago” (Wilkinson and Blackmore 2008, 124).

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