

THE EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA AND  
TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT ON  
EVOLVING GENDER IDENTITIES

By

Deanna Wong

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APPROVED BY

Chris Kinman, M.A., Advisor, Counselling Psychology Faculty  
Colin Sanders, Ph.D., Faculty Reader, Counselling Psychology Faculty

Division of Arts and Sciences

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### Abstract

Gender identity definitions are evolving faster than ever before with the advent of technological advancement that mass media both constructs and reflects the discourses, interests and thirst for knowledge in informing individuals on how to perform their respective genders, and what choices are now becoming available to them with mixed messages in media. Using a Social Cognitive Theory framework, studies and discourses are examined in light of the uncharted territories and spaces that are being co-constructed as individuals exchange, challenge and engage in messages that inform social norms and their gender performances. Due to the significance of having a coherent sense of Self, mental health practitioners should be aware of the changing needs of this tech-savvy generation that will be facing challenges in developing their gendered selves

## Introduction

As an Asian girl brought up with strict conservative Chinese Confucius *and* Christian Baptist values, I was brought up to be a *proper lady* and harshly reprimanded for stepping one dainty toe out of line.

Although I am very proud of my identity as a Chinese Canadian woman, it has been a long-standing, and continuing struggle to develop an identity I could like in myself in the face of very mixed, often negative messages in mass media. However, it is also thanks to mass media, that platforms of gender discourses have opened up and individuals world-wide are able to engage in transforming gender stereotypes to liberate everyone in society.

In this paper, I argue that culture helps to shape an individuals' identity, and specifically, that and gender identities are being co-constructed by exposure to the beliefs held at large in our immediate culture. These beliefs in turn, are mediated by media through technology. Given the fact that current youth are a whole new generation of tech-savvy, heavy consumers of social media, who thrive on instantaneous access to current events in the world, as rapidly as it does to pornography, it is not so surprising if people are breaking out of gender dichotomous labels, and identifying their gender and sexual orientations as more diverse than ever before. My argument is based on Bandura's (1999) Social Cognitive Theory and the works of gender egalitarian authors, and researchers, as well as popular culture.

This presentation of how technology, media and gender are intertwined in their rapid development is of significance because gender and sexual identity are core components of an individual's sense of Self, it is imperative for therapists to learn and be prepared for the upcoming generation of young clients who will no doubt be struggling with their identities. If we are knowledgeable and aware of how rapidly our culture and their identities are evolving, then we may be at least somewhat prepared to aid these clients in discovering themselves. It is my hope that by the

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end of this paper, the therapist will find something useful either to reflect upon in themselves to push the boundaries of his or her limited understandings just a little further, or at least be able to apply some of the research explored here in their practice.

*\*(Sidenote: the terms gender and sex will be used interchangeably at times—despite of the understanding that sex is the biological disposition an individual is assigned at birth, and that gender is the social construction that norms dictate the enactment of a particular sex—to be consistent with the plethora of studies mentioned here that sometimes use the terms interchangeably.)*

## Chapter 1

### Social Cognitive Theory and Other Frameworks in Understanding Media Effects

Although most theorists and studies adopt an integrated mix of social and cognitive theories to understand gender identity formation, the origins of current theories evolved from learning theories from the 1960's. For instance, Mischel's (1966) "ideas were a direct outgrowth of learning-based approaches quite popular at the time"; he "emphasized the importance of environmental determinants of gender development (rewards and models) and suggested that behaviors precede cognitions (e.g., 'I have been rewarded for doing boy things, I must be a boy')" (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.904). At the same time, departing from the popular psychoanalytic and learning theories, "Kohlberg (1966) emphasized the importance of children's growing understanding of gender categories and their permanent placement into one of them. He proposed that such cognitions precede behaviors (e.g., 'I am a boy and thus like to do boy things')" (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.904). Specifically, Kohlberg's (1966) Cognitive-developmental theory utilizes "a Piagetian analysis of age-related changes in cognitive structures to the social domain" (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.909). In Cognitive-developmental theory:

One critical component of the theory is gender constancy, which represents the developing understanding of the invariance of gender— quite similar to the concrete–operational concept of conservation of physical properties. Constancy is usually represented by three stages . . . : (a) children's growing realization that they are either a boy or a girl (called gender identity); (b) the recognition that this identity does not change over time (called gender stability); and (c) the recognition that this identity is not affected by changes in gender-typed appearances, activities, and traits (called gender consistency). Once children achieve this understanding about

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themselves, information about gender categories is believed to take on greater significance in how children respond to gender norms, develop relevant attitudes, and guide their behaviors.

(As cited in as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.909)

Importantly, Cognitive–developmental theory purports that “gender development involves an active construction of the meaning of gender categories, initiated internally by the child rather than externally by socialization agents . . . it argues that mastery or competence motivation is a driving force in gender development” as children strive to understand the world around them and through categorization (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.909). Moreover, “Kohlberg (1966) was the first to posit that developmental changes in children’s level of gender understanding are crucial for organizing other aspects of children’s gendered behavior and thinking” (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.909). Generally, four main underlying principles of cognitive theories include: a) that humans have a tendency to use functionally significant and salient categories, like gender, to classify and organize information from their environments, b) there is an underlying coherence (or a perception of coherence) or similar traits that can be grouped and differentiated between, c) categorization promotes inductive reasoning or ability to make inferences based on categorizations which promotes the growth of knowledge structures, and lastly, d) there are cognitive consequences of categorization—a tendency to exaggerate between-group differences and enhance within-group similarities—that further promote the development of knowledge structures (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, pp.911-912). Additionally, Bem (1989) “suggested that once children understand the genital basis of sex categories, they show gender constancy, and that such an understanding can occur as young as 3–4 years of age” (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.910). In support of his theory “previous studies have found significant relationships between level of gender constancy understanding and numerous aspects of gender development” such as: selective attention, same-sex modeling, same-sex activity, clothing, and peer

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preferences; gender stereotype knowledge; and affective indices of heightened responsiveness to gender (as cited in Ruble & Szkrzybalo, 2002, p.909).

Likewise, according to Gender Schema theory (Bem, 1981) gender schemas are “mental associations representing information about themselves and the sexes— that influence information processing and behavior. . . as a function of interactions between the individual and his or her environment as well as changes in response to situational variations” (as cited in Ruble & Szkrzybalo, 2002, p.911). These “[s]chemas are not seen as passive copies of the environment; instead, they are viewed as active constructions, prone to errors and distortions . . . [additionally,] some children may initially develop idiosyncratic schemas or ones that match the other sex more than their own sex, and these could direct children’s behavior” (as cited in Ruble & Szkrzybalo, 2002, p.911). For instance:

a girl with a tomboy schema could allow her more flexibility in her behavior and thinking.

Similarly, children’s interests in attractive activities or in future high-status jobs may modify their schemas; when children have strong personal interest in an activity typically associated with the other sex, their schemas may become more flexible . . . Thus, the influence of gender schemas on behavior and thinking is dependent on many factors within the child and the environment. (As cited in Ruble & Szkrzybalo, 2002, p.911)

However, gender schema perspectives insist that “the impact of the schema will lessen with the emergence of other cognitive–developmental processes, such as flexibility in classification, and with individual differences in values, gender salience, and schema elaboration” (as cited in Ruble & Szkrzybalo, 2002, p.925). Additionally, biological differences also seems to impact how vulnerable some infants can be to socialization: “Udry (2000) found that women...exposed to higher levels of androgens prenatally were less open to socialization into feminine roles than were other women...[Thus,] biological and early hormone environments [seem to] work in interaction with cognitive

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and social factors to influence development” (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.926). Furthermore, Bem (1981) posits that gender role schemas are extended and refined during adolescence: along with physical and mental maturity, “the socio-cultural context defines how to evaluate and handle these changes and prompts adolescents to develop their social and sexual selves in ways that are congruent with socially prevailing gender roles”, turning to peers and media that provide ample examples as guidance during such situations (as cited in Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010, p. 845).

Consistently, “Bandura’s social-learning theory...identifies 3 main processes involved in learning: direct experience, indirect or vicarious experience from observing others (modeling), and the storing and processing of complex information through cognitive operations” (as cited in Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Markham, Low, Eitel, & Thickestun, 2005, p.304). According to Bandura (1986), “behaviors are learned and that they are influenced by social context: ‘Television is seen as an increasingly influential agent of socialization that produces its effects through children’s propensity to learn by imitation’” (as cited in Escobar-Chaves, et al., 2005, p. 304). Furthermore: “Bandura (1997; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963) argues that...learning is more likely to be translated into behavior when: a) the role model is similar to the viewer (e.g., gender matched), b) the behavior and/or context are ‘realistic’...c) the role model is attractive, and d) the behavior is positively reinforced” (as cited in Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008, p. 444).

After Bandura’s (1986) Bobo doll experiment wherein children were found to mimic violence they watched on television—demonstrating vicarious learning—“social learning theory evolved into social cognitive theory [SCT] to describe ‘reciprocal, casual relationships among the environment, individuals and behaviors’...act[ing] as interacting parts affecting one another in a unidirectional process” (Callahan, 2011, p. 30). For instance, “social cognitive theory...suggests that adolescents seeing [*individual choice and background*] other adolescents in media enjoying sexual behavior with no

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negative consequences [*behavioral observation*] have an increased probability of observational learning and behavioral imitation”, especially when mimicking the actions are reinforced by peers (*environmental factor*) (Bleakley, et al., 2008, p. 444). Therefore, “internal variables—such as a child’s biological preparedness to learn and engage in gender-typed behaviors, his or her emotional state...self-standards, anticipated outcomes, and past success or failure in producing such gender-typed behaviors...[are] important roles in the emergence and maintenance of gender-typed behaviors” (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.904). That said, “SCT stresses that children select and create their own environments as well. For instance, children may contribute to their gender role socialization through their selection of playmates and activities” (As cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p. 905).

Overall, SCT “suggests that humans learn behaviors by observing others and choosing which behaviors to imitate”—behaviors that are rewarded are positively reinforced and therefore encouraged to repeat, whereas behaviors that are punished are negatively reinforced and discouraged to repeat (as cited Petersen & Hyde, 2011, p. 150). According to SCT, “gender differences in behavior are created because boys and girls observe different behaviors...and girls learn gender-appropriate behaviors because they are reinforced for gender role-consistent behaviors and punished for gender role-inconsistent behaviors” (as cited in Petersen & Hyde, 2011, p. 150). Due to this social reinforcement, “boys and girls prefer to imitate same-gender models, which further increases their attention to gender role-consistent behaviors” as they learn vicariously which behaviors are rewarded and punished” (as cited in Petersen & Hyde, 2011, p. 150). Through this reinforcing cycle of observational learning eventually, SCT asserts that “boys and girls internalize these standards for gender appropriate behavior and regulate their own behavior in accordance with gender norms” (as cited in Petersen & Hyde, 2011, p. 150). Moreover, “SCT asserts all humans are naturally motivated to seek gratification from achieving their socially defined standards” (Callahan, 2011, p. 34). Thus, the motivation for

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individuals to internalize social norms is also derived from the gratification of achieving these social standards. Ruble & Szkrybalo (2002) add that “the motivation, self-efficacy, is equated with developing competence in a particular area of functioning...the effective enactment of developing skills (as cited in, p.925). In other words, the satisfaction of competence in achieving social expectations is also a driving force that perpetuates gender-typed behaviors.

Callahan (2011) also asserts that “observational learning is far more than behavior imitation; it is an integrative learning process. Personal standards of conduct guide behavior motivation. Behavior itself is produced based upon the ultimate pursuit of self-satisfaction while rejecting behavior one may personally disapprove of” (p. 204). According this author, it seems that having a sense of congruency in values and actions, also serves as an important motivation for behavior.

On a cognitive level, “Bandura (2001c) offers the following explanation of the four modes of thought verification--enactive, vicarious, social and logical” that are fundamental to the cognitive aspects of SCT (Callahan, 2011, p. 36):

1. Enactive verification—relies on the adequacy of the fit between one’s own thoughts and the results of the actions they spawn. Good [consistent fit] matches corroborate thoughts; mismatches [inconsistent fit] tend to refute them.
2. Vicarious verification—observing other people’s transactions with the environment and the effects they produce provides a check on the correctness of one’s own thinking....
3. Social verification—used when experiential verification is difficult or unfeasible...evaluate the soundness of views by checking them against what others believe.
4. Logical verification—check for fallacies in thinking by deducing from knowledge that is known. (As cited in Callahan, 2011, pp.36-37)

That said, “SCT asserts for effective cognitive processes to occur, individuals must be

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able to distinguish between accurate and faulty thinking (according to societal norms)” (Callahan, 2011, p. 36). For this reason, “[c]onflict between social and self-produced sanctions can occur when individuals are socially punished for behavior the individual personally values...self-sanctions can be weakened over time if we acclimate ourselves to mores that are socially accepted”, thus shaping an individuals’ values over time (Callahan, 2011, pp. 44-45).

Unfortunately, values around gender can perpetuate unfair standards: for example, “today, the double standard holds that casual sex and multiple sex partners are acceptable for men, but not for women...This sexual double standard is regulated by punishing women for sexually permissive behaviors” (as cited in Petersen &Hyde, 2011, p. 150). In this case, SCT “would suggest that men and women internalize these standards for gendered sexual expression and regulate their behaviors and attitudes in accordance with the sexual double standard” (as cited in Petersen &Hyde, 2011, p. 151).

Indeed, “experimental evidence is clear: Gender stereotypes about activities and toys influence children’s behavior, motivation, and memory” (as cited in Ruble &Szkrybalo, 2002, p.917). In fact, infants show categorical responding to female and male voices by 6 months of age; by 10 months, infants are capable of holding both gender categories in mind while making some types of judgments, and seem to recognize the association between gender categories and objects (as cited in Ruble &Szkrybalo, 2002, p.919). Similarly, studies showed demonstrated that young children are quick to make inferences about “a neutral item paired with either a girl or a boy led to a categorical inference. For example, if they were told that a boy likes a sofa and a girl likes a table, children would infer that another girl would like the table (as cited in Ruble &Szkrybalo, 2002, p.925). Interestingly, research suggests that the “rigidity of gender-related knowledge and behavior waxes and wanes across development. For example...gender stereotyping about the kinds of objects and activities associated with males and females emerges between 2 and 4 years of age, reaches a peak of rigidity between 5 and

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7 years, shows greater flexibility during middle childhood...but may intensify once again during adolescence” (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.925).

Some reasons for early learning of these stereotypes have been attributed to: “biological influences, parental reinforcement, and/or to familiarity with toys in the home” (as cited in Ruble & Szekrybalo, 2002, p.918). However, many studies have pointed to mass media as one of the most influential sources for perpetuating gender stereotypes. According to SCT:

the media may create the common model for imitation. Gender norms for sexual expression may be observed on television, in movies, on the Internet, or from song lyrics. Although the sexual double standard is commonly portrayed in the media, the media are becoming increasingly sexually liberal, providing more sexually permissive models for both men and women to imitate...Increased globalization and access to technology allow people all over the world access to these models in the media...insofar as the media provide a model for sexual expression, these changes toward sexual promiscuity in the media should be accompanied by changes in actual sexual behaviors. (As cited in Petersen & Hyde, 2011, p. 150)

Indeed, research shows that, “[i]f a narrow and well defined range of attitudes and...gender roles are on display, imitation seems more likely...[in] youth media’s portrayal of romance and sex, this condition is met...[providing] evidence that stereotypical gendered representations of romance and sex prevail” (as cited in Bogt et al., 2010, p. 846). These researchers concluded that “exposure to formulaic content of youth media may shape sexual attitudes and stereotypes, and promote chronic adoption of these schemas” (as cited in Bogt et al., 2010, p. 846). Likewise, “Bandura also explains how media can incite behavior change: In some instances the media both teach new forms of behavior and create motivators for action by altering people’s value preferences, efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and perception of opportunity structures” (Callahan, 2011, p. 203). Theoretically, this occurs when “reward

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or punishment for social behaviors shown on television... influence learner-viewers' beliefs, attitudes and judgments of the behaviors, which therefore influence the inclination to emulate observed acts...[which] affect emotions and attitudes related to specific behaviors exhibited in mass media" (Callahan, 2011, p. 43). For this reason, media has "a potentially significant influence on the shaping and shifting of personalized perceptions of moral values" (Callahan, 2011, p.38).

Clearly, media in all its technological forms has a significant impact on directly and vicariously transmitting values, attitudes, and norms in its explicit and implicit messages through its content. Social Cognitive Theory, developed to include both traditional Behavioral Learning and Cognitive theories, serves as a helpful framework in understanding media and its effect on individuals—especially in youth. In the face of technological advancement, we must consider the impact mass media may have on current and future minds, values, practices, and norms.

## Chapter 2

### The Invasion of Mass Media Via Technological Advancement

Research and literature is abound with the undeniable fact the last two decades have been transformed by technological advancement, wherein we are facing a technological revolution that is transmuting culture via mass media, at speeds that history has never seen before. As Smahel & Subrahmanyam (2011) assert, “[d]igital media, such as computers, the Internet, video games, and mobile phones, have come to occupy a central place in the lives of today’s youth. . . . Remarkably, most young people use interactive technologies and seem to be living their lives online” (p.v). Consider the following statistics:

- On an average day, youth use media almost 6.5 hours...thus media are clearly a considerable presence in their lives. (Bleakley, Fishbein, Hennessy, & Jordan, 2008, p. 433)
- In one recent survey, 95% of all 15- to 17-year-olds have gone online, 29% have Internet access from their bedroom, and half go online at least once a day. (As cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 85)
- The average American youth spends 900 hours in school and 1,023 hours watching TV every year. (As cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 11)
- Children aged eight to eighteen are reported to use the media nearly eight hours each day, devoting three to four hours to TV viewing alone. (As cited in Day, Epstein, & Ward, 2006, p. 57)
- [in 2000] U.S. 8- through 18-year-olds spend almost a third of every day exposed to media messages. (As cited in Roberts, 2000, p. 9)
- The average American home ...has three TVs, two VCRs, three radios, two tape players, two CD players, more than one video game console and more than one computer.

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American kids ages 8 to 18 spend about 7 hours a day interacting with some form of electronic media ...[and] the most avid consumers of this new media are young men 16 to 26. (As cited in Dunlap, &Johnson, 2011, p. 209)

Not surprisingly, “the bedrooms of today’s youth have been turned into mini–media centers . . . only the most atypical U.S. youngsters lack relatively easy and constant access to a wide variety of media” (Roberts, 2000, p. 9). Given these overwhelming statistics and the intensity at which children are exposed to mass media, it is rather alarming that “[o]ne of America’s top exports is media. People around the world watch images portrayed in American films and television and believe this is how American society is actually constructed” (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 42). Indeed, “Bandura (2001c) states, ‘at the societal level, the electronic modes of influence are transforming how social systems operate and serving as a major vehicle for sociopolitical change’” (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p.42). Thus, not only are youth exposed to mass media at an intense rate and efficiency while they are at a sensitive developmental stage wherein their values are beginning to form, but they are bombarded with an American capitalist agenda.

In addition to these concerns, researchers also argue that the solitary use of media encourages private use and creates disconnection within the family unit (Rogers, 2000, p. 13). As another study reveals, “[p]arents also seem to feel that new technologies are interfering with their family life . . . a third of his sample felt that time on MySpace interfered with family life”; in fact “Children’s immersion in their technologies was so complete that parents could not break through it and so frequently retreated” (as cited in Smahel &Subrahmanyam, 2011, p. 97). Indeed, further analysis found that “[c]loseness was negatively related to time online, and the more time teens spent online, the less close they were to their parents” (as cited in Smahel &Subrahmanyam, 2011, p. 98). Clearly the traditional family unit, and how culture was previously taught by and imparted through from parents or elders to

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children, seems to be getting replaced by mass media faster, more efficiently, more intensely, and *privately consumed*, more than ever before. Indeed, the statement that “[v]alues are not, and will not be, inculcated by the family, the church, or other social institutions in either the present or the future. They are, and will be, inculcated by the visual and electronic media” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 54) could not be truer today, and likely will be even more evident in the near future. On the other hand, although social media seems to be drawing youth away from their family unit, another study pointed out that the same isolating effect was not found among peer interactions:

it seems that the Internet is increasing contact with peers, but not necessarily at the expense of face-to-face interactions. The increased contact with peers also includes a widening or broadening of their peer network. In chat rooms, youth could converse with multiple partners simultaneously in the public space...An in-depth interview study of 21 15- to 18-year olds in Israel revealed such a dual role for mobile phones – participants reported that they contributed to both intimacy as well as inter-generational distance. (As cited in Smahel &Subrahmanyam, 2011, p.86)

So what are the effects of mass media on people? Two opposing sides of the debate on whether mass media is a capitalistic, mind-controlling, manipulative agent or whether it is merely a diverse construct of mankind that is a reflection our developing values, attitudes, and desires, a globalizing culture, were first presented by “Theodor Adorno [(1903–1969)], who felt that the power of mass media over the population was enormous and very damaging, and in the opposite corner...John Fiske, who argues that it is the audience, not the media, which has the most power” (as cited in Gauntlett, 2002, p. 19). Adorno and Horkheimer first referred to mass media as the “‘culture industry’ ...to indicate its nature: a well-oiled machine producing entertainment products in order to make profit...not a culture produced by the people. Instead, the culture consumed by the masses is

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imposed from above – churned out by the culture industry” (as cited in Gauntlett, 2002, p. 21). In Adorno’s view, mass media is “...provided for all so that none may escape’...the person seeking entertainment ‘has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him’...so choice is an illusion too. We can choose what we like...but from a limited range presented by the culture industry” (as cited in Gauntlett, 2002, p. 21). According to his view, there was no time between work, coming home from work to enjoy mindless entertainment, and returning to work the following day to develop any sort of critical thinking on what had been consumed: ultimately we are “drones, manipulated by the system to want the pleasures which it offers, and satisfied (in a rather passive, brainless way) with the daily diet of entertainment which it pours forth . . . . ‘The power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness’” (as cited in Gauntlett, 2002, p. 22).

Similarly it was:

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), who had noted that leaders could win the assent of the people (‘hegemony’) if they were able to make their policies appear to be ‘common sense’...Thatcherism became successful because it was able to articulate a right-wing political agenda in terms which addressed the concerns of ‘ordinary people’ and made the solutions seem sensible and obvious...In studying the media and gender, one could use this kind of approach to see how the media might make certain formations of masculinity, femininity and sexuality seem to be natural, inevitable and sexy. (As cited in Gauntlett, 2002, p. 26)

Gauntlett (2002) insists that “uncritical consumption means that the text has interpellated us into a certain set of assumptions, and caused us to tacitly accept a particular approach to the world”; for instance, “magazines use glamour, humour and attractive photography to seduce (interpellate) readers into a particular worldview. However...the approach is limited by its determinism – it attributes power to grand ideologies, and none to individuals” (as cited in p. 27). This view cautions that “even readers

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who think they read the magazines very [casually] are still absorbing lots of messages about what society (as seen through the magazines) thinks is important – such as beauty and sex – and...less bothered about – such as serious political issues” (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 206).

The most vulnerable consumer then, may be children as they have yet to develop higher reasoning and critical abilities and highly sensitive to their immediate environments. The consensus view is that children and adolescence are more susceptible to media influences, as research suggests “[y]oung people are less experienced with real-life situations and are therefore less knowledgeable and sophisticated...Children are more willing to believe information they receive in the media because they have less critical thinking skills and experience” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 55). According to the Cultivation hypothesis:

heavy exposure to mass media creates and cultivates attitudes more consistent with a media-directed version of reality than with reality itself. Media portrayals and messages might affect the behavior of young persons over time by enabling them to acquire new attitudes and behaviors or by changing the likelihood that they will perform new or previously learned responses. This may occur when a child’s expectations about the outcome of certain behaviors are altered through identification with the character portraying or providing the stimuli, by raising or lowering behavioral inhibitions, by modifying the potential for environmental cues to foster certain behaviors, or by linking specific meanings to a behavior. (As cited in Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005, p. 304)

Indeed, a plethora of research supports the notion that this young population is affected by exposure to media: for instance, “more than 3500 research studies have demonstrated a significant link between exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior in children and adolescents” (Strasburger, 2004, p. 57). In one of the most well-known studies in the 1960s, Bandura’s Bobo doll-punching bag

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experiment exemplifies how nursery school children imitated aggression—“[t]he children frequently imitated what they had just seen on the TV set, especially if the model was depicted as having been rewarded for his behavior. The model did not have to be human; a cartoon character was equally as effective”—clearly demonstrated that TV shows (including animated cartoons) were an “unhealthy reservoir of violence for children. These experiments are typical of a large number of well controlled laboratory studies that document that television violence can cause short-term aggression in some children” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 58). Additionally another naturalistic longitudinal study by Williams (1980’s) found that “[a]fter the introduction of television, No tel[ivision] children displayed significant increases in both physical and verbal aggression” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 59). In other words, children were found to display aggression after viewing television compared to when they had no television and no prior displays of aggression. A similar finding in a longitudinal study by Rowell Huesmann and Leonard Eron in 1960s found that the “amount of exposure to television violence in the 875 third graders (age 8) was highly predictive of aggressive behavior 11 and 22 years later...The relation existed even when IQ and socioeconomic status were controlled for. By age 30, viewing media violence at age 8 was a significant predictor of criminal acts” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 59). Likewise, another “longitudinal approach in conducting a 3-year study of more than 1000 children in Australia, Finland, Israel, and Poland...[found that] early exposure to television violence predicted subsequent aggression in every country except Australia” (as cite in Strasburger, 2004, p. 59). These studies and others, demonstrate that early viewing of media violence leads to aggression, which then leads to a preference for watching violent TV (Strasburger, 2004, p. 60).

This is concerning because “children and adolescents learn their attitudes about aggression and violence at a very early age... [>8 years] and, once learned, such attitudes are very difficult to modify” (Strasburger, 2004, p. 60). For instance, another study in 2003 followed children into adulthood and

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found that viewing violence and aggression led to more aggression, violence and criminal acts against others years later, controlling for socioeconomic status (SES) and parenting practices, and “also determined that aggressive children seeking out more violence on TV did not explain their findings” (Strasburger, 2004, p. 60). To reiterate, aggressive children who sought out violent television content was ruled out for their finding that violent content lead to behavioral violence and criminal acts years later in this longitudinal study; which means that violence and aggression in television directly led to behavioral problems. Villani (2001) outlined “[t]hree primary effects arise from viewing televised violence: a. Learning of aggressive behaviors and attitudes b. Desensitization to violence c. Fear of being victimized by violence” (p. 394). In one study, “the data from their survey of 2,245 students, grades 3 through 8, showed that children who watched more than 6 hours of television per day reported more trauma symptoms and more violent behaviors” (as cited in Villani, 2001, p. 394).

Unfortunately, media influence is not limited to only violence and aggression, but influences other risky behavior in youth as well. For instance Klein et al. (1993) examined data from surveys of 2,760 of 14- to 16-year-old adolescents in 10 urban areas which outlined eight “risky behaviors (sexual intercourse, drinking, smoking cigarettes, smoking marijuana, cheating, stealing, cutting class, and driving a car without permission) increased among adolescents who listened to radio and watched music videos and movies on television more frequently, regardless of race, gender, or parental education level” (as cited in Villani, 2001, p. 395). Another study demonstrated that college men exposed to R-rated, violent films had a desensitized reaction and less sympathy for alleged rape victims (Linz, Donnerstein, & Adams, 1989).

In addition to vicariously learning and being desensitized to violence and aggression, other fears and attitudes seemed to have at least a short-term effect on children: “Those who saw a movie that depicted a drowning were less willing to go canoeing, and those who saw a movie with a house fire were

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less eager to build a fire in a fireplace” (as cited in Villanni, 2001, p. 396). Villanni (2001) notes that “[o]ne can nonetheless speculate about the impact of accumulated fear over time in youths without responsible adult intervention” (p.396), with repeated exposure to dramatized, sexual, or violent media content. As Villanni (2001) explains, “[w]hether through television or computers, music lyrics or music videos, the messages conveyed are received by children and become part of their internal world, thus either directly or subtly influencing their behavior” because “[e]xcessive media use, particularly where the content is violent, gender-stereotyped, sexually explicit, drug- or alcohol influenced, or filled with human tragedy, skews the child’s world view, increases high-risk behaviors, and alters his/her capacity for successful, sustained human relationships” (p. 399). Similarly, Strasburger (2004) describes two events of many that seem to be rather frequent in news and other social media these days:

the amount of direct imitation that occurs is rare; but when it occurs, it makes headlines.

Recently, a 15-year-old Albuquerque boy was killed imitating a stunt from the MTV show Jackass. He jumped off the hood of a moving car and was thrown to the ground and dragged...In Connecticut and Florida, two teens were hospitalized with severe burns after squirting themselves with lighter fluid and laying across barbecue grills, as on the show...Given their importance in the average teenager’s life, MTV and music videos probably influence their social judgments and “prime” their views. (As cited in p. 89)

Furthermore, in addition to rare instances of direct imitation, and as earlier noted, frequent viewing of dramatized violence and other explicit material also impact views and attitudes of individuals. For instance, it appears that television ‘cultivates’ a view of social reality in viewers such that they think television is an accurate reflection of reality: “The notion that the viewing of television program content is related to people’s perceptions of reality is virtually undisputed in the social sciences” is what has been referred to as the “mean world syndrome” which not only affects children and adolescents,

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but sometimes adults as well (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 61). Strasburger (2004) notes that “[j]ust as lung cancer does not develop in all smokers, aggressive behavior does not develop in all TV viewers. However, the risk is significant” (p. 61).

According to Strasburger (2004), between year 2000-2002 “[t]he average American child or teenager views nearly 14,000 sexual references, innuendoes, and behaviors on television per year” (p. 64). Due to this and other findings, “data suggest that American television is frequently sexually suggestive, unrealistic, and unhealthy...Sex is depicted as a casual pastime...with little or no consequences. The importance of this in terms of normative adolescent thinking and behavior cannot be overemphasized” (Strasburger, 2004, p. 65). In other words, what youth view in media normalizes risky sexual behavior and attitudes. For instance, “[e]arly content analyses showed that music videos were rife with sex: More than 75% contained sexual scenes, and half of all women were presented as sex object . . . . American culture has become increasingly sexualized over the past 20 years” without emphasizing birth control (Strasburger, 2004, p. 67). Clearly, media has “a significant impact on teenagers’ attitudes about sex. Several studies have found that exposure to sexual content on TV leads to greater expectations that one’s peers are sexually active and a more positive attitude toward recreational sex” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 69).

Conformity to sex role stereotypes has also been exemplified in many studies. For example, Freuh & McGhee (1975) found that boys and girls who spent 25 or more hours watching TV “clearly associated with stronger traditional sex role development. The lack of interaction effects suggests that this relationship holds equally for boys and girls, and it does not change with increasing age” (p. 109). For instance, one study found that “frequent viewers thought that boys should play with guns and trucks and that girls should play with dolls. Television also cultivates such notions as ‘women are happiest at home raising children’ and ‘men are born with more ambition than women’” (as cited in Strasburger,

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2004, p. 69). Apparently the “National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) report concluded, the single most significant aspect of a child’s learning about sex is the set of messages that relates to ‘normal’ male and female characteristics and their roles in life” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 69). Likewise, Bogt, Rutger, Engels, & Bogers (2010) found that “for girls, but not boys, exposure in the form of heavy TV viewing and internet surfing and chatting, was generally related to higher SAS [Sexual Attitudes and Stereotypes] scores. . . . For boys, using the internet search for romance was also a significant indicator of SAS” (p.852). Evidently, although girls and boys used different forms of media, media use was directly correlate to endorsing sex-role stereotypes: “For girls only, heavy exposure to TV and internet related to higher endorsement of casual sex, the idea that men are sex driven, and stereotyping women as objects and men as tough” (Bogt et al., 2010, p. 853).

Thus, these researchers demonstrated that “more frequent exposure to youth media—TV, music/music video, internet—is related to higher endorsement of permissive sex and more stereotypical gender-role attitudes . . . . [and] *are the strongest indicator of permissive sex and stereotypical gender-role attitudes when other factors are controlled* (Bogt et al., 2010, pp. 852- 855). Not surprisingly then, recent research suggests that the “internet is the latest and potentially the most important provider of explicit sexual content” (as cited in Bogt et al., 2010, p. 855). That said, Bogt et al. (2010) “conclude that media preferences are more important indicators of SAS than exposure per se”; in other words, these researchers interpret their cross-sectional results as contrary indicator that media preferences are more related to sexual attitudes and stereotypes than exposure to media itself—and that the latter may be more reinforcing than causal. However, Bogt et al. (2010) found more evidence “for the idea that this new media environment, with its easily accessible, explicit, and even pornographic content may be a more powerful socializing agent than” traditional forms of media (p. 856). In a survey for teenagers:

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44% said they had seen X-rated content • Of the 1000 most-visited sites, 10% are X-rated • Access to violent pornography has increased • 12% reported finding a site where they could access information about how to buy a gun • 25% have visited a site promoting a hate group • Many child-oriented web sites have advertisements • 62% say their parents know little or nothing about the Web sites they visit. (As Strasburger, 2004, p. 85)

These findings are concerning since, “[me]dia may not only affect behaviors, but may also be of prime importance for adolescents’ general ideas of romance, sex, and relationships” (Bogt et al., 2010, 847). Moreover, media is rife with stereotypes: “in a large 24-country study including the Netherlands, of gender representation in youth TV, high cross-national similarities were found in stereotyped representations of women and men” (as cite in Bogt et al., 2010, p. 847). Thus media may be acting as a “Super Peer” for adolescence:

The Super Peer theory posits that they media can represent a potent source of information for teens as to what is normative behavior and may indeed exceed the influence of an adolescent’s more traditional peer group. The effect of exposure to attitudes and behaviors portrayed in the mass media may be compounded by the glamour typically associated with...both the characters and the actors playing them...Moreover, TV programming targeted to youth takes advantage of the attraction of children and teens to characters they perceive to be 2 or 3 years older than they themselves are –“peers” with whom they typically cannot socialize but whom they long to be like. Such characters, although older than the child’s peer group, provide templates for the child’s “aspirational” behavior. (As cited in Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005, p. 305)

According to Bogt et al. (2010) “[c]ontent analyses of hip-hop music has revealed that hip-hop songs and music videos also contain frequent references to alcohol and drugs...men portrayed as cool, tough, and potentially violent, and women depicted as play-toys and routinely referred to as ‘bitches’

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and 'ho's'" (as cited in p. 846). Not surprisingly then, "liking hip-hop and hard-house music was positively associated to particular gender stereotypes and preferring classical music was negatively associated" with SAS (Bogt et al., 2010, p. 856). Thus, it appears that preference for the content of media is an important factor for SAS reinforcement, or the lack thereof. However, Bogt et al. (2010) reminds us that "[c]orrelation analyses cannot discern between causal influences or selection effects" and recommends longitudinal studies for clearer understanding of effects of media on SAS (p. 856). Correlational studies are convenient but especially lacking when it comes to studying social behaviors that rely on responses from youth:

Because rap music videos tend to portray women as sex objects, the teen's social schemata for women as sex objects will be 'primed' frequently. Yet, if you were to ask him if he thought music influenced his attitudes or behavior, he would say no and would be giving an honest, if inaccurate, answer...This is a kind of corollary to the third-person effect that the media exerts—call it the "stealth effect". (As cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 89)

This stealth effect sums up the most problematic issue for studies that rely on children and adolescence, as this group is less critical and more susceptible to media influences. Indeed, "data suggest that messages embedded in other media types are more powerful than direct advertising appeals when it comes to influencing behavior...[Teens] tend to resist direct appeals to change their behaviors and are better persuaded by subtle, embedded messages" (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005, p. 305). For these reasons, marketing has switched to using popular trends and using 'viral' marketing that appeals to consumers in far more subtle, indirect ways (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005). I have noticed this too on social media, especially, in addition to ads companies are employing young men and women on social platforms like Instagram and YouTube where clothing and cosmetic companies pay these self-

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made minor celebrities to wear and use their products. My childhood friend next door gets sent free movie screenings because he began a movie review series on You-Tube, for example.

Females in particular may be especially negatively affected by mass media, since “women exposed to sexual and sexist media content offer stronger endorsement than do women exposed to nonsexual content of casual and stereotypical attitudes about sex” (Ward & Epstein, 2006, p. 58). For this reason, women may internalize stereotypes and have similar expectations for themselves and how they should be treated by others. Moreover, “frequent exposure to sexually oriented genres leads younger viewers to overestimate the prevalence of divorce, extramarital affairs, and sexually active youth, creating the notion that ‘everyone is doing it’” (as cited in Ward & Epstein, 2006, p. 58); thereby normalizing unrealistic portrayals of relationships that “demonstrate the likely problematic influences of media exposure on emergent beliefs about sexuality” (Ward & Epstein, 2006, p. 58).

Likewise, Strasburger (2004) notes that “dissatisfaction among young women with their weight seems at an all-time high”:

Twenty years ago, the average American model weighed 8% less than the average American woman; today, she weighs 23% less...As many as half of normal-weight teenage girls consider themselves overweight and have tried dieting...Nearly one third of third-grade girls have tried to lose weight; by sixth grade, this figure reaches 60%. [Consequentially] many researchers feel that the “internalization of the thin-ideal body image” has resulted in women’s increasing dissatisfaction with their bodies and a subsequent increase in eating disorders (as cited in p.82).

Personally, as a 28 year old woman myself and a feminist, I have to admit it has been a long struggle growing up in Canada and having internalized many of the same American standards of beauty. Although I did not struggle with my weight—being somewhat underweight for my height—and I have frequently been accused of being vegan, of having bulimia nervosa, of ‘not having enough meat on my

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bones', and constantly berated by larger women, yet teased for not having a full bosom—something that still causes me insecurity—I noticed that there is no positive body image for women, large, medium or small. My differently sized friends and colleagues are relentlessly bemoaning weight and body size issues despite of frequenting the gym regularly, in the majority of conversations we have or I overhear: the diet trends I see on my Facebook which my fellow feminist colleagues post are also daily. The most alarming realization is despite of being empowered by the knowledge that media is perpetuating extremely unrealistic, photo-shopped ideals of body types, I am not immune to its effects—I feel the social pressure every day to look presentable, and sometimes the judgments are direct and verbal, however unintentionally negative.



(Sallan, 2009)

Consistently, studies have revealed that, “[i]n normal teens, just wanting to look like actresses or models on television, in movies, or in magazines doubles the risk of monthly purging...College women who most ‘internalize’ the cultural bias towards thinness score higher on tests of body dissatisfaction and bulimia” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 84). Ruling out bi-directional effects:

The most powerful link occurred in a naturalistic study on the Pacific isle of Fiji...Three years after television was introduced onto the island, 15% of teenage girls reported that they had vomited to control their weight compared with only 3% before the introduction of TV.

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Furthermore, the proportion of teen girls scoring abnormally high on a test for disordered eating doubled. After the introduction of TV, three fourths of the girls reported feeling “too big or fat,” and those who watched more TV were much more likely to feel that way and to diet. (As cited in Stasburger, 2004, p.290)

As one psychologist states, “[t]hanks to advertising, children have become convinced that they are inferior if they don’t have an endless array of new products” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 75). Even Senator Hillary Clinton asserts, “[t]oo many companies simply see our children as little cash cows that they can exploit” (as cited in Stasburger, 2004, p. 75). According to Strasburger (2004), “[c]hildren and adolescents in the United States are assaulted by 3000 ads per day. They have become the targets of a \$250 billion ad industry with 900,000 brands to sell” (as cited in p. 76). In fact, “many parents feel that advertising has turned their children into junior consumers. In one poll, 87% of parents surveyed reported that advertising and marketing were making their children too materialistic, and 63% reported that their children were defining their self-worth by how many possessions they had” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p.77). Likewise, a longitudinal study found that “adolescents who had a favorite cigarette advertisement in 1993, compared with those who did not, were twice as likely either to have started smoking by 1996 or to be willing to start, and those who owned or were willing to own a promotional item were three times as likely to” start or be willing to start smoking (as cited in Vallani, 2001, p. 398). Additionally, “[c]hildren with more knowledge of beer brands and slogans held more favorable beliefs about drinking and more frequently intended to drink as adults. The positive values associated with drinking included romance, sociability, and relaxation” (as cited in Vallani, 2001, p. 398). Evidently, children and adolescence are very susceptible to advertisement and constitute avid consumers, despite of—and perhaps *because of*—their inexperience and naiveté. This is a rather alarming finding since children will have fragile identities based on superficial materialism if they

become dependent on media sources as guidance for what the latest popular trends are, or materialistic norms, to follow.

Accordingly, the Media Practice model is:

developed to explain media use in a comprehensive and contextual framework and highlights the connections between adolescents' identities and media selection, interaction, and application: "This model assumes that youth choose media and interact with it based on who they are or who they want to be at the moment." Theoretical research is borne out by communications-related survey data. Advertisers recognize that the content of their messages will have an effect on consumer purchasing behavior. Additionally, young people report that media messages are an important influence in their lives and that they receive important information about life choices from the media. (As cited in Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005, p. 304)

Thus, as Fortunato (2005) emphasizes "framing can be a powerful aspect of media effects because audiences 'are only able to make a determination about a topic based on the information that is made available'" (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 11). Those who control mass media then, also determines what information are available to the public. Moreover, "[a]udiences rely on the media to provided information about issues in society [and their importance. Thus, [m]edia scholars agree mass media organizations draw their most powerful influence from the framing of issues and television content" (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 23). For this reason it will remain "[t]he challenge to adults who deal with children, either personally as parents or professionally, will be to monitor media use in ways that foster curiosity and the positive aspects of the ability of media to teach"(Villani, 2001, p. 400).

### **Media Need Not Be Dangerous: A Tool For Exploration**

Despite of the aforementioned negative effects media can have on children and adolescence, media has also been an extremely useful and integrative tool for teaching and information gathering. For instance, adolescence “use television to obtain information about aspects of their self, such as gender and sexual identity . . . [self expression] and to learn about sexual and romantic scripts (as cited in Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011, p. 32). Adolescence—and adults—can find answers to sensitive topics like “Is birth control necessary...? Is it okay to have feelings for someone of the same sex? As with other media, the effect of viewing sexual content is probably related to the subtle, cumulative impact of a variety of messages and information over time”—and not a dangerous threat to teenagers (Strasburger, 2004, p. 64). As Strasburger (2004) states, “[d]espite all of these concerns, the Internet has become an amazing resource for children and teenagers. Not only does it provide a worldwide encyclopedia at blinding speed, but it is also interactive” (p. 86). Likewise, “[t]he Web also provides a plethora of health information for teenagers, although the accuracy of that information may sometimes be suspect” (Strasburger, 2004, p. 86). Moreover, research has also demonstrated that “the media can be powerfully prosocial at times: Altruism and helping behavior, [h]elping behavior rather than hurtful behavior [as well as a] variety of other qualities, including friendliness, imagination, racial and ethnic tolerance, and respect for elders” (as cited in Strasburger, 2004, p. 100).

In fact, Bandura (1986, 1997) suggests that the “multitude of mass media in our daily lives can present a social learning framework against which we reference ourselves and how we are ultimately defined and positioned as members of society” (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 2). Indeed, studies show that “adults experience more informal learning from mass media consumption than learning in a classroom setting” (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 2). Encouragingly, Bogt et al., (2010) found that “For

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girls, internet surfing for fun and using the internet to find information was negatively correlated to sexual attitudes and stereotypes” (p. 852). Thus, although the internet perpetuates mass media, depending on the content conveyed and the own users preferences and choices, the negative effects of media can be mitigated and when used purposefully and proactively, can be a wonderful resource that is easily accessible. As “the present age of mass media provides the public with a wide variety of specialized choices of media...unseen in earlier ages...’Since the Internet developed in the 1990’s, along with the expansion of cable television and other media, [it has] expanded the opportunities for citizens to obtain information from other sources” (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 16).

This is especially true for adolescence seeking sensitive health information. For instance, “60% of teens participating in a recent survey said that they learned about how to say ‘no’ to a sexual situation by watching television, and 43% said they learned something from television about how to talk to a partner about safer sex” (Collins, Elliot, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003, p. 7). Moreover, consumers often seek out magazines for health topics; and “analyses indicate that magazine coverage of sexual health issues does occur and has increased in some respects over the past decades” (Ward & Epstein, 2006, p. 58). For instance, “magazines do offer young women information (for example, how to identify an STD) they may be reluctant to seek elsewhere” (Ward & Epstein, 2006, p. 60). Thus it appears that magazines also offer informative and useful content in addition to entertainment, which can be an even better form of educating young adults than traditional forms of learning:

Singhal and Rogers (1999), entertainment education is “the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message both to entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior” (p. 9). The goal is to capitalize on the appeal of popular media, such as soap operas and radio dramas, in order to show individuals how they can live safer, healthier, and happier

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lives. (As cited in Ward & Epstein, 2006, p.60)

Strasburger (2004) outlines the benefits of media education as well: multiple studies demonstrate that “reducing the total number of hours of television viewed and teaching children to become more ‘intelligent viewers’—has been shown to decrease (1) obesity... (2) children’s request for toys...and (3) aggressive behavior” (as cited in p. 98). For this reason, researchers have urged educators to use “[p]opular culture as a facilitator of, and catalyst for, self-directed learning [which] can bring about learning that is far more powerful, lasting, and lifelong than learning in formal educational settings and other traditional...[methods] of teaching” (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 212). Consider the following examples of educational entertainment:

a radio drama entitled *Twende na Wakati* (Let’s Go with the Times), which aired from 1993 to 1998 in Tanzania, was found to have strong effects on family planning and HIV prevention attitudes and behavior (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Compared with those who did not receive this radio broadcast, residents in the treatment areas increased their sense of self-efficacy with respect to family size determination, increased approval for contraceptive use, increased inter spousal communication about family planning, and increased current practice of family planning. Later programming that focused on HIV prevention was found to reduce the number of sexual partners of both women and men and to increase condom adoption (Vaughan, Rogers, Singhal, & Swalehe, 2000). (As cited in Ward & Epstein, 2006, p. 61)

Again, content in mass media and consumer intent is a major determinant of media effects on individuals. Furthermore, as Ward & Epstein (2006) argue, “despite evidence that a majority of portrayals are one-dimensional sexual stereotypes, some characters are not and instead provide realistic characterizations with which viewers can connect” (p.60). This is significant since media representation of minorities as well as the internet providing platforms for minorities to connect in can help individuals

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develop their identities: “The Internet...is another spatial environment in which queer self-invention and coming out are often encouraged” (Fruth, 2007, p.8). For example, these internet platforms have been referred to as ‘mediated quasi-interaction’ wherein all forms of mass media have contributed to “collectivity identity formation...[which] create ‘a kind of social situation in which individuals are linked together in a process of communication and symbolic exchange’” (as cited in Fruth, 2007, p.9) Within these mediated quasi-interactional platforms—inclusive of radio, television, social media, etc.—“recipients of media are separated from both media producers and other recipients yet can still form social bonds with these other participants”—irrespective of whatever agenda’s marketing campaigns have (Fruth, 2007, p. 10). As Fruth (2007) conveys, the internet “functions as a virtual third place in which viewers and users experience a sense of belonging through social interaction, cultivate an interest in social and political matters, and engage in informed public discussion of issues of importance” instead of “a marketing tool that can be employed to maximize corporate profits” (p. 66). Rather, Fruth (2007) contends that:

Media reception involves a set of practices that are socially, historically, and culturally embedded and directly linked to the issues of the assumption, negotiation, and formation of collective identities. Those “communities,” whether actual or imagined, in turn, enable particular viewing practices that can help create and sustain a sense of solidarity, allow for the redefinition of individual and collective subjectivity, sustain collective memory, challenge tradition, and activate fantasy. (p.10)

Although the Uses and Gratification theory insists that people use media for escapist, entertainment and information gathering purposes, wherein users play an active role in choosing the media content that affects them, Subrahmanyam & Smahel (2011) expand on that with their Co-construction model which says that: “In interactive digital environments, such as chat rooms...and social

networking sites, users construct and co-construct their environments. Although designers may provide the platform or the tool, in actuality, users co-construct their use...in ways that the designer may have never anticipated” (as cited in p.34) These authors contend that “[o]nline environments are cultural spaces...[which are] not static, but is a cyclical dynamic entity, and users are constantly generating and passing on new norms” Subrahmanyam &Smahel, 2011, p. 34). Thus, according to Subrahmanyam &Smahel (2011), “adolescents’ physical, social, and digital worlds are intertwined and interconnected and have a transactional or bi-directional relationship with each other . . . . Digital worlds are very real to youth – and within their subjective experiences, the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ may even blend with each other” (p. 35). As Kauth (2000) contends:

culture broadly encompasses ideas about social reality, including customs; mores; cherished values about, for example, individual autonomy and civil rights; social institutions like marriage and democratic government; social role; gender role; ethnicity; class; and, most...recently, sexual identity. Culture...[conveys] ideas and information through various means. Culture is communicated visually through the arts and by word of mouth via folklore, storytelling, and religious practice...[a well as] through the written word in books and literature and in technological developments. Culture is at heart a social experience...transmitted through general social experiences like war, poverty, political domination, slavery, famine, plague, and, beginning in the 20th century, mass media, including radio, television, and now the Internet. (As cited in p.68)

Rather than construe users as mindless, passive recipients of marketing agendas: “Instead, we must see users as creating their contexts in conjunction with other users, thus influencing and being influenced by the very online culture that they are helping to create” (Subrahmanyam &Smahel, 2011, p. 34). For example, in a study by Brown, Halpern, & Engle (2005), it was revealed that earlier maturing

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girls had a preference for and chose to engage in more sexual content in various forms of media regardless of age or race compared to their later maturing peers, likely because they were unable to turn to their later maturing peers for guidance, and so used media as a Super Peer instead. Likewise, Johnson & Dunlap (2011) contend that such findings “challenge the notion that insidious media images infiltrate youth’s minds and...‘dupe’ unknowing youths into accepting media images [rather,] it suggests that active participants...selectively adopt and adapt available discourses to meet the needs and desires they have for themselves” and may also be a means of expression for them (as cited in p.221). Indeed, “studies show television learner-viewers actively choose media that provides alternative narratives to their own lives (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2000, 2001a, 2001b)” (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 211). Thus, “rather than the people accepting a stream of similar products, as Adorno would suggest, Fiske says that there is a ‘drive for innovation and change [which] comes from the audience activity in the cultural economy’ (1989c: 62) . . . .the meaning of any text is not complete until interpreted by an individual within the context of their lives” (as cited in Gauntlett, 2002, p. 24-25). As Gauntlett (2002) contends, human interaction then, is the only thing new and unpredictable that is truly unique wherein we are the creator and not the mindless consumer (p. 22). Strasburger (2004) suggests the following to mitigate negative effects and promote the positive effects of mass media:

- (1) Improve the quality of programming for children and adolescents.
- (2) Improve and regulate advertising.
- (3) Recognize that media violence is a public health threat.
- (4) Create a uniform rating system for all media.
- (5) Improve the portrayal of sex and sexuality in the media.
- (6) Maximize the prosocial aspects of the Internet.
- (7) Improve the image of women in programming and advertising.
- (8) Fund and conduct more research.
- (9) Increase media education for children and adolescents.
- (10) Increase media education for parents and

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pediatricians. (11) Use media to campaign for health and prosocial purposes. (12) Increase media advocacy efforts. (p.90)

Fiske (1989) asserts that “[p]opular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of... resources for the various formations of...people to use or reject in the on-going process of [creating] popular culture” (as cited in Gauntlett, 2002, p.23). Gauntlett (2002) furthers that, “the power of the audience to interpret media texts, and determine their popularity, far outweighs the ability of media institutions to send a particular message or ideology to audiences within their texts” (p. 23). This is because “different individuals with their own changing tastes and a ‘shifting set of social allegiances’ ...are complex and contradictory (Fiske, 1989a)” which therefore creates a “[c]ulture [that] is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above” (as cited in Gauntlett, 2002, p 23). Indeed, “[d]ifferent cultures produce different social realities...Social reality...is what we know and accept to be true. Through numerous interactions with others and constant contact with the culture, particular roles and personal identities are created for each of us” (as cited in Kauth, 2000, p.69). Kauth (2000) observes that, “the mass media has become more liberal and considerably more challenging to traditional standards...this has been a reflection of changing attitudes, but also involves the media actively disseminating modern values” in a bi-directional influential way; wherein the liberal views of today will be the traditional-conservative views of the future (p.249). Ward and Epstein (2006) in their study of television role models for young women, advocated for “*More three-dimensional characters...A broader range of physical appearance types and less focus on this as the center of women’s worth... more three-dimensional portrayals of lesbians, bisexuals, and women questioning their sexuality...[and] more agentic portrayals of female sexuality*” (p. 67). Less than a decade after this study, shows such as *Orange is the New Black* became a hit series with a storyline—with a female executive producer—

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feature those exact demands: based on the memoirs of a female prisoner that is set in a women's prison featuring all female protagonists that present a wide range of body shapes, ethnicities and sexual orientations including lesbians, bisexuals and a black transsexual—all of whom who are assertive and unabashed about their desires, goals, and sexuality. As the character Tastee in the series *Orange is the New Black* (2013) humorously remarks:

Hey that's the thing with the internet. Nobody's a freak no more, it used to be all these weirdos sitting alone in their houses, jerking at the bus, or fallin' in love with their toasters, feelin' all creepy and sad. Now, all they got to do is log on and find the same minded toaster-lovin' people. And like BAM suddenly shit be perfectly normal. Darlin' you could be into cannibalism or like being tinkle; it don't matter, somebody out there gonna like what you like. (Kohan, 2013)

Evidently, mass media is a tool that helps to create culture; and culture itself is created by the many views, attitudes, values, and interests of individuals that contribute to its' diversity. At times, aspects of mass media may perpetuate unhealthy stereotypes and serve as a model for risky behaviors including violence, aggression, and unsafe sexual practices for susceptible audiences--especially when marketing values dominate its' content. Conversely, individuals engage in and perpetuate values, perspectives, and behaviors that reflect their own interests. In this way, media is inseparable from culture, and rather than being a dangerous entity that infiltrates naïve minds, we must exercise responsibility in its use to advocate for entertainment-based education, to teach children and adolescence to be critical of its direct and indirect messages—to distinguish between norms of reality and those that are dramatized—and to be proactive in the content we produce and perpetuate in these virtual communities. Most importantly, we must recognize media as a tool that creates cultural spaces that can break down hegemonic agendas of capitalism; that allows room for the exploration, discovery,

creation of identities, values, and subcultures.

## Chapter 3

### The Beauty That I Beheld

Given the significant impact and usage of mass media as tool for creating culture, the development of technology and its' increasingly fast-paced efficiency and accessibility lends itself to the creation of virtual spaces wherein identities may be developed. Moreover, due to the fact that media and thus culture along with its social norms are constantly evolving, "the book of tradition has been (more or less) ripped up, to be replaced with a bookstore bulging with new lifestyle manuals" (Guantlett, 2002, p.244). These "new lifestyle manuals" are uncharted territory, and because identities—or self-narratives—are moored to social norms and expectations, where these new manuals will lead, and how useful they really are, is anyone's guess.

As Guantlett (2002) provides:

Anthony Giddens's [1991] view of modernity...[asserts that] today is the knowing social construction of identity. Your life is your project – there is no escape. The media provides some of the tools which can be used in this work. Like many toolkits, however, it contains some good utensils and some useless ones; some that might give beauty to the project, and some that might spoil it. (People find different uses for different materials, too, so one person's 'bad' tool might be a gift to another.) (As cited in p. 244)

Guantlett (2002) contends how media is aiding tolerance for sexual diversity by normalizing differences in sexual diversity by helping viewers become more familiar and comfortable with these lifestyles: he notes that "[v]iews of gender and sexuality, masculinity and femininity, identity and selfhood, are all in slow but steady processes of change and transformation" (pp.254-256). Consistently, McAdams (1996) "argued that the development of identity is an ongoing and fluid process, during which

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identity is adapted to current post-modern condition....Identity is never 'established,' but instead is a process of narration that occurs in the context of several multiple selves" (as cited in Subrahmanyam &Smahel, 2011, p. 60). Researchers contend that "[y]outh use digital media such as blogs to construct self-narratives. Identity is a multi-dimensional construct...digital contexts can support youth as they construct their personal, social, gender, and ethnic identities" online, so that "[v]irtual identity is also comprised of personal and social aspects" inclusive of a person's thoughts, emotions, aspirations, etc. (as cited in Subrahmanyam &Smahel, 2011, p. 64).

In their study, Subrahmanyam and Smahel (2011) found that rather than stay disembodied anonymous users that hide behind new alternative identities, most adolescent users went out of their way to present their real selves via reflective narratives on their blogs and "concluded that although the teen bloggers did not often write openly about identity, the narratives they constructed in their online blogs may have helped them with the task of establishing their sense of self (pp.67-68). *Although I would like to note that I have observed in recent years (2014-2016) that blogs are no longer the norm. Current trends focus on taking 'selfies' (self-portraits) and videos, with narratives condensed to a single caption under the picture—longer posts or online and cellular texts are chastised and 'emoticons' (miniature cartoon faces) are used instead for efficiency purposes.* Nonetheless, these researchers "confirmed that adolescents in a state of identity achievement more frequently reported testing or diverging from the norms and rules of everyday life" (Subrahmanyam &Smahel, 2011, p. 71). Thus, it appears that youth creatively used their virtual selves to test others' reaction with experimentation, to overcome shyness, and to build relationships, in the process of self-exploration: "The youngest participants (9-to12-year olds) reported pretending to be someone else most often (72%). Girls and younger teens most often pretended to be older (50%)" (as cited in Subrahmanyam &Smahel, 2011, p. 71). Evidently, "anonymous online environments such as bulletin boards allow teens to ask questions

about sensitive topics or to explore aspects of their identity that they are still exploring”

(Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011, p.35).

As Fruth (2007) eloquently conveys, “[g]ender is a process embedded in ‘complex and contradictory’ social, historical, economic, and discursive contexts which come to bear on identity and media reception. Given that gender involves the three overlapping components of definition, identification, and position, it can be, at each level, assumed, negotiated, and refused” (p.44). As Wieringa (1998) notes, “French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir (1947)...was the first to point out the distinction between ‘natural’ sex and ‘cultural’ sex roles which became the basis for later sex/gender theories” (as cited in p. 353). Later, Nicholson (1995) defined gender as “‘the social organization of sexual difference’” in relation to our bodies: that gender is defined by the meanings a given society associates our physical bodily differences with—whatever those meanings may be—so that any perceived differences are only as significant as the meanings or knowledge that societal norms assigns it (as cited in Wieringa, 1998, p. 355). In this way, “[w]e cannot ‘know’ our bodies in some pure form, for every form of knowledge is a product of the discourse in which it is constructed. So we can only ‘see’ our bodies through lenses that are always already social” (as cited in Wieringa, 1998, p. 355). Consistently, Callahan (2011) provides: sexual identity incorporates the subjectification and even potential objectification of individuals that are defined and portrayed in mass media, which we inevitably partake in as we vicariously develop our sexual identities (p.77). Thus, because we define ourselves in relation to those around us in accordance to current norms and standards of society, Butler’s (1990, 1997, 2002) performative theory of gender insists that, “learner-viewers can adopt sexual identity as performance...[wherein] individuals in society feel pressure to constantly perform established sexual identity norms and avoid social punishment” (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 77).

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For instance, I recall one afternoon in high school wherein I had been meeting with my English teacher after class: I had been waiting for my teacher to gather his papers as students cleared the halls in anticipation to enjoy their freedom from the end of classes for the day. As I propped myself tiredly against the nearest desk and let my gaze mindlessly drift with my mind, I was abruptly brought back to alertness as I beheld a beautifully graceful visage through the window of the classroom door. I was held in breathless captivity as the sunlight literally filtered through this person's silky, shoulder-length hair: *this slender perfection of a girl goes to my school? I've never seen anyone so graceful and flawless!* Immediately, I was hit with a deep pang of jealousy—this girl with luminescent skin would no doubt be drawing all the attention of all the cutest boys in school—coupled with self-loathing for never being able to look as elegant; and of course with a burning curiosity to get a better look at this enthralling Beauty. As if God ordained it, she opened the door and glided right in. My next reaction was a very ungraceful, awkward, jaw-dropping gawk as I stared in confusion for a full minute. She was a *he*, and I had to study his body for long moments before I could register what gender this gorgeous individual was. He actually blushed with a delicate shyness and looked away because I was so stunned with confusion I could not gather myself to stop staring rudely—but he definitely had no breasts and bore a prominent Adam's apple just above the stylish little scarf he donned. Over the course of that year, I observed his gracefulness and discovered the following term that he would be in one of my classes. He had a habit of carrying a stylish bag which he strung over one shoulder like a purse, and would pull out a bag of yarn to knit in class. He remains to be the prettiest person that I ever laid eyes on, this Beauty that I had beheld through the window.

Now that I think back to that incident, I have an even deeper respect for his inner beauty: this boy, a year below my grade, had defied all gender norms and stereotypes in a place rampant with bullies and others who revel in taunting 'others' as adolescence are quick to reprimand and ostracize those who go

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against the social norms of their peers. This is especially true, “[w]hen people deviate from gender-role scripts, they are often met with disapproval, which, in turn, makes them more likely to hide their gender deviance and conform to gender norms in the future...people are punished for nonconformity” which reinforces stereotypes as nonconformists are pressured to conform to them (as cited in Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012, p. 171). In fact studies reveal that, “[b]oth men and women present themselves as having more traditional gender-role beliefs in order to conform to the preferences of a desirable interaction partner of the opposite sex” (as cited in Sanchez et al., 2012, p. 171). Thus, “as a result of fear of backlash, men and women alike avoid violating gender roles and instead, strive for gender-role conformity, and, thus, perpetuate the cycle of gender stereotyping” (as cited in Sanchez et al., 2012, p. 175). The double standard as a result of gender stereotyping is a pitfall for everyone as it reinforces unhealthy gender scripts: for instance that men need to assert their dominance over others, and have sexual prowess as proof of their manhood, and sometimes do so with violence; whereas women are only worth as much as their outer appearances and should be submissive, passive, and chaste (Sanchez et al., 2012). In support of this, studies have shown that “men who have low sexual desire do not fit the cultural stereotype and may be accused of being less masculine and not virile. These strict gender roles do not allow for variability within genders and may inhibit sexual expression in men and women” (Petersen & Hyde, p. 163). As for women, “[m]asturbation may be a healthy way for a woman to explore her body and become comfortable with her sexuality, but women who feel guilt or shame about their sexuality [may be uncomfortable] with their sexuality and may have unsatisfying sex lives” (Petersen & Hyde, p. 163).

Several researchers attribute this gender stereotyping to popular culture in media. As Sanchez et al., (2012) argues, “[g]iven the glamorization of traditional gender roles and scripts in popular culture

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and their normalization via gendered sexual socialization...the continued prevalence of the traditional script is not surprising” (as cited in p. 171). This is especially problematic for society because

men’s sex-dominance beliefs and gender-role conformity may perpetuate sexual aggression against women and thus, further promote women’s lack of sexual agency. Being inundated with media messages pairing men with dominance and women with passivity may be one culprit in the automatic sex–power associations both genders develop . . . . Magazines, television shows, and movies commonly depict female submission and male sexual dominance over women. [In fact]...women tend to spontaneously associate sex with submission, likely because sexual stereotypes are pervasive and eroticized to such a degree that they become internalized (Kiefer et al., 2006). (As cited in Sanchez, 2012, p. 174)

As Haug (1999) contends, “[i]f the resulting gendered identities are not appreciably unique, it is simply because the narrow range of choices reflects the conserving nature of institutions that are involved in the production of gendered identity” (as cited in Dunlap & Johnson, 2013, p. 74). Haug (1999) asserts that the notion of freedom to choose and variety we *think* we have is a fictitious because the options we have are limited to what society allows us to enact—in whichever temporal context it happens to be in (as cited in Dunlap & Johnson, 2013). People reinforce and co-create social norms while continually negotiating its’ rules and their cultural significance; relative to the specific historical moment in time that it functions to serve the needs of the majority (as cited in Dunlap & Johnson, 2013). However, rules and norms are changed and renegotiated as individuals share their personalized stories that ultimately create a ripple effect which have the potential to become a new ‘norm’ (as cited in Dunlap & Johnson, 2013). In this way, “the individual and collective function as a dialectic that facilitates the exploration of larger sociocultural forces through the lens of individual experience” (Dunlap & Johnson, 2013, p. 74). In other words, the multi-directional ways that the

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individual interacts with society allows for the exploration and reflection of societal norms that evolves along with the individuals that contribute to its' process.

Given how strict the social process for maintaining gender scripts can be, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer no doubt face even more stigmatism for their diversity and nonconformity to traditional gender scripts. Research suggests that "LGB adolescents' awareness of social norms vilifying their attraction to same-sex individuals may lead many to suppress their sexual identity from their established peer networks for fear of being ostracized" (as cited in Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009, p. 33). Additionally, "Gover (1994) reported that 95% of gay youth surveyed expressed feelings of isolation from peers. If LGB adolescents are not experiencing sexual identity formation with the assistance of face-to-face communication among peers, they may look elsewhere for support and information" like online community spaces (as cited in Bond et al., 2009, p. 33).

Fruth (2007) purports that:

Among other things, the reliance on dualisms tends to make invisible other categories. One of the fundamental dualisms in western culture, male/female, for example, has rendered invisible other transgendered and intergendered positions, while the heterosexual/homosexual opposition has elided and denied the possibility of bisexual and other queer sexualities.

Moreover, when scholars employ binaries in their analyses, they may also, however unwittingly, transcode the values inherent in other hierarchically constituted dualisms, aligning, for example, time/male/reason/mind and positioning them in opposition to space/female/unreason/body, valuing the former set of terms and devaluing the latter (p.124).

On the other hand, "[i]n contrast to this dualistic epistemology, Pile [1994] proposes...the notion of a 'third space' ...a geographical place 'structured by intersecting geometries of power, identity and meaning' and a politics that avoids 'polarity [enabling] the construction of new radical alliances'" (as

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cited in Fruth, 2007, p.125). To clarify, the third space 'does not contain pre-constituted identities which determine experience, nor does it possess an authentic character or identity,' but is, rather, 'an ambivalent space of negotiation, and a site of struggle for meaning and representation where power is transient, flexible'" and may create new boundaries, meanings, and definitions (as cited in Fruth, 2007, p. 126). To exemplify, Fruth (2007) suggests that "[c]ities are also third spaces that embody contradictory fantasies, identifications, and shifting alliances that disrupt received and dualistic notions of sexuality, gender, and identity" because "the urban ghetto function[s] as a type of third space, a space in which heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine, public/private, and other dualisms breakdown"(p.126). These third spaces need not be physical, but may manifest itself in any subcultural group, including online communities, cafes, or even work places.

For instance, at my current workplace wherein I am an Outreach Worker of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver—the ghetto, and heart of the city—hegemony breaks down in the face of cultural diversity, where every corner is a combination, or a contrast of art, subcultures, poverty, wealth, and folks from all walks of life that inhabit the same street. Interestingly, on the block of my workplace, I had encountered an intoxicated man at the end of my shift, and against our usual practices, I led him to the Men's department, away from the Women's department to ensure none of our female clients would run into him by accident. As a relatively young, slim, polite-looking, Asian woman, my larger, Caucasian colleagues in the Men's department were extremely alarmed and concerned for my personal safety as this intoxicated fellow was somewhat moody and loudly trying to make conversation with me. Each time he raised his voice, the new receptionist would radio in another larger staff member meanwhile firmly and sternly telling this client off—which caused him to escalate further in response. Before I could convey that I was perfectly fine and well-trained for such circumstances, my female colleague

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appeared coincidentally, and tore me away from the entire scene, ignoring the clients' protests, and assuring me that everything would be okay in the process.

Based on well-intended misconstrued preconceived notions, my experience and professionalism was undermined and utter chaos ensued in the scene I was literally taken out of. Between trying to de-escalate him as I was familiar with and attempting to talk to two colleagues at once—I prioritized addressing the client directly and failed to convey to my distressed colleagues that I needed them to support my lead in handling this so that I could respectfully hand him off to another staff and avoid his escalating on them. He was eventually escorted out—defeating the purpose of my taking him there—but I was starkly made aware of the multi-layers of different power dynamics and stereotypes that played out. Ironically, of all the staff involved, I had the most comfort and experience in handling the situation—although was taken out of commission before I could do so. A few blocks down the same street, at a low-barrier feminist work place, right in the middle of the highest drug and sex trade area, I had de-escalated far more intoxicated and often aggressive individuals on a daily basis and was called upon to break up every verbal and physical fight between any non-English and English-savvy speaker, with not a single injury or any harm to my personage in three and a half years prior to that over-dramatized minor occurrence. And yet, only a few blocks away, similar non-profit organizations who served the same inhabitants had a completely different approach to serving the same goals: I was coddled in one and empowered by the other despite of similar contexts, and only differing by the meanings those around me associated me with. Indeed, it was interesting to experience first-hand how “[u]sers and inhabitants can employ spatial codes in ways that ‘change,’ ‘appropriate,’ and ‘overlay’ physical spaces” (as cited in Fruth, 2007, p. 127).

All in all, Fruth (2007) conveys that “[i]f heterosexuality harnessed to capitalism is a homogenizing force, gays, lesbians, and queers have ‘remapped desire’ and the spaces in which those

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sexualities are articulated” (p. 130). In other words, the LGBTQ community has redefined preconceptions of a dualistic definition of sexuality that capitalism had previously homogenized. The third spaces in which new identities are ever-evolving in, creating new definitions and norms, is significant as it offers society as a whole new options and new ways of conceiving gender and all other aspects of identity: ethnicity, culture, religion, age, orientation, etc. Already, “a growing percentage of sexual minority youth appear to be identifying as queer, choosing to not identify with an identity label altogether, or challenging the assumption that their sexual orientation is a core feature of their sense of self” (as cited in Nussbaum &Mustanski, 2012, p. 250). Those identifying as “Genderqueer indicated their identification as both male and female or neither male nor female, and was described as less limiting than traditional identity labels. According to Hansbury’s (2005) observations, this appears to be the most diverse, fluid, and youngest group within the spectrum” (as cited in Nussbaum &Mustanski, 2012, p. 250). Moreover, “[t]ransgender individuals may be likely to represent their sexual orientation in non-binary ways, such as queer and pansexual, given their own experiences transgressing societal norms surrounding sex, gender, and sexual roles/behaviors” (Nussbaum &Mustanski, 2012, p 251). In one survey, transgendered participants were asked to identify a either “transsexual, cross-dresser or transvestite, drag, female=male impersonator, or other (such as transgenderist, bigender, genderqueer, two spirit, etc.). Although 29.5% of the sample identified as “other,” these responses were not reported, and participants were only allowed to select one identity” (as cited in Nussbaum &Mustanski, 2012, p. 245). Furthermore, “[s]exual orientations such as pansexual, queer, and bisexual also do not assume the sex or gender of the individual claiming the orientation. These individuals may wish to represent their attractions in ways that do not specifically reference their own sex or gender, which may be in transition, fluid, or not fully captured by gay, lesbian, or heterosexual identity labels” (Nussbaum &Mustanski, 2012, p. 251). Clearly such studies reflect the growing needs and trends of these ‘third-

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space pioneers', and indicate that dualistic structures no longer serve the needs of current or future generations, but call for more fluid, dynamic construal's in understanding identity—and this should be of considerable import and priority to health care practitioners.

## Chapter 4

### Femininity

Femininity has always been the performance of one dichotomous side of gender, the 'other' sex, definable only when relative to the 'normal' male sex, as the French feminist Beauvoir (1949) asserted (as cited in Callahan, 2011). In her "seminal (1949) publication, *The Second Sex*...she wrote about women in mass media by asserting mass media defined women according to a male's gaze, construct and desire" (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 51). Although there has been much progress in the last few decades with feminist movements, there remains much more work to be accomplished in achieving gender equality.

How have some forms of media changed to represent women? According to some scholars, '[f]or the most part ... women's magazines are pushing the same message they were half a century ago: women's existence revolves around landing the right guy' – although...today's technique is great sex rather than great cooking... 'packaged under the "liberated woman" [façade], they're really just another variation on the "snagging and keeping a guy" theme'. (As cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 190)

In fact, some magazines are so rife with unhealthy stereotypes that the former editor of popular magazine *Marie Claire*, Liz Jones quit in 2001 after the company rejected her attempts to introduce a greater diversity of women that included racial minorities and models of varying sizes: she states "I had simply had enough of working in an industry that pretends to support women while it bombards them with impossible images of perfection day after day, undermining their self-confidence, their health and hard-earned cash' (Jones, 2001b)" (as cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 194). Indeed, "images of thin models are 'popular' and will sell magazines... 'If you stick a beautiful skinny girl on the cover of a

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magazine you sell more copies', as model agency Premier told reporters' (BBC Online, 2000c)" (as cited in Guantlett, p. 195).

Capitalistic values dominating the media in such was are especially unfortunate, as the British Medical Association, *Eating Disorders, Body Image and the Media* (2000) reported that "eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia have one of the highest mortality rates of all psychiatric illnesses, and that 'the degree of thinness exhibited by [fashion models] is both unachievable... biologically inappropriate, and provide unhelpful role models for young women'" (as cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 194). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) contends "many girls and women internalize the culture's practices of objectification and habitually monitor their bodies' appearance. The repercussions of this self-objectification...[include] a host of emotional, motivational, and attentional states...contribut[ing] to women's mental health risks (p. 196). Consistently, it has been found that "women were up to ten times more likely than men to be unhappy with their body image" (as cited in Guantlett, p. 79). Conversely, "[m]en are ideally required to be thin and well-toned too, but can get away with imperfections as long as they can compensate with charm or humour...our media culture is quick to pick out women for the smallest aberrations. Men can get away with being a bit more bald or fat or sweaty than the ideal" image (Guantlett, 2002, p. 79).

This irresponsible method of marketing used in media has profound effects world-wide as American media and impossible beauty standards are becoming endorsed globally: There was a friend I had made online in my early 20's on a gaming site wherein players could create a tiny avatar or game character that was cute and personalized. In this game, players simply accumulated coins to pay for assets—from clothing items to furniture and housing—wherein 'work' was a series of mini challenges within the game, and players could gift money to one another—a virtual community not too unlike reality. In my little virtual home, I had uploaded my actual picture on the mantel as a way of

personalizing my home with some authenticity, because many of the social interactions and friendships I made there were likewise genuine. As this world welcomed players around the world to all ages, I happened to befriend a young 9-year old girl from India who had visited the chat room I had created to trade virtual dresses. She visited my little home and marveled at my picture, paying me compliments in broken English, telling me her dreams to become beautiful and adorned in finery, while asking me questions: if I was a model where I came from (it was a tiny, blurry picture), and how to become like me—educated, beautiful, and kind—at least in her blessed eyes! We bonded over American celebrities and lifestyles that she excitedly updated me on via the American pop culture magazines and ‘news’ that she made collages out of with her cousins. After further conversation—I was attempting to instill feminist views to ensure her that knew physical beauty paled in comparison to inner beauty—she agreed that achieving standards she and her female relatives saw in the magazines was perhaps not always healthy. She conveyed to me she had a cousin in the hospital who was very ill, losing weight, and refusing to eat. This cousin of hers was a few years her senior, an adolescent, whom my young friend was visiting in the hospital every few days, who had obsessed over models in the magazines, proclaiming she would become one as her career. It became clear that my friend’s admiration for me was reflective of the values and beauty standards she and her cousin had poured hours together obsessing over in the magazines. Indeed research supports that “adolescent females at higher risk of developing an eating disorder...were also more likely to read girls’ magazines or listen to radio programs (Escobar-Chaves, 2005, p. 305). I was crushed and devastated that this little 9-year old girl was about to lose her ailing cousin suffering from apparent anorexia—my friend told me her family was prepared to hear news of her dying any day then.

On the other side of the planet, I felt completely helpless: how could I explain in basic English how anorexia robbed women of their health, and the unintended yet irresponsible impact of a

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capitalistic society on them, to a 9-year old on some silly virtual gaming platform? For all my feminist views and BA in Psychology at the time, I could not even send her health pamphlets to give to her parents—although I am sure the doctors were already trying their best. For a couple weeks she would come back to report her cousins worsening condition to me, and all I could do was listen and futilely attempt to convey positive body ideals in the most child-friendly manner I could, as I cried quietly behind my computer screen for this little girl and in anger for what society was already teaching her. It was extremely emotionally agonizing for me to know that she did not yet understand how death would impact her and her family and that she was about to learn what loss meant at such a young age. Eventually we lost contact, though I do not recall how. However, she left with me a strong resentment towards the objectification of women and the unrealistic, photo-shopped, standards of beauty American industry had imparted the world with, and I had vowed to help educate and stand against these commercialized evils that were robbing women of their cousins, loved ones, and their own self-esteem and health.

Although feminist groups have been working hard to fight against these unhealthy messages that our patriarchal society has ingrained into everyone, Callahan argues that it is a challenging time for consumers to interpret the images and their associated meanings within mass media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or to define oneself as a feminist due to the mixed messages we are told (2011, p. 67). Bean (2007) contends that “American feminism is experiencing an identity crisis....What we can say for sure is that as feminism moves into the twenty-first century a deeply entrenched ambivalence has characterized nearly all feminist discourse over the past two decades”: first wave of feminism addressed women’s rights, the second wave endorsed a superwoman who does whatever a man can do and still run the house, whereas the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave supports variety and contradiction, which is often confused with post-feminism, neither of which are concretely defined but overlapping in many ways (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 67).

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Genz (2009) adds “[f]or feminists on the anti-subjectification side of the great sexualization debate they agree ‘what some are calling “the new feminism” is really “the old objectification”, disguised in stilettos”” (as cited in Callahan, 2011, p. 74). In other words, some forms of feminism have become so convoluted that it is ironically reverted back to the initial problem of objectifying women—if only packaged under the pretense of liberty. Personally I could not agree more with Genz and speculate that marketing industries in the entertainment business have found a way to brush off original waves of feminists advocating for anti-objectification of women, under the guise of ‘liberating’ women’s sexualities. This way, industries that rely on objectifying women as their marketing campaigns could use this framework to continue objectifying women while assuaging feminist groups and falsely claiming to recognize women’s rights. For instance, “[c]ritics such as Susan Douglas (1995) see this as a triumph of the capitalists, managing to turn feminism into something narcissistic which you have to spend lots of money on, and – in line with L’Oreal’s ‘Because I’m worth it!’ tagline – even feel pleasure and liberation in doing so.” (as cited in Guantlett, p. 54). Thus, “[a]dvertising and the media often suggest that women...make sacrifices to achieve a better body, and ‘treat’ themselves to a range of cosmetic treatments and adornments...to ‘just be yourself’ or ‘express yourself”” (as cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 129) use positive ‘love yourself’ connotations to endorse the very materialism that perpetuates insecurity and body dissatisfaction. For this reason, “Cronin warns that these regimes can never make women truly individual; indeed, as more and more messages tell us, this ‘compulsory individuality’ takes women further and further away from truly being ‘an individual”” (as cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 129).

That said,

Male viewers identify with the (male) protagonist, and the female characters are the subject of their desiring gaze. Female viewers...are also compelled to take the viewpoint of the central (male) character, so that women are denied a viewpoint of their own and instead participate in

the pleasure of men looking at women. ('Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at', as John Berger had put it (1972: 47).) The female character has no importance in a film...except as a 'spectacle', the erotic object of both the male characters and the cinema spectators; her role is to drive the hero to act the way he does. (As cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 38)

According to Guantlett (2002), "a bigger problem with Mulvey's argument is that it denies the heterosexual female gaze altogether. Mulvey's argument cannot be too strong if a mainstream film like Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001) can bounce it off the rails altogether" (p. 39). That is, "if the traditional thrills of the action genre can be combined with the sight of Angelina Jolie in shorts and a tight top, for example, then the deal is sealed" (p.66). I would like to point out that this so-called example of 'progress' that Guantlett insists, still assumes a very masculine character as its' protagonist—the character Lara Croft is only exciting and admirable when she trades her gowns and bonnets in for army pants, a black tank top, hair braided up, a utility belt, and gun or knife in hand. Other than the fact that Lara can adopt a masculine side to her—her real persona—the same masculine traits and heroic actions are glorified while her feminine aspects are beautiful but ultimately boring and dull, in comparison to her exciting, agentic, masculine side. As Gunter (1995) provides, "men were more likely to be assertive (or aggressive), whilst women were more likely to be passive. Men were much more likely to be adventurous, active and victorious, whereas women were...shown as weak, ineffectual, victimised, supportive, laughable, or 'merely token females'" (as cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 43). Although I acknowledge that Lara Croft is a female protagonist who defies the traditional representations of women in films, I do not see much of a difference in how her character defies the glorification of masculine traits and still endorses the need to be sexy in order for her to establish her femininity with her "tight top". . Likewise, "the film's [Charlies angels] message was 'by all means be feisty, but never

forget to be feminine” (as cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 67). In other words, being a kick-ass heroine and thereby adopting masculine traits will make you interesting—but never forget to be sexy, because your female aspects depend on that in order to be entertaining.

Thankfully, Jenji Kohan’s portrayal of women in her TV series *Orange is the New Black* (2013) finally offers female role-models women can look up to: criminal protagonists who are agentic, intelligent, funny, daring, exciting, in all colours, shapes and sizes—all in the same conservative, drab, prison outfits. One of the highest rated shows in pop culture by 2016—all without the help of tight, revealing outfits that flaunt their bodies. This group of diverse women are funny, interesting, passionate and engaging without having to be sexy for *others*, while openly exploring their own sexual needs—without having to adopt masculine characteristics. These are a group of women who are interesting, and engaging just by expressing themselves! Hopefully entertainment industries can model after Kohan’s work and start bringing this diversity and dynamism into their female roles to mitigate the negative effects traditional stereotypes have caused.

## Chapter 5

### The Other Sex—Or Choreplay and Mancards

Although masculinity has not undergone the dramatic changes and controversy that femininity has, it is slowly evolving from being a *must* to a performative *choice*, as gender identity gets redefined under socio-historical times of change. Nonetheless, masculinity has remained to be a defining source of pride, guidance, and stereotype, privileging those who display this well, and conferring a hierarchal lowered status by default, to those who do not. Although one of the most hegemonic and least fluid gender identities however, it too, is widening its definition while gender identity itself goes under reform in the face of media and the culture that drives it.

Masculinity has been defined as

a set of physical, emotional, and cultural practices in which men (and occasionally women) engage male social gender roles. Culture is a recursive context for the performance of masculinities, functioning as both the cause and product of masculine behaviour...in opposition to femininities as well as securing and maintaining dominance over feminin[ity]. (As cited in Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, p. 210)

Furthermore, Connell (1995) contends that masculinity “is situated in a dichotomy of difference, which values the masculine over the feminine and affords power to it....[it] is a fluid construct organized by the interplay of social relations, which are themselves the product of individual agency and social structure” (as cited in Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, pp. 210-211). Ironically, “[a]lthough masculinity could be performed in many ways, men often feel obligated consciously or unconsciously to perform masculinity in ways that are dependent upon the current cultural climate” (Johnson & Dunlap, 2013, p. 72). This expected performance then, affords privilege to men who adhere to its

expectations—“structured to legitimize dominant ideological messages and behaviours that privilege men and heterosexuality, which in turn subordinate women and non-heterosexual identities” (Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, p. 210)—meanwhile severely limiting the very men who are socially pressured to adhere to its’ strict scripts; otherwise known as hegemonic masculinity (Johnson & Dunlap, 2011).

As Connell (1995) furthered, “[w]ithin contemporary American culture, hegemonic masculinity is often characterized by physical, social, and sexual aggressiveness combined with emotional stoicism” (as cited in Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, p. 210). Significantly however, “privileging...these performances simultaneously marginalizes the demure and emotionally expressive behaviour that has been traditionally associated with femininity and male homosexuality” in a way that significantly limits the well-being of the men who practice and endorse this hegemonic construct (Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, p. 211). Despite of this emotional limitation however, “[i]n addition to bestowing power on those who perform it, hegemonic masculinity is also a powerful tool for maintaining the current social order” i.e. double-standards and other hierarchal stereotypes (Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, p. 211).

In contrast, Connell (1995) advocates for renunciation as a solution to patriarchy: “Renunciation means giving up every day masculine privileges and styles of interaction and also has important consequences for sexuality and emotional expression” like liberating these areas of human interaction (as cited in Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, pp. 211-212). Although renunciation of male privilege will be effective, Connell also ominously warns that it may come at a heavy cost in the interim: “Renunciation may also cause a temporary loss of gender identity resulting in self-mockery and psychological dissonance that may paradoxically increase men’s internalized sexism and homophobia” (as cited in Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, p. 212). However, fearful assumptions such as these that imply that men and other male masculinities would lose their sense of selves and even begin to develop internalized sense of self-loathing and possibly worsen rather than unravel sexism and homophobia, seems to be a rather

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pessimistic excuse to justify the maintenance of patriarchy. To be fair, Connell's views are a decade old, and at the time, this was likely a legitimate concern.

However, to refute such views, sociologist Micheal Kimmel (2015) advocates *for making gender visible* as the way to pave the road for gender equality. In his *TED Talks* conference, he outlines studies that demonstrate how it would benefit men, along with the rest of society, without psychological repercussions; and instead result in psychological and economical gains. Kimmel (2015) argues that the problem when men often face when they deal with advocates of feminism and gender equality is that they either dismiss it in agreement that it is an ethical imperative with no real action accompanied by it, or they are passionate in its advocacy but in a heroic cavalry-like manner attempt to 'save' their female counterparts—thereby, indirectly perpetuating the same 'powerlessness' onto women, or others get highly defensive about it because they see it as detrimental to men. To exemplify, Kimmel (2015) recounts how he went onto a talk show opposite of four other Caucasian men titled "*How a Black Woman Stole My Job*" and while the other "angry white men" argued that they were qualified for promotions and deserved these jobs that they did not succeed in getting, Kimmel asked them about one word in the show's title: the word "*My*"—and it dawned on everyone what the real problem was—a sense of entitlement that the job was due to them as an immediate assumption. To give another example, he quoted a riddle someone had given to him when he was younger:

A man and his son are driving on the freeway, and they're in a terrible accident, and the father is killed, and the son is brought to the hospital emergency room, and as they're bringing the son into the emergency room, the emergency room attending physician sees the boy and says, "Oh, I can't treat him, that's my son." How is this possible? We were flummoxed by this. We could not figure this out. (Kimmel, 2015)

In order to gauge the level of change, Kimmel posed the riddle to his 16-year old son

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and his friends, and their immediate response was: “‘It’s his mom.’ Right? No problem. Just like that. Except for my son, who said, ‘Well, he could have two dads’” (2015). Kimmel (2015) continues on to point out that the problem is that male privilege is invisible to the one who holds that privilege, because when the problem is not yours to face, one can be unaware of its’ effects. Thus, he goes on to list studies that demonstrate rate of happiness and well-being is highest in European countries that are more egalitarian: that the more gender-equal companies are, the lower their job turnover, they have lower levels of attrition, higher rates of retention, job satisfaction, and productivity (Kimmel, 2015). In response to companies bemoaning about the cost of changing their work environments to more egalitarian ones, Kimmel asserts, “what you have to start calculating is how much gender inequality is already costing you. It is extremely expensive” (2015). Moreover, Kimmel (2015) adds that sharing the housework, leads to happier and healthier families and a more present father-figure for their children, a balanced work life: “They smoke less, drink less, take recreational drugs less often...less likely to go to the ER but more likely to go to a doctor for routine screenings...less likely to see a therapist [or] to be diagnosed with depression...[or take] prescription. And finally, when men share housework and childcare, they have more sex”—*Choreplay*, as Men’s Health magazine advertised it. Evidently, Connell’s (1995) fears have been dispelled by research, and gender equality benefits everyone—including men.

That said, what effects does mass media have on men’s masculinity? Wearing (1998) provides:

The products of popular culture not only provide pleasure in the context of leisure, but also have the capacity to impart information about gendered and sexual identities through the transmission of cultural values and social norms, especially during times of social identity development. . . . these products convey normative social expectations and how those expectations continue to reinforce power relations that encourage domination and

marginalization. (As cited in Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, p. 212)

In a study by Johnson & Dunlap (2013), they identified three basic archetypes that are most typically portrayed in media: the Alpha-male, who is the idealized strong masculine male that always gets the girl, the Beta-male who never wins the girl but is resourceful and educated, and the Coward who usually plays the villain that is an outsider and wrestles with isolation and selfish, revenge-seeking thoughts—the antithesis of what an ideal man should be. With these stereotypes, men are able to relate to each of them, as Johnson and Dunlap (2013) contend, “through media...[we] construct and negotiate our own identities in relation to [various masculine] types. The alpha male was clearly idealized and desired, but virtually unattainable. The beta male was less desirable, but permissible and accessible. Finally, the coward was reprehensible, but also uncomfortably” relatable (p. 78).

In their study, Johnson and Dunlap (2013) also identified the variable called The Man Card which “permits its bearer to enact behaviours, e.g., crying in public, that would otherwise transgress hegemonic conceptualizations of masculinity. In this way, The Man Card reflects the recursive nature of individuals’ gendered performance vis-à-vis dominant cultural norms” (p. 81). In other words, all-male participants of this study agreed that a masculine man, someone alike the alpha male, could enact effeminate or exaggeratedly feminine behaviors so long as he adequately demonstrated his masculinity most other times. However, “[o]nce legitimacy is in doubt, the credential is revoked and the individual is left to reconstruct his identity” (p. 81). In this way, male peers socialize one another in a cycle that ensures other men are adequately masculine. These researchers conclude that men:

encounter various messages about masculinity and must apply and negotiate their meaning to our own lives. This process of negotiation necessarily entails an encounter with the various masculine types and a decision as to which types we shall try to imitate and in which contexts...the negotiation of these types has serious implications for our own self-appraisals and

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even the extent to which we critique ourselves . . . .by providing idealized masculine types, media portrayals create opportunities for individuals to creatively reinterpret masculinity for their own purposes. (Johnson and Dunlap, 2013, pp. 81-83)

Consistently, Guantlett (2002) provides that popular culture like magazines also provide archetypes of masculinity that are relatable to sexual minorities as well and insists that “their existence and popularity shows men rather insecurely trying to find their place in the modern world” (p. 180). To this end, the magazines offer “[a] narrative of the self. At the same time, [they] may raise some anxieties – about fitness of the body... or whether the reader is sufficiently [masculine]. The discourses of masculinity which the magazines help to circulate can therefore, unsurprisingly, be both enabling and constraining” and yet be remarkably narrow in comparison to queer theories (p. 81). In comparison to women’s movements in media, for instance, which offer “incitements for women to fulfil any role proliferate, conventional masculinity is increasingly exposed as tediously monolithic. In contrast with women’s ‘you can be anything’ ethos, the identities promoted to men are [still] relatively constrained” (Guantlett, 2002, p. 251). As Guantlett (2002) concludes:

The problem for men was not seen as being their new role – or lack of one; instead, men’s troubles stemmed from their exaggerated and pointless commitment to men’s old role, the traditional role of provider and strong, emotionless rock. Where men had a problem, then, it was not so much because society had changed, but because they as individual men had failed to modernise and keep up. . . . Meanwhile there is a generation of younger men who have adapted to the modern world (in a range of ways), who have grown up with women as their equals and who do not feel threatened or emasculated by these social changes. These men and their cultures are largely ignored by the problem-centred discourse of masculinity studies. (pp. 251-

252)

To summarize, traditional masculine identities constructed and reinforced by patriarchy, serves to dominate and subjugate those that do not adhere to the social expectations of this archaic standard for men. Although this may have privileged men in the past, it is evident that the traditional concept of masculinity no longer serves men—or anybody—well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and although it has been slow to evolve in comparison to femininity and LGBTQ gender identities, mass media is allowing for more discourses to occur in order to break free from masculine hegemony and offer men and other persons adopting masculine identities more variation in their gender roles. Hopefully with recent studies showing the benefits for men to move away from macho stereotypes, they can experience better emotional, psychological and physiological health benefits.

## Chapter 7

### LGBTQ Identities: Confessions of a Confused Counselor (-to be)

*Why would anyone give up being a man? It's like winning the lottery and giving the ticket back.--*

Figueroa from *Orange is the New Black*

Given the impact of mass media that has thus far been examined for feminine and masculine gender identities, what might it have on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer (LGBTQ) identities? In my opinion, it is this group of minorities that has been the pioneers of third spaces within mass media that challenge the patriarchal system of stereotypical beliefs most significantly. Because this group pushes boundaries, gender identities are being redefined and options and variety are becoming available to modern society in ways we have never known before.

Although some psychologists attribute sex and thereby gender differences to chromosomal and hormonal differences, other psychologists argue that socialisation is more important and through modelling and reinforcement, “most investigators agree that cultural influences and socialization processes are the main determinants of an individual’s gender role identity and roles” (as cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 34). To clarify, although many individuals may be born with certain dispositions in terms of attraction, like biological sex which may be prenatal and unchangeable, the genders we adapt and inevitably perform are social constructs that are an ongoing development in response to social norms conveyed by mass media. For instance in a recent study by Sanders et al. (2015), “some youth commonly described how they modeled their experiences from what they had observed and how modeling reinforced positive feelings toward the activity in subsequent sexual activity” (p.603). For instance, in addition to using pornography or other sexually explicit material (SEM) to prepare

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themselves for actual sex and how to engage partners, participants also used SEM to “discover and navigate their sexual orientation exploration and identity development. They often described that watching SEM served as a confirmation of their sexual orientation as gay” when they lacked arousal for the opposite sex and found themselves more attentive towards the same sex or towards both (Sanders et al., 2015, p. 602). Consistently, Kauth (2000) insisted that through “operant conditioning, studies have failed to demonstrate that sexual attraction is 'acquired through learning, although preference for certain sexual activities may be learned'” (as cited in p. 59). This is significant, because media is allowing for the open exploration of sexuality that may redefine gender identities, and individuals may be offered new platforms to explore new interests and discover themselves within.

In fact, researcher and theorists contend that sexual attraction, and thereby sexual identity (because we define ourselves in relation to others), is fluid rather than dichotomous: “Alfred Kinsey was the first researcher to suggest that sexual orientation is...a complex system including sexual identity, sexual attraction, and sexual behaviors” (as cited in Petersen & Hyde, 2011, p. 158). As such, Kinsey suggests that “sexual orientation should not be conceptualized as two categories, heterosexuals and homosexuals, but instead should be considered as a continuum between exclusive same-gender attraction to exclusive other-gender attraction” (as cited in Petersen & Hyde, 2011, p. 158). Similarly, Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz (1990) assert that sexual attraction is fluid, and only social pressures restrict individuals from loving a person irrespective of their sex (as cited in Kauth, 2000, p. 101). Moreover, because females have less social restriction to express and reinforce love towards any gender, their identities are more fluid, and so the same would hold for men if not for a patriarchal society that restricts masculine identities the most (as cited in Kauth, 2000, p. 101). As Margaret Mead provides:

*Even a superficial look at other societies and some groups in our own society should be enough to convince us that a very large number of human beings probably a majority-are bisexual in their potential capacity for love. Whether they will become exclusively hetero or exclusively homo for all their lives and in all circumstances ...is, in fact, a consequence of the way they have been brought up, of the particular beliefs and prejudices of the society they live in and, to some extent, of their own life history. (As cited in Kauth, 2000, p, 169)*

Kauth (2002) argues that “[m]ost men and women experience an undifferentiated erotic predisposition and have the potential to experience erotic and sexual attraction to both sexes. However, cultural beliefs and social pressures guide sexual feelings and behavior in particular directions,” for this reason “[f]ew people are likely to have sex-specific or exclusive sexual attractions” (p. 191). To exemplify, “[b]y the age of 8, children are well able to recognize the values of their culture regarding sex-appropriate emotional expression, including the acceptability or intolerance of intimate feelings for same-sex nonkin” (as cited in Kauth, 2002, p. 194). Thus, “restriction of sexual opportunity through ...social regulation is one of the primary ways that cultures have controlled...sexual experience . . . Given a more supportive social environment, it seems likely that [more individuals would] report same-sex erotic feelings and sexual behavior” because people are products of their current social realities (Kauth, 2002, p. 197-198).

If socialization is at least as important as genetic disposition in producing sexual identities via the exploration of sexuality as a fluid concept, then the role models for diverse groups should aid in the exploration and discovery of one’s gender identity. How does media portray the LGBTQ communities? Has this served to discourage or encourage diversity and development? According to Fruth (2007), “[f]ilm inevitably serves to gratify the psychological needs of the heterosexual audience and the hegemony of heteronormative culture” (p. 26). This is due to the fact that the image of the homosexual

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in cinema is usually portrayed as a “comic relief, fostering laughter at the expense of ‘real’ lesbians and gays that served homophobic hatred and violence” if only to confirm “the superiority of heterosexuality when compared against its degenerate others (the pervert; the sissy; the manly woman...)an object lesson for those who dare to transgress the boundaries that separate proper masculinity and proper femininity” (as cited in Fruth, 2007, p. 24). Thus, “[s]ocial messages about being ‘heterosexual’ are loud, clear, and consistent. At the same time, messages about being ‘gay’ or ‘bisexual’ are usually negative and also quite clear” (Kauth, 2000, p. 64)—that is, when they are not completely hidden from view (Guantlett, 2002).

Thankfully, due to activist groups in the past few years, today gender types represented in media are “more complex, and less stereotyped, than in the past...gay and lesbian characters have started to gain greater acceptance within the TV mainstream, but remain relatively uncommon in movies. Overall...modern media has a more complex view of gender and sexuality than ever before” (Guantlett, 2002, p. 90). Indeed, it was my senior year in university in my Canadian Literature class, that my openly gay professor proclaimed that all our texts for the year would be by Canadian homosexual authors and that whoever felt offended and uncomfortable could either stay to get educated on why it made them feel that way, since this was a required course, or they could leave and register under a different professor. It was a direct challenge to a roomful of university students to test their true capacity for learning—about half the class left within the first week. The rest of us stayed to receive a proper education: this was the first professor that captured our full attention and created a voraciously curious appetite for what she had to offer on the very first day of class. It was as though she had just offered us a choice to take the blue pill or the red one as in movie *The Matrix*, and only those of us like Neo, who was up for the challenge to handle the truth could be offered an education that would forever

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change the way we saw the world. Never having been too keen on formal education, I was for the first time riveted to my seat along with the remaining students almost begging her to teach us!

To say that this was a mind-blowing learning experience would be an understatement of what took place that following semester: Annamarie Jagose's *Queer Theory*, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Ivan E. Coyote's *Loose End*, and countless other brilliant authors burst through my little bubble of a world that a typical sheltered Christian Asian woman could never otherwise have known. I was completely enthralled, and for once in my strictly heteronormative feminized life, I was able to explore all these intriguing new worlds—the same world—but through the lens of much more diverse, beautiful individuals. I had never truly appreciated inner beauty quite so much until I was able to feel my heart racing and face flushing along with the characters in these books as they narrated their puzzling, swirling attraction for the same sex, which utterly confounded and enticed me at the same time. I am almost regretful to report that I remained heterosexual—a small evidence that engaging in homosexual media does not make one gay—but I was excited to discover and begin to understand LGBTQ individuals like never before, and many stigmas I had held were demystified. Thanks to queer literature, I was able to explore, question, and normalize experiences I had previously never been able to understand: why did I blush beet red when the sophisticated butch blonde woman dressed in a white suit winked at me after she caught me peeking at her at my first retail job? Was I gay? Bisexual? Why do I find voluptuous hyper-feminine women physically attractive? Is my boyfriend going to be okay that Ruby Rose makes me and every female friend I know question their heterosexuality because *her masculinity* is jaw-droppingly gorgeous?

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*(Caption: Ruby Rose, from bottom left to right are images taken from her transformation video)*

According to Gauntlett (2002) forms of media such as these “explains why some men are disturbed – even angered – to see other men acting in an ‘effeminate’ manner, because this behaviour challenges their everyday understanding of how things should be in the world” (p. 95), not unlike my offended classmates that had chosen to stay ignorant as they walked out of that enlightening opportunity. Still, contends Gauntlett (2002), “[t]he performance of gender appears here [to be] something which is learned and policed, and which has to be constantly worked on and monitored” (p. 95). Indeed, “queer theory emphatically rejects the idea of gay people as ‘intrinsically different’. The

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point of the celebration of diversity and difference is that everybody is a little different from everybody else (and that we are happy about that)”(Guantlett, 2002, p. 149)—especially fans of Ruby Rose. As with the LGBTQ literature that captured interest, “[i]n his book, *Striptease Culture*, Brian McNair (2002) shows how sex and sexuality have come to be represented in a diverse range of way in popular culture...[resulting in]the rejection of tradition and the transformation of society” (as cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 13). As Guantlett (2002) predicts, “[i]t seems likely that as the media introduce the general audience to more everyday gay and lesbian (and bisexual, and transgendered) characters, tolerance should grow” (p.13).

Not only does queer representation in media promote tolerance and acceptance, but perhaps more importantly, it has allowed for LGBTQ individuals to discover and model after these characters. According to Bond et al. (2009), since the 1970s, “research was concluding that books, magazines, and pamphlets were outlets for gay men to utilize in accepting their sexuality. Technology has changed the media landscape, but it has not diminished the importance of media during the sexual self-realization of LGB individuals” (p. 34). As previously mentioned, developing technology has permitted the existence of “a virtual community that gives these adolescents a sense they are not alone. The anonymity provided by computer-mediated communication is one of the reasons that individuals participate in virtual communities” (as cited in Bond et al., 2009). In their study, Bond et al. (2009) found that 72% of LGBTQ individuals used media as a means of gathering information for their coming-out process, and that 70% of them used the internet as a resource to learn about themselves and connect with supportive communities online. This practice was also found to be especially helpful in mitigating some negative effects they experienced from less accepting family members including feelings of depression and isolation (Bond et al., 2009). As Bond et al., (2009) states, “[t]he results of this study show that, overwhelmingly, participants reported the use of the Internet during the pivotal time of sexual self-

realization” (p.44). Thus, media may be a great asset in developing a gendered self, especially for non-heteronormative individuals. As Shaw (1997) offers:

the Internet is the new gay bar, a communication space where gay relationship formation thrives. Consequently, if fear and intimidation are preventing adolescents from disclosing their alternative sexualities to their families during the coming-out process, the Internet affords them anonymous safe spaces to discuss these issues. . . . In other words, media use may now be their relational proxy. The displacement of family communication with virtual relationships could be a very positive means of managing communication complications for LGB youth attempting to deal with their alternative sexuality, as reports of loneliness and self-esteem were not affected by an individual’s reliance on the media. (As cited in Bond, 2009, p.45)

This finding is significant, because media can indirectly be promoting emotional and psychological health for LGBTQ individuals. For example, “gay magazines can help a person feel comfortable about their sexuality, and feel part of a broader queer community or identity” (Guantlett, 2002, p. 208). One respondent had been confused about sexuality until magazines helped him understand that he was not alone in his identity struggles:

‘.... I came very close to trying to kill myself because I just felt so different. Then in 10th grade [age 16] something amazing happened that would end up changing my life forever, I bought my first David Bowie CD . . . . I saw for the first time in my life a man who was a little bit like me! He had homoerotic lyrics all through that CD and I realized for the first time that I was not alone ...’  
(As cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 22)

Indeed, research has demonstrated a plethora of negative health risks not only for LGBTQ individuals but for people who display gender atypical behavior (GAB) (Alanko et al., 2009). Purportedly, both LGBTQ and heterosexual participants noticed as early as age 8 that they were reprimanded for

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GAB, and even those who were heterosexual but displayed GAB reported more psychiatric symptoms alongside victimization and discrimination for being different. This was especially true for gay men whose fathers were more rejecting and mothers less loving than non-GAB counterparts, and similar reports of parental distancing was found for gender atypical behaving individuals (Alanko et al., 2009). Moreover, LGBTQ individuals reported having to conform to hegemonic heterosexual norms was a great source of distress that affected their mental health later in life, especially when it contributed to internalized homophobia (Alanko et al., 2009). Additionally, another study revealed that transwomen may be especially vulnerable to adverse effects of heterosexual norms, as they experience prejudice and violence at higher rates than their LGB counterparts:

The extremity of the violence cisgender men use to punish transwomen in private, sexual situations highlights gender inequality in the forms of the cultural devaluation of femininity, homosexuality, and, particularly, males choosing to take on characteristics coded as feminine. Whereas transmen may face less censure because they are adopting the socially respected traits of masculinity, transwomen are understood as committing the double sin of both abandoning masculinity and choosing femininity. (Schilt&Westbrooks, 2009, p. 460)

To conclude, these findings bear great significance, as “youth are ‘coming out’ or disclosing their homosexual identity at much younger ages than before” (as cited in Subrahmanyam &Smahel, 2011, p.54), because the advent of LGBTQ portrayal in the media will be necessary for the psychological well-being of LGBTQ youth; and may be an avenue for health practitioners to engage this population with entertainment education. This finding also reflects how the media may be helping youth connect to supportive communities online that give them more confidence and clarity as a Super Peer. As Johnson &Dunlap’s (2011) study demonstrated, media played an instrumental role as a major resource for “access[ing] information about being a gay man and how media consumption ‘reaffirms traditional

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divisions, but also provides space for contradictions, resistance and contestation of hegemonic cultural practices' (Wearing 1998, 75) [aiding] participants in their coming out process" (as cited in p. 214). Thus, for LGBTQ individuals "media served as a means for opening the closet door as the men realized, consciously and unconsciously that they could escape their isolation, assess others' reactions via shared media experiences, and finally locate themselves in the gay community" (Johnson & Dunlap, 2011, p. 215).

## Chapter 8

### Media as an Escape: Addiction, and Homogeny?

When children and adolescence engage with material without critique, the negative effects of internalizing unhealthy ideals can result in the performance of more rigid stereotypes along with a host of mental and sometimes physical illness like body image issues, as one extreme. On the other hand, consumers may also choose to disengage under the overwhelming pressure of messages and spaces co-created by media, on this opposing end, may result in a disembodiment or a kind of listless displacement in social spaces. This is a troubling concept as “[k]ids today don’t play outside anymore. They are inside playing video games...our world is [being] defined by mass media” (Callahan, 2011, p. 38). To this end, some researchers argue that

the fragmentation of identities in online contexts may prevent the development of a flexible and incomplete personality...compared to offline relationships, virtual ones lack continuity: online relationships are too easy to leave, and escape may become a major strategy for dealing with a problem. Virtual identities may become dissociated and inflexible, and consequently fragmented online identities may have a more negative influence on the individual. (As cited in Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011, p. 75)

This view may have some merit as youth they are highly susceptible to influence and indeed studies aforementioned in this paper have demonstrated some negative effects, most notably in stereotyping and internalizing unrealistic ideals and beliefs of the world—inevitably reinforcing these beliefs. Media is “potentially shaping learner-viewers’ perceptions of reality, especially for viewers who may faithfully view one particular type of television production repeatedly over time” (Callahan, 2011, p. 209). Furthermore, “easy access to mass media entertainment makes it easy for the public to engage (and escape) in”; and consistent with the Uses and Gratifications theory, people use media to gratify

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their individualistic needs, regardless of what underlying capitalist agendas there may be, people turn to media for escapist reasons as well as other needs (Callahan, 2011, p. 24). As Callahan asserts “[e]ngaging in mass media has become a primary source of pleasure and escape from everyday life into an exciting, vibrant netherworld. Mass media offers learner-viewers an alternative existence to leading mundane lives...far more exhilarating than our own” (as cited in 2011, p. 208). As enticing as that sounds, that may be problematic for users that fall into this with addictive patterns, as with any other method of escape when coupled with capitalistic agendas.

Alexander Bruce’s (2008) theory of dislocation—severe isolation and disconnection with one’s world—argues that the free market society is creating dislocation and the depressive symptoms that entail it. He argues how

our hyperindividualistic, hypercompetitive, frantic, crisis-ridden society makes most people feel social and culturally isolated. Chronic isolation causes people to look for relief. They find temporary relief in addiction to drugs or any of a thousand other habits and pursuits because addiction allows them to escape from their feelings, to deaden their senses, and to experience an addictive lifestyle as a substitute for a full life. (Alexander, 2014, par. 34)

In fact, isolation is exactly what the free market thrives on, because if one was content with their lives, they would not need to indulge themselves with short-lived, addictive pleasures which the market supplies (Alexander, 2008). Although our Western societal values promote individualism and competitive self-achievement, isolation also comes hand in hand. This isolation and focus on the self, disconnected from others is at the root of depression and drives us to seek more in life—or addictions to numb the agony of loneliness.

Consistently, Fruth (2007) contends that compared to the past “contemporary experience is

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marked by a lost sense of belonging...that electronic media have reorganized social space...while also reordering social experience in a way that results in a 'disconnectedness' or [placelessness] even as the electronic media create new opportunities for connectedness" (as cited in p.7). For instance, "[m]ost queers are aware that space is "heterosexualized" in ways that often leaves them feeling displaced" (Fruth, 2007, p.7). To reiterate, "space" refers to physical or abstract place or opportunity for learning, growth, transmitting information and creation. Perhaps previously there wasn't space to express or explore oneself but only hierarchal rules imposed upon us, where we are reinforced to re-enact one dichotomy or another, devoid of choice or option. Thus, consistent with Alexander's (2008) dislocation theory, Fruth (2007) argues that:

the goal of space under late capitalism is fragmentation, homogenization, and consensus. Late capitalism produces "abstract space," or a space that seeks to eradicate...[diversity] through various prohibitions and divide space in a way that reduces resistance to the accumulation of wealth and the production and exchange of commodities . . . If late capitalism produces abstract space, it also produces abstract inhabitants...who cannot recognize themselves within it. (As cited in p. 20)

Thus Fruth (2007) defines "placelessness" as "the sense that once clearly defined and delimited public and private spaces and the identities that they enabled have been undermined and people are left disconnected from social space and other social subjects" (p. 21). In other words, media used predominately as a means of escape without critical consumption of latent capitalistic messages, may result in a disembodiment of the user.



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*(Caption: unisex clothing becoming the latest trend. Stylish and non-sexist, however, the uniformity is discrete and uncanny: have consumers traded in conformity for homogeneity? Where is the celebration of diversity here?)*

*Last picture featuring 4 individuals including racial diversity all sport stony looks with all but one model making any eye-contact, and all of them resembling differently shaped mannequins more so than the models above. Most importantly, this is the original picture featuring the second model completely headless and disembodied: popular trend or capitalistic homogeneity?)*

Thus, despite of that fact that many researchers advocate that “media choices reflect the needs and preferences of consumers and that the consumers actively shape their own media

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environment...[and] that users are anything but passive spectators [wherein] individual characteristics of consumers affect media's influence" (as cited in Bogt et al., 2010, p.845), I wonder if it is merely a perception of choice/ active thinking rendered by clever yet deceptive marketing campaigns, like using reverse psychology or fear-mongering which are pervasive in media marketing. The images above that portray models advocating for unisex clothing are also a result of feminist and anti-hegemonic activists campaigning for the amelioration of the traditional gender dichotomy. However, as with the anti-objectification wave of 'new feminism' which is arguably coming back full circle as 'the old objectification' with the sexualisation of women in the media, unisex clothing industries are no doubt taking full advantage of activists that are trying to break down the hegemonic dichotomy view of gender—yet unwittingly be falling into the hands of capitalists once again?

Indeed, Fruth (2007) emphasizes that life in America "has been exacerbated by urban development, suburbanization, the growing popularity of electronic media, and a retreat to the domestic sphere, all of which have steadily undermined people's sense of individual freedom and contentment, creating widespread "segregation, isolation, compartmentalization, and sterilization..." (as cited in p. 22). Again, this mirrors Alexander's (2008) contention that any form of escapism including media driven by free market values "allows [users] to escape from their feelings, to deaden their senses, and to experience an addictive lifestyle as a substitute for a full life" (Alexander, 2014, par. 34). This then, begs the reader to question, if future generations are really being trained to think critically, if they are already baby-consumers as soon as they can get their hands on technology, despite of the intention of education entertainment? It appears that both sides of the debate can find just as many studies that advocate for as well as refute either perspectives. Perhaps then, it may be up to the user to choose whether they wish to engage critically to embrace challenging and widening their own views, or whether, like half my Canadian Literature classmates in my senior year of university, choose to

disengage and stay comfortable in their own preferred interests.

## Conclusion

As Giddens offers, “therapy is basically about helping individuals to sort out a strong self-identity based on a coherent and fully understood narrative of the self: a thoroughly modern and reflexive ‘methodology of life-planning’”(Guantlett, 2002, p. 108). With the advent of technological advancement transforming our ever-globalizing world, it remains to be seen whether future tech-savvy clients with their virtual sense of selves will be fragile or robust, and how we can prepare ourselves as therapists to engage with this generation in third spaces to reach a place of understanding and connection, to engage with them at their comfort levels. Thus, with the perpetuation of mass media via technological advancements globalizing nations world-wide, it is imperative to examine its effects on individuals and their sense of Self—especially when media and technology are efficiently evolving faster than researchers can conduct studies of its’ changing effects. Perhaps for this reason, researchers cannot draw clear-cut conclusions as one finding outdates another as changes are evolving at a pace faster and more intensely than ever before. The fact that media, technological advancement and a globalized *culture* are intertwined and inextricable—media being a tool that co-creates culture—makes it difficult to pinpoint any linear effects on individuals. This is disconcerting as youth today are far more tech-savvy than any generation before them—and the adults who can guide them are *not* as tech-capable, and so the transformative nature of mass media via technology is already redefining and creating new avenues of exploration, especially of identities. This paper focuses on gender identity as one significant aspect of people’s lives to demonstrate the overwhelming impact that mass media like the Internet is transforming and *being* transformed simultaneously to evolve what we understand as culture, today within its socio-historical context.

As the chapters in this paper have demonstrated, the Social Cognitive Theoretical framework best captures the multi-directional relationship that mass media has with one’s gender identity in its

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active co-creating, learner-user model. While capitalistic agendas irresponsibly use mass media for direct and vicarious methods of marketing—inadvertently perpetuating and reinforcing hetero-dominant gender stereotypes created by patriarchal hegemony—users of mass media also choose what forms, values, ideas, and trends of media they want to engage in. In this way then, media is a tool: “an ‘enabler’ of ideas and meanings, promoting diversity and difference, which might lead to social change (Fiske, 1989)” (as cited in Guantlett, 2002, p. 28). However, it may be that in order for media to be a productive tool for social change, the user must choose wisely what to engage in, disengage from (the titillating free market values like materialism and other addictive vices), and be critical analysts in making this distinction.

Certainly for untrained youth—those who grow up absorbing and endorsing capitalist values as the marketing industry hopes while riding the profitable wave of popular cultural trends—this could create a problem when they internalize these values before they get the opportunity to develop critical reasoning skills. On the other hand, when users *do* choose to engage with media critically and proactively—if we can teach children to embrace rather than avoid the challenges of discovering and developing discursive spaces—they may very well one day break free from all hegemony to celebrate diversity in full vivacity; creating a culture that evolves progressively in the interest of *all* its inhabitants.

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