

The Influence of the Media on Adolescents:

An Examination of Identity Formation

By Allyson Shifley

For my parents and my brother, my teachers and my advisors, my friends and my peers, and for everyone who watches TV, reads magazines, browses the Internet, and listens to music.

“All together, the massive flow of popular images, representations, and symbolic models disseminated by the media profoundly shapes what young people think about the world and how they perceive themselves in relation to it.”

(Huntemann & Morgan, 2001, p. 309)

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It is not my intent to argue that the influence of media is good or bad, but rather to increase awareness that the surrounding media influences our daily actions and routines.

Introduction

As Americans, we spend much of our time watching television, listening to the radio or an Ipod®, pouring over magazines, browsing the Internet, looking at billboards, and following the latest celebrity gossip. Most people born since 1960 have grown up with a television on for several hours a day in their household. According to Nina Huntemann and Michel Morgan (2001), a child in the USA usually watches four hours of television a day and watches 20,000 hours of commercials a year. If you think about your dialogue with your friends, coworkers, or family members, how much of it is about the latest episode of a popular TV show? Or a new movie? The top 10 hits on the radio of the week? Or the latest sale at the mall? Probably, this constitutes a surprisingly large amount of your dialogue with other people. And why shouldn't it? Media is everywhere.

Two hundred years ago, people were limited to the scope of their community, the people directly around them, for advice and observation. Now there are television shows that expose us to parts of the world that otherwise we might never see. At the click of the mouse, we can read articles from newspapers around the globe. And while reading the latest magazines, we can see fashions from across

the country and around the world. With all of this input, children and adolescents absorb a lot more information than just from their parents, relatives, siblings, friends, or the community. A study done in

1999 estimates that children between the ages of 2 and 18 “spend, on average, almost 3 hours daily watching television; almost another hour listening to recorded music; nearly another hour with computer games or other computer usage; 39 minutes with radio; and just 44 minutes of reading” (Singer & Singer, 2001, p. xiv). Also, as children age their amount of television watching also increases, especially between the ages of 8 and 18. One likely explanation of this increase is because as children grow older, they seek new role models (Singer & Singer, 2001). The television is one possible source for guidance and advice.

Adolescence comprises the important formative years in individuals’ lives, the time when individuals are forming their own, separate identities (Myers, 2008). And, although they prefer to have separate, unique identities, teenagers tend to conform first before branching out as individuals. At this time, especially, the models that adolescents observe can influence who they become. Social Learning Theory emphasizes the role of observation, looking to these models, in an adolescent’s learning process. These models can include parents, teachers, siblings, peers, the media, and more. Observational learning, then, explains the role of modeling in an adolescent’s learning process. Observational learning depends on numerous factors, however, if what an adolescent observes will be remembered and then later acted upon. For example, a teenager who sees a certain

behavior on television will not necessarily reenact that same behavior. There has to be a motivation to imitate it and reinforcement to continue imitating a behavior.

Whether individuals copy a behavior depends on their own personality; therefore, different things on television will appeal to different individuals. Still, the media can be both a positive and a negative role model. The show, movie, advertisement, or other media forms that an individual is exposed to dictates the influence on that person. The possible influence not only depends on the person's personality but also depends on knowledge of the effects of media on themselves and on culture. This paper stresses the reasons why adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the influences of the media, in both harmful and helpful ways. The question that will be the focus of this essay concerns the effect of media on an individual's sense of identity. Using several different theories and other psychological terms and definitions this paper will explain how the media is able to impose on an individual's life and uncover the methods that media uses to appeal to individuals. Although, I will be focusing mainly on electronic media sources, especially television, I still do not wish for people to underestimate the effects that other sources of media can have on individuals. Instead, I wish to highlight why being conscious of the media that surrounds individuals is very important.

The Roots of Media in Our Households and Childhood

As children are exposed to the media, interactions with the media can possibly become as influential, if not more influential for some individuals, as interactions with parents and other models. The media can influence a child's decisions about dress, behavior, and attitude: "Every exposure to every media model provides a potential guide to behavior or attitude, a potential source of identification, a human exemplar we may use – whether in accordance with the model or explicitly contrary to it, and whether consciously or not – to define and construct our identities" (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001, p. 310). The actors, actresses, and other celebrities that portray certain behaviors, ideas, and beliefs are now prominent models in an adolescent's life. The radio, for example, "has been explained by many as providing teenagers with acceptable social cues; as giving them something of interest to discuss with their friends; as an important source for socialization..." (Paik, 2001, p. 13). Still, the radio is not the only source that adolescents turn to; there are movies, television shows, magazines, advertisements, and the Internet just to name a few sources.

Albert Bandura, a psychologist specializing in studies about social learning, estimates that the media ranks third as a source of influence on an individual, behind family and social environment respectively (Huston & Wright, 1996). It's no wonder that the media

ranks highly with the amount of television and ads that Americans seem to be watching these days. The following lists are just a small taste of how much the media is intertwined in our lives. The first list of numbers represents the family life and television while the second list of numbers represents children and television.

1

Percentage of households that possess at least one television: 99
Number of TV sets in the average U.S. household: 2.24
Percentage of U.S. homes with three or more TV sets: 66
Number of hours per day that TV is on in an average U.S. home: 6 hours, 47 minutes
Percentage of Americans that regularly watch television while eating dinner: 66
Number of hours of TV watched annually by Americans: 250 billion
Value of that time assuming an average wage of \$5/hour: \$1.25 trillion
Percentage of Americans who pay for cable TV: 56
Number of videos rented daily in the U.S.: 6 million
Number of public library items checked out daily: 3 million
Percentage of Americans who say they watch too much TV: 49

2

Approximate number of studies examining TV's effects on children: 4,000
Number of minutes per week that parents spend in meaningful conversation with their children: 3.5
Number of minutes per week that the average child watches television: 1,680
Percentage of day care centers that use TV during a typical day: 70
Percentage of parents who would like to limit their children's TV watching: 73
Percentage of 4-6 year-olds who, when asked to choose between watching TV and spending time with their fathers, preferred television: 54
Hours per year the average American youth spends in school: 900 hours

(Compiled by TV-Free America, 2007)

These statistics have led many families to debate whether or not to have a television set in their household. By not having a television set, they hope to eliminate the direct influence of television on themselves and their children. Even with this effort, however, they cannot seclude themselves completely from the indirect influences of the media. There are still billboards, magazines, and the possibility that friends and family members who do watch television could inform you of something that they have seen. Still, television can be both a good and a bad influence depending on the show, the household environment surrounding the television set, and the viewing habits of the individual.

A young child's viewing habits are actually founded on his or her parents' habits and the parents' level of education. Parents with higher degrees of education tend to run households with more emphasis on reading and less time for watching television. Compared to children of less well-educated parents, children of well-educated parents watched more educational programming and less programming designed for adults. Also, when children are accused of watching too much television, their bad habits can actually be the result of their parents' bad TV-watching habits; therefore, it is possible that the parents can often be the source of "too much television viewing" for their children (Huston & Wright, 1996, p. 51). Still, since the parents usually choose the shows to which their young children will be exposed, they often watch the show together. This coviewing can be worthwhile because the parent is available to monitor the viewed shows, explain different aspects of the show to

the child, or point out different religious beliefs, morals, and values that the show might introduce (Huston & Wright, 1996).

However, as children grow up, parents usually cease watching as many shows with their children, and the children take control of the television. Since it appears that “many television viewing habits are established early, so the experiences of children during the first 5 or 6 years of their lives many indeed have long- term consequences for the ways in which they use the medium” (Huston & Wright, 1996, p. 53-54). Still, not all habits are established in early childhood years; adolescence is another influential period.

Why Adolescents Are Vulnerable to Media Effects

Many advertisers try to focus their advertising specifically on adolescents because adolescents are the easiest age group to influence. Teenagers are viewed as constantly changing. They want to show individuality, yet they want to be in style and fashionable. They continuously buy new products to keep up with different trends and fashions. If advertisers can condition an adolescent to buy their product and like their product, then once the adolescent grows up he or she will be more likely to stay with that product then switch to a new one. It's the same principle as "build good habits now because they will be difficult to change later in life." The **Mere Exposure Effect** assists advertisers in their goal. The effect is a "phenomenon by which repeated exposure to novel stimuli tends to increase an individual's preference for such stimuli" (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007, p. 628). For example, the more ads you see for McDonalds, the more likely you are to visit their locations. This effect is also influential in presidential races or in competing clothing stores because the more you hear a name the more comfortable you are with it.

The successful effectiveness of the Mere Exposure Effect on adolescents can be explained by means of **identity formation**. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development states that the "establishment of a secure identity provides the foundation for the commitments one makes to a personal ideology, occupation, and lifestyle" (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2007, p. 97). Erikson has

characterized adolescence “as the period in the human life cycle during which the individual must establish a *sense of personal identity* and avoid the dangers of *role diffusion* and *identity confusion*” (Muuss, 1988, p. 60). Forming one’s identity is a continuous process. “Identity is fluid, partly situational, and thus constantly under construction, negotiation, and modification. As a process, it is actively constructed as it is expressed – and vice versa” (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001, p. 311). According to Erikson identity achievement means that an adolescent has to sort out his or her strengths and weaknesses, answer where he or she came from, who he or she is at this moment, and who he or she want to become. To find the answers to all of these has to be actively sought; society is not going to just give an identity to an adolescent (Muuss, 1988).

These questions only appear at this point because adolescence marks the period when individuals are capable of abstract thinking. Piaget’s Cognitive Theory of Adolescence states that with abstract thinking “the adolescent can now make hypothetical deductions and entertain the idea of relativity” (Muuss, 1988, p. 187). Piaget’s theory is broken down into several stages. Each stage correlates to a certain age group. Everything builds up to adolescence and the *stage of formal operations*. Formal operations include the ability to use propositional thinking, combinatorial analysis, and abstract reasoning or thinking. Adolescents have become able to generate hypothetical ideas and generalizations on their own and also some means to either prove them or justify them. Basically, it is the ability to think for themselves. Now, adolescents can weigh the consequences of their thoughts and ideas. Still, it is a confusing process. Adolescence is also the period

where adolescents learn from trial and error, by observing, and by conforming to their peer groups or the media (Muuss, 1988).

This way of thinking is just one of the many significant changes in social interaction and behavior at this time (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007, p. 168), and it is difficult to know whom one should listen to, trust, and look toward for guidance. To achieve a secure identity during adolescence teenagers make mistakes and learn from them, and they observe others. The older generations can “no longer provides effective role models to the adolescent” because they cannot relate to the rapidly changing present and the uncertain future (Muuss, 1988, p. 61). Primarily then, adolescents turn towards their peers and still to a small extent, their parents; however, some of the influence comes from the media. This role model position allows advertisers and the media to take hold of this situation and use it to their advantage. What the media exposes an adolescent to daily influences the adolescent’s behavior, personality, and identity.

Adolescents conform to certain standards within their peer groups to gain approval, be included, and be considered “cool”; anything not to be the “outcast” (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007). Teenagers conform to gain this approval by possibly changing their attitudes, hairstyles, and clothing styles- any behaviors to “fit in.” Usually, authority figures in the community- the group of the “cool kids” or the older trendsetters dictate what is “cool.” Conforming to the “expectations of peers helps adolescents find out how certain roles fit them” (Muuss, 1988, p. 61), which helps adolescents develop identities of their own. And, a lot of the time, these trends dictated by peers actually trickle down from the media and celebrities. If

individuals observe a group of teenagers, they can usually see similarities between an adolescent's actions and what the individual has seen on television, in movies, or from celebrities. One example is the recent trend to wear leggings- many female celebrities were wearing them and the fad trickled down to the rest of American society. Many girls, whether it was a good look for them or not, started to wear them too. Or, there was the phase when people quoted Paris Hilton's "That's Hot." More recently, there are the *High School Musical* and *Hannah Montana* fads that have inspired clothing, dolls, and behaviors. Many of my dance students request music from these shows and they know every lyric and corresponding dance moves (yet, I cannot get them to remember my simple dance routines). Although these phases come and go, they do have an impact on culture and daily life. What the media promotes, adolescents are prone to believe.

Conformity propels these fads into American culture. Because adolescents conform to be "cool," conformity is a significant issue in adolescence during identity formation. According to Erikson "as long as the adolescent depends on role models and feedback, the in-group feeling that the peer group provides will remain quite strong... Eventually adolescents must free themselves from this new dependency on peers – which has just replaced their dependency on parents – in order to become themselves – that is, to attain a mature identity" (Muuss, 1988, p. 61). However, it takes a while to reach a mature identity and until an adolescent reaches that point, they are apt to conform to their peers' expectations. **Conformity** is the "change in behavior or belief as the result of real or imagined group pressure"

(Myers, 2008, p. 188). Learning when to conform and when to be different marks a large part of an individual's struggle in identity formation. There are a few different variations of conformity, according to Myers (2008). These include **compliance**, **obedience**, and **acceptance**. These three mark different intensities of conformity, each one provoking a different mindset. Advertisers use them to draw adolescents to their products. Compliance is when someone publicly "accepts" a behavior and engages in it while privately disagreeing with it. When we comply with an explicit command, then it is obedience; this is usually to avoid being hurt or punished. Acceptance is when we genuinely believe and want to exert a certain behavior; we have been persuaded to believe this behavior. Additionally, if the individual internally disagrees with a behavior but outwardly changes his or her behavior to comply, this could cause cognitive dissonance. Potentially, cognitive dissonance could result in the individual's attitude altering to match the exerted behavior, even though he or she did not originally believe in it. It is human nature, however, to want to have one's actions and attitudes agree. When an individual commits an act that his or her attitude does not support, he or she is more likely to change that attitude to match the behavior. This is because it is much easier to change an attitude than to change an already established behavior.

It is also important to consider the power of suggestibility in relation to conformity. For example, Tanya Chartrand and John Bargh investigated social contagion in "the chameleon effect." In one of their experiments they placed a subject in a room with a confederate. This confederate then occasionally rubbed his face or shook his foot in

an attempt to influence the subject to also rub his face or shake his foot. Many of the subjects did end up copying the confederate's behavior, but it was an unconscious action that was committed without any intention to conform to the confederate's behavior (Myers, 2008). The result shows that an individual can be unconsciously influenced. Although this study only had little actions, rubbing a face or shaking a foot, this is evidence that individuals, including adolescents, can be influenced unconsciously. So, if an individual can adhere to a certain behavior without knowing it, how does that affect behaviors on a larger scale?

David Phillips, a sociologist, has studied and confirmed imitative suicidal behavior. He calls imitative suicidal behavior "the Werther effect" after the effects that *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had on young European men. Shortly after its publication in 1774, young European men started "dressing in yellow trousers and blue jackets, as had Goethe's protagonist, a young man named Werther" (Myers, 2008, p. 192). However, these young men went further than just imitating Werther's dress; many of them also committed suicide as Werther did after being rejected by the woman he loved. Phillips has discovered the number of suicides increases after a highly publicized suicide. One example is the month following Marilyn Monroe's suicide on August 6, 1962. During the rest of August there were 200 more suicides in the United States than normal. Phillips also reports that teenagers are the most susceptible to the Werther Effect; a fact that could explain why there are usually clusters of teen suicides. In fact, suicide rates in the United States rise

slightly after fictional suicides on soap operas and after serious dramas that deal with suicide (Myers, 2008).

These young “Werthers,” the men who committed suicide after reading von Goethe’s novel, fell into the potential influence that the book exerted on them, and as a result they died. But, they had to have a motive to imitate this fictional plotline. Factors that influence conformity rates include group cohesion, perceptions that group members are acting independently, group size, familiarity with the certain belief or behavior, self-esteem, and perception about the status of other group members (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007). If the majority group is unanimous and an individual assumes that the group members are all acting independently, then an individual is more likely to conform. This is especially true if there are at least three people in only one group, or three groups of people. If an individual is familiar with or has preconceived notions about the certain behavior, then he or she will be less likely to conform than if they had never thought about the behavior before. Also, if a person has low self-esteem he or she is more likely to conform than a person with higher self-esteem. This is also true if the individual is especially concerned with social relationships than if he or she does not put a large emphasis on them. Researchers have discovered that conformity increases if there are difficult judgments or if individuals feel incompetent. When individuals are insecure about their judgments, and the more insecure they are, the more easily others influence them (Myers, 2008). Lastly, the perceived status of the other group members can be very influential. An individual is more likely to

conform if he or she believes that the other group members are of a higher status than him- or herself.

Although there are all these factors that influence conformity rates, there are two social influences that adolescents usually face as well. The social factors that adolescents typically experience throughout their identity formation are **Normative Social Influence** and **Informational Social Influence**. Normative Social Influence is a “social influence in which we conform not because of an actual change in our beliefs, but because we think we will benefit in some way (such as gaining approval)” (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007, p. 622). Whereas Informational Social Influence is “one basis of conformity in which we accept a group’s beliefs or behaviors as providing accurate information about reality” (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007, p. 622). Both represent ways of conforming that adolescents sometimes rely on to “fit in,” and both could possibly come from the media.

Conformity and Socialization in the Media

The Paramount Pictures movie *Mean Girls* is an excellent example of conformity in high school and includes both normative and informational social influences. Raised in Africa, Cady Heron, the main character in *Mean Girls*, does not know what to expect in an American public school. Essentially she enters into a world of “psychological warfare and unwritten social rules that teenage girls face today” (Varma). Although she makes two true friends at the beginning, Cady is invited to join The Plastics, the most popular clique in school, described as the “school royalty.” Her two friends, Janis and Damien, tell her to go ahead and join so that Cady can then report back with the school’s gossip and the three of them can laugh over it. When Cady begins to fall for Aaron, Regina’s (one of the Plastics) ex-boyfriend, things turn nasty. Now instead of just having a private laugh over what goes on in the The Plastics, the three friends try to sabotage The Plastics. To do this Cady has to continue pretending to be part of the group so she begins to mold her identity into the group’s collective identity, even though at first she does not agree with everything the group stands for (Normative Social Influence). Then, after a while she begins to accept that what The Plastics believe in and the way they act in the school is the “cool thing to do” (Informational Social Influence). She slowly conforms to their social rules because she wants to be cool and fit in. She no longer hangs out with her true friends because they are considered the “social outcasts.” Soon, the “queen bee” of The Plastics is thrown out of the group because she begins to gain weight and wears sweatpants

on Monday, which is “against the rules.” The other Plastics now begin to follow Cady around and she assumes the role of “queen of the Plastics.” Although the movie focuses on the main groups and the characters directly affected by the plot line, there are still inserts of “regular” girls at the high school and the influence that The Plastics have over some of them. For example, one of the wannabe- Plastic girls in the school says: "I saw Cady Heron wearing army pants and flip flops, so I bought army pants and flip flops."

The turning point in the movie results when Cady’s real friends accuse her of actually becoming a Plastic instead of just pretending:

Cady: You know I couldn't invite you [talking about a party at Cady’s house]! I had to pretend to be plastic.

Janis: Hey, buddy, you're not pretending anymore! You're plastic! Cold, shiny, hard plastic!...Did you have an awesome time? Did you drink awesome shooters, and listen to awesome music, and just then sit around and soak up each other’s awesomeness?

Cady: You know that you're the one who made me like this so you could use me for your eighth grade revenge!

Janis: God! See, at least me and Regina George know we're mean! You try to act so like innocent like, Oh, I use to live in Africa with all the little birdies, and the little monkeys...

Cady: You know what? It’s not my fault you’re like in love with me or something...

Janis: See, that's the thing with you Plastics. You think everyone's in love with you, but, in reality, everyone *hates* you, like Aaron Samuels for example! He broke up with Regina and, guess what, he still doesn't want you! So why are you still messing with Regina? I'll tell you why, because you are a mean girl...

(Mean Girls, 2004)

There is also a scene in which Cady goes over to Regina's house. While there, Cady experiences a much different home life than what she has. The mother is trying to act "cool" as well, pretending to be her daughter's best friend. Mrs. George (the mother) says to Cady "there are NO rules in the house. I'm not like a regular mom, I'm a cool mom" (*Mean Girls*, 2004). In the same household the viewer glimpses the girl's younger sister, probably around 8 or 9, who is watching a show obviously aimed at an older audience. The young girl lifts up her shirt to flash everyone, imitating the behavior of the older girl on the television screen. This is an example of how the media can influence adolescents and young children. The mother obviously has no control over what programs her daughters watch; therefore, both girls have a skewed sense of reality that they have adopted from what they see on television.

The ultimate irony in *Mean Girls* is that Cady's parents send her to public school because they want her to be socialized. Neither they nor Cady realized how this high school could affect them. Still, this fictional movie is an excellent example of just how powerful media can be in adolescents' lives, because Cady enters high school as an innocent girl who has not been previously exposed to influences of people like The Plastics or to any media information to the viewer's knowledge. Toward the end of the movie there is an all-junior-girl meeting at the school during which the school administrators try to give all the girls an "attitude makeover." One of the female teachers, Ms. Norbury, asks the girls in this group meeting to close their eyes are then:

Ms. Norbury: Raise your hand if you have ever had a girl say something bad about you behind your back. [Everyone raises their hands then opens their eyes and looks around.]

Ms. Norbury: Raise your hand if you have ever said anything about a friend behind her back. [Everyone raises their hands then opens their eyes and looks around.]

Ms. Norbury: There's been some girl-on-girl crime here.

The sheer number of girls who raised their hands in response to these two questions is fairly sad, but indicative of "girl world." The girls here, however, were given the chance to apologize to their fellow classmates and the class as a whole was reunited. The real peace offering at the end occurs when Cady wins Spring Fling Queen and instead of keeping the crown for herself she breaks the plastic crown (symbolic breaking of the group) and throws out the pieces to all the girls in the audience while complimenting hairdos, dresses, etc (*Mean Girls*, 2004).

Still, these girls have been socialized to act in a certain way. The younger sister draws all her knowledge from a particular television show and possibly others, and also from her sister and The Plastics: the viewer does not know specifically. This family's view of society has led them to believe that this is the way to act; they have been socialized. **Socialization** is a process "by which society conveys behavioral expectations to an individual, through various agents such as parents, peers, and school" and the media (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007, p. 155). Also socialization involves persuasion. **Persuasion** is "the process by which a message induces change in beliefs, attitudes,

or behaviors” (Myers, 2008, p. 224). For adolescents to be socialized, however, they have to be persuaded because “our minds are not just sponges that soak up whatever pours over them. If the message summons favorable thoughts, it persuades us” (Myers, 2008, p. 245).

Persuasion studies have said that the major influence on people is contact with other people and not the media, but the power of the media should not be underestimated. Although people influence people, the ideas and resources come from somewhere and are spread somehow. This “process by which media influences often occurs through opinion leaders, who in turn influence others, is called **two-step flow of communication**. These opinion leaders are usually perceived as experts and could be anyone from scientists to teachers or anyone else who gathers information on their own and passes it on to other individuals. Therefore, the source of all the information, the media, is being passed on to other people whether or not it’s realized. Media penetrates the culture in an indirect way through the two-step flow process. It is also significant in the argument for or against watching television because television’s influence is constant. Even if you do not watch a particular show, you will still be exposed to the influences of the shows because other people will inform you about them. In the cases of the parents who do not allow their children to watch television, the children will still be exposed to television or ideas about television through their friends. They will know who the characters are and they will still want television related action figures and stuffed animals (Myers, 2008).

The Negative and Positive Effects of Media

Television as a form of media is neither a good nor a bad thing for adolescents. It can be creative and stimulating or it can be boring and stereotypical. Still, the public tends to rely on the television to inform them about the events and news around them. A study done by Walma van der Molen and van der Voort (1997) compares whether children remembered print or television news information better. The study supports that children remember news presented to them on television more than news that they read in a newspaper. Still, it is important to remember that the effects of television shows depend on the content of the show. Studies have shown that the content of the show affects viewers more than the quantity of television they watch.

The possible content of a television show could have an emphasis on physical attractiveness and the importance of “looking good.” This message of “looking good” is propelled by the media not just in the images on the television or movie screen, but also in magazines and on billboards. Advertisers try to manipulate individuals into thinking that they would feel better and more satisfied about their physical appearance if they have a certain product or that they are only “in fashion” if they had a particular pair of jeans and shoes. Advertising sets people up to feel dissatisfied with their present situation in order for them to want to buy their products. And to do this advertisers show us beautiful models wearing the latest trends and looking so happy in their cool lifestyle (Laboucan, Duncan, & Thompson, 2008).

Researchers are concerned about the effects that advertisements have on adolescents, both male and female, because of the large emphasis on physical attractiveness. Advertisements show images of very thin, attractive models and adolescents are drawn to reproduce these seemingly desired traits. The media has now dictated the “perfect” body images for men and women: Men are supposed to have rugged good looks and be fit and muscular, while women are supposed to be ultra-thin. In one study 69% of girls “said that magazine models influence their idea of the perfect body shape” (Healthy Place, 2000, p. 1). The movie *Mean Girls* even tries to make this fact into a funny joke. When two of the Plastics are talking about how hard it is to be a female in this world, they end up using negative body image as the reason that it is difficult to be a female in the United States and England:

Gretchen: And even in fancy countries like the United States and England, seven out of ten girls have a negative body image.

Regina George: Who cares? Six of those girls are right!

(*Mean Girls*, 2004)

There is also a scene in the movie in which Regina is trying on a dress in a store named “Store 1-3-5.” The store name comes from juniors clothing sizes with 1, 3, and 5 being very skinny. When Regina can’t zip up the back of her size 5 dress the store clerk says, “try Sears or something” for a larger size.

In 1996 the international ad agency Saatchi and Saatchi conducted a poll that discovered that “ads made women fear being unattractive or old” (Healthy Place, 2000, p.1). *Teen People* magazine

conducted a survey that found that “27% of the girls felt that the media pressures them to have a perfect body”

(Healthy Place, 2000, p. 1). Some researchers have speculated that action figures have increased the expectation for boys and men to be muscular. These thoughts are very similar to the accusations against Barbie® dolls and the unrealistic ideals that Barbie represents. For adolescents imitating these “desired appearances,” they are exposing themselves to dieting, anxiety, anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders (Healthy Place, 2000).

On a positive note, media has done a lot to broaden the world for adolescents. Television is used both as an educational resource and as a leisure activity. Adolescents who watched informative, educational shows as a preschooler continue to watch more informative shows as adolescents. Likewise, adolescents who watched more entertainment-type shows as children continued to watch those shows and watched fewer informative shows than their peers. These individuals used television as a source of leisure (Huston & Wright, 1996). In a study with high schoolers, “researchers found that viewing educational television programs as pre-schoolers was associated with higher grades, more reading, less aggression and more value placed on academics when those children reached high school” (National Institute on Media and the Family, 2002). Again, those who watched “Sesame Street” or “Blues Clues” as a child tend to place more value on achievement, higher grades, and are more artistic and creative than fellow students who did not watch these programs (Christakis, 2007).

Our society, through the media, could “provide children [and adolescents] with effective positive models of race, gender and intergroup interaction” (Graves, 2001, p. 61). Television can assist people in learning how to work, live, and play with people of other ethnicities, religions, races, genders, and classes. Although we are now in the 21st century, we still need a source to help us coexist with people who differ from us. Television and other media forms could be a great potential advocate for this. The key is to make television a tool in this process.

The media also unites people. Whether it is a family coming together to watch a show in the living room, or friends pouring over magazines and critiquing the different images and articles together, or friends watching movies together. All these events can encourage friendship and togetherness, another important aspect of growing up and forming one’s identity.

Social Learning Theory and Observational Learning

Using **Social Learning Theory**, a theory that emphasizes the role of observation in learning, we can explain the infiltration of the media into our lives and especially the lives of adolescents. Social Learning Theory focuses on the relationship between environmental and social factors and behavior. This means that there are copious amounts of variables between individuals including age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, and available role models (Muuss, 1988). Even with these differences, adolescents still all look toward others for help, advice, or encouragement. As a result adolescents observe and imitate peers, elders, and the media.

When we are younger we mostly model our parents and our teachers since they are the most prominent figures in our daily lives. With the onset of adolescence, however, teens stray away from looking at their parents or teachers as models and turn towards their friends and peers. For children adults are the more powerful models who hold more prestige, intellect, and have control over the rewards. Adolescents, however, are in this transitional stage where although they are not children nor are they quite adults, they have figured out a lot about what it means to be an adult. Basically the “tricks” that can convince a child that an adult is incredibly intelligent and should be listened to will not necessarily work on an adolescent all the time. Plus, for a child the parent or other adult models are the dispensers of rewards, but an adolescent’s peers now control the rewards for certain behaviors and actions. This transfer of who holds the rewards

is very important because now adolescents are inclined to imitate each other, reinforce each other, and dictate how their social community is going to act. Also, even though adolescents turn towards their peers they also imitate, model, and observe “Entertainment heroes,” such as fictional characters and actors and actresses (Muuss, 1988).

Connected to social learning theory, **Observational learning**, or modeling, tells us that much of our learning comes from watching or listening to others. The knowledge of the actions and ideas that we see other people exert is stored in our memories, available to imitate if and when we encounter the right situation. In fact, “the process of acquisition can be considerably shortened by the provision of social models” (Bandura, 1963, p. 3) instead of reading or hearing about a behavior.

For example, I remember a time when my family was going to visit my dad’s friend and his family. My brother and I were less than thrilled that we were about to spend our weekend with three young children, even if we were only 13 and 15 ourselves. Before we left, our dad told us to “dress appropriately” and then to “act appropriately” in front of this family. I distinctly remember my brother and I giving him this “are you kidding me” kind of look- appalled that our father would criticize our clothes and because we did not see why our attire mattered. So, after minimal amounts of protesting, I put on a sweater – it looked like I was wearing a T-shirt over a long sleeve shirt – and jeans, got in the car, plugged myself into my CD Player, and off we went.

A few hours later I was playing with three-year-old twins and their four-year-old brother. Of course, the two boys were much more interested in playing with my brother, but the girl was following me around like my shadow. While we were playing she somehow dirtied her clothes so she had to change. Off she went to her room, and when she came back it was as if I was looking in a mirror. Although she had previously been wearing a dress, she had changed into jeans and had managed to fit a T-shirt over her long sleeve shirt to imitate my attire. Her new look had nothing to do with the fact that I could be a good role model or that this look could possibly be stylish. It was just that I was an older girl and she wanted to act older, so she was imitating the nearest example – me.

Although she is not an adolescent, nor am I an “entertainment hero,” this example illustrates Albert Bandura’s **proposed four significant stages in observational learning**. According to Bandura, an individual must go through four stages to learn by observation, or in other words, to reinforce imitation. The first stage is simply that an individual’s attention must be attracted to whomever or whatever is modeling a specific behavior. In this instance, the girl was attracted to me and the behavior I was exhibiting as well as my appearance, because I was an older girl. Her desire to act older is her motive to remember my behavior and appearance. Therefore she retains a mental representation of my appearance, passing stage two of Bandura’s observational learning (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007). There are two representational systems in observational learning – imaginal and verbal – which assist in retrieval and reproduction of the modeled behavior. The first, imaginal formation, occurs during

exposure when a modeled stimuli elicits a perceptual response that links the two thoughts together. The second representational system involves verbal coding. Verbal coding assists the retention of information in observational learning because verbal instruction is more easily acquired, retained, and reproduced than images. When verbal is associated with imagery, however, observers are more likely to remember the image or behavior (Bandura, 1972).

The next stage in Bandura's observational learning, stage three, specifies that a situation must arise to trigger the remembered observation. If you recall, she soiled the outfit she was wearing and had to change clothes. Therefore, the perfect opportunity arose for her to display her newfound behavior. However, there is one more critical stage that she has to go through; she has to be reinforced to display this behavior again. If she is not, then it is unlikely that she will risk wearing this outfit again. But if she receives a compliment, or even just a comment, about her outfit, then this behavior has been reinforced and she will put it into her repertoire ready to pull out again (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007).

Models exist in all cultures. Through these models, children, adolescents, and adults alike learn "socially sanctioned behavior patterns" (Bandura, 1963, p. 47). In some cultures all adult behaviors are learned through imitation and without any explanation. For example, in a Cantelense subculture of Guatemala, the young girls are presented with a water jar, a broom, and a grinding stone, all miniature versions of those tools used by their mothers. Then, completely through observation and imitation these young girls acquire the sex-appropriate behaviors. Young Cantalense boys go

through similar rituals to learn their fathers' occupational activity by use of miniature adult tools (Bandura, 1963).

In the United States, parents provide their children with toys that could be miniature representations of adult appliances. Usually, in our culture, a daughter is provided with a kitchen set, an Easy Bake® oven, a baby carriage – toys that will foster imitative female adult-role behavior. Boys usually do not have direct occupational toys, but rather toys that are indicative of male occupations in general, such as trucks and building materials (Bandura, 1963). Parents, however, are “in danger of becoming relatively less influential as role models” (Bandura, 1963, p. 49) because symbolic models are increasingly becoming more influential in their children's lives. These symbolic models are presented orally, in written form, pictorially, or through a combination of both audio and image. Television and other media forms, therefore, fit this description as influential sources that displace some of the parents' status as a child's role model.

It is important to remember, however, that just because a certain behavior is modeled does not mean that the observer will imitate it. It depends on the reinforcement schedule and also on individual differences. For example, “imitative behavior is more readily elicited in high-dependent than in low-dependent children” (Bandura, 1963, p. 10). Basically, those children who need to imitate others' behaviors do so either because they have experienced failure or they are just more susceptible to social influence. The sex of the model and the sex of the child are also influential to the extent that a child will imitate the modeled behavior (Bandura, 1963). Usually, if a

female models a certain behavior then a female child is more attracted to her, whereas a male child will be more attracted to a man modeling a certain behavior. Still, these gender stereotypes do not always hold depending on the individual modeling the behavior. The social status of the model also affects the degree of influence. The more prestige people are perceived to have, the more likely they will be imitated.

Even so, people do not always act on the behaviors that they see modeled. It does depend on the previously discussed factors, which include how dependent an individual is, the sex of the model, and the social status of the model. The following example illustrates a common learned behavior that is not usually acted upon:

There are thousands of product categories advertised on television, one of which is cosmetics. There are many different brands all competing for your interest and your patronage. While these ads are usually directed toward the female audience, this does not mean that men can automatically block out seeing and hearing the advertisements. Instead, they usually watch while waiting for the intended program to resume. So, just because a man has seen these advertisements does not automatically mean that he is going to try the newest brand of mascara on the market. This is for several reasons. One is that he is a man and we, as a society, have deemed it socially unacceptable for men to wear mascara. Also, he has not received any reinforcement for wearing mascara, partly due to the first reason. If, by chance, he does risk wearing mascara, he will most likely receive punishment, therefore eliminating the desire to wear mascara again.

Now, there are always exceptions, but for the most part, this is a fairly good example of a learned behavior attributable to the media that is not acted upon. A man could go through all four stages of Bandura's Observational Learning, yet if he received punishment the probability that he will repeat the behavior diminishes significantly.

Social Cognitive Theory and Media Reinforcement

After Bandura developed the Social Learning Theory, he realized that there was another step in the learning process: the individual's self-beliefs. With this element in mind, Bandura developed the **Social Cognitive Theory**. In 1986 Bandura published *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, which promotes a theoretical perspective in which "human functioning is viewed as the product of dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences" (Pajares, 2002, p. 1). This theory recognizes that it is not just environmental factors that influence an individual's every move, but that the individual proactively engages in the behaviors, actions, and thoughts that they desire: "People are viewed as self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting and self regulating rather than as reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by environmental forces or driven by concealed inner impulses" (Pajares, 2002, p 1). Unlike other theories that overemphasize the role that environmental factors play in learning, Bandura believes that introspection is very important in the explanation of human development. It is necessary to understand an individual's thought processes to predict how environmental factors will affect this individual. Thus "individuals are viewed both as products and as producers of their own environments..." (Pajares, 2002, p. 2).

Still, part of Social Cognitive Theory is the understanding that individuals are instilled with certain abilities that assist them in

determining their own environments. These abilities are the capacity to symbolize, the use of forethought, vicarious learning, self-regulatory mechanisms and self-reflection. One of these abilities, **vicarious learning** highlights the role of observing others in learning and connects back to the concept of Observational Learning. Another set of abilities, **self-regulatory mechanisms**, gives individuals the knowledge and control to self-direct their behavior. It is this ability that lays the foundation that allows the individual to act upon this newly acquired behavior or to reject it (Pajares, 2002).

There are still more factors that influence whether an individual is likely to exhibit this new behavior or not. The reinforcement that an individual receives is very important. **Reinforcement** is defined as “a stimulus whose delivery following a response leads to an increase in either the frequency or probability of that response” (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007, p. 289). There is positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement in operant conditioning. In order to elicit a certain behavior after the stimulus is presented we would use **positive reinforcement** to increase the probability of the desired response. Or, if we wish to elicit the behavior more often when a stimulus is removed following the behavior, we would use **negative reinforcement** (Ettinger & Hofmann, 2007).

An article in the *Boston Globe* addresses the issue of reinforcing certain habits in teenagers – especially when the media reinforces these habits. This particular article, titled “Would Hannah Montana Wear It?” ties in with media icon Miley Cyrus (Hannah Montana), and is concerned with the launch of several loungewear stores aimed at college students. The concern with them is that they attract not only

young women but also teen and preteen interest. The stores, although they say they are aiming for college students know that their products also appeal to the younger audiences. These stores are specifically designed for the younger audience and they provide a “parent-free shopping place,” perfect for those individualistic teenagers.

According to Todd D. Slater, a retail consumer analyst and managing director at Lazard Ltd., teens prefer these new loungewear stores and not department stores because “their parents shop (at department stores). They don’t want to be in a dressing room next to a 40-year-old mother” (Ryan, 2008, p. D5). There is another larger influence, however, involved with the success of these stores – popular culture. These loungewear stores are marketing exactly what girls see celebrities wearing. “When girls see pop star Miley Cyrus [Hannah Montana] pictured in a lacy camisole, or “High School Musical” star Ashley Tisdale gyrating in a mini skirt for a sneaker ad, they want the look, too” (Ryan, 2008, p. D5).

While the *Boston Globe* article concentrates only on clothing choices, this same principle can be applied to other issues. When an individual is looking to others as models, several problems may arise if the individual is “modeling the behavior of peers who may be no more knowledgeable, intelligent, mature, and wise than the individual himself is” (Muuss, 1988, p. 283). This is why it is important for adolescents and their parents to realize what they are exposing themselves to by watching television. The medium is a “double-edged sword. If wielded positively, television [and other media sources] could go a long way toward fixing problems stemming from other sources” (RAND, 2008, p. 3). One such problem

is the exposure to sexual behavior on television. Although viewers usually think that anything in a television show that makes reference to sex or sexually provocative behavior is bad, it could possibly be a positive influence on adolescents. For example, one study asked a group of adolescents who regularly watched *Friends* about an episode focusing on the pregnancy of one of the characters, even though that character had used a condom during sexual intercourse. The episode contained information about condom-efficacy rates and the study asked the adolescents if they remembered that information. Most of them did recall the information and some of them had even discussed condom effectiveness with an adult. Still, other studies have shown that viewing television shows with sexual content, actual depictions, and sexual talk hastened the initiation of sexual behavior in teens (RAND, 2008). Again, proving that if the “double-edged sword” is wielded negatively, then those problems stemming from other sources could possibly worsen.

Conclusion

When I tell people the topic of my senior thesis, many have exclaimed, “Why are you writing on that?!” in a tone that suggests that the influence of the media is discredited in their minds. Whether they know it exists and just think it is too obvious to write about, or they do not believe that the media affects their life, is confined to their minds. Personally, I believe that people, children and adolescents especially, recognize that media is a large influence only in hindsight. After they buy a certain article of clothing or listen to certain music genres, they might think about why they performed this behavior. It is possible that they bought a pair of jeans because they liked them and nothing else influenced that act, but by just buying jeans they are conforming to society. And, maybe it is “uncool” to listen to country music because your peer group does not like it. But, does an individual recognize what is happening at that moment, or only as he or she is rethinking the event afterward? There are cases of both, but predominantly he or she will only think about it, if at all, in hindsight.

This is because media has infiltrated the culture so thoroughly. The two-step flow of communication is a great estimation of how much the media has become part of our daily lives. Recall that the two-step flow process is when the media influences opinion leaders who then influence other people. In this fashion, the media is indirectly influencing the people imitating the opinion leaders; these individuals might not even realize that the media is involved in the behavior at all. Still, since these people are imitating the opinion

leaders, they are implementing Social Learning Theory and Observational Learning. They will only imitate the behavior, however, if they have been persuaded or socialized. Or, if they conform, comply, accept, or obey. And, even if they imitate the behavior once, for an individual to continue imitating a behavior he or she has to be reinforced. The media can be a trendsetter, an adolescent begins to copy a behavior viewed on television for example, and a trend reinforcer, an adolescent, although his or her friends already might act out a certain behavior, now sees it on television, which is reinforcement enough to start or continue with this behavior. In either case, adolescents follow the media as a common point to relate to others their age. Media is one role model in an adolescent's identity formation.

Adolescents have a tendency to conform because they do not have a sure sense of their identities. Therefore, an individual will attach him- or herself to a peer group that, as a group, can dictate what is acceptable or not. He or she will go through either normative social influence or informational social influence or both at some point during his or her identity formation. Where this peer group acquires the guidelines for what is deemed acceptable, however, could be the media.

Now we have returned to the beginning of the "media circle," so to speak. Adolescents are vulnerable to the media's influence. Advertisers use techniques such as the mere exposure effect just to try to influence adolescents. With the media consistently displaying different ideals for "the perfect body" or expectations about different ways of life, adolescents have a lot of pressure in their lives. We must

remember, however, that the media does have positive aspects as well. Some television shows can encourage creativity and improves cognitive abilities. Informational, or educational, shows provide adolescents with a visual way of learning. Also, importantly, television is a leisure activity. When watched in moderation and appropriately, television shows can be a stress relieving activity, just something to relax with or to unite friends and family.

Being aware that the media is the first conscious step towards preventing the media from blindly influencing you. Media consciousness will help guard yourself against becoming someone that you are not, all because something in the media told you that who you were was not acceptable.

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