



Boys, Girls, and Media Messages in a Digital World

A Common Sense Media White Paper

I. Gender Stereotypes in Media: What's the Issue?

In today's 24/7 media world, girls and boys are inundated with messages about how they should look and act. These messages surface not only through mainstream media and popular culture, but also increasingly through kids' peer-to-peer interactions online. A few decades ago, only a handful of movie studios and TV networks created most of the video that Americans watched. Nowadays, anyone with a smartphone can create and share video within a matter of minutes. Today's kids are no longer passive media *consumers*. Many are also active media *creators*, with the ability to post content around the clock.

Media messages play a powerful role in shaping gender norms, and the shift toward social media means that kids can easily access, create, interact with, and share media messages about boys' and girls' roles. These developments present both pitfalls and opportunities, allowing kids to:

- reflect back to the world the gender stereotypes they've been exposed to;
- encounter more extreme, unfettered attitudes about gender roles; but also,
- create positive community norms that encourage gender equity and respect.

The deeper that media messages about boys and girls are embedded in young people's social media lives, the more important it becomes to teach them how to recognize and curb gender biases. Adult mentors are uniquely positioned to have meaningful conversations with kids about media messages, as well as empower them to challenge harmful stereotypes.

Kids come across gender stereotypes in all types of media – advertisements, magazines, movies, music, TV shows, video games, and, more than ever, the digital content that they create and share with peers online.



90% of 13- to 17-year-olds have used some form of social media.

Common Sense Media (2012). *Social Media, Social Life: How Teens View Their Digital Lives*. San Francisco, CA.



Male characters outnumber female characters 3 to 1 in family films, even though women comprise over 50% of the U.S. population. This ratio, as seen in family films, is the same as it was in 1946.

The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media (2012). Gender Roles & Occupations: A Look at Character Attributes and Job-Related Aspirations in Film and Television.

II. What's at Stake?

Perpetuating gender stereotypes

Research shows that gender biases continue to exist in the mainstream media that kids consume and that, in some cases, these biases haven't improved since the 1940s.ⁱ Studies also show that stereotyped messages about boys and girls in traditional media — television, movies, magazines, music lyrics and videos, advertising, video games — can, over time, influence kids to adopt similar, narrow perceptions of social roles.ⁱⁱ

Kids who don't think critically about gender stereotypes can be misinformed about how the world perceives them and what they can grow up to be.

86% of teen girls in a national survey by the Girl Scout Research Institute agreed that reality TV shows “often pit girls against each other to make the shows more exciting.”

The Girl Scout Research Institute (2011). *Real to Me: Girls and Reality TV*.

The gender codes that girls and boys experience in online communities powerfully inform their sense of what’s normal. This influences how kids and teens develop their identities, express themselves, and socialize.

For girls, media messages still focus on the importance of beauty rather than brains.

Mainstream media often:

- celebrates women who are thin and fashionable and disparages those who do not fit such standards,
- treats women and girls as sexual objects, starting at a very early age,
- portrays women as dramatic, catty, and manipulative.

Stereotypes about boys can be more nuanced, but some messages are loud and clear. Mainstream media often:

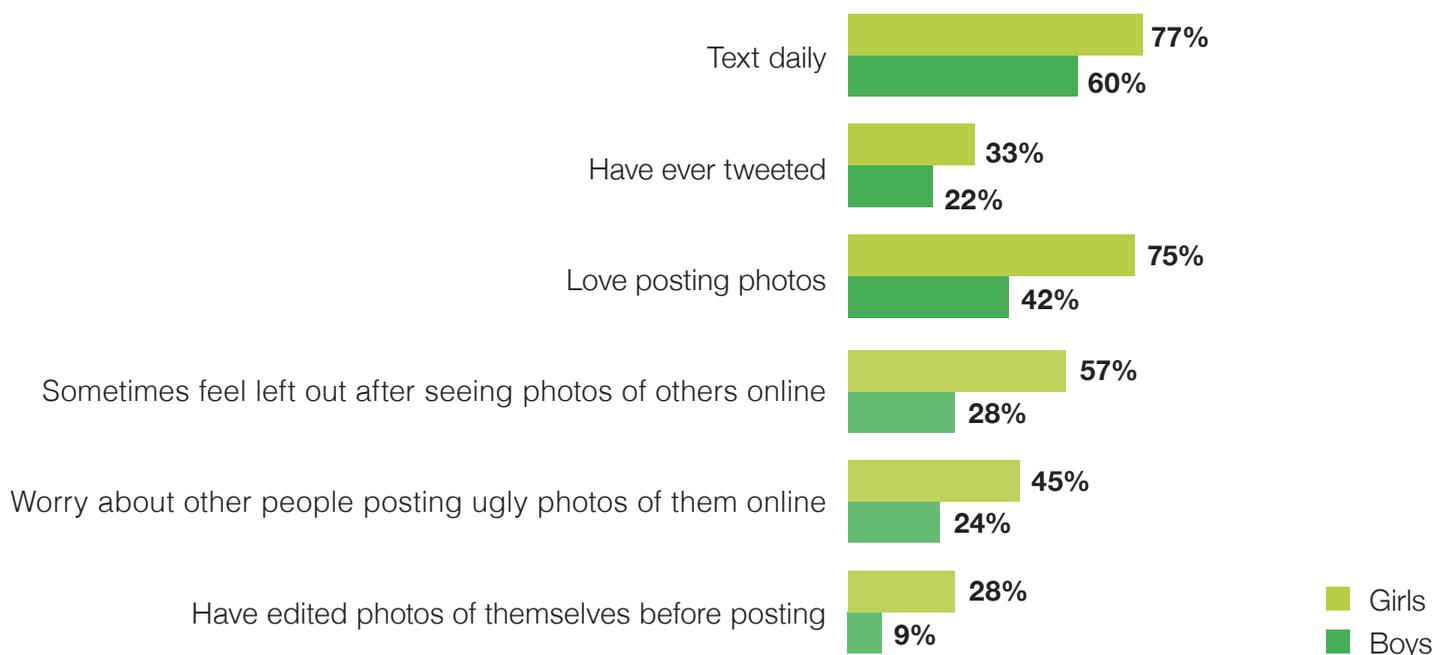
- idealizes the “buff and toned” male body,
- stigmatizes boys who display emotion rather than bravado,
- depicts boys who act recklessly, even at the expense of others, as cool and adventurous.

As media consumers and creators, kids and teens may mirror these kinds of gender stereotypes (and more) in the digital world – while taking photos, posting comments, texting, or crafting their online image. When kids are exposed to rigid ideas about boys’ and girls’ roles through their peers – both online and offline – it can be difficult to convince them to not adopt those ideas.

Researchers are just beginning to tap into the social, emotional, and developmental implications of teens’ digital lives. Most kids begin engaging regularly with cell phones and social network sites during early adolescence – a time when they also become increasingly preoccupied with image and friendship. Through social and mobile media, teens provide one another with instant and impactful feedback on their appearance and self-expression. And while this level of connecting, sharing, and networking can be enriching for teens on many levels, the price of Internet fame can be great, especially regarding gender. Many teens will post comments, “like” photos, and tag friends with an online audience in mind, which can magnify feelings of judgment and popularity. Thus, the pressure that girls face to look good or even “sexy” online can get magnified, and the pressure that boys face to look and act “like a man” can increase, too. For kids and teens of color, the nature of these social pressures is far less understood and likely even more complex.



More teen girls text daily than boys. In the daily Twitterverse, there are also more girls than boys, and when it comes to photo posting, it's especially a girl thing ... but not always a *good* thing.



Common Sense Media (2012). Social Media, Social Life: How Teens View Their Digital Lives. San Francisco, CA.

Encountering the extreme

Gender norms play a key role in shaping issues such as online hate speech, digital drama, cyberbullying, and sexting. Quite often, these issues are rooted in social attitudes, not in the technology itself. Girls especially face double standards in the digital world. For example, it's not uncommon for accomplished female bloggers and journalists – especially those who write about politics, current events, sexism, and feminism – to receive denigrating comments from users like, “make me a sandwich.”ⁱⁱⁱ Online misogyny also takes the form of Internet memes and social network site fan pages about rape, domestic violence, and “slut-shaming.”^{iv} No matter how lighthearted the intentions behind these remarks, they have the potential to disempower and silence women of all ages – perhaps even more so than the sexism we see in traditional media.

Because the Internet makes things more transparent and people can post anonymously, kids may come across extreme messages about gender roles that they may not be exposed to in their everyday lives.

Media creators can combat gender biases

Our media-saturated culture may bombard kids with messages about gender roles, but it also gives kids fodder to speak their minds, share their stories, establish meaningful and supportive relationships, and discuss community norms. Thanks to the Internet, kids and teens can discover role models who are not represented in mainstream media – ones who challenge the status quo. They can make an effort to not perpetuate gender stereotypes in the videos, images, comments, and messages that they share. They can actively promote cultures of kindness, empathy, and respect in their online communities. And they can leverage the power of social media to develop their own positive media messages – through campaigns, articles, videos, images, and more. In order to learn how to be responsible and respectful digital media users, young teens must also develop an awareness of the unspoken rules, assumptions, and stereotypes that can inform their behavior.

To be responsible digital citizens, kids and teens need to crack the gender code and think critically about social attitudes that can fuel issues such as digital drama, cyberbullying, and sexting.





Recommended action

The fight against negative and limiting gender stereotypes in traditional and digital media is important, and the solution is to work together.

Parents can ...

- Help kids choose age-appropriate media that reflects their family's values, and keep an eye out for teachable moments to spark family discussions about gender stereotypes.
- Encourage kids to clarify the motivations behind what they post on social network sites and blogs, such as why they are sharing a sexy picture or why they only want to portray themselves in a certain light. In doing so, parents can help kids develop a motivation that comes from themselves (internal) rather than what they think makes them attractive to others (external).
- Place value on things beyond people's appearances and superficial qualities; help kids develop appreciation for positive actions, experiences, and interactions (versus "pretty pictures").

Adult mentors are well positioned to help young teens develop lifelong media literacy skills — ones that will discourage them from perpetuating harmful attitudes about gender roles.

Educators can ...

- Create opportunities for students to develop media literacy and digital citizenship skills.
- Spark meaningful class discussions about social norms and gender stereotypes online: where they come from, how we learn them, and how they can shape the media we consume and create.
- Encourage a community approach, and empower parents to continue lessons about gender stereotypes and media messages at home.

Media companies can ...

- Improve representation and diversity of girls and women on screen and in other media formats.
- Increase the number of female executives, creators, and decision makers in the media and technology industries.
- Present female and male characters and role models in ways that demonstrate equality, intelligence and mutual respect.

Policymakers can ...

- Support media literacy and digital citizenship education in both formal and informal learning environments.
- Raise awareness and support discussion of gender and media issues through a national public awareness and education campaign and grassroots action.
- Urge media and technology industry leaders to improve role models and media environments for girls and boys.

Teens can ...

- Monitor their “body talk” online, and make an effort to highlight people’s values and accomplishments, rather than the way they look.
- Challenge attitudes – online or offline – that perpetuate gender stereotypes, biases, and double standards.
- Discover and support positive role models online, as well as harness the power of social media to serve as role models themselves.



Endnotes

- i Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., Prescott, A., Pieper, K. (2012). Gender Roles & Occupations: A Look at Character Attributes and Job-Related Aspirations in Film and Television. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media. Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, University of Southern California.
- ii Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1994). Growing up with television: The cultivation perspective. As cited in American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2010). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>
- iii Marwick, A., Lewis, H. (2012, August 7). E-Patriarchy. The Stream. Al Jazeera English. Interview.
- iv Chemaly, S. (2012, September 26). The 12-Year-Old Slut Meme and Facebook's Misogyny Problem. Huff Post Media. The Huffington Post.

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