

# What Preteen Girls Learn About Gender Roles From Celebrities\*

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A face-to-face qualitative interview study was conducted to examine the perceived gender roles and gender identities among 10 to 12 years old girls in Hong Kong. Sixteen girls aged 10 to 12 were asked to take pictures from the media they consumed that illustrated “What girls or women should or should not be; and what girls or women should or should not do”. Analysis of interviews and images captured found that celebrities and characters in popular media play a significant role in socializing preadolescent girls on gender roles and gender identity formation. Celebrities and media characters that caught the interviewees’ attention were mainly female adult entertainers and media characters. Girls showed admiration of specific talents and personalities of the celebrities and media characters. They paid much attention to the private lives of the celebrities. They learned from celebrities and media characters that certain behaviors were not acceptable in the social arena.

*Keywords:* media images, socializing agents, preadolescent, qualitative method

## Introduction

Tweens is a subteen consumer segment (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; Siegel, Coffey, & Livingston, 2004). The segment is defined by age, and the concept is based on the idea that these children are “in-between” childhood and teen-hood (Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Siegel et al., 2004). In the present paper, we focus on the 10-12 years old girls. This phase of life is of particular interest because of the salience of sexuality during the period among the young people themselves, as well as the adults who may impose advisory and disciplinary practices on them (Ho & Tsang, 2002). Tweens are also considered to be powerful influencers of their parents’ consumption as well as consumers with a considerable direct consumption of their own (Andersen, Tufte, Rasmussen, & Chan, 2008). Lindstrom (2004) proposed that the global direct and indirect tweens’ consumption was no less than 1.18 trillion U.S. dollars in 2003.

Young people, and particularly young women, adolescent girls and tween girls are exposed to messages that tell them how they should act, how they should look, who they should idolize and the limits of their aspirations. A qualitative study of U.S. adolescent girls using participant observation and personal interview found that interviewees demonstrate intense interest in popular culture. They often discussed media contents of television, consumer magazines, and movies (Durham, 1999). These girls often use mass media to reconstruct the dominant ideology of femininity, such as emphasis of physical appearance, aspiration of getting married and child-bearing, as well as rejection of homosexuality (Durham, 1999). Media learning research, including Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1986) and Gerbner and his colleagues’ Cultivation Theory (1994), suggests that media messages have an effect on the individual’s sense of self and behavior (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, &

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Signorelli, 1994). Using a qualitative interview methodology, the current study identifies how social learning of gender roles and identities occurs in the Hong Kong.

## **Literature Review**

### **Gender and Gender Equality**

While sex is a biological phenomenon, gender is a psychological and social phenomenon that describes the cultural associations and expectations relating to one's biological sex (Rice & Dolgin, 2005). Sex differentiation takes place as children gradually learn to be masculine or feminine according to culturally established gender identification expectations and their interpretation of them (Trepanier-Street, Romatowski, & McNair, 1990). Gender roles refer to the behaviors in which men and women are expected to engage (Rice & Dolgin, 2005). According to the social learning theory, a child learns sex-appropriate behaviors through a combination of reward, punishment, direct instruction, and modeling (Bandura, 1986).

As a former British colony, Hong Kong has laws protecting women from gender bias in terms of education, employment and pay package (Chan, 2000). Hong Kong provides nine-year free education to all children, both males and females, between the ages of six and fifteen. The proportion of females with tertiary education is similar to that of males (Census and Statistics Department, 2009). Because of improvements in education, economic development, and the influence of the Western feminist movement, the status of women in Hong Kong has achieved significant improvement in the last two decades (Lee & Collins, 2008). Hong Kong is compatible with many western societies in terms of social economical development and availability of education for women. The female labor participation rate for Hong Kong is 53% (Census and Statistics Department, 2009), which compares to 56% in the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

As a Chinese society, Hong Kong is influenced by the Chinese paternal oriented culture that discourages gender equality. Confucianism influences a majority of the population. Chinese culture accords greater esteem, privilege, and status to males and there are more restrictive prescriptions for the roles of women. Women are expected to submerge their individuality to the orders of the male members of the family. The virtues for a woman are defined narrowly in her role as wife and mother (Cheung, 1996).

### **Young People and Celebrities**

Advertisers and retailers often employ media celebrities as spokespersons for products and services that target young people. This is because young people often form secondary attachments to media figures in addition to relations with family and peers. These attachments facilitate adolescents' transition to adulthood and the formation of a mature adult identity (Erikson, 1968). Caughey (1984; 1985) found that young admirers consider a celebrity idol as their idealized self-image. Admirers wanted to develop or refine personality traits that were similar to those of their idols. Young people reported that they wanted to change their physical appearance, abilities, values and attitudes in order to imitate those of their idols (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Caughey (1985) concluded that people's "imaginary" relationships with media figures will shape both their own self-identities and their subjective evaluation of self-worth.

McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002) proposed that consumers' relationship with media celebrities can be classified into three types, namely entertainment social, intense personal, and borderline pathological. A survey found that young people who reported that they shared a bond with their idols (all of whom were media figures) were more likely to attribute a role to their idols in guiding their choice of identity and shaping their

feelings of self-worth (Boon & Lomore, 2001).

Because of the booming pop music and film industries, Hong Kong enjoys an ever-changing list of popular singers and movie stars (Chan, Cheung, Lee, Leung, & Liu, 1998; Leung, 1999). These popular idols are admired by young people for ostensibly being wealthy, beautiful, young and hedonistic. Nearly all the major newspapers in Hong Kong devote two to three pages to international and local celebrity gossip every day. *Next* magazine, a weekly magazine with readership of 530,000, publishes a celebrity gossip supplement every week with over 100 pages of articles and advertisements. A content analysis of television advertisements for products target at young consumers found that 40 percent of the sample advertisements featured celebrities (Chan, 2010). Idol worship is common among young people in Hong Kong. A survey of 2,000 secondary school students found that close to 70 percent claimed to have at least one idol. Popular singers and movie stars were typical favorites (So & Chan, 1992). Listening to popular music is a major form of entertainment for young people, and pop music singers are often idolized (Wong & Ma, 1997). A survey of high school and university students in Hong Kong found that the respondents favor to those celebrities who are talented, attractive-looking, powerful, and extraordinary (Yue & Cheung, 2000). According to Yue (2007), idol worship and model learning both involve admiration and identification. However, idol worship is characterized by person-focused admiration and idol mystification, while model learning is characterized by attributes-focused admiration and model identification. Idol worship leads to an idolization model demonstrated by romantic attachment, high monetary and time investment, feelings of low self efficacy, illusory romance, vainglory and confusion of self-identity. Model learning leads to an actualization model illustrated by identification, low monetary and time investment, feeling of self efficacy, self inspiration, personal growth and identity achievement (Yue, 2007). A survey of 631 young people aged 15 to 24 in Hong Kong found that imitation of celebrity models was moderate to low with a score of 2.4 on a five-point scale (Chan & Prendergast, 2008).

Celebrities play a major role in young consumers' development of self identity. Young people demonstrate empathy and interest in celebrities' social lives. Most of the studies reviewed above involve teenagers and young adults. There is a lack of study on celebrities and gender roles among a younger age segment. A study of young girls and celebrities enables us to understand how celebrities play a role in gender role formation. The media socialization process is important for parents and educators to help young girls to adopt nonstereotypical gender roles and facilitate girls to explore their full potentials.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative interview methodology was adopted. Data for the study were collected in March 2009. Altogether 16 interviewees were recruited through social network. Ten interviewees were studying at local Chinese speaking schools and the remaining six interviewees were studying at international schools that use English as the medium of instruction. Two interviewees were Caucasians and the remaining were Chinese. All interviewees were asked to take seven to ten digital photographs each day for one week. The instruction is "Please take images from any media that are about *what girls or women should be or should not be, and what girls or women should do or should not do*. You can take the images from all kinds of media, including newspapers, magazines, outdoor posters, television programs, subway posters, web sites, books and so on. The selected media should be the ones you are exposed to or sometimes use in your daily lives. The media can be aiming at people like you or aiming at people who are different from you". Written permission from parents was obtained before the study commenced.

Within a few days after the image collection week, the author conducted face-to-face interviews with the interviewees. The list of questions asked is shown in the Appendix. The photos taken by each interviewee were downloaded to the researcher's computer. The interviews took place at private and public venues including sports centers, and schools. The interviews were conducted in either Cantonese (a dialect used in Hong Kong) or English. The interviews took 20 to 36 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed or translated into English by a female graduate research assistant. The findings from the interviews were compared across the sample. Marshall and Rossman's (1999) comparison analysis method was used throughout the data analysis process to link data by constantly comparing and contrasting them (Strauss, 1987). Dominant themes were identified through repetitions, as well as search for similarities and differences.

### Findings

#### **Finding 1: Celebrities and Media Characters Who Captured the Attention of 10 to 12 Years Old Girls Were Mainly Adult Female Entertainers**

Interviewees were asked what girls or women should be or should not be, with reference to the digital images that they had taken. Altogether 32 celebrities and five media characters were reported by the interviewees 45 times. Fourteen out of the 37 celebrities and media characters were nonChinese females and the remaining 23 were Chinese females. NonChinese females' celebrities reported included Selena Gomez, Miley Cyrus, Anne Frank, Princess Diana, and Madonna. Nearly all the Chinese celebrities mentioned were local actresses and pop singers. Five of the celebrities discussed were professionals such as authors (e.g., J. K. Rowling) and medical doctors. According to public records, the ages of the celebrities and media characters mentioned ranged from 10 years old to 76 years old. Nine of the celebrities and media characters were aged below 20 while the remaining 28 characters were aged 20 or above. The mean age of the celebrities and media characters reported was 30. Two of them (i.e., Princess Diana and Anne Frank) were deceased. One interviewee discussed four characters from the book *Pride and Prejudice*. Another interviewee brought up a character from a popular television drama. Surprisingly, no media characters from cartoons were reported as examples of what girls or women should do or should be.

#### **Finding 2: Celebrities and Media Characters Serve as Negative Role Models**

Interviewees most frequently reported how these celebrities and media characters demonstrated to them what girls or women should not do. This theme was brought up 18 times. The reasons for considering celebrities negative role models included alcoholic abuse, having a plastic surgery, gossiping, being promiscuous, performing hot dances, taking drugs, and being superstitious. Here are three illustrative quotes:

One of the pictures I took is Miley Cyrus. In some ways, in life, she made bad decisions so when people want her to be their role models, they should think clearly. She has done stuffs that the media and lots of people disagreed with. For example, she goes out at night and done stuffs she is not supposed to do, such as drinking. I think she is really bad as a role model. (an interviewee from an international school, age 11)

In this quote, the girl identified drug abuse and underage drinking as the kind of inappropriate behaviors of Miley Cyrus. At the same time, she perceived that her poor decisions in life would have negative impact on those who follow her as role models.

"Jill Vidal and Kelvin Kwan took drugs and were arrested. They should not take drugs." (an interviewee from a local school, age 10)

The photo I took is Gillian Chung (a local pop singer). Her nude pictures were released on the internet. She should not take such photos with Edison. Originally they did not think others would look at the photos and they took them just for fun. But in the end, others could see those photos. Gillian Chung had to step down from show business after this incident. She admitted that she was stupid to had loved Edison Chan. She admitted that she regretted it. I think she should have thought it through in the first place. (an interviewee from a local school, age 12)

In this quote, the girl reported a media scandal and identified with the financial loss of the female celebrity involved. She demonstrated identification with the celebrity in her strong emotions of regret.

### **Finding 3: Interviewees Showed Admiration of Specific Talents, Competency, or Personality of the Celebrities and Media Characters**

This theme was brought up 16 times. The list of virtues that interviewees admired include being clever and smart, enjoying work and having fun, having self-confidence, engaging in charity work, being gentle and well-educated, pursuing personal goals, showing persistence and bravery, being strong, expressing her own feelings, achieving in career work, and comforting others. Here are two illustrative quotes:

The woman in the picture is J.K. Rowling. I think women should pursue their dreams. She was originally a badly off single mother. Because she was poor for a period of time, people around her didn't support her to write. In the end, she became successful. So I think even though the situation is bad, if a woman pursues her dream, her dream will eventually come true. (an interviewee from a local school, age 12)

Yan Sheung is the chief editor of a fashion magazine in a television drama. Each issue of the magazine has to obtain her approval before printing. She has achievements and I admire her. (an interviewee from a local school, age 12)

These two quotes showed that the girls were aspired to celebrities with successful career.

### **Finding 4: Some Celebrities and Media Characters Were Perceived as Positive Role Models**

The theme was brought up seven times. This theme is similar to the previous one discussed above. The difference denotes the fact that the interviewees specifically mentioned that the celebrities and media characters serve as their role models in this theme. Interviewees reported what they learned from these celebrities and media characters about facing adversity, saving the planet, helping others, being brave, being courteous, and building friendship. Here are two illustrative quotes:

This is a picture of Heidi Klum. She is rich and famous, and she is contributing to different charities. She helped others to relive their dreams. She hosted the show *Project Runaway* that comes up with really nice clothing design. She is my role model. (an interviewee from an international school, age 12)

Here are Charlie Yeung and Gigi Leung. They wrote a book titled "My grow-up journal". They shared the secrets of growing up and they built mutual trust and friendship. They are my role models in building up friendship. (an interviewee from a local school, age 12)

### **Finding 5: Interviewees Gave Detailed Accounts of the Social and Private Lives of the Celebrities**

Girls were interested in the private lives of the celebrities. In particular, they were observant of the family lives as well as sexual lives of the celebrities. One interviewee discussed the bright side and the dark side of Madonna's adoption of children. This is what she said.

This is Madonna. She has adopted several children and she wants to adopt one more child. But it is not allowed because she has already adopted too many children and has not been staying in a country long enough. People should stay in a country for at least 7 months before they are allowed to adopt a child. I think Madonna is not fully right. She adopts these children in order to help them. But since she has already adopted so many, she may not have time to take good care of them. (an interviewee from a local school, age 10)

One girl discussed the sexual molestation of a female actress. Another interviewee discussed the spreading of a rumor by a popular singer. Let's look at the following quote.

This is Ella Koon. She started a rumor that a male actor had molested sexually an actress. After investigation, there is no such case. She attended a function and sang songs and suddenly the music stopped while she was singing. Audiences saw that she was unhappy. The TV producer asked her to go backstage to avoid embarrassment. When she returned backstage, the music came up again. Then she cried backstage. The TV station said that she had made a bad impact on the image of the company and that they would not continue hiring her. She should find out the truth before telling people about it. (an interviewee from a local school, age 12)

In this quote, the girl gave an almost eye-witnessed account of a trivial incidence that happened to a celebrity. The quote portrayed the flow of the event, as well as the responses and the feelings of the celebrity involved. She was also aware of the consequence of the event from the employer's perspective.

A media sex scandal happened in February 2008 drew much attention of the tween girls. Nude photos of Edison Chen, a popular Hong Kong singer, and his female sexual partners were leaked out. Among these female partners, Gillian Chung is a popular singer among children and young girls. Interviewees altogether took six pictures of the female celebrities involved in the scandal. While four interviewees perceived Gullian Chung a negative role model, one interviewee perceived that she was strong. She stood up for her family and moved on with her life.

#### **Finding 6: Interviews That Were Critical of the Outfits of the Celebrities**

This theme was brought up three times. Girls commented that they disliked some of the clothes the celebrities wear. They criticized the outfits as too sexy, or too darkly colored.

### **Discussion**

In this qualitative interview study, girls aged 10 to 12 were asked to take pictures from the media they consumed that told them what girls or women should be or not be and what girls or women should do or not do. Based on the images captured and the discussion of the images captured, we have the following four observations about what these girls learned from celebrities and media characters about gender roles and identities.

First, girls aged 10 to 12 very often select female adult media celebrities as models for gender roles and gender identities. The selection of media celebrities was focused on certain admirable attributes. Some interviewees reported explicitly that they adopted the celebrities as positive role models. Interviewees also identified with the celebrities because they liked the way they behave, or their specific personality, or their specific talents. In all the interviews, there is an absence of idol worship. No interviewees reported strong emotional attachment with the media celebrities or demonstrated confusion of self-identity. None of the interviewees perceived the celebrities and media characters as perfect. In fact, interviewees sometimes reported inappropriate gender roles from these celebrities. Celebrities engaged in socially unacceptable behaviors such as drinking and taking drugs were scorned by the interviewees. The findings support that interviewees demonstrated entertainment social relationship with the celebrity. The findings do not show evidence of intense personal nor borderline pathological relationship with the celebrities (McCutcheon, Lanage, & Houran, 2002). Instead, the findings demonstrate that interviewees are able to evaluate the behaviors of the media celebrities according to their moral standards.

The celebrities and media characters are highly visible for others to observe and to obtain information for

role modeling. Because of limited life experience, most of the 10 to 12 years old girls may not have an extensive personal network. There is so much written about the celebrities and media characters on the television, newspapers, and magazines that these girls found them familiar and accessible (Singh, Vinnicombe, & James, 2006).

Girls studying at local schools were more likely to adopt Chinese local popular singers and actresses as role models for gender identities. Girls studying at international schools were more likely to adopt nonChinese popular singers and actresses as role models. This can be attributed to the different media interviewees used. It is observed that girls studying at local schools most often took pictures from Chinese newspapers and Chinese gossip-type weekly magazines.

Second, tween girls are inspired by the celebrities and media characters to pursue an identity that is intelligent, achieving, independent, self-confident, and expressive. The result is similar to the study of young working females in Hong Kong who generally consume women magazines in order to construct an idealized image of modernity and outstanding beauty (Fung, 2002). The difference between the 10 to 12 years old girls in this study and the young working females lies in the aspiration of achieving outstanding beauty. Interviewees seem to put more emphasis on the talents and the competency of the celebrities and media characters. Whereas in Fung's (2002) study, interviewees (female magazine readers) put much emphasis on the outfits of the celebrities and models featured in the magazines. Tannen (1990) argued that men are socialized to be aggressive, assertive, ambitious, and independent in order to survive in a hierarchical world, while women are socialized to be submissive and cooperative. Fung (2002) suggested that Hong Kong females' pursuit of beauty was a socially acceptable way of to express their desire to be outstanding. In the current study, the 10 to 12 years old girls expressed their admiration of the achievements of the celebrities. Interviewees also admired the gentleness and the caring acts of the celebrities and media characters. It shows that interviewees are inspired by both masculine and feminine personality traits of the celebrities and media characters.

Third, the interviewees paid much attention to sexual lives of media celebrities. They often made reference to them in defining standards for societal acceptance and moral decisions. Discussing sex is a taboo in the Chinese society. Although premarital sex seems to have become more prevalent in the last two decades, evidence suggests that Hong Kong youth retain traditional views on love, courtship, and marriage (The Women's Foundation, 2006). Interviewees in the current study demonstrated conservative attitudes toward sex. They disapproved of premarital sex of female celebrities involved in the media scandal.

Fourth, a majority of interviewees perceived celebrities and media characters as either positive or negative role models. Only one interviewee reported the ambiguity and ambivalence of a celebrity (i.e., Madonna). It suggests that the evaluation of celebrities and media characters by the interviewees is based on a narrowly defined set of criteria.

As a qualitative study of a convenience sample, the current study does not allow for the generalization of findings within and beyond Hong Kong. The small sample size also posted a limitation for generalization.

Future study should measure the emotional attachment and social learning involving media celebrities using quantitative methodology. Studies can also be conducted among 10 to 12 years old boys and among older boys on the perception of masculinity and media consumption.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the analysis of interviews and images found that celebrities and media characters play an

important role in shaping 10 to 12 years old girls' perceived gender roles and identities for females. Interviewees often refer to adult celebrities for positive and negative gender roles. Interviewees learned from celebrities and media characters that certain behaviors were not acceptable in the social arena. These girls showed admiration of specific talents and personalities of the celebrities and media characters. Successes in career as well as charity work of celebrities are most frequently mentioned as reasons of admiration. Interviewees paid much attention to the private lives of the celebrities.

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#### Appendix: List of questions

1. From these pictures, what do you think about what girls or women should be or should not be?
  2. From these pictures, what behavior(s) do you think are appropriate or inappropriate for girls or women?
  3. Who create these images and why do they create them in this way?
  4. Are you satisfied with the way the images of girls or women are created now?
  5. If you were a media owner and/or a media producer, what would you do in constructing images of young girls or women?
- \* Answers to these questions are not included in this paper.