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Superwomen on the big screen: How media portrayals affect female viewers

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Received: September 11, 2013**Accepted:** June 04, 2014**Published:** July 11, 2014**ABSTRACT**

Background: There are a growing number of motion pictures and television series that feature superwomen-type protagonists. This requires an investigation to explore the effect that motion picture portrayals of “superwomen” (women who adhere to the superwoman ideal of femininity) can have on the gender role expectations of female viewers. **Materials and Methods:** Undergraduate female college students with an average age of 21.7 years old participated in this study at an arts college in a suburban area on the U.S. East coast. Adherence to the superwoman ideal (SWI) was measured using An adapted 23-item version of the superwomen scale (SWS) for college students. While Cronbach’s alpha was 0.82 in that original use of the adapted scale, More recent publications have found the reliability to be consistent at 0.88. **Results:** Results show that women exposed to a movie trailer featuring a superwoman protagonist report significantly higher scores on the superwomen scale (SWS)[1] than participants in the control group, who watched no video clip. With a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.89, the internal validity of the SWS was supported. Consistent with previous research, it was also found that body dissatisfaction, as measured by Stunkard’s figure rating scale], and scores on the SWS were positively and significantly correlated. **Conclusion:** Overall, the results support the validity of the SWS and suggest that women’s gender role expectations can be influenced, at least temporarily, by exposure to certain types of female protagonists in motion pictures.

KEY WORDS: Media, superwoman complex, women’s issues**INTRODUCTION**

According to Murnen *et al.* (1994)[1], many modern women have assimilated a cultural gender role standard they term the superwoman ideal (SWI) of femininity. Adherence to the SWI has been described as a desire to achieve perfection in several different areas such as work and home life, engaging in multiple roles including a more masculine identity, and concern with physical appearance. This collection of characteristics may seem strange, but the authors explain that their convergence actually makes sense for this historical period. Half a century ago, the women’s movement won a place for women in traditionally masculine roles, such as independent career success. While our culture has begun to expect this type of behavior from women, it has not simultaneously lowered its expectations for achievement in traditionally feminine spheres, such as caregiving and concern with a slim and physically “fit” appearance. Thus, to be considered successful by society, superwomen feel they must do it all – establish a prestigious career, nurture relationships (e.g. with their children), and maintain an attractive appearance.

Despite the name, the characteristics correlated with a subscription to this gender role ideal are far from ideal. For example, while developing the superwomen scale (SWS) to measure adherence to the SWI, Murnen *et al.* (1994)[1] found

that high scores on the SWS are positively and significantly correlated with total scores on the eating disorders inventory [2]. Several studies have reached results consistent with that original finding. One study found that among female undergraduates, endorsement of components of the SWI (i.e. strong emphasis on physical appearance and expectations for success in multiple roles) is correlated to eating disorder symptoms [3]. It has also been demonstrated that adolescent girls’ endorsement of the SWI is associated with disordered eating [4]. In addition to these findings, the superwoman research has also found other unique features to the SWI, such as masculine identity.

Masculine Identity

Research on the psychological effects of nontraditional sex-role orientations, such as a more masculine identity, among women has been mixed. Some authors have posited that stress surrounding traditional female gender roles is responsible for distress and negative symptoms. For example, Martz *et al.*, (1995)[5] found that women with eating disorders report significantly higher levels of the female gender role stress than controls. Further research suggests that women who adhere strictly to traditional feminine self-concepts are at greater risk for depressiveness, social anxiety, and concomitant personality disorders [6]. Recognizing some of the confusion that exists in this area, research has attempted to discern exactly what aspects of gender role orientation really

affect female psychological well-being. Instead of looking at the differences between women through the lens of the masculine and feminine dichotomy, Pritchard (2008)[7] added the dimension of an “undifferentiated” orientation and found that masculine women had significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction and bulimia than women classified as androgynous. While these results do not end the confusion over the place of gender roles, they supports that idea that traditional femininity is not the sole source of psychological distress.

This idea is supported by Bekker and Boselie (2002)[8], who found that women with eating disorders report higher levels of feminine and masculine gender role stress than controls. These results suggests that women with eating problems are strained by the expectations of both gender roles – a particular type of strain that characterizes a superwoman, who feels that she can and must excel in both traditional male and traditional female gender roles. Thornton *et al.* (1991)[9] provided further evidence that one particular type of gender role orientation is not responsible for the psychological strain placed on women. They found that both masculine and feminine gender-typed women who adhered to the SWI were more likely than androgynous women to be at-risk for eating disorders. This suggests that rather than using only traditional conceptions of gender roles, the complex combination of qualities that characterize superwomen might be a helpful way of thinking about the gender role strain faced by modern women.

Physical Appearance

One of the particularly stressful aspects of traditional femininity is a preoccupation with maintaining an attractive appearance. Research has shown that women who adhere to traditional gender role expectations for male-female social relationships were more likely to worry and have maladaptive assumptions about their physical appearance [10]. It is not only these social relations; however that bring out the stress of maintaining attractiveness. Malatzky (2011)[11] discusses the SWI in terms of motherhood and childbirth. She writes that it is during this period of a woman’s life that the stress of superwoman expectations can become almost unbearable. Increasingly, women that have recently had children are expected to appear as though they had never given birth (Malatzky, 2011)[11]. This is an expectation reflected by the prevalence of adherence to the SWI. Of course, it is even before childbearing age that women feel the pressure to conform to prescribed standards of beauty. Darlow and Lobel (2010)[12] study of undergraduate females found that external evaluation of a woman’s appearance can have great negative effects, including a drop in her own self-esteem. Additional literature on the negative effects of concern with physical appearance is plentiful.

Perfectionism

Maintaining a fit physical appearance is only one aspect of perfectionism, an aspect of the SWI that has been shown to have negative effects on individual well-being. Cassin

and von Ranson (2005)[13] review of a decade of literature on personality and eating disorders stated that high levels of perfectionism have frequently been shown to correlate with the occurrence of Anorexia and Bulimia. Dour and Theran (2011)[14] found that endorsement of the SWI ideal was only significantly associated with unhealthy eating attitudes for adolescent girls with high levels of maladaptive perfectionism. Thus, the authors conclude that perfectionism moderates the relation between endorsement of the SWI and unhealthy eating attitudes.

Media and the Superwoman

In our society, women are bombarded by media messages that explicitly or implicitly define culture ideals of physical attractiveness [15]. Even media sources that seem to have an overall positive or neutral message reveal this trend. Aubrey (2010)[16] showed that popular health magazines for women in the United States had just as many cover headlines phrased in terms of appearance as those framed in relation to health. Women exposed to magazine headlines promoting appearances reported higher levels of body shame than those assigned to health headlines. Images in the media can also have a powerful effect on female viewers. One study investigated the effects that exposure to images of performance athletes, sexualized athletes, sexualized models, and non-sexualized models has on adolescent girls and college women [17]. After viewing photographs of one of those types, participants that viewed performance athlete images (non-sexualized and not models) reported less self-objectification than other groups.

Past studies have also shown that women notice subtle differences between gender role portrayals of other women in the media. Jaffe and Berger (1994)[18], for example, showed that women detect and respond differently to advertisements based on the stereotypical role portrayals they contain. Advertisements with stereotypical female role portrayals in conformity were less effective in generating purchase interest among female participants than those with progressive, egalitarian gender roles. Both of those types were significantly more effective than advertisements with traditionally feminine role portrayals.

Greenwood’s (2007)[19] study showed that the idealization of behavior of attractive, aggressive, female superheroes is associated with aggressive tendencies among female college students. Building on that research, Taylor and Setters (2011)[20] found that viewing video clips of Hollywood motion pictures containing an aggressive and stereotypically attractive female protagonist led female viewers to endorse both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine gender role expectations for women. This relates to the idea that women are endorsing a more masculine identity in the aggressive, female superhero. The SWI also perpetuates an aggressive, masculine identity.

While these studies provide a solid platform for investigation into the complex relationship between female viewers, female protagonists, and gender roles, there is a need to apply their

principles to other areas with practical social implications. No research, for example, has directly explored the effect that media portrayals of superwomen have on the gender role perceptions of other women. With the growing number of motion pictures and television series featuring superwomen-type protagonists, there is a need to investigate. Drawing from the previously described literature on women and the media, the current study explores the relationship between media and the SWI. It was hypothesized:

1. Exposure to a movie trailer featuring a superwoman protagonist would make female viewers more likely to endorse the SWI.
2. Exposure to a movie trailer featuring a superwoman protagonist will be correlated to a thinner body image endorsed on the Stunkard scale ratings.

METHODS

Participants

Undergraduate female college students ($n = 100$) took part in this study at a small liberal arts college in a suburban area on the U.S. East coast. The majority of participants were Caucasian, so no racial or cultural factors were considered in data collection. Participants were obtained using an online experiment management system. Many students were required to participate in studies to gain academic credit in psychology classes. Other participants were recruited using a flier advertising study time-slots and locations. The average age of participant was 21.7 and the mean grade point average (GPA) among participants was 3.46.

Measures

In order to assess the media influence on the superwoman in the experimental group, based on the movie clip, the movie trailer first had to be selected. Movie trailers were viewed by the researchers and rated on the three main aspects of the SWI: Masculine identity, perfectionism, and emphasis on physical appearance. The movie trailer that was selected based on these three criteria was the trailer for Erin Brockovich, which is a film from 2000. Other films were considered that were more recent, such as *I Don't Know How She Does It* from 2011, but the trailer for the film did not have as much emphasis on all three areas of the SWI.

Adherence to the SWI was measured using the SWS [1]. An adapted 23-item version for college students was used after factor analysis [4]. Cronbach's alpha was 0.82 in that original use of the adapted scale. More recent publications have found the reliability to be consistent at 0.88 [21]. Possible responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), so the range of possible scores was 23-138, with higher scores indicating higher levels of adherence to the SWI. The scale evaluated perfectionism (e.g. I get very upset with myself when I do not excel on a project I am working on, or get an A on an exam), concern with appearance (e.g. I hold myself to high appearance standards because I believe that in order to truly succeed in this society you must be thin and attractive), and desire to excel in multiple roles (e.g. In

order to be fulfilled [now or in the future], I feel the need to "have it all" [i.e. a strong marriage, a prestigious career, and great kids]).

Body dissatisfaction was assessed using Stunkard's figure rating [22]. Participants are asked to select two figures from a series (numbered 1 to 9) that ranges from very thin to very obese: The figure they believe to be the most representative of their current body shape and then one that they designate as their ideal body shape. The difference between current and ideal body shape is a measure of body dissatisfaction.

Procedure

To ensure informed consent, participants were first asked to read and sign a consent form. Each administration of the experiment was randomly assigned to either the control or experimental condition immediately upon entering the room, every other person receiving their condition. Participants in the experimental condition were asked to watch the trailer for the movie *Erin Brockovich*, which portrays a female protagonist acting in accordance with the SWI as described in the measures section. Participants that were part of the control condition did not watch anything. All participants then completed a one-page demographic sheet and were evaluated for endorsement of the SWI using the SWS [1]. Participants then completed Stunkard's figure rating scale [22].

RESULTS

There was a significant difference between group scores on the SWS, $t(98) = -2.17$, $P < 0.05$, $d = -0.43$, with women in the experimental group (mean = 86.60, standard deviation [SD] = 12.46) reporting higher scores than women in the control group (mean = 79.70, SD = 18.69). With a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, the internal consistency of the SWS was supported. Body dissatisfaction, as measured by Stunkard's figure rating scale, and scores on the SWS were positively and significantly correlated, $r(87) = 0.27$, $P < 0.05$. There was also less deviation in scores among those in the experimental group on the SWS [Table 1].

DISCUSSION

Results showed that females in the experimental group did exhibit significantly more endorsement of items on the SWS. Consistent with Taylor and Setters (2011)[20], this suggests that exposure to media portrayals affect gender role perceptions and increase the expectations that women have of themselves. Specifically, this result suggests that viewing superwomen in the media may increase adherence to the SWI. This result is significant because it provides further evidence of the pressure that our culture and media place on modern

Table 1: Superwoman scale scores

Groups	Mean	SD
Control group ($n=50$)	79.70	18.69
Experimental group ($n=50$)	86.60	12.46
Total	83.15	16.18

women. The results of this study may even provide a glimpse into the mechanics of how that pressure actually translates into psychological distress and disordered eating among women. Indeed, consistent with research that has found that endorsement of the SWI is associated with disordered eating [3,4]; our results showed that scores on the SWS were positively significantly correlated with body dissatisfaction. While not a direct cause of disordered eating Body dissatisfaction represents one facet of this issue.

It is difficult to know, however, exactly how the video affected the experimental group. The most likely explanation is that watching a female protagonist deal with the demands of the SWI reminded participants in the experimental group of some of the expectations they have for their own lives, or that our culture has for them. Alternatively, out of empathy, the experimental group may have been answering “for” the protagonist. In other words, they may have been giving the answers the character would have given, instead of answering for them. Whatever the exact process, women were very attentive to the superwoman protagonist’s situation. Future research should attempt to discover the exact operation of the process. In addition, future research should examine more long-term effects that media exposure has on women in regards to a superwoman identity. When understood, this phenomenon may provide helpful new approaches to education. Multi-media and motion picture presentations might be the most effective tools for educating women about the feminist agenda, for example.

Limitations of this study include a small sample size that was not ethnically diverse. The small sample size may account for the fact that, with a Cohen’s *d* of .43, we only approached a medium effect size. There also may have been selection bias based on the fact that some participants received course credit for their participation. With a mean age of 21, the sample was relatively young. The sample also had a high mean GPA, 3.46, which may indicate that women self-selected for the study that were already adhering to some perfectionist tendencies.

Future research should aim for an older sample that may already (or be seriously considering the decision to) have children. Future research might also include a neutral condition that views a video clip featuring a female protagonist adhering to a stereotypical gender role. The effects of other types of media and other specific types of gender role portrayals should also be explored by future research.

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