

How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman's Life

From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to
Cougars-on-the-Prowl

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First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978–1–137–56617–1

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ames, Melissa, 1978– author. | Burcon, Sarah Himsel, 1965– author.

Title: How pop culture shapes the stages of a woman's life : from toddlers-in-tiaras to cougars-on-the-prowl / Melissa Ames, Sarah Burcon.

Description: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015035336 | ISBN 9781137566171 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Women in mass media. | Mass media—Influence. | Popular culture—United States.

Classification: LCC P94.5.W652 U616 2016 | DDC 302.23082—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015035336>

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

Conclusion: Exiting the Funhouse – Challenging Society’s Lessons One Stage at a Time

To say that modern-day society has a love-hate relationship with feminism would be a ridiculous understatement. We simply don’t know what to do about the controversial ‘F word’, and this is apparent in the cultural products aimed at girls and women at every juncture in their lives. The mixed messages – about feminism, gender, sexuality – are everywhere. The contradictory lessons are in toy boxes, on bookshelves, in blog posts, on film screens, in songs, on television, in commercials, on Twitter, in magazines, on stage. They’re in the cultural conversations surrounding Miley Cyrus, Jennifer Aniston, Kate Middleton, Jennifer Lopez, Amy Schumer, Tina Fey, Caitlyn Jenner, Hillary Clinton, and so many others. They’re in critiques of *Gossip Girl*, *The Bachelorette*, *Sex and the City*, *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, *Menopause the Musical*, and more. They’re in scholarly discussions about Elsa, Anna, Katniss, Bella, Stacy’s Mom, Stiffler’s Mom – in analyses of all mothers and daughters and sisters (fictional and real).

You don’t have to look too closely into these ongoing dialogues to catch the array of conflicting lessons that are being delivered: girls and women are taught that femininity is expected, but devalued; that they should be sexy, but virginal; that they should be independent, but not too independent; that they should look younger, but act their age. They hear that feminism is no longer needed, but that gender equality hasn’t quite yet been reached. They are told that they now have endless choices, but that some choices are the wrong ones; that they can have it all, but not really. People announce how much the world has changed for women even as they reinforce the same tired gender stereotypes from decades prior. They give lip service to the idea of gender equality at the same time as they bemoan any significant gains made by women. They celebrate equality in contemporary relationships but

then wax on about how this equality has led to a crisis in masculinity. Feminists are framed as ancient, heroic warriors ... and as contemporary rabble rousers up to no good; as champions for gender equality ... and as opportunistic man-haters. It's no wonder why some people are so confused. Why so many young women who benefit from the long history and current work of feminism are quick to say 'I'm not a feminist, but ...' while finishing the trailing phrase with a belief that aligns with feminism. It might explain, but not excuse, the existence of the Women Against Feminism movement,¹ of mothers who write treatises about how they just *had* to stop being feminists once they had sons,² or why *TIME* magazine would think it amusing to propose banning the word 'feminist'.³

What we aimed to reveal in this book is how all of these warring notions infiltrate our cultural products in the form of gendered lessons that compound over years. Call it social construction or pseudo-self-help, such texts have a major impact on how we conceptualize femininity and masculinity and on what behaviors we expect and/or endorse from men and women. Popular culture not only tells us what to think and *how* to act, but *when* to think and act out such things. It reinforces the idea that a woman's life should progress through a pre-scripted set of stages and that certain behaviors are expected during those stages.

Looking at all of these societal lessons staggered throughout the years of a woman's life left us feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and – oftentimes – disgusted. However, once we started learning of the ways that these messages are being resisted, rejected, and refunctioned, we regained our hope. The top-down efforts of education programs and corporations are encouraging, and the grassroots campaigns of individual people are inspiring. These movements – some of which we'll highlight briefly below – show that these gendered instructions can be untaught.

Operation save the girls: formal and informal media literacy efforts

One of the more formal ways in which we can unlearn these lessons is to be taught *how* to unlearn them. Media literacy initiatives linked to public education are on the rise and are more needed than ever before. According to the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), it's important to learn from an early age how to be a critical thinker so that as people age, they can better understand the messages they're receiving from the various media outlets. This organization and others advocate for offering focused media literacy courses in schools,

or integrating such instruction across the curriculum. In the United States, the widespread adoption of the Common Core Standards since 2010⁴ has actually increased the amount of direct instruction schools spend on media literacy, being that K-12 English Language Arts standards require students to master visual analysis and comparative media study, not to mention consider the historical context surrounding texts. While implementation of such media literacy standards varies greatly from state to state, district to district, and school to school, the chances are that students today are getting some sort of direct instruction about how to engage with media messages. However, this training doesn't have to be limited to formal classrooms.

There are more resources than ever before for those who want to interact with and combat these messages. A number of academics concerned with how gender training can be resisted have added media literacy advice into their cultural analyses. For example, M. Gigi Durham's *Lolita Effect* includes various sections on how to discuss cultural myths with young girls.⁵ Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown's *Packaging Girlhood* has various parental tools woven into the text: follow-up questions for discussing the media girls watch, lists of sexual innuendos in films girls watch, a catalogue of films and books that include few gender stereotypes and house strong female protagonists, and readymade scripts or conversations for use with children, preteens, and adolescents on topics such as stereotypes, how marketing operates, how gendered interactions are portrayed, and how to let youngsters choose their own activities and identities without harm.⁶ Jennifer Pozner's *Reality Bites Back* closes with a chapter titled 'Fun with Media Literacy: Drinking Games, Deconstruction Guides, and Other Critical Thinking Tools' aimed at an older audience.⁷ And there are countless other resources available on the Web for those interested in media literacy work, such as the American Psychological Association's New Girls, Women + Media Project⁸ and The Media Literacy Project.⁹

When companies have a heart (and sometimes an agenda): some positive ad campaigns

Formal and informal media literacy efforts can definitely help 21st-century women resist gender dictates. However, what would help even more would be having fewer gendered messages to thwart in the first place! Some companies have taken action of their own accord in attempts to work toward this goal. For example, one of the most talked about Super Bowl 2014 commercials – ironically, one sponsored by the feminine

product company Always – is such an example. In June 2014 the company launched its '#LikeAGirl' video on television.¹⁰ The video began with the question: 'What does it mean to do something like a girl?' Then, young women and men were asked to demonstrate doing things 'like a girl': they ran 'like a girl', they punched 'like a girl', and they threw a ball 'like a girl'. All of the participants performed these actions in a similar fashion: they flailed their arms, smiled foolishly as they ran, and moved their legs ineffectually. But when younger girls were asked to do these same things 'like a girl', they gave it their best shot: they ran with determination, punched with force, and threw the ball with gusto. The video pauses to project the question: 'when did doing something like a girl become an insult?'¹¹ This video demonstrates not only the negative stereotypes concerning female strength and skill, but it also reveals how deeply entrenched these stereotypes are in the general population. The young girls who attempted each action to the best of their ability – even when such requests were framed as actions to be done 'like a girl' – are proof that girls are not born as self-effacing beings, but rather they slowly accept negative gender stereotypes over time. The video goes on to interview girls, noting that the phrase 'like a girl' is humiliating, and the text screen appears noting that 'a girl's self-confidence plummets during puberty.'¹² The following screen shot finally arrives at the company's self-promotion, declaring: 'Always wants to change that.'¹³ The video is, of course, a public relations product meant to foster positive feelings for a company that profits from products that are marketed to young women beginning puberty.

However, despite their self-serving motives, the video had an incredibly positive message and initiated the trending of the hashtag #LikeAGirl on Twitter. Suddenly feeds were filled with pictures of girls and women around the world doing all sorts of positive acts – all accompanied with the popular hashtag. For example, one young woman posted an impressive photo of her prizewinning high jump with the statement: 'I'm proud of jumping #LikeAGirl', and another woman posted images of herself in her army fatigues, stating 'I serve my country #likeagirl'.¹⁴ Despite sparking a widespread, positive Twitter campaign, the public service video didn't escape the wrath of online detractors who revealed, once again, the misperception that feminism implies an attack on masculinity. Shortly after the video aired during the Super Bowl, self-proclaimed 'meninists' urged people to 'get the hashtag #LikeABoy trending', and, indeed, quickly came posts such as '#LikeABoy because equality matters'.¹⁵ While there were more nuanced reactions to the Always campaign that used the #LikeABoy hashtag – for example mothers who posted pictures of their

sons doing stereotypically feminine things like painting their nails or playing with princesses,¹⁶ photos that could be read as celebrating boys' feminine sides or as poking fun at deviant gender play – the activity surrounding the Always campaign clearly shows that gender equality is far from having been reached and that many more messages like this one are needed from those in charge of consumer products.

Yet another video that operates in a way similar to #LikeAGirl was a commercial launched by Similac, one of the largest baby formula companies. This two-and-a-half minute video titled the 'Sisterhood of Motherhood' first aired on 17 January 2015.¹⁷ Meant to tackle a serious subject with a humorous tone, Similac purportedly released this video as a way to encourage moms to accept one another's particular type of parenting. It opens with a mom, baby strapped to her chest, sitting down on a park bench. She looks around, seemingly frightened, as several stroller-pushing moms with grim looks walk up in a scene that conjures up that of rival gangs arriving for a confrontation. We see more babies in strollers, their moms in power suits clutching cell phones and briefcases. These working moms wag their fingers at some bottle-wielding moms who are spraying the bottled milk onto the ground in a defiant gesture. (Clearly, this portion of the video is meant as a hyperbolic allusion to the shaming that non-breastfeeding mothers often face.) Then we see some stay-at-home dads, followed by yoga moms, and stay-at-home breastfeeding moms as the park quickly fills up with a variety of clichéd parenting types.

Then the quips begin: 'Oh, look, the breast police have arrived', says one mom; 'helicopter mom, 12 o'clock', mutters one dad.¹⁸ The judgmental comments continue and escalate: 'Oh, disposable diaper. Well, apparently we don't care about the environment'; 'I wonder what it's like being a part-time mom'; and 'Stay-at-home moms. I wonder what they do all day.'¹⁹ The final argument in the video, not unimportantly, stems from a comment that 'it's not all about the breast', and the entire group of warring parents is getting ready for a brawl when a stroller begins rolling down a hill with a young child in it. United by shared concern, the diverse range of parents all race down the hill and rescue the baby just in time. (Worthy of note might also be that it was a *dad* who ultimately reached the runaway stroller first.) As a result of this moment of unity, the video ends as they all smile, shake hands, and come together as a group of parents. This text appears across the screen: 'No matter what our beliefs, we are parents first. Welcome to the Sisterhood of Motherhood. Similac. #SisterhoodUnite'.²⁰ Like Always, Similac has a vested interest in producing such an ad because the breast- vs.

bottle-feeding mommy war isn't good for their company. However, the message contained within this strategic public relations piece is a good one: there is no one 'right' way to parent.

While complicated by their potential hidden agendas, these videos are part of growing efforts by various industries to attend to the problematic messages that are being directed at women and girls. In an effort to thwart the abundant imagery that promotes unhealthy beauty standards, fashion industry officials and advertisers have adopted more stringent standards to avoid overselling thinness. For example, in 2008, after the deaths of models suffering from anorexia, Madrid and Milan fashion officials prohibited models who had a body mass index under 18.5 from being on the catwalk.²¹ Also, not long into the 21st century, the ad world made efforts to spread the message that true beauty is not stick-thin or skin-deep. In 2004, Dove launched its 'Campaign for Real Beauty', which featured 'real women' – of various sizes – on billboards and magazines across the country.²² The ad campaign, like the videos discussed above, although beneficial to female viewers, was likely not an entirely altruistic act on the part of the company, however, because within a year of its launch Dove's sales had risen 12.5 percent and then increased by another 10 percent in the year following.²³ And some critics resist celebrating this positive campaign on the basis that Dove's parent company, Unilever, also owns companies like Slimfast (a diet supplement), Axe (men's body spray), and Fair & Lovely (skin-whitening cream) – companies with products that do not align with its 'real beauty' message.²⁴ Although these companies may benefit from their feminist campaigns, the media landscape would be a much healthier place for women and girls if all companies embraced this means of increasing their bottom lines.

It takes a village (of icons) to fuel a movement: celebrities who embrace feminism

And it's not just educational and industry leaders paving the way to a better tomorrow for women. Recently, numerous celebrities have shrugged off the stigma that can accompany labeling oneself as a feminist and have embraced the term.²⁵ Of course, the media being the media, this has resulted in unproductive debates about which celebrities deserve to be called feminist, ranking one person's feminism over another's. For example, following Emma Watson's UN speech concerning the #HeForShe campaign (discussed in Chapter 2), Watson was immediately compared to pop singer Beyoncé. Beyoncé had recently performed at the

2014 MTV Video Music Awards in front of the large, glowing, capitalized word 'Feminist', and had also released a 12-minute video titled 'Yours and Mine', which included her discussing feminism. Since forced female competition is a societal norm, these two celebrities were pitted against one another (with or without their consent), with the public chiming in with their thoughts on who was the 'better' feminist. Beyoncé received a lot of criticism – some focused on her education and lack of full-coverage clothing.²⁶ Sadly, this shows that oftentimes celebrities who want to embrace and claim feminism are punished for their efforts to do so.

This example and many more prove that celebrities often face scrutiny for doing work on behalf of women. Despite this potential, celebrities – males and females alike – continue to use their various platforms to work toward gender equality. For example, during her impassioned 2015 Oscar acceptance for best leading actress, Patricia Arquette addressed wage inequality between men and women.²⁷ There are also movements underfoot in Hollywood that aim to make it a more feminist-friendly (or at least women-friendly) industry. The Women's Media Center is raising awareness and funds to help address the 'crisis of representation in the media'.²⁸ Female celebrities have been collaborating in creative ventures to draw attention to the rampant sexism in Hollywood. One example is the #MAKEITFAIR campaign, which calls attention to 'gender equality in the stories we tell, the wages we earn, and the futures we shape'.²⁹ The three-minute video was produced by an all-female production team and featured more than 70 women, including well-known stars like Rita Wilson, Mamie Gummer, Annie Parisse, Kathleen Chalfant, and Jessica Hecht.³⁰

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