Men watching *Sex and the City*, *My Little Pony*, and *Oklahoma*: The interpretation of gender appropriateness in the reception of cross-gendered media products

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Abstract:
To achieve the goal of gender equality, more research should be conducted on men's media engagings, and particularly those times when they engage with media targeted at women. Are men able to do so comfortably, or do they experience anxiety when resisting sociocultural expectations about what is appropriate for their gender? This study presents interviews with men who recalled times when they engaged with media they perceived as meant more for women. The analysis focuses on the reasons men gave for such engagings, and how their perceptions of gender appropriateness relate to their reasons for these engagings. The results indicate that if a gendered media product is deemed as useful to the man at a particular time in his life, then such determination may help him ignore any restrictions to the engaging caused by perceptions of gender appropriateness.

Keywords: Gender, Media Products, Cross-Gender, Media Engaging, Stereotypes

Introduction

United States' society and culture have been bifurcated into 'for him' and 'for her' since before the arrival of mass media. This bifurcation has been based on assumptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior for either gender, with rules on how men and women are expected to behave, think, and feel in particular situations. Such assumptions and

expectations of gender appropriateness have been structured into numerous aspects of U.S society and culture, including media products produced 'for him' or 'for her' to consume. The sociocultural conditions of the environment in which an individual lives, and how they interpret these conditions, can impact the types of media products they engage with, and how and why they engage with these particular products (McQuail, 1994).

A 'gendered' media product contains features deemed more suitable and appropriate for one gender as opposed to the other; thus, members of different genders may feel most comfortable engaging with the media meant for them (Morley, 1994): anything competition-oriented is typically meant for men (action movies, video games, sports), while anything relationship-oriented is meant for women (romance novels, soap operas, 'chick flicks') (Lull, 1990). The use of 'gender' here considers how the concept represents a sociocultural construction of behaviors deemed appropriate for a specific biological sex, with 'female' or 'feminine' traditionally equated with the idea of 'woman,' and 'male' or 'masculine' with the idea of 'man' (Deaux, 1985; Hawkesworth, 1997; Laner, 2000). Thus, a 'gendered media product' is deemed as appropriate for a particular biological sex given the presumption of socially and culturally appropriate behavior for the particular gender.

Through the course of their daily lives, men and women engage with media meant for their gender; yet, they may also engage with media meant for the other gender. Such instances comprise the act of 'cross-gendered media engagings.' The term 'media engaging' is used here instead of 'media use' due to the varying applications of the term 'use' in describing the selecting, interpreting, and appropriating activities that constitute the process of a person's encounter with a media product. The verb form 'engaging' is used instead of the noun form 'engagement' to reflect the procedural nature of this experience. The term 'cross-gendered media engaging' suggests the goal to understand individuals' selecting and interpreting of gendered media meant for a different gender.

A tendency exists in media studies to focus more on women's engagings with media products (Harris, 2007; Jhally, 1999; McKay, Mikosza & Hutchins, 2005). Decades of research have been devoted to understanding how women engage with the media, including cross-gendered media engagings, to understand how women confront and negotiate the expectations regarding what constitutes socially and culturally appropriate behavior for their gender. If the goal is to promote gender equality and not just the advancement of women, however, then more research must be conducted on men's media engagings, particularly during those times when they cross the gendered line. If cross-gendered media engagings are deemed as a beneficial activity for women, then gender equality would dictate the same should hold true for men. Indeed, to address the so-called crisis of masculinity, as well as the problems associated with the social and cultural construction of masculinity (Horrocks & Campling, 1994; Kahn, 2009; Robinson, 2000), a need exists to understand when and why men feel comfortable crossing this gendered line. The question then becomes whether perceptions of gender appropriateness prevent men from engaging with a media product that may benefit them.

This study represents an attempt to understand how men interpret specific engagings with media products they saw as meant for women. The goal of the study is to investigate their reasons for these cross-gendered media engagings, and to understand how they saw the issue of gender appropriateness in relation to these reasons. The analysis focuses on themes given in the men's reasons for engaging and how they interpreted the issue of socially and culturally determined gender appropriateness in their reasons for engaging. Through a mapping of the reasons for engaging and interpretations of gender appropriateness, the analysis indicates some conformity to our expectations based on gender norms, while also allowing for personal tastes and needs to supersede assumptions about gender.

Gendered Media Engagings

Symbolic differences found in sociocultural norms define the boundaries of each gender; that is, the information encapsulated in these norms structure what each gender should feel, think and do in their everyday lives in order to be treated as a proper member of that sociocultural environment (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). Members are taught the proper behavior, internal and external, to match their biological sex; that is, information that an individual must know to function as a successful member of that environment. Individuals are expected to be willing and able recipients of this information; males and females would want to receive this guidance from the sociocultural environment in order to successfully (i.e. without extreme prejudice and/or harm) exist within it. Thus, over time, a person's exposure to a particular society and/or culture can lead them to develop specific ideas as to what is appropriate behavior for either gender. This socialization can then lead to perceptions of gender appropriateness in a variety of everyday contexts.

The work of scholars such as Dallas Smythe (1995) made apparent the reliance on advertising revenue in most media industries, so that the role of the industry's media products is to generate an audience for that product. Potential audiences for the media products are conceived as a mass of people that need to be addressed and organized to be sold as a commodity to the advertisers (McQuail, 1997). To create such audiences, media producers create media products they believe will attract a specific demographic to sell to advertisers most interested in that type of consumer (Turow, 1997). The gender binary represents one of the most common ways of segmenting people into potential audiences and consumers. Using the concept of what women and men are expected to prefer, based on sociocultural definitions of masculinity and femininity, media producers create media products with these features.

The traditional construction assumes men identify more readily with masculine features, whereas women more readily identify with produced considered feminine (Kuhn, 2002). Femininity is traditionally constructed around emotionality, nurturance and community, while masculinity is traditionally constructed around rationality, ruthlessness and individuality (van Zoonen, 1991). Based on these polarized characterizations, media products with feminine features include romantic interests, comedy, fashion, musical

numbers, and handsome men, while masculine features include competition, science and technology, violence, politics, and sexy women (Austin, 1999; Bhatia & Desmond, 1993; Calvert, Kondla, Ertel & Meisel, 2001; Cherry, 1999; Jacobson, 2005; Kuhn, 2002; Nyberg, 1995). The individual who agrees with the construction of gender as directed to their biological sex -- that is, the gendered individual -- is expected to desire the media products meant for his or her gender and to accept such gendered media without question.

In research focusing on selecting media products, such gendered differences have been found to exist in studies from around the world. Men tend to be the consumers of sports, horror, action/adventure (especially violent or sexualized), news, pornography, digital games and comic books (e.g. Bury, 2003; Hald, 2006; Hamlen, 2010; Ohannessian, 2009). Women tend to be consumers of romances (comedic and dramatic), soap operas, fashion or home economic shows, talk shows, telephones and online communication (e.g. Adriaens et al, 2011; Bhatia & Desmond, 1993; Cherry, 1999; Harris et al, 2004; Hendriyani, d'Haenens & Beentjes, 2012; Kuhn, 2002). Again and again, studies on consumption of media products demonstrate gender as an explanation for people's selection of media products (e.g. Brown & Pardun, 2004; Emmers-Sommer, Pauley, Hanzal & Triplett, 2006; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2007; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hoplamazian, 2012; Mitra, Willyard, Platt & Parsons, 2005).

In terms of interpreting a media product, results tend to show that men and women around the world differ in how they interpret or understand the meaning of a media product (e.g. Calvert et al, 2001; Shields, 1999; Tsai & Lin, 2004). In terms of these results, men and women have been shown to differ in who they identify with (Hoffner, 1996), how they describe the same content as either action or violence (Funk, 2001), how they reacted to sexual content (Cantor, Mares & Hyde, 2003) and their reaction to the sexualized appearance of women (LaTour, 1990). More work on interpretation has been done from a qualitative approach, but the focus has been on one gender at a time, usually women, and oftentimes to locate acceptance or resistance (e.g. Austin, 1999; Durham, 1999; Press, 1991; Radway, 1984).

From film and television to video games and the Internet to mobile devices and social media, each new media appears to warrant the same research question: how do men and women differ in their engagement with this media? Although some studies do show gender differences diminishing, especially in relation to the Internet (e.g. Debrand & Johnson, 2008; Lin & Yu, 2008; Tang & Cooper, 2012), other studies indicate that while people may not differ on their use of such media technologies, they may differ on their views of the technologies and their own ability to engage with them (e.g. Bunz, Curry & Voon, 2007; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). These findings perpetuate the research goals of understanding where gender differences occur, what causes such occurrences, and what results from the occurrences – sometimes with an additional goal of reducing the differences. Although this action-based goal is not as common, it could be seen in the impetus to study cross-gendered media engagings.

Cross-Gendered Media Engagings

While the pattern of gendered individuals engaging with media products meant for their gender appears to be a common one, there are people who cross gendered boundaries by engaging with media not necessarily targeted at them. Crossing that gendered line, however, may not always be comfortable to do. Women have reported thoroughly enjoying masculine-directed media such as superhero comics and digital games; while some explained they engaged as a resistance to gender stereotypes, others felt as though they were trespassing in a social and cultural area not meant for them (Nyberg, 1995). Likewise, men who watched feminine-directed media have reported feeling awkward discussing their enjoyment of such gendered media with very few feeling they could openly express interest in such products (Jewkes, 2002). Such discomfort apparently happens at an early age, as boys realized that some activities were not considered socially acceptable for them (Ashley, 2010; Pompper, 2010); they have discussed being aware of a social stigma and being afraid of how other boys would respond to their engaging with such media (Ging, 2005; Reinhard, 2008).

During the early part of the 21st Century, it appears more acceptable for women in the United States to cross gendered boundaries than men. Such transgression by women may arise from feminist calls for women to assume sociocultural roles equal to men (Jacobson, 2005).There have not been similar calls for men to assume roles equal to women, however: to become stay-at-home dads, to cry openly, to prefer fashion over sports, and so forth (Harris, 2007; Jhally, 1999). As such, higher cultural sanctions against men for gender transgressions persist, which would also apply to men enjoying media meant for women. The fear of social stigmatization, from peers and society at large, remains more prevalent in the men of this culture (Jhally, 1999; Reinhard, 2008). While there may not be any 'logical barrier' to prevent men from such cross-gender transgressions (MacKinnon, 2002), from the perspective of the men in the study, there are still interpretive barriers, based on their perspective on the sociocultural environment, that may preclude them from such engagings.

As a socialization agent, media help construct an idealized masculinity through which male consumers can learn how to act and how to construct their identities (Ging, 2005; McKinnon, 2009; Wohlwend, 2012); indeed, media products often contain texts that illustrate the discomfort of not adhering to this masculine ideal (Hatfield, 2010) or will adopt and modify feminine qualities to make them more masculine, such as making the attention to physical appearance an important consideration for professionally successful men (Weber, 2006). If a media product does not represent this masculine ideal, men who engage with the product typically voice resistance to it (Mazur & Emmers-Sommer, 2002; Pompper, 2010). Even when they seem to enjoy the engaging, such enjoyment may result from other circumstances, such as feelings of affection for the women they were with during the engaging (Harris et al, 2004).

This study focuses on men's selections and interpretations of cross-gendered media products. 'Understanding how men construct the gendered address of the media texts with

which they engage could provide insight into the reasons why they do or do not engage with media texts not targeted at them. The study's approach considered gender as an interpretive framework that an individual learns from society and culture, and which may affect how an individual engages with gendered media products. Thus, how a man views himself in accordance with appropriate gender behavior may impact how he selects and interprets gendered media. This concern then results in the central research question for this study: How do men view gender in relation to their reasons for engaging with media products meant for women?

Interviewing Process

As the study's goal was to understand the processes of media engagings, it was necessary to conduct an interpretive investigation of subjects' actual media engagings. By focusing on specific situations of media engagings, the individual's experiences and evaluations of the gendered media were thoroughly probed for how they made sense of what happened in the situations. Using Brenda Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (SMM) (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003), an in-depth interview was constructed that asked people to recall their experiences for four types of gendered media engaging. The interview was constructed as a combination of SMM Life-Line and Micro-Element interviewing protocols (Dervin, 2008). The Life-Line protocol asked interviewees to recall all of their gendered media engagings over the course of their lives. The Micro-Element protocol asked interviewees to recall specific aspects of how they made sense of selected media engagings, such as their questions at the time, their emotions, their ideas, their sense of self, and so forth; these specific aspects are referred to as sense-making instances.

The sample consisted of twenty-two men, most of whom were undergraduates at a large Midwestern university with five solicited to participate outside of the university setting but still residing in the Midwest region of the United States. The majority were Caucasian, with only two self-identifying as Hispanic. Their ages ranged from nineteen to forty-four years-old at the time of the interviews in 2008. The majority reported they were single, with four in relationships and three married at the time of the interview. Participation ranged from interviews with the primary investigator -- in person, over phone or instant messenger -- to filling out an in-depth open-ended questionnaire; all methods of participation included the same questions in the same order.

The study involved a 2x2x2 factorial design. The interviewees' self-proclaimed gender was one factor. Another factor asked them to recall their experiences with media meant for women and those meant for men. The interviewees determined the gendered nature of the media products; the senior author, as primary investigator, did not impose any definitions of what was meant by gendered media; only examples were offered. The final factor was one of time. Interviewees were additionally asked to recall gendered media products they engaged with once and those they engaged with repeatedly over some span of time. For analysis purposes, this paper focuses on men's recollections of cross-gendered

media products used only once and used repeatedly. All the subjects had at least one situation for these two types of engaging, resulting in forty-four experiences to be analyzed.

For each recalled situation, the interview protocol measured various sense-making instances of their cross-gendered media engagings. First, the interviewee discussed why they saw the media product as being directed to one gender and not the other. This question measured the interpreting of the media product as meant for men or meant for women. After discussing this interpretation, the next series of questions focused on: what led to the engaging, what led them to use this product only once or repeatedly, and how they saw the issue of gender appropriateness relating to their previous answers. The first two questions measured the selecting of the media product, while the third question measured the perception of gender appropriateness in their reasons for engaging with the media product. The remaining questions followed a standard SMM interview protocol (see Reinhard, 2008), but were not analyzed for this report. To find patterns in what men were putting forth as their reasons and perceptions of gender appropriateness, a thematic analysis was conducted.

The following results sections use men's discussions of their engaging with the HBO series *Sex and the City*, animated series from the 1980s, and musicals to illustrate how these themes relate to one another. For the animated series, such as *My Little Pony, Strawberry Shortcake* and *Care Bears,* all three men described them as 'girlie cartoons' or animated series meant for girls that they had engaged with only once. For the musicals, all three men described these media products as ones they engaged with repeatedly. For *Sex and the City*, two men had engaged with the television series once or twice, while three men engaged with the series repeatedly. All of the men's recollections from the interviews are reported using pseudonyms and pertinent demographic information from the time of the interviews.

Seeing Gender Differences in Animated Series

For three men, their experiences as children watching what they referred to as 'girlie cartoons' served as some of their first experiences when they became aware that gender differences existed. Either they watched the animated series and realized there was media meant for girls and media meant for boys, or they became curious as to why it seemed that something was meant more for girls than boys. For these three men, nothing in these girlie cartoons or their experiences watching the shows compelled them to be regular viewers. Indeed, quite the opposite: these experiences appeared to prove to them that gender differences existed for a reason.

Franklin, a 19 year-old Caucasian man in a relationship at the time of the interview, recalled watching *My Little Pony* and *Strawberry Shortcake* as a child because his younger sister would watch them. In a sense, then, he was surrounded by these programs, and his exposure was more happenstance than choice, as he said the shows 'made me want to barf.' According to Franklin, the nature of these series made them distinctly for girls, from the 'bright pretty colors' and 'happy squeely sounds and made up words' to the villains being 'puff balls' and the lack of fighting between the heroes and villains. This lack of fighting was

especially egregious to Franklin, as he thought it made the series 'sickeningly sweet' and a waste of time:

> Always 'Please don't fight' and if the bad guy did anything bad, the bad guy was always an incompetent fighter and couldn't do anything, and the little girls ran away and cried and then the bad guys would give up and be sorry and so on and so forth. And then everyone would live happily ever after. And I'd sit there going, did I just waste 30 minutes of my life on this? Really, huh. Okay.

The content of the series appeared to be enough of a detriment to his engaging with it that he could not understand how anyone could relate to it.

This inability to relate appears to have prevented Franklin from enjoying the animated series. He decried the 'series' lack of story, hero, and conflict: 'I keep coming back to that word hero but it's just in this particular case there was nothing there, just sugar drops and gum fairies.' Without anything drawing his interest, Franklin did not consider this a media he wanted to repeatedly engage with. He felt that as '… a little boy who was more interested in being strong and being tough and that sort of thing' the series had nothing to offer him because it did not offer any information about how to deal with his real life. While he said he was not a violent person, Franklin further explained '… the bully down the block wasn't going to leave me alone because I hand him a sugar cane and say "will you please talk with me?"' Thus, even though the animated series may have provided girls with information as to how society and culture at the time deemed they should act, Franklin did not see the series offering him the same help. Instead, he saw the animated series as telling him that he is 'supposed to be defending women.' Franklin was quick to recognize how that idea might make him sound, and the sentiment was clear to him at the time of the interview: 'I know I'm being sexist here, but they don't actually do anything, it's all, let's try and talk it out. Instead of let's fix things, it's let's comfort one another awhile, which made no sense to me.' Perhaps, then, the animated series did offer him information, but it was information that reinforced gender stereotypes instead of feminist messages of equality.

Isaac, a 26 year-old single Caucasian man, saw many of the same features in the girlie cartoons that Franklin did in his explanation of the 'animated series' gendered nature, such as 'there's a lot of talking about feelings, what I refer to as feely stuff' to handle conflicts instead of what he was used to seeing where 'the conflicts is that somebody would get punched, or somebody would get shot.' In his mind, at that age, the dialogic or passive aggressive styles of conflict resolution were unusual and did not work as well as violence to resolve such conflict, and so the shows did not appeal to him. Furthermore, the shows' focus on caring meant 'all the girls liked it, so okay, if that's what girls are into, if that's what they like, that's their stuff. That's girlie stuff.' Perhaps what also made the gendered nature of the animated series apparent to Isaac was the lack of a boy audience for the girlie cartoons:

It didn't seem like it would appeal to boys, not a lot of boys were watching it, and I sat down, and I could see why this doesn't appeal to guys because I'm not currently like it either. … And since all the girls were liking it, that's pretty much what we saw, okay, that's what they're watching, that's what they like. It was directed that way, and we just let it go that way. We didn't really question it too far past that.

In a way, then, Isaac saw what was happening around him as boys watched certain cartoons and girls watched other cartoons, and what he saw in the series confirmed this observation.

Isaac, however, was curious about this observed gender difference, which led him to sit down and watch the animated series 'to see what the appeal was to it.' According to Isaac, the curiosity was more than just about the girlie cartoons, but also about gender differences, particularly because his mother worked in electrical engineering, which he recognized as primarily a masculine job. At an early age, then, he wondered about the animated series: 'Why was it being labeled as such by everybody else? Why was it only girls were watching it? Why was it that it was this way? Why was this the way they were?' At this time, Isaac appeared to be questioning gender differences, and he said the animated series did 'kinda help me understand the difference between what can be considered for guys and what can be considered for girls. And at least in respect to when it came to cartoons…' Seeing the features of the animated series as being 'girlie' helped him understand the binary between what girls and boys like:

> … it kind of set up the standard of, okay, if you're a girl, these are the kinds of things you're supposed to be into. If you're a guy, these are the types of things you're supposed to be into. It kind of fed into creating a dividing line between men and women, as far as what one should be watching, what one shouldn't be. It created a baseline for it.

While Isaac recognizes such a baseline as being 'ignorant' today, the observed binary still represents what American society generally deems appropriate or inappropriate for one gender as opposed to the other. Furthermore, according to Isaac, the issue of gender appropriateness did not prevent him from watching more of the animated series; instead, he said they just did not appeal to him. Without violence, the girlie cartoons did not entertain him.

Robert, a 24 year-old single Caucasian man, echoed the sentiments of both Franklin and Isaac. Like the other men, Robert focused on the features of the animated series, especially the characters of *My Little Pony*, when he called it 'practically a living girlie-girl stereotype': the preponderance of characters being girls and ponies was evidence to him that the animated series was meant for girls, since 'most girls want a pony at some point.' Robert recalled watching the girlie cartoons while home from school and flipping television

channels. Seeing these animated series, for Robert, 'cemented that there was [a] difference between boys and girls.' He said the show did not teach him any specifics about these gender differences, but as with Franklin and Isaac the animated series served to enforce that such a difference exists: 'at that point it translated as something ineffably alien.' This 'alien quality' hindered his continued engaging with the animated series. He said he did not understand this difference at the time, but also that no one 'tried to explain it to me and simply told me to accept these things.' As with the Franklin's and Isaac's brief engagings, Robert's experiences with 'girlie cartoons' served to further an understanding that gender differences exist, but not why or what to do about it.

Connecting to Others via Musicals

Musicals represent another media genre perceived as feminine by the men in the study. Unlike 'girlie cartoons,' however, these experiences were recalled as times when the men repeatedly returned to watching this film genre. Isaac was joined by two other men who recalled times when musicals played a role in their lives. These roles, however, were not necessarily indicative of the men having affection for and being fans of musicals. Instead, the men indicated that these movies primarily served the purpose of relationship maintenance in their lives, with only one man indicating any real affection for a particular musical.

Returning to Isaac, he recalled that his later experience with musicals was impacted by how the men in his life reacted to them. He mentioned watching *Grease* a couple times, which he considered 'very girlie, as most musicals, with the exception of one and that's *Little Shop of Horrors*.' At first, his perception of the film's gendered nature may have resulted from his dislike of singing and dancing, and thinking that because he didn't like it, the film was not meant for men. However, he went on to discuss the impact his father and other men had in this perception:

> And then you start talking to your dad, and inviting a few guys over, and you bring it up and it's no, no, it's musicals, plays, girlie stuff, and you start building that in your mind there. Thinking back now, I didn't like it but I don't see any particular reason why I would consider it girlie, other than it was told to me. Ultimately that's it, I was told.

His overall perception of musicals as gendered then comes from this combination of his own preferences and what other men were telling him, but apparently that explanation made more sense at that time, as his reflection during the interview led him to explain: 'There's no real logic behind it, no real argument for it either.' It may be that Isaac's reaction to the film, because it was not more strongly linked to concerns about gender appropriateness, did not inhibit his continued engagement with the film.

While he watched the animated series to satisfy his curiosity, Isaac's engagement with *Grease* appeared more 'imposed, out of laziness.' He recalled how his mother watched the movie, and thus had control of the TV:

> And there wasn't another TV in the house that I could watch, and I didn't want to go play with one of my other brothers. So it was either sit there or go find something else to do and I was really not in the mood to go find something else to do.

While he did not feel like stopping the engaging due to being lazy, he also said he did not really see anything 'gender specific to it.' He didn't see the appeal of the movie, but he reiterated that he did not see anything gender specific about it until he was told to see such aspects. So, although he perhaps was not very keen on *Grease*, he did not perceive anything in it as preventing him from watching it, and even the comments from the other men in his life did not stop him from watching the film and spending time with his mother.

Leonard, a 25 year-old single Caucasian man, recalled an experience similar to Isaac's, as he watched musicals mostly because of a family member, and he also perceived them as gendered from being told so. For the interview, he specifically recalled his time watching *Oklahoma*, of which his sister was a fan. The fact that his sister and her female friends enjoyed it, while his male friends did not, seemed to help him determine for whom the movie was meant. Additionally, like Isaac, Leonard somewhat recalled seeing his father's reaction to the film:

> I want to say maybe it was my father's reaction to the musical also. I remember he sat there and watched it a few times with everyone. But I think he was kind of rolling his eyes at it, at certain parts, so maybe I thought this isn't quite for men based on my dad's reactions. But I don't know if that's really true or not, I might be just totally making that up.

In thinking about these messages he perceived from others, he did seem somewhat confused, as the content of *Oklahoma* did not seem meant for women: 'it's a cowboy movie, you know, there's some gunfights, there's a big tornado, you have the action elements and the violent elements in that movie.' In Leonard's estimation, these content features appeared to be suitable for boys, and perhaps this interpretation was enough to help offset his perception of those watching the film.

As Leonard recalled, his sister would watch the movie, and he would 'usually skulk into the room and sit down and watch part of it or all of it.' He enjoyed being with his family to watch the movie and talk about it. This family viewing activity appeared important to Leonard: 'No matter what, no matter how bad a movie it was, that's something that I really enjoy. So whether or not I liked the movie, I would enjoy watching it with my family.' In a sense, then, these times with the musical were a means by which Leonard could bond with his sister and other family members. And while he did say that he often wondered why he was watching the movie, he did not recall seeing any issues with gender appropriateness while spending time with his family.

Although his sister enjoyed the movie, he recalled that she was just as capable and likely to make fun of it as he was: 'Some of it was just over the top cheesy. Cheesy stuff. So we could sit around and talk about it, make fun of it and the characters. That was a good time.' Indeed, this ritual for watching movies appears to have been central to Leonard's continual experience with musicals, and it may be that this ritual outweighed any concerns about gender appropriateness that may have precluded his engaging with the films. Indeed, he did not really think in terms of gender appropriateness at the time, although he felt the need to say so in the interview:

> I don't know why I have this impulse to say that I did it, because I don't think I really did. I don't think I ever said, 'I can't be watching this, this is only for girls.' I mean, I was aware that … or thought that it was girl media, but I never thought it would be inappropriate for me to be watching it.

This response was not defensive, nor was it posturing; Leonard seemed to think that he should have been concerned about the gendered nature of *Oklahoma*, but his recollection of the fond times spent with his sister and other family members appears to be at the heart of these cross-gendered media engagings. Thus, for Leonard, musicals served a purpose of helping create familial bonds.

For Ted, a 20 year-old Caucasian man in a relationship, the Disney animated musical feature *Beauty and the Beast* served a purpose in helping define an aspect of his life. Ted saw the movie as an 'emotional drama' focusing on a 'female heroine' with a 'kind of a negative portrayal of manly men, you know, big, stupid, brawny.' These content features led him to perceive the gendered nature of the movie, along with the perception that 'I don't think guys generally are led to enjoy musicals. They generally ask, "why the hell are they singing."' Thus, all three men here have discussed seeing other men's negative reactions to musicals as part of their reasoning for labeling such media as meant for women. Additionally, similar to the other men in this study, Ted also connected this musical to a family member: he associated his grandmother with Angela Lansbury who played Mrs. Potts in the film. His first encounter with the film was happenstance, as he recalled sitting down to watch it after someone happened to put it on; his connection between Mrs. Potts and his own grandmother may have resulted from that first viewing.

Along with this familial connection, Ted also personally connected to the music of the film. At that time in his life, he was 'really getting into music. I was never good at any musical instruments but I sang a lot. And that gave me something to sing at that point.' Along with seeing singing as more feminine, Ted did comment on how the movie reinforced gender stereotypes of how 'men were action-driven, action-oriented, and women were these damsels in distress who didn't want to be and were told not to be.' His love of singing, however, appeared to be enough to override such perceptions of gender appropriateness, and Ted repeatedly watched the movie because he preferred it: 'It was just fun. I still do enjoy the music and the animation is gorgeous and it was just a well put together movie.' As

he grew older, music became more central to his life, as his parents placed him in choirs, leading him to sing semi-professionally for an audience.

The music of the movie, then, helped him connect to others. He did think, however, about the perception of gender appropriateness and men: 'I think there's a lot more male-oriented music out now, but back then it seemed like either you like classic rock but if you liked any other kind of music you were a sissy.' Nonetheless, his love of the music and singing was more important to him and this perception was not enough to deter his engaging with this media product. Overall, the men discussing musicals appeared able to justify their engaging as a motivated by a desire for satisfy social inclusion. Thus their engaging with musicals was a means to connect with others around them; this gratification has been seen elsewhere as a drive behind men's media use (e.g. Adriaens et al, 2011; Jansz, Avis & Vosmeer, 2010).

Criticizing and Connecting with *Sex and the City*

The previous two sections differed primarily in the time spent with the gendered media product: some men recalled only watching 'girlie cartoons' for a brief time, while others repeatedly engaged with musicals. While girlie cartoons seemed to define gender differences for the men, musicals appeared to offer a means by which to connect to others, thereby providing a function in the lives of the men during that time. This last section considers men watching *Sex and the City*, but analyzes times when they watched the show only once and times when they repeatedly engaged with the series. The same patterns seen in the previous sections appear here as well.

Ben, a 20 year-old single Caucasian man, was only a child when he watched the series, which may partly explain why he only engaged with it once. Even at that young age, however, he saw the series as meant for women because the content featured women as main characters, but also because 'when I watched it, it was with my mom and she was laughing a lot. I didn't understand the jokes, so it was a lot of ladies' humor.' Ben indicated some familial connection in his reason for watching the series, as it was time to spend with his mother. Beyond that, he did recall seeing more episodes as they were on HBO, but he 'never really got into those episodes.' He saw the series as 'being for women,' indicating a perception of gender appropriateness involved in this engaging. Indeed, this perception appears to be the reason for his ending the engaging, as this perception appears linked to a concern about how other men would respond if they knew he watched *Sex and the City*:

> I think just having developed my belief that it was for women was really prominent for me because I think it's normal for men to have issues with…not really having issues, but with gender kind of … like in high school, the insult was always don't be a woman, or something like that. Or you're such a girl if you were scared to do something. Or something like that, and I guess those things kind of prevented me from wanting to look deeper into those kinds of things to see if I liked them.

While he acknowledged the merits of the show, citing the awards it had won, he admitted it was not for him. This concern regarding how other men would react appears to have hindered any desire Ben might have had to spend more time with the ladies of *Sex and the City*.

On the other hand, Jeremy, a 32 year-old single Caucasian man, did not want to continue watching the series because he did not see any merit in it. Like Ben, Jeremy saw the series as meant for women because it focused on 'these female characters and their exploits' but he did not think these characters were 'positive role models' for the women watching the show. More than this negative perception of the content, the show did not appeal to him as the women were 'talking about things I don't necessarily want to hear about. …the fact that I don't like it is my primary reason for not thinking it has…it doesn't appeal to me and it doesn't fall under that male media stereotype.' As with the other men discussed here, the dislike of the series apparently served as part of Jeremy's reason for interpreting the media product as feminine.

Similar to Ben, Jeremy watched the series because of others in his life: he was living with his male cousin, who would occasionally watch it. As a result of this exposure, Jeremy came to believe the show was attempting to masculinize the women, putting them in 'a stereotypically male role in terms of their career choices and how they wanted to advance their careers, and also their sex lives, the media generally doesn't portray women as being so casual about it.' This representation of women did not induce him to watch the series, saying he was more irritated by it than interested in it: 'I don't like the characters, I don't think they're necessarily good people. I don't like the … whole relationship aspect of it, it really turns me off.' He criticized the series, including the appearance of the lead actress, Sarah Jessica Parker: 'Just looking at her hair was enough to make me not want to watch the show. Not really good reasons, but …' Jeremy's criticism prevented him from watching more, but he wanted to stress that it wasn't his criticism of the gendered nature of the show: 'It's like it's showing women in more of a male light, but that's not why I didn't like the show. I didn't like the show because I thought it was just … kind of ridiculous.' Neither issues of gender appropriateness or the gendered nature of the series were the reason Jeremy did not watch more of *Sex and the City*; he simply did not like it.

Neither Ben nor Jeremy wanted to spend much time watching *Sex and the City*; there were three men in the study who did. Adam, a 31 year-old single Hispanic man, saw the series as meant for women because it was mostly the girls in his high school who were watching it – and, specifically, girls who were becoming sexually aware and empowered:

> It catered to girls that were, like, opening up; it was the liberation of all these women that had always thought they had to be a certain way and had always been taught they can't do this until they're married, and they can't have this type of boyfriend and this show's opened all that up. And it was for girls because guys didn't have to open up that way. We were

already that way. So this show taught girls that it's okay to have a friend like Carrie, that's a sex star, or whatever that is. It's okay, she's not a freak. She's your friend …

Adam celebrated the series' ability to represent this more masculine portrayal of women in the same way Jeremy criticized it. Both men saw this content as the reason for the series' gendered nature, but Adam thought this portrayal as a good for the women around him: '… this show taught women; it was a great thing, because they don't have to hold themselves down like they did previously.' This positive reaction to the themes and message of the series could help explain his continual engaging with it.

Adam started watching the series after seeing the girls around him act 'very differently.' He was curious about this series 'that's making people change. A lot of people.' In this way, he started engaging with the series to satisfy his curiosity, and he deemed the series as appropriate for women's lives as it reflected changes to contemporary society and the acceptance of women's sexuality:

It actually is appropriate in the age that we live in that women don't have to follow all these mores or whatever they are, all these rules established that says a woman has to be like this and can't ask a guy out, you know, all the things that are like that.

For Adam, then, increased equality between the genders is appropriate, and his preference for the series seems partly based on how it handled changing gender dynamics in the late 20th century. Along with an appreciation for the content of the series, such as the strength of the relationship among the characters and the definitive personalities of each character, this egalitarian approach to gender also appeared in his reasoning for repeatedly engaging with the series:

Because it's the liberation of women. I see this show, it's the liberation that you're in control, forget about what men think, forget about what anybody else thinks, you do what you want do, you feel proud of it and that's the sexiest thing there is.

Overall, Adam appreciated the show's dismissal of traditional gender stereotypes, and this appears to be the main reason he enjoyed watching *Sex and the City*.

Similarly, Zane, a 29 year-old married Caucasian man, appreciated the quality of the series. The nature of the characters and the plot inspired Zane to define the series as gendered, and he also mentioned that he had 'the feeling that the marketing was very targeted toward women, too.' Furthermore, he also saw the series as upending the traditional depiction of sexual content as meant for men:

> Even the sexual content is not … not what we would associate with what
> men watch. Stereotypically speaking. A lot of television is saturated with
> the kind of sexual content that is targeted to keep men's attention, in my
> opinion, I guess, but this one I don't think does.

Unlike the other men, Zane was married when he began the engaging: he watched the
series with his wife as part of their regular routine of watching TV series from DVD
collections.

> We like to watch together, and she borrowed it from a friend but said we
> could watch something else, if you don't want to check this out and I said
> well, you already got it in so let's just finish it. … I was newly married, I
> think I just really enjoyed it.

He did comment that this image of a man being excited to watch more of the series 'didn't
jive with my image of what men want. But I found it very compelling myself.' Thus, while
there is some indication that Zane was drawn to repeatedly engage with this series because
of his relationship with his wife, he also seemed drawn to the content of the series enough
to not be dissuaded by any perception of gender appropriateness.

Indeed, Zane's appreciation of the series – particularly the storytelling and character
development -- constituted the primary reason he repeatedly returned to it:

> And the storytelling is of a high enough caliber, all the characters were
> real, the situations they got into weren't really mega-formulated like, will
> she get the boy? Oh! Will she get … they were really interesting stories,
> where different things happened, there was something to learn about.

Perhaps the key phrase in that reasoning is 'there was something to learn about.' Zane
would go on to discuss his interest in Sarah Jessica Parker's character as a sex advice
columnist, and how he was interested in seeing 'where she got the fodder that she was
writing about. And also, it's a field I'm interested in.' It appears, then, that part of Zane's
appreciation of the content was due to how it connected to his own personal interests.
While he was aware that normally this show would not be 'what I think most men would be
interested in watching, including myself,' he was impressed by how the show did not fall
back on stereotypes in its treatment of sex and sexuality. In recognizing that the series
offered a serious and respectable treatment of a topic in which he was interested, Zane
apparently found *Sex and the City* to serve a role in his life that helped overcome any issues
of gender appropriateness that may have hindered his engaging with it.

Similarly, Mark, a 27 year-old single Caucasian man, appeared to enjoy the series
because he found he could relate to it. As with the other men, Mark saw the gendered
nature in the focus on the 'lifestyles of females in New York City' as well as the fact that he

did not see much likelihood of doing the same activities or even watching the series with his male friends. As with the men who discussed engaging with musicals, his engaging with *Sex and the City* began due to a familial connection, as his mother was watching the series and he decided to join her. Interestingly, he recollected how this first encounter with the women in the series helped 'put me in their shoes,' indicating a beginning of identification that would apparently become central to his engaging.

Mark reported that he continued to watch the series because he appreciated the content, but also because it connected to his own life, beyond just the familial connection with his mother.

> I found humor in it and it reminded me of eating pizza with my mom, I became and addict to the show. I was single and many of them were on the show, always in search of the right one.

While Mark could not relate to the specific concern the women had of meeting the 'man of their dreams,' he could relate to the more general relationship concern of finding a romantic partner. The ability to identify on this level was further found in how he did not see any issue with gender appropriateness in his repeatedly engaging with the series: 'Hey, both men and women can be single waiting for the right person to come along. There is hope; there wasn't a show like this for guys.' Rather than focus on the stereotype of women seeking romance, he stressed the more universal nature of an individual's seeking love. In some fashion, watching the series helped Mark deal with feelings he associated with being romantically unattached and thus served some role in his life beyond simply enjoying the content.

Conclusion

The approach of uses-and-gratifications is concerned with how a person uses the media product, arguing that in some way the use will gratify a need or desire of the individual (McQuail, 1997; Rubin, 2002; Ruggiero, 2000). According to this exploratory analysis, men who find a gratifying use for a media product meant for women may be able to overlook any social and cultural issues of gender appropriateness and enjoy the cross-gendered media engaging enough to continue. In some way, the men struggled with issues of gender appropriateness and how they should engage with something deemed to be stereotypically feminine. Their reasons for engaging related to interpretations of gender and gender appropriateness that align with social and cultural gender norms. Many times, however, the perception of the utility of the gendered media product and the focus on personal affinities for the gendered media product appears to offset, downplay, or otherwise reduce the concern over being appropriate given these gender norms. When the focus was more on their personal affinity and situated needs, the men may have been able to overlook or ignore the social and cultural conventions.

Thus, the less men considered engaging with the media product meant for women as being about other gendered individuals in their lives, and the more they saw the engaging as being about themselves, then the less they were concerned about issues of gender appropriateness in their reasons for engaging with the cross-gendered media product. This conclusion could usefully draw on the concepts of priming, social schemata, and schema theory (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Gregory Hoplamazian (2012) have considered a similar theoretical application by combining gender schema theory, social role theory, and social-cognitive theory: the more important gender is to the person's identity, then the more likely it impacts how they engage with gendered media products. Perhaps the conclusion to draw from these connections between the reasons for engaging and the interpretations of gender appropriateness is that people tend to only think about gender when primed to do so. Unless something happens to have the individual think about gender, that particular mode of thinking, or socially informed schemata, may not be activated, and the individual may relate to the media product based on some other schemata, such as any based on personal affinity or situated needs.

While there does appear to be a pattern of men being less concerned – or at least portraying themselves as such – about gender for personal reasons, there also appeared a high amount of entering such situations only because of their relationship with women. It is possible that the men's engagings were due more to the women they were with than to their own personal affection for the media product, similar to a finding on dating couples and romantic films (Harris et al, 2004). Society's goal should be for men to feel as comfortable engaging with media products meant for women as we want women to feel engaging with media products meant for men – so that men will seek them out on their own, and not via a situation involving women. There is some indication in this study of that possibility, if the men can find value in the product or in the process. It may take being introduced to such media products in situations when they already feel comfortable, such as with people they respect and for whom they have affection. If they do not see value, however, then they may transfer the usefulness of such engagings to those they are with, rather than to the media product. It may be that they need to see value in engaging with the media product to help them become generally more comfortable with media meant for women.

Such transference may be most likely to occur with heterosexual men seeking to create or maintain a relationship with a romantic partner; it is necessary to see if homosexual men make the same transferences. The men in this study were not asked to identify their sexual orientation, which is a limitation in need of address. Homosexual men may be less likely to feel constrained by the need to maintain certain interpretive and performative behaviors that align with notions of traditional masculinity, and thus may be less likely to be affected by perceptions of appropriateness for men. Even the importance men ascribe to adhering to any hegemonic notions of masculinity could impact their engaging with these gendered media products, which was found in Knobloch-Westerwick and Hoplamazian (2012). Further research should consider these factors when

understanding the connections between the reasons for engaging and the interpretations of gender appropriateness.

Overall, this exploratory analysis suggests the utility of studying men's interpretations of gender in their media engagings to allow men to voice how they see issues of sociocultural expectations impacting what they choose to engage with, and how they desire to do so. The findings in this study suggests ways in which men may be comfortable crossing the gender line, when those perceptions of gender appropriateness to not impinge upon their desire to engage with something they deem as important to them. More work needs to be done to more fully understand the interpretive processes that constitute such cross-gendered media engagings, and hopefully, over time, men will feel increasingly comfortable with media meant for women, such that the use of a gender binary to create media products may no longer be worthwhile for media producers.

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