

An Environmental Scan and Thematic Analysis of Media Depictions of Women Engaged in

Bathroom Behaviors

Upper Project Report, Summer 201

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Introduction

Everybody poops. And nearly everyone is disgusted by feces. But these commonalities do not extend to how people feel when they fail to satisfy social norms of defecation and flatulence.

Weinberg & Williams (2005) interviewed 173 heterosexual (H) and non-heterosexual (N) male (M) and female (F) students at a Midwestern university to discover attitudes about defecation and flatulence. A significantly greater proportion of HF (55%) and NM (59) than HM (27) and NF (38) were likely to experience discomfort for being overheard defecating or flatulating out of fear that they would be perceived as less attractive and as violating gender norms. HF's fears about being perceived as less attractive and less feminine for being overheard defecating may not be invalid, as some HMs interviewed reported that hearing a woman defecate might spoil their image of women as "perfect creatures that are the object of desire" (Weinberg & Williams, 2005, p. 327).

These differences in attitudes towards defecation between sexuality/sex groups should be interpreted as gender differences (or differences between performances of behaviors and attitudes deemed appropriate for people of a given biological sex), because NM and NF tend to be more feminine and masculine, respectively, than their heterosexual counterparts (Bailey, *et al.*, 1997).

Consistent with Weinberg & Williams (2005), Toner & Ackman (2000) found that a primary concern of feminine women with irritable bowel syndrome was lack of control over their bodies. They interpreted this concern as resulting from gender role socialization which dictates to women that they should be neat, clean, and in control. Weinberg & Williams similarly interpret HF's and NM's greater discomfort for being overheard defecating as a consequence of feminine

gender identification which emphasizes purity and restraint. This, in turn, raises the question of how have fecal matters become linked with feminine gender identity.

Media have the capacity to shape our perceptions of proper gendered behavior (Wood, 2011). From the perspective of cultivation theory (the idea that media consumption correlates with adoption of the values and beliefs presented in the media) Signorielli (1989) found that endorsement of traditional gender roles correlated positively with amount of TV watched, because TV programs themselves reinforced traditional gender roles.

Media are a significant source of information and attitudes about bodily functions, including menstruation, aging, and hair growth, (Raftos, *et al.*, 1998). Before the end of WWII, female hair removal was not a normative practice. Since then, however, it has received significant advertising and TV attention, which has largely presented it as sexually attractive, conducive to social mobility, and femininity (Lebray, 2002). These ideals seem to have been internalized by society, indicated by Maslov & Graman's findings (1998) that men and women who viewed a video of a woman who hadn't removed her body hair for two months rated her as less attractive, intelligent, sociable, and feminine than men and women who viewed a video of the same woman after she had removed her body hair.

The proposed study and gendered depictions of fecal matters in the media

Given media's potential to influence beliefs about appropriate gendered behaviors, even as they relate to bodily functions, and given the prevalence of the belief that fecal matters are unfeminine, it is reasonable to suspect that media may play some role in perpetuating the perceived conflict between fecal matters and femininity. Given the conflict between fecal matters and femininity, it might also be the case that urination is construed as unfeminine, and that media play a role in this belief.

To fill the paucity of research on this topic we propose a study to scan the media landscape for depictions of women's bathroom behaviors (i.e. women talking about or actually flatulating, urinating, or defecating) in all forms of media (e.g. film, TV, advertising, online memes, etc.) and to analyze them for recurring themes. Our purpose is to understand and illuminate how environmental contexts (media contexts, in particular) shape and reflect women's bathroom behaviors.

The following research questions will be addressed in this study:

1. Does the media depict bathroom behaviors as shameful or stigmatizing for women?
 - a. Do women depicted in media attempt to conceal their bathroom behaviors?
 - b. How do women depicted in the media react to being "caught" defecating, flatulating, or urinating?
2. Do women depicted in the media employ euphemisms to discuss bathroom behaviors?
3. How do men depicted in the media react to women's bathroom behaviors?

Procedure and timeline

Dr. [REDACTED] and I plan to conduct this research over the course of two semesters—Summer and Fall 2015. The first step in this study will be to conduct a literature review. Potential sources of insight include research on media's role in shaping beliefs about gender, the content of media's depictions of bodily functions as they pertain to gender, and gender differences in the experience of bodily functions. We may also explore research on stigma, the policing of women's bodies, and communicative practices which shape and reflect our perceptions of gendered behavior. Ultimately, we plan to develop an informed theoretical background on these issues so that we know what to look for during the next stage in this study.

Next, through the lens of the research listed above Dr. [REDACTED] and I will conduct an environmental scan of the media landscape for depictions of women engaged in bathroom behaviors. We will scan TV programs, films, advertisements, and internet memes to derive our sample of depictions of gendered bathroom behaviors. We will use keyword searches on Google and Youtube, and probe friends and family for examples of such depictions.

Our cursory search has already revealed a few examples, including scenes from the films *Bridesmaids*, *The Change-Up*, *White Chicks*, *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle*, *Hall Pass*, and *The House Bunny*, an episode from the popular TV series *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Broad City*, and a series of video advertisements for the product Poo-Pourri.

Our next step will be to conduct a thematic analysis of our sample to identify recurring themes in depictions of fecal matters. As an example, in some of the aforementioned scenes men's sexual interest evaporates for women when they engage in defecating. A more extensive analysis of a large sample will reveal more themes which might contribute to dominant perceptions of gender and bathroom behaviors.

The literature review, environmental scan, and thematic analysis should be completed during Summer 2015. After this phase of the study our focus will shift to preparing a manuscript for publication in a peer-reviewed journal and applying to conferences to present our research, both of which will be undertaken in Fall 2015.

Potential impact of the study

This research would be the first of its kind, illuminating the ways in which media may or may not contribute to pervasive beliefs in our society about the relationship between gender and bathroom behaviors. This information would be useful from a media literacy perspective because discovering a potential source of sexist messages is essential to critically analyzing them.

This research might also be the first step in applying cultivation theory to this topic. Cultivation theory would determine the extent to which media actually influence public perceptions on this topic.

Relevance of proposed study to faculty's expertise

Dr. [REDACTED] is a Health Communication and Gender scholar, who teaches Communication and Gender (COMM 3070) at the University of Utah. As stated in her syllabus, this course “apprehends gender as a cultural communication practice that simultaneously reflects and enacts the culture in which it occurs.” She has conducted ample research to support this claim, including several studies focusing on how communicative processes can either suffuse certain practices with sexist implications, or provide a temporary escape from patriarchy, depending on how they are conducted ([REDACTED] et al, 2011).

Additionally, Dr. [REDACTED] teaches Introductory Communication (COMM 3190) and Health, Communication, and Culture (COMM 116/110), and does media studies-related research. Each of her courses builds on the axiom of COMM 3070—that what we perceive as reality stems from the symbology that we affix to communication. My proposal seeks to identify and explore problematic cultural meanings associated with gender and the related media representations of gendered practices and behaviors, which correlates perfectly with Dr.

[REDACTED]'s expertise and research interests.

Relevance of proposed study to student's goals

Conducting this study would be my first semi-professional application of knowledge and skills related to research, writing, and gender studies. Additionally, it would be my first experience collaborating with a professional researcher for an extended project. Such experience would be transferable to any career I might pursue. Within the field of psychology, this research

would provide valuable base knowledge for a career in psychology of gender and health psychology, because this research will familiarize me with beliefs about behavior appropriate for gender and the ways in which these might intersect with patients' experience of digestive health issues or self-esteem.

Completion of this study will also serve as evidence for my commitment to scientific discovery and my ability to remain engaged in a specific topic for an extended period of time. Both of these qualities are surely conducive to admission into research oriented graduate programs, which I eventually plan on applying to.

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Sample