

# Looks are all important for girls on tween TV

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"Girls can participate in everything that boys can, but while doing so they should be attractive." This, according to American researchers Ashton Lee Gerding of the University of Missouri and Nancy Signorielli of the University of Delaware, is one of the gender ideals conveyed by tween television programs to their young viewers. Their research, published in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*, also found that men and boys were stereotypically portrayed as brave in action-adventure programs.

Because children's self-concepts as well as their conceptions of the world around them may be shaped by the types of images they see on television, Gerding and Signorielli specifically studied how gender is portrayed in American television programs created specifically for tween viewers between the ages of eight and twelve years old. During

this important developmental stage, social and intellectual schema are established and identity and gender are explored. Tweens also watch the most television.

Characters in 49 episodes of 40 distinct American tween [television programs](#) aired in 2011 on Disney Channel, Disney XD, Nickelodeon, and the Turner Cartoon Network were analyzed in terms of their attractiveness, gender-related behavior, and personality characteristics such as bravery and handiness with technology. Two specific genres were examined: teen scene (geared towards girls) and action-adventure (geared towards boys).

The results show that [females](#), compared to the American population, were underrepresented in the action adventure genre, but that the gender distribution in the teen scene genre mirrored the male-female distribution in the U.S. population. Overall, compared to males, females were portrayed as more attractive, more concerned about their appearance, and received more comments about their looks. Females were presented similarly in both genres. Overall, males were shown in varying levels of attractiveness, and were portrayed as more stereotypically brave in the action adventure genre.

A critical finding was that tween programs still portray females as more attractive and more concerned about their appearance than males. Tween programs had no so-called "unattractive females" in them, but featured males with varying levels of the American cultural ideals of attractiveness and unattractiveness. Gerding and Signorielli believe this may send the message that even though women can participate in everything that men can, they should be attractive while doing so and should work to keep this up.

"The messages inherent in the action adventure programs are that males and females mostly participate in and do the same things, but that males

are more important than females because they vastly outnumber them," says Gerding.

"Tween programs, which are seen worldwide, put viewers at risk of developing skewed conceptions about gender-roles that may be limiting," adds Signorielli. "We therefore advise the use of media literacy programs to help mitigate some of these potentially deleterious effects."

**More information:** Gerding, A.L. and Signorielli, N. (2013). Gender Roles in Tween Television Programming: A Content Analysis of Two Genres. *Sex Roles*. DOI: [10.1007/s11199-013-0330-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-013-0330-z)

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