Vampires and Shades of Grey: How media shapes who we are

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Do you watch television shows like those produced in Hollywood? They may be shaping the way you act.

Are you a Homer Simpson or a Dexter? How about a Clair Huxtable or a Carrie Bradshaw? Chances are you don't think of yourself as a doughnut-loving oaf, a brilliant serial killer, an unflappable power-mom/lawyer nor a lovelorn fashionista.

But when you watch these characters on [television](link), your brain is doing something you may not even realize, says University of Arizona associate professor of marketing Hope Jensen Schau: figuring out who you are.

Schau, also associate dean of Eller MBA Programs and the Gary M. Munsinger Chair in Entrepreneurship and Innovation, knows this not only from decades of inquiry preceding her but from her own marketing and sociology research.

In one recent study, Schau and a colleague asked college students to create a collage of products that television characters of their choosing might use in a given day. They then interviewed them about what they'd created to tap into participants' ideas about the characters and themselves.

Schau and her colleague found that participants engaged with TV characters in ways far more nuanced than just aspiring to be like them—a view espoused by much of the previous research. They often saw the characters as like them, not just identifying with how they looked or dressed but relating to values they perceived in the [characters](link) and using their behaviors to define themselves by comparison or contrast.

For example, one participant noted that "the fashion on *Sex and the City* is over the top, but that's OK. It sure makes my fashion addiction at Forever 21 more acceptable."

Another participant, an African American student, found inspiration in *The Cosby Show*, saying that while she did not aspire to be a lawyer like the character, Clair, she was encouraged that those like her were presented in professional roles, like doctors and lawyers.

Twilight and the Feminist Debate; 50 Shades of Taboo

Of course, no man or woman is an island. Even when we watch television or read a book alone, we do it as a member of various groups: as a member of a family or as a friend; as a member of a group like Weight Watchers; or as a member of a social media group, like Instagram. So popular media not only affects how we construct our identities, it helps define what's normal, whether that's in the break room or in the bedroom.

Consider, for example, the record-breaking *Twilight* franchise, which Schau uses to help students recognize popular media as a social force.

While it is tempting to dismiss the *Twilight* books as little more than "abstinence porn" (one of many monikers given by its critics), Bella, the heroine of the series, navigates the roles of child, lover, wife and mother in ways that offer its mostly young, female audience rich fodder for deciding how women should behave.

In fact, feminism is one of the most discussed issues in *Twilight* fan communities. Schau found that forums for *Desperate Housewives*, a show one might expect to provoke questions about feminism, had only 26 posts that even mentioned the word, and no dedicated threads. *Twilight* forums had 41 threads on the topic, and the word "feminism" appeared in more than 1,100 threads.

Seen through this lens, television, movies and books are not just the bailiwick of producers and critics; they are an issue of public health. That idea inspired Jake Schreiber, who graduated from the UA last year with a dual masters in business administration and public health.

"It encouraged me to view popular culture and media in ways I hadn't considered before, and pushed me to think critically about an

enormously popular work of fiction and what the potential ramifications could be," Schreiber said.

E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which began as *Twilight* fan fiction, explores sadomasochistic sex and became the fastest-selling paperback in history. Schreiber pored over all three books in the "Fifty Shades" trilogy, tallying occurrences of stalking, controlling behavior and physical violence, then reached out to see how the books had changed conversations around domestic violence.

What he found was a dearth of attention to instances of violence in the series, which surprised him in light of the heated debates inspired by *Twilight* and a phenomenon he feels may be due to the series' taboo subject matter. For while people who worked with at-risk women said they were concerned about how content like that in *Fifty Shades* could cloud our ideas of red-flag behaviors, only a handful of professionals were even willing to talk with him.

Power to the People

Today's media barrage may seem like an ill unique to the modern world, but Schau points out that popular culture has always informed identities and social norms.

Before television and movies, before even the printing press, plays, stories and songs informed and influenced human culture, reflecting life but also instructing us on how to live.

The difference today is that technology spreads the messages—those the media moguls feed us and those we co-create as consumers—faster and further than ever before. But Schau also sees that technology as empowering.

"The means of production have never been so readily available," she noted.

So rather than clinging to a character from a TV series, consumers today have readily available tools and platforms to create and broadcast their own stories. They can also change the ones they are given.

Consider *Xena: Warrior Princess*, a show that launched in 1995, three years after *The Cosby Show* ended and at the dawn of the Internet era. What started as just a heroic woman warrior became, by series finale, a heroic lesbian warrior, Schau notes, because a passionate fan base hungry for a positive media representation demanded it.

Those kinds of fans are referred to as a cult following. But the interplay between them and the fictions they embrace is nothing short of transformative.

"What we imagine as trivial popular culture isn't trivial," Schau says. "Societies grow when people see trajectories that are consistent with our goals. Every time we create trajectories showing what somebody could be, we change society."

Provided by University of Arizona

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