

Girls receive conflicting career messages from media, new research shows

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

Teenage girls like and feel more similar to women in appearance-focused jobs such as models and actresses, though they find female CEOs and military pilots to be better role models, according to a new study by researchers at Oregon State University.

For the study, 100 [girls](#) and 76 boys ages 14 to 18 were shown

photographs of model Heidi Klum, actress Jennifer Aniston, CEO Carly Fiorina and military pilot Sarah Deal Burrow. Klum and Aniston represented the appearance-focused careers and Fiorina and Deal Burrow represented the non-appearance focused careers.

Girls generally rated the women in the appearance-focused careers higher on likeability than the women in the non-appearance focused careers. Girls also rated the women in the appearance-focused photos as more competent than the other women. Boys, on the other hand, found the women in the non-appearance focused careers were more competent. The boys also ranked the appearance-focused photos lower on likeability.

The findings highlight the conflicting messages girls receive in the media about careers and success for women, said researcher Elizabeth Daniels, an assistant professor of psychology who studies the effects of media on body image and gender.

"Girls know they should look up to female doctors and scientists, but they also know that women in appearance-focused jobs get rewarded by society," Daniels said. "It is, therefore, reasonable to think they would prefer women in those jobs."

But the study also shows that [teenage girls](#), as well as boys, value women in roles that are not appearance-focused and generally find those women to be better role models. That should encourage movie, television and advertising executives to showcase a much wider range of working women and move beyond the "moms and models" that are the most common examples of women in media, Daniels said.

"The dominant belief is that sex sells," she said. "But our findings show teens have positive attitudes toward other images of working women, providing evidence that there is support for these other images."

The research was just published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research*. The co-author is Aurora M. Sherman, an associate professor in the School of Psychological Science at OSU. The study was conducted while Daniels was on the faculty at OSU-Cascades; she's now working at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

The researchers wanted to study adolescents' attitudes about working women in part because they are under-represented in the media and are often depicted in stereotyped roles. In film and prime-time television, for example, women are less likely to be shown working in professional roles such as executives at a major corporation. That could send a message to young people that such occupations are unattainable or inappropriate for women.

"We already have a lot of research about the negative effects of sexualized or idealized media images on young women," Daniels said. "But there is very little research about the effects of other types of positive images of women, such as CEOs or military pilots. We wanted to understand how young people respond to those images."

The teens in the study were given a brief description of each woman's occupational accomplishments with each photo. The teenagers then answered a series of questions about the women in the photos, including: likability, competence and similarity to themselves.

The majority of both boys and girls rated the military pilot and the CEO as good role models, at 90 percent and 79 percent, respectively, while 58 percent said the actor was a good role model and 48 percent said the model was.

"The most striking finding is the disconnect between girls' [role model](#) evaluations and their ratings of women's competence," Daniels said.

But the research also shows there is interest in and appetite for more diverse images of working women in media and advertising, she said. "Those images are reviewed positively by audiences, but it is really rare to see women featured in their careers."

Additional research is needed to understand how media may affect the career aspirations of children and adolescents.

"Does it affect the teens' aspirations of what they can be? Does exposure to a female CEO or military pilot encourage girls to join a computer coding club or take math or science classes? We don't know yet," Daniels said.

Future research also could look specifically at why boys downgraded the competence and likeability of [women](#) in appearance-focused jobs but teen girls did not, Sherman said.

"We speculate that teens may be receiving some deeply mixed messages about the importance of appearance for femininity that may be at odds with the messages they are learning about competence in occupations," she said.

More information: *Journal of Adolescent Research*, jar.sagepub.com/content/early/.../58415587025.abstract

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