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David Gauntlett discusses movies such as Knocked Up and Spiderman 3, men’s and women’s magazines, TV shows, self-help books, YouTube videos, and more, to show how the media play a role in the shaping of individual self-identities.

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• a comparison of gender representations in the past and today, from James Bond to Ugly Betty;
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• an outline of creative approaches, where identities are explored with video, drawing or Lego bricks;
• a website with extra articles, interviews and selected links at www.theoryhead.com.

David Gauntlett is Professor of Media and Communications at the University of Westminster, London. He is the author of several books on media audiences and identities, including Moving Experiences (1995, 2005) and Creative Explorations (2007). He produces Theory.org.uk, the award-winning website on media, gender and identity.
For Jenny (1977–)
and Finn (15 January 2008–),
always
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PICTURE CREDITS

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Why explore the relationship between media, gender and identity? Media and communications are a central element of modern life, whilst gender and sexuality remain at the core of how we think about our identities. With the media containing so many images of women and men, and messages about men, women and sexuality today, it is highly unlikely that these ideas would have no impact on our own sense of identity. At the same time, though, it’s just as unlikely that the media has a direct and straightforward effect on its audiences. It’s unsatisfactory to just assume that people somehow copy or borrow their identities from the media. To complicate things further, we live in changing times. What we learned in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s about media and gender might not be so relevant today, because the media has changed, and people’s attitudes have changed. The ‘role models’ of times gone by might be rather laughable and embarrassing now.

Even the idea of media ‘audiences’ has become more complex in recent years. Since the first edition of this book was published in 2002, we have seen the launch of MySpace (in 2003), YouTube (in 2005), and numerous other social networking sites where people can be creative media producers, sharing their work with thousands and sometimes millions, or just communicating with friends. This was all possible previously, of course – in particular, the World Wide Web had become a popular place for people to share their life stories and creative products during the 1990s (see Gauntlett, 2000; Gauntlett and Horsley, 2004). The promise of the Web, to connect people and enable them to create, share and collaborate, was there from the
start, but has only really taken off since around 2003, with the growth of ‘Web 2.0’ tools which make this especially easy for people. Today, YouTube and MySpace are the fourth and sixth most popular websites globally (see Alexa.com for latest rankings). Apart from search services, these are the most popular websites in the world.

We know from various studies that individuals – especially young people – are spending less time with traditional media, such as television, and more time online, interacting with others through these popular websites (see, for example, BBC, 2006a, 2006b). So people’s relationship with media today is more often characterised by the role of ‘user’ or ‘participant’ than ‘audience member’. Nevertheless, each of us is still ‘audience’ of a lot of electronic and print messages every day – and ‘audience’ seems to be the best word we have for it at the moment. Perhaps we can accept that the idea of ‘audience’ itself has now changed, and incorporates a level of interactivity.

This book, then, sets out to establish what messages the media suggests to contemporary audiences about gender, and what the impact of those messages might be. We will consider some of the previous writings on media and identity, but rather than dwell on the same set of works that textbooks have covered in the past – a set of concepts and ideas which I will suggest are not always so helpful today – this book seeks to introduce the reader to particular social theorists (such as Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler), whose ideas about identity give us more to work with when considering the role of the media in the formation and negotiation of gender and sexual identities. This second edition also gives you a taste of new ‘creative methods’ which have been used to explore identities in unconventional ways.

WHY MEDIA INFLUENCES ARE IMPORTANT

In modern societies, people typically consume many hours of television each week, look at magazines and other publications, surf the internet, pass billboards, go to the movies, and are generally unable to avoid popular culture and advertising. In the most obvious example, people in Europe and the USA typically spend three or four hours per day watching TV. That’s a lot of information going into people’s heads – even if they don’t see it as ‘information’, and even if they say they’re not really paying much attention to it. (For statistics on leisure activities and media consumption, see www.worldopinion.com, www.statistics.gov.uk.)

It seems obvious and inevitable, then, that we will be affected by these experiences somehow. The media shows us situations and relationships from other people’s points of view – indeed, it is part of the eternal fascination of drama that we can see ‘how the world works’ in lives other than our
own. This could hardly fail to affect our own way of conducting ourselves, and our expectations of other people’s behaviour. For example:

- Domestic or romantic dramas (including soap operas) show us how neighbours, friends and lovers interact. When a person has a lover for the first time in their lives, how do they know how to behave? And where do we learn the typical shape and content of friendships? Our main reference points are surely films and TV.
- Magazines aimed at women, and increasingly those for men, contain all kinds of advice on how to live, look and interact. Even if we only read these items in an ironic state of mind, it must all sink in somewhere.
- Movie heroes, female or male, are almost uniformly assertive and single-minded. The attractive toughness of these stars, whilst not necessarily a problem, is ‘advertised’ to us continuously, and therefore should have some impact on our own style and preferences.
- Images of ‘attractive people’ abound. This may have absolutely no influence on how we rate our own appearance, and that of others – but that’s improbable.

So it is imperative that, as students of contemporary culture, we try to investigate the ways in which everyday popular media material affects people’s lives. Researchers have tried to do this before, of course – not always with great success, as we will see in the next chapter.

**MEN AND WOMEN TODAY**

Before we consider the media’s role further, it is worth establishing the relative positions of women and men in modern Western democracies. If there is a ‘battle of the sexes’, who is winning nowadays? Women and men generally have equal rights – with a few exceptions within various laws, which we see being campaigned against and changed. The sexes today are generally thought to be ‘equal’, to the extent that the cover of *Time* magazine wondered if feminism was ‘dead’ in June 1998. There is even a noisy minority who argue that feminism has ‘gone too far’ and that it is now men who have the worst deal in society (Farrell, 2001; Nathanson and Young, 2001, 2006; Hise, 2004; Ellis, 2005).

**Equality and inequality**

The modern Western world is an odd mix of equal and unequal. Women and men may ‘feel’ equal, but at the same time are aware that this is kind-of
inaccurate. Women have the formal right to do most things that a man can do, and vice versa; situations where this is not the case become well-publicised courtroom battles. More informally, women and men generally believe themselves to be equals within the sphere of personal relationships.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens (of whom more in Chapter 5) asserts that intimate relationships have become ‘democratised’, so that the bond between partners – even within a marriage – has little to do with external laws, regulations or social expectations, but is based on the internal understanding between two people – a trusting bond based on emotional communication. Where such a bond ceases to exist, modern society is generally happy for the relationship to be dissolved. Thus we have ‘a democracy of the emotions in everyday life’ (Giddens, 1999).

A 1999 study based on longitudinal data from the US General Social Survey, run by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, concluded that over the previous 27 years:

Marriage has declined as the central institution under which households are organized and children are raised. People marry later and divorce and cohabitate more. A growing proportion of children have been born outside of marriage. Even within marriage the changes have been profound as more and more women have entered the labor force and gender roles have become more homogenous between husbands and wives.

(Smith, 1999)

Compared to the findings of similar studies in 24 other advanced industrial countries, Americans were found to be ‘on the middle range of many of the attitude scales’ and could be expected to further ‘evolve in their attitudes towards acceptance of more non-traditional attitudes’, the study found (ibid.). In other words, the new ‘democracy of the emotions’ which is beginning to take hold means that adults are less willing to stay in unhappy relationships or dysfunctional households, and are increasingly likely to ‘vote with their feet’ and go in search of happiness elsewhere.

Women increasingly reject dated ideas regarding their gender role, and men are changing too. The UK’s National Centre for Social Research (2000) reported that their annual survey of social attitudes had found that:

The traditional view of women as dedicated ‘housewives’ seems to be all but extinct. Only around one in six women, and one in five men [mostly older people], think women should remain at home while men go out to work.
This sounds like a huge break with tradition, then. But note that this is a change in attitudes. The reality of actual behaviour is somewhat different. The government’s Time Use Survey for 2005 found that:

Women in Great Britain spent more time on shopping and other domestic work in 2005 than on paid work, 228 minutes and 146 minutes respectively. In comparison, men spent more time on paid work (225 minutes) than on domestic work (129 minutes). If paid work and domestic work are combined, women still spent 20 minutes more on average per day on work than men.

Overall, women carried out about two thirds of the time spent on housework (178 minutes a day compared with 100 minutes for men). Women spent more time than men cooking and washing up, cleaning and tidying, washing clothes and shopping (159 minutes per day compared with 71 minutes per day for men). Men spent more time performing DIY repairs and gardening (23 minutes per day compared with 11 minutes per day for women).

(National Statistics, 2006a)

It is worth remembering, of course, that paid work can be difficult and tedious. But housework is almost always tedious, and exhausting. Men, we note from this study, only really pull the stops out for the satisfaction of putting up some shelves and growing potatoes. Young fathers seem to be doing a bit better: New Scientist (2005) reported that British fathers of under-fives spend an average of two hours per day on child-related activity; in the 1970s it was just 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, there are obvious inequalities on the ‘macro’ level of Western states. Most visibly, those people we see on TV running governments and businesses are more often men than women. For example, the proportion of female politicians in Western European parliaments was 19 per cent on average in 2007. In the USA, this was just 16 per cent. In Sweden and Finland, by contrast, it was 47 and 42 per cent respectively (all data from Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2007).

In the UK, just 15 per cent of businesses are owned by women (ESRC, 2006), whilst in the United States, women own 26 percent of all non-farm businesses (US Department of Labor, 2002). According to the research organisation Catalyst, women held just 15.6 per cent of the top corporate officer positions in Fortune 500 companies in 2006, and occupied only 14.6 per cent of all board seats in those companies. The number of women in
top-paying positions was 6.7 per cent (Catalyst, 2007). A United Nations report on women’s impact in business, academia, civil society, the media and the judiciary, in 2006, was surprisingly stark: Rachel Mayanja, the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues, officially summarised it by saying, ‘Women remain largely invisible, their voices unheard’ (United Nations, 2006).

The principal jobs in businesses and organisations are no doubt protected by a ‘culture of men’ at the top. For example, when Cambridge University – a supposedly ‘enlightened’ institution – commissioned a report from external consultants to find out why women were not well represented in its top jobs, the researchers identified ‘an insular and secretive “macho” culture, dominated by white males’ (BBC Online, 2001a) – revealing how everyday attitudes at the ‘micro’ level can have an impact upon the ‘macro’ level employment statistics.

Macho work cultures are detrimental to women’s chances of progression – and may not be so great for men either. The pressure of work in the City, London’s financial centre, was highlighted in 2007 by a spate of male breakdowns, suicides and a murder. ‘It is a very macho culture, a very competitive culture’, commented Andrew Kinder of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy. ‘It is surely no coincidence that there are more Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous meetings in the City than anywhere else’, noted the Independent (Mesure, 2007).

Traditional attitudes can have an impact on other people’s lives at all levels. Although girls in the UK tend to do better than boys at school, for instance, studies by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) have shown that they still tend to be pushed by their teachers and careers advisors towards ‘the five “C”s – cleaning, catering, caring, cashiering and clerical’ (EOC, 2006). Masculine stereotypes meanwhile mean that young men still tend to avoid precisely these careers, even though they say that they might enjoy them (EOC, 2005). Furthermore, a study in 2007 found that Black and Asian women were ‘missing’ from almost a third of workplaces in areas with significant ethnic minority populations: ‘Those who want to work are finding it more difficult to get jobs, progress within them and are more likely to be segregated into certain types of work, despite leaving school with the same career aspirations as white girls and similar or better qualifications than white boys’, the study found (EOC, 2007). All of these stories – which are mirrored around the world – are about other people’s expectations getting in the way of individual choices and achievements.
All bad news?

In spite of the depressing facts and figures above, there is still a lot of on-going transformation for us to be reasonably pleased about. Society clearly changed a great deal in the second half of the twentieth century, and sexual equality is something that almost everybody in power at least *says* they are in favour of. On the everyday level, as noted above, women and men expect to be treated equally, and are frustrated if this does not happen. As we will see in later chapters, magazines for women encourage their readers to be assertive and independent. Pop stars like Beyoncé, and other media icons such as Oprah Winfrey, convey the same message. Magazines for men, whilst sometimes going overboard with macho excess, encourage men to understand women, and face up to modern realities. Women and men are usually equals in today’s movies and TV shows; we raise an eyebrow when this isn’t so. Things have changed quite quickly, and there is still some way to go, but equality within everyday life is now quite well established. This needs to be carried forward into the formal world of work and government where a disproportionate number of men are running the show. Other changes are needed in the world of work too – amazingly in the ‘modern’ world, working fathers are allowed few concessions to spend time with their children, and paternity leave, which is typically minimal or non-existent, is viewed as a luxury. (Tony Blair set a poor example by refusing to take paternity leave upon the birth of his son in 2000; instead he said he would work less for a short period so that he would be able to ‘help out’, but insisted ‘I have to run the country’, as if no Prime Minister had ever taken a break (BBC Online, 2000a).) Mothers are still seen as the natural carers of children. But attitudes and regulations are changing, albeit very slowly, in this area too.

Masculinity

Every so often there is a wave of media coverage about contemporary ‘masculinity’ and the idea that it is ‘in crisis’. In Australia in 2006, for example, former political leader Mark Latham prompted such a debate when he complained, in print, about the decline of ‘Australian male culture’:

This has been squeezed out of society by a number of powerful influences: the crisis in male identity brought about by changes in the workplace and family unit; the rise of left-feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, with its sanitising impact on public culture;
and, more recently, the prominence of neo-conservatism and its timid approach to social behaviour and language.

(Latham, 2006)

This observation led to his forthright conclusion: ‘Australian mates and good blokes have been replaced by nervous wrecks, metrosexual knobs and toss-bags’ (ibid.). Unsurprisingly, Australian columnists took this prompt to spend a few weeks discussing the state of Australia’s men in general, and toss-bags in particular.

In Britain, a somewhat more temperate debate was prompted by the publication of Anthony Clare’s book On Men: Masculinity in Crisis in 2000 – which gained publicity since Clare was a well-known broadcaster – and, separately, London’s Royal Festival Hall ran a series of public discussions on ‘Masculinity in Crisis’ in spring 2001. Similar discussions were prompted in the USA by the publication of Susan Faludi’s Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man (1999), in which Faludi, well-known as the bestselling feminist author of Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women (1991), appeared to come out in sympathy for the modern man.

Anthony Clare sets out the ‘masculinity in crisis’ idea at the start of his book:

Now, the whole issue of men – the point of them, their purpose, their value, their justification – is a matter for public debate. Serious commentators declare that men are redundant, that women do not need them and children would be better off without them. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that men are in serious trouble. Throughout the world, developed and developing, antisocial behaviour is essentially male. [...] And yet, for all their behaving badly, they do not seem any the happier. Throughout North America, Europe and Australia, male suicides outnumber female by a factor of between 3 and 4 to 1. [...] Men renowned for their ability and inclination to be stoned, drunk or sexually daring, appear terrified by the prospect of revealing that they can be – and often are – depressed, dependent, in need of help.

(2001: 3)

Men used to know their place, as provider for their family, says Clare, and this was a role to be proud of. But today, as women show that they can do everything that men can, this provider role becomes diminished. Women
are also finding that they can bring up families perfectly well without the father being present at all, and scientific advances seem to be making men unnecessary to reproduction itself (Clare 2001: 7).

All this adds up to the modern men’s ‘crisis’ although, of course, it’s a bit over-excitabile to call it a crisis. It’s a set of changing circumstances, and men, most certainly, need to renegotiate their place within this new culture. But – without wanting to sound too masculine and rational about it – it’s surely nothing to have a crisis about. Men may not be able to fit into their traditional role, but that’s no reason to conclude that life is over for men. Men just have to find a new, modern, useful place for themselves in the world – just as women have to. And this is where the mass media and popular culture come in, because they offer important tools to help men – and women – adjust to contemporary life. Many of the academic books on ‘masculinity’ are disappointing, as they dwell on archetypes from the past, and have little to say about the real lives of modern men; whereas top-selling magazines and popular self-help books – and, to a lesser but significant extent, TV shows and movies – are full of information about being a man in the here-and-now. So these are discussed later in this book.

To be fair, Anthony Clare doesn’t think that men need to have a crisis, either, but they do need to change. Emotional communication, and the expression of love and vulnerability, are important. Men don’t need to become ‘like women’ but can develop a new form of masculinity which places ‘a greater value on love, family and personal relationships and less on power, possessions and achievement’, he suggests (2001: 221). He carefully sifts through scientific evidence in order to reject the idea that men cannot help themselves for biological reasons. As one reviewer noted,

Clare does a thorough job of demolishing the ‘unreconstructable caveman’ that pop science peddles to the media. It’s easy (but false) to say that testosterone causes aggression; the truth – that [testosterone]-levels and aggressive behaviour are linked in a circular relationship dependent on a multitude of environmental factors – is hard to fit into a tabloid headline.

(Kane, 2000)

Clare is particularly good on the masculine drive to ‘prove’ oneself through work – perhaps because, as he admits in the book, he has suffered from this himself. He marshals evidence from major studies, though, to support his point that the quality of personal relationships has a much greater impact on
a person’s levels of life satisfaction than their success in work. Indeed, ‘once a person moves beyond the poverty level, a larger income contributes almost nothing to happiness’ (2001: 100; see also Layard, 2006). Therefore he recommends social changes to allow men and women to spend less time in work, and more time experiencing their relationships with each other, with children, and with the world in general – which, the evidence shows, makes for happier people and – lest employers be worried by all this talk of leisure – better workers.

In Susan Faludi’s *Stiffed* (1999), as mentioned above, the well-known feminist surprised readers by arguing that contemporary culture damages men just as much as women, albeit in different ways. (This, of course, is not actually inconsistent with the basic idea of feminism, which originally sought to free both women and men from constricting gender stereotypes.) Explaining the book’s title in a 1999 interview, Faludi said:

> To me it has three meanings: working stiff; the way guys have been cheated by this society; and the fact that men are supposed to be stiff – that they have to show their armoured self to the world all the time. Having to do that hurts them as much as it hurts everyone else.

(Halpern, 1999)

Like Clare, Faludi notes that men who spend their lives in work miss out on a proper engagement with their partners, children and friends, and don’t get anything for it except an early death. Faludi finds that the traditional male ‘provider’ role also bitterly hurts men who cannot find employment. In this sense, Faludi feels that men have been ‘betrayed’ by a society which had seemed to promise them that the traditional masculine role would deliver some ultimate happiness. She also implies that feminism was mistaken to see men’s traditional role as being one of ‘power’, and wrong to think that men had kept the best lifestyle for themselves and only given women the boring responsibilities. A role which turns men into bread-winning robots, subject to the whims of the employment market and disconnected from quality relationships and parenthood, is not particularly powerful or desirable, she observes. It is important to note that Faludi does not renounce feminism, or suggest that women now have a better deal in society than men; her point is more that contemporary society is just as depressing and constricting for the average man as it is for the average woman, and that men deserve to be heard.

Faludi further argues that both sexes have now become victims of the culture of consumerism, appearances and glamour:
Truly, men and women have arrived at their ornamental imprisonment by different routes. Women were relegated there as a sop for their exclusion from the realm of power-striving men. Men arrived there as a result of their power-striving, which led to a society drained of context, saturated with a competitive individualism that has been robbed of craft and utility, and ruled by commercial values that revolve around who has the most, the best, the biggest, the fastest. The destination of both roads was an enslavement to glamour.

(1999: 599)

It is our media-saturated consumer culture which now has men as well as women ‘by the throat’ (1999: 602), she suggests, and she urges men to overthrow the overly competitive, uncommunicative and ultimately unrewarding world they have created for themselves.

There is general agreement, then, that this is not a particularly stable time for the ‘male identity’, if such a singular thing exists. Some parts of popular culture are said to be ‘reasserting’ the traditional forms of masculinity, whilst others are challenging them – and as we will see later in the book, it’s even debatable which media products are conveying which messages. More of that later; now we’ll turn to masculinity’s opposite – or counterpart – femininity.

**Femininity**

The ideas of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ have been pulled through the social changes of the past few decades in quite different ways. Masculinity is seen as the state of ‘being a man’, which is currently somewhat in flux. Femininity, on the other hand, is not necessarily seen as the state of ‘being a woman’; instead, it’s perceived more as a stereotype of a woman’s role from the past. Men like their identities to fit within ‘masculinity’, even if we have to revise that term as attitudes change. Modern women are not generally very bothered about fitting their identity within the idea of ‘femininity’, though, perhaps because feminists never really sought to revise femininity, preferring to dispose of the fluffy, passive concept altogether. Femininity is not typically a core value for women today. Instead, being ‘feminine’ is just one of the performances that women can choose to employ in everyday life – perhaps for pleasure, or to achieve a particular goal.

There’s plenty of evidence that traditional femininity is no longer popular. Virtually everybody wants young women to be successful, so the characteristics of femininity – passivity, reticence, assuming that men and
authority figures are probably right and that you are probably wrong – are therefore redundant. Schoolgirls today have shaken off ‘feminine’ docility and are out-performing boys at all levels of school education in both the UK and the USA (www.statistics.gov.uk; www.nces.ed.gov). Sales of the Barbie doll are reported to be falling because only the youngest girls will accept such a ‘girly’ toy nowadays, and the pretty-but-passive Barbie doll is easily beaten at Christmas time by toys and games related to Dora the Explorer, the inquisitive and multi-lingual adventurer whose animated TV series is hugely popular around the world (Gogoi, 2006). Meanwhile, young women have a wide range of other assertive ‘girl power’ role models to choose from in magazines, movies and pop music – all of which will be discussed in the following chapters.

Traditional ways of thinking are still present in modern society, of course, so we can think of occasions when a woman may be criticised for her ‘lack of femininity’. And elements of fashion, say, might be commended for adding ‘a dash of femininity’ to a woman’s appearance. Even these examples of the term in use, however, incorporate a recognition of the broadly ‘optional’ role which femininity has today. Whole books have been written about how Madonna showed that femininity is a ‘masquerade’ or a ‘performance’ in her videos from the early 1990s such as Express Yourself and Justify My Love (Schwichtenberg, 1993; Lloyd, 1993; Frank and Smith, 1993). For example, E. Ann Kaplan wrote that ‘[Madonna’s] image usefully adopts one mask after another to expose the fact that there is no “essential” self and therefore no essential feminine but only cultural constructions’ (1993: 160). Madonna was seen to be playing with ‘the given gender sign system’ where ‘femininity’ was just one of the available guises. And indeed, the idea of a woman being seductively ‘feminine’ in order to get her own way is a dramatic cliché appearing in various movies from throughout the last century, so the idea of femininity as a mere performance, to be used by wily women, is not new.

Today, magazines such as Cosmopolitan suggest ways in which cunning women might use ‘feminine’ tricks to get certain things from gullible men, but traditional femininity is far from being essential to the modern female reader – instead, it is just one technique amongst many, and an amusing, lightweight one at that. In a fascinating in-depth study of a group of British working-class women, Beverley Skeggs (1997) finds that her subjects had a complex relationship with ‘femininity’, since they sought the ‘respectability’ which was associated with the ‘feminine’ role, but had no interest in being associated with its connotations of passivity or weakness. The women rejected the historical idea of women’s ‘divine composure’ in favour of their modern ‘having a laugh’. As Skeggs explains, ‘They had knowledge and
competencies to construct feminine performances, but this was far removed from *being* feminine. They usually “did” femininity when they thought it was necessary’ (1997: 116). The women found that they were compelled to invest in femininity in order to succeed economically – such as when applying for a job – and that femininity was also a kind of ‘cultural capital’ which brought both pleasures and problems.

Their forays into femininity were immensely contradictory. Femininity offered a space for hedonism, autonomy, camaraderie, pleasure and fun whilst simultaneously regulating and generating insecurities. The women simulated and dissimulated but did not regard themselves as feminine. [...] Aspects of femininity are, however, something which they have learnt to perform and from which they can sometimes take pleasure.

(Ibid.)

Femininity, then, whilst seen as a ‘nice’ thing for women traditionally, is increasingly irrelevant today. Whilst ‘masculinity’ always included a number of positive attributes which men are keen to hang on to – assertiveness and independence, for example, are clearly good things when not taken to extremes – ‘femininity’ was traditionally lumbered, by the unsubtle patriarchs of yesteryear, with feeble qualities like subservience and timidity. The sensible woman of today has little enthusiasm for these traits, and so the meaning of ‘femininity’ now is just a swishy kind of glamour – and ideally is just a masquerade, utilised by a confident woman who knows *exactly* what she’s doing.

**SEXUAL IDENTITIES TODAY**

Although lesbians, gays and bisexuals continue to face prejudice and discrimination, there is a growing amount of evidence that Western societies – especially younger generations – are becoming more accepting of sexual diversity. When the first edition of this book was published, we were able to report that British attitudes had largely broken with tradition: a 2001 study by Britain’s largest market research group, Mintel, suggested that gay and straight lifestyles were increasingly convergent, and that an atmosphere of tolerance and social mixing dominated in cities (Arlidge, 2001). A MORI poll in the same year found that just 17 per cent of people in England said that they felt ‘less positive’ towards lesbians and gays, and three-quarters of people with children in their household said that they would be comfortable if the child had a gay or lesbian teacher (MORI, 2001). In the USA,
however, surveys suggested some less open-minded views: surveys conducted by Gallup had found acceptance of homosexuality as ‘an acceptable alternative lifestyle’ rising from 38 per cent in 1992 to 52 per cent in 2001 (Newport, 2001), but almost half the population (42 per cent) felt that ‘homosexual relations between consenting adults’ should not be legal. So – have things changed since then?

In 2004, the large-scale Pew Global Attitudes Project found that the question ‘Should homosexuality be accepted by society?’ gained an affirmative response from 69 per cent of Canadians and 77 per cent of Western Europeans, but only 51 per cent of Americans. Fewer than half of American men (46 per cent) felt that homosexuality was acceptable (Pew Research Center, 2004a). It is worth noting that elsewhere in the world, there are more trenchant views: in Kenya, for instance, 99 per cent of people said that the answer to the question ‘Should homosexuality be accepted by society?’ was ‘No’ (ibid.).

Recent polls on legal issues in this area give us a little more information on attitudes in the United States. A CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll in 2007 found that around half of Americans would support the legal recognition of same-sex marriages or civil unions for gay or lesbian couples (24 per cent accepting the idea of same-sex marriages, and a further 27 per cent approving of civil unions but not same-sex marriages). However, almost as many respondents (43 per cent) said that they would approve of neither. Asked whether ‘people who are openly gay or homosexual’ should be allowed to serve in the US military, 79 per cent said yes, 18 per cent said no. On the question of whether gay or lesbian couples should have the legal right to adopt a child, however, only 57 per cent were in favour, with 40 per cent opposed (Polling Report, 2007). As mentioned above, these attitudes can differ by age: for instance, the Pew Research Center in 2006 found that among the over-65s, three-in-four (73 per cent) opposed the legalisation of gay marriage, whereas more than half (53 per cent) of the under-30s were in favour (Pew Research Center, 2006).

As these polls indicate, the legal status of gay and lesbian partnerships has become a hot issue in various parts of the world. Same-sex marriages have been legally recognised in the Netherlands (since 2001), Belgium (2003), Spain (2005), Canada (2005) and South Africa (2006). The US state of Massachusetts recognised same-sex marriages in 2004, a decision which to date has withstood various attempts to overturn it (see the Wikipedia article ‘Same-sex marriage in Massachusetts’ for up-to-date coverage). Same-sex civil unions, similar to but legally not the same as marriage, have been introduced in Nordic countries and Western Europe since Denmark led the way
in 1989. In the UK, civil partnerships came into effect in 2005. (The helpful Wikipedia article ‘Civil union’ provides much detail.) Again, the picture is less positive elsewhere in the world: homosexual acts can result in the death penalty in countries including – at the time of writing – Iran, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

It is not possible to measure the relative influence of the mass media upon changing attitudes to sexuality, of course (although when questioned, MORI respondents said that the media was an important source of information about minorities (MORI, 2001)). In his book *Striptease Culture*, Brian McNair (2002) shows how sex and sexuality have come to be represented in a diverse range of ways in popular culture, and makes a strong case for the central role of popular culture in the rejection of tradition and the transformation of society. It seems likely that as the media introduces the general audience to more everyday gay and lesbian (and bisexual and transgendered) characters, tolerance should grow. Discussions of the representations of sexual minorities in television and film appear in Chapter 4.

**OTHER AXES OF IDENTITY**

Identities, of course, are complex constructions, and gender is only one part of an individual’s sense of self. Ethnicity is obviously an important aspect of identity, and like gender may be felt to be more or less central to self-identity by each individual, or might be made significant by external social circumstances (such as a racist regime or community). Other much-discussed axes of identity include class, age, disability and sexuality. In addition, a range of other factors may contribute to a sense of identity, such as education, urban or rural residency, cultural background, access to transportation and communications, criminal record, persecution or refugee status. Furthermore, whilst usually less significant in terms of overall ‘life chances’, any aspects of the physical body can be relevant to self-identity: for example, whether one is seen as overweight or underweight, tall or short, hairy or shaven or bald, or wearing spectacles, unusual clothes, or piercings. Researchers have studied all of these aspects of identity. This book generally confines itself to discussing gender, though, as one particular part of identity which all individuals, in whatever way, have to integrate and express within their personalities.
### OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

In Chapter 2, we catch up on previous debates about the power of the media within cultural theory and psychological research. Then we consider representations of gender in the media, both in the past (Chapter 3) and today (Chapter 4). In Chapters 5 to 7, we look at some theoretical approaches which we can employ to help us understand how people form their sense of self and identity in relation to the media: Chapter 5 takes up the work of Anthony Giddens, Chapter 6 employs Michel Foucault and Chapter 7 makes use of queer theory. (No previous knowledge of these approaches is assumed.) In Chapters 8 to 10, we turn back to actual contemporary media, and seek to relate some of these theoretical ideas to popular culture. In Chapter 8 we consider popular lifestyle magazines aimed at men, such as *FHM* and *Maxim*, and Chapter 9 looks at those for women, such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*: do these glossy publications play a role in shaping gender identities, or are they pure entertainment? Chapter 10 looks at some aspects of popular culture which provide ideas about ‘ways of living’, from the notion of ‘role models’, to self-help books and their more explicit advice about self-fulfilment. Chapter 11, which is all-new for this edition of the book, discusses ways of exploring identities in which participants are asked to engage in creative visual tasks – including my own recent study in which participants were asked to build metaphorical models of their

### MEDIA, ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY

identities in Lego. Finally, the conclusion brings together a number of key themes which emerge through the course of the book.

A note on methodology

The book mixes an analysis of previous theories and research with some new material. Quotations from e-mail interviews are included in the chapters on men’s magazines, women’s magazines and role models, providing qualitative information about how people relate to media texts. E-mail interviews are very similar to any other kind of interview, except that the researcher is able to contact people from different parts of the world quite easily. As a means of surveying the general population, this is a bad method (the most obvious problem is that only people with internet access are even potentially reachable). For interviewing fans or users of a particular media artist or artefact, though, the internet is extremely valuable – fans can be found via websites and message boards dedicated to the performer or thing in question, and are often happy to share their thoughts about the object of their affection. It’s also not too hard to find people willing to be interviewed about their other media habits and interests.

Some people say ‘You don’t know who you’re talking to on the internet – they might be lying to you’, but this is often a weak reservation; people are no more likely to waste their time lying in an e-mail interview, than in a
face-to-face interview. Where in-depth interviews about magazine reading or pop music idols are concerned, in particular, it seems unlikely that anyone would bother making fictional submissions. Of course, respondents may leave out or ‘modify’ parts of their account, but that is the case in any interview situation.

Elsewhere, I have sometimes taken the responses of consumers (of a movie, or a self-help book, say) from websites where everyday people are requested to post their views – such as The Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) for movies, and Amazon (www.amazon.com) for books and music. Whilst comments from these sites could not be used as the basis for a whole thesis – because their authors are a self-selected bunch of people interested in reviewing things on websites (who may not, therefore, represent the ‘general audience’) – quotes from these sites are useful for fleshing out an idea or illustrating a point, and they do represent the spontaneously-offered views of people who are actually interested in the media product in question.

**Funny way of talking**

This book is not intended to be written in pointlessly complex language, but a few specific terms from the worlds of sociology and cultural studies will spring up here and there. Most students will probably be familiar with them already, but for clarification, here’s what I mean by the following terms:

*Text* – In media studies, ‘text’ can refer to any kind of media material, such as a television programme, a film, a magazine, or a website, as well as a more conventional written text such as a book or newspaper.

*Discourse* – Broadly means ‘a way of talking about things’ within a particular group, culture or society; or a set of ideas within a culture which shapes how we perceive the world. So when I talk about ‘the discourse of women’s magazines’, for example, I am referring to the ways in which women’s magazines typically talk about women and men and social life, and the assumptions that they commonly deploy.

*Biological determinism* – The view that people’s behaviour patterns are the result of their genes and their biological inheritance. Biological determinists typically argue that women and men are fundamentally different, and that they cannot help it – they were born that way.

*Social constructionism* – The view that people’s personality and behaviour are *not* pre-determined by biology, but are shaped by society and culture. People are not fixed from birth, and can adapt and change.
Modern life and modernity – The present time in developed Western countries. Although postmodernists have correctly observed a range of cultural features of developed societies (such as scepticism towards science, religion and other ‘macro’ explanations; consumerism; superficiality, and the importance of appearance and media image), I agree with Anthony Giddens that it’s not really worth calling these features ‘post’-modern, because we do not really live in a wholly new era. The term ‘post-traditional’ is certainly useful, however. More on these terms appears in Chapter 5.

Other terminology will be explained as it appears.

WHAT’S WRONG WITH THIS BOOK

Like all books, this one spends time discussing things that the author considers to be relevant and interesting, at the expense of other matters which are judged to be less pertinent, or which there simply wasn’t room for. This section offers brief explanations for some of its limitations:

The emphasis tends to be more on the choices of individuals, and less on the social constraints which they may face

There is a growing social perception, which is certainly encouraged by popular media, that people can make what they want of their own lives. This book explores this idea of personal autonomy – and therefore might occasionally appear to be assuming that we all live in a ‘middle class’ world where people are free to do what they like and not be inhibited by lack of money, or fear of social rejection or violence. Needless to say, however, most people do face social, cultural and financial constraints, which have been well documented by social scientists for many decades. These constraints can be very powerful. At the same time, though, individuals do have choices, and we are surrounded by media which celebrates a range of possible lifestyles (whilst also, perhaps, selecting and channelling what seems to be available). Rather than simply rehash the sociological pessimism which assumes that any sense of individual autonomy is more-or-less irrelevant because of the poverty and sexism imposed by capitalism and patriarchy, this book takes individual identities – and their relationship with popular media – more seriously, because changes in people’s consciousness will ultimately lead to changes in the wider society (an idea developed further in Chapter 5). We should also note that the notion that you can choose a way
of living, as suggested by some of the theorists and media which are dis-
cussed in this book, is not actually limited to the middle classes, even if it
sounds, to some people, like a ‘middle class’ discourse.

The book doesn’t spend much time criticising media texts themselves

A number of previous books on media and gender have consisted of
detailed criticism of particular representations of women (e.g. MacDonald,
1995; Tasker, 1998; Gateward and Pomerance, 2002), or representations of
men (e.g. Cohan and Hark, 1993; Lehman, 2001; Spicer, 2001). Even
Liesbet van Zoonen’s excellent introduction to Feminist Media Studies
(1994) spends more time on critical approaches to texts than on the more
significant question of how audiences relate to them. Although these text-
based approaches may reveal ‘hidden’ (i.e. not-so-obvious) aspects of media
messages, they often do not help us to understand why such texts are
appealing or popular, or how they are consumed by actual audiences. (They
may also suggest interpretations of texts which are not apparent to most
viewers, and it is difficult to assert that a particular academic reading of a
text is superior to that made by any other person.) In this book I will
discuss the changing representations of gender in Chapters 3 and 4, and
elsewhere, but rather than describing worrying aspects of texts in themselves,
I will be considering – in later chapters in particular – how we can under-
stand the ways in which popular media are connected to the gendered iden-
tities of real people. In other words, how do mass-produced items (from the
‘outside’ world) become significant in how we think of ourselves (in our
‘inner’ world)?

The book only focuses on popular, mainstream media

Although many delightful challenges to the status quo are made by small-
scale or minority media producers and artists, this book is concerned with
the messages about identity, gender and lifestyle which people most commonly
encounter, which means that there is a deliberate focus on the popular and
mainstream.

The book doesn’t simply spell out the process by which we acquire gender

This book argues that there is not a single, straightforward psychological
process through which gender identities are formed; instead, there is a