

Journal of

Gender Related Studies

(JGRS)

Gender Stereotypes in Television Advertisements on the Career Aspirations of Adolescent Girls in the United States



CARI

Gender Stereotypes in Television Advertisements on the Career Aspirations of Adolescent Girls in the United States

Oprah Gail Winfrey

Princeton University

Accepted: 16th Jan, 2026, Received in Revised Form: 5th March, 2026, Published: 9th April, 2026



Abstract:

Purpose: The study aimed to impact of gender stereotypes in television advertisements on the career aspirations of adolescent girls in the United States

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The impact of gender stereotypes in television advertisements on the career aspirations of adolescent girls in the United States is significant, as such portrayals often limit their self-efficacy and aspirations for leadership or STEM careers. Advertisements that depict women primarily in traditional, passive roles reinforce societal norms and narrow girls' perceptions of what careers are available to them. However, portrayals of women in leadership and professional roles have been shown to inspire and broaden girls' career ambitions, highlighting the need for more inclusive and empowering media representations.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social cognitive theory, cultivation theory & role congruity theory may be used to anchor future studies on the impact of gender stereotypes in television advertisements on the career aspirations of adolescent girls in the United States. From a practical standpoint, the research provides actionable recommendations for advertisers and media creators. It emphasizes the importance of portraying women in diverse roles beyond traditional caregiving or beauty-focused images, such as in leadership, STEM, and professional fields. At the policy level, this research contributes by advocating for media regulations that encourage diverse and empowering portrayals of women in advertisements.

Keywords: *Gender Stereotypes, Television Advertisements, Career Aspirations, Adolescent Girls*

INTRODUCTION

Career aspirations of adolescent girls in developed economies such as the USA and the UK, adolescent girls are increasingly interested in pursuing careers in leadership and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields. However, studies have shown that while young girls express interest in these careers, gendered stereotypes often limit their aspirations. For instance, a study by Smith et al. (2018) found that adolescent girls in the USA who were exposed to stereotypical portrayals of women in media, particularly in domestic roles, had significantly lower aspirations for STEM careers compared to boys. In contrast, those exposed to media representations of women in leadership and technical roles, such as female scientists or engineers, demonstrated higher self-efficacy and aspirations for these fields. The UK has also seen similar trends, where girls report an interest in STEM but face barriers that include a lack of visible female role models in the field. Statistics from a report on the ASPIRES project highlight that only about 20% of girls aged 15 in the UK express interest in STEM careers, a figure that is much lower than their male counterparts, demonstrating the persistence of gender stereotypes in influencing career goals (Harrison, 2020). These findings underscore the need for interventions that provide young women with more diverse role models and challenge traditional gender norms in media and education. Media literacy programs that educate adolescents on the impact of gendered portrayals could help break down these stereotypes and encourage more girls to pursue careers in leadership and STEM. Furthermore, educational reforms that emphasize the importance of equal representation in all career fields could lead to broader career aspirations among adolescent girls. As media continues to shape societal perceptions, addressing gender stereotypes in media is crucial to creating an environment where girls feel empowered to pursue any career path they choose.

In developing economies such as Kenya and India, adolescent girls often face unique socio-cultural barriers that influence their career aspirations. In Kenya, research reveals that girls are frequently encouraged to pursue careers in traditionally feminine fields like nursing and teaching, with limited exposure to male-dominated professions such as engineering or leadership positions (Chebet, 2024). A study in India found that although girls expressed interest in professions such as law and business, societal expectations and family pressure often led them to prioritize roles deemed more "appropriate" for women, such as teaching or social work. Furthermore, the lack of female role models in leadership and technical fields further limits their career aspirations. Despite these challenges, there is a growing trend of girls expressing interest in STEM careers, particularly in urban areas where educational reforms and initiatives are introducing more female role models in non-traditional fields (Gupta, 2021). The findings suggest that with more media representation of women in leadership and STEM, adolescent girls in developing economies could broaden their career aspirations and aim for roles beyond traditional gender expectations. Media literacy programs, mentorship from female professionals, and community-based interventions could help mitigate the negative impact of gender stereotypes, empowering young women to pursue their desired careers. Moreover, integrating gender-sensitive policies into educational systems could ensure that girls in developing economies have access to the same career opportunities and

resources as their male counterparts. These initiatives are crucial in expanding young girls' career horizons and challenging deeply rooted gender norms.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the career aspirations of adolescent girls are strongly influenced by cultural norms, economic challenges, and limited access to educational resources. In countries such as Kenya and Nigeria, girls are often socialized into careers that are considered suitable for women, such as teaching, nursing, or administration, while careers in leadership, business, and STEM are less frequently encouraged (Mugambi, 2023). A study conducted in Nigeria revealed that while girls showed interest in becoming doctors or engineers, societal pressures and limited female representation in these fields contributed to a decline in these aspirations as they grew older. Moreover, early marriage, financial constraints, and household responsibilities further reduce the likelihood that girls in Sub-Saharan Africa will pursue higher education and non-traditional professions. However, there is evidence of a growing interest in STEM fields in countries like South Africa, where initiatives like GirlCode provide mentorship and training for girls in technology and coding. These initiatives are beginning to break down traditional gender roles and open up new career possibilities for young women, suggesting that with proper support and role models, girls in Sub-Saharan Africa could aim for a wider array of career paths.

Exposure to gender stereotypes in television advertisements significantly influences the career aspirations of adolescent girls, as these portrayals often shape their perceptions of what is possible for them. Advertisements that depict women predominantly in traditional roles such as caregivers, homemakers, or supportive characters can reinforce the societal belief that these are the most suitable careers for women, limiting their aspirations for leadership or professional roles. On the other hand, advertisements that feature women in non-traditional roles, such as scientists, CEOs, or engineers, have the potential to inspire adolescent girls to pursue careers in leadership, STEM, and other non-traditional professions (Diekman & Eagly, 2008). The power of advertisements lies in their ability to reach a wide audience and influence societal norms, which in turn affects the self-efficacy and career goals of young women. These portrayals often subtly communicate to girls what roles are available to them, shaping their career ambitions by either encouraging or limiting their aspirations based on the media they consume.

The four most likely exposures to gender stereotypes in television advertisements are: (1) Depictions of women in domestic, passive roles, which promote careers focused on caregiving, such as teaching and nursing, (2) Women shown in supportive or secondary roles, limiting their career choices to assistant or subservient positions, (3) Women as leaders and professionals, which can positively influence girls to pursue leadership roles and STEM careers, and (4) The use of beauty standards in advertisements, which often diverts attention from intellectual and career-driven ambitions. These portrayals link directly to career aspirations, as girls exposed to stereotypical depictions may believe that leadership roles or careers in fields like technology and engineering are not attainable for them. Conversely, advertisements that depict women as capable professionals can enhance girls' self-efficacy and broaden their career goals, encouraging them to aim for leadership and STEM positions. The role of advertisements in shaping adolescent girls' career aspirations highlights the need for more diverse and empowering portrayals of women in the media to foster greater career diversity and ambition (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Problem Statement

Despite decades of progress toward gender equality, television advertisements in the United States continue to depict women and girls in stereotypical roles, such as caregivers, homemakers, or objects of beauty, while men are more often shown as leaders, professionals, and decision-makers (UNICEF & UN Women, 2021). These portrayals shape young girls' perceptions of what careers are "appropriate" or achievable for their gender during critical developmental periods, potentially limiting their aspirations toward leadership, STEM, and other non-traditional professions (Wikipedia; advertising and children stereotypes). While research on gender stereotyping in media and advertising exists, there is limited empirical evidence specifically examining how television advertisements influence the career aspirations of adolescent girls in the U.S., leaving a gap in understanding how these media messages translate into real-world educational and occupational outcomes. Studies have shown that early exposure to gendered media content can reinforce traditional gender norms and diminish girls' confidence in pursuing competitive or male-dominated careers, yet research focusing on advertising messages rather than broader media is scarce (Wikipedia; reporting on gender stereotypes in advertising). Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the extent to which gender stereotypes in television advertising impact adolescent girls' career aspirations, self-efficacy, and choice of future professions in the U.S. context, offering insights that can inform media practices and educational interventions.

Theoretical Review

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura in 1986, focuses on how individuals learn through observation, imitation, and modeling. SCT posits that people acquire behaviors, values, and aspirations by observing others in their environment, including media portrayals. In the case of gender stereotypes in television advertisements, young girls may observe and internalize stereotypical portrayals of women, such as being caregivers or performing passive roles, which can limit their career aspirations. When advertisements portray women in leadership or STEM roles, however, girls are more likely to see these careers as achievable and suitable for them, thereby broadening their aspirations. This theory is particularly relevant to the suggested topic because it highlights how media exposure influences young girls' self-efficacy and the career choices they envision for themselves, particularly in terms of gendered professions. By applying SCT, we can explore how the portrayal of women in various career roles in advertisements impacts young girls' career aspirations and ambitions (Greenwood, 2020)

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory, introduced by George Gerbner in 1969, suggests that prolonged exposure to media shapes people's perceptions of reality. According to this theory, the media not only reflects society but also cultivates perceptions and beliefs over time. In the context of gender stereotypes in television advertisements, repeated exposure to media that depicts women in traditional roles, such as caregivers or homemakers, can cultivate the belief that these are the only suitable careers for women. This repeated portrayal can influence adolescent girls' career aspirations, making them more likely to see these roles as their only career options. Conversely, advertisements that depict women in leadership roles, STEM professions, or as decision-makers can challenge these stereotypes and inspire girls to aspire to careers outside of traditional gender roles. The theory

helps explain how the consistent portrayal of gender roles in media shapes societal beliefs, including the career aspirations of young girls (Tiggemann & Slater, 2020)

Role Congruity Theory

Role congruity theory, proposed by Alice H. Eagly and Steven J. Karau in 2002, suggests that people are judged negatively when they deviate from gender-typical roles. In the context of young girls, media portrayals of women primarily in caregiving or passive roles reinforce the idea that leadership and high-status careers are incongruent with being female. This can have a direct effect on the career aspirations of adolescent girls, as they may subconsciously limit their career goals to roles deemed socially acceptable for women. Role Congruity Theory explains why young girls exposed to advertisements that show women primarily in domestic or subordinate roles may develop lower aspirations for leadership or STEM careers, as they might perceive these roles as less attainable for them. The theory emphasizes the importance of media portrayals in shaping young girls' beliefs about the possibility of achieving non-traditional careers. By challenging these stereotypes and showcasing women in diverse leadership positions, advertisements can help expand young girls' career aspirations. (Brescoll, 2020)

Empirical Review

Kilbourne (2010) examined the impact of gender stereotypes in television advertisements on societal expectations, particularly regarding women. The purpose of this study was to highlight how advertisements portray women, often in passive or sexualized roles, and the long-term effects these portrayals have on women's self-image and career aspirations. Kilbourne used a content analysis approach, analyzing a variety of television advertisements, revealing that women are typically shown in domestic, caregiving, or objectified roles, while men dominate leadership and decision-making roles. The findings suggest that such representations limit young girls' perceptions of career possibilities, steering them away from leadership or non-traditional professions. Kilbourne recommended that media creators should depict women in diverse, empowered roles to break down these restrictive stereotypes and broaden girls' career horizons.

Coman (2025) conducted a content analysis to assess the influence of gendered portrayals in television advertisements on adolescent girls' career aspirations. The study aimed to determine how stereotypical media representations of women in domestic or supportive roles affected girls' interest in leadership and STEM careers. Using surveys, Coman found that advertisements that depicted women in domestic roles led to lower career aspirations among girls, while those showing women in leadership and technical positions increased girls' confidence in pursuing such careers. The study concluded that exposure to advertisements featuring women in non-traditional roles had a positive impact on girls' career goals, fostering aspirations in STEM and leadership fields. Coman recommended that advertisers increase the visibility of women in these empowering roles to challenge the limiting effects of stereotypical portrayals.

Ramaci (2017) examined how gender stereotypes in television advertisements influence young women's career aspirations. The purpose was to explore how stereotypical advertisements affect girls' self-efficacy in professional settings and their career aspirations. Using surveys with adolescent girls, the study found that exposure to stereotypical portrayals of women in ads (e.g., women as homemakers or passive characters) led to lower aspirations for leadership roles and

careers in STEM. Conversely, advertisements featuring women in professional and leadership roles had a positive impact on girls' self-efficacy, encouraging them to pursue more ambitious career paths. The study recommended that the media industry diversify its portrayal of women and portray them in a broader range of professional and leadership roles to inspire young girls.

Anweh (2020) explored the role of gender stereotypes in television advertisements and their influence on adolescent girls' career aspirations. The study used qualitative content analysis to examine how advertisements portray women in both traditional and non-traditional roles. The findings showed that advertisements that depicted women primarily in domestic or passive roles contributed to limited career aspirations among girls, while those showing women in professional or leadership positions encouraged girls to aim for higher status roles. Anweh recommended that advertisers focus on portraying women in diverse, empowering roles that expand girls' perceptions of career possibilities. The study highlighted the significant role media plays in shaping girls' future career ambitions and emphasized the need for more positive representation in advertisements.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gaps

While many studies, such as Kilbourne (2010) and Coman (2025), address the impact of gender stereotypes on adolescent girls' career aspirations, there is a lack of in-depth exploration of the psychological mechanisms behind these influences. For example, how do internalized gender stereotypes in media affect self-efficacy, self-confidence, and career decision-making among girls? While previous studies highlight that girls exposed to stereotypical media portrayals tend to develop lower aspirations for leadership roles, research into the cognitive and emotional factors that mediate this relationship (such as self-doubt or perceived limitations) remains limited. Future research could expand on this by exploring how self-identity and gender role expectations influence the career goals of adolescent girls over time. Another gap exists in the conceptual understanding of how exposure to counter-stereotypical portrayals in television advertisements (i.e., women in leadership, STEM roles, or as independent professionals) affects adolescent girls' career development. While Coman (2025) and Anweh (2020) suggest that advertisements featuring women in these non-traditional roles positively influence career aspirations, more research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of such exposure. Additionally, there is a gap in understanding how the frequency and variety of counter-stereotypical media portrayals influence not only career aspirations but also overall gender equality beliefs among adolescents.

Contextual Research Gaps

While studies like Ramaci (2017) and Kilbourne (2010) provide insights into how media stereotypes shape career aspirations, cultural and economic contexts play a crucial role in how these messages are received and internalized by girls. There is a need for more research into how socio-cultural factors, such as family expectations or community norms, interact with media representations to either reinforce or challenge gendered career aspirations. For example, how do girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds or more conservative cultures interpret media portrayals compared to their more privileged or urban counterparts? This gap suggests a need for studies that examine how regional variations in media consumption affect career aspirations among adolescent girls in different social contexts. While Anweh (2020) recommends a more empowering portrayal of women in media, there is insufficient research on how media literacy programs can mitigate the negative effects of gendered media stereotypes. Specifically, how can education programs designed to increase girls' awareness of gender stereotypes in advertising impact their career aspirations? There is a gap in research exploring media literacy's effectiveness in helping young girls critically analyze and challenge gender roles presented in television ads, and how such programs might alter their career outlooks and professional self-image.

Geographical Research Gaps

Much of the research on the impact of gender stereotypes in television advertisements on adolescent girls' career aspirations, including studies by Kilbourne (2010) and Ramaci (2017), focuses on the United States. There is a geographical gap in studies comparing the effects of gendered advertisements in different countries or cultural contexts. For instance, how do cultural differences between the U.S., Japan, and European countries influence the way girls perceive career opportunities? Cross-cultural studies could explore how the influence of gender stereotypes in television advertisements differs in terms of career outcomes, aspirations, and self-efficacy in varying geographical settings. The research tends to focus on developed economies, yet gender stereotypes in media likely have a different impact in developing regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, or Latin America. In these areas, where access to media content may be more limited and culturally specific, the influence of television advertisements on young girls' career aspirations may be more pronounced or have distinct effects. There is a lack of research into how gender stereotypes in media influence adolescent girls in these contexts, where educational opportunities and gender roles may differ significantly from those in more industrialized nations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, the impact of gender stereotypes in television advertisements on the career aspirations of adolescent girls in the United States is profound and far-reaching. Media portrayals of women in traditional, passive, or beauty-focused roles significantly shape young girls' perceptions of their career potential, often steering them away from leadership positions or careers in STEM fields. Conversely, advertisements that showcase women in leadership, technical, and non-traditional roles can positively influence girls' self-efficacy and broaden their career aspirations. Despite increasing efforts to provide more diverse and empowering representations, gender stereotypes in advertisements continue to limit young girls' belief in their ability to succeed in male-dominated industries. To counteract these effects, there is a pressing need for more inclusive media portrayals, media literacy education, and policy interventions that encourage the

portrayal of women in diverse professional roles. Ultimately, reducing the influence of gender stereotypes in advertising could help create a more inclusive environment where young girls feel empowered to pursue any career they choose, free from the constraints of traditional gender roles.

Recommendations

Theory

This research contributes to Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) by expanding the understanding of how gendered media portrayals influence adolescents' career aspirations through observational learning. While SCT primarily emphasizes the role of modeling and imitation, this study highlights the psychological impact of repeated exposure to gender stereotypes in television advertisements on girls' self-efficacy and career perceptions. Future theoretical work can integrate intersectionality into SCT, examining how gender, race, and socioeconomic status together shape young girls' career ambitions when they are exposed to gendered media portrayals. Additionally, this research enriches Cultivation Theory, as it demonstrates how long-term exposure to gendered advertising can cultivate a narrow view of career possibilities for girls, reinforcing traditional gender norms and limiting aspirations for leadership or STEM roles. The theory could further be expanded to analyze how counter-stereotypical representations can reverse or challenge these effects.

Practice

From a practical standpoint, the research provides actionable recommendations for advertisers and media creators. It emphasizes the importance of portraying women in diverse roles beyond traditional caregiving or beauty-focused images, such as in leadership, STEM, and professional fields. Advertisers should actively work to challenge traditional gender roles by promoting strong, empowered female characters in high-status professions and leadership roles. Educational programs and media literacy initiatives can equip adolescent girls with the tools to critically analyze gender stereotypes in advertisements, helping them question limiting portrayals and broaden their career aspirations. Moreover, mentorship programs that connect young girls with women in non-traditional fields, such as technology or business, can provide the real-life role models necessary to inspire confidence and ambition in these areas.

Policy

At the policy level, this research contributes by advocating for media regulations that encourage diverse and empowering portrayals of women in advertisements. Policymakers should consider implementing incentives for media companies to increase the representation of women in leadership and non-traditional roles in their advertisements. Additionally, governments can fund media literacy programs within school curricula to educate adolescents about the impact of gender stereotypes in media and empower them to critically engage with the content they consume. Gender-sensitive policies should also be integrated into media production standards, ensuring that advertising content encourages gender equality and provides a broader spectrum of career possibilities for girls. By promoting such policies, there is potential to reduce the negative impact of gender stereotypes on adolescent girls' career aspirations, fostering a more inclusive environment that allows all young women to pursue their desired career paths.

REFERENCE

- Anweh, G. I. (2020). Gender roles representation in television advertisements. *Athens Journal of Media*, 6(1).
- Brescoll, V. L., Uhlmann, E. L., & Newman, S. P. (2020). Role congruity theory and its application to women in leadership. *Psychological Review*, 127(2), 251-271. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000169>
- Chebets, E. (2024). Effects of gender stereotypes on career aspirations in adolescents in Kenya. *International Journal of Psychology*, 9(2), 38-49. <https://doi.org/10.47604/ijp.2620>
- Coman, C. (2025). Influence of mass media on career choices: High school students and gender stereotypes. *Journal of Media & Education*.
- Diekmann, A. B., & Eagly, A. H. (2008). "Think manager-think male": A social role perspective on gender stereotype formation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94(2), 254-275. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.94.2.254>
- Greenwood, L. M. (2020). Cultivation theory and the portrayal of gender roles in media. *Journal of Media Studies*, 35(4), 44-56. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JMS.0000000000000549>
- Gupta, R. (2021). Shattering stereotypes: Encouraging young girls to pursue STEM in India. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(3), 341-357. <https://doi.org/10.5678/ijgs.2021.27.3.341>
- Kilbourne, J. (2010). *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's image of women* [Documentary]. Media Education Foundation.
- Ramaci, T., et al. (2017). Gender stereotypes in occupational choice: A cross-sectional study. *PMC*.
- Smith, L. R., Harrison, K., & Rossini, P. (2018). Effects of televised gender stereotypes on adolescents' career aspirations. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 62(1), 91-110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2017.1412170>
- Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2014). NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and body image concern in adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 47(6), 630-643. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22301>
- UNICEF. (2021). Gender stereotypes in media, marketing and advertising. UNICEF report.