CAMmer in the Spotlight

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Getting to know… Kristen Harrison

What are you currently working on? I am currently writing up papers from a data set including a survey of parents of preschoolers and data from the preschoolers themselves, related to family eating behaviors, family media behaviors, and children's perceptions of healthy meals. This project, conducted in Michigan, was an extension of work I did as part of the STRONG Kids Program at the University of Illinois, where I worked before coming to the University of Michigan in 2011. I am also developing a theory of media use as sensory curation, like mood management but exploring how media devices, especially mobile devices, allow children to create little media environments that may be more comfortable than the natural or built environments. The idea is to explain why some children grow seemingly dependent on their tablets and phones and computers, by acknowledging the sensory affordances of the devices.

What has been your most memorable project so far, and why? The STRONG Kids Program research has been my favorite so far, because I got to help children build pretend meals with their Placemat Protocols. Any time research and play can be combined, it's a good thing! The project also involved asking children about their food brand awareness. Taking a page from Jean Piaget, who was among the first researchers to examine young children's "wrong" answers to intelligence test questions to understand how their minds work, I looked through preschoolers' "wrong" answers on questions that asked them to identify common brand logos. Answers like "Old McDonald's" for McDonald's and "Fried Old McDonald's" for Kentucky Fried Chicken were not only funny but informative; they suggest that children's developing brand awareness merges with their knowledge of fictional characters

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in fairytales, nursery rhymes, books, movies, and the like.

Which achievement are you most proud of, and why?

Sticking it out long enough to make it to full professor. I can't even call it an achievement. I've learned that we open no doors by ourselves; all doors are power-assisted. By people. The CAM community is full of people who are seriously committed to advancing each other's careers. I sit on a college-level tenure-and-promotion committee so I witness every week how much work goes into advancing other people's careers, and how easy it is for some people to slip through the cracks, if no one is really looking out for them. I'm delighted that there are people who like (some of) my work, but the only thing I'm actually proud of is just continuing to move forward, doing research and asking new questions. My "achievements" aren't really mine to own; they're gifts from the people who wrote letters on my behalf and sponsored me, beginning with Joanne Cantor, my graduate advisor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and continuing with probably a dozen or more senior CAM members (and others) over the years.

What would be your work motto?

I have a lot of mottos because I talk too much. Here's one grabbed at random from the carousel of thoughts in my head: Never try to solve a problem with analysis that can be solved with design.

Which of your publications is your favorite, and why?

That would be: Harrison & Hefner (2014). Virtually perfect: Image retouching and adolescent body image. *Media Psychology, 17(2)*, 134-153.

It's hard to choose but this one was so much fun to do. The goal was to test the difference between exposure to unretouched and retouched photos, and since there are no guaranteed unretouched photos in the mass media, we had to make our own. We had a photo shoot, complete with a big white paper backdrop and one of those silver photography umbrellas, to capture students of all different shapes and sizes in fashion poses. Then I sent the photos to a professional retoucher to create the retouched versions. Then a sample of adolescents viewed same-gender photos, either unretouched or retouched, and completed body-image measures. Any study that involves making something arty is going to be a favorite.

Our previous CAMmer, Alison Bryant, would like to know: What do you see as your most critical piece of work that the industry has yet to understand / take note of / heed as they develop content and/or products?

The study above showed that telling adolescents that the images they are viewing are retouched actually makes them feel worse about their bodies than viewing the same images without that information. Other studies published concurrently by body-image researchers around the world showed the same

boomerang effect. It goes against our intuitive belief that if we tag advertisements with warning labels – "what you are about to see is fake" – we will somehow become immune to the effects of exposure to those images. If that were the case, though, art wouldn't have much of an effect, would it? We know paintings are fake, but they still move us. There is a movement afoot to put labels on ideal-body imagery in advertising to notify viewers that they have been retouched. From a political perspective, this looks progressive. But from an evidence-based policymaking perspective, it's a bad idea.

If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why?

I've become deeply interested in the ecology of children and media in the family context. Historically we have studied mostly the messages, but I'm interested in the messages, the devices, the way time is spent, what is displaced, how sensory environments are constructed and maintained, how family relationships revolve around media, the whole shebang. I'm very interested in the ways that media use can be adaptive as well as maladaptive, and how people use media to cope. Maybe someday someone will give me millions of dollars to do "thick description" studies of children and media on a large (big N) scale – that would be fabulous. I'd love to work with a team of ethnographers.

If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be?

It's all about relationships. If you are getting your degree in a department where students are encouraged to compete with one another, resist that imperative. Instead, build research teams with your peers. If not research teams, build supportive friendships. The most creative partnerships start that way, and you will love your job and conferences so much more when you can come together with people and say, "Look what I found!" The same is true when developing relationships with school administrators and parents, anyone you hope to work with a second time. Working with children is all about building trust, so it takes a while, but the payback of that trust will span your whole career.

Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why?

I think Jan van den Bulck would make a great CAMmer in the Spotlight. I'd ask Jan, How does your work inform our understanding of the role of media in structuring children's lives on a day-to-day basis?