



Overtly 'girly' scientists alienate potential students

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It probably sounded like a good idea late at night in a Brussels basement where some desperate folk from the European Union's Research and Innovation promo team were holed up on a mission to "get more girls into science".

Why not create a glitzy website for 13 to 17 year old girls that's right out of a teen magazine? Yes, cried the promo people, and why not add a teaser video of three junior Charlie's Angels complete with killer stilettos and lab coats?

But in the cold light of day, the EU really should have done their homework before launching Science: It's a girl thing!

We believe them when they say they are worried about women being under-represented in science at a time when Europe needs more researchers to foster innovation and bolster its economy.

And of course they're right to argue that young people typically make critical career decisions between the ages of 13 and 17, and that recent analysis of education data shows that at 15, girls and boys have similar preferences for and attainment in science and technology - but that a large number of girls subsequently drop out. Not to mention all the women who fall away even later after doing their expensive PhDs.

But the team really should have done some background before launching the teaser video for the initiative (above). If they had, they would have probably come across some recent research by University of Michigan psychologists Diana Betz and Denise Sekaquaptewa that would have stopped them dead in their tracks.

Betz and Sekaquaptewa recruited 142 girls aged 11 to 13 and showed them mocked-up magazine articles about three female university students who were either described as doing well in science, engineering, technology or mathematics (STEM), or as rising stars in unspecified fields. The three also either displayed overtly feminine characteristics or gender-neutral traits.

Oddly, the researchers found that girls who read about the feminine science students decreased their self-rated interest in maths ability and short-term expectations of success.

Worse still, girls who already disliked science were especially demotivated by the feminine scientists. Sekaquaptewa says this was probably because they saw simultaneous success in both domains as totally unattainable.

So there you have it. The study suggest that the EU's cringeworthy video will not only generate tons of hate tweets but also backfire, demotivating girls who are interested in science and totally alienating those who are not. What a way to spoil a worthy initiative.

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