Angelina Scarlotta

Professor Ellen Rockmore

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Gender Representation in the Media

Feminist media studies first came about in the early 1970s, around when color television became more common than black and white in American households. They were brought on by second-wave feminism which sought to broaden female societal positions in order to bring about work related and educational equality. The movement saw the changing technologies as opportunities for revolution and felt that it was necessary to understand them. In these studies, the second-wave feminists found that mass media greatly perpetuated harmful gender stereotypes, overwhelmingly depicting women as wives and mothers even as more and more entered the workforce and took on less traditional roles (Ross, 2012). How women are represented in the media has greatly evolved today: female superheroes dominate the silver screen, plus-size models grace the covers of magazines, and #Girlpower has over twenty-six million tags on Instagram. These changes should not be discounted, but female representation in the media has not improved as much as the industry would have us believe. While female representation has evolved, the media continues to perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and objectify women.

In the 1950s and 1960s, women were primarily portrayed in domestic roles, whereas men were shown pursuing careers outside of the home. The popular sitcom I Love Lucy which ran from 1951 to 1957 followed the life of housewife Lucy Ricardo. The show is often praised for its

portrayal of a headstrong female lead, but it finds comedy in Lucy wanting to do anything other than stay home, the subject of many of its jokes being Lucy's desire to pursue show business. In response to second-wave feminism in the 1970s, films and television shows began to portray more realistic and independent women. For example, in 1974 "One Day at a Time" was the first television program about a divorced woman (Wood, 1994).

Today, women have greater opportunities to take on more complex, progressive leading roles; however, their domestic lives remain the focus. According to University of North Carolina Chapel Hill professor of communication studies and humanities Julia T. Wood, even when the media creates roles for women outside of the home, their duties as friends, mothers, and wives are given more screen time than their professional responsibilities. Despite having impressive and time-consuming careers as lawyers or doctors, they are somehow able to regularly meet with friends, spoil their children, and put homemade meals on the table. This portrayal is detrimental to the well-being of its female viewers because it pressures them, creating "unrealistic expectations of being 'superwoman,' who does it all without her hair getting out of place or being late to a conference" (Wood, 1994, p. 235).

It is not enough to simply have a career-focused female lead because this character is often still stereotyped. Every aspect of her on-screen presence—such as how much screen time she receives and in what context, how other characters perceive and interact with her, how she is made to view and speak with them, and how she is dressed—can indicate patriarchal biases. A common stereotype is that women should focus on finding a husband, and this is often all they are shown to talk about.

One method through which this stereotype can be identified is the Bechdel Test. Created by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in her comic strip "Dykes to Watch Out For," the test either passes or fails films and television shows based on whether or not they have two female characters who speak to each other about something other than a man (Selisker, 2015). Unfortunately, it seems that the test's pass rate is quite low. In an interview with the Huffington Post in 2014, Bechdel implied that many popular series fail, saying, "I would never watch any television or movies if I only watched shows that passed the test" (Katz). Admittedly, it is a strict test, but including in a two-hour movie a single conversation where women speak about their jobs, hobbies, or interests does not seem overly difficult.

There are countless examples of films and television shows that portray women in outdated and unrealistic fashions. The extremely popular Sex and the City is but one example of a show that perpetuates the out-dated belief that women should focus on finding a husband. The show totes a message of empowerment for its primarily female viewers, and yet it fails the Bechdel Test (Katz, 2014). While it follows the lives of sexually liberated, career-driven women in New York City, it does so within the confines of traditional femininity, dressing its main characters in pumps and frilly outfits as they hunt for the perfect man each week (Ross, 2010). These four main characters, though best friends who spend most of their free time together, speak to one another exclusively about their sex and dating lives, as though they have nothing else important in their busy and complex lives to discuss. The upcoming movie Wonder Woman: 1984 is a prime example of a film that objectifies its female protagonist. The sequel to Wonder Woman (the first DC Comics live-action film to star a woman in the lead since V for Vendetta in 2006) provides girls with a positive role model, showing that they too can be the heroes. Yet, this

message is undercut with hypersexualization of the film's titular female role. The trailer is full of intense battle scenes in which Wonderwoman single-handedly defeats the bad guys and shields her love interest from bullets—all while wearing a strapless cocktail dress and heeled boots masquerading as armor.

Media executives are sending conflicting messages to their audiences, boasting empowerment on the surface while more deeply perpetuating harmful stereotypes. The media puts forth that a woman is allowed to have a career, so long as she prioritizes finding a husband, and she is allowed to be the hero, so long as she is dressed in a way that straight men enjoy. Women may be recognized for their ambition or ability, but they are more valued for their household potential and pleasing appearances.

While second-wave feminism ushered in more images of independent, authoritative, and career-oriented women, minorities have been somewhat left behind. Black women primarily play supporting roles as athletes and musicians, if they are featured at all. Latinas and Asian women appear even less often (Wood, 1994). Advertising limits their range of roles, as well as their mental and physical capabilities. More specifically, black women are exoticized, Latinas are made overly emotional, and Asian women are portrayed as sexually submissive (Ross, 2012). White women are not stereotyped like this. In addition to the already overwhelming stereotypes women of color face for being women, they face even more for their ethnicity.

These stereotypes are present not just in film and television, but also in the advertisements which accompany them. In commercials, women are often shown to be submissive in domestic settings and with household products, whereas men are in places of business with "masculine" items such as alcohol or vehicles. Additionally, numerous studies

have analyzed gender stereotyping in children's toy commercials. They overwhelmingly found that girls commercials were peaceful, playful, and domestically related, whereas those for boys were active and aggressive. The production features contribute to these stereotypes as well, with abrupt cuts appearing in male advertisements and slow, passive transitions occurring in their female counterparts (Ross, 2012).

Since advertising more directly determines consumer habits than film or television, it is more influential in a sense to the pervasian of these stereotypes. If an advertisement tells a girl that she should buy Easy Bake Ovens and baby dolls and tells a boy that he should get Nerf Guns and sports equipment, then they will learn to desire these gender-rule-abiding objects, even if they are not what they would have wished for otherwise. This can greatly affect a child's aspirations, as they will think that women are intended for the home and men that men are free for endeavors outside of it.

Some advertisements attempt to show that they are subverting gender stereotypes by being aware of and commenting on them. Sue Abel, senior lecturer at the University of Auckland, found that the 2003 New Zealand commercials for Hallensteins, a men's clothing line, and Vodafone, a mobile phone brand, purposely depict harmful stereotypes. Hallensteins uses the tag-line "It's good to be a guy," showing footage of men relaxing, grilling, and drinking outdoors contrasted with women bustling around the kitchen, loudly talking and making salads. The Vodafone advertisement focuses on a lazy young man who orders his attractive girlfriend to get a ringing phone that is right next to him, simply because he does not want to get up. The advertising creatives maintained that the commercials were executed in a way that was not oppressive, but rather self-aware and even empowering. For instance, Carl Fleet of the Vodafone

commercial believed that the final shot of the girlfriend glaring at her boyfriend implied her dominance over him and that she would not be picking up the phone for him again. However, female viewers thought that the advertisements encouraged male superiority, and male viewers thought that they mirrored their own perceived masculinity (Ross, 2012). Despite the positive intentions when creating these commercials, meaning is subjective, and so, they had negative, unforeseen consequences.

Gender stereotypes bolster the false belief that men and women are different by nature, thereby strengthening pre-existing gender inequalities in American society. They limit individual life chances for women, their opportunities to improve quality of life, and resultantly hinder their pursuits of and potential for happiness. Narrowly depicting women as family focused and feminine, traps them in a lose-lose situation—forcing them either to conform or feel out of place for refusing to. There are some women who prefer to live that way, and, of course, there is nothing wrong with that. The issue is that women who would prefer other lifestyles are made to feel as though they cannot go after them.

Gender stereotypes do not just impact the lives of adult women, but also the development of children. According to a study done by Anne Frederickson M.D., children internalize the media's portrayal of men in smart, action-based roles and the depiction of women as weak and unintelligent, but beautiful. These stereotypes harm girls' adolescent development, putting them at risk for lower academic and career ambition, high rates of depression, negative self body image, and disordered eating (Frederickson, 2017). Today, an individual first encounters the world outside of their family through film, television, advertising, and the Internet. As such, it greatly influences their beliefs about themselves and others growing up. By exposing children to

gender stereotypes from such a young age, gender bias is virtually guaranteed to continue from one generation to the next.

In addition to valuing women for their domestic services beyond all else, the media sexually objectifies them. The aforementioned costume choices in Wonder Woman: 1984 are one example of this. Another more subtle example is how advertisements dehumanize the female form. Rather than showing images of a woman in her entirety, they fragment her into conventionally sexy body parts—reducing her to just lips, breasts, hips, and so on (Ross, 2012).

Moreover, the women who are objectified in these ways uphold a certain standard of beauty. The media features young, white, tall, skinny women. Those who do not fit this standard— and even some who do but think that they do not—are at greater risk for depression, poor self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating like bulimia and anorexia nervosa. Social comparison, the process by which a person compares themself to others and determines their relative self-worth, makes women and girls feel as though they are not attractive or thin enough, regardless of their true appearance or body weight. This inadequacy results from upward comparison to superior-seeming models and celebrities outside of their reference group, their cluster of peers against whom they can directly compare (Layard, 2005; Vitelli, 2013). There is an ideal of physical fitness for males as well, though they do not experience the negative effects at nearly the same level as females (Vitelli, 2013). Objectification of women is detrimental because it dehumanizes them, places value on their bodies over their brains, and creates a near impossible standard of beauty.

The Internet is one form of media that seems somewhat disconnected from gender stereotypes and objectification. It provides a level of anonymity that allows users to transcend

traditional gender roles. An individual can act however they wish, regardless of whether or not their behavior matches with how society says that they should act. However, it is not a perfect escape for two reasons. First, it is temporary. A person must eventually return to their own body and to this gendered physical reality. Second, the way in which the Internet is used remains divided by gender, in spite of its increased liberty. In accordance with their social and caring "nature," women more often use relationship based applications, and, following their "innate" aggression, men often play action video games (Ross, 2010). Because these gender roles are so ingrained in us, we cannot escape them even when given a clear opportunity.

Media and society are invariably connected, and so, gender stereotypes and objectification in film, television, and advertisements are harmful to the public perception of women. American perspectives on women have changed dramatically since the conception of film and television; they now have the right to vote, can exercise greater physical and sexual autonomy, and are more widely accepted in traditionally male-dominated spaces. But, the media moves at a frustratingly slow pace, and it continues to depict women in domestic roles and men in authority positions.

Society influences media just as much as media influences society; it is a cycle, though it is not always in sync. American sociologist Gaye Tuchman concluded in her 1978 essay "The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media," one of the first studies on female media representation, that the media mirrors society's most prevalent attitudes while supporting outdated gender-role behavior. The media teaches children in particular "that women should direct their hearts toward hearth and home" (Ross, 2012). Gender is a learned cultural concept and the media teaches it. So long as mass media constructs outdated representations of female,

male, and non-binary communities, inequalities between them will persist. It is, therefore, the media's responsibility to evolve gender representation in their productions. However, on-screen representation cannot change unless representation behind the scenes is improved.

There is a severe lack of women in the media, and many of these stereotypes and objectifications of women occur because mass media is produced from the male perspective with male audiences in mind. Just five percent of television writers, executives, and producers are women; in journalism, less than two percent are in corporate management positions, and five percent are newspaper publishers (Wood, 1994). At this year's Academy Awards, not a single woman was nominated for best director. In the ceremony's ninety-two years, five female directors have been nominated and only one, Kathryn Bigelow for the Hurt Locker in 2009, has won (Whitten, 2020). In order to progress both in media and society, women's voices must be heard; in order that gender representation in popular culture may be modernized and equalized, mass media must make space for women in leadership and creative positions.

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