



Mediated Gender Normativity: The Construction And Perpetuation Of Gender Stereotypes Through Media Representation.

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Abstract:

We learn our gender as surely as we learn to speak, and what we learn is that women must be passive and men must be active. This is the great theme of cultural narratives.” These words by Jean Kilbourne capture the powerful role that media and popular culture play in shaping society understands of gender.

In today’s world, the Media has become one of the most efficient fuels in running the engine that drives societal attitudes and perceptions. Undeniably it is shaping and molding the way people view themselves and others. For decades, social media has had the power to influence one’s identity. Despite the proliferation of diverse media platforms- ranging from television, radio, music, cinema, and social media, gender representation is often confined within restrictive stereotypes. A concept one might agree with, while the other finds it contentious.

This article examines the extent to which the media continues to reflects and reinforce binary gender stereotypes, thereby limiting the way society views and expects individuals to express masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, it also highlights the contemporary shifts to break down these stereotypes, the growing consciousness of people and society, ultimately giving us a glimpse of the road ahead towards greater gender representation and equality.

The findings indicate that while mainstream media continues to propagate narrow and often stereotypical portrayals of gender, there is a discernible trend towards greater inclusivity and complexity in gender representation. Increased social awareness, advocacy, representation have prompted both creators and consumers to challenge traditional narratives, fostering a more nuanced understanding of gender identities. However, significant efforts for equitable representation persist, necessity the ongoing critical engagement and policy intervention.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, Media representation, stereotyping, sexualization, media influence, gender identity, socialization.

Introduction:

The portrayal of gender roles is not a recent phenomenon; it has deep historical roots that have survived over the decades, shaping societal structures. In the 20th century, women in real life as well as the media were portrayed more as homemakers, wives, caregivers, or simply as objects of male desires. Men, in contrast, were seen as breadwinners, family protectors, and leaders embodying traits of strength, power, and wisdom.

To quote Justin Baldoni from his book “Man Enough: Undefined My Masculinity” -We live in a society that has been telling men for far too long to hide their feelings, suppress their emotions, and “man up” - as if being a man means being anything less than fully human.²

Classic Hollywood movies have frequently portrayed roles of women as simply confined to the damsel-in-distress, the mere love interest, while the male protagonists were the heroes, the adventurers, and the intellect. Such portrayals served to cement public perceptions of what is deemed as the “appropriate” gender behavior.

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With the rise of television in the 1950s and 1960s, these gender norms were further amplified. Certain sitcoms like “I Love Lucy” and “Leave It to Beaver” showcased traditional family dynamics, reinforcing the notion that women’s primary role was within the home while men were decision-makers in the public sphere.

Regardless of the advancement in gender equality, it is notable to mention that the entire concept of gender stereotypes has not completely disappeared in contemporary media.

In films and television shows, gender stereotypes are evident in character archetypes, storylines, and visual representation. Women are often portrayed as either excessively emotional or sensitive. Female protagonists are frequently depicted as dependent on male characters for validation, rescue, or simply one’s life purpose. Men, on the other hand, are typically characterized as physically dominant, detached from their emotional identity, and driven by career success or conquest. Vulnerability, sensitivity, or domestic inclination in male characters is rare or sometimes even treated as comedic. Something for the audience to ridicule if shown.

As Erving Goffman explains in his book ‘Gender Advertisements’, “Women are shown as caressing fabric, softly touching their bodies, whereas men’s touches are utilitarian or assertive” (Goffman 61). This illustrates a sense of passivity as a feminine trait and masculinity denoting purpose and activity.³

For example, in the famous action film franchise James Bond, the male hero is shown as invincible, sexually assertive, and morally upright, while female characters serve as romantic interests or sidekicks with minimal personal development.

Emma Watson, a prominent Hollywood actress and the UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, stated in her HeForShe Campaign Speech 2014, “Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong... It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, not as two opposing sets of ideals.”⁴

While movies can somehow be subtle in their stereotypes, advertising relies heavily on them to convey quick, memorable messages. Household product commercials often target women as homemakers responsible for cleanliness, cooking, and childcare. And men are the ones being recruited for advertisements for cars, technology, or financial services, indicating power, status, and power.⁵

Another aspect that we can examine in the context of the young generation is video games. Female characters are mostly over-sexualised with revealing outfits, while the male counterparts are portrayed as demure, muscular, warrior-like attributes. While some exceptions can be made to argue on this, the gaming industry,

with its impactful influence on the young minds, still continues to narrow down the graphical representation of gender roles.

Adrienne Shaw, an Associate Professor in Temple University's Department of Media Studies and Production speaks on this, quoted "The representation of women in video games is limited: either hypersexualized objects or weak secondary characters—reaffirming two stereotypical poles."⁶

The same can be taken in the music industry. Music videos often show women in the background as a decorative piece or valued mostly for their beauty. Music genres are somehow confined to a certain gender. Genres like rap, rock-metal are often seen as a male-sphere and women often have to work a few steps harder to prove their competence. Beyoncé Knowles, a cultural pop singer, often known for using her platform to promote women empowerment said "We have to teach our boys the rules of equality and respect, so that as they grow up, gender equality becomes a natural way of life. And we have to teach our girls that they can reach as high as humanly possible."⁷

While social media helps to challenge these stereotypes it also perpetuates them. Influencers are often expected to behave and present themselves with certain behavioural boundaries. Some of the same influencers also feed into these stereotypes that get its ripple effect on all their viewers. Various trends and memes which include showing women as 'overthinking' creatures, men being made fun of for showing vulnerability or for simply crying or showing emotions. These are just some of the many examples that just hints at how things made for humor and fun can sometimes subconsciously shape the society's perception of gender norms.

Susan J. Douglas in her book "The Mommy Myth" critiques the concept of "intensive motherhood". "Media insist that 'good' mothers must devote endless time, money, and energy to their kids"—creating impossible "supermom" expectations.⁸ Academic analysis shows that during the COVID-19 lockdown, 9 out of 10 jokes were sexist memes targeting women, often framed as harmless jokes, reflecting casual sexism that people were expected to follow with. The implications of these stereotypes can go a long way. Breaking through the ravages of time, history and technology, shaping the minds of each growing generation.

Society consumes what the media provides in all forms. Girls may develop insecurities or limit their career aspirations just because that is what has been instilled into their minds from the media, while boys may suppress emotions to conform to masculine ideals.⁹ It also affects inter social relationships. Men may feel the pressure to dominate, and women may feel scared to prioritise other things like career over their families and personal relationships. Such expectations cause strain and misunderstandings between people.

Because of those same expectations women are still underrepresented when it comes to leadership roles, and men refrain from jobs like nursing, care-giving, fashion and makeup industries because it is considered to be 'feminine'. Media glamorising the 'alpha-male' aggression and women's submission can also trigger toxic relationships, in some cases even leading to gender based violence and harassment.

But the question arises when we are to ask ourselves 'So are these any positive take backs from the media to tackle these stereotypes'. It would be wrong to totally generalise the negative impacts of media, and believe it as a new normal.

There have been many breakthroughs in recent years. Movie representation has been breaking barriers. Movies like 'Wonder Woman', 'Hidden Figures' have casted women as the main protagonists who defy expectations to serve as empowering models. The movie 'Barbie' where the female protagonist enters the real world, questioning identity, patriarchy, and womanhood, breaking 'perfection' stereotypes. It also became a global cultural event that influenced fashion, media, activism, and public discourse on gender roles. While the film satirized and challenged traditional gender stereotypes, its reach extended far beyond the cinema, inspiring aesthetic trends, social commentary, and even environmental activism.¹⁰ Many sitcoms like 'This is Us' show men's emotional vulnerabilities, negating toxic masculinity.

The Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO)—an activist group known for its 1990s protest against gendered toys—resurfaced to launch the “EcoWarrior Barbie” campaign during the film’s release.

Animated movies like ‘Moana’, ‘Brave’ have come about with strong independent protagonist who defy the conventional expectations of their families and venture out to find the purpose of their respective lives. Scholars have noted that such portrayals reflect a shift in the way female characters are written and perceived in children’s media, providing young audiences with role models who challenge the limitations of traditional gender roles.

Movements like the #MeToo and #BodyPositivity that sparked a huge Internet sensation leveraged social media to challenge harmful norms and encourage discourse on gender equality.

There has been a growth in social media influencers who have solely built their platforms to promote women empowerment. This commitment ranges to different careers; from Youtuber Liza Koshy, actress Priyanka Chopra Jones, to model and actress Zendaya, environmental activist Greta Thunberg to Malala Yousafzai. Prince Harry the Duke of Sussex spoke about mental health struggles after Princess Diana’s death; quote “The stigma surrounding mental health is something we urgently need to get rid of/men especially need to feel okay asking for help”¹¹. Barack Obama, the former President of the United States often emphasised empathy and emotional intelligence in leadership; that those are the signs of strength in leaders.¹²

These are just one of the many prominent people in the society that have used their platform to advocate on gender equality, be an example and role models to their audience in their mission to break gender stereotypes.

So at the end of the tunnel, where does this all end us with?

First of all, media creators which include filmmakers, advertisers, and journalists should consciously promote authentic and diverse representation of the genders, refraining from stepping into the outdated and conventional portrayal.

Additionally, policymakers and regulatory bodies should establish clearer guidelines to discourage the reinforcement of harmful gender norms in public content. Brands and companies can leverage their influence by producing advertisements and campaigns that celebrate inclusivity and gender equality, setting new standards for the industry.

Another innovative step is by incorporating Gender Equality into the school curriculum. Furthermore, schools should provide safe spaces where the students can express themselves freely without fear of judgment based on gender norms. By normalizing these conversations early, schools can contribute to raising a generation that values individuality over stereotypes, leading to a more equitable and open-minded society.

Finally, continuous dialogues on gender representation will ensure that the society is aware of the misrepresentation and stays committed to the progress it has made and is yet to further make.

All these small steps can actually help evolve the media into a powerful force that shapes and reflects a more equitable world, for all genders

Conclusion

The mission to reach a society where people will not be required to speak out on gender stereotypes, where men and women can be free to express themselves the way they wish is a long one to go. A multifaceted approach that starts from the individual to the society. It begins with self awareness, and by questioning the beliefs that we have inherited and are still inheriting about what men and women “should” be or are “expected” to be. It also extends to how we educate the young children, for they carry the seeds to our future, to educate ourselves and others, shape workplaces and relationships. It liberates one from restrictive labels.

When we allow people to express their full, authentic selves, without the constraints of outdated roles , without taking a second thought of what the society will perceive them as if they react or behave a certain way, we create a world where strength can mean vulnerability, leadership can mean empathy, and identity is not limited by simply ‘gender’.

Taking a step away from these stereotypes not only frees individuals but it enriches society by embracing the full range of human potential and what one can achieve.

To end, a quote from Gloria Steinem (American journalist, writer, and political activist)

- “A gender-equal society would be one where the word ‘gender’ does not exist: where everyone can be themselves”¹³

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