

4.5 MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND DISABILITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- › Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of media representations of gender, sexuality and disability (AO1).
- › Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the nature, causes, trends and significance of media representations of femininity, masculinity, sexuality and disability (AO1).
- › Apply this knowledge to contemporary society (AO2).
- › Analyse changes in the media representation of gender, sexuality and disability (AO3).
- › Evaluate sociological explanations in order to make judgements and draw conclusions about media representations of gender, sexuality and disability (AO3).



INTRODUCING THE DEBATE

This chapter aims to examine media representations of a range of groups, many of whom have traditionally occupied a subordinate position in society. Women and gay people have experienced significant social progress in the past thirty years. Equality between men and women, and between homosexuals and heterosexuals, has largely been achieved in many areas of social life.

This chapter therefore aims to see whether such change is reflected in the way the media portray these

groups. In contrast, the disabled as a minority group have not yet achieved the goal of equality with the able-bodied. Pressure groups for disabled people, such as Disability Rights UK, suggest that negative mass media representation is a social barrier that undermines disabled people's identity and potential independence. This chapter will therefore examine the evidence to assess whether this argument stands up.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY

Symbolic annihilation

Tuchman *et al.* (1978) used the term 'symbolic annihilation' to describe the way in which women are represented by the media. They argue that women's achievements are often not reported, or are condemned or trivialised by the mass media. Moreover, when women are portrayed, they are generally shown in a narrow and limited range of social roles and their achievements are often presented as less important than their looks and sex appeal.

Limited roles

Tunstall (2000) argues that the presentation of women in the media is biased because it mainly represents women as busy housewives, as contented mothers, as eager consumers and as sex objects in various stages of undress. It generally ignores the fact that well over half of British adult women go out to work. Tunstall observes that, in contrast, men are often portrayed as active and in positions of power. The male body is rarely sexually objectified in the mainstream media and little reference is made to men's marital and domestic status.

The 'Just the Women' report (2012), based on a fortnight's analysis of 11 national newspapers in September 2012, concluded that just over 1300 news reports portrayed women in limited roles. The report found that the tabloid press in particular often focused on women's appearance and reduced them to sexual commodities to be consumed by what Mulvey (1975) calls the **male gaze**. According to Kilbourne (1995), the media often present women as mannequins: tall and thin, often size zero, with very long legs, perfect teeth and hair, and perfect skin. Kilbourne notes that this mannequin image is used to advertise cosmetics, health products and anything that works to improve the appearance of the body for the benefit of the male gaze (rather than for female self-esteem). Wolf (1990) argued that the dominant media message aimed at women is that their bodies are a project in constant need of improvement.

Bates (2014) argues that the music industry is particularly guilty of sexually objectifying women in lyrics and videos. She observes that as consumers of the music industry young girls: "learn that women are, almost without exception, required to bare as much skin as possible when singing ... while male artists, remaining fully clothed themselves, will strew writhing bikini-clad women around the sets of their videos like Christmas decorations."

UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT

The **male gaze** refers to the way the camera looks at a woman in the same way as a man does and consequently portrays women as sexual beings or as decorative. It is assumed by a male-dominated media that this is what the male audience wants.

The 'Just the Women' report also found that 'women's issues' were often covered in a very narrow and stereotyped way and women who had achieved some level of social status as politicians or actors were often denigrated and humiliated by the media. For example, Salinas (2015) observes that journalists often pass negative comment on the way women dress, their weight and looks and their sexual and family lives. In 2015, the leader of the Scottish National Party, Nicola Sturgeon, remarked: "...What annoys me or worries me most... I'm used to reading pretty derogatory things about me in the newspapers about how I look, and my hair... and it's water off a duck's back, but ... younger women, who might be thinking about going into politics, they'll read that about me and think: 'I don't fancy putting myself in the firing line for that.' It worries me that it puts women off going into politics."

Similarly, research by Martinson *et al.* (2012) found that there were few media stories about women's abilities or expertise and that the experts consulted by the media in the fields of business, politics and economics were overwhelmingly men. Cochrane (2011) found similar levels of symbolic annihilation in television's relationship with women. She found that a range of television output – news and current affairs as well as political and comedy panel shows – were dominated by males. Radio was also characterised by an under-representation of females. For example, Cochrane found that 84 per cent of reporters and guests on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme were male.

In your opinion, do women have 'special' needs that justify women's pages in newspapers or television programmes such as *Loose Women*?

Another good example of the symbolic annihilation of women's activities is the media coverage of women's

sport in newspapers and on television. Packer *et al.* (2015) found that at the time of the 2012 Olympics, 4.5 per cent of articles in national newspapers related to women's sports but this fell to 2.9 per cent in 2013. What coverage does exist tends to sexualise, trivialise and devalue women's sporting accomplishments. For example, Duncan and Messner (2005) note that commentators, (97 per cent of whom are men), use different language when they talk about female athletes. Women in sports are often described as 'girls', whereas males are rarely referred to as 'boys'.

Orbach (1991) argues that the media perpetuate the idea that slimness equals success, health, happiness and popularity. She accuses the media, especially women's magazines, of encouraging young girls and women to be unhappy with their bodies. She notes that they create the potential for eating disorders by constantly exhorting females to be concerned with their weight, shape, size and looks, by using pictures of size-zero supermodels to illustrate articles and, through adverts, encouraging dieting and cosmetic surgery. Banyard (2010) cites research that suggest that only five minutes of exposure to thin and beautiful images of women result in female viewers feeling low self-esteem about their own bodies in comparison to viewing neutral objects.

In your opinion, do media representations of models 'cause' girls to be unhappy with their bodies?

Do the modern media empower women?

Gauntlett has drawn attention to 21st-century media aimed at young women, which, he claims, differ in character from the media of 20 years ago. He argues that magazines for young women today emphasise that women must do their own thing and be themselves. This set of media representations suggests that women can be tough and independent while "maintaining perfect make-up and wearing impossible shoes". He claims that surveys of young women and their lifestyles suggest that these media messages are having a positive and significant impact on the way young women construct their identities today.

Green and Singleton (2013) argue that it is in the field of new media, particularly those underpinned by digital technology, that women are most empowered. It has been argued by Plant (1997) that the internet is a feminine technology that has the potential to destabilise patriarchy because its use allows women to explore, subvert and

create new identities. There is some evidence that the internet, in the form of Twitter, Facebook and websites such as everydaysexism.com, have been very useful as tools for challenging negative media representations of women.

In your opinion, how might girls and women use new media such as Twitter and Facebook to challenge sexist stereotypes of women in the mainstream media?

However, research also indicates that women who use new media such as the internet may experience the sorts of everyday sexist representations encountered in older forms of media. For example, women's rights campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez was subjected to 50 rape and murder threats every hour for two days in 2013 from internet and Twitter online trolls, while the academic Mary Beard and the MP Stella Creasy have also received threats and sexist abuse via Twitter. It is a fact that under almost any article on an internet news site that positively focuses on women's issues or rights there will be huge numbers of sexist comments. The internet may help disseminate feminist ideas more widely but it also does the same for its polar opposite – misogyny or woman-hating views. Green and Singleton also acknowledge that women's participation in internet online communities such as Mumsnet and Facebook may merely reinforce the notion that women should perform the 'emotional work' for the family.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITY

There has been little analysis of how the media construct, inform and reinforce cultural expectations about men and masculinity compared with the dozens of studies of how the media represent women and femininity.

In 1999, the research group Children Now asked boys between the ages of 10 and 17 about their perceptions of the male characters they saw on television, in music videos and in movies (Children Now, 1999). Their results indicate that media representations of men do not reflect the changing work and family experiences of most men today. The study found the following representations of masculinity were dominant:

- › males are violent
- › men are generally leaders and problem-solvers
- › males are funny, confident, successful and athletic
- › men and boys rarely cry or show vulnerability

- › male characters are mostly shown in the workplace, and only rarely at home.

More than a third of the boys had never seen a man doing domestic chores on TV. These images support the idea that traditional images of masculinity generally continue to dominate mass-media coverage of boys and men.

McNamara (2006) analysed a wide variety of media – newspapers, magazines and television – and claimed that media representations of men and boys generally failed to portray the reality of masculine life. McNamara found that:

- › 80 per cent of media representations of men were negative. Men and boys were routinely shown as "violent and aggressive thieves, thugs, murderers, wife and girlfriend bashers, sexual abusers, molesters, perverts, irresponsible deadbeat dads and philanderers, even though, in reality, only a small proportion of men act out these roles and behaviours."
- › Men and boys were also shown as irresponsible risk-takers and, in particular, incapable of communicating their feelings or controlling anger.

In contrast, McNamara did find that 20 per cent of media representations of masculinity focused on men and boys who were in touch with their feminine side and expressed this through their appearance – the **metrosexual male** – and, through fatherhood especially, the need to connect emotionally to their children. However, on the whole, McNamara concludes that men are demonised by media representations of masculinity.

UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT

The **metrosexual male** refers to men who take care of their appearance in terms of consuming toiletries and fashion products and who are unafraid to express emotional vulnerability. The 'hipster' is thought by some to be symbolic of this metrosexual ideal.

Gauntlett suggests that men's media such as *FHM* and *Men's Health* transmit metrosexual values because they portray men as "fundamentally caring, generous and good-humoured". Gauntlett argues that these magazines are often centred on "helping men to be considerate lovers, useful around the home, healthy, fashionable, and funny". However, Gauntlett does acknowledge that images of the "conventionally rugged,

super-independent, extra-strong macho man still circulate in popular culture", although men's magazines that present women for the benefit of the 'male gaze', such as *Nuts* and *Penthouse*, are becoming increasingly obsolete.

There are, then, signs that media representations of masculinity are moving away from the emphasis on traditional masculinity, to embrace new forms of masculinity that celebrate fatherhood and emotional vulnerability. Similarly, it is important not to exaggerate changes in representations of masculinity, as the overall tone of media representations still strongly supports hegemonic versions of what it is to be a man.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Feminist perspectives

Feminists are the main sociologists working in this field. They have been very critical of the representations of men and women in the media because they believe that the mass media play a major role, alongside the family and education, in the social construction of gender roles: how children learn to be feminine or masculine. The media emphasis on females as domestic goddesses and sex objects is seen as problematic because it is believed to have a limiting effect on young females' behaviour and aspirations, especially in adolescence.

Liberal feminists believe that media representations are slow to change in response to women's achievements in society. This 'cultural lag' is due to the fact that women rarely achieve high positions in media organisations. For example, there have been very few female editors of British national newspapers. Mills (2014) argues that the newsroom is a very male culture that can be off-putting to females. She observes that "the tabloid newsroom is far from being woman-friendly – visitors would be lucky to see a woman anywhere near a news desk. There is a deeply entrenched bloke culture. It's all about the boys' club, promotions are dished out in the pub and women aren't invited."

Lauzen (2015) found that in 2014–15 women accounted for only 27 per cent of creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and directors of photography working in prime-time television. In 2014, females only comprised 12 per cent of protagonists, 29 per cent of major characters, and 30 per cent of all speaking characters in the top 100 grossing films. Women continue to be disproportionately found in costume design, make-up and hair, which have less status and are paid less than male-dominated technical areas such as camera, sound and lighting.

Marxist or Socialist feminists believe that the roots of the stereotypical images of men and women in the media are economic. They are a by-product of media conglomerates need to make a profit in capitalist societies. Media professionals, who are mainly men, aim to attract the largest audience possible in order to attract advertising revenue. This means that television sitcoms, game shows and soap operas often reflect the social consensus that men and women should occupy traditional domestic roles. Women who do not fit these stereotypes are excluded because of fears that traditional audiences will be turned off, thus reducing the size of the audience.

Marxist feminists have also focused on the content of women's magazines. These types of media make profits from advertising rather than sales and, therefore, it is in the interests of these magazines to promote 'false needs' around beauty, size and shape, etc., in order to attract advertising revenue from the cosmetics, diet, exercise and fashion industries. By presenting an ideal that is difficult to achieve and to maintain, capitalist groups are assured growth and profits. It is estimated that the diet industry is worth \$100 billion a year in the USA alone. Marxists note that another media marketing strategy that encourages women to invest in the beauty market is an increasing emphasis in media content on retaining youth and resisting ageing.

Radical feminists such as Wolf believe that the media deliberately dupe women into believing in the 'beauty myth'. This is the idea that women should adhere to a particular ideal in terms of look, sexiness, shape, weight, size etc. Women are strongly encouraged by the media to see these goals as central to their personal happiness rather than competing with men for positions of power. This creates a form of false consciousness in women and deters them from making the most of the opportunities available to them.

In your opinion, how much influence do you think the beauty myth has on the way females present themselves to the world?

McRobbie (1999) argues that much of the media projected towards young women today constitute a form of 'popular feminism' expressed through magazines that promote the concept of 'girl power'. McRobbie argues that young women in the 21st century are promoting a new form of feminism that, on the surface, looks like a rejection of the feminism of previous generations

that focused on patriarchal forms of exploitation. She argues that "to these young women, official feminism is something that belongs to their mothers' generation. They have to develop their own language for dealing with sexual inequality; and they do this through a raunchy language of 'shagging, snogging and having a good time'."

McRobbie argues that the key difference in the language used by traditional and popular feminists is that the latter is now in the mainstream of commercial culture, whereas the former was marginalised and often ignored by the mainstream media.

However, Gauntlett suggests that it would be foolish to assume that media representations reflect similar perspectives on gender and sexuality because the forms of media and audience for both are so diverse. The reality is that media messages about both gender and sexuality are likely to be mixed. For example, magazines aimed at older women might contain traditional ideas about women's role and assume that motherhood or heterosexuality is the norm whilst magazines aimed at a younger generation of females may represent a range of possible futures for females that does not exclude alternative sexual lifestyles.

How do the magazines that you (or your female relatives) read challenge or confirm traditional female roles?

Postmodernist perspectives

Postmodernists such as Gauntlett are more positive about representations of gender. He focuses on the relationship between the mass media and identity and argues that, in contrast with the past, men and women no longer get singular and straightforward media messages that suggest that there is only one ideal type of masculinity or femininity. Gauntlett argues that the mass media today actually challenge traditional definitions of gender and are in fact a force for change because they encourage a diversity of masculine and feminine identities. He argues that: "the traditional view of a woman as a housewife or low-status worker has been kick-boxed out of the picture by feisty, successful 'girl power' icons." He also claims that there is a new emphasis in men's media on men's emotions and problems, which has challenged masculine ideals such as toughness and emotional reticence. As a result, the media are now providing alternative images and ideas about gender, which are producing a greater diversity of feminine and masculine identities.

Pluralist perspectives

Finally, pluralists claim that the concept of symbolic annihilation underestimates women's ability to see through gender stereotyping and manipulation. They believe that feminists are guilty of stereotyping females as impressionable and easily influenced. They claim that there is no real evidence that girls and women take any notice of media content or that it profoundly affects their attitudes or behaviour. Pluralists also argue that

the media simply reflect social attitudes and tastes – in other words, public demand. They argue that the media are meeting both men's and women's needs and that if women were really unhappy at the way they were being represented, they would not buy media products such as women's magazines. However, in criticism of pluralism, they fail to consider the possibility that sections of the media may be responsible for creating those needs in the first place.

FOCUS ON SKILLS: EVERYDAY SEXISM



Laura Bates' book *Everyday Sexism* documents the everyday "run-of-the-mill, taken-for-granted" sexist moments that ordinary women in the UK encounter. For example, Bates believes that society's tolerance of smaller incidents of sexism such as wolf-whistling creates an atmosphere in which men can get away with more serious incidents. Her book suggests that if an alien used the British mass media to get a picture of how the human race worked, it would come away with a distorted picture of men and women in a number of ways. First, the alien is very likely to believe that men outnumber women. Second, it would assume that most women were young and obsessed with their looks and how sexually attractive they are to men. Third, our alien would think that fat women were deviant.

Bates is particularly critical of the explicit misogyny and highly sexualised images apparent in music culture as well as the media criticism of body weight and the lack of body diversity in magazines aimed at females. She is also critical of how the tabloid newspapers are

desperate to portray any young woman as a sexual object even if they are a victim of crime. She observes that when news of Reeva Steenkamp's murder by Oscar Pistorius was first reported, *The Sun* ran a full front-page photograph of her in a bikini, which the journalist Suzanne Moore called "lechery over a corpse".

Kat Banyard in her book *The Equality Illusion* highlights the media amazement and furore over the first appearance of the Scottish singer Susan Boyle on *Britain's Got Talent* in 2009. Banyard claims that the media treatment of Boyle was like "a twenty-first century freak show", and that it occurred because she wasn't wearing make-up and had untidy hair and crooked teeth. In other words, she didn't meet the media's standard of beauty that a female performer was supposed to have and therefore was deemed undeserving and delusional.

Questions

1. **Suggest two reasons** why the treatment of Susan Boyle was like a 'twenty-first century freak show'.
2. **Explain** why an alien using the media as their primary source of information would end up with a distorted view of men and women.
3. **Identify and analyse** the media's obsession with the female figure.
4. **Evaluate**, using information from this source and elsewhere, the view that media representations of femininity and masculinity reflect the reality of life in the UK for women and men.

REPRESENTATIONS OF SEXUALITY

Batchelor *et al.* (2004) carried out a content analysis of media, such as magazines and television programmes consumed by young people, in order to examine how

sexuality is represented. They discovered that some aspects of sexuality were represented very positively in terms of publicising sexual health information, the exploration of issues such as consent and whether couples were 'ready' to have sex. For example, the right of girls