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| Women in Media |
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As American citizens we take pride for living in one of the most technologically and socially advanced countries in the world. As a society that not only exist, but thrives in a technological world, we are constantly surrounded and influenced by media. An act as simple as going to the grocery store to get milk can result in countless media exposures from television, radio, or over our ever-present smartphones.

One of the most influential aspects of media resides in its ability to define and portray gender ideals. Typically the media portrays messages derived from cultural stereotypes of gender. Our American culture tends to characterize the male gender as competitive, goal driven and often as being breadwinners. Media illustrates and reflects messages of the male stereotype across many boards, mostly reinforcing the image of a strong, heroic man. The female gender faces a more challenging and adverse stereotype within the media then men. Messages pertaining to females tend to reflect normalcies of women who are subordinate, domestic and passive members of society. Contrary to media depictions, women have outgrown this stereotype drastically within the past 40 years proving to be equal and powerful members of American society. The representation of women, specifically mothers, within the media does not reflect the position women hold among society in the present day. Each message women are subjected to through the media is absorbed, whether consciously or subconsciously, and has an impact on both their individual identity and social identity. Media depictions and stereotypes must advance to modern day reality and reflect women and their ability to be career woman, blue-collar workers, working or stay at home mothers as the strength it is, or we risk our society regressing into outdated stereotypical gender roles.

One of the most influential channels of media is the television. Television has been a staple of American culture since the 50’s and has highly influenced society ever since. Typically in the 1950s women were primarily domestics with some seeking positions in positions usually considered gender appropriate such as nurses or teachers. Media developed at this time that targeted a female audience was typically comprised of subject matter revolving around beauty and household maintenance. Commercials, programs and movies during this time represented women in a confined stereotype by depicting females as members of society who are expected to get married, have babies and become as domestically skilled as possible while maintaining whatever physical or fashionable trend the media displayed as important. Times have drastically changed since the 50’s and women have stepped out of the house and into male dominated areas, in particular the workforce. Women presently account for 50% of the American workforce and are quickly gaining credibility and power in this key segment of society. Women’s growing presence in the workforce has brought attention to many different aspects of the female gender specifically society’s expectations and understanding of pregnancy and motherhood. Pregnancy has remained something that is both culturally glorified and ridiculed at the same time. Women face social and professional hurtles and misconceptions not only as a pregnant woman, but also as a mother. In the article “Gender differences in the influences of Television on Gender Ideology? TV Hours and Attitudes towards Employed Mothers 1988-2008” written by Jacqueline Coombe and Shannon Davis, their research theorizes “two key themes have emerged regarding these traditional messages: engendering of occupation and abilities and traditional parental roles that do not reflect nontraditional lifestyles.” (p. 208). Modern day mothers are from a generation of women who were motivated by their teachers, families and friends to further their education and to grow to be career driven; characteristics stereotypically assigned to males. Achievement of such stature has shifted the role of motherhood as history understood and shaped it into a characteristic of a female who is a multi-tasking, career driven, yet nurturing member of society. Regardless of women’s strides and growth within society the media continues to hold onto the limiting and suppressive ideal of the female, inevitably causing women to question their identity and value in society. Coombe and Davis (2013) explain their phenomenon stating, “Television also portrays family interaction through traditionally gendered parental relationships”. Daü and Way (1985) conducted content analysis of prime time television and documented that the traditional parental roles were predominantly modeled. They determined that though there were many nontraditional family compositions (single parent or male headed households) represented, the traditional mother and father was represented most often. Mothers were portrayed in ways that "do not support changes in women's roles" (Daü & Way, 1985: 497); (p. 4). Their research has proven that even though media has advanced with society in portraying nontraditional families as normalcies, the role of females remains traditional and has not fully evolved to reflect true roles that are reflective of today’s modern woman.

Mothers in American culture face scrutiny if they work too much, work too little, send their children to daycare or choose to stay at home as a domestic; whatever the choice their decisions are compared and contrasted by society through mediated messages. In addition to media dramatizing and exploiting mother’s decisions, their bodies during and after pregnancy has developed into a highly controversial yet glamorized topic in the media. As described in the article “Caregiving and Female Embodiment: Scrutinizing (Professional) Female Bodies in Media, Academe, and the Neighborhood Bar” written by Suzy D’Enbeau and Patrice M. Buzzanell, the body mediates the relationship between self-identity and social identity. Media is actively changing the way we view pregnancy and has created a cultural obsession and fad with pregnant women’s stomachs which media coined “the bump”. D’Enbrau and Buzannel argue that media glorifies “the bump” as the new “celebrity sexy” enabling society to perceive pregnancy as the highest achievement a woman could physically and emotionally reach in society. The media has become so fixated on “the bump” that it has all but forgotten to represent women’s roles as mothers post pregnancy. After birth many women face many issues such as post-partum depression, balancing their life professionally, life at home, and life within their social circles; all of which the media chooses not to acknowledge or portray. Mediated glamorization of “the bump” has radiated messages that pregnancy and being a mother is a fashion statement or as stated by Coombe and Buzzanell pregnancy is a “New Accessory”.

An example of Media’s representation of motherhood as being something to accessorize is exemplified in a commercial developed for the pain reliever Motrin. The commercial suggests that mothers need pain relievers to ease the discomfort from carrying their baby all day. The term “wearing” their baby is an example of the glamorization and need to portray motherhood as a fashion statement. Motrin uses suggestive dialogue claiming the more a mother holds her baby the less the baby will cry. The commercial states “I mean, I’ll put up with the pain because it’s a good kind of pain; it’s for my kid. Plus, it totally makes me look like an official mom. And so if I look tired and crazy, people will understand why.” This statement could be related to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis; women viewing the commercial might interpret and be influenced by the thought that if they are not physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted they might be an inadequate mother. Motrin’s portrayal of what qualifies a woman as an “official mom” is not a true representation of the majority of mothers in society who often are devoted to their careers, furthering their education or engaging actively within their society. Moms may need Motrin to help with the headaches of life, not the physical pain of carrying their baby all day.

The purpose of this paper was to bring attention to the confined and inaccurate representation of women and their gender composition, specifically as mothers, within the media. Televisions portrayal of women and mothers who are subordinate domestics reinforces the stereotype within our culture of the woman as simply “the domestic” and fails to depict the contributions credibly that women deserve for their position in our current society. The medias tendency to glamorize and attach aspects of fashionable trends to represent the ideals of motherhood will continue to oppress and objectify women’s self-identity and social identity within our culture. If the media continues to portray only a narrow, outdated and limited representation of womanhood, our cultural expectations of gender roles will regress from being constantly bombarded by an inaccurate message, which reinforces an outdated and limiting stereotype.

Work Cited

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