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HONORS THESIS

NSFW: Not So Feminist Women
A Media and Cultural Studies Analysis of Working Women in Popular Media

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ABSTRACT

Even though gender diversity of characters has increased in television shows and films, this study hypothesized that female characters who are presented as feminist icons function as feminist backlash and perpetuate negative and harmful stereotypes. This was found to be especially true for career-focused women. Applying a cultural studies approach to reading television and film studies through a feminist lens identified the antifeminist factors that continue to cause the perpetual loop of independent women reverting to dated social roles. This research connects what audiences consume through popular media to how they perceive their female co-workers. The findings of this study can help employees identify when they may be stereotyping a female co-worker, but more importantly *why* they so easily make assumptions about their female colleagues and how media texts have influenced their perceptions of women in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Representation in mass media is a large and controversial issue. Calls for more diverse depictions of race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, age, gender, and weight have all caused major changes in the media we consume within the past decade. However, as the percentages of diverse characters have now increased tremendously, we are left to wonder if just a percentage can solve the overarching representation issues. While there are more diverse characters featured in both television and movies, does this increase in visibility make a difference if only stereotypical versions of marginalized people are portrayed?

The goal of the present study is to determine whether the portrayals of women specifically, have evolved and if these portrayals impact how women are perceived in the workplace. Considering existing literature, including content analyses of television and film, feminist theory applications, and studies on attitudes towards women in the workplace, this study hypothesizes that mass media portrayals of career women negatively influence perceptions of women in the workplace and prevent them from progressing into leadership roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As our lives become increasingly filled with accessible media at our fingertips, there is an overwhelming amount of literature within the fields of communication, psychology, and cultural studies devoted to the impact of mass media on audiences. Cultivation theory and its counterpart, cultivation analysis, are commonly referenced in these studies to explain how mass media sources including film and television have an impact on the perceptions of social reality. This theory, first introduced by George Gerbner (1998), implies that when viewers are subjected to consistent or repetitive messages within mainstream media, they will begin to form a social reality based on what they consume. For example, this theory asserts that if someone watches television often, they may perceive the world as more dangerous or violent than it is in reality because of the unrealistic number of characters who encounter crime or violence on prime-time television (Gerbner, 1998).

In addition to forming altered and illusionary perceptions of reality based on media conceptions, viewers with high exposure to television and film can begin to build their attitudes and behaviors based on the exaggerated realities presented in fictional content (Bandura, 2001). According to social cognitive theory, people base their knowledge and understanding of social society on previous experience and environmental influences (Bandura, 2001). Film and television act as environmental influences that audiences internalize as true representations of the society they interact with in their own lives (Bandura, 2001). These learned behaviors and attitudes are then translated into their own social norms and used to respond to social prompting, interpersonal conflict, and most other social situations (Bandura, 2001). These social theories serve as evidence that the media consumed by audiences directly affects their perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes.

The field of media and cultural studies builds critical approaches to consuming media texts, including television and film, based on social theories like cultivation and social cognitive theory. By synthesizing multiple theoretical frameworks, media and cultural studies avoids one dimensional readings of media texts with a transdisciplinary approach. For example, Kellner (2020) builds on approaches developed by the Frankfurt School, British Cultural Studies, and contemporary critical theories to form a "multiperspectival approach." This comprehensive approach "(a) discusses production and political economy, (b) engages in textual analysis, and (c) studies the reception and use of cultural texts" to identify the effects of media culture (Kellner, 2020).

As Kellner (2020) asserts, media culture functions to divide society into "us" and "them" and shapes our view of the world in order to reproduce current social roles and distributions of power. Media culture continuously emphasizes who has power and who does not, who can act a certain way, and who cannot (Kellner, 2020). Individuals then begin to construct their identity and how they fit into society based on the media culture they consume (Kellner, 2020). Therefore, it is important to consider how representations of women in both television and film are impacting perceptions of and attitudes towards women within society.

<u>Media Portrayals of Women</u>

Women by the Numbers

Women have long been underrepresented in television and film (Atkin, 1991; Lauzen et al., 2007). Scholars have discussed the accuracy of portrayals on prime-time television for decades and more recent studies analyze the female portrayals we consume from film (Neville & Anastasio, 2018). The first rise in female characters on television occurred from 1976-1979 as competition between the major television networks for original programming intensified (Atkin, 1991). Research found that periods of high competition between media outlets led to experimental phases during which executives were willing to take risks with more diverse characters to attract new groups of viewers and compete with programming aimed at a specific demographic (Atkin, 1991). For example, ABC's Monday Night Football was counterprogrammed with shows featuring female leads with the target audience of women in mind (Atkin, 1991). Despite a seemingly evolving television landscape that has included even more women as the major networks have had to compete with a wide variety of cable channels since the 1980s, very little progress has been made in the depictions of women (Atkin, 1991; Lauzen et al., 2007).

Poor representation of specifically middle-aged female characters has continued for decades (Lauzen et al., 2007). A content analysis of one episode from every series airing on the six networks in a single season uncovered discouraging results when considering the representations of women in different stages of life. This research found that females were increasingly underrepresented as their ages increased. While women outnumbered men in the 20-29 age range, men outnumbered them at every other age (Lauzen et al., 2007). Plus, as women characters aged, their participation in activities typically indicative of youth, including leisure activities and sexual activity, declined drastically (Lauzen et al., 2007). These results expose significant misrepresentations that cause incorrect assumptions about the female population. Furthermore, this exemplifies how network programming skews views of adulthood by ending the representation of women in middle and elderly ages and overrepresenting young adult female characters.

Building on Lauzen and Dozier's (2005) content analyses of the top-grossing movies of 2002, Neville and Anastasio's (2018) work functions as the most recent study of female representation within film. Their study, which coded characters in the top-grossing 2016 films for age, gender, and status, found that men accounted for 68.2% of major roles in movies (Neville & Anastasio, 2018). Women were overrepresented in the 30-49 age group but their representation in the 50-69 age group was significantly lower than males (Neville & Anastasio, 2018). Similar to findings on television, younger women are overrepresented; however, in movies females in their 30s and 40s outnumber those in their 20s that dominate prime time. And as expected, men outnumber women by a large majority, but the proportion of women had increased since the original study in 2002 (Neville & Anastasio, 2018).

Although the number of female characters featured in media has been slowly increasing, there are many ways in which diversity still needs to progress, as exemplified by the skewing of age representations. More inclusive portrayals of women who represent a variety of ages, races, sexual identities, and weights are necessary in mass media and there are substantial bodies of research that emphasize this need. However, the present study has identified the category of "professional" or "working" women as a group of interest and looks to analyze the insufficiency of both the representation of working female characters and how they are portrayed in current media content.

Portrayals of Leading Ladies

There is an abundance of literature on the effects of media exposure that demonstrate the influence television and movies can have on perceptions of the world, which, in turn, can affect behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of others (Gerbner, 1998; Bandura, 2001; Kellner, 2020). Therefore, it is important to examine the portrayals of female characters in these forms of media to understand why stereotypes and misconceptions of working women exist and why women are portrayed a certain way in media content. We continuously see that working women are underrepresented and depicted in a negative light in both television and movies. Berg and Streckfuss (1992) extended previous research on women in prime-time television with their content analysis of late 1980s television. They found that over 65% of occupational

action, or work-related performances, were carried out by men (Berg & Streckfuss, 1992). Male characters were more likely to work in communication, manufacturing, or transportation industries and held twice as many jobs in public administration (police officers, firefighters, judges, etc.) than women. Women were more likely to work in retail or construction industries with service-based, customer-facing roles (Berg & Streckfuss, 1992). Multiple studies assert that females are more likely to enact household roles while a very small percentage of men are portrayed without an occupation as an important part of their characterization (Berg & Streckfuss, 1992; Lauzen et al. 2008). If female characters are portrayed in a working role, they perform more interpersonal roles within their work, while men take the lead on decision making and operational functions of an organization. (Berg & Streckfuss, 1992). As Lauzen et al. (2008) concludes, these findings counter popular opinion that stereotypes of women are no longer used in television. Women are still limited to household roles and those that do have a job or career are often portrayed as deserting their family or not giving the attention necessary to their children. The research clearly shows female storylines are proportionately more focused on family, relationships, or household duties, proving that representations of career women are severely lacking in both quantity and quality (Berg and Streckfuss, 1992; Lauzen et al. 2008).

Similarly, in movies we continue to see stereotypical portrayals of female characters. An intersectional analysis of women and power in film coded movies featuring female characters into three different categories: domination (power-over), empowerment or resistance (power-to), and solidarity among women (power-with) (Sutherland & Feltey, 2016). The results revealed that there were almost no examples of power-with stories that featured women working together (Sutherland & Feltey, 2016). Most power-over films featured women of color as the characters were often portrayed as masculine and revenge seeking, which is problematic within itself (Sutherland & Feltey, 2016). And lastly, power-to stories mostly revolved around middle-aged white women discovering their potential or transforming into a more powerful version of themselves (Sutherland & Feltey, 2016). Not only does this study bring about many concerns on the portrayal of different races within women led films, but many of the stereotypes discussed resonate with other film studies on women.

One common thread that reveals itself within many feminist film critiques is the "mean girl" mentality, or the idea that women cannot work or get along with other women. In an attempt to relate media exposure to social behaviors, one study found that female characters are significantly more likely to enact socially aggressive behaviors towards each other in teen movies and they are more often than not rewarded for these behaviors (Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). When applying social cognitive theory to these results, it can be assumed that through media exposure women could come to believe that they cannot work with each other or that they must be enemies in the workplace. The portrayals of mean girls in teen movies trickles into depictions of career women as well. Women who have a career are often portrayed as "toxic individuals" who struggle to separate work from their personal lives (Ezzedeen, 2014). In addition to being dehumanized by peers and subordinates, female characters that present as serious about their careers are characterized as "self-serving and mean" (Ezzedeen, 2014). Women who have a career are made to transform to be a likeable character, to find love, or even to become successful.

While studies in television have not yet uncovered insights into the portrayals of female character's personalities and character traits at the same level that film research has, there are many similarities in the representations of women in both media. Both television and movies have a lack of women in working roles, especially leadership positions. However, the few female characters that are focused on a career are villainized and pitted against each other. More can be learned about why these stereotypical portrayals continue to be a staple in Hollywood by applying feminist ideas.

Applying Feminist Theory

Since the emergence of third-wave feminism in the mid-1990s, much importance has been placed on applying a feminist lens to media studies. While television and movie industries have focused on presenting a "new woman" who embodies feminism in her independence and sexuality, reviews overwhelmingly agree that these so called "feminist icons" function as a form of feminist backlash. Scholars cite television shows including *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* as examples of what in actuality is anti-feminist television (Kim, 2001). Shows like

these, of the late 1990s and early 2000s, cater to feminist audiences by offering diverse women who struggle with many feminist issues but undermine any feminist message with "narrow casting" and antifeminist storylines (Press, 2009; Kim, 2001). Conventional looking women continue to fill traditional social roles and undercut feminist values when addressing women's issues, like abortion for example (Press, 2009; Kim, 2001). Although the women are presented as more independent, confident, and sexual, they push back against feminism by ultimately falling back into the same traditional roles we have seen since the dawn of television (Kim, 2001). Therefore, while third-wave feminism is presented within the storylines of these women, it is completely undermined by their actions.

As a result of the surge of antifeminist storylines, the importance of post-feminist discourse within television has been emphasized by scholars within the past two decades. Feminist theory is often a confusing concept as post-feminism has been increasingly misunderstood as antifeminism (Lotz, 2001). As Lotz (2001) argues in her review of postfeminist television criticism, feminist television studies have had to adapt to many understandings of what "post-feminism" is and how to apply it to television. These adaptations have led to new approaches of analysis to identify attributes of post-feminism and led to an understanding that the complexities of post-feminism are indeed reflected in the complexity of characters approaches to feminist issues (Lotz, 2001). A few years later, Lotz (2004) argued that similar adaptations should be used to critique films. By merging postfeminist television criticism with feminist film theory, scholars can begin to understand how audiences interpret feminism in films (Lotz, 2001). Furthermore, considering the modern ways in which viewers consume media can play a role in how feminist storylines impact perceptions. For example, in an analysis of *Legally Blonde* factors including DVD bonus features, use of fashion and brand names, presence of female writers, etc. can all be considered as influences on how feminism is portrayed within the film, aside from just the plot of the movie (Lotz, 2004). Bridging the postfeminist television approach with feminist film theory is an important step in moving cultural studies and feminist studies forward and offers a broader view of how television and movies can be analyzed from a feminist perspective.

Only a small number of studies that implement this approach have emerged since Lotz's article was first published in 2004. One of the very few examples is an analysis of six contemporary films that applies postfeminist double binds. The study reviews movies like *Sweet Home Alabama, The Wedding Planner,* and *Miss Congeniality,* which present these postfeminist double binds, or no-win situations, to their female protagonists - forcing them to choose between love and a career (Senda-Cook, 2009). By implementing subtle arguments for love over career or implying that transformation is necessary to be successful or happy, these films function to undermine feminist values and push women back into their traditional social roles. Ultimately, by bridging the two media approaches, scholars come to the same conclusion that current popular culture media acts as feminist backlash. The content that claims to feature "feminist icons" completely undermines any ideas related to third wave feminism. This only pulls women backwards into their traditional social roles or, as their alternative, they can be dehumanized as conniving, isolated, villains that do not deserve love or family because they embody feminist values (Ezzedeen, 2014). Overall, it seems very little progress has been made since the rise of third-wave feminism, other than a problematic emergence of false feminism within both television and film.

Implications of Media Portrayals

Just as we have seen an increase in gender diversity in media over the past fifty years, there has also been an increase in career women and women in leadership roles in society. But, have perceptions of women in these roles remained the same? In 1985, a study concluded that male MBA students soon to enter the workforce had overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards female business executives (Dubno, 1985). When considering literature published at least 15 years later than this original study, the research clearly shows that very little progress has been made regarding attitudes about women in the workforce (Rhee & Sigler, 2014; Kiser, 2015).

Female employees are often given the advice to anticipate and fight against stereotypes of working women (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010). One example in particular stands out within the research, "Queen Bee Syndrome," or the idea that women in leadership are more

critical of their female subordinates (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010). This relates back to the stereotype often portrayed in media that women cannot get along in the workplace. While advice published for career women promotes fighting against the stereotypes projected onto them, research shows that women who take action to differentiate themselves from the pack are actually less likable among peers and managers (Rhee & Sigler, 2014). As a result of the preconceived notions about working women, females in the workplace are perceived as "less productive," "less effective," and "less competent" than their male counterparts (Rhee & Sigler, 2014; Elesser & Lever, 2011; Carli, 2002; Kiser, 2015). However, findings from several studies suggest that a woman's competence can actually undermine her authority in a leadership role, because her competence makes her unlikeable (Carli, 2002; Elesser & Lever, 2011).

Additionally, women are found to be held to higher standards than their male peers, yet they are often rated as less productive by their managers because of "too many responsibilities," citing family needs and household duties as perceived factors interfering with their work (Elesser & Lever, 2011; Kiser, 2015). Men continue to have negative attitudes towards women in leadership and prefer to have male managers (Kiser, 2015). Therefore, gender bias is still a severe issue within work environments. Consequently, women feel the need to work harder than men in order to meet the higher expectations set for them and prove their deservingness for power and authority. This has led to increases in workaholism and the effects of excessive drive on women's psychological health (Levy, 2015). Women who take on leadership roles in both the workplace and the household suffer psychological consequences and negative effects on their mental well-being, unless they are equipped with a social support system that helps them manage work and family life (Levy, 2015). Unfortunately, most workplaces do not offer any kind of support for working mothers and have not eliminated the gender biased expectations that cause female employees to feel the need to work harder than their male co-workers. In conclusion, the existing literature offers an endless supply of evidence that gender bias is glaringly present in the current workforce culture and is negatively affecting not only women's ability to progress forward in their career, but also their mental health.

Conclusions

Although gender diversity of characters has increased in television shows and films, women are still represented by negative and harmful stereotypes (Atkin, 1991; Berg and Streckfuss, 1992; Lauzen et al., 2007; Lauzen et al. 2008). This is especially true for career-focused characters, as they are continuously villainized until they ultimately choose to transform themselves to fit traditional social roles (Ezzedeen, 2014; Kim, 2001; Press, 2009; Senda-Cook, 2009). Applying feminist theory to television and film studies has helped scholars identify the antifeminist factors that continue to cause the perpetual loop of independent women reverting to dated social roles (Kim, 2001; Senda-Cook, 2009). However, more work can be done in identifying why we have not moved towards actual feminist media and away from fake feminist media that undermines the progress made by third-wave feminism. Current workplace perceptions mirror media portrayals, continuing to pressure women into familial roles and undermining their authority because of their responsibilities as mothers or wives. This research will look to identify why these media portrayals are perpetuating the glass ceiling for women and what can be done to progress society forward.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Based on the existing literature in both media studies and gender studies, it is evident that portrayals of women in the media will directly impact perceptions of social reality. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the media effects of these portrayals on perceptions of women in the workplace to determine whether progress in gender equality in television and film could lead to more progressive attitudes towards women in the workplace environment. This research will look to identify not only how television and movies portray working women and women's issues, but also whether there are underlying messages of feminist backlash within what is supposed to be feminist media.

By closely examining the social context in which the media texts were produced and consumed, the content of the media, and the underlying messaging within the sample texts, the impact of media culture on women in the workplace can be identified, explained, and critiqued in order to inform purposeful and impactful change within media culture.

While other studies have identified some patterns within representations of career women in both television and film, there has yet to be any research that can directly connect these negative portrayals as a factor that adversely affects women in the workplace. This study hypothesized that there would be clear evidence of the contradictory nature of media texts and feminist backlash that continues to perpetuate negative stereotypes of working women. In the future, this body of work can be used to help employees identify when they may be stereotyping a female co-worker, but more importantly *why* they so easily make assumptions about their female colleagues and how media texts have influenced their perceptions of women in the workplace.

METHOD

The goals of this study were to analyze the media effects of television and film portrayals of women in the workplace, identify feminist backlash in contradictory media texts, and make meaningful connections to effects in the workplace environment. This research employed discourse analysis, borrowing from Ezzedeen's (2015) previous study, to explore the context in which working female characters work including words, phrases, conversations, and visual imagery. The content identified in the discourse analysis was then analyzed using Kellner's (2020) approach to media culture. In this cultural studies approach, television, film, popular music, magazines, and advertisements all function as cultural texts (Kellner, 2020). A qualitative study of media texts was carried out to identify patterns in how career women were portrayed in popular culture. The results identified the social perceptions that the discourse surrounding career women affects and creates.

Sample

Film

Motion pictures included in the analysis were chosen based on several criteria to ensure that they featured female characters that could be analyzed effectively, and that the movies were successful enough to have an impact on popular culture. The films selected must have ranked above #60 on the domestic box office charts between 2000 and 2020. There must have been one or multiple female characters whose occupation was crucial to the plot of the film. Movies that were set in another time period were not included as to focus on current depictions of social roles. It is important to note that partaking in criminal activity was not considered an occupation, nor a work environment; therefore, movies like *Ocean's 8* were not included.

Comedy, drama, and action films were included; however, sci-fi, animation, children's, horror, and thriller were excluded again as to not skew data with unrealistic or fantasy-like representations of women. In addition, any media text that was based on a true story was excluded in order to focus on fictional portrayals. The movies included in the sample were

selected by reviewing the films ranked on the domestic box office (including calendar grosses) for each of the 20 years and determining whether they met the aforementioned criteria based on prior viewing or an overview of the synopsis and cast list (Domestic Box Office). As a result, a total of 21 films were identified and included in the sample (See Appendix B).

Television

Television series included in the analysis were chosen based on very similar criteria. The shows selected must have aired between 2000 and 2020 for at least three seasons. Shows that were set in another time period, such as *Mad Men*, were not included. There must be one or multiple female characters who are either the lead or part of an ensemble cast. In addition, the female character's occupation must be crucial to the plot of the series and the show must take place, at least partially, in a work environment (office, court room, restaurant, etc.). Again, partaking in criminal activity was not considered an occupation, nor a work environment; therefore, series like *Good Girls* were not included. Being a student or intern was also not considered a career; consequently, shows like *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Scrubs* were not added to this sample.

Genres included comedy, drama, and action; however, sci-fi, animation, children's television, horror, and thriller were left out as to not skew data with unrealistic or fantasy-like representations of women. The shows included in the sample were selected from the top 400 most popular television series on IMDb (2021). Series that met the aforementioned criteria were identified based on prior viewing or an overview of the synopsis and cast list. As a result, a total of 10 television series were identified and included in the sample (See Appendix A). Any singular episode of each series could be viewed for analysis because according to the criteria, the selected shows include portrayals of women within the work environment in every episode. Each episode should then yield similar results in terms of how the series represents career women; however, a minimum of 20 episodes per television series was analyzed.

Procedure

In order to identify prominent themes within the discourse of career women in cultural texts, the films and episodes of television shows selected were viewed by a singular coder. This coder took detailed notes on character demographics, characteristics, and the character's job title and/or description. Most of the qualitative analysis focused on the context that the career women appeared in, language that other characters used to describe them, dialogue between the characters and their co-workers, and recurring themes regarding women in the workplace. Other notes recorded more about the female characters' relationships, interests, hobbies, and behaviors.

While there were some preliminary codes based on demographics and psychographics, most codes emerged from the discourse analysis when patterns became identifiable. Similar to Ezzedeen's study, after each text was analyzed, themes were be sorted into two categories: professional (sexual relationship with boss, disliked by peers) and personal (strict diet, enjoys running, no children). Dividing the thematic analyses allowed conclusions to be drawn within the two individual domains and between both professional and personal themes as well.

Cultural Studies Approach to Analysis

Using Kellner's (2020) "multiperspectival" approach, the recurring themes identified in the discourse analysis were examined in three ways. First, using the political economy approach, each text was analyzed in terms of mass appeal. This analysis addressed questions such as: "Why does this media text appeal to a broad audience?", "Why is this a popular media text?", or "Why do audiences relate to this media text?" By determining why these series and films have a mass appeal, the analysis then began to identify the intended effects of the media and contradictory messages that were represented within it (Kellner, 2020).

Next, each text was subjected to a discursive reading, or close reading, during which the analysis and categorization procedures described above were performed. This identified the harmful stereotypes that were being presented and patterns across the characters' personalities, behaviors, and relationships. Plus, these findings called more attention to the

contradictory nature of the cultural texts and their intended effect on the popular consciousness (Kellner, 2020).

Lastly, the social horizon of each media text was considered. This level of analysis focused on questions such as: "During what historical or political climate was this media text produced and released?", "What does this text say about the historical moment it was consumed in?", and "What societal anxieties are transcoded within this media text?" By analyzing the historical context of when the media texts were released, this research led to further discussion of audience reception of the series and films and identified media effects that translate into the work environment (Kellner, 2020).

Leaning on feminism and cultural studies theoretical frameworks in order to apply an American cultural studies approach led to conclusions about representations of women within popular culture and the culture industry as a whole.

FINDINGS

The Contradictory Nature of Media Texts

Political Economy and Mass Appeal

When applying the political economy approach to the sample of media analyzed it becomes evident that the mass appeal of these texts is not that they are exclusively feminist or anti-feminist texts, but that they are contradictory in nature and position audiences to read characters in oppositional ways or synthesize characters to negotiate their existence within societal norms. This offers a clear explanation to why many of the career women featured in these films are idolized as feminist icons, even though their behavior undermines feminism in numerous ways. The media texts make use of female stereotypes in order to appeal to the broad mass media market, while also portraying a facade of fake feminism in order to entice feminist viewers, especially young women to be drawn into these films.

The most glaring example is *Miss Congeniality* (2000). Sandra Bullock stars in the lead role of Gracie Hart, an ambitious and determined FBI agent who is all business when it comes to protecting the contestants of the Miss United States pageant. While one audience member can read her as a strong, feminist woman who is focused on her career and performance, another viewer could read her as someone who is "lost" and needed a makeover in order to find her way back to being a "real woman." Even if audiences are in the former, the movie continues to undermine any feminist values that the film used to market to audiences. For example, Hart's male coworkers refer to feminists as "fugly women" and the movie incessantly reiterates that feminists must be masculine and unapproachable with comments like: "In place of friends and relationships you have sarcasm and a gun" or "When I met you, Dennis Rodman looked better in a dress" (*Miss Congeniality*, 2000). In the end, Gracie Hart undermines herself by giving in to both the beauty standards of society and the man that was not interested in her until she met those beauty standards (*Miss Congeniality*, 2000). However, audiences still revere her as a feminist icon because she has been able to "have it all" with both success in her career and her personal life.

Another example of this contradictory nature within the media texts was the reoccurring theme of "The Cautionary Tale." More common among television shows, this pattern consisted of a battle between the new and old wave of feminists within the same text. For example, in *Younger* (2015), Hilary Duff plays young and overachieving Kelsey Peters, a junior book publisher rising in the ranks with her quick wit and innovative marketing skills. Then there is Diana Trout (played by Miriam Shor), who is the publishing company's head of marketing that has paid her dues and is in one of the most senior roles possible at the peak of her career. However, the personal life of Diana, who is in her 40s and single, is something that Kelsey and other coworkers often scoff at. Kelsey and the younger characters even often reference Diana as someone they do not want to end up like and "feel sorry for" (*Younger*, 2015). In this scenario, Diana serves as the cautionary tale that contrasts Kelsey's ambition. Viewers can easily envision Kelsey successfully running the company in the future, but also root for her to not end up like Diana. Therefore, while viewers are attracted to the show because Kelsey serves as an empowering feminist character, Diana is there to remind them to not be *too* successful or be prepared to face a fate of loneliness and disappointment in their personal life (*Younger*, 2015).

Overall, it is evident that the goal of media texts is to appeal to a mass market by creating a story that anyone can negotiate to fit their personal beliefs. Whether it be reading a character to fit preferred ideals or synthesizing multiple characters in order to form a reality in which the audience feels comfortable with the social roles presented, the media texts perpetually set up viewers to focus on what they wish to see while also taking in underlying messages of feminist backlash.

Feminist Icons or Feminist Backlash?

In the discursive reading of the texts selected, two distinct stereotypes of women that almost all of the characters fit into became apparent quickly. These two "types" of women were categorized as the "people pleasers" and the "queen bees" for the purpose of this study. First, characters like Marisa Ventura (*Maid in Manhattan*, 2002), Jane Nichols (*27 Dresses*, 2008), and Betty Suarez (*Ugly Betty*, 2006) serve as "people pleasers." These women are

"pushovers" who get walked all over in both their personal and professional lives (*Maid in Manhattan*, 2002; *27 Dresses*, 2008; *Ugly Betty*, 2006). They are heads down workers who do the right thing and make the right choices but can never get ahead no matter how hard they work. Then come women like Diana Trout (Younger, 2015), Miranda Priestly (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006), and Margaret Tate (*The Proposal,* 2009) who are unapologetically in charge and demanding of attention. They are successful and respected within their careers but lack any semblance of a life outside of work (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006; *The Proposal,* 2009).

While these two "types" of women handle their careers in much different ways, all the characters included in the analysis had very similar personal characteristics and habits. Recurring themes identified in the personal lives of the characters included that they had strict exercise habits, meticulous apartments, and well organized, conservative wardrobes. But to contrast the image of a perfectly put together life, most of the women were sloppy drunks, anxious eaters, and terribly bad dancers. The underlying message in these personal depictions is seemingly that what looks perfect on the outside is often a mess on the inside, most likely to make the characters more relatable to a general audience.

As suspected based on the literature review, the women in this sample struggle with the intersection of their careers and personal relationships. Very few of them are married; however, those that are in a relationship face divorce or cheating as a direct result of "too much time spent at work" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006; *The Intern,* 2015; *The Bold Type*, 2017). Also, most of the women have very few friends or family and live very independently. This often leads them to pursue relationships, both friends and romances, within their workplace as they often do not "get out much."

Ultimately, it was found that each of these women is met with a transformational moment or decision in which they need to sacrifice an aspect of their career in order to find/reestablish love (*How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days,* 2003) or achieve a similar level of personal success, like having a baby (Baby Mama, 2008). In this instance, they are forced to revert away from their career success and back to traditional social roles. Therefore, as hypothesized, these female

characters function as feminist backlash and portray underlying messages that perpetuate harmful perceptions of career women.

<u>Wait, What Wave is This?</u>

Social Horizon of Films

When analyzing the social horizon of films included in the sample, it became clear that the social context in which the films were produced and released impacted how female characters were portrayed and perceived by audiences. In the films of the early 2000s, the findings supported conclusions made in the literature review, that these films are positioned in the "post-feminist" world and undermine elements of third wave feminism. However, later films begin to feature women in powerful roles with powerful principles guiding them. *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *Baby Mama* (2008), and *The Proposal* (2009), all feature a protagonist that you love to hate because she is the "Queen Bee" type. But these characters signify a shift in media portrayals of women as they are all accomplished women, not just working, but running large companies at the height of their careers. This new wave of women executives in films follows a steep rise in the number of women in politics in the early 2000s, including the introduction of Nancy Pelosi as the first female speaker of the house. Plus, there was a major increase in the number of female CEOs from 2000-2010 with tens of Fortune 500 companies adding women to their executive ranks during this period. Therefore, in this instance we see media moving with society, as both progress to have more women in leadership roles. However, as previously discussed the media portrayals of these female leaders is unfavorable to say the least.

The films released later in the 2010s do move away from the villainous Miranda Priestly type (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006), instead presenting us with kinder, more palatable leaders like Jules Ostin (*The Intern*, 2015) and Carly Whitten (*The Other Woman*, 2014). But these characters are still met with the same dilemmas and revert to the same traditional social roles expected by society, even giving up on their ambitions much easier than their predecessors. These films seemingly transcode anxieties of women deserting their familial roles for a high-

powered career. Rather than addressing what may happen if women decide to abandon typical ideals to pursue a life surrounding their career, these movies present transformational moments that force women to choose family or love over their career. Therefore, as women climb the ladder in society, audiences are reassured through these media texts that social roles will remain the same and nothing less of women should be expected.

Social Horizon of Television Series

The television series included in the sample offer an even more insightful look into the effects of social context in female portrayals. First, the actual absence or very minimal roles of the female characters in the first few seasons of *The West Wing* (1999), speaks for itself. However, the mere presence of women in a political drama may have contributed to wider acceptance of women into politics in the early 2000s. In the next wave of shows including *The Office* (2005) and *Ugly Betty* (2006), the effects of women rising in power are clearly evident. Both of these series transcode social anxieties about "the female takeover." While *The Office* (2005) presents a plethora of unhinged and unstable women incapable of leadership, Jan Levinson (played by Melora Hardin), takes the cake. The Vice President of Sales, a divorced, desperate, control freak, is portrayed as a "crazy" woman gone mad with power and authority. Jan clearly serves as an example that women are "too emotionally unstable" to run a company (*The Office*, 2005). Similarly, while the magazine publishing company is still owned and run by men in *Ugly Betty* (2006), series regular Wilhelmina (played by Vanessa Williams) takes every opportunity to sabotage the Editor in Chief in order to take control of the magazine. Again, exemplifying that women are power hungry, and transcoding societal anxieties about women rising in the ranks in the early 2000s.

Interestingly, in the following years we do begin to see the result of "the female takeover" in both comedies and dramas including series like *Parks and Recreation* (2009) and *Homeland* (2011). While very different shows at the core, both present a stereotypical "crazy woman" that cannot handle the pressure of her job. While CIA Agent Carrie Matheson actually suffers from bipolar disorder, she struggles to contain her emotions when it comes to her job and often fails her team by going off on her own tangents that do not lead to substantial results

(*Homeland,* 2011). In the extreme comedic version of this, Leslie Knope is a disaster of a Parks and Recreation Director who fails to meet the basic requirements of her job and poorly manages her team to the extent of dangerous conditions (*Park and Recreation*, 2009). Both characters portray the danger of a vulnerable woman in a position of power and offer harmful depictions that set women back in a time when they are supposed to be empowered to take on new leadership roles.

In the final wave of workplace series, audiences are introduced to successful and emotionally stable women executives. However, the social context in which these shows were released continues to complicate portrayals of women throughout the series. *Superstore* (2015), *Younger* (2015), and *The Bold Type* (2017) all ran seasons within the height of the #MeToo movement and record-breaking women's protests in the wake of President Trump's election. While some of the series, notably *The Bold Type* (2017), offered direct commentary on the movements and even revolved storylines around #MeToo and the Women's March, they also depict women in a negative light when it comes to relationships in the workplace. Each of these shows portrays its female characters as incapable of separating their love life from their work life (*Superstore*, 2015; *Younger,* 2015; *The Bold Type,* 2017). Every single main character in each of the three shows is at some point involved in an inappropriate workplace relationship, with both their superiors and subordinates (*Superstore*, 2015; *Younger,* 2015; *The Bold Type,* 2017). Therefore, these series seemingly attempt to further implicate women in the problems of the #MeToo movement and point fingers, rather than properly address concerns with power dynamics in corporate America.

Overall, throughout the different waves of workplace television being produced, the influence of social horizon can be identified as reactive to what is happening in the current social and political climates. It is evident that the shows analyzed transcode social anxieties about women being empowered to explore careers and leadership opportunities and function as backlash to the feminist empowerment that is occurring in reality in the same context.

Additional Findings

Lack of Racial Diversity

In addition to the findings of the discourse analysis previously discussed, this study also uncovered an extreme lack of diversity within the media sample. Out of the 54 female characters analyzed, only 11 (20.4%) were women of color. While television series offered more diverse characters than the film sample, over 70% were Latinx, and the remaining two characters were biracial, light skinned women. There was no representation for Asian women in the television sample. Also, it is important to note that many of the racially diverse characters were featured within the same series. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013) and *Ugly Betty* (2006) accounted for most of the diversity as they each featured multiple women of color. Whereas *Superstore* (2015) and *The Bold Type* (2017) offer one diverse main character each. The remainder of the shows analyzed in the television sample did not include any women of color.

In the movie sample, we see even less diversity with women of color making up only 14% of the career women. Alex Munday, played by Lucy Liu in *Charlie's Angels* (2000), serves as the singular Asian American female in the sample. However, her portrayal is more than problematic. In comparison to her fellow angels, Natalie (Cameron Diaz) and Dylan (Drew Barrymore), Alex is oversexualized with noticeably more slow-motion shots and close ups of her body. She is continuously dressed in tight, black leather outfits when not "disguised" in offensive appropriations of varying Asian cultures (*Charlie's Angels*, 2000). This portrayal of Alex perpetuates the fetishization of Asian women in American culture and demeans her competence compared to her counterparts in the film. Not only is the negative stereotype of an "Asian seductress" emphasized by this character, but other harmful Asian stereotypes are presented. We are introduced to Alex as an overachieving child with strict adoptive parents who are highly established professors (*Charlies Angel's,* 2000). Alex herself is academically inclined and a literal rocket scientist, as aerospace engineering was her previous career before becoming a private investigator on Charlie's team of "angels" (*Charlies Angel's,* 2000). These pieces of her background reinforce the model minority myth, a stereotype that assumes

all Asian Americans are overachievers who excel in their education and effectively achieve the American dream. Depictions of these Asian stereotypes in mainstream media such as *Charlie's Angels* (2000), emphasize and reinforce negative perceptions of Asian women that perpetuate unnecessary pressure on their appearances, choices, and most importantly their careers.

Similarly, there was only one black woman within the 28 characters analyzed in the film sample. Tiffany Haddish plays Mia Carter, the "impractical" partner of a beauty and cosmetic company started with her best friend in *Like a Boss* (2020). As the most recent release in the mix of films, this movie does include many diverse characters including Salma Hayek's Claire Luna, an over the top, orange-haired, Latina beauty mogul. However, again the way these characters are written is heavily reliant on stereotypes that demean the women's success in their careers and question their professionalism. Mia Carter is introduced as a smart and ambitious woman, but this characterization is quickly overshadowed by her aggressive behavior, lack of professionalism, and focus on earning money to live a glamorous lifestyle (*Like a Boss*, 2020). In contrast with her reserved business partner (played by Rose Byrne), Mia uses threatening language, intentionally damages property, and overall has an extremely short temper. This portrayal reinforces the "angry black woman" stereotype that has been ingrained in social perceptions as a result of this continued perpetuation and presents an untrue narrative that black women cannot be professional working women.

While there is a much more significant number of Latina women in both the television and film samples, it was interesting to discover that the majority of these eight characters are played by the same three actresses. America Ferrera leads both *Ugly Betty* (2006) and *Superstore* (2015) making up 40% of Latina characters in the television sample herself. Likewise, Salma Hayek is featured in *Ugly Betty* (2006) and *Like a Boss* (2020), accounting for almost 30% of the Latina characters in the entire study. Jennifer Lopez also plays two of the characters featured in the film analysis. However, it is important to note that Mary Fiore, played by Lopez in *The Wedding Planner* (2001), was not counted as a diverse character because she is portrayed as an Italian American in the film. This was seemingly a missed

opportunity to highlight Lopez's Puerto Rican descent in order to increase diversity, as Mary Fiore's ethnicity was not central to the plot of the movie. On the contrary, Lopez's role in *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) does address main character Marisa Ventura's ethnicity and highlights the struggles she faces as a Latina maid. Overall, the portrayals of Latina women are more prevalent and favorable than those of other women of color, but much progress is still needed. With the recent struggles to diversify corporate leadership and increase the number of diverse women in executive roles, this evidence leads to questions about how popular media portrays women of color in leadership roles and how this may hold back diverse women looking to move up the ladder.

Lack of Sexual Diversity

Within twenty years' worth of the most popular movies and television featuring working women, there is one singular woman who is not straight. Kat Edison, of *The Bold Type* (2017), is the only character that self identifies as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. The social media director of a large magazine, played by Aisha Dee, comes out as bisexual early in the series and many of her storylines revolve around her romances with women (*The Bold Type*, 2017). As a bisexual and biracial woman, she serves as an advocate for the many communities she is a part of and eventually loses her job because she exposes a board member of the company for supporting conversion therapy (*The Bold Type*, 2017). While Kat serves as a great example of the kind of LGBTQIA+ representation audiences could be seeing, it is disappointing that her sexuality and personal beliefs ultimately derail her career. The intended message may have been to encourage young people to stand-up for what they believe in; however, it seems that the underlying message may have been that doing so will inevitably end your career. What does this say about corporate America's acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community? And more importantly, what does the sheer lack of LGBTQIA+ representation in the last twenty years say about how media influences social perceptions?

It should also be noted that *Ugly Betty* (2006) features Alexis Meade, a trans woman, as a recurring character. This was surprising to see in one of the older series within the sample. However, she is positioned as a villain for much of the series and her identity is never

explicitly stated or discussed in a way that allows for progressive conversation on transgender issues. Ultimately, while she does function as representation for the trans community, her storyline does not play a *major* role in progressing gender or sexual diversity on television.

Production of Similar Media Texts

As evidenced in the sample of films (see Appendix B), there has been a steady decline in the box office popularity and corresponding production of movies that feature working women. Until *Like a Boss* was released in early 2020, there had been a four-year gap in which no applicable movies were found. Most of the films analyzed were released in the early 2000s and remained popular throughout the 2010s.

In contrast, there is a steady flow of workplace television series throughout the twenty years examined. Following the success of *The Office* (2005) in correspondence with the wide-spread popularity of early 2000s movies like *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), there is a surge in series that take place at work, especially those that feature women. *Parks and Recreation* (2009) and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013) take a page out of *The Office's* (2005) book, focusing on an ensemble cast with men and women and the relationships they form at work. Meanwhile, more risqué networks (MTV, Freeform, etc.) that are later to the game, embrace a work environment dominated by women, taking a cue from *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), in order to highlight a more dramatic and potentially more progressive side of career women.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this analysis offer further support for previous studies which assert that female characters present harmful stereotypes that undermine feminist values and act as a form of feminist backlash, especially depending on the social context in which they were released. This contradictory nature of the media texts is what makes them attractive to a broad audience because viewers are positioned to synthesize characters in order to relate and negotiate their own messages and beliefs from within each storyline. Harmful stereotypes that perpetuate unfair perceptions of career women are repeatedly represented in popular media which continues to affect how women are perceived within society. As evidenced by the literature, these negative perceptions have continued to hold women back in their careers and affect women's mental health overtime. In the future more research can focus on directly connecting specific stereotypes to perceptions held in corporate America and quantify the impact of those on women's achievement, wage growth, and mental health.

In addition, there has been an increase of shows and movies that are exclusive to streaming services during the period examined. While there were no applicable examples in this sample, future research can examine the impact of streaming service shows on perceptions of women within media and investigate differences in cable network and big box office portrayals versus streaming service portrayals of working women.

Overall, this study presents useful information about how media texts impact our social perceptions and offers evidence as to how our perceptions of career women have been impacted by the media we consume. However, there is plenty more opportunity to further expand on this work to encourage and inform meaningful change in the media industry.

<u>APPENDICES</u>

<u>Appendix A – Television Series Sample</u>

Series Title (IMDb Popularity Rating)

The Office (#20)   *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (#40)   *Superstore* (#46)

Parks and Rec (#92)   *Homeland* (#93)   *The Bold Type* (#108)

Younger (#204)   *The West Wing* (#273)   *Rizzoli and Isles* (#323)

Ugly Betty (#366)

<u>Appendix B – Film Sample</u>

Movie Title (Release Year)

Charlie's Angels (2000)   *Bride Wars* (2009)

Miss Congeniality (2000)   *The Proposal* (2009)

Bridget Jones's Diary (2001)   *Horrible Bosses* (2011)

The Wedding Planner (2001)   *Friends with Benefits* (2011)

Sweet Home Alabama (2002)   *The Heat* (2013)

Maid in Manhattan (2002)   *The Other Woman* (2014)

How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days (2003)   *The Intern* (2015)

The Interpreter (2005)   *Spy* (2015)

The Devil Wears Prada (2006)   *Trainwreck* (2015)

27 Dresses (2008)   *Like a Boss* (2020)

Baby Mama (2008)

Appendix C – Impactful Quotes

"That's what happens when you start doing well at work. Let me know when your whole life goes up in smoke. That means it's time for a promotion."

(*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006)

"She is tough, but if Miranda were a man, no one would notice anything about her except how great she is at her job."

(*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006)

"It's classic though, isn't it? The successful wife… the husband feels his manhood is threatened so he acts out, girlfriend I guess makes him feel more like a man."

(*The Intern,* 2015).

"I did everything that I was supposed to do. I didn't cry in meetings. I didn't wear short skirts. I put up with the weird upper management guys that kiss you on the mouth at Christmas. Is it fair that to be the youngest VP in our company I will be the oldest mom at preschool? Not really, but that's part of the deal. I made a choice. Some women got pregnant, I got promotions and I still aspire to meet someone and fall in love and get married but that is a very high-risk scenario."

(*Baby Mama*, 2008)

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