<u>How might media be used to challenge traditional ideas about gender?</u>

<u>Introduction</u>

In my essay I explore the ways in which the media is attempting to change the narrative on gender and how they are giving society a different perspective of gendered activities and traditional gender roles. Furthermore, I will suggest ways that media could challenge traditional gender norms. Throughout my essay I will investigate the work of several different linguists, authors and other relevant bodies that have helped to shift gender roles. I will also explore behind the scenes of the media by looking into gender roles within the workplace. I will also touch upon sexuality and other minority groups that are underrepresented in the media. Finally, I will research how the media has represented gender throughout the years and see how each wave of feminism has effected that.

Traditionally, gender was considered by roles and it placed women and men in entirely different categories. For example, women were deemed as the primary caregiver and housewives whereas men were the breadwinners and had a more assertive nature. It is important to note that gender in itself is a social construct, so it is not factual. Ann Oakley (1972) was one of the first social scientists to distinguish gender and she described it "as the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity" (Oakley, 1972, cited in Blackstone, 2003). Additionally, Oakley(1972) emphasised in her book 'sex, gender and society' that there is no solid definition of gender as "no two cultures would agree on what distinguishes one gender from another" (p.158). Another common way in which men and women were defined by their gender is through their personality. Deborah Tannen's difference theory model highlights this, she stated that men often assert their 'status' in a conversation whereas women offer 'support' and that men portray themselves as more 'independent' but women are more 'intimate' in their conversations so seek support from who they are communicating with. However other linguistic researchers believe that language does not define genders ; instead status does so it can not be fully accurate. Furthermore, everyone has their own identity and personality so gender alone can not support why people act in the way they do.

The media has a significant impact on society and ones thoughts as it is what people consume the most of, so what they portray about gender is usually believed and considered reliable. All forms of media communicate images of gender and they are often conforming to stereotypes and underrepresenting women. For example in "prime time television there are three times as many white men as women" (Basow,1992). Furthermore, minorities are even less visible in the media as African Americans are usually supporting roles. In contemporary society, the media does attempt to challenge these traditional ideas about gender by portraying the genders as more equal and even representing more genders than just 'women and men' such as those that identify as non-binary. Many influencers have come out as non-binary, this has had a positive impact on their followers and the general public as it makes them appear more relatable. For example, pop singer demi Lovato is non binary and they dress to express themselves rather than to fit a stereotype. In a recent interview taken from a podcast, Demi explained how "I just felt like a human" (Gallagher, 2022) rather than a specific gender. Another issue that social media and influencers attempt

to tackle is toxic masculinity, this is "a cultural concept of manliness that glorifies stoicism, strength, virility, and dominance, and that is socially maladaptive or harmful to mental health"(Dictionary.com, 2019). This term was coined by shepherd bliss in an attempt to "characterise his father's militarized, authoritarian masculinity" (Harrington, 2021). The term emerged in the 1980s and it has since been adapted by feminists as a way to explain men's misogynistic language. Arguably, pop sensation Harry Styles has achieved a lot in regards to defeating toxic masculinity, especially in the fashion community. In December 2020, Styles was pictured on the front cover of Vogue In a dress and skirt. Having someone so influential prove that anyone is entitled to freely express themselves is imperative in challenging traditional ideas about gender. Furthermore, it teaches young boys that having this hard exterior is not necessary in making you a man.

Another way in which the media could challenge gender stereotypes is by portraying more women in the workplace and removing this 'housewife' stereotype. Gender stereotypes and ideologies effect our thoughts and perceptions so it is vital that more equality is shown. The media often reflects real life and therefore represents people in proportion to real life, this may explain why traditionally women were under represented on television and why women were shown to be housewives and men to be working. In the mid-1980s, 'close to half (43 per cent in 1984 and 48 per cent in 1987) of people supported a gendered separation of roles, with the man in the 'breadwinner' role and the woman in the caring role' (Gender roles An incomplete revolution?, 2013), this is probably because it is all they knew at the time. Although women are presented in the field of work considerably more than they used to be, there are still areas where they appear to lack. For example , In the top films from 2010 to 2013, "there is a ratio of 7.6 men working in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) to every 1 woman in STEM. At the same time, men are shown as incompetent in the domestic arena" (Smith, 2014, cited in Ward and Grower, 2020, p.4). Furthermore, It could be argued that the media has expanded since 2013 and in many ways it has, however statistics from 2019 to 2020 regarding women on television highlight how "only 42% of streaming shows have a female protagonist" (Women and Hollywood, 2018). Nevertheless, Some of the most popular tv shows now portray women in the field of work and many shows are now centred around feminism, a few examples of this are suits, greys anatomy, the handmaids tale, dynasty and killing eve.

When investigating the medias role in challenging gender stereotypes, it is important to consider people's involvement behind the scenes , especially In news journalism, as who they are employing will possibly reflect what they are publishing, "the feminist logic is that more women reporters, editors, and producers will expand the ability for women on the inside to speak for themselves" (Carter, Steiner and Allan, 2019). Men typically dominate journalism and news content as they own a lot of the news organisations so already women are underrepresented and at a disadvantage. The main distinction of news categories is 'hard' and 'soft' news, hard news typically covers factual, important and newsworthy topics, whereas soft news is deemed less important as it covers lifestyle events and popular culture; its primary purpose is to entertain. North (2009) expands upon this to explain how women journalists are not treated equally to their male counterparts as "hard news is equated with masculine traits and soft news with feminine traits" and female writers

predominantly write 'soft' news. Feminists are critical of this as hard news is associated with higher status due to its importance so there is clear segregation in the workplace as it undermines women's ability. Ultimately, giving women more substantial opportunities in the workplace would help bridge this gap and allow women's stories and success to be presented online.

Arguably, feminists have been responsible for a change in how the media portray women and therefore how they are perceived by wider society. The concept of feminism can be dated back to the earliest eras of human civilisation. Furthermore, the term was coined in 1837 by French philosopher, Charles Fourier, it was originally concerned with "feminine qualities or character," (Dictionary.com, 2019). Since the suffrage movement, it is has been linked with women's rights and feminists are now considered advocates for equality. The first wave of feminism began in the 1800s and was mostly concerned with legal inequalities. One of the first media breakthroughs was created in 1870 as feminist Lucy Stone published one of the first women's journals in America, it was made to "to address a broad segment of middle-class female society interested in women's rights" (Woman's Journal | American periodical | Britannica, 2019). From this, many other activists began their own campaigns and media coverage increased of these events. The second wave began during the 1960s as "a reaction to women returning to their roles as housewives and mothers after the end of the Second World War" (Anand, 2018). This wave was triggered by 'the feminine mystique', a book publish by Betty Friedan, she believed that women were being targeted and completely misrepresented within the advertising industry. The 'feminine mystique' refers to the image in which "women were defined only in sexual relation to men—man's wife, sex object, mother, housewife—and never as persons defining themselves by their own actions in society" (Friedan, 1963, p.14). Friedan also explained how 'pervasive' this image was within the mass media, women were blamed for things out of their control. This is evidence of how traditionally women were defined by their sex, gender and role in society and how they faced lots of sexism and discrimination online. Linking back to employment, women had to break the stigma themselves during the second wave, statistics show that as a result of the feminine mystique, "Fifty-nine percent of women work at jobs outside the home, including the mothers of young children"(Friedan, 1963, P18). Although Friedan had a lot of impact on women at the time, critiques have argued that she failed to recognise black feminism and women from less privileged, working- class backgrounds. Another major criticism of Friedan's work, made by Bowlby (1987) is that many aspects of it "seem anachronistic", as 'they refer to demands which no longer seem pertinent or because they appear unacceptably narrow or biased'. Ultimately, in western societies today, Friedan's work is not as relevant as women have progressed a lot more and no longer meet her out dated demands. The final 'wave' otherwise known as post feminism is what we are witnessing currently. Post- feminism came to prominence in the 1990s but as Gill (2007, p.3) acknowledged "there is little agreement about what post feminism is", and it should instead be understood as a 'distinctive sensibility' made up of multiple themes. The pre fix 'post' further implies that feminisms goals have been completed but some people believe it addresses the absences in feminism and allows contemporary women to embrace their femininity. It would be expected that post feminism covers women in a more equal way to

men as society has developed since the first wave, however it appears to achieve the opposite. Post feminism media culture is concerned with the female body ; having a 'sexy body' is "presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity" (Gill, 2007,p.7). This is evident across many Rolling Stones covers, some studies have suggested that the sexualising of women on these covers may be as a sort of "backlash against women's gains" (Hatton and Trautner, 2013,p.1). This was proposed as there was a relationship between women's increasing power in the music industry and their sexualization on the cover of Rolling Stone, "as women musicians gained in popularity, they were increasingly sexualized" (Hatton and Trautner, 2013, p.2). The Rolling Stones magazine is published worldwide for everyone to view, so they are emphasising this idea that a woman's body is her only 'source of identity' and it further implies that they should be desirable and sexy for a man's pleasure as many men will read the magazine. Additionally, female audiences could be effected by this and develop body image issues as a result as all they see online is this perfect (edited) body and compare it their own. On the other hand, post feminists could argue that it elevates women as they are not conforming to traditional feminism and instead are embracing their sexuality and femininity.

Successfully targeting the younger generation could allow the media to challenge traditional ideas about gender and change society's perception. If the younger generation of today grow up seeing equality around them then it may prevent sexist views in the future .Within the media, these traditional ideas of gender are changing and more equality is visible, however there is still cases for example where boys are presented differently to girls. In a study of teen networks (Disney and nickelodeon and CN), the female characters were portrayed as obsessed about their appearance and they were "more likely to receive comments about their looks than male characters" (Gerding& Signorielli, 2014, cited in Ward and Grower, 2020). These gendered activities are also implemented from a young age as boys are typically associated with trucks and cars whereas girls are expected to play with dolls and mimic this nurturing role. Another expectation is that "Boys should be directed to like blue; girls toward pink" (Gender Equality Law Center, 2015). It could be argued however that these expectations are slightly outdated as many brands are now removing gender bias from their marketing. In 2021, Lego announced that they were removing gender bias from their toys and marketing as a result of a survey they published. Lego went on to create the 'ready for girls campaign' to celebrate "girls who rebuild the world through creative problem solving" (www.lego.com, n.d.). This campaign is imperative in shaping the future generation. It arguably helps children's confidence too as it encourages them to accept themselves for who they are and play with any toys they wish, regardless of their gender.

Another way the media would be successful in challenging traditional views on gender is by targeting minority audiences. Minority groups remain ignored in many parts of the media; critical news scholars claim that "the news supports the values, beliefs and norms of a ruling elite… thus to effectively build and maintain support for the ruling elite, the news must appear neutral and disguise its ideological roots" (Hall, S, Connell, I and Curti, L, 1977, cited in Meyers, 2004). By being more inclusive and representing black women and other minority groups, people may adapt their views on traditional gender in relation to race. Traditionally,

black women were excluded from mainstream feminism due to their race however, in recent years the concept of 'black feminism' has gained more attention. Black feminism is concerned with gender and racial inequalities and focuses on empowering black women. As a result of this, representation of black women in the media has increased, a positive example of this is that "Black women are more likely to be depicted as working in a Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) occupation than other women of color and white women (14.3% compared to 9.6% and 9.6%, respectively)" (See Jane, n.d.). Nevertheless, other statistics show how "black women face more objectification and sexualisation than white women, Black women (13.5%) and other women of color (14.8%) are more likely to be depicted as partially/fully nude than white women (9.0%)" (See Jane, n.d.). This links to earlier findings and proves how sexualisation in the media, regarding women, is still an issue. News studies have also explored the representation of African Americans and found that they either 'explicitly target men or implicitly neglect women' and black people are generally 'portrayed as both a problem and threat to society'(Meyers, 2004). Although, this study was taken from the early 2000s, it is clear that the media is failing to challenge stereotypes and ideas about gender when it comes to race as black women are massively underrepresented and mistreated.

The media is also becoming an accessible way to learn about sexuality as more sexualities are being portrayed. Traditionally, homosexuality was illegal across the globe so it was not covered in a positive way in the media, there were also no gay characters in television and film. Even as recently as the 2000s, "Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth rarely find themselves represented in the mainstream media" (Brown, 2002). As mentioned, targeting minority groups could successfully change traditional views and as the LGBTQ+ community are a minority group, including them more throughout media content could help change people's existing beliefs. There is an increasing amount of homosexual characters in tv shows, statistics show that "Bisexual+ characters make up 29 percent of all the LGBTQ characters on broadcast, cable and streaming" and that out "of the 775 series regular characters scheduled to appear on scripted broadcast primetime programming for the 2021-2022 season, 92 characters (11.9 percent) are LGBTQ" (GLAAD, 2022). Furthermore, there is now more shows centred around homosexuality, for example RuPaul's Drag Race which began in 2009. This show has "led to an exponential rise in drag events" (Baxter, Leer and Graham, 2022,p.2) as it embraces drag as an art and adding the competition element to the show makes It more enjoyable for viewers. In society, drag has always been popular, just not in the way we know it today. For example in Shakespearean times men would dress up as women and perform in plays but the idea of "cross-dressing and homosexuality can be viewed by some as 'deviant' behaviour" (Baxter, Leer and Graham, 2022,p.2) so it was never referred to as 'drag'. Many argue that "RuPaul has been the catalyst for this explosion of drag as an art form which has gained undeniable acceptance and popularity in mainstream society (Alexander,2017; Jordan,2018, as cited in Baxter, Leer and Graham, 2022). Overall, by having these role models throughout the media, it allows more people to feel seen as they can relate to these different characters and shows.

In contemporary society, views on traditional gender roles and stereotypes are slowly diminishing and the representation of men and women online are changing and developing. The media has played a significant role in this as they have incorporated more women into television and film. Furthermore, through social media especially, they have been able to shift perceptions on femininities and masculinities. With the assistance of celebrities and influencers, it is now deemed just as 'manly' to be sensitive and it is acceptable to wear typically more feminine fashion. The media has also been successful in representing minority groups across the globe; the portrayal of these different groups allows young people to feel more seen. Overall, the media is one of the biggest catalysts for social change as it is so widely used ,so information spreads and as a result perceptions changes.

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