

Gendered Media Representations beyond Television: Charting Stereotypes Then and Now

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Abstract

This article explores the intersections between media effects theory and gender studies. It analyses whether gender stereotypes have become to decrease, both in television and internet contents, as a result of the increasing gender balance in the public spheres. The study, moreover, reflects on the tendency of the internet to produce and reproduce misogynous discourses and to reinforce gender normativity.

Keywords

Media effects theory; gender studies; digital convergence; gender stereotypes; hate speech.

Resum

Aquest article explora les interseccions entre la teoria dels efectes dels mitjans i els estudis de gènere. S'analitza fins a quin punt els estereotips de gènere han començat a de créixer, tant als continguts d'internet com televisius, a conseqüència del creixent equilibri de gènere en l'esfera pública. L'estudi, a més, reflexiona sobre la tendència d'internet per produir i reproduir discursos misògins i per reforçar la normativitat de gènere.

Paraules clau

Teoria dels efectes dels mitjans; estudis de gènere; convergència digital; estereotips de gènere; discurs de l'odi.

1. Introduction

Within the short but intense history of Communication Studies, media effects theory has placed great emphasis on viewers' tendency to reproduce message contents, drawing attention to the importance of monitoring or regulating the latter. Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al. 2002) in particular, within media effects, has concerned itself with the mainstreaming effect of television contents, the latter appealing to a majority of spectators and, in the process, reinforcing the social and communitarian bonds that hold them together. These consensual values that are reinforced through television are explored by the commercial media model, which seeks to give audiences the encoded meanings, or frames, that are in line with the cognitive maps that they have acquired through socialization. Any attempt at urging audiences to decode meaning (Hall 1984) outside their habitual cognitive parameters could run the risk of leading to a loss in audience shares in the highly competitive and saturated media market, of which television is a prime example. The cognitive maps that media producers seek to activate in viewers take recourse in stereotypical images that are used to legitimate a particular view of the world as natural, rather than constructed, and, therefore, ideological. One of the areas in which such stereotypes are particularly visible is that of gendered representations, with women being habitually associated with relational and communal social roles and men with agentic social roles

(Eagly and Steffen 1984). Analysis of televisual entertainment and news has focused minutely on such stereotypes, addressing how attitudes towards gender imbalance may be influenced by exposure to stereotypical media content.

This article gives voice to such debates, exploring intersections between media effects theory and gender studies. Simultaneously, on the basis of the observation of increasing gender balance in the public spheres of most Western countries in our day and age, the extent to which gender stereotypes have come to decrease as a response to this changing situation will be explored (Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero 2012). Studies are invoked that indicate that changes in gendered representations have resulted mostly in reversals of gendered performance, whereby women tend to assimilate masculine characteristics (Lacalle and Gómez 2016).

Finally, considering the age of convergence (Jenkins 2006) in which we live, it is argued that there appears to be little separation between patterns of television and Internet consumption, with the Internet facilitating the consumption of gender stereotypes in a more intense and immersive mode than television. The reason for this situation resides in various affordances of online architecture, namely its disembodied and instantaneous nature, which, despite appearing at first glance to facilitate experimentation with normative identity frames, ends up offering increasingly coherent and non-ambiguous identity frames in comparison with offline domains (van Dijck 2013).

The article ends by reflecting on the Net's capacity to reinforce gendered normativity through the dissemination of misogynous discourse (Sadowski 2016). The necessity of thinking new forms of regulation against hate speech in online contexts is elaborated on, taking into account that traditional forms of regulation devised for the mass media are no longer applicable in the online domain.

2. Cultivation Theory and Gender Stereotypes

Cultivation theory presupposes that television contents shape the way spectators view social reality, with those who spend more time watching television revealing a greater tendency to reflect the perspectives of message patterns that have been consistently articulated through that medium than those who watch less television (Gerbner et al. 2002; Morgan, Shanahan Signorielli 2014). With this viewpoint, exposure to a 'reality' that is repeatedly depicted through television broadcasting and entertainment programming, and which favours certain narratives over others, leads spectators to adopt similar world views, thus conditioning their interpretation of social context (Selepak & Cain 2015; Signorielli 2009), even when images are incongruous with real-world events (Selepak & Cain 2015; Botta, 2000; Dixon & Linz 2000). The critique of violent TV programmes has often based itself on cultivation theory, due to assuming that these provoke irrational and unfounded fears in viewers as regards the risks of violence in the environment and that of individual susceptibility to crime (Britto et al. 2007; Custers & Van den Bulck 2012; Doob & McDonald 1979).

Originally presented in the 1970s by George Gerbner, cultivation theory became one of media and communication's most popular theories to analyse mass media effects, placing emphasis on issues concerning the reproduction of 'the established structure of power' (Gerbner 1983: 358). According to Gerbner, the attitudes and values that are cultivated by mass media are those that already exist in wider society. Through the dissemination of such values among viewers, the media were seen to contribute to the renovation of the shared social bonds that hold members of any 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) together. In effect, Gerbner et al. (1984, 1982) described television as having a 'mainstreaming' effect due to reproducing tendentially consensual, middle-of-the-road values that appeal to the majority. While first-order effects refer to the direct perceptual changes that derive from media consumption, second-order effects correspond to the updating of currently-held values and beliefs resulting from media exposure (Dahl 2015: 65)

Despite living in an increasingly digitised society in which the way we receive entertainment or news has changed significantly, it is not clear the extent to which the mainstreaming effect of such content has come to change. Indeed, among the cultural aspects that Morgan et al. (2015) indicated as noticeably persistent across various TV programmes are those related to gender roles. Norms pertaining to gender roles correspond

to second-order cultivation values, as they stand for attitudes and judgements that research has shown to be influenced by exposure to television (Kahlor & Morrison 2007; Scharrer 2018). Watching certain television genres has also been shown to correlate with the adoption of views regarding the allocation of gender roles in real-life contexts (Kahlor & Morrison 2007; Scharrer 2018). When televisual broadcast and cable contents systematically portray women as associated with certain social roles to the detriment of others, the former 'take on an aura of naturalness and truth' (Merskin 2007: 135) and become stabilised within the prevalent gender economy of signs.

In this perspective, gender stereotypes arise from a regular and repetitive pattern of representation of women and men performing distinct social roles both in the interpersonal and work domains (Eagly and Steffen 1984; Lacalle and Gómez 2016). As such, social roles can be regarded as providing the essence of gender stereotypes. The allocation of social roles to women and men revolves around alleged inclination towards either communal or agentic objectives (Lopez-Zafra and Garcia-Retamero 2012) with the first being associated with 'selflessness, concern with others, and a desire to be at one with others' and the second manifesting itself through 'self-assertion, self-expansion, and the urge to master' (Eagly and Steffen 1984: 736). Various studies (Berg and Streckfuss 1992; Gerbner et al. 2002; Lacalle and Gómez 2016; Morgan 1982; Signorielli 1989; Signorielli and Kahlenberg 2001) focusing on the effects of television have pointed to the role of prime-time programming in perpetuating widespread beliefs concerning the stereotypical performance of gendered social roles, whereby women habitually appear in communal activities, essentially focusing on the enactment of interpersonal connections as regards family, friends or romantic partners, as opposed to men, more frequently associated with agentic activities oriented towards self-affirmation (Lauzen, Dozier and Horan 2008: 210).

Indeed, Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001) note that marital status and professional roles are depicted as tensional on prime-time television, with women spectators being conditioned into believing that more qualified jobs are incompatible with a successful marriage. Lacalle and Gómez, in turn, observe that successive studies have indicated that work context, as represented in fiction, is still a man's world, due to 'a significant percentage' (2016: 61) of female characters being assigned roles as housewives or unqualified female workers in comparison with their male counterparts, whose identity is habitually defined in terms of occupation. Likewise, Berg and Stekfuss (1992) claim that, when represented in the context of work-settings, the female characters who appear on CBS, NBC and ABC prime-time television programming tend to perform 'more interpersonal/relational actions (motivating, socialising, counseling, and other actions which develop worker relationships) and fewer decisional, political, and operational actions than do male characters (cf. Lauzen, Dozier and Horan 2008: 202).

3. Televisual Cognitive Maps and Reversals of Gender Performance

Television portrayals tend to base themselves on rather rudimentary gender stereotypes, due to the necessity of catering to the largest possible audience through the production of mainstreaming effects, described as consensual values that appeal to the majority of viewers and that cater to the commercial media model. Merskin (2007) invokes the Gramscian concept of hegemony to describe how stereotypes thrive on a social control strategy of consent, whereby simplistic representations are normalised due to reinforcing a particular definition of social identity that contributes to legitimating the cultural, political and economic mores of any dominant culture (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz 2005).

Consent for such stereotypical images is thus based on the reenactment of a cognitive mapping which tends to justify and naturalise dominant ideologies by buttressing the belief structures that are held in common by members of a group (Leudar and Nekvapil 2000). In this perspective, prime-time television gendered representations promote social consensus by expressing a notion of unity, translatable through the pronoun 'we' and reflecting a particular view of events which is in synchrony with preestablished habits acquired through socialisation. The 'power' of media effects thus resides in their capacity to cognitively reproduce the mental representations that are presumably shared by members of any particular 'ingroup', rather than in any capacity to effect significant change on the basis of the presentation of products that conflict with those representations (Alvares 2016).

This cognitive reproduction corresponds to a 'preferred' encoded meaning (Hall 1984: 136), namely the attempt on the part of media producers to define the parameters, or frames, within which decoding can occur. In other words, there is an 'implied audience' (Nielsen 2009, p. 24) for whom media producers encode their messages, heuristically reproducing the cognitive structure that is distinctive of that particular 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) (cf. Alvares 2017). Regular contact of TV spectators with prime-time characters, who enter viewers' intimate living space on a daily basis, implies that TV portrayals be 'interesting enough to entertain, yet familiar enough to be recognizable and comforting' (Lauzen, Dozier and Horan 2008: 211). Frames which encode characters performed by women as focusing on relationships and those performed by men as revolving around work-related activities are in tune with prevalent social expectations and therefore resonate with audiences' prevalent cognitive maps.

However, taking into account that women have, in the vast majority of Western countries, come to prominently occupy non-traditional social roles, it would be legitimate to infer that the recourse to gender stereotypes in the representation of women on television would be likely to decrease (Lopez-Zafra & Garcia-Retamero 2012) as a sign of the times. This decrease in stereotypical female social roles essentially translates as a reversal in gendered performance whereby

empowered women, often occupying leadership positions, are increasingly depicted as having masculine traits, namely that of rationality, allowing them to hide emotional expression behind a mask of 'insensitivity'. Lacalle and Gómez note, for example, that 'television fiction rarely opts for the novel representation of a dominant, independent woman, but rather opts for copying characteristics associated with masculinity, namely aggressiveness, individualism, competitiveness and decision-making, as well as authority and organizational skills' (2016: 64). In this optic, female professional success is frequently represented as deriving from frustrations in the private sphere, thus foregrounding the association of women with the primacy of interpersonal and relational roles.

The North-American television series *Sex and the City*, which originally aired on HBO for six seasons from 1998 to 2004, articulates a feminist master narrative that is in tune with a gendered reversal of femininity, by emphasising that 'women's aim is to gain equal power to white, heterosexual, middle-class men within the hegemonic social structure' (Brasfield 2014: 133). This series thus attempts to portray women in agentic rather than communal social roles – 'not shy but aggressive, not docile but assertive, not private but boldly public'–, ultimately failing in its reversion of stereotypes due to simultaneously articulating traditional 'formulas of nudity, hetero-coupling and, most importantly, gender division' (Lorié 2011: 49).

4. Stereotypes Online: Beyond Convergence with Television

In its 1998 Green Paper on *Regulating communications: approaching convergence in the Information Age* (DCMS/DTI), the British government claimed that the market would, in the near future, essentially become more homogeneous in terms of providers rather than consumers, due to differences continuing to prevail in the pattern of consumer demand among traditional broadcast audiences and Internet users. In our current context, it appears that this separation is negligible, to the extent that the Net is facilitating the consumption of gender stereotypes, similarly to what has traditionally happened in the domain of television. However, the specificities of the Net, namely the relative anonymity that derives from the apparently disembodied nature of the online environment, as well as the circulation of messages beyond their original spatiotemporal context of authorship (Murthy 2012), potentiate a voyeuristic capacity that reinforces a 'hypersexualised mediatised staging of gendered power relations' (Alvares 2018: 2). In a context of ubiquitous data, social media users seek clear and non-ambivalent identity categories that avoid confusion as to how the person is to be defined. As such, despite appearing to facilitate the experimentation with normative identity frames through the expression of 'multiple selves' (Turkle 1999: 647) in an immaterial virtual environment, online social networks offer increasingly coherent, homogeneous and non-fragmented 'pegs' that serve to anchor identity more firmly than in offline

contexts (Alvares 2018; Farquhar 2012; van Dijck 2013). By privileging the presentation of non-ambivalent identity online, a normative femininity is reified within the economy of gender difference structured by the male gaze, thus reinforcing a prescriptive connection between gender and sexuality.

Such identity categories, exploited by the architecture of platform interfaces, play in to the demands of neoliberal consumer culture by overemphasising particular brands of femininity in digital contexts, namely those that, due to attaining high rankings on social media platforms, can be converted into value and profit (Carah and Dobson). Indeed, platform companies profit from the production of an online self that appears as 'standardised tradeable' merchandise (van Dijck 2013: 212), by selling coherently organised behavioural data to agencies, governments and advertisers, contemplating both security and marketing purposes (van Dijck 2013; Bivens and Haimson 2016).

The privileging of topics and images that cater to the highest number of people, on the part of social media, facilitates the conversion of women into objects of surveillance through the dissemination of images, often of a sexualised and depersonalised nature. In this process, gendered dichotomies, based on relations of power, are reinforced by the threat of 'intimacy made public through the transgression of boundaries' (Alvares 2018: 5). Disciplinary effects are thus exercised through the production and reproduction of women as out of context, with images that violate intimacy acting as technologies of control over female behaviour.

Online misogyny operates by displacing or expelling signs of embodied femininity (Sadowski 2016) onto a realm of virtuality where women tend to experience loss of control, due to loss of context (Butler 1997). Under such circumstances, impression management becomes important in the attempt to avoid loss of context and assume control over one's identity, playing, according to Siibak (2009) a prominent role in the construction of a feminine ideal. Adolescents, in particular, manifest the necessity of constructing online identity profiles that are in synchrony with those attributes valued by online peers. An identity is thus chosen and performed in tandem with messages and comments received from peers.

Back in the late seventies, Nancy Chodorow (1978) had proposed a psychoanalytic model that explained the female relational self as deriving from a parental structure according to which daughters tend to be treated as narcissistic extensions of their mothers, thus having difficulty in affirming themselves as autonomous subjects. This relational model of continuity with the mother is then projected onto others, with women habitually defining themselves as 'connected' (Westkott 1989: 1) with others, as opposed to boys, who, treated as distinct from their mothers, tend to form more delimited ego boundaries than their female counterparts. This general tendency can be observed in the gendered use of media, whereby women, unlike men, tend to prioritise the building of relationships (Bullen 2009; Goodall 2012; Wood 2011) through their interactions on social

network sites. Men, in turn, tend to favour the use of media for instrumental objectives (Goodall 2012; Wood 2011), in tune with the agentic values that correspond to stereotypically male social roles.

Taking into account that popularity, measured either through a large number of 'likes' or clicks, is clearly favoured by the architecture of new media, messages that give rise to affective or emotional engagement are those that spread most rapidly on digital media (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018). The easy spread of emotion is reinforced by a digital environment in which communication tends to occur within groups ('discursive cocoons' or 'echo-chambers') of like-minded individuals, who tend to reinforce each other's opinions (Dahlgren and Alvares 2013). In such circumstances, in which individuals do not have to persuade those who do not share their viewpoint over the validity of their claims, the division between an ingroup and an outgroup, distinctive of the cognitive structure that reproduces stereotypes, becomes particularly entrenched. In other words, conformity to a group ideal (that of the 'ingroup') becomes increasingly ingrained both through the reinforcement of opinion that characterises communication online as well as through the relational intimacy offered by online space. If it is already the case that female stereotypes tend to resuscitate communal values, this characteristic appears to be inflated in online communication, where the affirmation of the self through relationality is very much emphasised. This means that, due to the prevalence of group logic online, social media profiles tend to reflect the need for social acceptance, with individuals establishing cohesive ties with those with whom they wish to identify. With this perspective, the number of friends, or connections, on a SNS profile is used to signal certain aspects of identity to audiences, in what corresponds to a public exhibition of social capital, interpreted as a sign that the selected identity ascriptions are reliable (Papacharissi 2009).

This form of communication, which is increasingly linked to affect, results in a polarization of discourse on the basis of a persistent mobilization of emotions (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018). As such, this polarisation works both ways, contemplating communication both in ingroup and outgroup. For example, the enhancement of communal values and relationality that has been singled out as occurring in communication among girls online may have as opposite effect the reinforcement of misogynous forms of behaviour online. According to Sadowski (2016), misogyny involves the strategy of expelling those who do not fit into the norm by displacing or decontextualising figurative signs of femininity, in a process whereby bodies are converted into objects. By making particular signs fix onto certain female bodies, those engaging in intimacy online either accept such bodies as part of an 'ingroup' or ostracise them by relegating them to the 'outgroup' (Alvares 2018; Sadowski 2016). Misogyny thus reveals itself as a 'profoundly evaluative cultural practice based on emotions' (Alvares 2018), whereby value is attributed to particular modes of femininity over others (Ahmed 2004; Sadowski 2016).

5. Regulation Online

The characteristics of the online world make it particularly receptive to the amplification of misogyny, partly because of a simultaneous reinforcement of the normativity of punitive social structures that reinforce gender dichotomies (Alvares 2018). Hence, the misogyny that inheres in mass media stereotypes in an offline context is somehow augmented in an online environment. Not foreign to this situation would be the inexistence of regulation against hate speech in online contexts, where the regulation applied to traditional mass media is no longer sufficient. Indeed, most regulatory bodies throughout Europe have introduced some monitoring of the representation of women on the mass media, with the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2010, recently amended on November 14, 2018) prohibiting 'discrimination based on sex in commercial communications' and urging 'Member States to promote a diversified and realistic picture of women's and men's skills and potential' (MLP in gender equality seminar 2018). This is, however, not the case with online media.

The affordances of online architecture, namely the expansion of an offline to online audience, the relative anonymity with which new accounts can be created –so as to guarantee the continuation of communication activities in case any one account is suspended (Alvares 2017)–, the instantaneity of message exchange and ease of access make digital contents very difficult to monitor (Brown 2018). This requires that we rethink forms of regulation that exist in the mass media and that are no longer capable of being applied in the online domain. In effect, norms of acceptability that prevail among mainstream broadcasting companies tend to be subverted in the current context (Alvares and Dahlgren 2016), with implications in terms of polarisation of misogynist discourse online.

However, despite authorities being increasingly reactive to online threats, in part due to the ubiquitous threat of terrorism, hate speech must include some indication of a violent plan of action to legitimate action on the part of those authorities (Shepherd et al. 2015). As such, sexist, misogynist, racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic online contents maintain themselves in a kind of no man's land, where it is difficult to apply legislation. The application of judicial competences becomes even more complicated, bearing in mind that online hate operates across borders.

A joint effort on the part of the European Commission and various Internet platform companies has nevertheless resulted in adherence to a 'Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online', since 31 May 2016. However, this code of conduct consists in a public commitment to implement regulation, lacking any legal capacity to make binding decisions. According to Brown (2018), this code can be regarded as problematic due to consisting of a set of measures aiming to restrain freedom of expression (i.e. cyberhate) at a national level, without involving the consent of national governments. Moreover, because the Code does not consist of European Union legislation but rather

of a form of voluntary self-regulation, the former cannot be scrutinised nor subject to approval on the part of the European Parliament. As such, the Association for European Digital Rights criticises this Code for paving the way for the implementation of procedures that may be decontextualised from a framework of accountability. Absence of accountability is linked to the Code's relegation of law to a secondary status, with the possibility of private companies enjoying the right to implement their terms of service in an arbitrary manner, leaving users vulnerable to accusations they cannot appeal (Brown 2018).

6. Conclusion

This article has shown that media effects theory, in particular cultivation theory, continues to be relevant in an age of convergence (Jenkins 2006). However, the televisual gendered stereotypes that tend to be studied by cultivation theory have intensified in an online context, partly due to the impact of an algorithmic culture that extends voyeuristic capacity. By privileging topics and images that cater to the largest number of visualisations, social media facilitate the conversion of women into objects of surveillance through the dissemination of images, often of a sexualised and depersonalised nature. In this process, gendered dichotomies, based on relations of power, are reinforced through the public exhibition of intimacy, corresponding to a transgression of boundaries.

Disciplinary effects are thus exercised through the production and reproduction of women as out of context, with images that violate intimacy acting as technologies of control over female behaviour. Online misogyny works by displacing signs of embodied femininity (Sadowski 2016) onto an online domain, where women tend to experience loss of control due to loss of context (Butler 1997).

Considering the fact that the Internet has come to facilitate online hate speech, of which misogyny is an example, forms of regulation that have been applied to the traditional mass media have to be rethought in these novel circumstances. Indeed, while most regulatory entities within Europe subject mass media content, namely television, to some form of monitoring, regulation online is much more difficult to implement. Although corporate social media responsibility of Internet platform companies has been made visible through their collaborative effort with the European Commission in adopting a 'Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online', the fact that the latter is not legally binding greatly limits its regulatory capacity, serving solely as a declaration of good intentions.

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