MEDIA, CULTURE AND SOCIETY
Focal points

- Feminist criticism of media representations of gender.
- Changing representations of femininity – from domestic goddess to glamorous career woman.
- Studies of ‘active’ female media users and cultural producers.
- Understandings of media representations of masculinity.
- Arguments about the marginalization of non-straight sexualities in media.

Introduction

Questions about the relationship between mass communications, gender and sexuality have formed the basis for countless books, articles and dissertations. As in the case of ethnicity, discussions about the nature and possible impact of media representations have long been at the centre of such writings. We'll focus on such matters early in this chapter, outlining the contributions of a range of critical feminist studies on the depiction of women in popular media forms. We'll then look at contrasting approaches that question what they regard as an overly dismissive approach to forms of culture and representation enjoyed by millions of women. This leads us to a switch of focus, towards audience studies orientated towards the way women use, enjoy and make sense of commonly derided media forms such as romance novels, soaps and magazines. We'll then discuss a growing body of work on masculinity and media before engaging with questions about the representation of non-heterosexual behaviours and identities in media.

Running through the chapter is the underlying notion that gender categories are culturally constructed. Our understandings and experiences of male, female, masculinity and femininity are, like our conceptions of black, white
and Asian, products of a history of human discourse. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault (1990), Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender should be understood as a series of performances based on prevailing understandings of what it is to be male and female. Gender, then, can be thought of as something that we *do* rather than something that we *are*.

Crucially, at the heart of these performances of male and female is an equally constructed set of understandings of sexuality that centre on the predominance of heterosexual, opposite sex desire. Dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity, then, revolve around discourses of difference from and desire for the opposite sex. The marginalization of same sex desires and identities forms an integral part of this. Meanwhile, rather than being arbitrary or equal constructions, feminists argue that prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity form part of a patriarchal system that legitimates male power and female subordination.

**Constructions of femininity**

**Female marginalization**

Although women figure prominently within media content as a whole, their role often is secondary to that of men. The number of blockbuster films with a female in the lead role – as opposed to one in which she functions as ‘companion’ and/or ‘love interest’ for a male star – remains low despite gradual improvements, a situation replicated across a range of other dramatic genres.

In the prestigious media sphere of news and current affairs, meanwhile, the Global Media Monitoring Project concluded that ‘the world we see in the news is a world in which women are virtually invisible’ (2005: 17). The study, which consisted of content analysis of news content across the world, found that women depicted within news are outnumbered by men on a scale of five to one and that there was not a single major news topic in which women outnumbered men. When it came to the ‘experts’ interviewed as part of news items, a massive 83 per cent were male. The situation was slightly better when it came to the gender of media reporters themselves, 37 per cent of whom were female, though forms of news regarded as ‘harder’ or more ‘serious’, such as politics and government, remained male-dominated.

Women also tend to be under-represented within key decisionmaking roles in media institutions. According to Ofcom (2007a), the proportion of UK broadcasting industry employees who were female was 44.9 per cent in 2007, but the proportion of senior management roles taken by women was lower, at 35.1 per cent, and, within the boardroom, the figure was 18.8 per cent.
Despite the importance of this continuing marginalization of women in management and media content, much of what has been written about gender representation has focused on an analysis of the particular roles in which women are represented. Often coming from an explicitly feminist perspective, such analysis has attacked media for reinforcing a patriarchal system in which women are subject to systematic male domination across society.

The male gaze

The most famous critique of the depiction of women in media is perhaps a short article by Laura Mulvey on 1970s cinema. Drawing on developments of Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, Mulvey (1975: 6) argues that cinema reflects ‘the unconscious of patriarchal society’ and reinforces the subjugation of women to heterosexual male control and desire. Cinema, she argues is centred on scopophilia — a Freudian term for childhood voyeurism or the pleasure of ‘taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze’ (1975: 8). In its stark separation of a darkened, anonymous auditorium from the world that unfolds onscreen, cinema functions as a voyeuristic medium, she argues, encouraging us to take pleasure from looking on an objectified private milieu.

Crucially, this process is gendered, so it is females in films who are set up as the object of scopophilia and males who bear the controlling and sexually objectifying gaze. This is ensured by the emphasis on visual sexual appeal in the construction and presentation of female characters:

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness … She holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire (1975: 9).

This role, as visual object, operates partly within the fictional world of the film, but its ultimate orientation is towards the male gaze of the cinema audience. Sometimes the audience gaze is mediated through the orientation of male characters in the film, while in other sequences this mediating role is bypassed and the female display is addressed directly to the camera.

The gender imbalance is exacerbated by another aspect to the operation of scopophilia in cinema. This relates to narcissism, or, the gaining of pleasure by gazing at one’s own image. In outlining the ‘mirror stage’ of child development, Jacques Lacan (2001) argues that the child enjoys in the mirror not a reproduction of himself, but something distinct, superior and closer to perfection – an external, idealized image against which the self develops.
For Mulvey, cinema replicates the role of this superior mirror image, constructing idealized onscreen images of human subjectivity for audiences to identify with and aspire to.

This narcissistic element is also deemed to be strongly orientated towards the male audience. While female characters are optimized in their function as sexual objects for the male gaze, the cinematic depiction of males is as subjects of audience identification and aspiration: ‘a male star’s glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror’ (Mulvey, 1975: 11). The male cinema goer, then, projects his identity on to the active, powerful male star, colluding in his possession and objectification of women.

In summary, Mulvey argues that cinema is systematically patriarchal: men are active, independent and in control of their destiny, while the role of women is to satisfy the male gaze and, ultimately, to be possessed.

Patriarchal romance and domesticity

Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze and her broader emphasis on the media subjugation of women have proved enormously influential, forming part of a broader critique of gender representations. While critical feminist analyses of pornography, such as those focused on in Chapter 7, apply the notion of female objectification to the most explicit media depictions of female sexuality (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1988), other theorists have focused on more everyday, mainstream media depictions, which presented women as subordinate to and dependent on men, particularly within the domestic roles of wife and mother.

A study by Erving Goffman (1979) identifies a series of themes pervading the representation of men and women in magazine advertisements. When heterosexual couples were presented together, men were either taller or higher up than women and the implied power difference was reinforced by an admiring gaze from the latter. Also, women were frequently represented in submissive postures – lying down, bending their knees, canting their heads or smiling deferentially.

Another common trait was ‘licenced withdrawal’, where women appeared to be distracted – avoiding eye contact, withdrawing their attention, daydreaming or fiddling with objects. In relation to this trait, Goffman notes that, while men’s use of objects tended to be functional and definite – grasping the shaving foam purposefully, using the toothbrush in the most efficient manner – women frequently were shown caressing objects in a distracted, emotional or sexual way.
Overall, Goffman concludes that men are presented in adverts as independent, purposeful and clear thinking, while women appear subordinate, dependent, emotional and absent-minded.

The depiction of women in magazine representations, meanwhile, has been focused on by a range of feminist commentators, who have regarded such depictions as part of a broader patriarchal system of male dominance. A semiological study of teenage girl’s magazine *Jackie* by Angela McRobbie in the 1970s illustrates a relentless emphasis on heterosexual romance. Picture stories with titles such as ‘As Long as I’ve Got You’ depicted cliché-ridden tales of love between ‘dewy eyed women’ and ‘granite jawed heroes’, for example (McRobbie, 2000: 81). Getting and keeping a man was presented as the primary concern of the girls – a goal whose achievement involved reconciling this natural female desire for romantic attachment with an equally natural promiscuous tendency in males.

Other dominant codes throughout the magazine reinforced this emphasis on getting and keeping a man. Pop music coverage was focused on the romantic potential of male stars, while a relentless emphasis on fashion and beauty is deemed by McRobbie to have been similarly ‘predicated upon the romantic possibilities it precipitates’ (2000: 101). In a nod toward Mulvey, McRobbie emphasizes that the Jackie girl ‘is intended to be looked at’ (2000: 76), something requiring close attention to images of beautiful models and articles on clothes and make-up.

The emphasis on women as dependent on men forms one of a litany of complaints against media representations of gender raised by Gaye Tuchman (1978), who argues that representations in news, television and adverts, among others, were responsible for the ‘symbolic annihilation of women’. Reviewing a range of quantitative studies, she argues that women were disproportionately represented within the home, reinforcing their association with cooking and childrearing, as well as their financial dependence on men. Occasional appearances at work, meanwhile, were restricted to subordinate roles, such as nursing and clerical work, and women within such roles, she claimed, were often condemned or trivialized (1978: 8). Such conventions predominated, she argues, even within female-orientated media, such as soap operas, women’s sections of newspapers and women’s magazines. While more prone to respond to progressive social change than television, the latter ultimately are deemed to have retained a clear emphasis on marriage, motherhood and domesticity (1978: 24).

**Post-feminist independence?**

Representations of women have changed considerably since the 1970s. In particular, the emphasis on domesticity, deference and traditional romance
identified by Tuchman and others has been partially replaced by more independent, assertive versions of femininity – something that can sometimes include a proud and explicit quest for sex. Targeted at financially independent career women, magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* have for some time constructed an image of women who, on the face of it, go out and get what they want – something expressed in their careers, disposable income and ability to have sexual relationships on their own terms (see Figure 4.1, page 64). Such magazines even sometimes feature objectifying pictures of naked men (Gauntlett, 2008).

Sometimes referred to as ‘post-feminist’, this more confident, independent female also appears frequently in advertising. Chanel’s campaign for its Allure perfume range in the early 2000s, for example, played on connotations of independence by featuring images of assertive and successful women set against captions such as ‘sculptor, London’ and ‘women’s rights activist, Somalia’. Chanel’s campaign took inspiration, perhaps, from Virginia Slims’ long-running attempts to associate its cigarette brand with women’s liberation in the United States (see Chapter 6).

Such championing of female independence also extends to cinema and television. One of the most talked about recent examples, on both the small and big screen, is the globally successful *Sex and the City*. The show centres on the sexual exploits and dilemmas of a group of professional thirty-something women – a PR consultant, an attorney, an art dealer and a newspaper sex columnist. The four have different attitudes to sex: Charlotte longs for the perfect marriage, while Samantha is unremittingly promiscuous and Miranda proudly independent – but all have a range of brief sexual encounters, periods of being single and longer-term relationships.

As well as celebrating their differences, the show explicitly highlights the independence and assertiveness of the women – they consume autonomously, engage in relationships on their own terms and sometimes manipulate and exploit men. Their all-female friendship group, meanwhile, is presented as the one consistent and dependable thing in their lives.

**The enduring gaze**

In comparison with earlier representations, the presence and popularity of images of single, financially and sexually autonomous women should not be underestimated. It both illustrates and contributes to changing social attitudes about what it is to be female and what role women should play in society. Yet not everything has changed. She may be a professional success story rather than a domestic goddess and she may be sexually assertive rather than romantically deferential, but two elements identified by earlier
theorists remain: the need to look good and the need to get male attention. And the two are inextricably linked, of course, by Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze. It is partly for this reason that McRobbie (2008) argues that such images constitute a post-feminist masquerade: they emphasize particular versions of female independence, while simultaneously reinforcing elements of patriarchy.

If anything, the shift towards the confident city girl representation has concentrated the emphasis on looking good and doing so by consuming. According to Ellen McCracken (1992), rather than being coincidental, this emphasis relates to a mutual dependency between media and the cosmetic and fashion industries. McCracken’s influential study of women’s magazines illustrates the way in which the editorial agenda of such publications fits seamlessly with the need to sell advertising space to fashion and cosmetics companies. Such magazines link together the two themes of looking attractive and consuming fashion and beauty products with a third one: (hetero)sexual attention and relationships.

Assertiveness and independence are regularly emphasized and encouraged, but still the life of the Cosmo woman revolves around a more familiar goal – getting male attention. Even the pose of the model or celebrity on the cover of women’s fashion and beauty magazines implies an out-of-shot male presence, argues McCracken (1992), her confidence, status and beauty associated with being looked on, admired and gazed at by the opposite sex. This cover image of perfect femininity and heterosexual success is deemed to act as a ‘window to the future self’ of the reader, who can strive towards it by taking heed of the fashion and relationship advice in the magazine and consuming the clothes, shoes and make-up promoted by its advertisers.

Similar themes can be identified in Sex and the City. The main characters are united by an emphasis on using their considerable wealth to indulge in extensive consumption, most of which is orientated towards clothing and accessories and, hence, the priority of looking attractive. It is no surprise that, like fashion and beauty magazines, the franchise has made substantial amounts of money from clothes, cosmetics and other product placements. Even more overriding, however, is that the identities and aspirations of all four women revolve around their relationships with men. The relationship patterns undoubtedly contrast in some respects with previously dominant images – particularly in the case of the proudly promiscuous Samantha – but, as the series progresses, the non-attached lifestyles of the girls are subject to greater and greater questioning, while the more traditional theme of ‘looking for Mr Right’, as Rosalind Gill puts it, looms ever larger (2007: 242).

Amid all her short-term liaisons, the story of the show’s central character, Carrie, is dominated throughout the six series by an on-off relationship with one man – ‘Mr Big’. The show’s much vaunted climax involves ‘Big’
travelling to Paris to tell Carrie what she has always wanted to hear since their first encounter – that he loves her. The 2008 film adaptation goes one step further, with Carrie marrying Big and, therefore, leaving behind the single life that had defined the show. By the end of the series, all four of the women are in long-term, loving heterosexual relationships and, of these, Samantha’s is the only one not to survive to the end of the first film. As a consequence, Gill argues that *Sex and the City* ‘works to re-establish and re-affirm precisely the boundaries it appears to threaten’ (2007: 246).

The increasingly dominant glamorous career woman representation exemplified by *Sex and the City* is also vulnerable to criticism in terms of what it excludes. Consistent with the vast majority of representations in the fashion and beauty industry, Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte and Miranda are white, slim, glamorous, straight, wealthy and upper middle-class. The show’s version of beauty and empowerment almost entirely excludes larger, darker-skinned and working-class women – something made all the more stark in the movie offspring, where Carrie’s employment of a PA barely connects to the rest of the plot and comes across as a thinly veiled attempt to tick all three boxes in a single character. The dominant white, bourgeois image of femininity, both onscreen and in print, is also unremittingly heterosexual, with representations of homosexuality restricted to quickly forgotten moments of curiosity and, of course, stereotypical depictions of gossipy, fashion-obsessed gay male friends.

Not all ‘progressive’ mainstream representations of women in recent decades have entirely fitted into the wealthy, consumerist (hetero)sex-orientated stereotype, however. Various police series, including *Cagney and Lacey, Juliet Bravo* and *Prime Suspect*, have featured strong female lead characters and focused primarily on career-related exploits rather than consumption or sex, as have a number of hospital dramas.

Meanwhile, although their most frequent depiction of women continues to centre on some variant of the love interest and/or sex object role, blockbuster movies increasingly feature females as active, powerful lead characters in their own right. Ripley in the *Alien* films is infinitely tougher, cleverer and more determined than all her comrades of either gender and not primarily coded as a sex object. Likewise, Sarah Connor develops into a physically and mentally strong female lead throughout the first two *Terminator* films and a spin-off series, without overt recourse to objectification. Interestingly, both the depictions in *Alien* and *Terminator* focus on another traditional feminine theme – that of motherhood – but, in this respect, the action-filled roles of Ripley and Connor are about as far as one could get from the passive domestic goddess. In various other cases where females have been portrayed in tough central roles, however, equal emphasis has tended to be placed on their feminine sex appeal, as in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, Charlie’s Angels,*
Wanted and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, or on their status as a companion for the male hero, as in The Matrix or Die Another Day.

There are also representations of women who come across as more unambiguously objectifying. Principle among these are depictions within lads’ magazines, such as FHM, Loaded, Nuts and Maxim. Nothing, perhaps, could illustrate the continuing importance of Mulvey’s observations about the male gaze more effectively than the presence of close-up images of glamorous women on the covers of both women’s and men’s magazines. In lads’ magazines, the images are overtly sexualized, focusing explicitly on semi-naked bodies and aroused poses. Such publications have made much of their ability to persuade female pop stars, television presenters, actresses and others to pose for them and a lad mag photo shoot has become a potentially valuable career move for female personalities seeking to climb the celebrity ladder. Women can be successful, intelligent and independent, it seems, but only if they don’t lose sight of their primary role as sexual object. For Gill, this observation applies to images of women across media – in news, television programmes, film and, particularly, advertising, where:

in the boardroom and in the bedroom, in the kitchen and in the car, wife and mother or executive or pre-teenager, women are being presented as alluring sexual beings (2007: 81).

Elitist critics?

Despite the apparent persistence of representations of women that might be deemed problematic, some feminists have been cautious of making criticisms
of such depictions, questioning what they regard as the overly dismissive approach to media and popular culture of some of their peers. Since the early 1980s, concern has been expressed that the uncompromising criticism of writers such as Gaye Tuchman might be having the effect of denigrating lifestyles and media genres that have been central to the everyday lives of large numbers of ordinary women. There are three elements to this concern.

First, in implying that the representations they were critical of were ‘negative’ and that they distorted femininity, some critics are argued to have ignored the elements of congruence between such ‘negative’ images and the everyday experiences of millions of women (Pickering, 2001). Calls for the replacement of ‘negative’ representations with ‘positive’ ones suffered, as did similar arguments in relation to ethnicity (see Chapter 10), from difficulties with respect to what exactly was ‘positive’, who got to decide and what the relationship was between being ‘positive’ and representing women’s lives in a faithful manner. In general, the approach of the early feminist critics equated positive with assertive, independent, powerful, rational and career-minded representations. This meant that images of domesticity, marriage and attachment to the family were in danger of being dismissed as negative or inauthentic forms of female experience.

Second, some feminist critics appeared to fall into a somewhat elitist dismissal of certain kinds of cultural texts. In particular, the targeting of criticism at media genres associated with female audiences – from women’s magazines to romance genres – was deemed to have established a wedge between such feminist critics and many of the women they claimed to speak for. Given that such media were highly popular with female audiences, there seemed to be an implication that such audiences were ignorant, duped or suffering from false consciousness.

Some of the feminist criticism is deemed to have adopted a tone comparable to more general attacks on mass culture and ideology, such as those of the Frankfurt School and contemporary critics of ‘dumbing down’. Often made by male academics, these broader criticisms have also tended to target those types of media most popular among women – popular music, consumer magazines, daytime talk shows, soap opera and celebrity news to name a few. Among other things, such genres are sometimes derided for an emphasis on the personal, the emotional and the private or domestic sphere – all of which are traditionally associated with femininity. Such criticism, it is argued, yearns for a version of quality that satisfies a dispassionate, masculine, public agenda, while attacking feminine tastes and priorities. By themselves attacking ‘feminine’ genres – albeit for different reasons – early feminist media critics are deemed to have reinforced this broader denigration of female perspectives, tastes and pleasures (Modleski, 1982). Joke Hermes outlines her concern about this approach as follows:
The feminist media critic is prophet and exorcist, even while being, as many claim, an ‘ordinary woman’ too. Feminists ... speak on behalf of others who are, implicitly thought to be unable to see for themselves how bad such media texts as women’s magazines are. They need to be enlightened; they need good feminist texts in order to be saved from their false consciousnesses and to live a life free of false depictions ... of where a woman might find happiness (1995: 1).

This brings us to a third problem. Like many other deconstructions of ideology in media content, feminist critics have tended to assume that gendered meanings are predetermined and that audiences are liable to be passively influenced by them. In Mulvey’s critique of cinema, for example, it is assumed that the gaze of the audience is always positioned as male so that even female audience members are forced into this perspective by the ways in which films are coded. Greater consideration of audience dynamics surely would illustrate that this assumption is too rigid and that, despite the tendency towards patriarchal coding, there are various opportunities for women to gain visual or erotic pleasure, either via a heterosexual gaze focused on male characters or a lesbian female-to-female gaze (Gauntlett, 2008). Determining that a representation is definitively either patriarchal or counter-hegemonic, then, may take insufficient account of the way the texts in question are used by audiences. A range of studies of female audiences since the 1980s have sought to address this inadequacy.

Empowering possibilities

Reading the romance

One of the first studies to focus in detail on female audiences was Janice Radway’s analysis of the world of romantic fiction. Popular with female audiences, this literary genre had been subject to extensive criticism from some feminists. Such critics attacked the apparently standardized, patriarchal and heterosexist narratives of the stories, which invariably would involve a lost, unfulfilled woman finding salvation and fulfilment in the arms of a tough, assertive male lover. Janice Radway (1987) does not fully reject such criticism, but she asserts that, in order to fully understand the significance of romantic fiction, we must examine how it is used by audiences. Focused on detailed qualitative interviews with members of a group of avid readers, Radway’s study foregrounds the role that novels played within everyday lives dominated by domestic and maternal responsibilities.
Radway learned that one of the most important motivations for reading was that the act of reading itself enabled women to claim time and space within the home. It was ‘a way of temporarily refusing the demands associated with their social role as wives and mothers’ and even ‘a declaration of independence’ (1987: 9). Yet, rather than being isolating, reading also connected them to a broader imagined community of romance readers, as well as to their local reading group.

Turning to their engagement with the content itself, Radway emphasizes the sophisticated and highly informed choices made by women regarding which authors and plot types fitted best with their particular preferences. Their preferred endings, as they themselves understood it, tended to involve not only the submission of the heroine to the masculine sexuality of the male but also his submission to her desire for more feminine forms of love. Radway argues that such plots provided emotional replenishment for women who were constantly called upon to support and care for others, because they offered a fantasy of being nurtured and supported as well as being sexually fulfilled. Neither this nor the other themes focused on by Radway are deemed to make the act of reading counter-patriarchal – after all, dependence on the male still seems to be reinforced in the plots and the women’s escapist use of them. Yet, Radway insists that the women enacted a small-scale appropriation of the texts, interpreting the plots in ways that resolved unsatisfactory elements of their everyday contexts.

**Subversive pleasures?**

Radway’s study is widely regarded as a pioneering contribution to the study of female audiences. Yet she is criticized by Ien Ang (1996) for having still ended up being too detached from the women in her study, interpreting the political significance of their accounts from an ‘outside’ feminist position rather than seeking to understand their enjoyment of media on its own terms. Ang’s own best-known work (1985) also focuses on audience responses to a popular and often derided product – the US soap opera *Dallas*, which, among other things, was the subject of accusations that it formed part of the swamping of the globe with superficial US mass culture. Ang rejects such ‘ivory tower’ accusations and resists presenting use of the text as a form of compensation for downtrodden audiences. Instead, she emphasizes the fundamental importance of the everyday emotional pleasures associated with ‘loving *Dallas*’ – pleasures connected with the show’s emotional realism, which, rather than acting as an ‘escape’, became intricately interwoven with everyday life and identity. Ang also demonstrates the ways in which lovers of the show used a range of different defensive discursive
strategies to reconcile the pleasures they gained from their viewing with dominant criticisms of it as a form of mass culture.

Other theorists have placed greater emphasis on the potential for women to generate progressive or subversive meanings from soap opera. Christine Geraghty argues, for example, that through their emphasis on strong, influential female characters and perspectives, soaps allow audiences to engage with discourses about ‘the way in which relationships ... between men and women could be differently organized on women’s terms’ (1991: 117). Similarly, John Fiske (1987) outlines a range of features deemed to offer the potential for counter-patriarchal readings. The ongoing multinarrative structure of soaps, for example, is deemed antithetical to one-dimensional patriarchal narratives that have a beginning, a middle and a happy ending of heterossexual love.

In place of this masculine final climax model, soap narratives are ongoing, so that romantic arrangements are never complete and always subject to disruption and threat. The narratives often depict everyday difficulties faced by women, sometimes offering the space for audiences to interpret infidelity as an understandable response or a subversive expression of independence. Soaps are argued to be less overtly centred on feminine spectacle than some other genres, allowing a focus on sexuality as ‘a positive source of pleasure in a relationship, or a means of her empowerment in a patriarchal world’ (1987: 187). Fiske recognizes, however, that soaps also offer possibilities for patriarchal readings, pointing out, for example, that, in some cases, female infidelity may be understood via stereotypes of sluttishness.

Although they place emphasis on differential readings and uses, studies such as those of Radway, Fiske and Geraghty remain focused on the issue of the generation of meaning and the significance of text as the basis for this. In contrast, a study of women’s magazine readers by Joke Hermes (1995) avoided textual analysis, focusing exclusively on the role of reading itself within the everyday lives of readers. Indeed, a key finding of the study was that readers themselves didn’t always attach much importance to content or take it particularly seriously. Most found some features useful either in practical or emotional terms and selectively integrated these into their lives. But Hermes’ interviews were dominated by discussion of the compatibility of the act of magazine reading itself with everyday routines. As a media format, they were easy to pick up and put down as well as being ideal for ‘relaxation’ – a term that might, in different cases, imply taking time out from work, worries or other people. Magazine reading is interpreted as providing sets of active experiences, then, that are only partially related to the detail of the representations on the pages of the publications.

Focusing more closely on readers’ engagements with the specific content of magazines, a reader study by David Gauntlett (2008) identified a pick ‘n’
mix approach with respect to which sections people read and which they
drew into their own lives. Some regarded the images and advice in magazines
as providing goals and means for self-improvement, some enjoyed criticizing
the kinds of identity depicted, while others regarded the magazines as an
escapist pleasure of little relevance to their own lives. Readers also dis-
played a range of views about the potential impact of the magazines and
some were sharply critical of the versions of femininity and masculinity they
presented.

Without fully rejecting feminist criticisms of magazine content, Gauntlett
emphasizes that they offer a more contradictory set of ideas than they are
sometimes given credit for and that readers draw on and respond to these in
a variety of ways.

From consumers to producers

Attention has been focused by some scholars on the activities of women
who have challenged dominant gender relations, not only as active audi-
ences but as producers of their own media texts. With respect to popular
music and youth culture, for example, the 1990s Riot Grrrl scene centred
on countering male domination within the music industry through a focus
on all-female bands who angrily repudiated traditional gender roles,
flaunting an aggressive and uncompromising sexuality through music,
imagery and on-stage performance.

While successful bands such as Bikini Kill, Hole and L7 attracted much of
the attention, the scene also was characterized by a punk-inspired DIY ethic,
in which, as well as being encouraged to pick up guitars or organize events,
participants produced a substantial grassroots network of printed and online
fanzines. Content was focused partly on bands and events, but also on ar-
ticles, illustrations, poetry and lyrics about gender, sexuality and female
empowerment (Leonard, 1998; Schilt and Zobl, 2008). Although the move-
ment gradually shifted out of the public eye, Kristen Schilt and Elke Zobl
argue that the network of DIY communication it gave rise to continues to
thrive underground in the form of websites, blogs and online forums
(2008).

Studies of the fans of popular media fiction have also looked at productive
activities that challenge traditional gender roles. Constance Penley (1991),
for example, focuses on the female-dominated phenomenon of ‘fan fiction’,
whereby individuals produce and distribute their own stories based on the
setting or characters of existing fiction. Such fan-produced stories – usually
distributed to other readers via online discussion forums – are diverse, but
Penley’s focus is on ‘slash’, a subgenre focused on the development of romantic
and sexual storylines. Typically, such stories subvert the largely patriarchal and heterosexual orientation of the original fiction by exploring homosexual encounters between male characters. As well as contesting dominant understandings of mainstream fictions such as Star Trek and, more recently, Harry Potter, such interpretations present an understanding of sexuality as flexible and unfixed, something that contrasts with narratives of heterosexuality and the discourse of male dominance and female subordination to which they are connected.

Despite their significance, Riot Grrrl and Slash are both relatively small in scale, relative to the mass circulation of popular media products. Yet, in recent years, millions of ordinary young women, alongside their male counterparts, have begun to regularly distribute their own media via social networking sites such as MySpace, Bebo and Facebook. Central to the use of such sites are representations of oneself and one’s friends via photographs and, according to Amy Dobson (2008), these now form an important component of the ways in which young people both contribute to and learn about constructions of male and female. Focusing on images of young women on MySpace, Dobson argues there is much within the content of such images that appears subversive of dominant versions of femininity. Women may still be the subject of visual attention, but, rather than seeking to approximate perfect constructions of feminine beauty, they tend to emphasize assertive, humorous and laddish poses and activities, including:

- images in which girls are making ‘silly’ or caricatured faces; wide open mouths and protruding tongues; poses which would typically signify a ‘masculine’ body (miming rear-entry penetration, squatting, legs wide apart, limbs akimbo and occupying space); and displays of drunkenness and rowdy behaviour (Dobson, 2008: 6).

Dobson acknowledges an undoubted sexual element to many of the images, some of which might even be interpreted as partial simulations of pornography. Yet she shows how their emphasis on what she regards as an active, humorous and grotesque bodily representation, contrasts markedly with feminine ideals emanating from the fashion and beauty industries.

**Remaining critical**

Studies of the activities of female audiences and producers, then, have been important in illustrating the limitations of feminist criticism of popular media texts. Yet, critical textual analysis ought not to be abandoned in favour of a complacent celebration of audience pleasure and/or empowerment.
Ang’s endorsement of viewing pleasures, for example, may have been politically convenient in avoiding criticism of ordinary consumers, but, on its own, such an approach might risk letting media producers off the hook with respect to the ways they construct gender. Similarly, although Hermes’ emphasis on the validity of magazine reading as an active and partially empowering activity is illuminating, the strength of her dismissal of more critical and text-based approaches is open to question. Williamson’s accusation that feminist audience studies were in danger of endorsing a ‘pointless populism’ (cited in Gill, 2007: 16) is overly harsh, but the warning therein that feminist approaches to media must be careful not to lose their critical edge is pertinent.

The testimonies of female audience members illuminate a range of complex details about their diverse engagements and sometimes critical negotiations with media texts, reminding us that the societal role and impact of media texts ought never to be taken for granted. Such details, though, do not preclude the possibility that consistent themes in media representations might have a broader pervasive influence. If there are limits to the range of understandings of femininity that are readily accessible within the content of a given advert, magazine, film or television programme, and if these limits are consistent with dominant existing understandings, then it does not seem unreasonable to identify the text as having the potential to reinforce such understandings. This does not mean all texts do this or that we should gloss over complex ways in which audiences engage with them. It does suggest, however, that the constructions of gender available within media content may be restricted and that they merit critical analysis.

**Media and masculinities**

Partly as a result of the crucial contribution of feminism to the establishment of the study of gender and media, a good deal of what has been written on the subject is centred on women – something reflected in the structure of this chapter, too. Yet, the ways in which masculinity is constructed in media, alongside the role of men as media producers and audiences, is every bit as important to discussions about gender, sexuality and identity. Over the past two decades, increasing academic attention has been devoted to this.

**Masculinity or masculinities?**

As Lauva Mulvey observes, the cinematic male lead is typically a dominant, powerful and sexually successful focus for male-centred audience identification.
Despite important elements of diversity, the last four decades of popular film have been dominated by representations of active, powerful male characters who use their prowess – whether physical or otherwise – to overcome the forces stacked against them and, often, win the love of the film’s lead female.

For John Fiske (1987), another key element of media representations of masculinity is a practical orientation towards the successful achievement of goals. Thus, the narrative structure of male-orientated television series, he says, tends to consist of a one-dimensional plot progression towards a climax of achievement induced by masculine performance of some kind. Most obviously, male power is emphasized, for Fiske, through both physical imagery of muscular bodies triumphing in fist fights and via male control of trucks, fast cars and guns. The focus for Fiske’s analysis was 1980s’ series such as The A-Team, Knight Rider and Magnum and most commentators would agree that there has been a degree of diversification of narrative structures and themes since that time. Nevertheless, it isn’t too difficult to find an emphasis on masculine purpose and toughness in contemporary action series (24, Prison Break), blockbuster movies (Casino Royale, Die Hard 4, The Dark Knight) and, of course, countless computer and video games. Even when they are not portrayed in physically tough roles, men regularly are represented as active, goal-orientated and competitive and as occupying positions of power, authority and responsibility.

Yet, masculinity in media is not quite as one-dimensional as it may first appear. Even the most extreme patriarchal versions of onscreen masculinity may entail ambiguities with respect to their social significance. The visual construction of extreme physical male prowess, for example, may lend itself in some cases to use as sexual objectification for the female or the homosexual male gaze. The clear and quite deliberate emphasis on the body of Daniel Craig walking out of the sea in swimming shorts in the marketing for Casino Royale represents just one example of this. The significance of representations of spectacular male physical power to heterosexual male audiences is also ambiguous.

For Fiske, rather than reinforcing everyday male experience, such images are more likely to act as unrealistic fantasies that compensate for the lack of independence, control or power characterizing most men’s lives, particularly in the contemporary workplace (1987). The ongoing decline of traditional male jobs in manufacturing industries has arguably exacerbated the separation between most ordinary men and the physical exploits of their screen heroes, while the diversification of relationships and families, the growth of female employment and changes in attitudes towards gender have also contributed to ambiguities in the status of masculinity.

Sometimes the changing reality of everyday masculinities is itself the subject of media representations. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was
much media reference to the ‘new man’, presented as comfortable with gender equality and concerned about his appearance and style. This was reflected in the growth of male-orientated style publications, such as *The Face* and *ID* magazine, and in a rapidly expanding portfolio of advertisements for men’s cosmetic and fashion products. Women’s fashion and beauty magazines placed emphasis on the desirability for women of this more image-conscious, sensitive male.

Another source for the ‘softening’ of male images was the phenomenon of the boy band, which re-emerged in the 1990s in the form of groups such as *Take That*. Orientated particularly towards young female and gay male audiences, the boy band combined some traditional elements of masculinity with style-conscious, highly sensitive, vulnerable and slightly built ‘boy next door’ features. Meanwhile, as Gauntlett points out, popular sitcoms such as *Friends* frequently depicted men who combined certain traditional masculine qualities with ‘characteristics of sensitivity and gentleness, and male-bonding’ (2008: 65).

**Lads’ mags and contradictory representations**

Yet, far from moving seamlessly from a regime of aggressive, powerful stereotypes to one dominated by sensitive caring representations the development of masculinities is full of apparent conflicts and contradictions. While Bob (now Raewyn) Connell (2000) argues that there is always at any one moment in time a hegemonic version of masculinity that is more influential than a range of others, Rosalind Gill (2007) suggests that the identification of such a single dominant type is difficult, given the increasing range of competing and overlapping versions of what it is to be male. The development of ‘lads’ magazines’ in the 1990s and 2000s provides an illuminating illustration. Centred on sex, drinking, cars, sport, gadgets and ‘male’ popular culture, such publications presented themselves as a reassertion of authentic masculinity in the face of the figure of the sensitive ‘new man’, who was derided as feminine and/or homosexual. The narrative throughout the magazines, according to a study by Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson and Kate Brooks (2001), is on the pragmatic use of women for sex and the avoidance of compromising one’s masculinity by being trapped in permanent relationships. Women, then, are a source of pleasure but also a threat to men’s natural love for adventure, drinking and having a laugh with their mates.

Underneath the hysterical hypermasculine exterior of babes, beer, cars, sport and laughs, however, are elements to the ‘new lad’ that sit less easily with traditional masculine confidence. Fashion and personal grooming are a
constant feature and, as with women’s magazines, this connects with an array of cosmetic and clothing advertisements. The stereotypical carefree male, with little concern for his appearance, may not be particularly profitable, making an emphasis on the need to look good a valuable modification from a commercial point of view. Furthermore, beneath their confident, cocky headlines, advice columns focus on health problems and relationship guidance, suggesting at least a degree of self-consciousness and insecurity. For Jackson et al., (2001) it is only through adopting their hypermasculine veneer that lad’s magazines can get away with the inclusion of such features.

While Jackson et al.’s account remains critical of lads’ magazines overall, Gauntlett (2008) is more sympathetic, pointing to the range of possible meanings and uses of such texts for male readers and to constant indications in the content of male weakness and confusion. He also argues that the exaggeration and irony in the hypermasculine façade of the magazines reflects a playful set of performances informed by an underlying acceptance of gender equality. For example:

The FHM writer, and their projected reader, do actually know that women are as good as men, or better; the put downs of women ... are knowingly ridiculous, based on the assumptions that it’s silly to be sexist ... and that we are usually just as rubbish as women (Gauntlett, 2008: 177).

Based on both textual and audience research, Gauntlett’s argument is compelling in its recognition of the complexity of the representations within what initially appear to be one-dimensional texts. Nevertheless, his account comes across as a little complacent. He successfully demonstrates that non-patriarchal readings of the publications are possible, but it is far from clear that most readers are liable to interpret the magazines through the prism of liberal views such as his own. Meanwhile, an ironic tone does not negate the possibility of reinforcing broader and more serious assumptions about gender and may even act as a device that helps to protect crude gender constructions from criticism (Jackson et al., 2001).

**Beyond heterosexuality**

One problem with lads’ magazines that is acknowledged by Gauntlett is their tendency to overtly exclude non-heterosexual identities from the version of masculinity they construct. And though their approach may be unusually stark, they are far from alone in contributing to the marginalization of gay and bisexual men. Likewise, we already have seen that
homosexual desires and identities tend to be excluded from dominant media representations of femininity. Opposite sex attraction, encounters and relationships lie at the core of the way in which media discourses construct masculinity and femininity and the marginalization of non-heterosexuals forms an integral part of this heterosexual matrix or hegemony (Butler, 1993).

Alluding to Tuchman’s earlier attack on media representations of women, Larry Gross (1995: 63) argues that homosexuals have been ‘symbolically annihilated’ or rendered invisible by mass media, adding that ‘when they do appear, they do so in order to play a supportive role for the natural order’ (1995: 63). In other words, media representations of minority sexualities have tended to reinforce as much as challenge the prevailing heterosexual hegemony. That is because sexual minorities have tended, like ethnic minorities, to be pigeonholed within a limited number of stereotyped roles and narratives. Historically, many of the lesbians to make an appearance in mainstream media, for example, were butch, aggressive, dysfunctional or unhappy characters (Arthurs, 2004). Meanwhile, Marguerite Moritz (2004) identifies an ongoing tendency for fictional narratives involving lesbians to restore heterosexual order, sometimes by positioning lesbians as troubled, dysfunctional or nasty characters who ultimately either are punished (by being killed off or imprisoned, for example) or restored to happiness by means of a return to heterosexual femininity.

In recent times, there has been a shift towards a very different sort of image of lesbianism – as young, glamorous and ultra-feminine. Lesbian-themed series, such as Sugar Rush and The L-Word have been of importance here, alongside lesbian characters, romances and encounters in a range of series, including Brookside, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Home and Away, Guiding Light and Grey’s Anatomy. Such representations have the potential to blur some of the boundaries of dominant femininity and perhaps even to raise questions about the automatic equation of feminine glamour with the male gaze.

As well as being the exception rather than the rule, however, lesbianism within mainstream soap operas or drama series often consists of a moment of temporary exploration or a one-off relationship. Such encounters tend to be followed by either a return to heterosexuality or being written out of the series – both of which function to restore the heterosexual equilibrium on which such shows are based. The narrative conventions of soap opera, in particular, make it difficult to accommodate homosexual characters for a significant period of time, simply because there are unlikely to be a sufficient number of potential partners in the predominantly heterosexual communities depicted to enable any more than a single relationship. Meanwhile, although it challenges some boundaries, the trend towards glamorous, traditionally feminine lesbian representations seems liable to reinforce
dominant notions of female beauty and particularly the notion of femininity as sexualized display. Within the world of the narrative, the male gaze may be secondary to female-to-female sexual attraction, but the spectacle of the young, glamorous lesbian encounter onscreen may also be read, in some cases, as a sexualized female display orientated towards the male viewer.

Gay men have probably been more frequently represented in mass media than lesbians and other sexual minorities, with a range of male game show hosts, pop stars and actors openly identifying themselves as homosexual, but depictions of male gay intimacy remain rare. Stereotypes of feminine, camp eccentricity have dominated, often establishing the gay male as a freakish, theatrical figure of fun, positioned at a safe and visible distance from dominant constructions of masculinity. Male homosexuality is also frequently represented in its most middle-class, sanitized and unthreatening guise (Arthurs, 2004). The largely asexual ‘gay best friend’ has become a particularly familiar stereotype in female-orientated television series, including Will and Grace and Sex and the City, as well as in romantic comedy films, such as My Best Friend’s Wedding.

Such representations could be argued to be ‘positive’, in that they tend to present gay men as likeable and friendly members of society, but, as well, as being guilty of a form of pigeonholing, their orientation tends to exclude some of the less socially accepted elements of homosexual identities. Notably, the same-sex encounters or romances of the gay best friend tend to be marginalized and, in particular, explicit male-to-male intimate and sexual contact remains unusual. A similar point could be made, perhaps, in relation to the numerous high-profile gay male artists in the popular music industry, many of whom have tended to avoid explicit or clear expressions of their sexuality in lyrics, imagery, interviews or public appearances in order to ensure that they remain sufficiently palatable to heterosexual audiences (Doty and Gove, 1997).

The example of the gay best friend character also exemplifies a tendency for gay, lesbian or bisexual characters to be secondary to predominantly heterosexual narratives. And according to Alexander Doty and Ben Gove, even if homosexuality is positioned more centrally, it tends to be focused on from a heterosexual point of view. ‘Heterocentric narrative construction’, they argue, ‘will, finally, structure the plot to revolve around how straight characters and culture respond to lesbians, gays and queers’, so that ‘we see these characters primarily through straight gazes and narratives’ (1997: 88). This connects to a further point, which is that the emphasis on attracting mainstream audiences causes non-heterosexual characters to be isolated within overwhelmingly straight environments or communities. As a consequence, we rarely see much evidence of broader gay peer groups or communities, let alone involvement in collective political activism (Arthurs, 2004).
This tendency for homosexual narratives to be marginal is not ubiquitous, of course. In addition to the lesbian-focused Sugar Rush and The L Word, the 1990s UK series, Queer as Folk focused in detail on the lives, relationships and encounters of homosexual men, enabling the exploration of a variety of different characters in the context of a gay scene. In contrast to the sanitized depictions elsewhere, the narratives of Queer as Folk centred on less socially accepted sides of the gay scene, with overtly sexual storylines, including a relationship between a 29-year-old and a 15-year-old and a number of explicit depictions of sexual encounters. More recently, the cartoon series Rick and Steve presented a satirical focus on the gay scene, complete with comic storylines about threesomes, lesbian motherhood and even HIV.

Another representation to break with desexualized or secondary representations was the Oscar-winning blockbuster Brokeback Mountain, which focused on a long-term secret love affair between two summer sheep herders in Wyoming. Significantly, Brokeback Mountain’s huge box office success enabled it to break out of the specialist gay content pigeonholes within which other productions, including Queer as Folk and Rick and Steve, have been located, reaching a huge, diverse audience around the world.

Encouraging though this may be, it remains the case that, outside of high-brow or specialist gay and lesbian media channels (see Chapter 12 for a discussion of the latter), non-heterosexuals are often either invisible or stereotyped as a fixed and familiar ‘other’, reinforcing the dominance of heterosexuality (Foucault, 1990).

It is important to recognize, however, that, while overt homosexual representations remain limited, there are many characters who are primarily coded as straight but offer the possibility of ‘queer’ readings among certain audiences (Doty and Gove, 1997). What were taken by some as occasional hints at an ongoing lesbian relationship between two of the main characters within the cult series Xena: Warrior Princess, for example, prompted many fans to understand and enjoy the characters as lesbian icons, even though they were not explicitly presented as homosexual. This was encouraged by the show’s producers, who developed the lesbian subtext by means of further hints as the series continued. Meanwhile, as we saw earlier in this chapter, groups of straight, gay and bisexual fans engaged in online Slash fan fiction communities have regularly created storylines centred on queer interpretations of apparently straight characters in mainstream series.

The popularity among some audiences of ‘queering’ outwardly straight characters prompts Doty and Gove to note that ‘almost every figure on television might be “representing” queerness in some way, to some degree, for some viewer’ (1997: 89). Once again, we are reminded of the need to recognize the range of audience responses to textual representations and the ways
in which such interpretations sometimes contribute to the subversion of
dominant structures of meaning.

Conclusion: a balanced approach

While feminism has been largely responsible for the development of studies
of gender and media, the growing body of research on masculinities has
helped to establish the importance of understanding gender as a matter that
corns the construction and living out of both female and male forms of
identity. Meanwhile, developing understandings of gay, lesbian and bisexual
representations in media remind us, among other things, of the crucial link
between the reinforcement of dominant understandings of sexuality and
prevailing constructions of masculinity and femininity.

In order to develop a rounded understanding of the relationship between
media and gender identities, it is equally important to balance emphasis on
representations in the content of media texts with the ways in which audi-
ences construct gendered and sexualized identities in their use of media. We
should be cautious of both overly deterministic forms of textual criticism
and of overly celebratory or uncritical audience studies. The role of the
structure and motivation of media industries ought not to be forgotten
either, particularly with respect to the relationship between particular con-
structions of gender and media profitability. After all, dominant representa-
tions of masculinity and femininity in media tend to be those that are most
effective when it comes to the selling of advertising space or, indeed, the selling
of consumer goods themselves.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1 a) Select an example of a recent blockbuster film and analyse the
constructions of its male and female characters using Laura Mulvey’s
framework. To what extent does your film illustrate her conclusions?

b) Do the representations of femininity in Sex and the City challenge or
reinforce dominant understandings of gender?

c) Should we celebrate the proliferation of glamorous female action heroes
such as Charlie’s Angels, Lara Croft and Buffy the Vampire Slayer?

2 a) What would a positive representation of femininity look like and why?
How about masculinity? Try to think of examples of each.
b) Why has feminist criticism of gendered media representations itself been subject to criticism?

3 a) Is there such a thing as a ‘female genre’? What would you include in such a category?

b) What contribution has been made by studies of female audiences? If audiences are active and creative, do we need to worry about what is depicted in media content?

4 Carry out an analysis of a recent edition of a lads’ magazine, such as FHM, Loaded or Nuts. In what ways are masculinity and femininity constructed by the front cover and the different features, illustrations, commentaries and adverts in the magazine?

5 a) Does the increasing prevalence of glamorous young women involved in lesbian encounters or relationships in the media challenge or reinforce dominant understandings of gender and sexuality?

b) In what ways have apparently straight characters or personalities been read or reinterpreted by some audience groups as gay? Think of as many examples as you can.

Suggested further reading


Analysis of media representations of sexual minorities, including discussion of the ‘queering’ of characters and stories by audiences.


Critical account of a broad range of debates and examples relating to media and gender.


Detailed study of men’s magazines, from the point of view of industry, content and audience.


Highly influential article that first established the notion of media depictions of women being orientated towards the male gaze.


One of the first and most well-known feminist studies of the audiences of female-orientated media forms.