**Subject:** Representation of women in popular culture

Since the beginning of history, gender roles and stereotypes have been prominent in the society. In the past, men were supposed to work, while women could only stay at home and take care of her children. In the modern world, fortunately, this is no longer the case, and women now have a lot more freedom and rights than they used to. However, this does not mean that unnecessary gender roles don't still exist in the society. Sure, there are differences men and women that we cannot ignore, but the general society still sees men and women differently in aspects where they shouldn't- and some of the most obvious cases of this comes from popular culture.

Popular culture has a huge significance in today's society, with people consuming never-ending content from the mass media every single day. It is very much reflective of the situation in the real world, and the way we view the world is heavily influenced by popular culture. Even though both men and women are highly involved in every aspect of pop culture, gender stereotypes are still obvious. With men, it is always about masculinity, dominance and success; while women are expected to be sexy and physically attractive. Pop culture and the media create a standard and expectations for how men and women should be like, no matter in real life or in media representation. This has caused a lot of controversy, especially over the way women are represented.

Firstly, women are often sexualized in popular culture. People expect women to look good in order to appeal to men. It is not uncommon to see women in the entertainment industry get more attention for their looks than their actual talent. Taking superhero movies as an example; no one ever expects male superheroes like Ironman and Captain America to dress in skimpy outfits that are designed to show off their sex appeal. Instead, their superhero outfits are designed for practicality. In contrast, that is usually not the case for female superheroes. As supermodel and actress Cara Delevigne said, "Female superheroes are normally naked or in bikinis. Wonder Woman: How does she fight like that? She would be dead in a minute." Guardians of the Galaxy's Zoe Saldana has also expressed disbelief over once being told by a producer, "I hired you to look good in your underwear holding a gun." Some may argue that female superhero roles are actually helpful in alleviating the issue of gender stereotypes, as they promote the idea that women can be strong as well, but how is it fair to women to only portray them this way for the sake of appealing to male audiences? Not only do sexual representations of women in movies undermine the characters and even the actresses, it also objectifies women, and sends the message that women are only useful if they are presented as sexual objects, or as "eye candy".

In addition to promoting this idea, the mass media also tends to normalize it. In the 1994 TV show "Friends", one of the main characters Joey is seen as a womanizer. He often objectifies women, sees them as sex objects, and even makes jokes about his female friends that are sexual in nature, such as imagining them in lesbian scenarios for his own pleasure and enjoyment. To make things even worse, the female characters accept his inappropriate comments as jokes, and never discuss the issue in a serious manner. Besides, there is a lot of gender stereotyping in the show, showing no diversity at all among female characters, who are all pretty and feminine. The show ended in 2004, but it is still available on Netflix, and is very popular among youngsters today. This may mislead people to think that inappropriate jokes about women are acceptable as long as they are jokes, or make young girls think that they have to be as stereotypically feminine as the female characters in the show when they grow up. Of course, "Friends" is only one of the more well-known examples out of hundreds of movies and television shows that have the same problem.
Another issue of women in popular culture is the lack of proper representation in sports. Everybody watches sports, whether it be die-hard fans of a specific sports team that watch every game, or people that occasionally watch highlights on the news. It is blatantly obvious that more people watch men's sports compared to women's sports, especially for popular sports like basketball and football. Consequently, some male sports players are so famous that they become household names- but this is rarely the case for good female players. In addition, male athletes usually get paid more than their female counterparts. In Forbes's 2018 list of the top 100 highest-paid athletes, all of the athletes were male. This is not because women are bad at sports, but because women's sports are rarely promoted in popular culture/ the media. The stereotype of "boys like sports" has encouraged males of all ages to enjoy sports, while females are discouraged from it. Therefore, women's sports are rarely shown on TV, which makes sports a male-dominated part of culture. The severe gender stereotyping seen in society and in sports culture not only harms the interests of female athletes at the moment, but also may discourage young girls from showing interest or pursuing sports, as they may be misled to think that only men can be successful in the industry.

Women's rights have seen a significant improvement through history, but while we acknowledge the progress society has made towards equality, we cannot turn a blind eye to the unfairness that women still face in popular culture today.

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