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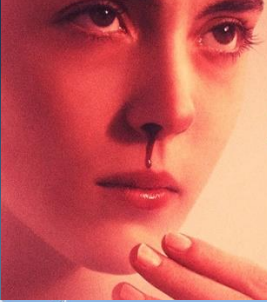
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**Film, Media, and Journalism**  
**Best Research Projects**  
**2023-2024**



# Introduction

With immense pride and pleasure, I offer to you the culmination of a rigorous academic journey: the best Research Projects produced by students in Film, Media, and Journalism in the 2023-2024 academic year.

Over the past year, these exceptional students have honed their intellectual curiosity, tackling intricate questions that span the breadth of the academic disciplines of Film, Media, and Journalism. From the frontiers of the study of the representation of autistic women to the intricacies of conducting a *Barbie* audience study, their research endeavours represent a contribution to the advancement of knowledge.

This collection showcases their innovative methodologies, their theoretical knowledge, the depth of their findings, and their spirit of inquiry. I invite you to delve into their vibrant tapestry of research and expand your own knowledge and understanding.

Angharad, Caitlin, Holly-Anne, Jack, Oliver, and Haidee – you have made us all very proud!

Dr Elena Hristova

School Director of Student Engagement | Lecturer in Film and Media

Module Leader UXS3900 Research Project

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‘They’re not autistic. They just hit all the diagnostic criteria:’

# A Critical Review of Autism Spectrum Disorder as a Commodity in Mainstream Television

**Angharad Davies**

## **Introduction**

‘You can’t be autistic; you’re rubbish at math.’ The disbelief at my diagnosis came as a surprise. My understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was a neurological disorder with deficits in social communication. Not a disorder that meant you were mathematically inclined. ASD has long been seen as a male disorder, with Raymond Babbitt (*Rainman*, 1988) as the poster boy for every autistic individual. With a rise in diagnoses of ASD in women, POC’s, and the LGBTQ+ community there has been a rise in research concerned with the accuracy of current media portrayals of an autistic person. As a late diagnosed autistic woman, I found myself searching for TV shows and films that I could relate to and finding little.

When I was diagnosed, I was met with disbelief from family members who immediately compared me to characters like Raymond Babbitt. They didn’t believe I could be autistic as I didn’t match the portrayals they had seen on the screen. It is being theorized that women are underdiagnosed, rather than unlikely to have ASD at all. The difference in how ASD presents in women compared to men is seen as a leading factor in that theory (Hull, L, Petrides, K, Mandy, W, 2020). With such a lack of understanding in how autistic women present, there is an understandable lack of autistic women within mainstream media. At least, it seems like there is a lack of autistic women within mainstream media.

I took an auto-ethnographic approach to the beginning of this project. As I had experienced little to no representation of autistic women in the mainstream media I consumed, I was going to review how autistic women are represented in media, and possibly find a reason for why they were so underrepresented. By analysing the current representation of autistic women, I discovered a bigger number of autistic female characters than I was expecting. The main issue found with those characters was the lack of an official diagnosis. A lot of these characters were also not as mainstream as the leading male autistic characters. With the most

well-known female autistic character being autistic-coded, this project evolved into a review of the attitudes of the creators and networks towards autistic characters in general.

My argument is that current representations of autistic people are neither accurate nor inaccurate. Rather, there is a history of good representation being hidden behind a lack of understanding of the spectrum of ASD and a poor attitude towards taking responsibility for a disabled character. By examining the attitudes of the creators behind *Bones* and *The Big Bang Theory* I show how undiagnosed characters are still autistic characters. The attitudes of Bill Prady and Fox Network are shown to be irresponsible, with their arguments to avoid an official diagnosis being highlighted as the main problem behind current autistic representation. I go on to explain the importance of an official diagnosis, as when the autistic community starts to claim these characters, debates are had over the validity of the label. These debates have a knock-on effect on the autistic community and add to the one-dimensional understanding of ASD and how it presents in anyone other than a white, heterosexual man. This is shown through examples of IMDB reviews of *Bones* character Temperance Brennan. Through analysis of these reviews, I show that her character is identified as different by audiences, and failing to correctly label her traits has placed the character under scrutiny and drawn criticisms towards the writing of her character. To further understand the importance of officially diagnosing characters, I investigate the impact of autistic portrayals on the wider public, including studies showing how a positive portrayal of an autistic character can help improve attitudes in real life. I use examples of recent autistic female characters from the shows *Everything Is Gonna Be Okay*, *Heartbreak High* and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, to prove that autistic characters in lead roles can be successful. I also use those shows as an example of how the better representations, as seen by audiences and the autistic community, tend to come from neurodivergent writers. This project also makes the claim that when a writer uses autistic traits for a character not meant to be seen as autistic, that this becomes exploitative. By using the traits of autism as a commodity, instead of giving the autistic community space to authentically exist within the media. This project agrees with previous work, that there needs to be a wider variety of autistic representation in media, but states that the problem doesn't lie in the accuracy of past portrayals. The problem lies within the exploitative nature of some writers and networks, with a reluctance to portray disabled characters as equal individuals. While the show's analysed featured female autistic characters, this research proved impossible to keep solely focused on autistic women, as the current representation is lacking in areas not exclusive to gender and is applicable to the autistic community as a whole.

### **Literature review**

The field of study for this project is Film Studies but a variety of work concerning ASD and media representation can be found in Psychology, Sociology, Autism and Development and Media Communication fields of study as well as Film Studies.

Past analysis of autistic characters has categorized media representations into different iterations of the ASD spectrum. Prochnow (2014) categorized these iterations into 4 sections: magical/savant, different/quirky, undiagnosed/unlabeled, realistic.

The analysis of these different subtypes of autistic characters highlighted a lack of negative portrayals of autistic people with the representations analysed being ‘hyperpositive to the point that they are unrealistic’, with a lack of representation of severe levels of autism and the hardships experienced with the disability (p.147). A lack of autistic people of colour and autistic actors was also identified. This research is somewhat outdated as Prochnow states that verbal and high functioning autistic people go against the norm in the autistic community with only 20% of autistic people being at this level in 2006. With that percentage now estimated at 40-70% a lot of the problems identified in this research do not line up with current understanding. Such as autistic actors playing autistic roles would be difficult as ‘acting is not a career choice conducive to most symptoms of autism’ (p.147). ASD is a developmental disability that is still relatively new within medical fields. Our understanding of the diagnosis and how it presents has changed in the last several years. A lot of the literature predating 2017 was behind paywalls and showed outdated information on the ASD spectrum, with research from 2020 onwards approaching the representation through a different lens. While Prochnow’s categorization of the representations is still a relevant framework, there was a lack of suggestions and analysis of what a better representation would look like and how that representation would be achieved. In direct contrast to Prochnow, Jones (2023) identified films as focusing more on ‘individuals with high support needs’ but was in agreement with the need to include a wider variety of representations from across the spectrum. There is a need to analyse more diverse representations of autistic characters (Young, 2012), as a number of studies have focused on the overall representation of the autistic community (Nordahl-Hansen, 2018; Jones, 2023; Mittmann, 2023), with studies exploring a specific character and the narrative setting of that character only increasing in number within the last few years (Gaeke-Franz, 2022).

Recent research has identified the need for more intersectional approaches to the representation of autism in media with the majority of representations being present in white heterosexual men (Aspler, 2022). However, studies reviewing ASD representation in media have been focused on the most common representations of white, autistic men with savant syndrome traits with the character of Raymond Babbitt being discussed the most (Nordahl-Hansen, 2021). By focusing on the popular mainstream representations of white autistic male characters, research is missing the chance to dive into the nuance of the lesser-known representations and why they are not as well-known as male characters. A review of the existing research studying ASD representations in film and television (Nordahl-Hansen, 2021) found that, at the time of the study, there was a significant lack of autistic voices within the discussion. He suggested that future research needed to include the perspective of autistic individuals on how different character portrayals affected the understanding of ASD within the wider public, and how that understanding has an effect on the autistic community.

There is a focus on how these portrayals can be used to educate the wider public (Mallipeddi, S, 2024). Reviews of existing portrayals of autistic characters have shown them to be promoting stereotypes while positive representations ‘highlighted strengths and reflected nuance’ (Jones, 2023). Negative aspects of the representations were seen as the idea of autism as something to be feared and a burden, and autistic people being unable to form and maintain any type of relationship. These stereotypical portrayals were found to fail to educate



the study groups involved, highlighting the problems within these representations and their failure to contribute to the acceptance and education of ASD. In particular, it causes concern for the perception of younger viewers towards autistic people. Exposure to problematic portrayals may influence the opinion of a viewer which, without correction or further education, could impact their view of the autistic community over the course of their life (Jones, 2023). It was highlighted that a person's view of ASD could change over time if they watched a series featuring an autistic person to its conclusion.

Autistic characters are most commonly used as narrative devices or seen as characters with above average intelligence. Anthony D. Baker has argued that the view of ASD within the media is that 'autistic characters are only viable characters – if a spectacular skill or power is among the defining features of the character's disability' (p.234 but quoted in *Beyond the Spectacle of the Autistic Adult*). The prevalence of savant syndrome in autistic characters is a misconception that continues to be used in mainstream media (Nordahl-Hansen, 2018; Jones, 2023; Mittmann, 2023). The use of savant syndrome continues to undermine the positive representations of ASD (Moore, 2019), with depictions of autistic characters without savant syndrome more likely to appear in supporting roles and with high support needs (Gregory, 2011). Suggesting that without savant-like abilities, autistic characters are viewed through their disability with very little dimension to their characters.

Academic reviews of autistic characters are not just limited to canonically autistic characters (Jones, 2022). Autistic coded characters are also discussed when looking at the accuracy of representation. These characters have been shown to appeal more to some members of the autistic community. They are seen as complex individuals who don't perpetuate the 'one-dimensional stereotype' (p.05). The problems with not officially identifying autistic characters has been highlighted as a lost opportunity to educate audiences about ASD with concerns that the struggles of an autistic person are not taken seriously when shows use them as comedic devices without explicitly stating why they have particular struggles. Jones (2022) provides a clear commentary on the opinions of the autistic community through her study. The study indicates that there are differing opinions on different characters. Autistic characters being played by autistic actors was seen as refreshing as they would have had personal experience to bring to the roles. Autistic writers are seen as providing the best representations. According to this study *The Good Doctor*, *The Big Bang Theory* and *Love on the Spectrum* were seen as the worst portrayals of autism on television. But it was noted that some participants viewed the good doctor as one of the best. This is also consistent with my findings. With *Love on the Spectrum* being identified as one of the worst portrayals, it challenges Prochnow's category of realistic representation. Prochnow states that documentaries would naturally show realistic depictions of autism because they 'do not have to create storylines to fit fictional characters' (p.145). But with Jones' study identifying a reality TV show as one of the worse portrayals, it is evident that ASD can be misrepresented in any format. It was noted that when autistic women were represented on screen they were 'presented as masculine or having characteristics that are consistent with male autism stereotypes' (p.11). There was acknowledgement that some autistic people avoid watching shows with autistic characters due to the consistent inaccuracies of past portrayals. But there was suggestions that all representation can be beneficial. In this context it was seen to raise

awareness of autism and encourage conversation around neurodiversity. While Jones' study is one of the few to include autistic people in discussions of representation, it should be noted that all participants 'were either currently working in academia, had previously worked in academia or were undertaking doctoral studies' (p.04). This is important to note as, despite participants showing a difference in opinion on the characters reviewed, this indicates that participants would have been in the low support needs category of ASD. As will be discussed further on in this dissertation, the problem identified with most representations is a lack of variety of the whole ASD spectrum. This study is missing participants from other part of the ASD spectrum, who may have seen the worse portrayals of autistic characters as relatable or representative of themselves. Autistic people have identified the need for inclusion of autistic writers when creating autistic characters (Nordahl-Hansen, 2023). While reiterating the need for a wider variety of representation, autistic groups endorsed having an expert in ASD involved with shows when dealing with autistic characters. Non autistic people felt the need to include an expert in the field of autism and have all characters display significant parts of the diagnostic criteria. This was seen as significantly less important by autistic people. A nuanced approach to the topic of autism representation in media appears to be popular within dissertations and theses. Shafee (2021) argues that the specific changes needed in film and television require more investigation. By examining the phenomenon of head cannoning (where a fan has a personal belief of a character or narrative which is not officially confirmed by writers) certain characters as autistic, she suggests that examining what makes these characters relatable to the autistic community would provide more insight into what changes need to be made to write autistic characters for autistic people.

A main concern identified within these studies is the accuracy of current media representations. With the impact of the media on public perception established as a factor for the stereotypical views towards ASD (Nordahl-Hansen, 2018) there have been multiple studies analysing and suggesting ways in which to make the representation better (Jones, S, 2023). The autistic community shows a varied opinion on different portrayals with good and bad points made for every character identified as autistic (Jones, 2022). Characters analysed by these studies were shown to 'align well with DSM-5 diagnostic criteria' but has been noted that a single representation 'cannot capture the richness and variety of experience that resides within the autism spectrum' (Nordahl-Hansen, 2018). When analysing the accuracy of these representations it was found that many characters hit the maximum possible score with the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria. This finding raised the question of whether including all characteristics from the DSM-5 could be counted as accurate. One individual representation could still be seen as misleading despite aligning significantly with the diagnostic criteria. Including more autistic characters in TV shows is seen as potential to educate and foster a positive perception of the autistic community. With TV shows running over a long period of time, there are opportunities to explore the complexities of an autistic character.

The study of ASD representation in mainstream media is so diverse that a study was done, reviewing how the topic was being researched (Nordahl-Hansen, 2021). The research being done appears to come from outside traditional ASD research fields. This is seen as a positive aspect of the existing research, as it allows a wider range of interpretations and perspectives on the different ASD representations. The two methods of study currently used when

researching these characters are analysis of the extent to which characters portray traditional ASD symptoms, and how the cinematic techniques and subtext of the production portray the feeling of the autistic experience. It is suggested that future research could benefit from combining these two methods of research to generate a deeper understanding of how ASD can be represented in mainstream media.

The main points identified in the existing literature create a basic foundation for how representation can be improved moving forward. Accuracy of portrayals, a need for a more diverse range of autistic characters, the misleading prevalence of Savant Syndrome and including autistic writers and creatives in the process have all been highlighted as necessary changes within the industry. There is debate within the literature on what an accurate portrayal of an autistic character looks like, with an uncertainty on whether certain portrayals encourage autism acceptance or add to the stigmatisation of the autistic community. Further research could benefit from being less concerned with the question of accuracy, but rather analysing the extent to which future autistic characters are being included as individuals within the narrative.

### **Theory**

Based on Stuart Halls' theory of representation we see that language is often incapable of representing the aspect of reality that it tries to convey. Autism is a word that is interpreted differently by different people as 'it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language.' (Hall, p.25). As previous work has suggested that the current representations of autism are inaccurate or not encompassing of the entire autistic experience, it is becoming irrelevant to argue that the accuracy of a representation is the problem within mainstream media. Rather this project argues that the attitudes of the writers and networks need to change in order to establish an inclusive representation of the autism spectrum.

Returning to Hall's theory that language, and other signs and symbols, can never truly represent its origin in reality, we can also see exaggerated stereotypes as failures to fairly depict the pluralistic reality of autism. Using his example of a rose in another's culture throughout media we see characters who were not written as autistic but were given the traits to convey a certain type of character. 'And if someone says to me that there is no such word as 'rose' for a plant in her culture, the actual plant in the garden cannot resolve the failure of communication between us. Within the conventions of the different language codes we are using, we are both right – and for us to understand each other, one of us must learn the code linking the flower with the word for it in the other's culture' (p.25).

While the autistic community has claimed those characters as conveying their code for autism, writers are refusing to accept that code as autistic. This project attempts to demonstrate that writers and networks have a certain idea of autism, as displayed through stereotyped portrayals, and now need to rethink their idea of the word and apply it to characters that are portraying the idea of autism to the communities it affects. A character who is quiet, reserved and a bit odd may be just that to a neurotypical writer. To an autistic

viewer, the same character may portray those same traits but will be interpreted differently through the language code of a neurodivergent mind.

## **Methodology**

With the lack of autistic voices within academic spaces I planned to facilitate online discussions within the Reddit group AutismInWomen. As the original research question was concerned with how autistic women were represented in mainstream media, I wanted to collect opinions and suggestions for better representation over a sustained period of time, to understand how autistic women currently felt about their representation and what they felt the problems were within that representation. Unfortunately, the moderators of the group denied my request to ask research questions and facilitate academic discussion. It was interesting to see that despite the need for autistic voices to be present in these discussions, this opportunity was denied. My message asking for clarification on why my request was denied, and if there were any changes needing to be made to my research question, was ignored. There were other Reddit groups consisting of the autistic community, but I decided against asking these other groups for participation. At the time I was researching exclusively autistic women and these other groups included autistic men and neurotypical people asking for advice on autistic loved ones. I was concerned that discussions in these groups wouldn't reach the intended demographic. In hindsight, I could have asked for permission to post in these other groups as the findings of my research proved to be applicable to the entire autistic community and not just autistic women.

I focused on analysing TV shows featuring autistic female characters and, after the denial of including autistic women in discussions, reviewed public blogs from the autistic community and analysed IMDB reviews of the relevant TV shows. I limited my analysis to shows with autistic female characters as there have been numerous studies and literature written on the portrayal of male autistic characters and I wanted to understand why the study of female characters was so sparse and how female autistic characters were currently being represented and how that representation was being received by the autistic community. The public blogs were the closest I could get to including autistic voices in my research and I chose to analyse IMDB reviews to see how these portrayals of autistic women were being received by the general public and not just the autistic community. This was important to understand as film is an industry of commodification and if a trend of dislike for autistic characters was shown throughout the IMDB reviews it would have identified a core part of the problem with the current representation.

I describe the shows I analysed as part of mainstream media. In this case, mainstream media was included as streaming services like Netflix and Disney+, as these are the two most popular streaming services in my locality and, unlike Amazon Prime, do not require subscribers to pay extra for content not included within that subscription. That limitation proved problematic however, as not all shows featuring female autistic characters could be accessed through those two streaming services. Two of the shows mentioned in my findings were accessible through Amazon Prime but I was unable to analyse them thoroughly as they were behind an extra paywall. Mainstream media in this context was also originally limited to shows from the UK and USA. No shows from the UK were found to feature autistic female

characters in my initial research but was included in the specifications as the UK and the US are where I get most of my content from. I was also unable to keep my limitations specifically to the UK and the US as two of the most progressive shows are from Australia and Korea respectively. However, both shows fell under my specifications as they were both available through Netflix. Overall, the limitations that were set for this project were difficult to stick to and further highlighted the inconsistency of portrayals of autistic women.

Due to the nature of the information I was analysing, the best course of action was discourse analysis. ‘It refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking’ (Rose, 2001). My analysis of the representation of autistic female characters was not based on the accuracy and clinical interpretation of the portrayal, but rather on the way these representations were being received by audiences and their responses. Through discourse analysis I was able to form an idea of the intertextuality of different portrayals and how they continued to form impressions on the public discourse of autistic characters. Throughout my research it became clear that to understand current representations, I had to understand past representations and how they continue to influence our understanding of ASD. By analysing public blogs from members of the autistic community I was able to understand how these popular representations of autistic characters influenced less represented members of the autistic community. I focused specifically on opinions from the autistic community. Despite previous literature focusing on the accuracy and variety of representations, it was necessary to understand how the autistic community saw itself through the discourse provided. With Rose (2001) stating that ‘our sense of self is made through the operation of discourse...discourse produces the world as it understands it,’ it was important to judge any representation of an autistic character through the lenses that these public blogs provided. As mentioned earlier through Stuart Halls theory, a representation of an autistic character can have a very different meaning depending on the personal experience of the person viewing the portrayal.

### **Findings and analysis**

When searching for autistic characters online the first problem that is encountered is the lack of a comprehensive list of officially diagnosed autistic characters. Both IMDB and Wikipedia include characters who have been headcannoned as autistic by fans and the actors that play them, and usually these lists have characters missing. For example, Temperance Brennan from *Bones* (2005-2017) is not included on the Wikipedia list of autistic characters in TV. Furthermore, the top of the list states “This is a list of fictional characters that have been explicitly described within the work in which they appear, or otherwise by the author, as being on the autism spectrum” (List of autistic fictional characters, Wikipedia). This statement is untrue considering the inclusion of Spencer Reid from *Criminal Minds* as he has never been officially diagnosed with ASD but was rather self-diagnosed by the actor that plays him (Anderson, 2021). IMDB’s list titled ‘Autistic/autistic-coded characters’ also does not give you a good idea of which characters are officially diagnosed, and which ones are autistic-coded. They start off the list with labels under each character stating whether they are autistic within the shows canon or if they have been claimed as autistic by fans but don’t continue those labels further down the list. Every google search for autistic characters seems

to turn up a new character with no official confirmation of whether they are autistic or headcannoned by fans. Whether a character is officially diagnosed or headcannoned by fans may seem like an inconsequential detail when researching the representation of autistic people in media but is an important factor when you consider the impact these representations have within our society.

What is an autistic-coded character? Put simply it is a character that exhibits traits and behaviours common with ASD but does not have the official autistic label as canon. Christa Mullis (2019) theorises that autistic-coded characters are so plentiful because writers and creators encounter more autistic people in their lives than they realise. The traits of ASD have been integrated into popular culture through media as a “shorthand for calling out the oddness of an oddball archetype character” (Mullis, 2019). Autistic individuals are generally seen by neurotypical people as different with confusing behaviours. It may therefore be a natural progression for neurotypical writers to apply these behaviours to characters that they are designating as different, to what has been established as normal, within the narrative. The problem is when writers and networks deny that these autistic characters are in fact autistic. It is difficult to claim that a character is not autistic when basing them off, and giving them the traits of, an autistic person.

Networks and writers have a history of being reluctant to label certain characters as autistic. *Bones* (2005-2017) and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) being the common examples as both shows have gone on record stating reasons why they chose to not diagnose the characters of Temperance Brennan and Sheldon Cooper. *The Big Bang Theory's* co-creator Bill Prady has stated that the decision to not diagnose Sheldon was made as ‘they were afraid that if they labelled Sheldon an Aspie, they would have too much responsibility to depict the condition accurately within a sitcom.’ (Sepinwall, 2010). *Bones* writer Hart Hanson based the character of Temperance Brennan off an autistic friend ‘but the needs of a broadcast network like Fox to get as large an audience as possible meant he couldn’t come out and say that’ (Sepinwall, 2010).

Since 2020 there has been an increase in nuanced representations of autistic women in TV shows through four specific shows. *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* (2020), *As We See It* (2022), *Heartbreak High* (2022) and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022) with *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* (2020) being the first American TV show to cast an autistic actress as an autistic character (Cromer, 2021). *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* is the first series with a diagnosed female autistic character as the main character. While the four shows mentioned above indicate the industry is starting to move in a better direction, there are still problems. *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* was cancelled after 2 seasons and *As We See It* was cancelled after 1 season. Both shows were also not part of the streaming services that were designated as mainstream media in the parameters of this research. Amazon Prime is a streaming service where, despite paying a monthly subscription, customers have to pay for certain shows and films that Amazon don’t own the rights to, creating another paywall in front of two TV shows that have representations of autistic characters created by people who are neurodiverse or closely related to a person who is neurodiverse. *Heartbreak High* and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* are both available on Netflix and at the time of writing are both ongoing with

*Heartbreak High* currently the only mainstream show with an autistic actress in the role of an autistic character. Notably, *Heartbreak High* and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* are not American productions. *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* is a Korean drama and *Heartbreak High* is an Australian drama. Despite being an American production, *Everything Is Gonna Be Okay* was written by an Australian comedian and *As We See It* was based off an Israeli series called *On the Spectrum*. All this to say that while other countries have had successful autistic stories, with a range of representation the US and UK are still very far behind with their entertainment media representations of ASD.

When a writer or network creates an autistic character but refuses to accept the responsibility of making that clear then we step into the problem of using ASD as a commodity. For the writers, the archetype of these off-kilter characters becomes too real when called by its actual name ‘taking their story out of the fictional playground they delight in and into the very much “too real” world of disabilities’ (Mullis, 2019). The traits of ASD are desirable when a character is needed to cause conflict or provide comedic value but giving autistic people their deserved credit and representation for providing the blueprint for these quirky and loved characters is not acceptable for some creators. When a writer or network is reluctant to label their autistic characters, they are failing to improve the representation of the autism spectrum within the perception of the wider public. As Nordahl-Hansen states in his work “such portrayals impact on the public perception of the condition and – if inaccurate – could lead to distorted views of what ASD actually is” (Nordahl-Hansen, 2017). The danger of ASD being distorted in its public image in this instance comes from a lack of mainstream content that showcases the ASD spectrum. The majority of diagnosed autistic characters are white straight middle class savant men/boys and naturally that is the image that is recalled first when thinking about autistic people. This oversaturated popular image of an autistic person is still struggling to fade into the ether and make way for other representations because of networks and creators that vehemently deny the autistic identity of the characters they have written to be that way. For the US, ASD appears to exist in a very specific way. There are plenty of US shows with officially diagnosed characters and most of, if not all, those shows are crime and medical dramas (Baden Gaeke-Franz, pp.308-309). The environment of a crime and medical drama is a safe space to place the savant type autistic, where their exceptional mathematical and analytical skills can be used to full advantage and there is little danger of a potentially offensive joke centred around a character’s ‘medical condition’. This genre provides a serious background where a disability can become part of the conflict. The problem with only placing officially diagnosed characters in those spaces is that they become the only places they could primarily exist. The character of Sheldon Cooper had an opportunity to be groundbreaking within American sitcoms as one of the few diagnosed autistic characters not in a medical/crime drama. Prady has been reported as saying that if Sheldon were labelled as autistic there would be a ‘danger that the other characters insults about Sheldon’s behaviour – in other words, 90 percent of the show’s comedy – would seem mean if they were mocking a medical condition as opposed to generic eccentricity’ (Sepinwall, 2009). As stated before, there are plenty of shows with officially diagnosed characters who don’t seem to share this fear of responsibility but seemingly because there was no fear of being seen as offensive to autistic people. And Prady wasn’t correct in thinking that officially diagnosing Sheldon was

the only way these jokes could be seen as mean and mocking. Sheldon is still an autistic character (Baden Gaeke-Franz, p.319). He is a prominent figure in a popular mainstream show who has long been head cannoned by fans as autistic, yet the creators of *The Big Bang Theory* refused to officially diagnose or label him because “in the writers’ minds, calling it Asperger’s creates too much of a burden to get the details right” (Sepinwall, 2009). Meanwhile the details are already there, just without a label. Prady is not comfortable taking responsibility for a diagnosed autistic character but ‘is fine with being held responsible for consistently portraying a character who is uncomfortable with eye contact, unable to detect sarcasm, sticks to stringent routines to maintain a sense of order in his life, and is wickedly intelligent in areas of his interest but delayed a great deal in any other life activities’ (Mullis, 2019). What Prady is essentially doing with this attitude is using autistic traits as a comedic commodity and washing his hands of all responsibility on how that representation is handled. Prady himself made the distinction that it would be too much responsibility to get the details of ASD right ‘within a sitcom’ (Sepinwall, 2010). Meaning, it is too much effort to write comedy catered to an autistic character without using them as the punching bag. It is not impossible to write autistic characters into sitcoms as equal characters to neurotypical characters. *Everything Is Gonna Be Okay* and *Community* (2009–2015) both have autistic characters within a comedic setting, with the humour not dependant on their personal differences. Creator of *Community* Dan Harmon did not mean to write the character Abed as an autistic character and was set to follow the same route as Prady until autistic fans pointed out the similarities of Abed’s character to their own experiences. Harmon decided to fully embrace these similarities and officially diagnosed Abed in the show which led to Harmon discovering that he is also autistic (Mullis, 2019; Baden Gaeke-Franz p.317). By embracing the speculation of autistic fans Harmon discovered that ASD doesn’t look how he thought it did. The difference in the treatment of these characters highlights the problematic approach that some neurotypical writers have towards profiting off autistic traits while excluding the autistic community.

By not diagnosing these characters, the traits they exhibit are open to debate from the wider public about the validity of them being ASD traits and the discourse surrounding the validity of head cannoning autistic characters was so prolific that a Tumblr blog was created, dedicated to posting reasons written by fans rejecting unofficially diagnosed characters as autistic (*Ridiculous Reasons Why That Character Can’t Be Autistic*, 2016). This debate is especially problematic to autistic women. With the majority of diagnosed autistic characters being men and boys there is very little in mainstream entertainment media to back up the reality of autistic women not presenting in the same way as autistic men. *Bones* character Temperance Brennan became an important role model to autistic women as one of the few autistic characters to show depth and personality outside of her ASD. Being a female autistic character also helped negate the belief that ASD is a male disorder (Malia, 2017). Throughout the show, any social inadequacies and personal problems Brennan has is explained away by her traumatic childhood and high IQ. And understandably, that opens her character up to a lot of criticism regarding her apparent inability to learn to adapt and become ‘normal’ like her peers. Without the context and education regarding a diagnosis of ASD and what that entails,



certain traits will be misunderstood and misrepresented. Three IMDB reviews from 2005, 2020 and 2022 respectively all touch on these points of criticism;

‘Although I love this programme I can’t help but feel that Brennan’s character can come across as a little bit heartless and slightly abrupt, almost to the point of unbelievable....it’s a shame she comes across as slightly narcissistic and to be honest above herself and inhuman!’ (scottie-51239, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2022)

‘And what’s with Bone’s catch-phrase? “What does that mean? I don’t understand that?” sheesh even the geekiest of scientists would get the x-files refence.’ (ssc7, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2005).

‘She’s a robotic Mary sue basically, she can do everything except be social because of her “bad growing up environment”. (hazard111, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2020).

By making Brennan an autistic character, without the official label, the writers created a character who is misunderstood by audiences and has added to the stereotypes perpetuated within mainstream media over what ASD looks like. To these reviewers these traits cannot possibly be anything other than narcissism or trauma because Brennan did not line up with the idea of what ASD looked like in the mainstream media. *Bones* also had the opportunity to be groundbreaking with its representation of Brennan. Despite the problems stated above, Brennan was a good representation of a woman on the ASD spectrum and had a lasting impact on autistic women. The reasoning behind Brennan not being officially diagnosed does not make sense. Hanson has gone on record to say that if the show had premiered on a smaller channel, they would have officially diagnosed Brennan from the beginning (Sepinwall, 2010). This reasoning does not hold up under scrutiny. Despite not having the official label, Brennan, like Sheldon, is undoubtably an autistic woman. Her character arc is based off emotional growth and learning to interact and connect with her peers in a way that is unnatural to her. She is very direct in her communication, finds it difficult to express her emotions and understand pop culture references. Jokes made by her friends go right over her head and she is told on multiple occasions throughout the show that she is a very literal person. All traits that are included under the DSM-5. These traits are continuously brought to attention in the dialogue of the other characters and in Brennan’s actions and play a pivotal part in her overall character arc. While the representation is improving, with female autistic characters paving the way, these shows are still not a plentiful as needed. Another reason for that is that networks don’t think officially diagnosed characters will sell (Sepinwall, 2010). *Bones* ran from 2005 to 2017 for a total of 12 seasons with an audience score of 83% and a critic score of 90% on Rotten Tomatoes. Along with its IMDB rating of 7.8 stars out of 10 and currently 95 on the list of 100 most popular TV shows on the IMDB charts you can argue that statistically this is a successful TV show with an autistic female character as the lead.

There is no way to know, if the network had officially announced Brennan as an autistic woman, whether that would have had an impact on the ratings, but it seems unlikely considering it was common knowledge early on that her character was influenced by an autistic person and had those traits analysed in IMDB reviews.

Several studies have been conducted to analyse and prove the influence of the media on the public's perception of ASD (Bakombo, S, Ewalefo, P, Konkle, A, 2023; Mallipeddi, S, Dickter, C, Burk, J, 2024; Nordahl-Hansen, A, 2018) with one study done specifically analysing the impact of Korean drama *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* on ASD awareness (Nam, S, Kim, S, 2023). They found that the 'perception of ASD shifted from an individual model to a social model' and promoted positive coverage of ASD in contrast to the 'focus on negative perceptions and emphasized prevention and treatment' (Nam, S, Kim, S, 2023). By focusing on the difference in media coverage on ASD before and after the airing of a mainstream drama with an autistic lead character this study has shown that a positive and informative representation of an autistic character has a direct impact on public perception of ASD which emphasises the importance of responsibly representing the condition and officially labelling autistic-coded characters. These two attitudes from the writers towards the autistic characters of these shows are damaging to the ASD community. With characters like Sheldon and Brennan, who are both examples of an autistic person undergoing personal change and character growth, their representations are only positive to the autistic audiences that identify with them but do nothing to help educate the wider audience of these shows as without an official label there is still room for argument on whether these characters are autistic at all.

There is no legitimate reason for networks and writers to avoid using officially diagnosed autistic characters. From the reception of characters like Abed, Woo Young Woo and Temperance Brennan there is also no legitimate reason for every officially diagnosed autistic character to follow the white savant man trope or be restricted to a narrative where only their intelligence makes them valuable. *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* was projected to achieve the top position globally on Netflix in 2022 shortly after its international release (Nam, S, Kim, S, 2023) and has many IMDB reviews stating how heart-warming and informative they found the character. With many of the reviewers describing themselves as neurotypical, it shows a wide demographic eager to accept and understand the personal challenges and perceptions of autistic characters.

Accuracy is not the problem. Using the character of Quinnie from *Heartbreak High* as an example, the actress Chloe Hayden was diagnosed as autistic at 13 (Walker, 2023). Being an advocate for disability rights and neurodivergent representation, it is safe to assume that her characterisation of Quinnie would have been based off her own experiences as an autistic person. Despite this, there were still accusations of stereotyping (sorchahonrine, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2022, IMDB). For every complaint against Sheldon Cooper there will be a little boy who feels represented by him. For every 'high-functioning' autistic character there may be a support needs teacher claiming autism doesn't look like that. With the representation of ASD being as diverse and subjective as it is, there is a need to ensure that all representations are not just focused on the Sheldon Cooper's, Raymond Babbitt's, and Shaun Murphy's. But

also focused on consistently providing authentic space for the Temperance Brennan's, Matilda's and Quinnie's.

## **Conclusion**

There is an audience for neurodivergent characters, despite the attitudes of networks such as Fox suggesting otherwise. There have been arguably good, diverse representations of ASD onscreen in the past but due to lack of labelling, the autistic community is still stereotyped as savant, math geniuses with no social skills. While past work has discussed how future representations can be written with more accuracy, it is important to now approach the problem of accuracy through a different perspective. It has been established in this project that every representation of an autistic character will have meaning to someone on the ASD spectrum. And that the accuracy of a representation is entirely subjective. With that in mind, future work should move on from analysis of stereotypes and discuss the lack of neurodivergent writers and creatives in the industry. It should discuss the moral problem of neurodivergent characters being written by neurotypical people, with no input from the autistic community. When a neurotypical writer creates a neurodivergent character, that character is being written through the perspective of a neurotypical mind. That character has been written for neurotypical viewers. Neurodivergent audiences deserve to have characters written by them, for them. With more analysis on the idea of ASD traits being used as a commodity, there is an opportunity for discussion about who benefits from autistic-coded characters as opposed to officially diagnosed characters. While it is generally understood that everything in the entertainment market is written and created to be sold as a commodity, there is a need to recognise the implications of an irresponsible representation. With a current increase in shows written by neurodivergent people, there is an opportunity to research the differences in attitude towards creating a narrative that will sell and populating it with neurodivergent characters that will also sell. While these shows are becoming more popular there is also a need to research why these shows are not available through mainstream streaming services. Future research should make it a priority to involve autistic voices in the academic discussion of ASD representation. It is my belief that representation is not a topic that can be confined to clinical observation but rather should encompass the opinions and perspective of the entire autistic community.

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# Building A Better Film Industry: The Important Career of Ava DuVernay

**Holly-Anne Backhouse**

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Finally, to Ava DuVernay. An example to all women that change is possible, should we all fight for it.

## **Introduction**

The film industry is not inclusive. Opportunities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have progressed for white women, although this is where the improvement ends. The work of Greta Gerwig, for example, has seen critical acclaim for the representation of women in mainstream cinema, most recently for *Barbie* (2023). Female solidarity is potent within Gerwig's films, but the core implication is clear, the cinematic world is for white women only (Kaul, 2021). It has become clear that the film industry does not care about the voices of all women. Black, women directors have stood on the sidelines whilst the industry remains exclusive. Therefore, Ava DuVernay demands that a better film industry must be built.

Ava DuVernay is an American writer, filmmaker, and director who made her mainstream debut with *I Will Follow* (2010). Since then, she has directed five feature films, three short films, and four documentary films which have varied in critical success,



from *Selma* (2014) to *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018). Outside of her directorial work, DuVernay focuses on reconstructing the conditions of film sets and creating better working conditions, to benefit crew members from marginalised backgrounds. DuVernay's stated aim is to promote the voices of women and people of colour, acting as counterpoint to a film and television industry which has often been quick to erase them (Hagan, 2022). She is particularly outspoken on the marginalisation of Black directors in the film industry and the power of representation. In an interview with CBS Sunday Morning, she emphasised that the industrial experiences of Black women directors must change, stating:

When people say: "What are your dreams? What do you want from the future?" Consistency. I just want to be here, and I hope the next women director will have bigger dreams. Bolder dreams. Mine is just to still be here because Black women directors, none have made ten films. Eight films. Seven films. Six films. I think right now we are at five. (CBS Sunday Morning, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2022)

This dream led to the creation of ARRAY CREW; a website founded in 2021 to support crew members from marginalised backgrounds. The website currently has over 10,000 verified crew members, with over 2,000 producers and department heads. (ARRAY CREW, 2024) Their impact, as noted on the website, is to provide film and television productions access to thousands of below-the-line crew members from diverse background, where everyone belongs (ARRAY CREW, 2024). Following this creation, Ava DuVernay partnered with Ron Howard to make hiring in the film industry more effective. Impact, founded in 2020, is Howard's hiring network for TV and film production. Now, the app will have an ARRAY CREW profile badge 'for users who identify as a minority concerning their gender identities, sexuality identity, race, and ethnicity' (ARRAY CREW, 2024).

The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative is the 'leading think tank in research, diversity, and inclusion in entertainment through original research and sponsored projects' (Smith & Wheeler, 2023). The initiative is central to this study, as it displays statistics on the film industry, whilst supplying 'research-based solutions' (Smith & Wheeler, 2023) on how to rectify the significant issues. This depicts the state of diversity within the industry and underlines the need for better inclusion for women of colour, as the study *Inclusion in the Director's Chair: Analysis of Director's Chair: Analysis of Director Gender and Race/Ethnicity Across the 1600 Top Films From 2007-2023* states:

Only 4 women of colour (3.4%) helmed one of the 100 top-grossing films of 2023. Three of those women were Asian (Adele Lim, *Joy Ride*; Celine Song, *Past Lives*; Fawn Veerasunthorn, *Wish*) and one was Black (Nia DaCosta, *The Marvels*) ... Only 25 top-grossing movies across 17 years have been helmed by a woman of colour. These 25 jobs were filled with 19 different women of colour. Six of these directors have had more than one film in the top 100: Ava DuVernay (2), Gina Prince-Bythewood (2), Jennifer Yuh Nelson (2), Kasi Lemmons (2), Nia DaCosta (2), and Stella Meghie (2). (Smith & Pieper, 2024, p.10).



Similarly, DuVernay seeks to empower other Black women directors to focus on the longevity of their careers and promote social justice within their work. Therefore, this study aims to indicate the vitality of change within the film industry and show how Ava DuVernay should be seen as an industry leader, who is working tirelessly towards representation and furthering diversity. DuVernay's interviews evidence that industrial change can be generated through inclusion, diversity, representation. This, in turn, will improve industrial experiences and environments for underrepresented individuals. Sentiment analysis provided by Rotten Tomatoes also showed varied negative opinions, which emphasises the importance of industry-based activism for underrepresented individuals, often with intersectional identities.

## **Literature review**

This section is based at the intersection of race, gender, and class. This literature review will critically review scholarship within the themes of intersectionality and social and political activism.

### **Intersectionality**

The framework of intersectionality is an accounting of overlapping oppressions. It implies that all women, without discrimination, should have experiences and opportunities available to them. This is fundamentally relevant to the career of Ava DuVernay. The article *Towards a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis* defines intersectionality as:

A heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarity of sameness in the context of anti-discrimination and social movement politics... intersectionality's insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013).

Black, feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins have also discussed intersectionality as a 'social construction, which functions on the exploitation of black women's labour' (Collins, 2000, p.4). Collins establishes that black women are frequently excluded within mainstream feminist discourses, with 'feminist thought' (Collins, 2000) being the thoughts of white, cis-gendered women. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* determines that:

Treating race, class, gender, and sexuality less as personal attributes and more as systems of domination in which individuals construct unique identities, black feminist analysis routinely identifies multiple oppressions as important (Collins, 2000, p.127).

The statement 'systems of domination' (Collins, 2000, p.127) is an important one, as it is here where intersectionality operates. Fundamentally, Intersectionality functions 'within political dimensions of oppression that have denied African American women the rights and privileges routinely extended to white male citizens' (Collins, 2000, p.4). The origin of this concept can be seen in the work of Angela Davis.

Davis discusses how intersectionality has, historically, functioned within the patriarchy. However, she argues the true enemy is capitalist, economic oppression. Her work shows how intersectionality is relevant now more than ever within current feminist thought. Davis argues, in terms of the suffragette movement, that:

Working class and black women alike were fundamentally linked to their men by class exploitation and racist oppression which did not discriminate between the sexes. Whilst their men's sexist behaviour needed to be challenged, the real enemy- the common enemy- was the boss, the capitalist, or whoever was responsible for the miserable wages and unbearable working conditions and racist and sexist discrimination on the job (Davis, 1981, p .142).

As feminist scholars, Collins and Davis understand how intersectionality operates against black women, often through discrimination and patriarchal powers. Despite this, both approaches cannot be seen as contemporary, due to the publication dates of 1981 to 2000, respectively. Therefore, Collins and Davis do not approach intersectionality with the same considerations towards sexuality as more modern scholars would. Brittney Cooper, for example, discusses intersectionality with a unique perspective of queerness, and the lived experience of a black lesbian In the U.S.

Exploitation is fundamentally a huge part of the lived experiences of black women, through race, sex, class, and gender. According to feminist activist Brittney Cooper, rage can be a useful tool to provoke change, stating:

Black girl feminism is all the rage, and we need all the rage feminism can give us. A common language for thinking about how sexism, racism, and classism work together to f\*ck sh\*t up for everybody (Cooper, 2018, p.5).

Like Collins, Cooper discusses how history, politics, and industrial hegemonies shape systems of power. Ultimately, 'African American women remain relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy from one generation to the next' (Collins, 2000, p. 274). In central scholarship like Cooper's and Collins', it is established how feminine thought, and feminine rage, can work to improve the intersectional experiences of black women.

'Black women caught at the intersections of race, class, and gender' (Cooper, 2018, p.132) are deprived of opportunities daily. This study applies this to the film industry. Black women directors are discriminated against in every direction. Evidenced in the *Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, Inclusion in the Director's Chair*:

Women and people of colour are not being hired in ways that represent their proportion in the U.S. or their percentage in the pipeline using numbers from the Sundance Film Festival, episodic television directors, or even Netflix features. If past behaviour is a predictor of future action, then we will not see these numbers move any time soon. (Smith & Pieper 2024, p.10)

Therefore, without black, feminist discourses on intersectionality, the potential for industrial change decreases. Through conversations of intersectionality, black women can discuss their lived experiences. This, as Cooper emphasises, can be through *Eloquent Rage* (2018), which

allows voices to be heard and opportunities to be gained. Alicia Garza, a feminist scholar and activist, continues the notion that power can impact people with intersectional identities, positively and negatively.

Like Collins and Davis, the work of Alicia Garza positions intersectionality within political and economic suffering. She believes that intersectionality is more than a theory, 'in practice, intersectionality results in unlearning and undoing segregation and thus interrupting the ways that power is consolidated in the hands of the few' (Garza, 2020, p.144). The concept of removing power from the 'few' and placing it back in the hands of black women is an integral movement, something to be considered within activism and social change.

Garza's work surrounding intersectionality is unlike other feminist scholars and activists. Her depiction of power, based on community and alliance, is an important insight. Garza's work is more evolved than Angela Davis', for example, as her work both tackles contemporary issues and applies it to historical movements such as the Suffragette movement. 'The challenges of economics, sex, gender, politics, and race' (Garza, 2020, p.1) that she has experienced are also like those of all black women. Garza's power, like Ava DuVernay's, is the ability to turn her lived experiences of intersectionality into something that can benefit others.

The intersectional experiences of black women are relevant to that of black, female directors who are often second to white men. Ava DuVernay attempts to tackle adversity in a similar way to Alicia Garza, in that change is essential. As developed by Crenshaw:

Intersectionality is a framework by which we examine how groups that experience double or triple discrimination get their needs met at the same time as, not in spite of, other groups in the same situation. Intersectionality asks why white women's experiences are the standard that we use when addressing inequality (Garza, 2020, p.147).

Community and alliance are at the forefront of Ava DuVernay's creative processes. Moreover, advocating for the intersectional experiences of women of colour is central to her work with ARRAY CREW. DuVernay's work is created with intersectionality in mind, that everyone deserves equal opportunities. Ultimately, all marginalised groups deserve a film industry that has changed, for the better. However, this cannot happen without activism and social change.

### **Activism and Social Change**

Activism and social change are integral to building a better film industry. For example, 'Cinema offers a site for identifying and combating subjugation' (Torchin, 2015), which can insight into industrial change. Though, it is through directors like DuVernay that activism can influence real life. Activism and social change are concerned with power. For example, building organisations and allowing those without power, freedom. 'U.S. black women's efforts to grapple with the effects of domination in everyday life are evident in the creation of safe spaces, which allow resistance to oppression' (Collins, 2000, p.274). Due to

this, intersectionality can often be discussed in conversations about activism and social change. Therefore, the work of Alicia Garza and Brittney Cooper, who detail their intersectional experiences of power, are foremost in this review.

Alicia Garza, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, concerns herself with developing intersectional communities and organisations. In *The Purpose of Power: How to Build Movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, she discusses how those without power must fight, together, against those with it. She believes the BLM organisation is about ‘building relationships and using those relationships to accomplish together what we cannot accomplish on our own’ (Garza, 2020, p.56). The memoir discusses how black women must look towards social change to improve the economy, democracy, and overall lived experiences of those without power. Garza’s work navigates how activism can inspire others to create movement and change in exclusive industries. This requires unity, community, and organisation.

Likewise, Brittney Cooper discusses how ‘every kind of black woman has fought for the right to be free to travel in pursuit of dreams and destiny’ (Cooper, 2018, p.124). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people must develop their communities, and build the change they wish to see. In her memoir, Cooper details her own experiences as a queer, black woman. One who had to confront her gender, race, and sexuality to understand the social systems around her. Often, this confrontation came with rage. When wielded correctly, this rage resulted in power that helped influence societal change. Ultimately:

Rage is costly, and its costs are directly proportional to the amount of power any given woman or girl has when she chooses to wield it. Black women’s rage builds movements. Black Lives Matter. This is the most eloquent statement of rage to come out of black communities in a generation (Cooper, 2018, p.167).

Power, as Cooper declares, ‘is conferred by social systems... those with actual power make decisions that have social and material consequences for themselves and others’ (Cooper, 2018, p.123). She questions if it should be the job of black women to forefront activism and social change, claiming ‘it is time that black women are not blamed for what is a structural problem’ (Cooper, 2018, p. 231). Overall, Cooper provides a unique exploration of black lived experiences. The application of rage, as a positive attribute, is unlike any other literature in this study. Cooper establishes rage as something to be proud of, something integral to activism and social change.

Sophie Mayer debates that social and political activism is incredibly important in feminist film. Unlike the scholarly work of Cooper and Garza, Mayer is unique to this study for her specific analysis of Ava DuVernay and her directorial work. Directors like DuVernay forefront such movements and make it their responsibility to represent marginalised groups. In *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema*, Sophie Mayer investigates how social and political activism belongs in the modern film industry. She builds on how feminist perspectives can shape the industry by identifying key issues and addressing them. She discusses DuVernay in *Political Animals* as an examination of experimental cinema and the power of a director’s imagination. DuVernay, as proposed by Mayer, recentres women in

activist movements and displays how contemporary, feminist cinema can create social change (Mayer, 2016). In Mayer's discussion of *Selma* (2014), she states that the film:

Not only recentres women in the story of Martin Luther King Jr's organisation but was released at a critical moment. The film's portrayal of the march on Selma responds to the repeal of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, but also, inadvertently, to the street protests in the face of police brutality (Mayer, 2016, p. 115).

Additionally, Leshu Torchin argues that 'off-screen space is crucial for the activist function of any film or cinematic project' (Torchin, 2015). Mayer builds on this through her discussion of DuVernay. Particularly, her ability to convey social messages through the screen. Further, the transnational and trans-generational power of activist cinema is stressed as a motivator for such work. 'We need to look at experimental cinema that reconceive the genre as well as the narratives' (Mayer, 2016, p. 132). Only through this, can activism and social change influence the film industry.

## **Conclusion**

Intersectionality, in combination with activism and social change, forms an understanding of DuVernay's importance in the film industry. It also indicates why, in fact, this study is so vital. DuVernay prioritises change for those with intersectional identities and attempts to improve their industrial experiences. Her work with ARRAY CREW can be seen within the forefront of this discussion. Within the context of the film industry, activism and social change will also be at the forefront of this study as it develops. This study establishes the vitality of Ava DuVernay as an auteur, and as an industry changing practitioner. Overall, my work fills in an important gap in academic discourses. There are no conversations on the industrial perspectives of black, female directors or individuals attempting to build a better film industry. Thus, my work reflects the industry today. An industry that is not inclusive to black, female directors.

## **Theory**

### **Auteur theory**

'The Discourses of authorship assert the central significance of individual creativity within the cinema, and usually locate this in the director' (Hill and Gibson, 1989, p. 310), which implies that directors, as auteurs, have individual personas which are reflected in their work. This is relevant within the modern film industry, as more films are displaying racial and feminist themes, many from the independent minds of directors. Auteur Ava DuVernay distinguishes her own persona through her fight for representation. *Selma* (2014), for example, establishes her demand for social change and the power of black community. Additionally, *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016) is an exploration of racial injustices and the prison system in the United States. DuVernay, as an African American woman, asserts herself as responsible for proper representation. Overall, DuVernay uses her work to grapple with the racial histories, philosophies and ideologies which have permeated American history and society (Hagan, 2022). Therefore, when situated contextually within DuVernay's career, Auteur theory

connects to the theoretical framework of Critical Race theory. DuVernay's directorial identity largely exists for the representation of people of colour.

### **Critical race theory**

Critical race theory focuses on specific identities, and the characters, actors, writers, or directors who embody them. 'A large majority of film studies scholars traces the history of representation and documents the discriminatory employment practices of the industry' (Hill and Gibson, 1989, p.159). Simply, the framework seeks to analyse the way racism operates within society. My study relies on the movement of Critical Race theory as it posits the question: 'why does the film industry marginalise black, female directors?'. This is also important whilst discussing feminist theory, as black women are frequently the target of prejudice from their gender or sexuality.

### **Feminist theory**

'Laura Mulvey argued that the institution of cinema is characterised by a sexual imbalance of power'. (Hill and Gibson, 1989). Feminist theory, therefore, can develop understanding surrounding power imbalances in the film industry. This is integral to the study of intersectionality. Black women are not only discriminated by their race, but by their gender as well. Feminist theory allows us to ask; why is this happening? Who is this happening to? And, most importantly, what is being done to prevent it? Ava DuVernay's industry changing work functions under feminist theory and attempts to answer these questions.

### **Methodology**

From *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016) to *Selma* (2014), Ava DuVernay has focused on intersectional identities within her directorial career. A demand for industrial change is also prevalent in her work outside of the director's chair. Quantitative analysis develops this larger discourse surrounding her work, particularly through ARRAY CREW. This analysis shows how representing marginalised groups has shaped her career and how this has been rejected by threatening discourses online.

### **Emergent coding of YouTube interviews**

Emergent coding, or 'emergent theming, formalises analytic connection among pieces of data' (Williams, 2008, p. 248). Video interviews are advantageous when conducting qualitative analysis, as the accuracy of transcription allows for emergent coding, which was essential to analyse DuVernay's interviews. Thematic elements appeared consistently in each interview, such as representation, social responsibility, and inclusivity.

This research was limited to the last ten years to create a contemporary research sample. This resulted in six interviews to analyse. Therefore, it was integral to gather this sample from YouTube exclusively, rather than extended to written interviews. Whilst managing significant subjects such as diversity and representation, the interviews had to be as concise and authentic as possible.

### **Sentiment analysis of Rotten Tomatoes reviews**

Sentiment analysis ‘attempts to automatically determine the sentiment contained in text, which can be characterised as positive or negative evaluation expressed through language’ (Taboada, M. 2016). In this study, the sentiment gathered was the determination of opinions and attitudes on social media. This was applied to online reviews of DuVernay’s films, seen on Rotten Tomatoes. I extracted sample reviews, from her highest rated work and her lowest (according to the rating system of Rotten Tomatoes). This displayed an overall negative social media commentary surrounding DuVernay’s work.

The research sample was notably small. The intention of this sentiment analysis was to show the little scope required to see threatening, angry sentiments that appear online. These reviews ranged from blatant racism to sexism, designed to intimidate black women out of industrial spaces. This highlighted the need for industry-based activism, the type that DuVernay fights for in her interviews. This data, under the claim of analysis and criticism, helped to show how openly black, women directors are attacked online, not for the quality of their work, but simply for their existence.

### **Limitations**

Interviews are a remarkable method of qualitative analysis as they are authentic and direct. That said, emergent coding of the transcripts was time consuming. It was also important to ensure the transcript was accurate to the conversation. That meant deciphering what was said by the interviewer and interviewee, and making sure this was exact.

The limitations of sentiment analysis can be vast. Firstly, opinions are subjective and hard to determine online. Additionally, I could not determine the gender, race, or sexuality of the entire sample. That meant the samples could not be categorised into which social group provided information. Knowing this would have shaped deeper analysis. Furthermore, the sample of Rotten Tomatoes reviews are more an understanding of the public sphere Ava DuVernay produces in due to these limitations, therefore, they complement DuVernay’s interviews, rather than the central focus.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that I am not a member of the Black community. Therefore, I cannot fully comprehend the struggle which DuVernay describes in her interviews or the lived experiences of Black, female directors. Similarly, I cannot completely debate the racist overtones of the social media commentary. That said, as a working-class woman, I can examine the need for industry-based activism in which she works for.

### **Analysis and Discussion: Creating industrial change**

#### **Inclusivity and diversity**

As prefaced in the introduction, the film industry is not inclusive. In the 2023 report: *Inequality in 1600 Popular Films*, the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative revealed that women and girls are excluded on screen. ‘A total of 4218 characters were evaluated for gender

identity across the 100 top films of 2022 and only 34.6% were female identified' (Smith, Pieper, Wheeler, 2023, p.1). This calls to question not only the inclusivity of the film industry but what is being demonstrated to audiences. With a lack of diversity on the screen, it is unsurprising that this also occurs behind the camera of television and film production. In the same report, it is revealed that 'less than one quarter (23.6%) of directors, writers and producers were women' (Smith, Pieper, Wheeler, 2023, p.1) between 2007 to 2022. In the 2022 interview: *Ava DuVernay on building her career as a director* with CBS Sunday Morning, DuVernay stated that although the film industry is exclusive, this can persuade other women, like herself, to seek out industrial change and diversify the film industry. The lack of wider opportunities for underrepresented individuals means that more spaces can be created. When describing her industrial experiences in the film industry, DuVernay remarked:

I was sober about the industry I was getting into and what my place was in it, there really was no place... you know what, they're probably going to kick me out of this is a couple of movies anyway, so why don't I just go for it and say what I want to say. (CBS Sunday Morning, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2022)

The interview indicates that her ambitions lie within the future of the film industry and the potential for inclusivity. DuVernay took the opportunity to make a statement of hope, that the next era of women will be able to work consistently. This can be seen as the contributing factor to ARRAY CREW's creation and its message of diversity. Although the interview was brief, DuVernay established that the lack of inclusivity can be improved through individual directors. 'Managing, as a woman, to be a director in Hollywood and have a name there is so marginal that the presence of a female director has come to be perceived as the illustration of a successful fight' (Toquet, 2022). This is a difficult concept. Power resides in industries such as Hollywood, yes, but singular voices like DuVernay's can advocate for the inclusion of black, female directors.

Often undiscussed is the importance of industrial change for audiences, not just film crew members. A diverse cast on screen, in most circumstances, is an effective tool for empowerment. Furthermore, exposure to diversity can only result in acceptance, to change negative perceptions in later generations, and establish new perceptions in younger generations. In a Rotten Tomatoes interview for DuVernay's: *A Wrinkle in Time*, an anonymous contributor stated that:

Disney is far out of touch with its target audience. This film panders to a liberalist audience that supports LGBT agendas. They were more concerned in a concentrated mix of ethnicities and alternate family models to further their all-inclusive ideal. The beginning of the movie seems very contrived and more concerned with an appearance of diversity that trying to tell a story. I watch movies to escape political agendas and personal beliefs of movie executives and producers. (Rotten Tomatoes, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2018)



The negative sentiment of this review is both directed to DuVernay as the director, and the display of inclusivity and diversity in mainstream cinema. This is evident through the language used, such as ‘agendas’ and ‘ideals’ (Rotten Tomatoes, 2018). They are used to perpetuate anger rather than actual criticisms. This is, apparently, directed towards other ethnicities, races, genders, or sexualities in the industry, as the reviewer criticises the ‘appearance of diversity’, calling the film an ‘all-inclusive deal’ (Rotten Tomatoes, 2018). Sentiment analysis of this singular review individually exposes the importance of industrial change. It reveals that we must take notice of the fight for inclusion and seek the positive change that can come from it, rather than allowing negative sentiments to take over.

Ultimately, ‘Women are seen as figures of vulnerability in dominant culture, their access to public space is highly policed and often curtailed’ (Mayer, 2015, p.133). As DuVernay discussed in her interview with CBS Sunday Morning, the next generation of black filmmakers should not receive the same exclusion, and evident anger, that women in this film industry currently receive. Like DuVernay, director Nia DaCosta received angry reviews in response to her film *Candyman* (2021). In a Rotten Tomatoes review, contributor Geaux P stated:

Wow, social commentary on gentrification. That’s what I want when I watch my horror movies. Stop hiring activists and go back to hiring actual directors (Rotten Tomatoes, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2023).

The fact that, in a horror film, DaCosta attempted to create a conversation surrounding race is, according to this contributor, a negative thing. This outrage is targeted towards industrial change, particularly the ‘activist’ direction of DaCosta, and her ‘social commentary’ film (Rotten Tomatoes, 2023). Furthermore, the statement that the industry should ‘go back to hiring actual directors’ (Rotten Tomatoes, 2023) is an interesting one. Is this targeted towards black directors? Female directors? Or simply those who would like to make a social difference? It is true that ‘racialised patriarchy is alive and well in our movements, and that unless we are intentional about changing this, it will continue to persist’ (Garza, 2020, p.205). Ultimately, industrial activists such as DaCosta and DuVernay must persevere, and promote inclusivity in order to change this narrative. A narrative that, clearly, does not believe in the diversification of film environments.

In the 2023 interview: *Ron Howard, Ava DuVernay on how new hiring app helps crew diversity* with CBS Mornings, DuVernay discusses the importance of crew diversity and inclusion in film environments, establishing that Hollywood must become more involved in the creation of new opportunities for minority groups. Although the industry may have, previously, been seen as inclusive, DuVernay argued:

I don’t think Hollywood is as committed vigorously and passionately as it was a couple of years ago. I do think that on the crew side, people need to find great folks to do these jobs so its very different now (CBS Mornings, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2023).

Personally, she attempts to create these environments through her app, ARRAY CREW, as well as a partnership with Ron Howard, who created the app 'Impact' to support crew diversity, collaboration, and tackle major hiring issues in the industry. Now, more than ever, the exclusion of minority groups in the film industry is being noticed. For example, June Givanni, an international film curator, created JGPACA for the promotion of African diaspora cinema and culture. She pioneers the 'distribution of African heritage collections and ensures they are widely accessible' (JGPACA, n.d.). The importance of her work cannot be understated, like DuVernay's. In a BAFTA interview, she tells the story of her work during the 1983 Third Eye World Cinema Film Festival. This details Givanni's work for black filmmakers, allowing their voices to be heard. She stated that:

There needed to be a sense that these people were seen as real filmmakers, not just cultural activists. There was a moment from recounting the black presence and promoting anti racism on tv, into demonstrating skill and knowledge and ambition around cinema. A lot of people with that ambition were beginning to make their voices heard. That was a really important time (BAFTA, 9<sup>th</sup> February 2024).

Both DuVernay's and Givanni's interviews reveal their intentions of the film industry. That their power must be used to diversify the industry and promote a more inclusive world. Both women should be seen as pioneers in the film industry because of this.

Overall, inclusivity and diversity are necessary for creating industrial change for crew members and film audiences. Individual directors such as DuVernay and DaCosta can empower others and fight for the acceptance of underrepresented groups. In the two interviews discussed, DuVernay advises other directors to seek out and create the industrial change they wish to see. Another way industrial change can be created is through developments in representation, explicitly for minority groups.

### **Representation**

Representation in-front of and behind the camera is an essential part of industrial change. In *Public Feminisms*, Carrie Baker comments that:

There are an abundance of women working in film, tv, and digital media contrary to mainstream discourse and the common misrepresentation of the media as very male and very white. Yet many of these women, especially women of colour, are having a difficult time making a significant headway into both Hollywood and independent media. (Baker, 2023)

Baker argues the media is 'very male and very white' (Baker, 2023), as though many statistics have revealed. For example, a 2020 study conducted by the National Research Group found that two in three black Americans believes the media perpetuates negative stereotypes (Button, 2021). The issue, as Carrie Baker reveals, is that entering this industry is slow, difficult, and exclusive for underrepresented individuals.

In the 2022 interview *Changing the game: Ava DuVernay's impact on film* with CBS Morning, DuVernay discussed the representation of black women on screen and how people of colour should exist in the same industry as white people. 'Every instance of representation executed well is another chance to help inspire and empower those who face undeserved discrimination' (Ferrer, 2021). Therefore, the promotion of other's work should be a priority. Like Baker, DuVernay discusses the difficulty black women face to work in the industry, and how the patriarchy is allowed to function, against women and people of colour alike. 'Often, men and male bodied people gain power and privilege from the disadvantages that face women and women identified people, it is a deadly imbalance' (Garza, 2020, p.199). In the interview, DuVernay remarks:

We must rethink in society who we are, but I think media for so long in the past told us that family looks a certain way. Images are so powerful. They shift and shape cultures. They shape the way we think about ourselves. That's why having different kinds of people creating these images is imperative (CBS Mornings, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2022).

This statement is integral in discussion of representation in both film and society. Similarly, French filmmaker Sarah Maldoror asserts:

African women must be everywhere. They must be in images, behind the camera, at the editing table, and involved in every stage in the making of a film. They must be the ones who talk about their problems. (Ellerson, 2023)

In the interview, DuVernay implies that the people creating these images should reflect the stories of underrepresented groups to improve their experiences in the industry and, as an extension, society itself. 'Racism inherent in systems, structures, and practices in government, institutions, and the like has meant that black people are often on the losing end of hierarchies' (Garza, 2020). Hierarchies which should be combatted within the film industry.

'Media can help establish role models for people to look up to, especially in fictional media featuring black protagonists with admirable qualities, characters such as T'Challa in "Black Panther"' (Ferrer, 2021). As a role model, DuVernay holds a standard to her own directorial work. In the 2016 *interview Ava DuVernay on her responsibility as a black woman director* at the Tribeca Film Festival, DuVernay expressed that her responsibility as a black, female director is to 'magnify the magnificence of black people' (For Harriet, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2016). This, according to DuVernay, is how other directors must use their power towards representation, in order to improve the careers of future industry workers. In her own words:

Overall, it is no one else's responsibility to make the things that I want to see. It's my responsibility, and if I want to see them then I need to make them. If I'm able, and I am, I do (For Harriet, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2016).

In the interview it is evident DuVernay believes in social responsibility. This, for example, is what led to the creation of *When They See Us*, her series which depicts the lives of the central park five, their incarceration and subsequent exoneration. In this series, DuVernay held herself responsible for this representation, which in turn created a wider awareness of the film industry, and American society itself.

As stated by Brittney Cooper, the problem with representation is that ‘only the experiences of white people are treated as universal, meanwhile, black movies, shows, and books are typically seen as limited’ (Cooper, 2018). On a wider scale, battling for representation can help in the fight against stereotyping and racial gatekeeping, the same type of issue which led to the central park five’s incarceration. Now this story is represented on screen, cultures can be shifted, and perceptions changed. Overall, ‘proper representation can also help bring people from across the black community together’ (Ferrer, 2021). This is the purpose of DuVernay’s career.

This interview discusses intersectional issues with race and with gender, particularly the way black, female directors are represented. Kiah E Bennett discusses the emergence of systematic gatekeeping and polarisation in the film industry. According to Bennett, ‘Hollywood’s industrial whiteness originates from post-civil rights Hollywood discourses, where mainstream calls for racial equity appear to be addressed in policy and on-screen representation, maintain its progressive image’ (Bennett, 2023). Indeed, this is an interesting notion when reflecting on DuVernay’s interviews surrounding representation. Likewise, the Hollywood industry attempts to maintain an evolved exterior, although, as previously stated by Baker, ‘women of colour are having a difficult time making a significant headway into both Hollywood and independent media’ (Baker, 2023). Subsequently, both scholars establish the lack of representation, which comes from racial gatekeeping, can play into public perceptions and sentiments. In terms of DuVernay’s work, reviews from Rotten Tomatoes reveal this.

Furthermore, when applied to the work of Ava DuVernay, negative perceptions of political correctness must be discussed. Often, audiences use political correctness as a tool to target black filmmakers, believing positive representation to be a bad thing. For example, in a Rotten Tomatoes review of *A Wrinkle in Time*, Tyler C commented:

When diversity is your main selling point and visual quality being your fallback. Overall performances in the film lack and the story is made politically correct for a progressive audience. It’s at best a popcorn film. (Rotten Tomatoes, 29<sup>th</sup> September 2022)

Analysing an angry sentiment is interesting, not for the statement but the reason behind it. For example, the reviewer Tyler C uses diversity, political correctness, and progression as negative attributes to DuVernay’s filmmaking. As stated by Carla Toquet:

DuVernay argues that in the industry “something that comes with some point of view and some personal perspective from a woman or person of colour is a unicorn.” She experienced this under the form of multiple microaggressions. (Toquet, 2022)

Angry reviews such as this fit into the ‘unicorn’ statement (Toquet, 2022). That, female perspectives are negligible, in that they do not exist. This review is not used to state the film is of poor quality but that black women do not belong in the film industry. Historically, ‘through mainstream media, black women were categorised into certain stereotypes: the nanny/maid, sassy big woman, angry, ghetto, loud and uneducated’ (Chavarria, 2021). Therefore, arguing that positive representation, or political correctness is a bad thing is seemingly a way to chastise the audience for progressive thinking. This idea ‘reinforces negative stereotypes that date back as far as the 18<sup>th</sup> century’ (Chavarria, 2021) and perpetuates the idea that industrial change is not needed. This relates back to Bennett’s discussion of racial gatekeeping, in the way that reviewers such as this argue political correctness doesn’t belong in the industry and neither do the women in it. In fact, ‘the history of film in America begins in the early 1900s, a period defined by the segregation era’ (Button, 2021), though throughout the history of film in America, ‘black stories have been systematically pushed aside’ (Button, 2021). Furthermore, the anger towards positive representation is interesting, as you would typically expect this type of anger to be long removed from an industry which has existed for so long.

According to scholar Azmi Bishara, ‘to overcome the centuries old legacy of racial discrimination the state must intervene in creating access to equality in the social base of individuals for opportunities to be equally available’ (Bishara, 2020). Although this is not based on the film industry, Bishara makes an interesting evaluation of representation and creating opportunities. In *Black Lives Matter: On Racial and Political Correctness*, Azmi Bishara also argues:

Liberal intellectuals, feminist movements and civil rights movements has adopted the discourse of political correctness, which seeks to purify the language of the terms and expressions that they believe to be racial slurs. They have become embedded in usage and contend that their usage should be socially unacceptable. (Bishara, 2020)

Essentially, the contention of discrimination and racism is what drives these discourses. However, it is the same discourse which motivates this study. Political correctness is not a dirty phrase. Political correctness, as DuVernay has established within her work, is the inclusion of all, and the representation of all underrepresented individuals which have been previously mistreated. Her resistance as a black filmmaker lies in the fact that she refuses the ‘white and male monopoly that was constitutive to filmmaking’ (Toquet, 2022). It is not, therefore, something to be contended.

In an interview with Today news, DuVernay discussed the power of representation and the way it generates opportunities for women of colour. As a black, female director, political correctness is also integral to her work, as she states:

That's something that I've just been really focused on over the last year, is that I've had more, I guess, power in the situation. Making sure women are being interviewed. That people of colour are in the room and getting opportunities (TODAY, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2020).

In this statement Duvernay recognises her power, and recognises the way women can help each other, to generate power through representation. DuVernay establishes that it is through representation that those underrepresented can experience industrial change. Thus, we can only learn from inclusivity, diversity, representation, and improving crew environments. Ultimately, understanding the lived experiences of minorities, particular in film crews, is something that can explain the importance of industrial change and what it can do for black, female directors.

### **Improving industrial experiences and environments**

Positive crew environments are fundamental for improving industrial experiences. This occurs through the representation, diversity, and inclusion of black women in film crews. However, recent research shows that 'on many measures the creative workforce remains fundamentally unequal in several structural dimensions including race, class, and gender' (Verhoeven, Coate, and Zemaityte, 2019). In a 'close up' interview with The Hollywood Reporter, Ava DuVernay discusses the necessity of being a role model in the industry. She debates that the way to improve crew environments is by giving actors opportunities to advocate for themselves. Therefore, she believes that respecting their boundaries is the way to improve crew environments. In the interview: *Ava DuVernay didn't want to be a 'social justice girl' with her work*, she remarks:

To me, the challenge is what the actors must deal with. I just wanted to give them as much of an opportunity to have an environment depending on what the situation is. Whatever's gonna help them be okay and every actor is different (The Hollywood Reporter, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2019).

Arguably, this is a prime example of DuVernay as a role model, or as she declares, a "social justice woman" (The Hollywood Reporter, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2019).

By following DuVernay's example, those in power may improve overall industrial experiences, however, this is a responsibility for everyone. 'By relying on "business as usual", the entertainment industry defaults to processes that have done little to open access and opportunity to individuals from all backgrounds' (Smith, Pieper, Wheeler, 2023, p. 32). In The Hollywood Reporter interview, DuVernay states:

I resisted after Wrinkle, all I wanted was to tell something true and something that was real. I went right back into the place that I said I didn't want to go. Start really with this, I realised you are a social justice girl, and that's social justice woman. You know, and that's okay. Really get comfortable saying you're interested in these things and whether that puts you in a pigeonhole in the industry, or you become a role model (The Hollywood Reporter, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2019).

DuVernay explains that fighting for social justice is okay, and we should all do it. Through this fight, we can become role models, which in turn improves the film industry. 'The media is its own sexist ecosystem, but the problem is compounded by the fact that it is also the lens through which every other broken system is presented to us' (Bates, 2022). Thus, film can reflect the damaged world underrepresented individuals exist within. This asserts that viewing our intersectional identities on the screen is important. However, it should be equally important for creatives to believe that they can exist behind the camera. Crew members should be confident that they can have access to work, no matter the colour of their skin, gender, or sexuality. Though, 'even as the entertainment industry grapples with its future during the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes, some processes are very much stuck in the past' (Smith, Pieper, Wheeler, 2023, p. 32).

In the interview with Sunday Today, DuVernay discussed the importance of protecting crew members and providing them with equal opportunities. The annual Celluloid Ceiling Project, for example, 'found that gains in women's employment (in the film industry) have been uneven, and in the case of some roles, negligible' (Lauzen, 2023, p.1). Therefore, it is not awards and critical acclaim that makes DuVernay a vital role model, but the protection of women in her crew, providing them with better environments to succeed within the industry. Ultimately, all women in the industry should have the opportunities to share their work and be known for it, too. This, she believes, should be the central focus of all production teams, stating:

I think we all must keep all that in perspective and not get too caught up in the firsts. Its nice for a moment, but also there are a lot of other incredible women out there. Like, for example, I've been congratulated for directing Harriet and Queen and Slim. It looks great, but I didn't make it. Had nothing to do with it (TODAY, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2020).

DuVernay's filmmaking practices, incorporate the inclusion of people in front of and behind the camera. For example, ARRAY CREW, the network which allows individuals with diverse background to connect with hiring teams (ARRAY CREW, 2024). This has also garnered the supports of all the major Hollywood studios and streaming services (ARRAY CREW, 2024) such as Disney, Paramount, Netflix, and Apple TV. Thus, Duvernay's impact has reached far into the industry, cementing her as a leading practitioner in the fight for a better film industry.

As the interview concludes, DuVernay declares her career ambitions reflect her ambitions for other black, female directors. Commercially, this is longevity, which is a

‘function of being a black, woman director in a space where there aren’t many’ (TODAY, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2020). ‘While the percentage of women directors have doubled over the last 25 years, they remain dramatically underrepresented, as do women working as writers, editors, and cinematographers’ (Lauzen, 2023, p.1). This, overall, is the lasting impression DuVernay will leave on the industry. That, as a black woman, crew experiences and environments matter.

## Conclusion

My research is unique as it combines the personal narrative of Ava DuVernay and an industrial exploration of the film industry. This, combined with an analysis of public interviews and reviews, constructs an architecture of the director’s creative experiences. Therefore, this method of research could extend its impact to other areas of the media, such as the music industry. Overall, my study is key, as there are no other academic discourses which discuss individual perspectives on the film industry, such as DuVernay’s.

Throughout this study the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative provided key insight into the industrial experiences of black women in film. This reinforced the need for industrial change which my qualitative research established. Smith, Pieper and Wheeler offer *Solutions for Change* (2023, p.32) and develop a similar viewpoint to this study, that ‘executives and filmmakers must examine the way that processes such as casting, hiring for production, and even marketing is designed to rely on exclusionary practices’ (Smith, Pieper, Wheeler, 2023, p. 32).

Ultimately, my research found that industrial powers such as Hollywood have the capacity to create positive change. When the industry begins to promote inclusivity, crew members, filmmakers, and audiences alike benefit from change. This study declares that this can only be achieved by following industry changing practitioner Ava DuVernay.

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## Appendix

### Ava DuVernay Interviews:

	Link and title	Date published
Interview 1	<a href="#">Ava DuVernay on building her career as a director (youtube.com)</a>	13.11.22
Interview 2	<a href="#">Ron Howard, Ava DuVernay on how new hiring app helps crew diversity (youtube.com)</a>	08.08.23
Interview 3	<a href="#">"Changing the Game": Ava DuVernay's impact on film (youtube.com)</a>	22.03.22
Interview 4	<a href="#">Ava DuVernay on Her Responsibility as a Black Woman Director (youtube.com)</a>	23.02.16
Interview 5	<a href="#">How Director Ava DuVernay Became A Hollywood Powerhouse   Sunday TODAY (youtube.com)</a>	02.02.20
Interview 6	<a href="#">Ava DuVernay Didn't Want to be a "Social Justice Girl" With Her Work   Close Up (youtube.com)</a>	11.06.19

### Rotten Tomatoes reviews:

A Wrinkle in Time- Ava DuVernay

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/a\\_wrinkle\\_in\\_time\\_2018/reviews?type=user](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/a_wrinkle_in_time_2018/reviews?type=user)

Selma- Ava DuVernay

<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/selma/reviews?type=user>

NAME	DATE	REVIEW	RATING
Tyler C	29.09.22	When diversity is your main selling point and visual quality being your fallback. Overall performances in the film lack and the story is made politically correct for a progressive audience. It's at best a popcorn film.	2.5/5
Anonymous	9.11.21	Horrible directing. Excuse for these women just to dress up in different outfits. They ruined the book.	0.5/5
Anonymous	3.12.19	Stunningly silly. Just another typical I hate white men story under a façade of fantasy. Which is fine if it had at least been compelling.	1.5/5
Anonymous	20.11.18	A politically correct Gollywood remake of one of our favourite sci-fi children's books; shallow as a puddle and heavy handed as a k0mmisar. Pass.	0.5/5
Anonymous	5.10.18	Complete Disney politically propagated garbage, sprinkled with over obvious Hollywood cameos.	0.5/5
Anonymous	4.10.18	Can't believe what I just watched... the political correctness... its okay to throw a ball on someone's face but not okay to watch nudity. I'd rather my kids watch nudity than violence.	0.5/5
Anonymous	27.9.18	Absolute garbage. Disney is so far out of touch with its target audience. This film panders to a liberalist audience that only supports LGBT agendas. They were more concerned in a concentrated mix of ethnicities and alternate family models to further their all-inclusive ideal. The beginning of the movie sees very contrived and more concerned with an appearance of diversity than trying to tell a story. I watch movies to escape political agendas and personal beliefs of movie executives and producers.	1/5
Anonymous	17.8.18	Overwrought and over acted, instead of a childhood classic this film screams social justices at you for almost two hours, at least the scenery is pretty whilst you get lectured at.	0.5/5

Name	Date	Review	Rating
Anonymous	19.05.15	This movie blew hard! I can't believe it got such praise. A two-hour historic race card just wasn't my forte, I suppose. The fact I'm not black and wasn't around during this time has nothing to do with why I found this movie boring. It was a good story, but a boring film. If you haven't seen it, wait until it's an ABC world premiere.	0.5/5
Anonymous	29.03.15	More race hate propaganda	0.5/5

Candyman- Nia DaCosta

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/candyman\\_2021/reviews?type=user](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/candyman_2021/reviews?type=user)

Name	Date	Review	Rating
Geaux P	27.9.23	Wow, social commentary on gentrification. That's what I want when I watch my horror movies. Stop hiring activists and go back to hiring actual directors.	0.5/5
Stephanie D	5.9.21	I did not like this movie at all. I just wanted a good Candyman story, not a platform for racial injustice.	0.5/5

Gulag Z	25.10.22	Hollywood will keep cranking out this “timely social commentary” horror flick dross for a good while longer. The titanic isn’t easy to turn.	0.5/5
Nicholas L	5.9.21	Completely deceptive. Social justice movie.	1/5
Taylor	10.9.21	Not scary at all. Was expecting more. Lots of references to “white man” could have been a great movie just needed some scares and less racial.	1/5
Christopher P	11.9.21	Terrible movie. Too many political undertones. Not scary.	0.5/5

# 'A hole, a pit, the more gaping, the more obscene it is, the more it's me': A brief history of the development of New French Extremity

**Oliver Cunningham-Wood**

## **Introduction**

"A hole, a pit, the more gaping, the more obscene, the more it's me." (*Romance*, 2001) is stated by a woman who sexually objectifies herself in order to identify with not only the male gaze but also to be sexually liberated; it perfectly encapsulates the New French Extremity (hence referred to as NFE) genre. Pornography, snuff, violence, and art house film, this is New French Extremity, a genre that is proudly packed with controversial subjects.

The intentions of NFE have been debated by academics, arguing that it is designed purely for shock and distaste, putting the industry in a place of 'cultural crisis' (West, 2016, p. 43). However, others argue it is to fight against previous French cinema that has been characterized as more formal with political and philosophical standpoints, seen in research by Christopher Butler, who references to film makers such as Jean Luc-Godard or HenriGeorges Clouzot.

The genre originated in the 1990s with films such as *Carne* (1991), directed by Gasper No  , continuing through to the present with *Raw* (2016), and *Titane* (2021), the subgenre however, was birthed via another known as splatter films; these date back to the 1960s with *Jigoku /The Sinners of Hell* (1960). The sub-genre consists of 'horror that explores the concept of human mortality and displays a fascination with the theatricality of mutilation along with the vulnerability of the human body' (Hesseldenz, 2023, n.p.).

Studies into NFE have been circulating since the 1990s, though they really started exploring the subject in the early 2000s. This was due to an increase in themes of pornography and morality with the release of the films *Baise-Moi* (2002) and *Romance*. This sparked debate amongst academics due to the themes of pornography, sex, and brutality, which began to blur lines and cross boundaries (MacKenzie, 2002, p.315) between that and art cinema, from which New French Extremity emerged. Academics argue that it began to promote extremity in intimate relationships, as seen in Ingrid Olson's article Too 'Extreme': gonzo, snuff, and governmentality.

The genre has seen many changes through the years due to the criticisms mentioned, developing from Art House to commercial in its content. The contemporary productions seem to find influence from modern horror to reach wider audience with films such as *Raw* and *Holiday* (2018). In doing so this has caused a definite shift which ultimately led to a plateau meaning future entries have been few and far between. Due to the constant developments from production, content, cinematography, people involved, and the themes; the genre has seen evolution. This project aims to evaluate key films and themes to showcase the development of the NFE genre. Firstly, focusing on the infant stages of NFE, considering how the genre was initially defined in the 1990s with many productions being headed by male directors. Secondly, shifting focus towards the early 2000s where conventions were cemented in place acting as foundations for future entries. This section looks closer at women filmmakers such as Catherine Breillat. The final section focuses on productions that display victimisation within NFE, highlighting links to French history which has been a definite factor to the genre's development.

Ultimately, this project produces a history that shows the development of the genre regarding sex, gender, and the relationships this includes. In exploring these developments, the project analyses the films that best represent each respective era detailed above, using various feminist theories as well as spectatorship theory to provide both close reading and arguments for why directors have made certain choices in hopes to understand how this may have aided in overall development of New French Extremity.

## **Literature review**

Over time, broad amounts of literature have been produced based around New French Extremity. Firstly, James Quandt's, *Flesh & Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema*, is a seminal text. Within his article he discusses recent emergence of 'exploitative' (Quandt, 2004, n.p.) French cinema from the late 1990s to early 2000s stating how early adopting critics refused to believe there was such a movement in French cinema and outlines his own distaste with the movement. He poses the question is this 'forcing French filmmakers to respond to the death of the ineluctable (French identity, language, ideology, aesthetic forms) with desperate measures?' (Quandt, 2004, n.p.). Overall, discussing that the genre has potential to align sensationalism with the sub-genre. However, it fails to do so causing it to fall into a less respected form of art. As mentioned Quandt's article is a seminal piece which inspired future literature with many academics referencing to it. The literature focuses heavily on feminism and gender, violence and censorship, these texts have inspired this research aiding my analysis below.

## **Feminism**

This section focuses on exploring the broad spectrum of feminism. Looking at an array of texts relating to the theories, movements, and discourses that have transformed society's views of NFE regarding gender, power dynamics, and social justice, all of which have helped shape this research.

Tim Palmer's book: *Brutal Intimacy*, also provides focus on the sub-genre, giving insight into the controversy of cinema du corps which has dedication to infamous titles within French Cinema that have been acknowledged into the genre by both academics and filmmakers themselves. The book provides a forum for discussion on female filmmakers and their significance in modern French cinema. Using the quote, 'I expect an artist to show me the edge. And to show me that edge, they must go over a bit to the other side', Palmer is looking at the genre more as an art form instead of just cinema which will aid in providing a deeper contemporary insight to the darker themes of NFE i.e. extreme violence. Within this book, Palmer brings in considerations of how some themes shown in NFE such as sex, 'emblemize the power struggles that arise within patriarchal societies [and] gender duels.' (Palmer, 2011, p.62). Margaret Barton-Fumo's, *Pleasures of the Flesh*, discusses patriarchal concerns in *Raw* with a direct quote from Julia Ducournau: 'I wanted the cannibalism to become a punk gesture against this patriarchy, against the establishment' (Barton-Fumo, 2017, p.45).

Maddi McGillvrey's chapter in *Women Make Horror, The Feminist Art Horror of the New French Extremity*, acts as a counter towards Quandt's article. She presents the ideas that NFE has the potential to include both art and horror or 'experimental and mainstream' cinema such as that displayed in *In My Skin* (2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001). McGillvrey argues the ideas that women who create films of this nature are outwardly challenging a male dominated sector, this is a feminist positive argument. It is important to note that men dominate the genre in ways that have controlled evolution. In having women filmmakers enter the scene in the 2000s, it allows for these shocking films to 'rattle the cage' (McGillvrey, 2020, p.131), creating cinema that has the possibilities to enable crossovers of art and experiment/extremities.

Building upon this, in an article centred around Catherine Breillat's work, exploring how 'her films allow women to be as crude and frank in their speech as men are normally expected to be' (Mtshali and Fahs, 2014, p.161) which is exactly what McGillvrey analyses. Breillat is a woman within the industry who arguably creates films for women in hopes to redefine how women, their autonomy and bodies are represented within New French extremity. Also considered is how as an industry, women's sexuality has been constructed 'as a response to male sexuality' (Mtshali and Fahs, 2014, p.162) here they are developing on the ideas of the exploitative nature of the industry and NFE, which has been argued by scholars such as Kristyn Gorton.

Gorton comes at this from both angles in regards to how the industry does exploit the display and treatment of women, however, she argues the idea that this is done in a way to represent the experience of a woman, 'Feminist theory is built on the very contradiction between unrepresentability of woman as subjects of desire and historical women who know themselves to be subjects' (Gorton, 2007, p.112) Gorton is developing ideas of how women in this genre are misrepresented and or represented in ways second to men. She looks at this from the perspective view of Breillat's work who as mentioned focuses heavily on women's sexuality and gender representation within her films.



Elizabeth Day's, *Femmes Fatales Fight Back with Sex and Violence* article is a key piece of feminist literature in which she considers the femme fatale nature of some characters presented in NFE. She uses *Baise-Moi* as an example stating, 'Femininity, has had to become harmless in order to reassure a 21st-century masculinity that finds itself in crisis' (Day, 2009, n.p.). She uses this as a basis to argue how NFE has been developed by women directors and has become a ground for realistic representation of feelings and actions of women who have been through awful experiences surrounding sexual assault and violence. This is important to this research as it has an outlook on the reasons as why women decide to create such visceral and violent films that have both sexually charged themes but are encapsulated by an anger towards a patriarchal system.

Also, in consideration with these thoughts, intersectionality is important to note, deriving from scholars such as Bell Hooks. Her ideas acknowledge how different factors interact with each other, for example: race, gender, and religion. Intersectionality is important to consider when looking at NFE because of how the genre includes a multitude of themes and characters that come from different walks of life all of which have direct and indirect correlations to what they experience and their outcomes within the films. It's also important to consider because it allows for a deeper analysis to take place, when we consider how different human factors interact, we can provide a closer reading of a scene / a film's intentions especially within feministic approaches to analysis.

### **Violence and Sexuality / French Censorship**

In the article, *Method Behind the Madness*, Matt Armitage discusses the genre of New French Extremity focussing on its violent nature. He argues that what is usually considered simply a 'nasty sub-genre of horror (or torture porn with a French accent)' (Armitage, 2018, n.p.) is intentionally transgressive due to how France has a history of censorship, governmental and 'political chaos' (Armitage, 2018, n.p.). Armitage highlights, the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 up to Nazi occupation of Paris are what have led French film industry into the realms of NFE.

Metin Colak progresses these ideas highlighting how the genre also acts as a challenge against classic cinema such as Hollywood. In this paper they present the idea that films of this calibre, sex and violence are made to represent the unrepresentable to spectators (Colak, 2011, p.497) effectively arguing the idea that even though the New French Extremity movement is critiqued for its content, the filmmakers of the genre are effective in their representation of their nation's struggles in times of chaos and censorship.

It is important to note how censorship is considered. Scott MacKenzie presents this through the means of *Baise-Moi*. He highlights how the film received a high amount of backlash from conservative and far right organisations/groups to appeal the 16+ rating it originally received. New French Extremity has received heavy censorship due to how the genre expresses 'extreme' topics in the realm of sex and violence as both separate and a combination. He argues that the censorship that it receives is not necessarily fair as many of the people who argue for censorship are actively damaging the reputation due to a lack of understanding.

Stating the genre is ‘telling it how it is’ rather than providing ‘illicit titillation’ (MacKenzie, 2002, p. 323). The genre makes the scenes brutal to avoid falling into being defined as pornography.

The argument surrounding links with pornography is one of which that dominates discussion of NFE. In the article: Too ‘Extreme’: Gonzo, Snuff, and Governmentality by Ingrid Olson, she details how the genre of Gonzo porn which entails the degrading of women through humiliation and rape-like content, is ‘promoting violence and/or making (or trying to make) rape look sexy is very disturbing’ (Olson, 2016, p.400). This directly provides links to NFE due to how there is an obvious imitativeness in the more ‘extreme’ entries of the genre, such as *Irreversible* (2002) or *Clip* (2012). The snuff side of pornography is what is more so cemented into the genre and is really where Olson’s argument resides, outlining how it is ‘the epitome of misogyny in pornography’ (Olson, 2016, p.400).

My research aims to contribute to the previous literature by analysing how male and female directors have taken different approaches to the overall genre. In doing so, the focuses are how the genre developed in the 1990s, to then considering how it changed when women filmmakers, such as Catherine Breillat, made their mark to the genre's evolution. This research considers NFE as a whole in its approach, analysing the genres development history towards themes of violence, sexuality, and feminism.

## **Methodology**

This project explores the NFE genre by focusing on the conventions presented in the early stages and how these conventions have evolved and developed to more modern entries.

Decided entries came from both male and female filmmakers to create wider understanding of the genre. I selected a sample of 23 films, half directed by men and half by women. The selection ranged from the early 1990s spanning to 2021; selecting from lists of noteworthy films from databases such as IMDB as well as various texts which have been discussed above within my literature review. The deciding factor of whether the film was noteworthy or not depended on whether it had received considerable discussion from genre academics or online articles. (See figure 1 on the next page)

Once the final sample was decided, I watched each of the films in order of year released, taking notes on the representation / treatment of women mainly focusing on any violence, sex or sexuality displayed to compare and contrast how male and female directors may differ or show similarity of these themes, this being quantitative content analysis. I wish to note that out of the 23 films selected, there were 2 of which I decided not to watch, these being *In My Skin* (2002) and *Clip*. I found *In My Skin* to be too triggering for my mental health and after reading various reddit threads on *Clip*, it was brought to my attention that the main character was a minor during filming, and due to the sexual and violent nature of the film I felt it wrong to watch whilst knowing this.

**Figure 1 - French New Extremity Dissertation Research Films**

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>DIRECTOR</b>	<b>SEX</b>	<b>RELEASE YEAR</b>	<b>RATING (IMDB)</b>
Carne	Gasper Noé	M	1991	7.1
I Stand Alone	Gasper Noé	M	1998	7.3
Sombre	Philippe Grandrieux	M	1998	5.9
Sitcom	François Ozen	M	1998	6.6
Criminal Lovers	François Ozen	M	1999	6.5
Romance	Catherine Breillat	F	2001	5.2
Trouble Every Day	Claire Denis	F	2001	5.9
Fat Girl	Catherine Breillat	F	2001	6.4
The Pornographer	Bertrand Bonello	M	2001	5.2
Baise-Moi	Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh-Thi.	F	2002	4.4
Secret Things	Jean-Claude Brisseau	M	2002	6
In My Skin	Marina de Van	F	2002	6.2
Irreversible	Gasper Noé	M	2002	7.3
High Tension	Alexandre Aja	M	2003	6.7
Anatomy of Hell	Catherine Breillat	F	2004	4.4
My Mother	Christophe Honoré	M	2004	5
Satan (Sheitan)	Kim Chapiron	F	2006	5.6
Frontier(s)	Xavier Gens	M	2007	6.2
Martyrs	Pascal Laugier	M	2008	7
Clip	Maja Miloš	F	2012	5.6
Raw	Julia Ducournau	F	2016	7
Holiday	Isabella Eklöf	F	2018	5.7
Titane	Julia Ducournau	F	2021	6.5

## Findings and analysis

The findings section has three parts. Firstly, looking at NFE in the 1990s, considering the genre when it was initially male dominated, then moving into the early 2000s when women filmmakers began to have their spin on the genre with films such as *Romance* and *Fat Girl* (2001). Before finally considering the more contemporary films in the genre which are more commercial to be more accessible for larger audiences.

### Defining the genre – New French Extremity in the 1990s

The 1990s saw NFE in infant stages and dominated by men. The genre saw heavy influence from art house cinema seeing directors such as Gaspar No , Philippe Grandrieux and Fran ois Ozon all being established but looking for something different. Tim Palmer references this as ‘show[ing] me the edge’. The edge being male directors portraying the abuse and objectification of women in patriarchal settings.

The first recognised NFE film is *Carne*, a short film about a butcher who is a single father to a special needs girl. When a misunderstanding leads him to commit a serious crime, he realises his life is falling apart. The film features three main women: the daughter, a barmaid, and a maid. The daughter is nonverbal, reliant on her father, and lacking a female figure. This puts a great deal of pressure on her father. Their relationship as father and daughter is incestuous; despite the fact that she is a teenager, he treats her as if she were a baby. He commits numerous incestuous acts against his daughter such as inappropriate touching, frequently bringing up puberty-related issues like breast growth and periods. This is a father who is concerned about his daughter as she grows up but abuses the power dynamic between parent and child for sexual gratification.

Furthering this, the father stabs a man who he assumes has raped his daughter, however, she had her first period. This results in his incarceration, leading his daughter to a mental institution as she has no one to care for her. After being released he goes to a barmaid that he previously met, where he initially proclaimed her as a ‘fat girl... I will fuck one day’ (*Carne*, 1991), firstly, this is misogynistic towards women and shows he views himself as a dominant masculine figure and her his submissive, Nikki Baughan addresses this in a British Film Institute article, ‘the traditional language of submissive female victim succumbing to the dominant masculine aggressor’. The dynamic changes as the Barmaid becomes more dominant; she instigates sex between the two resulting in pregnancy. Tensions rise from this as he does not want another child, this forces him into a second decline admitting that he has two things that he cannot refuse ‘fucking her and hurting her’ (*Carne*, 1991). This quote embodies the conventions of NFE providing insight to the objectification of women.

*I Stand Alone* (1998) builds from its predecessor increasing violence and hostility towards women both in language and physical acts. It provides context such as how The Butcher was sexually abused as a child by a priest which gives context to the rage and violence, he holds within himself. Nevertheless, he sexually abuses his own daughter

highlighting his lack of morality and justice which coincidentally are the first words presented during the opening titles and continue to be shown throughout. The Butcher has a depressing outlook on human life, arguably a nihilist, he sees life and birth holding little value, understanding it as just another human function. He states you are either a 'cock' or a 'hole' (*I Stand Alone*, 1998), the argument being that people are only worth something whilst eligible for sex, and after that life is meaningless. This connects misogynistic ideologies with the brutalist nature of The Butcher cemented throughout. Due to his girlfriend's (The Barmaid) pregnancy, he becomes frustrated because she now has a level over him, the baby.

After an argument where he is accused of an affair, he sees red, unleashing fury; he savagely attacks his pregnant girlfriend causing her to clench her stomach resulting to what can only be assumed to miscarriage, screaming 'my baby!' (*I Stand Alone*, 1998).



Figure 2. A still showing the Barmaid clutching her stomach. *I Stand Alone* (Noé, 1998)

This heartbreaking scene shares interest with Tim Palmer's book, *Brutal Intimacy*. Here he explains how NFE investigates patriarchal impacts on society specifically patriarchal mindset hindering the development of both emotional and physical advances for women in a contemporary society. These ideas reside in the 2000s when women characters become more complex as instead of falling victim to the patriarchy, they reclaim more individualism with regards to their sexuality and emotional strength.

Moving to the climax, a 30 second countdown is given to the audience for those who do not wish to see the final act of the film. This timer acts as a method to aid with crowd control over the inexorable ending, also coinciding with possible censorship as it allows for choice over spectating the 'unwatchable' (Angelo, 2012, p.166). This bridges the gap on what we consider ethical in film, effectively going 'beyond accepted limits' (Angelo, 2012, p.166).

One of the final lines The Butcher says is ‘The act of violence I must commit is a wholesome one’ (*I Stand Alone*, 1998), here he is talking about acts of filicide and incest. By labelling these acts as ‘wholesome’ it allows transgressive ideas to the build-up over what the viewer is about to witness; arguably one of NFE's main goals.

In providing the unwatchable with a pre-warning, Gasper Noe, the director, is allowing for moral judgement to be made, leading the viewer to decide whether to be a spectator or not, as according to Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson, crisis, violence, chaos, and uncertainty are the primary characteristics of modern society (Colak, 2011, p.491), and so the viewer gets to choose whether to become a willing victim of modern society and to spectate the possibility of an unethical sequence.

Once the warning ends, The Butcher enters a dreamlike frenzy; he envisions sexually abusing his daughter, shooting her whilst having flashbacks to her birth. The unwatchable becomes engrained in the scene as by providing flashbacks of birth we can infer the idea that he is aware of the permanent damage he is causing whilst also questioning his own ethics and morals. He has only ever loved one person and one person has only ever loved him, his daughter. Ultimately abusing his parental power and diminishing the ‘purity’ his daughter holds so that no one else can take that from her, this is a reference back to when he killed the man for ‘raping’ his daughter. In doing so he is taking power from her and causing her to be another victim to patriarchal power (Colak, 2011, p.492). Which is a dominant factor to both the creation of the genre and the following – *Criminal Lovers* (1999).

*Criminal Lovers* takes an interesting stance in NFE. The director François Ozon was already being discussed as an auteur whilst only on his fourth film (Hain, 2007, p.227) *Criminal Lovers* investigates the concept of a femme fatale, a woman stereotyped as an attractive and autonomous seductress who causes distress in men who fall for her. The film follows Luc and Alice in a hellish retelling of Hansel and Gretel, who are captured by a hunter in the woods. The film examines gender and sexuality, with Alice portrayed as a dominant woman and Luc as more submissive. Maclaran and Stevens' 2019 study on sexual fatalism emphasises the film's exploration of the dynamic of dominance in relationships, with Alice embodying the femme fatale throughout. This is due to how Alice instructs Luc sexually and also takes non-consensual pictures of Luc's impotence threatening to share it. The film emphasises the importance of gender and sexuality in the narrative of NFE. This is further developed during the murder of Saïd.

The scene depicts Alice as dominant in every aspect, including her expressions and body language, as she initiates the encounter and places herself on top of Saïd, while the camera remains still as Luc attacks him. This positioning emphasises her control and power over the situation, as well as her dominance over both men.



Figure 3. A still of Luc in the doorway. *Criminal Lovers* (Ozen, 1999)



Figure 4. A still of Alice on top of Saïd looking at Luc. *Criminal Lovers* (Ozen, 1999)

The camera angles and framing emphasise Alice's authority in the scene, indicating that she is in charge, it is also reminiscent of classic pornography camera angles. As audience we know that she has lured both men to this position and is avoiding committing the murder, she uses the emotional manipulation of another man having sex with her to rile Luc up so that he will commit the murder. When she turns back, her face looks as if to say, are you just going to stand and watch, or are you going to be a man? Hain adds that Alice is 'a vapid, controlling, castrating high school femme fatale' (Hain, 2007, p.282). This is where the concepts of masculinity and gender roles become particularly intriguing within NFE. Alice utilises Luc's masculinity against him in order to manipulate his behaviours, which develops a crisis of masculinity due to strong-willed, independent women. The way in which Alice manipulates Luc is through a series of lies, the main being that Saïd had gang-raped Alice. The lies and planned seduction techniques lead Luc on a dark path to the eventual murder. It is worth noting that a series of flashbacks centre Luc as questioning sexuality by providing insights to gay tendencies such as having a liking towards Saïd. Considering this, it is arguable that Luc killing Saïd was an attempt to eliminate feelings towards Saïd.

Interestingly, Alice, highlights to Saïd that Luc is gay – linking back to previously mentioned impotence. Here Ozen is presenting women as manipulators and instigators. Ozen is highlighting the sexual desire women hold over men, leading to spiralling events cementing the idea of the hetro-masculinity crisis.

### **Cementing the genres conventions – Letting women have their turn in the 2000s**

As we move into the millennium, the genre gains traction with female directors. Filmmakers such as Catherine Breillat, Claire Dennis, Virginie Despentes and Coralie TrinhThi have all created important films highly regarded in the genre due to the influence they have had seen through awards and nominations (Breillat, 2024). The 2000s, saw the genre bloom into a more commercial style with less art house influence. It also placed women as victims to a patriarchal world, highlighting their struggles with exploring sexuality and being autonomous of themselves (Baughan, 2022, n.p.).

In 2001, Catherine Breillat's *Romance* was released. The movie follows a schoolteacher, although being deeply in love with her partner and sleeping in the same bed with him, is unable to cope with the near complete lack of intimacy he allows. Increasingly dissatisfied, she discovers that her sexual cravings drive her into increasingly more hazardous situations, including developing a relationship with the headmaster.

The film explores gender and sexuality in a different way to what has previously been seen. Marie, the protagonist, explores her sexual desires in ways that are considered 'taboo.' She engages with BDSM as well as claiming ownership of male genitalia. In the opening of the film, we see a man and woman having pictures taken whilst Marie watches, the photographer tells the woman to look 'submissive' (*Romance*, 2001) in doing so she looks down, drops her eyes, leans into the man and pouts. This scene drives stereotypes of men and women; the man is made to look strong and powerful; the woman is secondary. However, the irony is he is much shorter and has to stand on his tiptoes as the pictures are taken.

Jumping forward in the film, Marie is mostly pictured wearing white which develops ideas of purity and virginity, however, we as viewers know this not to be so true, she is sex obsessed and wants sexual relations with her partner, he does not. Even though he makes it very obvious that he is not interested, she is persistent. She denies his wishes and carries on removing his underwear and begins to perform oral sex. In doing so, she makes him feel bad for both his impotence and unwillingness to have sex; ultimately victimising herself. He lacks a sex drive, causing them to come to an agreement that she can look elsewhere for intimacy. Marya T. Mtshali and Breanne Fahs explain how 'women's sexual desire is accompanied by shame' and women's sexuality has been constructed 'as a response to male sexuality' (Mtshali and Fahs, 2014, p.162) This is the mould that Breillat is aiming to break in *Romance*. Marie comments,



I don't want to see the men who screw me or look at them. I want to be a hole, a pit, the more gaping, the more obscene it is, the more it's me, my intimacy, the more I surrender I disappear in proportion to the cock taking me. I hollow myself. That's my purity (*Romance*, 2001).

The language used here positions her as an object for sex, this aspect is not only intriguing but also pivotal to my argument resounding *Romance*, it explores how women can 'be as crude and frank in their speech as men are normally expected to be' (Mtshali and Fahs, 2014, p.161). The language holds a literary quality but reminiscent of pornography. She only feels sexy when seen in the male gaze, there is a duality of both desire and shame. She is claiming ownership of her sexuality as a woman in order not to succumb to male desire. This is also evident when she is raped, she shouts 'I am not ashamed!' (*Romance*, 2001). This is reminiscent of third wave feminism; the idea that she is empowering herself, and finding sexual freedom (Snyder-Hall, 2010, p.255), the reclaiming of 'choice' in women's sexuality.

This indicates that she is reclaiming herself in areas where she has been objectified for male gratification. When considering these themes, we can also look at another film by Breillat, *Anatomy of Hell* (2004). The film follows a woman who pays a gay man to stay four nights at her home to observe her where she is "unwatchable". The film explores female sexuality as both independent but also only valid by another's approval. The first example of this occurs after the two leave the clinic, they argue about women and men's roles within 'desire'. The woman bends down and begins to engage in oral sex with the gay man, and as he climaxes, she offers him money for the next four nights. This is an example of submissive women taking control of sexual situations, which is the point of the narrative.

Delving further, most scenes place women in the eye of the male gaze, yet we understand she is in control. In *The Point of View of Shame*, Kristyn Gorton argues that the man being gay,

Adds a different dimension to the encounter and does not allow us to think about the engagement between them as simply 'heterosexual': instead, we are forced to consider them solely as 'man' and 'woman' (Gorton, 2007, p.117).

The reason for this is because Breillat is stripping characters down to their simplest human form so that the exploration of sexuality is unhindered by heterosexual norms. In *Romance*, Marie says 'love between a man and woman is impossible' because of their incomparable experiences, including those of sexuality and sexual exploration. Men are less likely to be made to feel guilty exploring our sexuality, whereas women are. This stems from the concept of intersectionality, which is the interaction of notable factors on various levels, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. (hooks, 1989, p. 15). In *Anatomy of Hell*, for example, Breillat includes a gay man to seemingly feminise homosexuality. He may be able to relate to a woman who is exploring her sexuality because he has likely experienced similar vulnerability in the past. This is demonstrated when he undresses the woman and remarks "the fragility of female flesh" (*Anatomy of Hell*, 2004).

The film explores the fear of women in a patriarchal society. Using menstruation to demonstrate this, ideas of shame are not only rooted in female desire but are also historically embedded in our culture. The shame stems from men's fear of female menstruation (Iris Marion Young, 2005, pp.116–117). In the context of the film, The Woman instructs The Man to remove the tampon from her vagina; as he does so, blood spills, and she places it in a glass of water. Guiding him to drink it; they are now forming a bond of shame, similar to the blood of the covenant; their bond of shame is stronger as a result of the choice made. Her shame is the internalised shame that society places on women for having periods; they are forced to hide it and act as if it does not happen; in the film, The Woman acknowledges that men 'wish not to acknowledge them' (*Anatomy of Hell*, 2004), and this is why The Man is ashamed; he is acknowledging the period, he is understanding the difficulty and pain that women are forced to endure on a monthly basis.

Young also discusses how shame only comes from the 'other'; she is stating the idea that shame of menstruation derives from male input which should be void as they will never understand, however, a stigma has been created which is what holds the shame still relevant to womanly life. This links back to incomparable experiences. It is arguable that Breillat is referencing Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism, which is seen in her work, *The Second Sex*. The theory links ideas of freedom of sexes and living as a human body-normalising human bodies lead to freedom (Code, 2002, pp.187–188). By including the acknowledgment of periods and then combining that with having sex whilst The Woman is in menstruation, it leads to this idea of normalisation of bodies and bodily functions which is aiming to remove the idea of shame that women are made to feel. This also allows for links back to *Criminal Lovers*, as there is a key quote, 'A woman isn't a woman until she's a mother' (*Criminal Lovers*, 1999), which connects Beauvoir's thoughts on how a woman is not born a woman but rather becomes one over time (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.14).

### **Commercialising a Genre – Victimising Women**

Venturing further into the genre, NFE homes some highly disturbing films that are critically acclaimed for milestone efforts in the genre being both powerful yet brutal (Crook, 2010). Two being, *Irreversible and Martyrs* (2008). The films emphasise women's roles as victims, and violence against women as central to the plot. The genre shifts once more, siding closer to classic gorefest horror while still incorporating elements of arthouse cinema that served as the foundations, as previously noted.

Beginning with *Irreversible*, the film is shot in reverse and serves as a mind-bending investigation into a brutal rape. The film employs a variety of genre conventions, including extreme violence, homophobic and racist language, and an overpowering sense of doom as the camera moves through the streets of Paris. We are forced to piece the puzzle together just like the two men who are searching for the man who brutally raped Alex, a woman they love. In simple terms *Irreversible* is a rape-revenge story however, it subverts this and becomes so much more as it combines the art style camera techniques alongside forementioned NFE conventions focusing on both spectatorship and feminist theory focusing on solidarity

amongst genders. The spectatorship comes from the inclusion of the 'unwatchable' once again.

Alex, our female protagonist, goes looking for a cab. Failing, a Continuing on, it appears Noe puts this scene in place to both put the viewer at ease and send them off the trail, but this is quickly diminished as soon as we see the subway. The long box corridor, with red walls and concrete floors trailed with dark lighting, forces the spectator to consider how this could play out.

Nearby, a woman tells her that 'the underpass is safer' (*Irreversible*, 2002), and we follow her where 'safety' should be. Olivia Harris relates this to spectatorship, stating that 'female spectators, are invited to identify with Alex by recognising a moment of female solidarity that is most likely familiar to any woman who has walked alone at night' (Harris, 2023, p.21). It appears that Noe includes this scene to both relax the viewer and send them off the trail, but this is quickly diminished once we see the tunnel. The long box corridor, with red walls and concrete floors trailed by dark lighting, forces the spectator to consider how this might unfold.



Figure 5. A Still of Alex walking through the underpass. *Irreversible* (Noé, 2002)

The camera slows, mimicking Alex's movement as a man and woman turn the corner arguing, the man becomes violent and assaults the women to the ground. Alex panics in fear of the aggressor as his anger turns to her. He pulls a knife, and the camera stops moving. We're locked in an agonising 9-minute rape scene with locked camera angles. It's just the viewer, Alex, and an assailant. The scene diminishes the concept of sexualisation. As viewers, we are forced to watch and sympathise with Alex as she is viciously attacked, with no relief. The scene perfectly captures the ideas of the unwatchable due to the excruciating cries of Alex and triggering shots of the attack, this is made even worse when a man turns down the corridor seeing the attack and instantly turns around without helping. We as

viewers are forced to spectate, experiencing this from the outside and Noe reminds us of this as he returns to his twisting camera shots.

Alex is the victim of this film however, Noe, seems to lose this idea. Two men seek revenge, not Alex. This is non-conventional not only for rape-revenge cinema but also NFE. Noe disconnects the victim from the violent act and focuses on how other people deal with traumatic information, in this case the men who are closest to Alex. She becomes what could be argued as 'unheard', the two men take it upon themselves to seek revenge calling it 'a human right' (*Irreversible*, 2002). Due to her being incapacitated, she becomes the context to the problem. She never asks for revenge; Olivia Harris presents the idea of male-female solidarity; the men seek revenge to deal with their side of the trauma, but do so with Alex in mind (Harris, 2023, p.24).

After the rape, we are taken back to earlier in the evening when Alex first went out, we don't find out about Alex's relationships with the two men until almost the end of the film, when it is revealed that she is pregnant with one of them and a friend of the other; although we get to see Alex at a party in a loving and carefree setting, we are still wounded because we know that the happiness is temporary as we are left in a state of dramatic irony.

Noe tortures the viewer with a combination of forced spectatorship, the unheard woman and overbearing masculinity; ending with the film dropping the bomb of Alex being pregnant during the sexual assault, this is arguably done for shock value to further cement the film to the genre, however, it may also act as a way to show how trauma is also intersectional. Trauma and being a victim are not just end to end, it is a web that evolves from numerous events and people.

*Martyrs* continues placing women as victims at the centre of the plot. it's also the first film which we can consider the term torture porn, this is not to say that previous NFE films do not fit this category, but *Martyrs* is the first where it is integral to the plot. *Martyrs* is an unremitting exploration of female victimisation, depicting graphic violence and tapping into themes of suffering and trauma through the story of Lucie's longing for vengeance and her friend Anna's involvement.

When using the term 'torture porn' it is reference to films which focus heavily on sadistic violence (West, 2016, p.147), this means that said violence must be integral to the plot. The difference with *Martyrs* is it doesn't reflect the torture as sexual or for any linked gratification, it is presented to break and victimise a person for them to reach 'transfiguration' (*Martyrs*, 2008) -the films word for the point before death. Torture porn is seemingly a stem from an early 2000s genre known as 'Gonzo', this was an extreme porn genre which heavily focussed on the humiliation and degradation of women (Olson, 2016). There are clear links to snuff films which NFE has seen influence with ideas of 'sexualising' rape and extreme abuse especially with films such as *Martyrs* and *Irreversible*.

When considering how *Martyrs* presents women as victims it is the way in which it displays systematic violence. The violence is reminiscent of the experiments and torture by Nazi Germany within World War 2 concentration and prison camps as well as the way in

which France would shame women who were known to have engaged with German soldiers. In a journal article by Donato Totaro, he outlines how the film has images of captives from the camps on the walls as well as ‘shorn women’, these were women labelled as Nazi sympathisers after the war and were publicly humiliated for their actions (Totaro, 2009, n.p.). *Martyrs* has two protagonists: Anna and Lucie. Lucie was captured by the films cult when she was only a child but managed to escape, leaving another girl behind. This haunts her; leaving her bound in trauma to the level that she performs self-harm under the influence that it is a ‘monster’ who cuts her. It is a hallucination of the girl she left, causing her to inflict penance due to her writhing guilt, leading to her death. This guilt was not hers to bare. Here's where the shorn women come to fruition. These women were made to suffer because of patriarchal (France's) failure to fight Nazi collaboration and the regime. Another NFE film, *Frontier(s)* (2007), focuses on this aspect of history more closely, but *Martyrs* is less on the nose.



Figure 6. A still of Anna Forcefully receiving a haircut. *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008)

Lucie achieves vengeance in hope that it will allow her to relieve her guilt, this doesn't happen and instead causes her into a frenzy of self-mutilation. We as viewers wince as she battles against the monster but as the camera cuts back to a wider view, Lucie is hurting herself. The scene is beautiful in its cinematography yet soul destroying in nature. Sadly, Lucie jumps from a window, slicing her throat – she died mutilated and filled with guilt. She became the monster she could not defeat.



Figure 7. A still of Lucie cutting herself with Anna in the background. *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008)



Figure 8. A still of Lucie's guilt demon cutting her arm. *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008)

As the film continues Anna finds a basement to the house, which is a lab made to hold Martyrs. There she finds a hall lined with pictures of previous women inducted into the program with one from the concentration camps; further placing the film within the realms of French-Nazi history. Anna finds a girl within the lab who resembles the image of Lucie's guilt demon.

Upon attempting to rescue her, the cult enters the house, shooting the girl and capturing Anna, placing Anna within the Martyr program. It is here we are introduced to the character Mademoiselle, the leader. She explains that women are more susceptible to reaching the point of 'transfiguration' as they don't give up as easy. As these ideas are presented, we as viewers must battle with what we are about to witness, awaiting the unwatchable.



Figure 9. A still of Anna bathing the girl from the basement. *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008)

Upon induction the torture begins gradually for both Anna and viewer. *Martyrs'* portrayal of women is most evident in the second act. Anna is treated as disposable. She is stripped of autonomy not only due to capture but also denied emotional autonomy. She is coerced into an emotional state beyond comprehension. We as viewers become spectators to punishment, which forces us to take on an emotional bond with Anna every time we hear a door open or steps, we fear the worst for what is about to happen.

New occupiers take over the house / lab. These captors take on stereotypical gender roles. The man, Michel, is the brutalist. He beats Anna, causing extreme trauma blows in unrelenting force whereas the woman, who we presume to be the wife, takes on the more caring roles but not in a maternal way. She tends to the daily things Anna needs such as feeding, cleaning and wounds. Now this could be done for a multitude of reasons, the abuse done to Anna is extremely systematic, it's not just a man beating on a woman. It's done in a way to disconnect the violence from the emotions felt. However, for the viewer it does the opposite, Anna loses consciousness yet we as the viewer are forced to witness her body lifeless and bloody. The viewer experiences the exploitative nature of extreme abuse from the outside and I feel this is what the director aimed for, similar to *Irreversible*. *Martyrs* explores violence against women in an exploitative way focussing on systematic abuse with an end goal of complete submission. The director is portraying the struggles of women in a world where they have been and continue to be systematically forced to fight against a patriarchal society. Although the film may not visually represent ideas of feminist ideology, it appears that this is what the director intended to show, emphasising the strength that women have demonstrated throughout history. The film emphasises a 'cause' (Couzens, 2013, n.p.), this



being women's determination to fight systematic gender inequality. The abuse shown in *Martyrs* is an extreme example of this.

## Conclusion

In summary, this dissertation has outlined the developments in the New French Extremity genre. The genre was birthed in the 1990s by the dark marriage of art house cinema with themes of extreme violence, misogyny, and sexual abuse. During this period, NFE was heavily dominated by male filmmakers and the violence seen throughout these productions was majorly against women, seen in films such as *Carne* and *I Stand Alone*. Palmer explains the genre as showing an edge, this being the 'unwatchable' (Angelo, 2012, p.166). As discussed above this would be...

Once these core values of extreme violence, misogyny, and sexual abuse cemented the genre, and the millennium hit, female directors began to become more involved in New French Extremity. Directors such as Catherine Breillat soared in popularity with well received feminist productions such as *Anatomy of Hell*. These productions focused closer on the lives of women in a patriarchal society. Breillat along with others, showed women exploring their sexuality, intertwining ideas of Third wave feminism with the extremities of NFE, effectively allowing women to 'be as crude and frank in their speech as men are normally expected to be' (Mtshali and Fahs, 2014, p.161). This expanded ideas of the unwatchable by developing scenes focused on menstruation, sex, and sexuality; all things that many people are reluctant to acknowledge therefore becoming a new interpretation of the unwatchable- the uncomfortable, for the patriarchal society. This era of NFE embedded the struggles of women in the patriarchal world, but we see one final development.

The final development combines what previously has been seen in the genre, extreme violence, sexual abuse, misogyny, and a dash of feminism. However, the genre began to move away from the Art house conventions and instead included more horror aspects. This led to NFE having more commercial productions (productions that appealed to wider audiences). *Martyrs* is a great example: the film is very much horror in the way it incorporates a monster and body horror violence. the movie utilises this to widen its audience, but still retains the core values of NFE through its systematic violence and victimisation of women as well as incorporating the history of France which is deeply rooted into the genre.

Ultimately, New French Extremity is a genre built around displaying what people view to be 'the unwatchable'; in doing so it becomes a playground for filmmakers, especially those of French descent, to display their ever-developing opinions of what French culture, life and history really is. Although there was a heavy amount of productions in late 1990s to early 2000s, they quickly began to dwindle shortly after. It is obvious to see that NFE is a genre for those who wish to witness 'an edge' (Palmer, 2011, p.57) in cinema. The three main developments in New French Extremity have been showcased here, along with the core values which have remained throughout: sex, sexuality, violence and above all that, extreme obscenity.



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# A Critical Analysis of Conservation Marketing and Campaigning Strategies in the Digital Age: The Case of World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

**Haidee Sumner**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Conservation is vital in protecting our planet and various species. Rockstrom and Stern state ‘the entire earth is threatened by further destruction of biodiversity’ (2020, p.3) - it is essential to encourage protection of the planet and biodiversity. A study argues choices humans make daily are a driver for environmental threats, therefore ‘influencing human behaviour is the ultimate challenge for a conservationist’ (Verissimo and McKinley, 2015, p.14). Reliance upon technology within the digital age forces non-profit organisations (NPO) to adapt marketing strategies to reach a wider audience, with no geographical restrictions. Social media marketing and campaigning is well-researched, coinciding with progression in the digital age. Theories and research regarding NPOs have circulated since 1996, with research conducted by Hibbert and Horne (1996), establishing marketing techniques by NPOs, focusing on ‘marketing for fundraising among individual donors’. Further development has created a broad amount of literature on this emerging topic. Conservation marketing is defined as ‘the ethical application of marketing strategies, concepts and techniques to influence attitudes, perceptions and behaviours of individuals, and ultimately societies, with the objective of advancing conservation goals’ (Wright et al., 2015, p.46), expanding the definition of marketing, exclusive to environmental issues.

Increased conservation marketing efforts are used by organisations to raise awareness, promote biodiversity and influence behavioural changes - making environmental progress and forming the primary ethos of NPO, WWF, founded in 1961 by environmental enthusiasts who sought to fight environmental implications of human development (WWF, 2010). WWF now has over 90 offices worldwide, with many individual branches across many countries. In 1986, the brand name was updated to World Wide Fund for Nature. However, the founding company name World Wildlife Fund is still used in many countries – recognised globally by the abbreviation WWF. Effective history with impactful conservation marketing campaigns shows progression in recent years, achieved through adapting communication strategies, indicating positive changes to conservation perceptions. Marketing strategies are

utilized in various types of media, including print adverts, video adverts, and social media marketing.

This dissertation explores ways marketing and campaigning resulted in environmental progression, such as legislation implementation, increased awareness, increased financial support (Hibbert and Horne, 1996) or active involvement. Acknowledgement of this research area has been undertaken over a long period, yet contains a substantial gap due to only becoming relevant recently, by adopting modern marketing approaches, facilitated by the digital age.

## **Background**

Environmental issues are prominent today, emphasising the importance of conservation marketing, suggesting influencing ‘human behaviour will lead us to embrace marketing as a fundamental component of the conservation toolbox’ (Wright et al., 2015, p.47). WWF are a key case study, with evidence of successful viral campaigns and advertisements involving collaborations with public figures and brands worldwide. Studying the organisation’s marketing strategies from different branches of the brand and social media campaigns provides insights into how environmental organisations result in behavioural changes. It is interesting to acknowledge how marketing adapted to coincide with changing media landscapes and to identify widely used strategies beneficial to this company. WWF is effective as they have a prominent social media presence and a large following, covering many aspects of marketing strategies, underpinned in theoretical approaches.

## **Justification/Aims**

In studying WWF as one of the world’s leading independent conservation organisations, research will analyse their marketing approach on various media platforms and outline development. Conservation marketing holds ‘potential to engage audiences’ and addresses ‘the human dimensions of biodiversity loss’ (Ryan et al., 2019, p. 354). My dissertation aims to form an understanding of how WWF’s strategies and campaigns result in progress, highlighting studies where this is evident, focusing on well-known campaigns, adverts on social media and print adverts from earlier years. Evaluation of common strategies finds out how and why they are effective in digital marketing, useful for conservation communication going forward.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter aims to critically analyse scholarly material within the conservation marketing field, focusing on key marketing strategies and theoretical framework, applicable to this WWF case study.

Increased efforts in conservation marketing resulted in a ‘growing body of literature detailing the importance of marketing for funding such organisations’ (Wright et al., 2015, p. 42) – progress has been made in recent years. In ‘Social Media Marketing – An Effective Solution for Non-Profit Organisations’ (Mehrotra and Siraj, 2021), authors underpin how NPOs use ‘cost effective technology solutions to enhance their reach, spread and appeal’,

demonstrating success in social media marketing due to the lack of geographical restrictions in reaching a target audience, applicable to WWF, through global reach via social media. Social marketing campaigns help ‘influence human behaviour for the greater social good’ (Salazar, Mills and Verissimo, 2018, p.634) - a key example is WWF’s ‘Earth Hour’. Social marketing is crucial for this study, defined as marketing with the goal of behavioural changes rather than selling a product (Salazar, Mills and Verissimo, 2018, p.634). It is important to acknowledge despite social media being used for social marketing, ‘they are not the same thing’ (Smith et al., 2020, p.310) – an imperative distinction to avoid confusion in the field.

### **WWF’s Earth Hour Campaign**

Arguably the most well-known campaign, introduced by WWF Australia in 2007, is ‘Earth Hour’, promoted annually by WWF and brands worldwide - described as ‘one of the most successful coordinated mass efforts worldwide to raise awareness of environmental issues, with excessive energy consumption being one driver of climate change’ (Jechow, 2019). Earth Hour is organised by WWF to limit electricity usage for one hour, one day, each year. Scholars highlight success in ‘raising media and public interest on climate change and degradation’ (Kountouris, 2022, p.9). Sison states the ongoing impacts ‘of single events in changing behaviours’ (Sison, 2013, p. 227) that link to positive changes. This is a fundamental reference, outlining history of the campaign by WWF’s communication director, ‘Mr. Andy Ridley with advertising agency Leo Burnett Sydney, aimed to engage citizens to turn their lights off for one hour to demonstrate their involvement in saving the planet’ (Sison, 2013, p.230). Scholarly work highlights involvement across countries worldwide, due to more ‘meaningful and transformative participation’ (p. 237). Chan, Pong and Tam (2019) state this area is ‘understudied’, aiming to close this gap. The authors conducted online surveys, concluding ‘environmental self-identity and humanity identity guide individuals to develop a favorable attitude and moral obligation toward Earth Hour participation’, increasing intentions to engage (Chan, Pong and Tam, 2019, p. 321). This campaign is well-researched with a broad amount of literature highlighting impacts – useful for this study. However, many researchers investigate the impacts of the Earth Hour Campaign, focusing on participation, without suggesting other outcomes and intentions of social media marketing - an area this research aims to address.

### **WWF Original Reports and Website**

The official WWF website is useful, outlining brand history and essential information. The history page on the official site states how the company was founded in 1961, with a detailed timeline of the progression and build of the company since then to modern day, referencing successes over the sixty-year period. A fundamental reference is official WWF annual business reports, covering successes within campaigns and as a company overall, evident with annual ‘Earth Hour Reports’, accessible on the website. A key chapter is ‘Achievements of Earth Hour’, outlining environmental progress within the movement. An article published by WWF highlights their ‘Emoji Based Fundraising Campaign’, used on

social media platforms, and relevant to this study, detailing how this campaign functions and impacts on funding. WWF's published data is essential to measure progress with marketing communications in this field; the 2022/2023 report outlines increased participation, changes to legislation and increased donations as a few examples (WWF, 2023). Reports are available over many years, allowing research to compare outcomes from different years, indicating whether progression has been achieved and how.

### **Conservation Marketing and Fundraising**

Several academic sources focus on conservation marketing and fundraising, such as Verissimo et al., (2017), in 'Increased conservation marketing effort has major fundraising benefit for even the least popular species' - focusing on correlations between social media marketing and funding linked to the most adopted species. The author of this paper is prominent within the field, publishing numerous works useful for this research. In 2015, a paper titled 'Introducing Conservation Marketing: why should the devil have all the best tunes', alongside recent works, such as 'Why do people donate to conservation?' (2018), outline consumer behaviours and likelihood to donate based off multiple research methods, resulting in positive environmental changes. The source reiterates WWF's use of flagship species within marketing projects to maximize donations, researching this theory in depth. Numerous scholarly works are essential for this study, with authors including Ryan et al. (2019), Walpole and Leader-Williams (2002), Hibbert and Horne (1996) and Wright et al. (2015), contributing important studies to the field of conservation marketing and the importance of funding for NPOs.

### **Gaps in Literature and the Future of Conservation Marketing?**

Gaps in literature indicate it is 'clear that Conservation Marketing represents a field that is wide open for research' (Wright et al., 2015, p. 46), due to social media marketing only becoming prevalent in recent years, meaning numerous scholarly works are considered outdated. Verissimo et al. explores how to expand knowledge, suggesting a 'need of more marketing research in the conservation NGO sector' by promoting 'collaborations between academics and NGOs' (2018, p.11), gaining a broader insight, recommended for future researchers. Another gap in conservation marketing is studies generally focus their research broadly, rather than focusing on a specific case study. Therefore, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding, examining where existing marketing theories are in practice by WWF. There is a lack of existing work focusing on WWF's marketing, despite it being a worldwide known brand. An essential research paper by Ryan et al., states 'Conservation marketing holds promise and appeal as a means to reach and influence audiences to benefit biodiversity conservation' – an optimistic outlook for the future of this research area.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This section of the literature review outlines the theoretical framework, establishing key conservation marketing strategies, theories and concepts widely addressed in existing literature.

## Celebrity Endorsement

One significant reference within this research is *Effectiveness of Biodiversity Marketing* (Ryan et al., 2019), highlighting conservation marketing theories and establishing the psychology behind effectiveness (Ryan et al., 2019b). Celebrity endorsement can be successful (Olmedo et al., 2020), applicable to WWF, with the involvement of the ‘Council of Ambassadors’ committed to WWF’s mission, evident with their social media presence. Theorists argue involvement of celebrities is likely to ‘promote brand credibility’, enhancing ‘the likelihood of persuasion’ (Walpole & Leader-Williams, 2002; Wheeler, 2009). Olmedo et al. (2020) examines this theory in environmental marketing campaigns, focusing on evidence of ‘effectiveness’, which previous literature was lacking. This theory is reiterated in recent studies, suggesting celebrity endorsement is used to ‘raise awareness, generate funding and effect behavioural change’ (Duthie et al., 2017). Involvement from ambassadors can help achieve goals, such as Sir David Attenborough, Ellie Goulding, Patrick Aryee, Sir Andy Murray and Lucy Siegle, alongside others (WWF-UK Council of Ambassadors).

## Flagship Species

A ‘flagship species’ is a key marketing theory, outlined in ‘Flagships, umbrellas, and keystones: Is single-species management passe in the landscape era’, providing an overview of flagship species used in conservation campaigning (Simberloff, 1998). A flagship species is ‘used as the focus of a broader conservation marketing campaign based on its possession of one or more traits that appeal to a target audience’ (Verissimo et al, 2010), with emphasis on ‘desirable traits’ beneficial for a marketing campaign. Walpole and Leader-Williams developed ideas, indicating flagship species ‘capture the imagination of the public and induce people to support conservation’ (2002, p. 544), highlighting the broad use of the ‘panda’, echoed with WWF’s logo and use in marketing initiatives. This theory was expanded in ‘Nonhuman Charisma in Action: Flagship Species’, suggesting flagship species are ‘highly visible icons of conservation... likely to trigger awareness, sympathy and resources’ (Lorimer, 2005, p. 923). The ‘giant panda’ is effectively analysed, indicating ‘resources raised from the charisma of the panda trickle down all over the world’ (p. 923). In 2015, research contributed new ideas, updating the field of research, stating the production of WWF’s logo in 1961 used ‘print and communication technologies such that the Panda logo has become among the most recognizable brands in the world’ (Jepson and Barua, 2015, p.99), answering how flagships ‘influence conservation outcomes’. In the paper ‘Toward a systematic approach for identifying conservation flagships’, authors suggest ‘little research has been done on the effectiveness of these campaigns’, containing flagships (Verissimo et al, 2010) - perhaps an area for future researchers to explore.



## **Facts**

Another marketing theory discusses facts in adverts, as it ‘stimulates genuine cognitive elaboration’ (Ryan et al, 2019, p. 356), which is the ‘central route of persuasion’ (Macdonald et al., 2017). Other work further explored this, such as MacDonald et al. (2017), acknowledging species that are likely to ‘catalyse such funding’ (p. 204), and how brands reach target audiences, who are often ‘middle classes who tend to be open to such engagement’ (Balmford and Cowling, 2006; Macdonald et al., 2016a) regarding conservation efforts. This paper underpins the success of various species, concluding ‘different species have certain characteristics that make them more or less likely to be successful flagships’. Research broadly in the area suggests the most high-profile flagships are ‘large mammals’, which ‘dominates the headlines in western media’ (MacDonald et al, 2017), reaching conclusions on defining a successful flagship.

## **Emotional Appeals**

Emotional appeals, such as fear and guilt appeals, have many authors contributing to this realm of research, such as Hibbert et al. (2007), Brennan and Binny (2010), Schaffner, Dermarmels and Juettner (2015), Thomas-Walters McNulty and Verissimo (2019) and Campos et al. (2021). Emotional appeals can elicit both positive and negative emotions. However, in the charity advertising industry, negative appeals are more prevalent (Yousef et al., 2022). Fear appeals are defined as ‘persuasive messages designed to scare information receivers into compliance by threatening them with negative consequences of noncompliance’ (Chen, 2015, p.75), a common marketing technique used by WWF. Guilt appeals make viewers feel guilty, which has a ‘significant impact on the behaviour of consumers’, allowing ‘marketers to use persuasion tactics to influence consumers’ (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994, p.42). All studies reveal marketing strategies resulted in emotions such as shame, guilt, fear or hope. Conversely, a strategy resulting in positive emotions are ‘enthusiasm appeals’, outlined by Searles (2010), suggesting hopeful campaigns increase engagement by focusing on an optimistic future (Searles, 2010, p.180), a strategy used by WWF in numerous campaigns. Hope is a ‘future focused emotion’; people feel more optimistic about reaching a goal (Septianto, Kemper and Chiew, 2020, p.447). Hope appeals focus on optimism, increasing likeliness to participate, a perspective shared by Yousef et al. (2022) and Chadwick (2014).

Overall, a broad amount of literature regarding conservation marketing exists, with key authors contributing new ideas to the field. Theoretical approaches cover many strengths and hindrances of specific strategies, exclusive to environmental marketing, essential in understanding different approaches used.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data was gathered and then analysed using critical discourse analysis, a popular qualitative research method in media studies. The method explores visual and language content of marketing posts and campaigns, outlining strategies and theories, facilitating success in reaching a global audience.

Data was gathered by looking at social media platforms used by WWF to raise awareness of marketing campaigns and adverts, selecting striking marketing posts, posted by official WWF branches and collaborative brands, highlighting strategies contributing to the brand's success. Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and Linked In were platforms commonly used for marketing by WWF, with a large following, therefore useful platforms for this study. This dissertation studies advertising in traditional media, such as print ads and progresses onto more modern approaches, such as social media, demonstrating how 'conservation organisations have adapted to the new media age' (Büscher, 2014, p.726). Secondary data is used throughout to analyse the content of marketing posts, reading research and evaluating current knowledge. Advantages of secondary data include existing research and reports are accessible and inexpensive, published over many years – changes in attitudes and contributions indicate research improvements over time (Kumar, 2008, p.58).

### **Sample**

The sample for this project includes twelve examples of successful marketing, where two correspond to a theme identified in previous research. Examples demonstrate a turning point for marketing, that proved successful in the digital age, indicating progression. This project required looking in depth at many examples. This began the coding process, establishing predetermined themes - creating six subtopics with two examples of each. This project determined 'successful' examples, looking at current research and statistics that reinforce environmental progression due to marketing. Examples were taken across many years throughout the digital age, indicating the introduction and development of new techniques, showcasing present impacts. This process resulted in refining techniques used and why they are successful. This formed an understanding of techniques, identifying various forms of media and developments as technology advanced.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis examines how language and visuals 'persuade people to think about events in a particular way', addressing behavioural changes in conservation marketing in media (Ryan et al, 2019b, p. 11). Hansen and Machin (2008, p. 780) suggested critical discourse analysis had a 'visual turn'; modern approaches allow researchers to 'analyse the way that this happens visually, through photographs, pictures and visual designs', evident in advertising by WWF. This method was useful in analysing visual content, language in adverts and captions on social media. This method extended to 'nonverbal aspects of interaction and communications' such as 'semiotic, multimodal and visual' (Wodak and Meyer, 2015, p.2) - important when studying social media. Scholars outline 'different parts of social media document work together to create and communicate meaning such as pictures and words' (Pennington, 2016, p.245). The combination of studying visuals and captions maximises findings (Pennington, 2016, p.247). This project analyses print ads, social media campaigns and adverts, video adverts and the logo itself, arguing why the flagship logo is significant - determining patterns and identified themes, highlighting established marketing strategies and theories.

### **Limitations**

When completing this study, limitations became apparent. The coding and analysis process was time consuming which is a limitation when using manual analysis methods. Another limitation is the lack of human participation in research. It would be beneficial for future researchers to perhaps involve the organisations they are researching, gaining a deeper insight from an insider perspective and access information that is not available on the internet. As an undergraduate, time and money were constraints to the project. Future projects may include semi-structured interviews, delving into more social media platforms, such as TikTok.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the dissertation analyses the content of different marketing examples by WWF, establishing reoccurring themes. Findings are incorporated into each example, stating outcomes of campaigns.

### Print Advertisements



Figure 1 - Print Advertisement- WWF-France – ‘Lungs’ (2008)

Imagery in marketing is powerful. It can condense ‘complex information, convey powerful messages, and has proven to have cognitive advantages’ (Bergman et al., 2022, p.367); visual adverts are memorable. Advertising agency TBWA Paris developed this print campaign for WWF France, for the ‘Before it’s too late’ (2008) campaign, now accessible on the internet. Trees resembling lungs are depicted, with deforestation occurring in the right

lung, demonstrating harmful impacts for nature and for humanity's health, as deforestation reduces oxygen in the atmosphere. The small text 'Before it's too late', followed by a website link, encourages viewers to visit the webpage. Trees represent nature's lungs, effective as metaphors 'get across the intended message', aiming to 'raise awareness and thus promote changes in public attitudes and behaviour' (Oļehnoviča, Tretjakova and Liepa, 2020, p.442.), which WWF uses to tackle deforestation. This ad personifies nature, portraying rivers as veins, echoed by scholars stating 'water, the bloodstream of our biosphere, determines the sustainability of living systems' (Ripl, 2003, p.1921) – water is essential for life. Grey clouds foreshadow a pessimistic future if action is not taken, common in advertising 'to warn about the urgent need of making changes' (Campos et al., 2021, p.8) – fear initiates change. This visual resembles smoking adverts, using a similar graphic lung visual to evoke fear (Andrews et al., 2014, p.167).

Language generates fear, outlined by Brennan and Binny (2010). Participants suggested guilt and fear campaigns were 'designed to arouse sympathy', using 'campaigns about the environment' as examples, initiating emotional responses. Viewers feel guilty as it insinuates human action is the issue. Secondly, viewers experience 'fear' due to the ominous phrase 'before it's too late', implying there will be a time that issues are 'too late' to resolve. This initiates 'a motivation to resolve the unpleasant emotion by useful adaptive responses' (Schaffner, Demarmels and Juettner. 2015, p. 268); people respond to avoid negative consequences implied. Visual metaphors are effective in 'enhancing persuasion outcomes' (Myers and Jung, 2016, p.229), an attitude shared by Burgers et al., stating 'rhetorical tropes like metaphors and irony have commonly been used in print advertising' (2015, p.515).



Figure 2 - WWF 'Horrifying Campaign' (2010)

These marketing strategies were adopted in this print ad, WWF 'Horrifying Campaign' (2010). This marketing approach uses fear appeals, similar to the 'Lungs' (2008) advert. The advert denotes a shark fin pointing out of water, a predator, holding the stereotype of being 'horrifying'. Next to this is the mirrored image, without the shark fin, with the caption 'more terrifying'. These few words depict a huge message - a world without sharks is more concerning due to threats from marine exploitation, despite their important role in marine ecosystems, overlooked by negative connotations. This fear is due to the media's portrayal 'as fearsome predators' alongside their 'cultural representation in movies such as Jaws' (Friedrich, Jefferson and Glegg, 2014, p.2), shaping public perception. This is a hindrance to shark conservation. WWF aimed to change this.

Simplicity makes this advert effective; there are minimal words, the picture depicts the issue, also evident in Figure 1. Statistics highlight 'around 100 million sharks may be killed annually' (WWF Official Website, 2024), threatening their future. WWF used this campaign to raise awareness of shark exploitation worldwide, formally brushed aside due to lack of interest in the 'horrifying' species. WWF uses print media, presenting visual imagery and fear appeals. Fear is echoed in text: 'exploiting the ecosystem also threatens human lives too', meaning the risk is not only for the species, but for 'human lives' too, as this affects natural ecosystems. Sometimes fear appeals are ineffective, if consumers feel overwhelmed by content, resulting in 'disengagement from the message through the denial of the problem' (Thomas-Walters, McNulty and Verissimo, 2019, p.1140). Marketing communications need to provide additional information, including statistics that reinforce issues raised, increasing trust and knowledge. WWF achieves this by directing viewers to



their website, evident in most forms of marketing by the brand, outlining issues in depth. Studies imply digital media challenged print media (Venkatraman et al., 2021). Print media resulted in increased engagement, allowing viewers to form deeper understandings of context, highlighting the ongoing advantages of print advertisements - even in the digital age (Venkatraman et al., 2021, p.843).

### The Panda as a Flagship Species



Figure 3 - WWF Panda Logo

Figure 3 depicts the famous panda logo by WWF, branded as one of the ‘most successful of all time’ (Brockington, 2008, p.555). ‘Flagship species’ are broadly used in conservation marketing. The panda is a recognisable flagship of WWF, since its creation in 1961. Giant pandas hold great significance within conservation communication, as they ‘exert significant influence through its charisma’ (Yue et al, 2024), and have potential to positively contribute to environmental changes. Walpole and Leader-Williams (2002) recognised the importance of pandas, ‘used by international conservation organisations as a means to raise public awareness and to fundraise’, with WWF as an example of this marketing technique (Walpole and Leader-Williams, 2002, p.544). Monochrome colour schemes, alongside the brand initials of WWF makes the logo effective; Nicholls implied ‘monochromatic species continued to be popular’ in ‘conservation imagery’, as the basic colour scheme helps organisations get noticed in ‘our busy digital world’ of colour (Nicholls, 2011, p.287), whilst minimising printing costs when it was produced. Many scholars recognise the global significance of the WWF logo, suggesting WWF undertook a ‘global rebranding’, which caused ‘several other NPOs to follow suit’ (Nicholls, 2011). Wright et al. suggested these rebranding efforts to this modern logo ‘demonstrate a growing acceptance that effectual marketing is a key component in funding conservation organisations’ (2015, p.42), expanded by Verissimo et al., suggesting WWF-US uses the panda flagship as a ‘recognisable face for a broad range of conservation projects’ (2017, p.99). Further research reiterates this, suggesting ‘emblems are prominently displayed at fund raising functions, through the World Wide Web and direct mailing, and on small gifts including coffee mugs and T-shirts’ (Clucas, McHugh and Caro, 2008, p.1518); WWF’s panda logo is present in all individual marketing initiatives and merchandise, forming a strong brand identity.



Figure 4 – WWF – ‘Would you care more if I was a panda?’ Campaign (2011)

Figure 4 is a campaign published by WWF, in March 2011, depicting flagship species in environmental marketing. This advertisement increased awareness of marine animals in need of conservation, causing guilt by using the rhetorical question: ‘Would you care more if I was a panda?’. Simberloff (1998) underpinned flagship species effectiveness, suggesting marketing is enhanced by using a charismatic species, making people donate. The question implies people have a greater concern for ‘giant pandas’ due to their appearance, described by scholars as ‘cuddly’ and ‘clumsy’ (Yang and Lim, 2022, p.2), which ‘helps evoke universal empathy’. This advert assumes people are likely to support a panda due to this image (Yang and Lim, 2022), compared to less popular endangered species, such as bluefin tuna.

This advert addresses limitations of the flagship species outlined in literature, suggesting using campaigns exclusive to these species’ means less conservation efforts for less popular endangered species. This is echoed in adoption of species; a study found the least adopted species for WWF US were ‘the mandrill, pileated woodpecker and bighorned sheep’, which was ‘explained by species appeal’, suggesting donations are often based on ‘aesthetic factors’ (Verissimo et al., 2017, p.98). Barua (2011) outlines using the panda ‘runs the risk of devaluing species’ that are not considered flagships (Barua, 2011, p.1437) - reiterated by Smith et al. (2012) and Fischer et al. (2011). This advert acknowledges this limitation, attempting to raise conservation funds for a less ‘charismatic’ species that were previously neglected – the bluefin tuna. The fish masked as a panda and asking this question, uses guilt appeal marketing strategies - increasing willingness to donate to less popular species, responding to disadvantages. Research outlined correlations between guilt

appeals and donations (Hibbert et al., 2007). The panda as a mask is effective as it triggers ‘sympathy, awareness and resources’ (Lorimer, 2007, p. 923), increasing the viewer’s emotional response, effective in marketing. The use of the panda broadly in marketing and on social media resulted in important news. In an article by WWF in 2023, the ‘International Union for Conservation of Nature’ (IUCN) announced that the giant panda is no longer ‘endangered’ and is now ‘vulnerable’ in status, after a 17% population growth over a decade (Giesbers, 2023). The author referenced WWF’s panda logo, detailing the ‘decades of conservation efforts’ and ‘investment into the conservation of iconic species like the giant panda’, has contributed to this positive outcome (Giesbers, 2023).

## **Video Adverts and Campaigns**

### **WWF-UK Christmas Advert 2020 – ‘Elephant Trail’**



Screenshot 1 - Elephant Trail (0:44)





Screenshot 2 - Elephant Trail (0:54)



Screenshot 3 - Elephant Trail (0:55)



LET'S PROTECT THEIRS

#### Screenshot 4 - Elephant Trail (0:58)

The 'Elephant Trail' advertisement was released on 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2020 as WWF-UK's Christmas advert. Black and white footage tells a one-minute environmental story, with a girl walking through a city. There are alarms sounding, cars on their side, and viewers are unaware the cause of events. She enters a park, noticing the equipment has been destroyed, continuing to walk, before coming face to face with the cause – a distressed elephant. A blank screen appears declaring: 'We would all be lost without a home'. Next, is a close-up shot of the elephant with tears. The blank screen with contrasting writing appears again, stating 'Let's protect theirs', leaving viewers with a blunt message – it is human responsibility to protect their habitat. The young girl in the advert (Screenshot 1) highlights it is the younger generation holding the power to change the outcome for species. The young girl has a panda sticker on her music case, demonstrating enthusiasm for conservation. The importance of the younger generation in conservation is outlined by IUCN: 'Nurturing an environment where young people feel valued, empowered, and heard in their environmental endeavours is not only morally imperative but also crucial for the long-term sustainability of our planet' (Kumar, 2023) – this generation can change the future, hence WWF use this age category in the advert. Additionally, this advert appeals to parents, encouraging pro-environmental attitudes, as scholars outline 'people with children care more about the future of the planet (Palomo-Vélez, Buczny and Van Vugt, 2020, p.748), aiming for the best future for their children, by acting in the present.

A Christmas advertisement is a prime window for fundraising for conservation, such as WWF. Christmas is a time with 'high sales volumes', driven by effective marketing. Successful advertising can 'communicate the essence of the brand in a way that is believable, credible and relevant to consumers' (Cartwright, McCornick and Warnaby, 2016, p.87), applicable to this WWF Christmas advert, combining real world events such as Covid-19, that target audiences relate to, linking this to environmental issues. The year of release is

important; Covid-19 hit in 2020 and the world closed down. WWF incorporated this into the advert:

‘2020 has been challenging for us all. It's reminded us of the importance of our homes and families, particularly at Christmas.

That's why our Christmas advert this year is on elephants - animals who rely on family ties too, yet are losing their homes every day.’

(WWF, 2020)

A marketing technique used in Christmas adverts is ‘tugging on the heart strings’ to ‘elicit an emotional response’ (Cartwright, McCornick and Warnaby, 2016, p.89); the elephant trail achieves this through language and visuals. Research suggests ‘employing emotional appeals is one of the most common strategies for NPOs to raise support for their cause’ (Septiano, Kemper and Chiew, 2020, p.445), with some appeals causing ‘negative emotions such as sadness’. The close-up shot of the elephant with tears personifies the creature showing it possesses emotion, resulting in guilt - blaming the loss of the elephant’s home on human action. This places viewers in the situation, claiming ‘we would all be lost without a home’ - humans are responsible so humans are the solution. Guilt appeals are enforced, ‘used to grab attention’, in the form of ‘shock, fear and guilt appeals’ as common examples (Hibbert et al., 2007, p. 724).

Campaign Video: Earth Hour 2024 Official Video



Screenshot 5 - Earth Hour (0:07)



Screenshot 6 - Earth Hour 2024 (0:28)



Screenshot 7 - Earth Hour (0:33)



Screenshot 8 - Earth Hour (0:56)

WWF International release an annual ‘official video’ promoting this event, posted on YouTube and social media platforms. The most recent advert premiered on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2024. The advert begins by introducing the logo, showing ‘Earth Hour’ capitalised in green font; the numbers 60 replicates blue and green colours of the earth, establishing this as an environment movement, dedicating ‘60’ minutes to fight climate change. This video

encourages participation ‘while doing something you love!’, depicting an enthusiastic tone, emphasised by the exclamation mark. This tone is echoed when discussing positive outcomes from 2023, suggesting people gave over ‘410,000 hours’ for earth, in ‘190’ different countries (WWF, 2024). The video incorporates footage of communities sharing their commitment to environmental action, expressing happiness of those involved, fulfilling the aim of the campaign: ‘it was not going to be about fear, but it was going to be about hope’ (Sison, 2013, p.231). Scholars found correlations between using facts and positive emotion simultaneously; responses relied upon the combination of ‘communication strategies that combine emotion and facts’ (Schaffner, Dermarmels and Juettnner, 2015, p. 266), stating ‘positive emotions... may lead to a larger probability to process the according communication’ (p. 268). Further research reinforces positive outcomes when using ‘enthusiasm appeals,’ reiterating optimistic attitudes, resulting in greater outcomes (Searles, 2010, p.180). There is no target audience - ‘anyone and everyone’ can be involved (Earth Hour, 2024), demonstrated with the broad age range represented in the video.

Alongside campaign videos, all individual branches of WWF share the event using marketing techniques, including images and facts. On the 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2024, a Facebook post by WWF – UK stated ‘Earth Hour, the area of 1,631 football pitches of forest is lost’, relating deforestation to a popular hobby, football, putting the extremity of the issue into perspective. Using facts is a key conservation marketing strategy as it educates audiences (Ryan et al, 2019, p. 356). The number ‘1,631 football pitches’, results in shock, proving emotion and facts are not independent, but are ‘complimentary routes to persuasion’, combining strategies for greater outcomes (Schaffner, Dermarmels and Juettnner, 2015, p. 266). Research into energy consumption impacts of Earth Hour state ‘switching off lights for one hour per year is certainly not enough’ (Jechow, 2019, p.14). One hour does not necessarily reduce carbon emissions, as many scholars outline (Sison, 2013, p. 236). However, the aim of this marketing campaign is not how an hour changes the world, but a symbolic gesture encouraging action beyond this event, sparking conversation worldwide. This hope appeal is reinforced in other social media campaigns, such as #TogetherWeCan (2021), promoting shared efforts globally changes the future of the planet, essential as hope is a ‘powerful motivator’ in behavioural change (Chadwick, 2014, p.599). Sison summarises this: ‘Earth Hour is a recognised global event with a clear brand, a symbolic visual, excellent applications of new and traditional media, and a global celebrity’ (Sison, 2013, p.236), showing the progression of conservation marketing in the digital age. Statistics published from 2024 Earth Hour stated participation from 180 countries, contributing to over ‘1.4 million hours’, making it ‘the biggest hour for earth yet’ (Earth Hour, 2024), reinforcing annual progression, driven by influences of social media marketing, uniting people worldwide.



Figure 5 - WWF Endangered Emoji Campaign (2015)

Social media marketing is prominent for environmental NPOs, with ‘nearly all conservation organisations active on social media nowadays’ offering ‘Web 2.0 communication’ (Büscher, 2014, p.727), exclusive to the digital age; the internet was a ‘catalyst’ for change in environmental communication (Miller and Heiland, 2021, p.1). Figure 5 shows the 2015 Endangered Emoji campaign by WWF-UK, alongside advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy London and Cohaesus (WWF, 2015). Introduction of emojis in 2014 urged advertising agencies to integrate them into marketing strategies. Emojis are simple in sharing emotion, prominent on social media (Yakın and Eru, 2017, p.235), as they ‘raise awareness and recognition of institutions’ (p.238), such as WWF. This Twitter campaign connected seventeen endangered emojis, represented in Figure 5. Once signed up, a donation was made for every endangered emoji posted, with WWF sending users a summary of emojis used with a sum - yet monthly amounts were decided by users (WWF, 2015). This is another example of WWF using contemporary topics and incorporating into marketing, as a new form of communication. This was reiterated by WWF, stating intentions to ‘translate the popularity of these characters into vital funds for its work’ (WWF, 2015).

This campaign targeted a younger demographic (regular twitter users), sharing the brand with a broader demographic with the ability to change the future. Twitter was effective in depicting environmental issues, often ‘ignored by the mainstream media’ (Xue, Li and



Anna Maria Wen, 2023, p.2) - an effective space for communication. The campaign got over 12,000 retweets on the first day (Cohaesus, 2015). This was a pivotal moment for marketing using emojis for fundraising, introducing a technique going forward, without generating guilt or fear. This campaign was accredited 'successful', attracting 59,618 sign ups and 559,000 mentions on Twitter in two months (Bergman et al., 2022, p.370), implying social media campaigning positively enhanced marketing in the digital age. Participation from celebrities involved resulted in 'thousands of messages a second when WWF ambassadors, with millions of followers, retweeted the campaign' (Cohaesus, 2024), using emojis as a 'universal language' (Yakin and Eru, 2017 p. 239). This allowed people to participate worldwide without language barriers, enhanced by celebrity involvement. Social media was subsequently used to promote other campaigns, such as 'Earth Hour', and 'Your Plastic Diet' (2020). Advantages of social media marketing is summarised by scholars: 'Social media marketing presents an opportunity for NPOs and charities to reach people in a timely, targeted, personal, relevant, engaging, and cost-effective way' (Yousef et al., 2022, p.2).

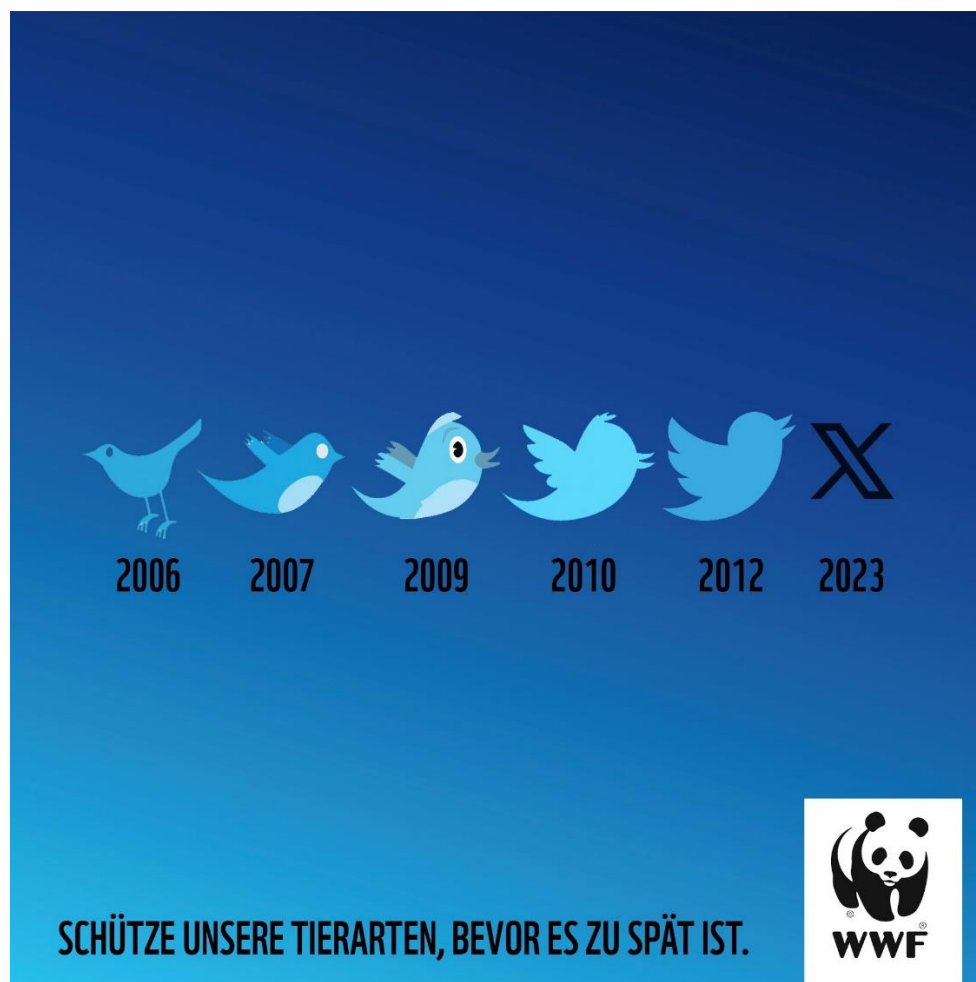


Figure 6 – Twitter Rebrand WWF Post (2023)

A more recent example is depicted in Figure 6, a social media marketing post, released by WWF Deutschland, created by marketing company 'McCann' for LinkedIn and Twitter. The



phrase ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ has become ‘the new maxim among social media marketers (Li and Xie, 2019, p.1), showing power of visuals on social media. In July 2023, Twitter was rebranded ‘X’, initiating a global debate on social media, with the loss of the recognisable blue bird logo. The caption translates to ‘Protect wildlife, before it’s too late’, using the same quote from earlier communication, used in the ‘Lungs’ print campaign from 2008.

WWF Germany used the rebrand to raise awareness about a topic with current cultural relevancy, making the post viral, as social media allows conservation marketing to ‘spread easily and quickly’, with over ‘half of the world’s population being active on social media’ (Takashina, Cheung and Miyazawa, 2022, p.2). The image displays the evolution of the twitter logo since the platform established in 2006. In 2023, the new logo appears, pre-empting extinction not only of the logo, but the blue bird itself. WWF utilised the logo change to create a comment on the extinction of wildlife, extending from the bird literally depicted, to broader species. The clever use of imagery, using relevant topics in the media to promote wildlife conservation is a successful strategy, additionally used throughout Covid-19, as apparent in the ‘Elephant Trail’ video advert. Becoming viral made users aware of the brand, which is the aim of social media marketing, ‘to become accessible to those interested and noticeable to anyone who was not familiar with their brand’ (Mehotra and Siraj, 2021, p.1073). This campaign aimed to result in behavioural changes of viewers. This logo change was a big topic of conservation; WWF used this image to promote behavioural changes to save the bird species, and species broadly, as the X implies total extinction. The majority of ‘conservation marketing conventions are built on the conviction that only through changes in behaviour can threats to biodiversity be mitigated’ (Frank, Glikman and Marchini, 2019, p.342) - this post aimed to achieve this, using relevant, contemporary events for communication strategies.

### **Celebrity Endorsement in Conservation Marketing**

Figure 7 is a post by Daisy London on X, formerly Twitter. Ellie Goulding is a WWF ambassador, officially joining in March 2022, to raise awareness and encourage participation in movements, sharing her partnership with the brand on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram reels and X. Daisy London partnered with Ellie Goulding in 2017, designing two bracelets, with profits given to WWF to fight climate change – a topic Goulding is passionate about. Ellie Goulding has since become an ambassador for the company, appearing recently in an Instagram reel (September, 2023) and a YouTube video, working alongside WWF reiterating the importance of forests, stating ‘I’m here to see first-hand why we must halt and reverse nature loss by the end of this decade’ (Goulding, 2023) – reflecting her personal beliefs regarding the importance of conservation.

DAISY

**Daisy London @Daisy... · 22/08/2017 ...**  
**@elliegoulding owning it @vfestival**  
**wearing our Ellie Goulding x Daisy**  
**bracelet to help @wwf\_uk fight climate**  
**change [bit.ly/EGxDaisy](https://bit.ly/EGxDaisy)**



Figure 7 - Ellie Goulding collaboration  
with Daisy London Jewellery Brand – X Post (22<sup>nd</sup> August 2017)

Celebrity endorsement is a significant strategy for social marketing. Research proposes ‘celebrity endorsers can enhance advertisement credibility and liking as well as brand image, awareness and purchase behaviour’ (Ford, 2018, p. 1). Scholars concluded celebrity endorsers improve effectiveness, resulting in ‘effective measures, such as attitudes towards the ad, attitude toward the brand and purchase intention’ (Muda, Musa and Putit, 2012, p.379). WWF work alongside numerous celebrities, who support their ethos and marketing campaigns, promoting the brand on social media, forming a ‘Council of Ambassadors’. Research highlighted people were likely to support a celebrity supporting conservation if they believed they ‘cared’ or were ‘knowledgeable’ about a topic, (Duthie et al, 2017, p.7), evident with WWF ambassadors as their social media presence reflects their views, instigating followers to participate. WWF’s ‘Council of Ambassadors’ are an

‘influential group of senior volunteers’, implying they are not being paid, suggesting they are committed to WWF’s mission personally. This means consumers believe their message, increasing support for a cause. This is underpinned by Duthie et al. who stated respondents were less likely to engage with marketing if they believed the celebrity was paid, which affected credibility of knowledge (2017, p.7). This is an effective strategy, allowing brands to reach an audience which otherwise would not be reached (Olmedo et al., 2020, p. 11), especially in the digital age of social media. The followers of a celebrity will become aware of campaigns and messages of WWF, increasing participation and awareness to strive for behavioural change.



leonardodicaprio



241,159 likes

**leonardodicaprio** The smallest member of the porpoise family is the most endangered marine mammal in the world. Unsustainable and illegal fishing practices have caused a dramatic decline in the vaquita's population. Fewer than 30 vaquita may be left in the wild and without immediate action, they face imminent extinction.

Join me and [@World\\_Wildlife](#) and let President Peña Nieto of Mexico know that we demand action to protect the vaquita today. Link in bio.

[View all 1,284 comments](#)

11 May 2017

Figure 8 - Leonardo DiCaprio Instagram Post (11<sup>th</sup> May, 2017)

Another example of celebrity collaboration with WWF is worldwide known actor, Leonardo DiCaprio, who posted on social media in 2017 to support conservation efforts to save the endangered vaquita (species of porpoise), requiring action to be taken. Leonardo DiCaprio is a prominent example, as ‘one of the most influential celebrity environmental activists in the world’ (Chaturvedi, Kulshreshtha and Tripathi, 2021, p.629), echoed on social media accounts. DiCaprio has supported worldwide organisations since 1998, working on the board of several organisations dedicated to conservation, one being WWF (Chaturvedi, Kulshreshtha and Tripathi, 2021, p.629). His support of WWF accelerated awareness; this post was visible to DiCaprio’s 17.5 million twitter followers and 50.3 million Instagram followers (Bergman et al, 2022, p. 363), reaching a vast audience, not possible by WWF’s campaign alone. As a result, ‘200,000 people’ emailed the Mexican President, who announced ‘a permanent ban on the use of gillnets in the northern gulf of California and collaborative efforts to develop new fishing techniques’ (Bergman, 2017, p.373). President Barack Obama became involved, highlighting social media’s power in uniting ‘presidents, celebrities and concerned members of the public’, as legislation implementation occurred - a huge success for WWF. However, this example outlined concerns regarding the longevity of conservation laws, highlighting policy changes over time. Conservation laws are not guaranteed to remain (Bergman et al., 2017, p.373), therefore need to be revisited for long term impacts.

Whilst this is an example of success, it is important to acknowledge the weaknesses of marketing strategies. Celebrity endorsement as a marketing strategy has faced ‘numerous barriers (Duthie et al, 2017, p. 12), as some consumers often question the credibility of issues raised. Willingness to engage is altered by questioning the celebrity’s knowledge of issues discussed, hindering development of marketing campaigns. To counteract this, involvement from celebrities needs to indicate a social media presence, reflecting their personal views. After looking at numerous examples, WWF continue to work alongside celebrities worldwide, highlighting credibility on social media, aligning with personal beliefs.

## **Brand Collaboration with WWF**



Figure 9 - WWF and Coca Cola Campaign – ‘Arctic Home’ (2011)

Coca Cola initially partnered with WWF in 2007 (WWF Report, 2012/13). The marketing campaign ‘Arctic Home’ was a partnership between WWF and Coca Cola, launching in October 2011 exclusively in the US and Canada. This was a global integrated marketing campaign to help critically endangered polar bears. Also considered a ‘flagship species’ of WWF, the charismatic nature of the polar bear helped marketing success due to willingness to donate. Marketing consisted of video ads, print ads and ‘digital and creative across Coca Colas spot on Piccadilly Circus sign’ (O’Reilly, 2013), to raise awareness of their partnership. Limited-edition coca cola cans featuring images of polar bears were released, helping raise awareness and funding, forming the biggest marketing campaign by Coca Cola, using their brand mascot. Collaborative marketing resulted in immense success for WWF, focusing on ‘communications and awareness raising’, including ‘cause related marketing campaigns’ (WWF, 2023), with ‘Arctic Home’ as a prime example. A news article states successes: ‘In just 5 months, Arctic Home raised nearly 2 million dollars for polar bear conservation’, highlighting financial gain and increased environmental knowledge, meaning WWF used funds to ‘support research’ (WWF, 2012). By collaborating with businesses, WWF broadens their reach, increasing donations from individuals interested in conservation and coca cola consumers generally. Research summarised this: ‘partners realize that what can be achieved together cannot be achieved separately’ (Harangozó and Zilahy, 2015, p.23).

This marketing technique overlaps with flagship species strategy, combining techniques, using polar bears, considered to be amongst the ‘twenty most charismatic species’, alongside

the 'panda' (Albert, Luque and Courchamp, 2018, p.6). Polar bears are successful mascots for conservation marketing due to the impact climate change has on their habitat – important in climate change marketing communications. Scholars suggest polar bears 'represent a good flagship to raise international awareness about the impacts of climate change' (Macdonald et al., 2017, p.205). This helped appeal to broader audiences, assisting funds to fight climate change. WWF-Canada posted their 'success', stating '\$420,000 raised by Canadians for Arctic Home', (WWF-Canada, 2013), showing extensive success. In 2021, Coca Cola and WWF renewed their partnership for three years (Black and Snavely, 2022). The most recent collaborative business report highlighted recent endeavours, striving for 'a more climate resilient and water secure future' (WWF, 2023), highlighting more collaborative marketing initiatives for a variety of causes, reiterating benefits of brand collaboration for further reach, funding and budgets.





Figure 10 - WWF Partnership with Omaze Facebook Post (16<sup>th</sup> February 2024)

More recently, WWF UK partnered with Omaze for their million-pound house draw in Cornwall, raising funds for WWF. As highlighted in the Facebook caption, Omaze guaranteed a minimum donation of £1 million to WWF-UK, with outcomes excelling this initial goal. Brand collaborations have become increasingly popular. Scholars argued the 21<sup>st</sup> century provided a new door for marketing; businesses and NGOs have a common sustainability goal, leading to ‘collaborative action’ (Hicks, 2012, p.256). This collaboration between Omaze and WWF reached consumers of both. Conservation progression can be



achieved by an audience who might not typically participate. Through increased brand exposure, they enhance brand awareness and credibility, resulting in more donations and participation in conservation, reinforcing WWF's reputation. Overall, this initiative raised £3.1 million for WWF (Omaze, 2024), surpassing original goals. Through brand collaboration, such as Coca Cola and Omaze, marketing budgets can be maximised, creating collaborative campaigns that gain more attention, providing benefits for both brands (Bracher, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

The key to impactful marketing is behavioural change. In conservation marketing, this comes in various forms – including increased brand awareness, law implementation, further research, funding, and adoption of species. Whilst this dissertation does not cover all campaign and marketing success of WWF over sixty years, all examples outline key strategies, driving the company's success. Impactful techniques were evident in earlier print ads and developed in the digital age using social media, enhancing outreach. Despite the digital age challenging print media, it is important to continue using marketing in various media channels, as each has a different target audience. WWF appeals to both a younger and older demographic. Therefore, it is important to appeal to all; everyone can participate regardless of age, helping fight environmental issues, prominent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The brand utilises various marketing strategies, successful in promoting and raising awareness of the above issues, as well as increasing funding for the brand resulting in conservation successes. It was difficult to define success, as different marketing strategies have varying degrees of success. Defining success in conservation marketing is a recognized dilemma, suggesting 'there is no single path to success nor a singular action that will ensure success' (Cooke et al., 2020, p. 370); success has no single measurement and can be achieved in numerous ways, evident throughout this research.

The main strategies highlighted included flagship species, brand collaboration, celebrity endorsement and the ongoing reliance of powerful visuals. This is a key aspect of marketing, using powerful imagery or footage to ensure marketing reaches consumers and builds brand credibility simultaneously. An aspect evident within most examples are emotion appeals, commonly in the form of fear or guilt, such as the 'Horri-fying' campaign, and the 'Elephant Trail' video ad. Conversely, 'Earth Hour' used enthusiasm appeals, making viewers hopeful. Whilst both appeals have proven to be successful, it is important to acknowledge both strategies cause opposite emotional responses – negative and positive. Both strive to achieve alternative outcomes, suggesting 'different emotions might be important for different stages of behavioural outcome' (Wonneberger, 2017, p180). Authors concluded 'guilt as one of the relevant factors for initial behavioural change, while optimism was more important for long term changes' (Wonneberger, 2017, p.180), suggesting the message corresponded to varying degrees of urgency. The engagement of the brand has significantly increased over recent years, coinciding with the digital age due to the evident expansion of marketing efforts. WWF's marketing achieves powerful emotional responses, resulting in one key indicator of social marketing success – behavioural change. Future

researchers could collaborate with corporations, contributing new ideas to a topic constantly evolving: conservation marketing.

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‘It’s not Harry Styles’ fault that he happens to be white and cute and straight:’

a study into the discourse around the ‘feminisation’ of white queer masculinity within English language media

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‘Playtime With Harry’ Photoshoot – Photographer: Tyler Mitchell

## INTRODUCTION

'It's not Harry Styles's fault that he happens to be white and cute and straight' explained Reddit user Afraid\_Sugar3811. Whilst politically infamous users Ben Shapiro and Candace Owens refer to Styles as an 'attack on masculinity.' (Evans, 2020) In a decade defined by the shift in societal norms of what it means to be a man or a woman, where boundaries of gender are renegotiated and an important vessel in the deconstruction of notions surrounding gender, sexuality, and race; the media as an industry has become a seminal platform for the exploration of what it means to be 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Such as, Lil Nas X challenging black masculinity and making it 'queer'. A key persona in the manhood and 'feminisation' of masculinity debate; Harry Styles. An English performer, who rose to fame from the British television phenomena *The X Factor* (2004-2018). With his rise in fame, his lack of desire to conform to a heteronormative façade lacked as he strayed from the idyllic pop sensation *One Direction* and his solo career catapulted into mainstream media with many accusations of 'queerbaiting' and fracturing societal expectations of masculinity and men.

Since the emergence of mass media and journalism as an industry, the ideas of hegemonic masculinity, sexuality and race have been propelled into mainstream society as social norms. These are shown through many pre-requisites found in classic media archetypes such as 'The Cowboy', first shown in *The Great Train Robbery*, the first narrative film. (Porter, 1903) Pre-conceptions within society surrounding the spectacle of masculinity have burdened men from the beginning of time, shifting their perspectives to conform to toxic ideologies and alter their behaviour in order to comply. For instance, men who do not comply with these stereotypes, can be forced to do so through public shaming and pressure. Heteronormative discourse is ingrained within the media, whilst harmful portrayals are being showcased to wider audiences, cultivating their views, opinions, and ideas about heteronormativity and how to be masculine. Media producers are relying on toxicity, misogyny, and traditional archetypes to reinforce their harmful stereotypes into the world and to reproduce these into the media sphere.

### Background

Harry Styles has emerged as one of the world's most prominent and influential popular culture icons, defying traditional archetypes and transmogrifying norms within his music, modus operandi, and social media presence. Styles adds an intricate debate to the ongoing discourse surrounding gender, sexuality, and race in English language media. For this project, it is critical to thoroughly review the history of these. Since the emergence of media as a form of mass communication, racism in history has been a 'disturbing factor in human relations in our entire social structure.' (Wesley, 1972) Using this, Styles has been accused of promoting racial politics, anti-black media and spreading hatred on social media and online journalistic outlets during his 2023 Grammy awards speech. Styles quoted 'this doesn't happen to people like me very often', which left viewers of the awards show immediately puzzled as to what Styles; a cisgendered, white male was attempting to express, sparking multiple online debates.

Sexuality and gender identity is also a rooted dispute in modern society. In recent years, there is a growing public discussion about LGBTQ+ history. The repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988 in 2003 is arguably one of the most significant events in British LGBTQ+ history; this law prohibited local authorities from promoting homosexuality. (Mills, 2006) Gender rights are one of the most controversial issues within history and include one of the most influential political movements to date, the Women's Suffragette Rights Movement. This movement showcases that the discussion about gender, sexuality and race is still extremely prominent in modern day society, despite the movement dating back to 20<sup>th</sup> century United Kingdom.

Harry Styles is integrated within popular culture as a queer icon latched to the music industry and can be used as a vessel to bring forth the media's perpetuations of being genderqueer and what it means to be a 'man'. This study will assist in changing the way the media incarnates gender, sexuality and race and showcases the impact on social media in a bid to change societies outlooks. This research can hopefully be a way for any underrepresented social groups to be displayed in a positive way, whilst highlighting inequities and condemning negative portrayals still shown in contemporary media. A debate this has sparked is the use of social media and the emergence of social media platforms as a force for positive and negative responses to representations of gender-queerness.

The history of social media as a platform has arisen from the human want to communicate to the masses utilising advancements in technology. Since the emergence of Web 2.0; the current state of the internet, the internet has dawned as a complex form of media that has captivated society since its beginnings, embracing the way we disseminate information. Social media arguably began with e-mail where there have been,

ongoing debates on whether Email could be considered a part of social media. The predominant reasons why Email is not considered a social media are because Email is a distribution mechanism whereas social media is a collective mechanism [...] But Email certainly qualifies if we go by the simple definition that social media is conversations that happen online. (Sajithra, 2013)

And eventually emerged the rise of media conglomerates, such as META, who created platforms such as Facebook and Instagram and the rise of social networking platforms such as Reddit and X (formerly known as Twitter).

Styles' *Vogue* cover remains one of the most controversial covers to date. The cover is titled 'Playtime With Harry Styles' (Bowles, 2020) and the article attached was written by Hamish Bowles, photography by Tyler Mitchell, Styles was styled by Camilla Nickerson and was published on the 13th of November 2020. This prominent piece in pop culture sparked multiple discussions on social and press media. For example, in more contemporary news pieces, actor Billy Porter was heavily criticised for "[doubling down](#) on his distaste for [Harry Styles](#)' historic *Vogue* cover." (Wong, 2023) This article from the *Huffington Post* indicates that issues surrounding Styles' presentation of gender is still heavily prominent in society

today, anchoring that society has not evolved regarding ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Further emphasising the importance of my research and highlighting the ideals of the press surrounding the popularity of news and what makes a publish worthy news story. However, in stark contrast, Styles also received support from the press media, *The London Economist* released an article titled ‘Harry Styles gets celeb support after criticism of Vogue cover dress’, (Mellor, 2020) displaying the plethora of support Styles had received for embracing a gender-fluid fashion piece.

This research dissertation delves into the social media discourse around Harry Styles’ gender queerness and explores how it affects the media’s construction of the feminisation of masculinity through people’s opinions on social platforms using the *Vogue* cover as a case study. Utilising social media as a form to study people’s unbiased opinions, exploring the idea that hegemonic ideologies of masculinity, race and gender hinder society as a whole and not just men. This study aims to explore the profound effects of this debate on society by exposing the erection of these societal constructions in relation to Styles’ gender-queer discourse.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Popular culture and literature are merely a reflection of societal values and ideals. Queer media has been an extremely prevalent topic within the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Many examples of literature and theoretical texts have amassed discourse around gender, sexuality and race which have plagued audiences across the world and help aid in answering the research area of the social media discourse around the construction of Harry Styles’ gender queerness and the media’s construction of the feminisation of masculinity. This project is rooted in academic literature in the field of gender, sexuality, and racial studies; there is a plethora of research providing a more detailed insight into this field. This section of the project will explore and analyse scholarly sources focusing on these main themes – gender and sex, sexuality and queerness and racial discrimination.

### **Gender and Sex**

The term ‘gender’ has amassed colossal amounts of controversy. What happens when the line between gender and sex is skewed? When exploring the feminisation of masculinity within English language media as a concept, many key theoretical texts including Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* explore this field with an emphasis on certain themes. For example, one clear theme showcased within literature and popular culture is the theme of queerphobia and ‘gender trouble’. This idea is explicitly shown in Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), specifically the idea that the subversion of identity and the abolishment of the binary view of biological sex, gender identity and sexual orientation are key to this debate. But what if Harry Styles creates ‘gender trouble’ within society and causes mass social chaos and sparks important conversations?

Within *Gender Trouble*, the idea that the framework for the discussion of gender within the media is rooted in the study of semiotics, the study of signs and symbols. Butler

explains ‘the relation between masculine and feminine cannot be represented in a signifying economy in which the masculine constitutes the closed circle of signifier and signified.’ (Butler, 1990) To further understand the disparity between male and female representations in the media, this idea is very effective when addressing this research area. Developing from this, it specifically aids when exploring Harry Styles and other artists messages and signs in media products, highlighting the difference in representation between gender and queer portrayals. Within the quote, Butler states ‘masculine constitutes the closed circle of signifier and signified.’ (Butler, 1990) This section of the quote implies that within conventional media representations of gender, ideas of toxic masculinity dominate media portrayals and act as a ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’, potentially marginalising ideas of femininity and feminine conventions. Further highlighting the medias perpetuation of negative stereotypes. However, a critique of this use of literature, it heavily focuses on ideas of feminism and femininity, however, Butler's concept as a whole critiques the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ through the angle of a feminist sociologist. Linking back to the field of research, this use of literature can be applied to the study as Butler explains that gender is performative and non-linear, much like Harry Styles’ representation of gender within print and mass media, such as, non-gender conforming clothing and the non-disclosure of his sexuality as shown in the *Vogue* cover.

Butler’s *Gender Trouble* heavily explores and critiques traditional feminism and explores the notions of being and what it means to be ‘feminine’ and a ‘woman’. Butler says, ‘Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’. (Butler, 1990) This quote explores the idea that gender is socially constructed, rather than a biological, innate status assigned from birth. This idea is extremely useful when applying it to the research field of gender as contemporary debates, including those of trans rights and the wage gap, help society understand and discuss the concept of gender and gender identity. With contemporary examples including the murder of Brianna Ghey, a young transgender female who was murdered by her classmates. In a news article written for *The Guardian*, the headline states ‘Brianna Ghey has ‘humanised’ trans debate in Warrington, says MP’ (Pidd, 2024), this showcases how Butler’s ideas help spark key debates within society. A key section of the quote is ‘gender is the repeated stylization of the body.’ (Butler, 1990) This could suggest that gender is merely a facade and not an inherent concept and can be highlighted using clothing and physical presentations. This can be applied to the research field as the crucial debate around Harry Styles is his use of non-gendered clothing. For example, a *Guardian* article’s headline states ‘How Harry Styles became the face of gender-neutral fashion.’ (Elan, 2020) Butler's ideas can be applied to this as Styles repeatedly stylises his fashion to create a gender-queer exterior, including those at his concerts and within the press. However, this can be critiqued as Harry Styles is a white, arguably heterosexual male and can be debated that gender-queer representations cannot be seen through these means, as, the use of a cisgendered male disparages the representation, leaving the LGBTQ+ community with a lack of positive representation. Using Butler’s *Gender Trouble* comes with many positives and negatives, the key focus of this book is women and as Harry Styles is a white male, some ideas are not applicable in this area. This project also focuses on a post Covid-19

pandemic age whereas *Gender Trouble* was written in the pre-pandemic era. However, the book itself focuses on gender representation and the meanings of 'gender' and 'sex', these are heavily applicable to this research as Styles is a key persona in these contemporary debates.

Another key text for my research is Steve Neale's 1993 *Screen* article 'Masculinity as Spectacle', as it is a foundational theoretical text for the discussion of masculinity in the media. This piece of theoretical text raises awareness and facilitates conversation about how masculinity is portrayed in film and is a critical reflection of masculinity and mainstream cinema. This article explores the theory that the media's frequent portrayal of societal heteronormativity has obscured masculinity as a feature of the medium and begins the article by highlighting the lack of literature surrounding representations of masculinity, particularly in comparison to the literature about women's representation in mass media. Neale explains 'heterosexual masculinity is inscribed and the mechanisms, pressures and contradictions that inscription may involve.' (Neale, 1993) This perspective is useful when applying to the research area due to the inside focus on masculinity in the media, it allows us to identify key areas that need further development in this field such as the representation of toxic masculinity and the ideas of Mulvey's 'Male Gaze.' (Mulvey, 1975) Further on, Neale explores the idea of how the male body is sometimes 'feminised', 'The look is usually marked as female. But Hudson's body is *feminised* in those moments.' (Neale, 1993) A key section of this quote is the term 'feminised', (Neale, 1993) utilising this, the term feminisation refers to the process of developing female characteristics and traits, this can heavily be applied to Harry Styles as much of his persona embodies femininity and gender-queerness. For example, in a *British Vogue* article titled, 'Harry Styles Is Very Ready for Gender Norms To Fade Away' (Mcnamara, 2019), *British Vogue* award-winning journalist McNamara states Styles discusses how the 'rigid roles society has long ascribed to people based on gender are falling away. The lessening of these roles, Harry said, is making all parts of life more interesting.'" (Mcnamara, 2019) This quote showcases a large cultural and influential shift away from traditional gender roles and stereotypes. However, linking back to Steve Neale, the breaking down of traditional gender roles, the construction of masculinity and how these roles are perpetuated to society through the mass media are discussed. Whereas here, Styles dissects these gender roles Neale proposes and allows for a broader range of gender expression through his androgynous exterior. Styles also deconstructs these ideas and transmogrifies the ideas of masculinity in popular culture through interviews, music videos and his album covers, such as the 2019 album *Fine Line*, (Styles, 2019) adhering to Neale's theory. That being said, strengths and limitations of Neale include the theory heavily focuses on men, an arguable denominator in gender media theory and is extremely useful when exploring the discourse around the representation of the feminisation of white queer masculinity within English language media. In stark contrast, the theory is arguably outdated, with cinematic examples being pre-2000, such as *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham, 1977) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, (Ford, 1962) making the argument not as strong as other contemporary examples. However, this anchors the reasoning behind why my research is needed, to enhance and expand on the existing literature discussing masculinity.



## Sexuality and Queerness

Ideas of masculinity and gender are crucial to this debate; however, sexuality and queer ideas are vital when exploring the field of the feminisation of white queer masculinity. Doty, Dyer and Bridges are key personas in this field, producing fundamental ideas within queer theory.

Theorist Alexander Doty demonstrates pivotal ideas in his book *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. (Doty, 1993) He discusses the construction of queerness in key areas within mass culture including,

influences during the production of texts; historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers; and adopting reception positions that can be considered “queer” in some way, regardless of a person’s declared sexual and gender allegiances. (Doty, 1993)

Throughout his work, Doty showcases the various ideas that shape the representation and reception of queerness and LGBTQ+ themes across different forms of media. For example, “queer’ might be used to describe the intersection or combination of more than one established ‘non-straight’ sexuality or gender position in a spectator, a text, or a personality.’ (Hill et al, 1998) This quote explores the ideas that the definition of ‘queer’ can be defined by the media texts background and the text can self-identify as queer ‘regardless of a person’s declared sexual and gender allegiances.’ (Hill et al, 1998) This idea is extremely useful when discussing the idea that English language media is becoming predominantly feminised, it helps society understand that the definition of ‘queer’ is fluid and can assist in the comprehension of queer themes in cinema, with contemporary examples being *Call Me By Your Name* (Guadagnino, 2017) and *Love, Simon*. (Berlanti, 2018) These examples solidify Doty’s ideas and help suggest that the increased ‘feminisation’ of masculinity within English language media reflects societal shifts and changes in attitudes towards queer themes.

Linking to Harry Styles, it can be argued that Styles is a critical reflection of Doty’s theory. Styles embraces androgyny and queerness and can arguably be using it as a form of queerbaiting to broaden his audience appeal. For example, in a 2013 E! News article titled, ‘Harry Styles Shoots Down Bisexual Rumors in British GQ’ (Grossberg, 2013), the article explores ideas of homophobia due to the fact ‘we’re pretty sure his female fan base is happy to hear that’ (Grossberg, 2013) he is heterosexual. The use of the word ‘shoots’ heavily implies that being ‘queer’ or ‘bisexual’ is a negative trait to have and illustrates that heteronormativity and homophobic traits are the norm within English language media. Doty as a queer theorist helps us understand how cinema has succoured to evolve the representation of queerness throughout history, however, this theory does come with strengths and limitations when applying to my research project. The theory helps us build a foundational knowledge of queer theory and highlights the significance of queer representation in cinema, however, the theory is heavily applicable to cinema and moving

image media and is mainly rooted in Western media contexts, this creates challenges when applying to non-Western queer media texts.

Inordinately linking to Doty, a journal article written by Tristan Bridges titled 'A VERY "GAY" STRAIGHT?: Hybrid Masculinities, Sexual Aesthetics, and the Changing Relationship between Masculinity and Homophobia' (Bridges, 2014) offers a more up-to date and contemporary view of queer theory. A key point from the article is the idea that the 'incorporation of "gay" cultural styles to enact masculine gender identities' and the idea that gay aesthetics are 'ways that suggest universal elements of sexual identities and cultures.' (Bridges, 2014) This study is strikingly useful when analysing media as the study explores the way gay aesthetics are comprehended by heterosexual men. Specifically linking this to Styles, in a Glamour magazine article written in 2022, he is said to have 'powerfully opened up about his sexuality.' (Morgan, 2022) Linking to Bridges findings, Styles can be capitalising 'on symbolic sexual boundaries to distance themselves from specific configurations of hegemonic masculinity.' (Bridges, 2014) This quote specifically refers to the heterosexual men within his study and can be applied to Styles due to the notion that he is a heterosexual male who incorporates gay and queer culture into his expression for the public eye. For instance, when Styles 'powerfully opened up about his sexuality', (Morgan, 2022) this emphasises the importance of queer culture within the media, creating a platform for a marginalised group to feel a sense of importance and self-identity as per Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratifications theory. (Blumler et al, 1973) However, this journal article comes with many strengths and limitations. To illustrate, this journal is more contemporary than other literature I have analysed in this review and is heavily applicable to the research field due to the prior research on heterosexual masculinity and the correlation of queer aesthetics. However, the research is not media and mass communications focused, creating an obstacle to overcome when applying it to English language media. This project contributes to the field by including new perspectives on queer theory and criticises media portrayals of the 'male pin-up'. (Dyer, 1982)

## **Discrimination**

Another key person in this debate is Richard Dyer. Dyer's key texts explore several theories such as the analysis of the imagery of white people and the male pin up. In his chapter, 'Don't Look Now: The Male Pin Up' (Dyer, 1982), Dyer explores how 'male pin-ups' (Dyer, 1982) construct ideas of hegemonic masculinity for audiences to view; an object of voyeurism. For example, images of heterosexual men aimed at women are argued to be 'a visual medium, these men are there to be looked at by women. On the other hand, this does violence to the codes of who looks and who is looked at (and how), and some attempt is instinctively made to counteract this violation.' (Dyer, 1982) Deconstructing this quote, men are deemed to be an object of voyeurism, this idea was originally sought from Mulvey's Visual Pleasures Theory in her seminal 1975 *Screen* article (Mulvey, 1975) and can assist in the understanding of the medias construction of stereotypes surrounding hegemonic masculinity by highlighting sexual visual aesthetics.

Arguably, Dyer's ideas are crucial when exploring sexuality in the media, however, Dyer also explores the racial differences between white and black males within this piece of literature, he explains 'such images also put black men 'outside of' this class [...] White men are more likely to be class differentiated, but this does overlap with the work/leisure distinction.' (Dyer, 1982) This is a salient point when discussing Harry Styles and the presentation of white queer male masculinity in the media, it showcases that black males fit 'outside' these models of idyllic presentations. Linking this to Styles, he has since been praised for breaking gender boundaries, but can it be argued he is only receiving praise since he is a white, heterosexual male with a large public following?

Celebrities have expressed their distaste with Styles due to this. To showcase, American performer Billy Porter has heavily criticised Styles as 'he felt Styles landed the first male cover because he's "white and he's straight."' (Franklin, 2023) The ideas of Porter showcase how the privileges of Styles being white and heterosexual have benefited him and is showcased through the visual medium of the 'Playtime With Harry' cover. This piece of literature however comes with a variety of highlights and challenges, in particular, the focus on hegemonic masculinity is a key and under-researched field, which helps create more opportunities for further development and primarily focuses on media representations of white, cisgendered, heterosexual males much like my research. However, the text only briefly discusses marginalised groups experiences with masculinity, such as LGBTQ+ males and men of colour and does not provide solutions to how to tackle these representations.

Since Styles is a white male from the United Kingdom, it is assumed his experiences of discrimination vastly differ to a black male from the United Kingdom. Similarly, to Dyer's ideas of black males being an 'outsider', (Dyer, 1982) discrimination theory is a crucial field when understanding how white queer masculinity is presented in English language media. A key persona in this debate, Kimberlé Crenshaw (who coined the term Intersectionality in 1989), who narrates Intersectionality as a theory, exploring the 'simultaneity of individuals' multiple social identities [...] may lead to both opportunities and oppressions that vary according to a given situation.' (DeSilva, 2020) Utilising this, Crenshaw draws on the experiences of black women to back up her points as to how discrimination stems from multiple forms of oppression such as sexism, racism and showcases a system of systematic domination of race. Using this theory as one of my primary sources of literature will allow me to further develop my knowledge in the field of discrimination as this theory can be applicable to my case study of Styles. As this project has defined limitations, I will not delve deeply into racial issues. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the concept of feminisation within the context of black masculinity presents a unique area for potential future research. Furthermore, more extensive research conducted by other race and discrimination theorists such as Richard Dyer and Derrick Bell would demonstrate to be a reputable source. However, this theory helps us build an understanding of discrimination within society and can lend itself directly to the media sphere. However, it can be deemed to ignore 'difference within groups contributes to tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that bears on efforts to politicize violence against women.' (Crenshaw, 1991) This can create tension within this research as it could create an unbalanced and unequal argument surrounding racial

issues, which can be arguably controversial as Styles is a white heterosexual male with a large public following.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the plethora of literature I have reviewed and analysed, it is apparent that my research question is a new and emerging field of analysis. Arguably, the most effective text that has assisted my research is Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, (Doty, 1993) because it explores the construction of queerness, which is a key concept in the feminisation of white queer masculinity debate. There is much more research within this field surrounding specific issues such as racial issues and queer issues.

The texts will be highlighted throughout the analysis section of the project, helping to gain an alternative viewpoint and assist in creating a balanced argument on such an under researched topic. Overall, the literature will be able to assist me in utilising these ideas to create the most accurate and effective research to successfully critique mass communication models.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Social Media Discourse Analysis**

This study utilises social media to explore the 'feminisation' of white queer masculinity within English language media with a focus on the media discourse around Harry Styles' gender-queerness. Researching how the media discourse around Harry Styles' gender queerness is portrayed within visual culture and how Styles is discussed in forums is an intricate and difficult subject to explore in detail. Previous research in this field has explored mass medias effects on adolescent sexuality and gender presentation such as Brown's study *Mass Media Influences on Sexuality*, (Brown, 2002) which my field of research reinforces and commences it further by assessing the ways in which a public figure - Harry Styles, has affected a smaller demographic and a smaller scope of people rather than a much larger sample size.

I looked at social media, specifically Reddit and X (formerly Twitter), collecting data from 25 pertinent quotes reacting to Styles' masculinity and sexuality media presentations in the *Vogue* cover. I used specific time frames to research this, specifically, 24 hours after the release of Styles' *Vogue* cover on the 13th of November 2020 and 11:59pm of the 14th of November 2020, as well as this, more recent quotes (2023 onwards) from social media platforms. I have curated a smaller sample of 25 social media quotes and two articles for in-depth analysis as my research corpus, distilling on the language used to develop clear semantic ideas in relation to 'Playtime With Harry'. In order to mitigate any ethical concerns over private accounts, I created an overt new account on these platforms, so my own personal algorithm does not hinder or have any effect on my result.

In terms of my selection of social media platforms, I chose to use X as there are an 'estimated 55.4 million people around the globe who actively use the service and post a

collective 58 million “tweets” each day’ (Murthy, 2018) creating a large sample pool for me to analyse. However, a limitation of using X is that X does not ‘not require users to provide their demographic characteristics (such as sex and age), often the demographics of Twitter users must be inferred or estimate.’ (Yildiz et al, 2017) I chose to use Reddit as it is not a conventional social networking platform like X. The social platform received ‘approximately 1.5 billion monthly visits in September 2020, Reddit is the 15th most visited website in the world’. (Hintz, 2022) It provides insights into niche communities who share their opinion without a filter. Using both these platforms creates a clear balance in opinion and targets two different online communities, this showcases how my method aligns with an interpretivist paradigm, as texts can be interpreted differently by different readers.

This form of data collection does not necessitate the completion of an ethics form because all quotes collected are within the public domain. Within the analysis and discussion section of this project, I have explicitly stated the X and Reddit profile handles, as the posts are public, and many users are anonymous (different usernames to their legal name). However, a limitation of this could include the fact I would not be able to follow-up any of the findings with the user to clarify any meanings. Another potential limitation includes the demographics of the user are unknown and only specific types of people are posting about Styles - those with extreme views either way, so this differs from completing a survey asking for example 50 people what they thought of his sexuality in the cover.

I also looked at two online articles that were subsequently found through Reddit and Twitter during the research process. These articles help assist in exploring the posts on the platforms more deeply, such as *Esquire* and *Business Insider* reporting on Conservative commentators Candace Owens and Ben Shapiro, which many of the posts have referenced. When looking for the tweets and Reddit posts, I was searching for posts that included references to the *Vogue* cover, Styles’ masculinity, sexuality, and reactions to the cover. When analysing this data, I used statistics and used both qualitative and quantitative analysis to delve deeper into the discourse.

### **Limitations**

Leveraging social media as a form of research comes with many strengths but also limitations. Social media as a form of research includes a widespread sample of participants you would not normally reach in a university setting, allowing for a broader, more global, and arguably more nuanced sample. Using social media over a survey or interview also mitigates the potential for the Hawthorne effect, (Chandler et al, 2011) which occurs as individuals modify their behaviour in an effort to appease the researchers' supposed needs. However, a limitation of using social media as a form of research is that posts on Reddit and X can be edited after the post has been live, potentially meaning that some of my collected quotes did not occur in the studied timeframe, which could be potentially softened after the fact. However, I have mitigated this by checking the post settings to see if the post has been altered from the original posting. When conducting this research, to avoid bias I used the same advanced search setting and used the same search on both platforms.

However, while studying social media has its advantages, it also has these disadvantages. For example, the use of survey interviews could have potentially been a much more suited research method as the interviewer can explain the questions in more detail face to face and create a personal rapport, however, interviews can arguably be very intrusive, they are time consuming and training would be needed to conduct them. Another method that may have been successful is the use of self-administered questionnaires, this form of quantitative research is inexpensive and can have a wide range of questions, however, participants may misinterpret questions and this form of volunteer sampling may have a low response rate, which ultimately would not aid me in answering the research question, which is why my method was chosen.

### **Discussion of Prior Methods**

My methodology has changed over the course of my research, which originally focused on content analysis of Styles' media to aid in answering the research question. However, social media is an increasingly significant source of cultural discourse, as well as a space for research as 'the social science community has become increasingly interested in non-traditional approaches to research design and data collection.' (Quan-Haase et al, 2016) Thus, I concluded that using social media platforms to research the public's responses to Styles' *Vogue* cover was the best methodology for answering my research question, with my aim to add to the academic discussions around how people respond to the feminisation of white queer male masculinity in English language media.

### **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Since societal norms and gender perceptions have evolved from the dawn of the media sphere, the provocative assertion posted onto Reddit, 'Bring back manly men!' (furchfur 2020) serves as a catalyst for deeper analysis into my research, this analysis and discussion will explore my research on Reddit and X (Twitter).

In this following section, my findings are all related to the Harry Styles November 2020 *Vogue* cover, including people's reactions on social media supplemented with discussion of press surrounding the cover. For this research project, I have analysed a plethora of tweets and Reddit posts and concluded that overall, the cover had a negative audience reception inspired by Stuart Hall's reception theory which explores how different media texts have different readings to audiences. (Hall, 1973) Whilst respecting people have different and oppositional readings of media texts, but subsequently acknowledging this theory, I will demonstrate that the overall reception on social media in the direct aftermath of the cover was derogatory and fatalistic. (See Figure 1).



Figure 3 - 'Playtime With Harry Styles' (Bowles, 2020)

### Are we 'Treating People with Kindness' – Online Homophobia

'Harry Styles doesn't deserve admiration or respect for dressing in clothes that belong to the opposite sex.' (deleted, 2023) Homophobic and queerphobic language are consistently used in posts and comments. With the search being 'Harry Styles Vogue Cover masculinity' from the 13th of November 2020 to the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, 24 hours after the *Vogue* cover was released, X in particular had a significant amount of homophobic abuse directed towards Styles. For example, one X user states, 'What an absolute f\*ggot' (sonsoforegon777, 2020) and another user states 'I think this guy might be a fruit.' (bhuezo, 2020)

These findings suggest that social media can be used as a convenient platform to target discrimination and abuse without having 'real life' consequences and proclaims the notion that the media dislike the femininity of gay men, highlighting an extension of societal misogyny. The data also helps the research further as the negative response could be an indicator of fragile or toxic masculinity, adhering to Neale's ideas in *Masculinity as a Spectacle*, as this critical response from the public is a response to Style's construction of masculinity in the *Vogue* cover, creating strong discriminatory responses by an anonymous audience. Analysing the language patterns of homophobic posts (see Appendix), I have discovered there are several patterns in language. The lack of punctuation could showcase a

restricted language code, Bernstein's theory of a restricted language code is used to 'denote an informal use of language' (Colman, 2008) which highlights a potential lack of education surrounding queer personalities and queer culture. Whilst small and no statistics could be considered statistically valid, the patterns are still suggestive of derogatory language targeted towards Styles.

A major finding was that the distinct change in tone between social media platforms when responding to the *Vogue* cover. For example, statistically, out of the 25 examples in my research corpus, 56% made emasculating comments regarding Styles' sexuality or negatively referenced his sexuality, with over half of these being tweets. This staggering percentage highlights society's negative response to queer culture, further emphasising the importance of my research as a key aim is to help aid shift societies ideologies around queer culture and toxic masculinity. This also shows how X as a platform is more lenient with their regulations regarding toxic language, one of their policies indicates the platform does 'not mediate content or intervene in disputes between users. However, targeted abuse or harassment may constitute a violation of the X Rules and Terms of Service.' (X Help Centre, 2024) This context helps understand the research deeper, bringing X's ethics to the forefront, helping us understand the language difference between the two platforms.

Between slurs and emasculating comments being made online, there is a fair share of anti-homophobic remarks made throughout the sample. This positive area of the research showcases societies best attempts to eradicate homophobia and toxic ideologies surrounding masculinity. For example, a Reddit user said,

Can't men have choices in what they wear. David Bowie did this in the 70s, and it's not a new thing. Being gay I get annoyed how whenever this topic comes up people go on about 'real men' going to war and use homophobia and sexism to shame men into acting as a stereotype. (Didotpainter, 2020)

and user omegashadow states 'Is it bad or are we reacting instinctively to violated convention despite pretending on the outside to be aesthetically open minded.' (omegashadow, 2020) These two posts offer a critique of societal attitudes towards homophobia. These assist within the field of research as it helps us create a balanced argument between the support Styles received and the discrimination orientated towards Styles. User Didotpainter draws on their own experiences as a gay person to further explain their point regarding homophobia and gender stereotypes, this use of qualitative research helps us gather a more emotive point and further highlights the importance of the research, which is to give queer people a voice in this debate. Further explaining this point, this table showcases the use of slurs in the social media samples:



FORM OF MEDIA	USE OF SLURS
Reddit	None present
Twitter/X	Slurs such as f*ggot present
Journalism and Press Media	None present

Figure 2 – Table showcasing the use of slurs on different social media platforms.

Analysing this table, we can conclude that X is the only social media platform researched to include the use of slurs in posts. The word ‘f\*ggot’ is not present on any other researched platform besides X. This could be explained due to the rules and regulations of the media platform. Print media however has their own ethics code which strictly prohibits the use of slurs and derogatory language in articles, however, X does not have this regulation, leading to a freer speech fuelled form of communication. However, slurs were not present on other social media platforms besides X in my research sample. This could heavily persuade individuals to use this platform to share their negative opinions without physical repercussions. Connecting to the research field of the ‘feminisation’ of white queer masculinity, these tweets heavily showcase how the feminisation of masculinity is frowned upon, even in this contemporary and post-modern society. Possible suggestions for improvement would be to create more regulations on social media platforms like Twitter to reduce the use of derogatory language and to create harsher penalties for those that use them. However, this could come with limitations in countries such as America (where the platform originates from) as the First Amendment protects their right to ‘freedom of speech’.

### Is this a ‘Sign of the Times’? - Societal Expectations of Men

‘Little progress has been made in decades to give men more freedom of expression’ says Reddit user Didotpainter. Societal expectations play a crucial role in my research, it helps us explore whether there has been a shift in ideologies over time or whether stereotypes will be in play for years to come. A key example of the impact of societal expectations found in my research is the *Esquire* news article titled ‘Harry Styles In a Dress Isn’t an Attack on Masculinity, No Matter What Ben Shapiro and Candace Owens Say’ (Evans, 2020) and a tweet from Marcyjmilller that stated

Gotta love how people who are little twigs in the big bundle of identity politics are turning on each other these days. Harry Styles wears a dress for Vogue's cover. Billy Porter calls Anna Wintour a profanity because, despite her asking him for guidance, she chose a white dude. (Marcyjmilller, 2023).

The use of the word ‘attack’ creates a harsh response for a reader, connotations of the word attack include hostility and strike, creating a link and idea that Styles had planned this cover to ‘attack’ masculinity. However, in stark contrast, it can be interpreted to be an attack on the criticism gender-queer media receives and Styles is merely the driving force for this. All comments from Evans’ article refer to people in the media, these influential people help shape public perceptions. Media personalities showcase their ideologies through mass

communication models such as television, radio, and social media. Social media being the key model of communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this allows messages to reach wider audiences. To illustrate, people are more likely to trust opinions of ‘influencers’ rather than the public. Additionally, the graph below showcases key words within the sample.

## REPETITIVENESS OF WORDS IN SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

*in relation to the Vogue cover ‘Playtime with Harry’*

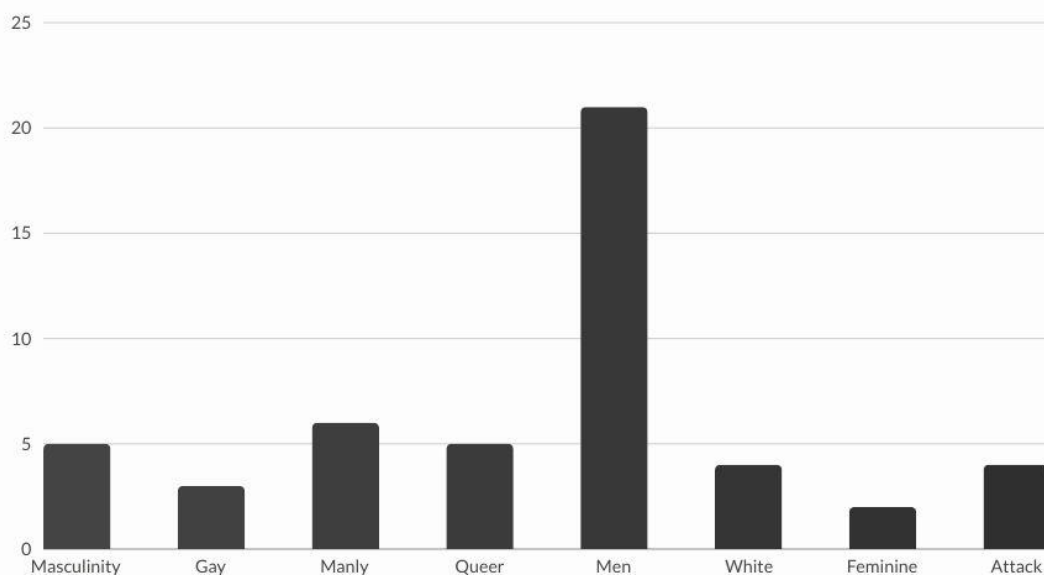


Figure 3 - Graph showcasing repetitiveness of words in social media posts.

From the data gathered, I analysed the repetitiveness of words in these posts in relation to the semantic field of societal expectations. A key finding was the word ‘men’ was repeated twenty-one times, ‘queer’ five times, ‘masculinity’ five times, ‘manly’ six times and ‘attack’ four times. Analysing these findings, we can conclude that the use of the word ‘men’ was the most repeated, but why? The key theme of societal expectations come to play here as societies ideas of a ‘man’ reinforces injurious stereotypes and these are sustained through mass communications and the media. The implications of this help us understand that societal expectations are systems of the patriarchy in relation to Crenshaw’s theory, and audiences can share their opinion through the medium of social media. This highlights how the medias influence heavily cultivates societies actions and behaviours as media representations of gender massively influence audiences on how they perceive certain themes, such as queer and femininity. In stark contrast, the word ‘feminine’ was only repeated twice throughout my research sample. This shocked me when analysing as this is a key word within this project, with references to sexism and homophobia and Styles himself, this word was a major

indicator into societies thoughts and feelings towards white males wearing genderqueer or 'feminised' clothes, creating an extension of misogyny.

However, on the contrary, the theme of societal expectations is also shown through the ideas created from the quote from X user kathyrinkes who said, 'In the newest "let's get men to wear dresses so we can make more cash" campaign.' (kathyrinkes, 2020) This quote reflects the theme of societal expectations through expressing the user's distaste to Styles' presentation of gender roles and attire in the cover. By suggesting Styles is involved in a profit-making campaign, it highlights how traditional gender expectations are being challenged in a post-modern society. This quote also shows clear support of the research field as this showcases a positive correlation between presentations of feminized masculinity in the media and a high level of social media discourse.

The term 'feminine' functions as a lens through which to view how society views celebrities and popular figures who, much like Harry Styles, defy gender stereotypes by dressing in gender-queer or feminised ways. The fact that 'feminine' is only mentioned twice within the sample showcases a gap in the coverage of gender expression and identity in the media is eye opening. This could heavily indicate the marginalisation of discussions and the showcases of themes of femininity and the feminisation of masculinity within its products, especially when it comes to male and masculine presenting characters, people and expressions that defy conventional expectations of what it is to be a man within society. The clear language used within my research helps prompt a deeper understanding of the use of gendered language and how representations are constructed and cultivated through media and through public figures like Styles. It also aids us in identifying a need for more analysis into media content in order to eradicate harmful stereotypes. Social media as a form of communication is such an important outlet for people to share their thoughts and opinions on certain topics, however, it can help highlight the importance of amplifying marginalised voices such as those in the queer community.

### **'It's not the same As it Was' - Culture Wars**

Another key thematic area that arose from my research is the idea of 'culture wars', specifically through political ideologies and those who adhere to traditional archetypes. A *Business Insider* article showcases a Conservative ideology through political commentator Candace Owens, an infamous figure within the queer community released a tweet in the wake of the *Vogue* cover calling Styles' cover an 'outright attack on 'manly men.' (Singh, 2020) This right-wing ideology also references ideas of Marxism as 'In the west, the steady feminization of out men at the same time Marxism is being taught to our children is not a coincidence.' (RealCandanceO, 2020) Referencing the sociological theory of Marxism which refers to the differences in social classes and the overruling of capitalism in favour of communism founded by Karl Marx explicitly refers to ideas of exploitation. This idea that Candance Owens has referenced this theory showcases that aspects of society believe showing feminised media to audiences is a form of exploitation. This quote also could suggest a societal fear of the loss of traditional and stereotypical gender roles and capitalist values, portraying a far-right ideology of society. The notion of 'bringing back manly men' is

arguably an attack on Styles and his gender expression. The inclusion of Marxism showcases the public figures political ideology, the inclusion of her ideology reflects the statistic that ‘one-Third of Tweets from U.S. Adults Are Political’, (Bestvater et al, 2022) connoting to users that queer spaces and themes are not tolerated within society. Rapidly eradicating any progress that has been made for queer and LGBTQ+ rights since the Stonewall riots and creating the notion Styles is constructing his masculinity in order to have more audience appeal.

However, on the contrary, in a Reddit thread titled ‘Harry styles makes history as the first solo male to appear solo on the cover of Vogue’, user SlimTim\_101 states, ‘Some really smart people just developed a Covid Vaccine yet a gender confused clown wears a dress and “makes history”? I feel sorry for you social media generation.’ (SlimTim\_101, 2020) This quote displays a traditional cultural perspective, heavily contrasting to the new contemporary culture of young people today. And, within this thread, user AgentJGomez responded with

Okay boomer. We’re not just celebrating him making history. He is a symbol of equality people like him are role models for us to be kind and be who we are without having to worry about what people think. Yeah we know he’s the first man to wear the dress as many other rock artist such as David Bowie had worn one. But anyways Harry’s shoot is a big deal for many people who are eccentric see things like make up and clothes as unisex that’s why it’s a bit deal people are starting to be more androgynous and themselves no hiding behind a void of pretending to be someone they’re not. (AgentjGomez, 2020)

This response from AgentjGomez represents a more contemporary cultures viewpoint, further emphasising the theme of culture wars; the quote counteracts the criticism of Styles by defending Styles’ cover and highlighting it a progressive piece of visual culture which aids towards equality and more acceptance of gender queerness. The use of the word ‘boomer’ in this context is a derogatory use of language used by Gen Z (people born between the mid 1990’s and the early 2000s) to dismiss a ‘boomer’ (people born between 1946 and 1964) arguably outdated and culturally offensive beliefs. This highlights the disparity of cultural beliefs between different generations, heavily exhibiting the medias influence on societal values, such as 1960’s Tide print advertisements placing women in the domestic housewife archetype. (See Figure 4).



Figure 4 – Tide print advertisement from the 1950's.

These three quotes showcase the theme of culture wars due to a clash of ideologies on societal values and views on gender expression and highlight the ongoing debate between differing cultures surrounding gender representation within the media. These two perspectives perfectly reflect differing attitudes towards gender representations and how audiences use social media to express their opinions.

On the other hand, when exploring the sample, the idea of a sexual imbalance of power arose. This idea is manufactured by the X quote posted by kristoffbitchh,

“It’s necessary homophobia. society has forced males to become so flamboyant, for example Harry styles dressing in a dress and on the cover of Vogue magazine. If people want to be gay that’s completely fine but stop pushing this ideology that society needs to worship it” wtf. (kristoffbitchh, 2020)

This finding provides some tentative initial evidence that the reactions to Styles’ gender construction and self-expression are taboo subjects, however, this user is critiquing another online quote which cannot be traced despite back-searching. This however raises intriguing questions around which audiences receive the preferred reading of the text, especially when it comes to culturally taboo subjects such as Styles’ feminisation of masculinity.

## Conclusion

Studying social media quotes to show responses to the 'feminisation' of white queer male masculinity within English language media is a pre-eminent way to gather a vast range of opinions from different cultures, age groups and genders to aid in the development of the research area. The significance of this research helps aid society in shifting their views to a more accepting view surrounding gender and queer representations by challenging media producers. This research also provides an insight into how social media platforms regulate their sites and how language used can be malignant and toxic, creating a large negative social sphere. A key area for future research would be into other case studies such as Lil Nas X, David Bowie, Mick Jagger and Frank Ocean, these queer artists would aid within this research as Lil Nas X and Frank Ocean would create a broader research pool into more racial issues within media representations of queer masculinity. Whereas David Bowie and Mick Jagger would aid us in exploring older portrayals of queer masculinity within the media.

## CONCLUSION

'It's not Harry Styles's fault that he happens to be white and cute and straight', it's the media. This project has delved into the social media discourse around Harry Styles' gender queerness and explored people's responses to representations of feminised masculinity. At the core of this project are the issues of homophobia, racism and sexism within society which is further cultivated throughout different forms of mass communications. A major conclusion of this project was the distinct lack of literature and research around the topic of the feminisation of white queer masculinity and Harry Styles as a case study. This project can be used to assist in future research within the field of gender, queer and discrimination media studies as it creates a clearer outlook on the impact of these representations on society. Within society, much larger issues are at hand; including those of queer and gender portrayals in the past and the lack of movement from these traditional presentations, which leads to areas for improvement for society and media conglomerates, which Styles as a persona is trying to combat. For instance, a key area for societal improvement is the lack of research within the field of white queer masculinity in comparison to representations of femininity and womanhood and a suggestion for societal improvement could include constructing more positive feminised masculinity representations in film. A small comparison to Lil Nas X, a black queer 'gay icon' can be made as Lil Nas X is a vastly under-researched person despite his mass amounts of online discourse, he is arguably a crucial figure in the study of black queer male masculinity. Overall, my research has shown that societies attitudes towards white queer masculinity are extremely cynical and obstructive, however, certain demographics and cultures opinions change throughout time and through societal shifts; have we really progressed within the last century? Styles is merely the beginning of a new gender-queer political movement, proposing the question, is this really a 'Sign of the Times?'



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## Appendix

Platform	Notes	User/Organisation	Date	Comment/Article Headline
Reddit		u/deleted	9 mnth .ago	Harry Styles doesn't deserve admiration or respect for dressing in clothes that belong to the opposite sex
Reddit		u/Didotpainter	3 yr. ago	The uproar over Harry Styles wearing a dress in Vogue shows how little progress has been made in decades to give men more freedom of expression. All he did was wear a dress, why are people so offended over a bit of fabric. Can't men have choices in what they wear. David Bowie did this in the 70s, and it's not a new thing. Being gay I get annoyed how whenever this topic comes up people go on about 'real men' going to war and use homophobia and sexism to shame men into acting as a stereotype. Does anyone feel the same way or do they feel there has been great progress for men?
Reddit		u/Yoshisaur10	3 yr. ago	I think that he may be going so over the top just to bring more attention to the issue, and to make a point that clothes shouldn't have gender. But that's my interpretation, I could be wrong.

Reddit		u/omegashadow	3 yr. ago	I agree that there is something that feels off about it but I think part of that is that the articles of clothing are actually very conventionally feminine rather than the typical very masculine jacket dress or avant garde androgynous style. While this causes a whiplash that's kind of the point, it's far further outside the norm to see conventionally feminine gowns paired with a blazer. Is it bad or are we reacting instinctively to violated convention despite pretending on the outside to be aesthetically open minded. It's putting more emphasis on the clothes gender tension rather than trying to subtly make it masculine.
Reddit		u/RainbowGoth89		I did see a bunch of queer, trans and gay artists on a thread pissed that a straight man was used to wear a dress and given recognition for it. Apparently they were tiffed because he is a privileged pretty straight wealthy white man and doesn't have to deal with the every day hate they receive. I thought he looked great and I thought they'd be more supportive because it paves openness for them. But some chose to be jealous and petty because they as artists themselves didn't get the recognition or clout. Can't please everyone 🙄
Reddit		u/SlimTim_101	3 yr. ago	Some really smart people just developed a Covid Vaccine yet a gender confused clown wears a dress and “ makes history”? I feel sorry for you social media generation.
Reddit		u/AgentJGomez	3 yr. ago	Okay boomer . We're not just celebrating him making history . He is a symbol of equality people like him are role models for us to be kind and be who we are without having to worry about what people think. Yeah we know he's the fist man to wear the dress as many other rock artist such as David Bowie had worn one . But anyways Harry's shoot is a big deal for many people who are eccentric see things like make up and clothes as unisex that's why it's a bit deal people are starting to be more androgynous and themselves no hiding behind a void of pretending to be someone they're not .
Reddit		u/Afraid_Sugar3811	3 yr. ago	Billy says, "It's not Harry Styles's fault that he happens to be white and cute and straight and fit into the infrastructure that way. That's why he's on the cover. Non-binary blah blah blah. No. It doesn't feel good to me. You're using my community -- or your people are using my community -- to elevate you. You haven't had to sacrifice anything." In other words, Billy is echoing

				long-standing queerbaiting claims Harry has endured for years now. Many argue he plays coy about his sexuality -- especially when it comes to his fashion sensibilities -- to cater to the LGBTQ+ community. Based on his dating history, though ... it seems like the dude's strictly into the ladies. That's certainly how it appears, anyway.
Reddit		u/furchfur	3. yr ago	UK: 'Bring back manly men!' Harry Styles is SLAMMED for wearing a dress in Vogue as journalist insists 'no society can survive without strong' males. The feminization of men at the same time that Marxism is being taught to children is no coincidence
Reddit		u/JasontheHappyHusky	3 yr ago	Harry Styles sent right-wing media personalities into a tizzy last week when Vogue dropped its December issue, which features the singer—the magazine’s first-ever solo male cover star—clad in a ruffled blue gown. Naturally, panic about traditional masculinity and gender presentation has been the focus of these meltdowns, though of course conservatives wouldn’t put it in those terms. Over the weekend, conservative commentator Candace Owens said the photos were evidence of the “steady feminization of men” which she said unsurprisingly coincides with the rise of Marxism. (Lol.)“It is an outright attack,” she wrote on Saturday. “Bring back manly men.” On Monday, Owens doubled down, tweeting: “I said ‘bring back manly men.’ I meant: Bring back manly men. Terms like ‘toxic masculinity’ were created by toxic females. Real women don’t do fake feminism. Sorry I’m not sorry.” There’s lot to unpack here, should anyone consider it worth their time to take Owens remotely seriously, a task I find impossible. As usual, Owens’ criticism is a hodgepodge of buzzwords more often used by conservatives than by the liberals they mock at this point.
Twitter/ X		@witchbitchpari	13th Nov 2020	‘Prime example Harry Styles Vogue Cover Now I don’t know how Harry identities but he is the standard for conventional beauty, and is easily digestible to mass media. His queerness sets a “standard” for the queer community that is quite unattainable.’
Twitter/ X		slayerfest	13th Nov 2020	i personally think it’s really cool that harry styles can be seen on the cover of vogue mag in a dress,, like it’s normalizing de-gendering clothing and not hinging your masculinity on the way you dress

Twitter/ X		@kathyrinkes	14th Nov 2020	In the newest “let’s get men to wear dresses so we can make more cash” campaign
Twitter/ X		@bhuezo	13th Nov 2020	I think this guy might be a fruit
Twitter/ X		@sonsoforegon777	13th Nov 2020	What an absolute faggot
Twitter/ X		@lovebscott	29th Aug 2023	Report: Billy Porter's Met Gala Invitation 'Revoked' After Calling Anna Wintour a 'B----' Over Harry Styles' Vogue Cover
Twitter/ X		@PopBase	12th Aug 2023	Billy Porter breaks down his issue with Harry Styles being the first solo man to cover Vogue, in new interview with The Telegraph: “[He’s] white and he’s straight. That’s why he’s on the cover. Non-binary blah blah blah blah. No. It doesn’t feel good to me. You’re using my community – or your people are using my community – to elevate you. You haven’t had to sacrifice anything.”
Twitter/ X		@hlarryious	12th Aug 2023	Billy insulted the entire non-binary community with his hurtful comments and insulted a person for matters on which he is clearly ignorant. I thought he took a moment to learn back in 2020 when he issued his 1st apology; this new statement was spiteful and factually inaccurate.
Twitter/ X		@MarcyJMiller	14th Aug 2023	Gotta love how people who are little twigs in the big bundle of identity politics are turning on each other these days. Harry Styles wears a dress for Vogue's cover. Billy Porter calls Anna Wintour a profanity because, despite her asking him for guidance, she chose a white dude.
Twitter/ X		@kristoffbitchh	23rd Nov 2020	“It’s necessary homophobia. society has forced males to become so flamboyant, for example Harry styles dressing in a dress and on the cover of Vogue magazine. If people want to be gay that’s completely fine but stop pushing this ideology that society needs to worship it”
Twitter/ X		@moesuttle	22nd June 2021	Harry Styles., straight man who queer-baits was applauded for being the first man to ever be on a cover of Vogue wearing a dress and I don’t remember ever seeing straight men asking what is he teaching kids, but when a black gay man does it, he gets called names???
Twitter/ X		@benshapiro	16th Nov 2020	This is perfectly obvious. Anyone who pretends that it is not a referendum on masculinity for men to don floofy dresses is treating you as a full-on idiot.

Twitter/ X		@RealCandaceO	14th Nov 2020	There is no society that can survive without strong men. The East knows this. In the west, the steady feminization of our men at the same time that Marxism is being taught to our children is not a coincidence. It is an outright attack. Bring back manly men.
Press media	Found through Twitter and Reddit	Esquire	Nov 17th 2020	<b>Harry Styles In a Dress Isn't an Attack on Masculinity, No Matter What Ben Shapiro and Candace Owens Say</b> Two of the internet's worst citizens have some (incredibly wrong) thoughts on how men should dress.
Press media	Found through Twitter and Reddit	Business Insider	Nov 16th 2020	<b>Celebrities and fans defend Harry Styles after conservative commentator Candace Owens calls his Vogue cover an 'outright attack' on 'manly men'</b>

# Anti-male “flaming piece of garbage” or “feminist masterpiece”? Investigating audience receptions of *Barbie* (2023)

**Caitlin Rees**

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## **Introduction**

In July 2023, I began a new job at a UK based summer school. I was one of 7 Activity Leaders, running the evening entertainment and excursions for the students. We’d meet up each morning to plan the logistics of these activities. By ‘we’, I am referring to the 4 female Activity Leaders. The remaining 3 male Activity Leaders would arrive at the activities with the students, without any attempt of planning the sessions with us. Our management team was extremely lenient with this yet were quick to scold the female staff members for being slightly late. It was immensely aggravating that the male activity leaders were allowed to bypass all these extra hours that we were putting in. These male staff members were also on a

higher hourly wage than us. This was simply a result of their age, rather than their gender, but it intensified our frustrations considerably.

During this time, *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023) was released in cinemas. My female colleagues and I watched the film in the cinema, and it genuinely moved us. We were each incredibly touched by America Ferraro's performance, illustrating the unspoken challenges of being a woman today. The film's portrayal of feminism inspired us to take our concerns about gender imbalance and an unequal gendered distribution in the workplace to our senior management team, who acknowledged their actions. The experience of watching the film together, and then working together as a group of women to advocate for ourselves in our workplace genuinely brought us all close together, and truly made me appreciate my female friendships more than ever. I attribute this female solidarity to the *Barbie* film.

*Barbie*'s release in 2023 is being regarded as one of the most inventive, immaculately crafted and surprising mainstream films in recent memory (Loughrey, 2023), becoming Warner Bros official highest grossing film of all time. The film follows Barbie, portrayed by Margot Robbie, and she navigates the reality of what it means to be a woman today, alongside Ken, played by Ryan Gosling. *Barbie* explores themes of feminism, patriarchy, sexism and stereotypes. Its release has encouraged a sense of community among its audiences, with viewers dressing up in pink in the cinemas during its release.

This research projects aims to explore whether *Barbie* has resonated with wider audiences to the same extent it did with myself. This paper gathers data from preexisting scholarship on *Barbie* and relevant film theory to establish the present divided conception on *Barbie*. Re-established through my audience study, this paper concludes that while *Barbie*'s reception has been divided, it cannot be denied that it is a groundbreaking film for gender representation in media. I establish that *Barbie* is anti-conformity, as opposed to anti-male, and a generous majority of audiences have received this meaning loud and clear.

## **Background**

As a film, *Barbie* set out to promote the idea of self-identification and taking pride in your individuality. When asked about this, Gerwig explained that "I want the movie to make people feel somewhat relieved of the tightrope. We ask ourselves — not just as women, men too — that we walk this impossible tightrope of being perfect," (cited in Tong, Mastromarino and Hagan, 2023). It is implied that *Barbie* intended to be a film for all audiences. *Barbie* appears to have appealed to most audiences with its humour, heart and outstanding cast. As initially expected, *Barbie* boasts a 90% score on Rotten Tomatoes from both critics and audiences (Di Placido, 2023). These affirmative views highlight *Barbie*'s multilayer meaning, Nora's review on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023, states "Much better than expected. Actually, had a decent plot and lesson. Brought back childhood memories" (Rotten Tomatoes, 2023). As well as this, several reviews highlight the film's versatile target audience. Noah's review published December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023, calls *Barbie* "a great movie directed to a more unaware audience, for those who understand its premise from a personal experience it feels more like a reminder vs an entertaining movie. Nonetheless, it is still very enjoyable to watch" (Rotten Tomatoes, 2023). Reviews such as these establish that *Barbie*'s messages of feminism and nostalgia have clearly resonated with most viewers, myself included.



Despite its intentions, the film's portrayal of gender equality has not been received in a completely positive way. Demagogues such as Ben Shapiro have argued that the film's concept of the patriarchy has been too extreme, portraying men in an exaggerated negative way to empower women. The film has divided critics and viewers alike. Shapiro shared his view of *Barbie* on 'X', writing that "my producers dragged me to see 'Barbie' and it was one of the most woke movies I have ever seen". He then continues to call *Barbie* a 'flaming piece of garbage' (Shapiro, 2023). I expand on Shapiro's view in my findings and discussion. Initially, I began this research aiming to test the hypothesis that men hate *Barbie* and women love it. However, Ginger Gaetz shared similar views to Shapiro. In a 2023 tweet, Gaetz highlights *Barbie*'s failure to address any notion of faith or family and claiming that it presents the that men and women can't collaborate positively. This view contradicts Gerwig's quote and presents a cause for investigation as to why *Barbie* is causing such a great amount of controversy.

### **Literature Review**

I have examined the existing available literature that presents an analytical view of the *Barbie* film and its messages. All available literature on *Barbie* has been produced within the last year, as the movie was only released in 2023. This is why studies such as mine are important to contribute to this relatively new and under-researched topic. Additionally, I have explored relevant academia that reinforces the source's conclusions regarding audience receptions. Initially, when exploring the range of academic sources on the *Barbie*, there was a fair divide in critique and praise. The reasons for this divide vary, yet there is not an obvious factor, such as gender, that causes this.

Lorence Olivo's review, published in the journal *The Objective Standard*, adopts a highly critical viewpoint of *Barbie*, addressing the film's lack of plot and the writer's focus on gender war. Olivo states that 'it was written by people who seemingly hold the worldview that the relationship between men and women is one of constant strife' and highlights the film's tendency to portray the Kens negatively while promoting the Barbies. This is a common perspective I anticipated when examining existing literature, but this is a useful source. While some of its points come across as quite brutal, such as '*it's just an excuse to pointlessly paint businessmen as evil and give life to an otherwise lifeless movie with a comedic chase scene*' (Olivo, 2023), this is a realistic and raw representation of audience reception. When examining the feedback of films like *Barbie*, that have clearly caused a great amount of controversy amongst viewers, sources such as this are vital to expose the full picture. In answering the research question, however, this source is limited as its language is very one-sided, meaning it lacks the ability to see the film from an affirmative perspective. I will ensure to gather data on what audiences liked and disliked about *Barbie* to avoid this from happening within my own research. This review also clearly fails to grasp any messages of feminism within the film, which establishes that this message has not reached the entire audience. However, it should be considered that Olivo's view may be exaggerated to align with the critical purpose of a review journal. Therefore, I will consider this when conducting my audience research and expect this message to have not been received by all viewers.

Another review that does recognize *Barbie*'s limitations as a feminist film is La Porte and Cavusoglu's 2023 review of *Barbie*, entitled 'Faux Feminism in a Capitalistic Fever



Dream'. It exposes several flaws in *Barbie*'s presentation of feminism. They discuss the film's lack of true inclusion and diversity, given that the lead characters are white. Additionally, they explore the film's problematic presentation of feminism through *Barbie*'s ultimate role as an object of male attention in the film, reinforced by Mattel's feverish need to control her as a money-making enterprise (La Porte and Cavusoglu, 2023). The review classifies *Barbie* as 'an advertisement for a socially problematic doll' (La Porte and Cavusoglu, 2023). Critical literature like this is vital when researching any film but particularly useful when exploring audience receptions of a film like *Barbie*. As a researcher, I understand how my own bias may impact my research outcome. Analysing scholarly work such as this exposes a flip side to this film that I genuinely hadn't considered before undertaking this project. From examining this literature, I will be keen to further explore whether other audiences agree with the idea that the film is essentially a commercial, rather than a feminist breakthrough as I hypothesized. As well as this, I am keen to conclude whether other female viewers also resonate with the film's poor presentation of feminist motives, as these female authors have established. This review was truly enlightening and a critical component of consideration for this research project, exposing a flipside of my personal preexisting perspective.

La Porte and Cavusoglu's argument regarding *Barbie*'s commercial intentions can be further established from examining further preexisting literature. An intriguing research paper by Tkalec, Žigo and Dolinara explores why contemporary audiences now have higher expectations for cinema, and subsequently why production companies now have a newer audience to appeal to. In the 2017 paper, entitled 'Film Reception by Means of New Media or How the Film Escaped from the Cinema', it is established that today, cinematic releases are powerful marketing tools rather than purely a form of escapism and entertainment. Film producers are now marketing to a new audience with higher expectations, due to the nature of streaming and unlimited accessibility to films. They concluded that the entire nature of the modern film industry is based on the whims of the audience, and, from the standpoint of profit, it is very important to assess what film audiences like and dislike (Tkalec, Žigo and Dolinara, 2017, p. 108). Their conclusion arguably reinforces that of the previous article and exposes why films such as *Barbie* may be viewed as a big commercial rather than a feminist breakthrough. This consideration is essential for my research as *Barbie* is heavy on its iconography and brand representation, such as its cast of stars like Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling, and its promotion strategies for Mattel. Tkalec, Žigo and Dolinara's paper reinforces how films like *Barbie* may have reached such great heights because of its marketing strategies, rather than the messages of the film itself.

I was keen to investigate whether this is recognized by audiences themselves during my research, or if these subtle marketing techniques are truly being overlooked because of *Barbie*'s ability to resonate with its viewers of all genders. Although the feminist messages are a majorly vital component of my research, it is essential to consider how the male characters are represented within the film, and how audiences have received this. A recent research article by Dikmen Yakali deconstructs the presentation of masculinity within *Barbie* from a postfeminist perspective. Yakali's work is published as part of the research topic 'Deconstructing Masculinity: Interrogating the Role of Symbolism in Gender Performativity'. This research is primarily based on masculinity, which is a significant and unresearched

aspect of *Barbie*. This article consolidates quotes from *Barbie* that presents masculinity through Ken's character. Yakali discusses key moments within the film that establishes the Kens' insecurity and their craving for validation from the *Barbies*. The study concludes that *Barbie* uses intentional satire to invite the audience to challenge traditional gender stereotypes, and therefore becomes a reflection on postfeminist masculinity and the performative nature of gender norms (Yakali, 2024). This source adopts an interesting point of view, in the sense that it explores the deconstruction of masculinity rather than femininity. It is something that other available literature lacks, as scholars are tending to examine the presentation of women in *Barbie* rather than men. Therefore, this article is a critical tool in answering the research question, establishing that *Barbie* may resonate more with male viewers than the film's feminized marketing suggests. This article is somewhat limited in the sense that its author is a female talking about the film's resonance with male audiences. Therefore, I am keen to explore the views of this reception from male viewers firsthand to expand upon this and will be doing so during my data collection.

An example of this is a published review by Robert Luke Taylor, an environmental historian. Within this literature, Taylor compares to its biggest cinematic competitor, *Oppenheimer* (Nolan, 2023). Taylor explains how *Oppenheimer* had portrayed a stereotypical story of a nuclear scientist during World War II, and that where *Oppenheimer* suffers for falling short of the mark for realism, *Barbie* uses this to its advantage (Naylro, 2023). He establishes *Barbie*'s effective use of a utopian world to illustrate messages about our imperfect society, comparing *Barbie* to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), and explains how the use of cinematic utopias are a stimulating tool for societal change. In an opposite view to Olivo, Taylor states '*it is full of hope for everyone, including both men and women*'. It is refreshing to examine such an encouraging view from a male historian rather than a film critic, as this view has a greater resemblance to those of the mass audiences who watched *Barbie* in cinema, while still having the judicious view of an academic. Taylor's review presents a supportive opinion on *Barbie*, and its comparison with *Oppenheimer* undoubtedly emphasizes its messages and audience appeal. Nonetheless, as I am examining *Barbie* as a standalone film, it is essential that I analyze the film's messages as such, rather than in comparison to another film. It is possible that Taylor's opinion of *Oppenheimer* may have initiated a more positive reaction to *Barbie* as he preferred it to *Oppenheimer*. As a result, I will examine audience views as an initial reaction to watching *Barbie*, to avoid bias within my research outcomes. I elaborate on this decision within my methodology. Despite this, Taylor's review is a useful source that provides a refreshing view on *Barbie*'s success and its wide target audience.

To further expand upon the film's success, *Barbie: For Better or Worse*, published in 2023 as part of Santa Clara University, explores the historical origins of the *Barbie* doll contextualized with the release of *Barbie* in 2023. This paper addresses *Barbie*'s box unforeseen financial success at the box office, and the significance of this for women in the film industry. It is evidence that audiences are eager and willing to support women – directed films, honourably demonstrating the message of Handler's mission that women can be anything (Hendricks, 2023). Hendricks establishes the same perspective as Taylor, claiming that *Barbie* is a film for everyone. She claims that *Barbie* 'critiques both genders openly, while admitting that both genders are valuable to a successful society'. This

acknowledgement that the film is somewhat critical is hugely valuable. Literature that can address both sides of the argument, which is essentially what Olivo, La Porte and Cavusoglu fail to do. This is something this research project aims to achieve, as film reviews are a result of many demographic factors that make film reflections indeterminate. Hendricks labels *Barbie* as a feminist catalyst, highlighting that the film has brought communities together and highlighted how women and feminists are treated, and why feminism requires men and women to coexist in a way that isn't a constant power struggle (Hendricks, 2023). The overall message of this literature is that *Barbie* promotes solidarity, as opposed to separation which viewers like Ben Shapiro argue, whom I will address in my findings. While this source doesn't highlight a misrepresentation of men in the film, its justification for doing so is valid. It acknowledges the film's true intentions and reinforces how this message has been distributed. It is an extremely helpful and valid source for this research project and provides a valuable insight into how a film can illustrate both a critical and positive portrayal of both men and women. Essentially, this literature subtly highlights the emergence of feminism within *Barbie*, and this theory is undoubtedly worth examining further within this research project.

One scholar that explores this idea of feminist film is Whitney Monaghan. In her 2022 paper, she explores the impact of gendered role reversals in "feminist" films. Specifically, she examines examples of films targeted at teenagers. The paper navigates how the representation of female characters fulfilling the parts of typically 'masculine' roles in films, such as a heroic protagonist, has impacted audiences and their views and expectations of women. Monaghan uses examples such as *Dude* and *Booksmart* to demonstrate that although these films highlight and confront genre tropes, they also intertwine popular feminism, woke capitalism, and neoliberal feminism (Monaghan, 2022, pg 3270). I found this conclusion to be extremely relevant to my research, as this is essentially what *Barbie* does. With a female-heavy cast, *Barbie* could also be used as an example in Monaghan's research. The literature's deconstruction of feminist cinema targeted at a younger audience is a useful tool when analysing contemporary films like *Barbie* that have been deemed "woke and feminist and full of cutting social commentary on the myriad failings of bros" (Rabin, 2023). Monaghan's paper presents the importance of female representations in modern cinema as a reflection of changing "feminist" teen cinema, establishing a continuation of these trends as the genre adapts to maintain relevance for new generations of viewers (Monaghan, 2022, pg 3261). Although *Barbie* is arguably not directly aimed at youth audiences, Monaghan's point about feminist cinema constantly evolving is extremely relevant. The literature produced on *Barbie* establishes that the film has caused great controversy as its portrayal of feminism is something that hasn't been seen before.

In summary, this review of preexisting literature has established that, while *Barbie* has received a fair amount of both critique and praise, further research is needed to determine whether it can be deemed a "feminist masterpiece", and whether this film is truly catered for all audiences. As a result, this is what my paper aims to investigate further. By considering the literature's credibility and relevance to my own research, I have been able to utilize the sources most beneficial to my area of study to their fullest potential. This is particularly important when examining film, as any data surrounding film reviews will be subjective.

Therefore, the preexisting sources are essential to contextualize and reinforce my primary data, consequently increasing my finding's reliability.

## Theory

To supplement this literature review, it is crucial to establish the theoretical framework relevant to my research. When investigating the proposition that *Barbie* is an example of a feminist film, we must unequivocally look into the work of feminist film theorists. In this case, I will be examining Laura Mulvey's work. Mulvey developed the Male Gaze theory, representing how cinema is adapted for the purpose of heterosexual male pleasure. Films present female characters through the gaze of these male viewers, often through subtly provocative camera angles, narratives and costumes. Through this voyeuristic pleasure, male audiences are subconsciously made to feel superior, even when viewing these women through a screen. In a 2018 interview with *Another Gaze*, Mulvey recalls her shift in perspective from passive audience member. She explains "...and instead of being a voyeuristic spectator, a male spectator as it were, I suddenly became a woman spectator who watched the film from a distance and critically, rather than with those absorbed eyes". This is extremely relevant when examining *Barbie*, as the film largely resonates with its female audiences, as Hendricks' paper explores in my literature review. During my research findings, I reference Mulvey's work as it proves to have been subtly referenced in *Barbie*, criticising these traditional passive purposes of female characters in cinema.

As this paper investigates audience reception, Stuart Hall's reception theory is another essential ideology to acknowledge. Hall proposes that media texts are not constructed with a fixed singular meaning, rather they are actively manufactured by audiences. This is actively achieved by audience members in accordance with their individual identities, beliefs and demographics. As a result of this, audiences do not receive a single, universal message from media texts. This allows for miscommunication between author and audience, with these moments of subversion revealing of the social relations that underpinned mass communication for Hall (O'Donnell, 2018, pg 592). As my review of literature has demonstrated, and as I had anticipated my findings would follow, *Barbie*'s messages have been received dissimilarly across audiences. The predominant reading appears to be that *Barbie* is "woke", however audiences are divided as to whether this is having a positive or negative impact. As my findings contextualise, reception theory plays a major role here. Hall's theory illustrates how misinterpretation can result in extreme reactions to film, and *Barbie* is a stellar example of this.

Both Mulvey and Hall's proposed theories address audience expectations and contribute to broader discussions about gender, representation, and media consumption. This context is essential when discussing *Barbie*, a film that has caused great controversy through its portrayal of gender, feminism and patriarchy. This is also particularly important when gathering data on a sample of audience members and investigating their judgements on *Barbie*.

## Methodology

This is an audience study where data was gathered inductively through a survey and focus group discussion. I was keen to adopt an active research methodology to efficiently

gather a generous amount of data from multiple participants at once. These methods also allowed me to gather a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, allowing me to analyse the views of *Barbie* both objectively and subjectively.

Prior to the survey and focus group data collection, my research session included a film screening of *Barbie*, I concluded that this would be the most appropriate research method for this study due to the nature of the *Barbie* film encouraging a sense of community amongst viewers. I was keen to mimic the experience I had in the cinema when watching *Barbie* by encouraging participants to wear pink to the session. In doing so, I assessed whether this solidary experience had a positive impact on viewers. It was also essential for participants to express their views immediately after this visual stimulus, as I recall the strong reactions me and my peers had right after watching *Barbie*. Ultimately, I concluded that this research method would result in more relevant, recent data as opposed to another method, such as synthesizing content analysis on *Barbie*. This would not allow me to explore audience views as thoroughly and would largely reflect the views of acclaimed film critics rather than audience members. As the literature view has established, *Barbie*'s academia is limited. Therefore, by conducting independent primary research I have collected information on specific topics from a particular audience.

I believed that my participants would be able to express their opinions more honestly when surrounded by their peers, as hearing external views will have influenced and broadened their initial opinions. On the other hand, I had considered that some participants may be less inclined to express their views openly when surrounded by others, particularly if these are people they do not know well. For this reason, the students I contacted were highly encouraged to invite their friends to participate. Not only did this greatly increase my anticipated number of participants, but the group was clearly comfortable enough to express their views, which is reflected in my findings.

My pool of participants consisted of 33 university students, aged between 18 – 25. I believe that this age group, being my generation, has had a particularly strong reaction to *Barbie*. My literature review has also established a lack of research on this age group. Therefore, I was keen to investigate the views of this group through my focus group to determine if online views such as those from Shapiro and Yakali are reflective of those within an in-person setting. Within this sample, I aimed to include people of any gender, nationality, sexuality and religion. To recruit this diverse array of participants, I reached out to numerous university student groups via email that would have a particular interest in my study. These groups include the Film, Photography and Feminist societies. By involving these groups within this study, the data reflects a generous representation of the university population. Also, I contacted all undergraduate students within the School of Arts, Culture and Language in Bangor University via email. This school reflects a generous number of students who may have a particular interest in my media research project (see appendix 1).

I had no preference as to whether participants have seen *Barbie* before the screening, but I asked them beforehand if this was their first time seeing the film. This was asked to determine whether most of the room would be sharing an initial reaction to the film, or if my participants were clearly willing to watch the film again for a second time. A large majority of the group had already seen the film, with only 4 participants being first-time viewers. This

was expected, as viewers would be more likely to watch a film if they had enjoyed it. This potential bias was considered when analysing the results.

The short survey consisted of 6 questions about *Barbie* that participants completed independently after the film screening. In doing so, they could express their views anonymously through the survey as well as share their opinions with others in an active setting in the focus group. Within the survey, participants were asked ‘What is your gender?’, ‘Overall, how would you rate the film?’, ‘“The *Barbie* Film promotes feminism’ do you agree/disagree?’, ‘Why?’, ‘What did you like about the film?’ and ‘What did you dislike about the film?’(see appendix 5). I kept the qualitative questions concise and open ended to give viewers the freedom to express their views and address topics that I may have not anticipated or predicted.

Once the surveys had been submitted, we then began our group discussion. This was led through a series of semi structured open ended questions. In doing so, if a theme arose that was not on the study group agenda, I was able to have the freedom to ask probing questions to encourage participants to further express their views and open another discussion. Participants were encouraged to share their views honestly and question each other throughout, creating a healthy debate. The results of this were transcribed (see appendix 6), enabling me to see exactly how different viewpoints compare, and how these conclusions had been reached.

The group discussion was audibly recorded using a portable microphone, which I informed participants of within the email invitations, on the consent forms, before the session began and before I had pressed the record button. I informed the group that their identities would remain anonymous, and that when transcribed, their discussion points would be labelled as ‘Participant A, Participant B,’ etc. I also disclosed that participants were welcome to leave the session before the microphone started recording.

When conducting this research, I considered ethical issues to ensure it is fair and my results are as accurate as possible. Firstly, due to my research session being administered on a voluntary basis, I have ensured there is no external influence that may have hinder a person’s decision to participate. I achieved this by distributing the exact same email to each student (see appendix 1), ensuring my language used was simply inviting and would not pressure people to participate in my research. I have followed Bangor University’s Ethics Approval procedures by obtaining an ethics approval certificate (see appendix 3) from my school, disclosing how I intended to involve my participants, and how their data will be used and stored. In addition, my participant consent form (see appendix 2) was distributed via email and signed by every participant involved in the *Barbie* film screening, independent surveys and discussion. These consent forms are stored securely in my OneDrive. All data from my research session, consisting of the completed surveys and transcript of the focus group (see appendix 4) was also stored in the university’s cloud storage on OneDrive. This storage is managed and secured by the university and can only be accessed by the researcher. All the above ethical information was disclosed in the participant information sheet (see appendix 4), which was also sent within the initial research invitation emails.

This project consists of a mixture of a positive and interpretivism paradigm, as I have measured the trends and codes in the reception of the film, as well as interpreted the qualitative data in context with secondary literature and my own understanding. In doing so, I

have concluded how audiences have received the film's messages through inductive reasoning, synthesizing my collected data alongside preexisting literature to reach a well-rounded, balanced and fair conclusion regarding *Barbie*'s reception.

## Findings and discussion

The data collected was analysed in several ways. First, the results of my survey (see appendix 7) formed quantitative graphs, which can be found below. These visuals are vital in data analysis as the results of these questions are clear and illustrative. Additionally, individual responses can be found in a spreadsheet in appendix 8, disclosing how all 33 participants answered all 6 questions. To preface, in order to protect my participants identities their responses are referred to as Participant A, B, C, etc, when referencing data from the focus group transcript, and Participant 1, 2, 3, etc, when referring to data within the survey results.

Within my transcript (see appendix 7), I have coloured coded the themes that have emerged more than once. In doing so, it was clear to see the trends and patterns within my participants responses which consequently revealed the notable themes that resonated with my viewers. These were coded as: feminism in pink, humour in blue, diversity and representation in red, gender in green and identity in orange. The quotes used in my findings are highlighted in bold. These 5 key themes that arose structured my findings and conclusion.

It is important to note that, despite collecting a generous amount of data from my sample, my word count limits how much of this data I can include. Therefore, I have distilled my data and selected only the most opinionated and relevant responses to my research question. As a result, a large amount of data is unreferenced here. However, my conclusions are an overall representation of my findings despite not being directly included individually.

The preeminent finding of my research was that the *Barbie* film has had a powerful impact on its audiences, and young adults have particularly resonated with its themes and messages. My participants were very open and honest about their views, which really exemplifies how this film has touched its viewers through its messages of feminism, solidarity and gender representation. There appears to be an overall affirmation of *Barbie*, however this appeal didn't prevent my participants from deconstructing certain problematic elements in its messages.

My participants were first asked to disclose their gender identity. This was asked to identify any patterns within the data that may be a result of a participant's gender identity. The results are as follows:

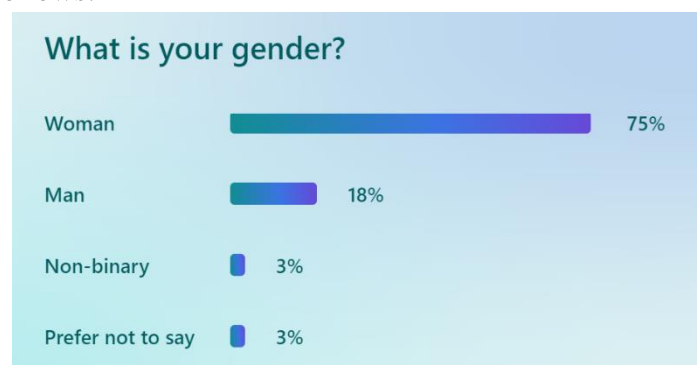


Figure 1: *What is your gender?*

My research session was female dominated, which was expected considering that 69 percent of *Barbie* audiences on its opening weekend were female (McClintock, 2023). When advertising this film screening, I was very aware that the idea of watching the *Barbie* film would simply be more appealing to women. The movie appears to encourage women to embrace their femineity that society has taught them to suppress, with its feminist tones and plethora of pink products (Rosenblatt and Tolentino, 2023). With only 18% of my participants identifying as men, 3% as non-binary and 3% as non-disclosed, it is only fair to acknowledge that my findings will inevitably present a female – dominated view of the *Barbie* film. For this reason, I will be analysing my findings through individual responses where possible to identify how these differences in gender identity has impacted this research outcomes.

### **Patriarchy and feminism**

One of my major objectives for this research was to investigate how the film’s portrayal of feminism and patriarchy had been received. Fundamentally, my research intended to conclude whether gender impacts this view. Within the anonymous survey, participants were asked to agree/ disagree with the statement ‘The *Barbie* film promotes feminism’.

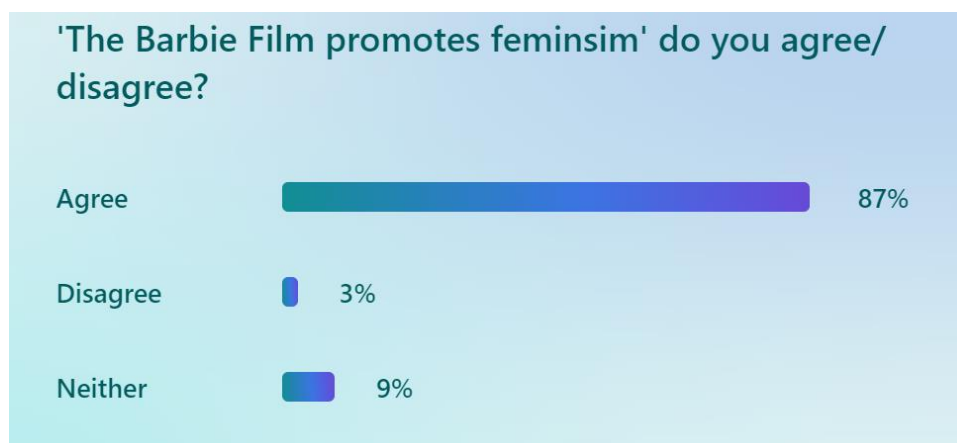


Figure 2: ‘The Barbie Film promotes feminism’ do you agree/ disagree?

Figure 2 illustrates a clear majority; 87% of participants agree that *Barbie* promotes feminism. Within this finding, all male participants agreed with the statement. This could be the result of several factors. Firstly, there have been numerous studies on how the term ‘feminism’ has been interpreted by different groups. In Anderson’s book *Modern Misogyny: Anti Feminism in a Post-Modern Feminist Era*, she illustrates the mindset of male antifeminists. According to this perspective, the initial aims of feminism have been met, therefore those women who continue to insist on the feminist movement are attempting to get ahead of men, and are therefore antimale (Anderson, 2014). This could explain why pieces of media such as the *Barbie* movie are appearing to be more feminist to men than they truly are. The *Barbie* film clearly promotes women’s rights and equality, however from Anderson’s perspective, some men may not view this presentation of feminism as gender equality. Rather, they predominantly read the media text as an attack on masculinity.



My participants were eager to expand on this topic during the focus group, also. After providing participants with the Oxford definition of *feminism*, they were asked whether *Barbie* promotes this, in their opinion. Participant E stated that ‘feminism is a concept that promotes gender equality for both men and women, but the film only promotes women’. Ben Shapiro shares this perspective. Shapiro uploaded a review video on YouTube, entitled ‘Ben Shapiro DESTROYS the *Barbie* film for 43 minutes’, which does as the title suggests. He uses language like ‘a piece of shit’ and ‘one of the worst movies I have ever seen’ to describe *Barbie*. He criticizes the film’s lack of plot and extremist feminism, claiming that the film teaches us ‘men and women don’t belong together, they belong very much far apart’ (Shapiro, 2023). This viewpoint, contextualized with my findings, establishes that the *Barbie* clearly hasn’t been perceived as a feminist masterpiece by all viewers. These viewers may be referring to the origins of the Barbie doll, which *Barbie* addresses. When Sacha meets Barbie, she tells her ‘You set the feminism movement back 50 years’ (Barbie, 2023). This acknowledgment that the idea of Barbie isn’t perfect is critical and implies that *Barbie*’s original purpose as a children’s toy has truly evolved into a feminist symbol. Barbie responds to this comment by explaining that Barbie is capable of anything, which the movie continues to establish.

A handful of my participants argued that views such as Shapiro’s are simply a form of denial, as the film reflects the reverse of today’s society. Participant B explains that ‘*I think that they make clear the satire through the narrator, where she says, ‘maybe in a few years the Kens will be at the same point that women are in society today’. That’s the point, to point out that this is a fiction of real life to point out the irony of today’s society. If it ended with everything being resolved, it would’ve done the point injustice as not everything has been resolved and it’s supposed to reflect today’s society’*. This was an interesting take, highlighting that viewers are clearly seeing parallels with our world and Barbieland. In Barbieland, women dominate all major corporate careers. The Barbies are doctors, lawyers, president and Nobel prize winners, for example. Kens exist as second-class citizens in this world, As Garber (2023) summarizes; *Kens are simply there when they’re needed. They’re cheerful and patient. They’re always ready to don sequins and smile for an intricately choreographed dance number*”. What else does this description refer to? Women in classic cinema, and today.

*Barbie* creates a subtle reference to the traditional exploitation of women in cinema that Mulvey theorises. When the Barbies become brainwashed by the Kens’ patriarchy ‘Kendom’, the Barbies take on the role of their cheerleaders. They swoon them with praise and exist purely to make the Kens appear superior. Stereotypical Barbie must remind each Barbie who they truly are to restore Barbieland. When Physician Barbie is enlightened, she exclaims “What is this? I would never wear this!” when she realises that she’s dressed as a maid. This is a clever hint of resistance to these traditional voyeuristic techniques used in cinema that Mulvey explores in her 1975 book, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. It implies that women are taking back the power that cinema has robbed them of.

The Kens’ passive role in this dystopian universe is essentially the role of women in our world. Their purpose is to conform to the rules set by the Barbies and compete for Barbie’s approval. Gerwig’s presentation of this is clearly extremely effective, illustrating the hidden struggles of women today. The results of my survey reinforce this, with several

participants mentioning this gender role reversal when asked ‘Is *Barbie* feminist? Why/ why not?’. Participant 19 agreed that the film was feminist and expanded by stating ‘*it is like a 101-feminism class and reverses typical gender positions making you aware of how weird our society in regard to how deeply engraved patriarchal structures are*’. This comment was particularly enlightening, as it shows how *Barbie* is exposing flaws in our societal structures that we, as an audience, didn’t even realize were there. In the focus group, Participant B says that ‘*it says all the things we’re not supposed to say out loud, and I love that about this movie*’. From these findings, *Barbie* has resonated with viewers through these parallel representations of gender. The fact that viewers such as Shapiro are calling this movie ‘anti men’, does this mean that society is anti-women?

### **Gender**

Today, gender and sex are no longer black and white, therefore it is essential to recognize this when examining a film that has been deemed ‘anti male’. One particularly thought-provoking subject that was discussed in the focus group was how these feminist messages were received by audience members who identify as neither male nor female. As *figure 1* illustrates, one participant identified as non-binary, and one preferred not to disclose their gender identity. If I were to repeat this research project, I would be particularly eager to explore the views of more of these audience members in more depth. As the preexisting literature presents the views on this film as ‘men vs women’, it would be beneficial to research particularly underrepresented groups, such as people who identify as non – binary, transgender or gender fluid, for example.

During the focus group, Participant B expressed that they thought ‘*it speaks quite weirdly to the trans and non – binary community. There’s this idea of swapping sides when Ken discovers patriarchy. I’ve heard lots of people who have had similar experiences when you can associate with the opposite gender’s experience where you get sucked into patriarchal practices, and how you may be treated with more respect on a day you present as more masculine. It’s important to remember that you’ve also been on the other side and experienced disrespect also*’. This is presented simplistically and effectively within *Barbie*. When *Barbie* and *Ken* enter the real world and discover patriarchy, *Ken* takes this back to *Barbieland* and embraces the idea of male superiority. Masculine characteristics, despite being presented comically by guitars and horses in the film, equal respect and privilege.

This represents and subtly criticizes a power structure that we see in society today, as the *Barbies* take back this power without losing their femininity. From this view, the film is not intending to be anti-men, rather it is anti-conformity, defying the idea that we are either masculine or feminine and arguing that we are simply individuals made up of selected traits and characteristics (Chiodo, 2020). Participant J shared this viewpoint, explaining that ‘*when it comes to self-identification with people of all genders, it shows the importance of finding yourself beyond your gender label*’. In summary, it can be justified that *Barbie* doesn’t promote one gender over another, rather it promotes self-identification.

*Barbie*’s slogan, ‘*You Can Be Anything*’, sums this up well. The *Barbie* film encourages viewers to be the truest and most pure version of themselves, despite the gender stereotypes that may be placed on them. When *Ken* is having an identity crisis towards the

film's conclusion, expressing that he is 'just Ken', Barbie rephrases this. She tells him that there's not Barbie and Ken; that there's Barbie, and there's Ken. This idea of breaking free of your gender and being yourself is essentially why this film speaks to so many audiences of all gender identities in a way that modern cinema rarely does.

### Who is *Barbie* for?

*Barbie* appealed to my audience. Not only do the comments in the focus group establish this, but the survey results also. Figure 3 shows an average of 4.48 stars was given by my participants. Within this, 55% gave a 5-star rating, 42% gave 4 stars and 3% gave 2 stars. From my previous findings, it can be argued that while the film's messages have been received in several ways, *Barbie* has still captivated audiences, nonetheless.

2. Overall, how would you rate the film?

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[Insights](#)

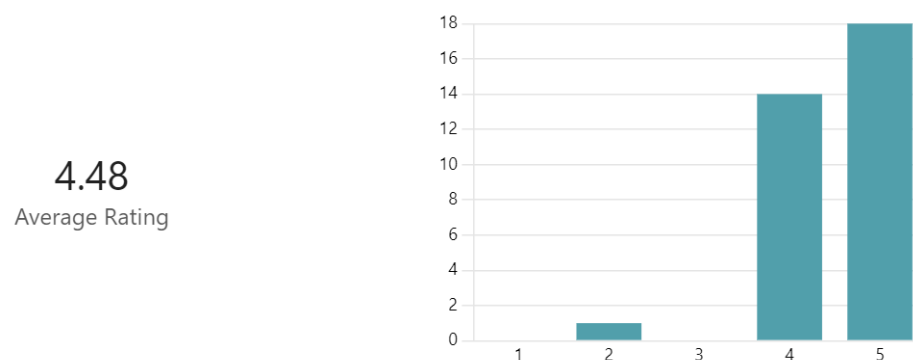


Figure 3: Overall, how would you rate the film?

Generation Z is a key audience when examining the reception of *Barbie*, as discussed in the background chapter. When I began this research project, I was keen to examine the views of *Barbie* from adults aged 18-25. This group is not only underrepresented in the preexisting literature on the *Barbie* film but is also a key audience when examining the *Barbie* film due to the role of nostalgia. My generation has only recently entered our adulthood years; therefore, a film about a beloved childhood toy has resonated with this age group due to our current experiences of leaving our childhood behind forever.

Participant 3 spoke about the purity of this from the flashback scenes of Sacha and her mom. They state *'Those flashback scenes just remind you that, once upon a time, there was no money or hierarchy. And yeah, there may have been gender roles and divides put on you by grownups in your life, but as a child you had little awareness of that. I love the innocence about it, it's just a reminder that you were that little girl once'*. This finding really portrays how this film is resonating with audiences who grew up with Barbie dolls, arguably establishing why the film is appealing to female audiences to a larger extent.

When the survey asks, 'What did you enjoy about the film?', Participant 20 highlights how the film resonated with their identity as a woman. They explained *'I love the nostalgia*

and how relatable it is as a woman... (I) adore the end sequence with the clips of real people home videos, it makes me cry every time'. It appears that young adults have particularly resonated with the purity of this film, rather than "the slyly inserted politics" (Shapiro, 2023). In a recent journal article, Rienstra (2023) explains how important it is that young women watch *Barbie*. In reference to the ending sequence that Participant 20 touches on, she establishes that you (women) should "cherish that moment and remind yourself: ordinary women's lives are valid and poignant and complicated and ultimately beautiful, and media usually doesn't help us perceive that" (Rienstra, 2023). In both Rienstra and my participant's views, it is established that *Barbie* has reached its female audiences simply by representing women and femininity in a raw yet touching way.

It is essential to address the monologue scene here, delivered by America Ferraro. Ferraro's character, Gloria, delivers a raw monologue about the unrealistic expectations that society places on women, and how women are held accountable for men's behavior. This scene was praised by participants within the survey and the focus group, addressing how it exposed the realities of misogyny and gender inequality today. In reference to this scene, Participant H states "I think there's a big thing about rejecting female rage, like women aren't allowed to be angry at the cards we've been dealt. I think her response to that was important in the film. It tells us that it's okay to feel angry and that it's okay to call things out without being just an angry woman, it's an important part of representation". Their point about representation was particularly interesting, drawing similarities to Rienstra's article in my literature review, highlighting the importance of young women watching *Barbie*. Evidently, this scene has resonated with female audiences.



Gloria's Monologue, (*Barbie*, 2023)

Participant I recalled how they had seen this scene before they had seen the film itself, due to its popularity on social media. It exonerates the power of this scene's message, and its ability to represent the ideologies of the *Barbie* to its audiences. This participant expresses that "she says what we all think and feel and this resonances with anyone identifying as a woman, it makes you feel something, and I sat with that feeling for a while". These responses implies that the film's messages are creating a sense of enlightenment and solidarity amongst its female viewers, delivering a very real and influential message that

female audiences are genuinely empathizing with. Harrington, 2023, argues that *Barbie* is one of the first pictures to give a voice to this innately female experience and judging from the response to *Barbie*, it's a message that resonates with the audience.

One of the most prominent debates within the literature surrounding this film was whether film about a doll representing a woman could truly appeal to masculine audiences. Margot Robbie discussed the difficulty of convincing executives that this film would engage with men. She states “...everyone was just like 'There's no way men are never ever, young or old, are never going to go see a Barbie movie.' And we're like 'But men will go see a great movie’” (cited in Northrup, 2024). From this perspective, the film was created to largely appeal to female audiences, yet it still intended to engage male viewers simply by being a great film. However, my research concluded that *Barbie* speaks positively to my male audience, overall. This was a pleasantly surprising discovery, given that most of the preexisting literature presents a negative connotation with the film by male viewers. When discussing the message of Ferraro's speech, Participant J states that “I think the film raises awareness of a lot of issues that male audiences needed to see, that I wasn't even aware of as a man”. This comment summarizes that the film is educating male audiences on issues faced by females today, and the fact that male audiences are receiving this intended message is truly inspiring.

When one of the Kens say, ‘I don't even care about being Ken anymore, I just miss my friend Barbie’, we gather that the film is criticizing the concept of the patriarchy, rather than men themselves. The Kens' ability to recognize their individual characteristics and attributes, other than being Ken, is another nod to the film's messages of feminism. However, the film establishes that the problem isn't Barbie or Ken; it is patriarchy—a social and political system that was set up by and for men (Katz, 2023). Within this review, Katz includes a quote from David Heyman, one of *Barbie*'s producers. He expresses that “...a lot of boys and men will find there's a lot to relate to in Ken as they try to find their place in the world”.

One of the film's slogans, ‘I am Kenough’, summarizes this. It subtly criticizes patriarchy and reminds men that they are more than they expectations of a societal structure, which is what my findings have shown that women are learning from this film, too. The idea of unification was clearly felt through male audiences, also. Participant B explains “there's a viewpoint about female friends that there's a competition for the attention of men. This is reflected through the Kens... it was an interesting flip that I noticed, especially when we went from the two lead Kens going from being quite catty with each other to being quite united in the idea that they are all together in the same situation...”. This finding shows how the theme of friendship, which has been previously presented as overly feminine in classic cinema, has reached male audiences and encouraged the importance of male connections, just as the film emphasizes the importance of female relationships. It speaks to audiences from this perspective, rather than one gender or another.

While my findings are fairly mixed and fail to establish one clear theory, it is fair to conclude that *Barbie*'s messages of feminism and gender has resonated with all audiences in some way. Whether this be through nostalgia, girlhood or even denial, my participants all disclosed that *Barbie* had an impact on them to some extent, as a viewer.

## Conclusion

This research project aimed to synthesize existing audience perceptions on *Barbie*, specifically investigating the reception of its feminist messages. From my primary research and academia review, it is justifiable to conclude that *Barbie* has sparked a series of strong reactions amongst different audiences. My research suggests that young adults have had visceral reactions to *Barbie* and were particularly impacted by its representation of feminism. It is evident that this response to *Barbie* has been predominantly positive, with the concept that ‘you are the idea’ (Barbie, 2023) having a marked influence on viewers.

Within my primary research sample, it was established that that impact was experienced by my male, female and non-binary viewers alike. In this case, the null hypothesis that male viewers had a negative reception to *Barbie* was rejected. While my literature review establishes that *Barbie* has received a fair amount of backlash, my focus group suggests that this is a result of a misinterpretation of *Barbie*’s messages, rather than people’s subconscious gender bias. As mentioned in my findings, my participants have deconstructed *Barbie*’s messages and reached the overall conclusion that *Barbie* is anti-conformity, not anti-male. Although the *Barbie* doll represents women, *Barbie* serves as a beacon of empowerment for all genders by initiating conversations about the damage caused by gender stereotypes today.

The findings in this project mitigated a gap in this relatively underrepresented subject area, exemplifying the power of modern cinema on audience’s sociological mindsets. I would be particularly keen to further this research with the equipment of more time and funding and would love to create a comparative study with the results of this paper to that of other university settings. This would allow me to draw an even more credible conclusion on how *Barbie* has been received by university students by increasing my sample size. I hypothesise that other university settings would deliver similar results, as my findings have established the significance of representation in fostering inclusive worldviews on film.

*Barbie*’s accreditation as a feminist masterpiece (Maddick, 2023) is undoubtedly somewhat justified. My participants’ explanations and deconstructions of *Barbie*’s narrative and themes of feminism were truly eye opening. The film has resonated with audiences in different ways, but this research implied that it does truly make people feel seen and heard. It has ironically painted a picture of our reality through a pink eutopia. As someone who initiated this research with my own affirmative bias towards *Barbie*, hearing my peers share my adoration for *Barbie*’s beautiful storytelling was inspiring. Gerwig’s portrayal of feminism through an iconic plastic doll was truly enlightening and effective. It leads me to conclude that humans truly do have one ending, but ideas live forever (Barbie, 2023).

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## Appendices

Appendices have been removed for confidentiality (Dr Elena Hristova)



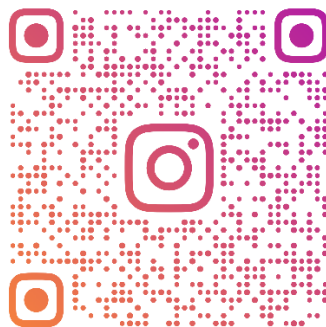


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