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The representation of women in both photography and media has evolved significantly over time. Historically, women were most often portrayed in stereotypical roles which reinforced traditional expectations and limited their presence to decorative individuals, emphasizing beauty, submissiveness and domesticity. However, these stereotypical representations have changed and began shifting since feminist movements have gained momentum, displaying women in diverse and empowering ways. With the rise of digital and social media platforms, these stereotypical representations have been further challenged which has made room for more self-expression and inclusiveness. Regardless of these improvements, unrealistic beauty standards, stereotypical depictions and underrepresentation remain. This essay will examine female representation in photography and media with the use of three keywords as a starting point to further explore this topic. Firstly, I will explore the keyword *Representation* to understand how important representation is in media today, and the effects of negative representation on real people. Then I will delve into the keyword *Negative Stereotypes* to comprehend the specifics of negative stereotypes in and outside of media and its impact on women. I will finish by examining the topic of *Female vs Male Gaze and Objectification* which will help expand on negative female representation in media due to the male gaze, how women are objectified across media, and explore how the female gaze redefines power dynamics, challenging traditional stereotypical portrayals, and how it provides a more authentic and empowering perspective of women in photography and media. The research conducted into these keywords, will aid in the understanding of female representation throughout media as well as the importance of accurate and fair representations and descriptions within photography.

Defined as “the way that someone or something is shown or described” (Cambridge Dictionary), representation is a vital aspect of media, shaping how individuals and communities

are perceived, understood and valued in society. As our lives have shifted online and many individuals spend most of their time in digital spaces, representation has become increasingly important in modern society. Representation in media not only allows minorities to feel seen and acknowledged but also provides them with a platform to challenge stereotypes, redefine narratives, and erase harmful stereotypes. By offering authentic and diverse portrayals, media can create a space that allows for better understanding and inclusivity. Representation also aids in reducing negative stereotypes which are/ were created by incorrect media representation and misinformation being used.

“Representation can be helpful in reducing negative stereotypes about other groups.

Initially discussed by psychologist Dr. Gordon Allport as Intergroup Contact Theory, researchers believed that the more exposure or contact that people had to groups who were different from them, the less likely they would maintain prejudice.” (Psychology Today, 2021)

Kevin Leo Yabut Nadal states that exposure to minority groups often leads to a better understanding of their experiences and typically results in reduced prejudice. Exposure to these minority groups also results in a reduction of negative stereotypes because this exposure and representation corrects any misinformed stereotypes. This means that correct representation in media holds significance because misinformed and lack of representation can lead to negative stereotypes.



Fig 1.

This image, titled *Sisters*, by Rozette Rago depicts 4 Asian women recreating stills from Rago's favourite films. With a lack of representation growing up, Rago sought out to recreate film stills in an experiment to explore how these movies would look if they had included representation and how that would have impacted Rago in her teenage years. Rago used this project to imagine how her life could've been if she were as free as the characters she grew up watching, she has used her career to correct how age-old media have represented people like her, correcting and reclaiming her heritage. While this project aims to correct depictions of Asians in media, the work remains relevant when discussing any form of representation in media and wanting to correct and reclaim how one's identity is seen through media.



Fig 2.

Susan Meiselas used this project to capture the power dynamics and sexual desire within an S&M club from a female point of view. Projects like this are often photographed by men and focus on how the men view the women working but this project focuses on representing the same type of location from a female point of view, focusing on the power dynamics and sexual desires that take place. Rather than portraying the women working in these clubs as objects to be viewed, this project depicts them as individuals who work here in order to do when they truly want to do.

“Mistress Astrid was a musician, for example. They had other lives; this was just their part-time work. It was a case of what do people do, to do what they really want to do.

There’s a duality working within themselves. We are all familiar with that.” – Meiselas

Meiselas utilised this project to look past the sexual fantasy happening in the loft, often depicted in male lead photography, and challenged common ideas regarding sex and power in society.

Both of these images/ projects utilise photography as a means of representation, each approaching it in similar yet distinct ways. Rago recreates film stills and replaces the subjects to more inclusive people while instead of recreating already existing images or stills, Meiselas explores a space often addressed and photographed by men and photographs the space from a more universal point of view, representing the women as women and not objects to be viewed. But, despite their different methods, they share a goal of reclaiming and challenging stereotypes and representations created surrounding their identities, aiming to correct misinformation and provide a more detailed and authentic portrayal. Growing up with a lack of (accurate) representation in media has led to negative stereotypes and unfair treatment so these women have taken it upon themselves to accurately represent themselves and those around them.

The word stereotype is defined as being a generalised belief that all individuals within a certain group, share the same traits and/ or characteristics, often based on limited experiences or assumptions. Stereotypes can be negative (e.g., lazy or criminal), positive (e.g., athletic or wealthy), or neutral (e.g., food or hobbies). According to Momentous Institute (2023) stereotypes “contribute to a dysfunctional class system.”. Stereotypes can lead to the denial of housing, employment, and opportunities as well as limit social interactions such as making friends or meeting new people. Gender stereotyping is harmful and can lead to violations of human rights such as the failure to criminalise marital rape, perceiving that women are the sexual property of their husbands, and the failure to investigate, prosecute and sentence perpetrators of sexual violence against women, root in the belief that victims consented to sexual acts due to their perceived lack of modesty in their behaviour and clothing. Negative

gender stereotyping is often a frequent cause of discrimination against women, contributing to violations of countless rights, including rights to health, adequate standards of living, education, and political participation. These stereotypes also effect rights within marriages and family life, freedom of expression and movement, access to justice, and protection from gender-based violence.

“Gender stereotypes, on the surface, may seem like a trivial issue, but it’s not just a case of too much pink and blue. If we impose rigid ideas of masculinity and femininity on children, we limit their potential and actually cause real harm in later life... Aside from career choice, gender stereotypes can affect every part of life, contributing towards poor mental health in young people, higher male suicide rates, low self-esteem in girls and issues with body image (1 in 5 14 year olds self-harm), furthermore allowing a culture of toxic masculinity and violence against women to go unchecked.” (Birmingham City University)

Eva Pemberton highlights that gender stereotypes, while they often seem harmless, can have serious and harmful consequences later in life. Proposing that establishing set ideas and roles of masculinity and femininity on children could lead to a limitation of their potential and cause harm later in life. By utilizing media to portray minority groups, it provides them with an opportunity and platform to challenge and clear (negative) stereotypes. Over time, this can aid in lessoning discrimination and reducing harm to these communities.



Fig 3.

Through her work, Cindy Sherman acts as both the photographer and the model, depicting traditional female stereotypes. Sherman creates a scene in front of the camera and proceeds to dress in outfits and sometimes wigs to replicate the look of a housewife or other characters that she creates for her imagery. Shermans *untitled film stills* as often referenced during theoretical discussions that touch on topics such as subject formation, feminism, and postmodern representation. Titled *untitled film still #3*, this image is styled in a way that replicates the aesthetics of the 1950s and 60s, this piece explores themes of gender roles, identity and representation. *Untitled film still #3* portrays a young woman dressed in feminine clothing, and an apron while stood by the sink in the kitchen, with the use of clothing that emphasizes her femininity and props that set the scene, this image depicts a traditional housewife in a traditional setting. Media often has a powerful impact on audiences meaning that this image, depicting a negative stereotype and reinforcing traditional white male expectations, can impact how audiences view women and spread negative stereotypes and misinformation. But rather than using photography to distribute and reinforce negative stereotypes, Sherman uses her work as a point of discussions when representing women.

“The role-playing was intended to make people become aware of how stupid roles are, a lot of roles, but it’s not all that serious, perhaps that’s more the moral of it, not to take anything too seriously.” – Cindy Sherman

Sherman states that her use of dressing up as different characters for her work aims to demonstrate the illogical nature of gendered roles. By recreating gendered roles in different scenarios by “role-playing” them, Sherman brings to light that gendered roles aren’t meant to be strict rules that women (and men) must live by, she uses her work and platform to question the legitimacy of gendered roles in society as well as being portrayed in media given that media has a large impact on audiences.

The female gaze is a term created by feminists in response to challenge a claim made by Mulvey that classical Hollywood media requires all spectators to identify with the male protagonist and adopt the male gaze. The term is defined as “The ways in which women and girls look at other females, at males, and at things in the world.” (Oxford Reference). Objectification, defined as “treating people like tools or toys, as if they had no feelings, opinions, or rights of their own” (Cambridge Dictionary) frequently accompanies the male gaze. The male gaze, defined as “A manner of treating women's bodies as objects to be surveyed, which is associated by feminists with hegemonic masculinity, both in everyday social interaction and in relation to their representation in visual media:” (Oxford Reference) is used throughout media, regardless of the era in which it was created. Across media and photography, the male gaze is used in media and when minority groups are portrayed, they are often depicted in ways that align with the male gaze's perception of what is considered accurate and desirable and for women, this often results in the objectification of them and their bodies. In turn, being represented by the male gaze results in the creation of inaccurate representations and negative stereotypes being created. Formed by feminists, the female gaze aims to undo what the male gaze has created, and accurately and fairly depict groups of minorities, focused on women.



Fig 4.

The Flying Cholitas by Luisa Dörr presents two women dressed in traditional Bolivian dresses, fighting. These women are depicted in traditionally feminine clothing while participating in nonfeminine activities, when viewed through the male gaze, this image doesn't depict women in an accurate way, but this image displays two women in their respective elements, participating to fight for earrings, conveying that women are capable of combat, challenging the traditional notions upheld by the male gaze. For these two women, this may be one of the most accurate ways in which they can be represented which means they are being depicted through the female gaze, creating an accurate and fair representation of their true selves.

“But then I saw it went beyond the ring. They are fighting for their rights, for recognition, for equality. They are fighting to put a meal on the table for their kids. They’re fighting for their lives.” – Luisa Dörr (*What We See*, 2023)

These women are represented in a way that is accurate for them, in combat for their rights, equality and more. By capturing this moment, Dörr highlights their strength, resilience, and determination, portraying them as active agents of change in their fight for justice rather than passive subjects. Through the use of the female gaze, Dörr has created a project that not only accurately represents these women through their culture and career but also challenges the rules of the male gaze in both media and photography.



Fig 5

This image by Cindy Sherman, titled *untitled film still #6*, depicts a woman in her underwear on a bed holding a mirror. She wears a loose blouse and has a look of innocence on her face.

“...I have nothing specific in mind when I'm working. My intentions are neither feminist nor political.” – Cindy Sherman

While Sherman has no set meaning to her work, this piece follows the expectations and stereotypes of women through the male gaze and objectifies her body due to the sexualisation of her body. She is exposed in a way that reveals her underwear and the way her blouse sits mixed with her facial expression, appearing as though she is looking at someone, and the setting being her bed, suggests that she is on the verge of intimate relations. Thus, objectifying her and viewing her through the male gaze.

Through this proposal, I have conducted research into the 3 chosen keywords and furthered my understanding of female representation through photography and media. This essay has explored the importance of representation and its effect on people, specifically women, and effectively communicating and analysing the ramifications of negative stereotypes. It also compares the use of the female and male gaze, particularly in how the objectification of women is portrayed in photography and its effects on both stereotypes and representation. This essay has highlighted how women are represented throughout media as well as the importance of accurate and fair representations and descriptions within photography. Through my research, it has become evident that the representation of women in photography has evolved throughout history, but more change is required. To continue my research on this topic and understand how to continue the transformation of female representation in media, I will write my dissertation based on the following question:

“How has female representation evolved in photography throughout history?”

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