

## A Look at Feminist Media Theory in Film

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The feminist theory can be described as “a theory that focuses on the subordination of women and the unequal status of girls and women in society” (Rathus et al., 2020). This theory dates back to the late nineteenth/early twentieth century when the term “first-wave” feminism was coined. In this early era, first-wave feminists argued for equal formal rights between men and women in the public sphere, meaning equality in politics and work, equal pay, the right to vote, and the ability to run for office. Since then, many diverse forms of feminism have emerged, each with the general goal of equality for women in society. Women are, and have been, faced with greater discrimination when compared to men in terms of “education, health, employment, social values, customs, on the name of caste, as well as on the norm of sexual harassment” (Shastri, 2014). Unfortunately, despite the numerous decades of fighting for equality, women are consistently seen to remain at a disadvantage in many aspects of life. In the film industry, feminism has been brought to light by acknowledging the way gender stereotypes, female representation, and other basic feminist principles all play a part in this gender difference. The purpose of this paper is to discuss and understand how feminist media theory challenges the patriarchal system of how media, mainly film, portrays each gender, including research, criticisms, and further suggestions to improve this theory.

### What is Feminism Media Theory

Feminist media theory “applies philosophies, concepts, and logics articulating feminist principles and concepts to media processes such as hiring, production, and distribution; to patterns of representation in news and entertainment across platforms; and to reception” (Steiner, 2014). This theory relies on the foundational principles raised by feminist theory to understand how women are portrayed and treated throughout media processes. In the realm of film production, men are typically portrayed as more of the hero figure, being powerful, smart, strong, and so forth. Women, however, are seen to hold roles that are in need of saving, being slow-witted, weak, and simple-minded. Women are also seen to hold a greater physical standard of beauty and thinness in not only film production but media in general. Feminist media theorists look at these differences in gender roles and study the “quantitative research of representations of women, from the decision-making places to various roles in which they are represented in the programs themselves”

(Miniê, 2007). This theory seeks to critique and uncover the different ways in which media, mainly film production, contributes to the reinforcement of gender inequalities in society.

## History of Feminism in Media

Feminist media theory is said to have begun in 1963 when Betty Friedan, a leader of the women's rights movement at the time, released an award-winning book, *The Feminine Mystique*. In her book, Friedan attacks the big-name magazine companies mainly run by men and highlights "American women's frustrations with their limited gender roles" (Michals, 2017). This book release was an immense step in the fight for gender equality. At the time, men at large were seen to hold most power positions in society, creating an unjust representation ratio of men and women in the workplace. Although Friedan created change by specifically calling out magazine companies, the actions she took invoked further inspiration for change among the different forms of media. The magazine companies Friedan was targeting advertised that "working women were unhappy and neurotic and women can find fulfillment only as devoted housewives and mothers" (Steiner, 2014). Such statements could not be taken seriously and struck a nerve with many women across the nation, inspiring many to join the women's rights movement to create change.

Donna Allen was a civil liberties and peace activist who can also be given credit for the beginning of feminist media theory. In 1972, Allen created the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press (WIFP) in attempt to "examine the current media system and formulate ideas about what is needed in order to truly develop a communications structure where everyone who chooses to, can communicate their information, perspectives, and ideas relatively equally" (Allen, 2020). Allen recognized the idea of society being a man's world and devoted much of her life fighting for there to be democracy in the media realm, where women would be given the same platform as men to guarantee women's voices could be heard. Allen became widely recognized and achieved many different awards for her acts of justice. Similar to Friedan, Allen inspired many women to stand for equality, not only in the press but in all types of media production.

## Feminist Research in Film

It can be acknowledged that the representation of women as well as the diversification of their roles in films have improved drastically throughout the years, yet feminist media theorists are still encouraging further equality. In 2022, only "33% of films featured sole female protagonists" (Lauzen, 2023), whereas "52% (52.2%) of films featured sole male protagonists"

(Lauzen, 2023). For human communication, these statistics are important as they shed light on the underrepresentation of women and their voices. According to The World Bank (2021), women represent 49.75% of the world population, making this underrepresentation of women in media quite alarming. Feminist media theorists aim to further eradicate the lack of female representation by encouraging equality of roles given.

Women in film are held to very high standards for their physical appearance. Female characters are seen to be younger than male characters as the “majority of female characters were in their 20s and 30s (56%), while the majority of male characters were in their 30s and 40s (59%)” (Lauzen, 2023). Human communication methods, such as films, have a very large impact on shaping and maintaining social norms. To widely promote that certain body images/types are better than others holds detrimental effects. Body norms that the media and film platform encourage carries immense societal weight, creating unrealistic mindsets of how a person’s body should look. Feminist media theorists aid in understanding how such media forms invoke unrealistic ideals of how each gender should look. These theorists promote a more realistic view of body image in the film industry, acknowledging that the social norms maintained are far from ideal for an equal society.

Many films often use women in a sexualized way, almost as an object or reward for the male character to gain. As history is known to repeat itself, sexualizing and objectifying women has been a way to satisfy the “male consumers’ pleasure” (Steiner, 2014). A survey was done on the top 100 movies of 2009 where it was found that “33.8 percent of female teen characters were seen in sexy clothing, and 28.2 percent were shown with exposed skin in the cleavage, midriff or upper thigh regions” (USC Annenberg, 2011), whereas male teens had “5.3 percent shown in sexy clothing and 11.2 percent showing skin (USC Annenberg, 2011). As for human communications, these numbers show great concern because women audiences may feel this is normal, accepting that women are meant to be sexualized. Feminist media theorists do not agree, rather they believe this will lead females to experience body shame, anxiety, and further effects, all of which harm women.

Other than on-screen inequalities, women are also seen to fall victim to many inequalities off-screen, the gender wage gap being one. It was found that in 2018 “the 10 highest-paid actors in the world, collectively made US\$748.5 million between June 2017 and June 2018” (Antonio et al., 2021), whereas “the world's top 10 actresses made roughly US\$186 million over the same

period” (Antonio et al., 2021). Even when men and women hold similar character roles “female stars in the nation’s movie capital earn an average of \$1 million less per film than their male counterparts” (Vickery, 2020). Feminist media theorists aim to diminish this drastic difference in pay because receiving unequal pay for equal roles simply does not make sense. As years pass, this wage gap finds itself to be improving and, it can be said, that this change can be seen on-screen too as “a large number of women are no longer housewives, but are now employed” (Miniê, 2007).

## Critiques and Suggestions of Feminist Media Theory

Criticisms have been made toward feminist media theory in a number of ways. One argument is that women in support of feminist media theory “fail to acknowledge the race and class differences between women” (Watkins & Emerson, 2000). Critics highlight that, with the commence of this theory, programs and films highlighted “issues like equal pay, occupational mobility, and protection against sexual harassment” (Watkins & Emerson, 2000), yet there was still a sense of racial and class bias. With this in mind, feminist theories should always aim to understand the severity of inequality faced by women of every class type and color in order to promote equality for all.

While feminist media theorists mainly focus on the issues of representation of women in media, critics argue that gender equality can not simply be solved by increasing screen time for women. There are deeper imbalances of power within society that maintain structural gendered issues far beyond what can be attributed to film and media. Therefore, feminist media theorists must ensure the promotion of equality beyond the representation of women in the media industry. They must acknowledge the broader structural issues such as the institutional and systematic factors that play a part in maintaining gender inequality.

A research question that could further be explored is that if the rise in feminism in media grows and becomes more successful, will this then lead to a dilution of the initial feminist message? Part of feminist media theory is to advocate for better representation of women in the industry, but once representation occurs more equally the risk of the message being lost becomes increased. When women become better represented, it is important to remember how they got there. Equality for women does not solely mean to be given the same screen time as men, but much more. The gender wage gap, gender stereotypes, the objectification of women, and deeper structural issues need to be equally promoted to ensure the initial principles of feminism do not

become dismissed. Therefore, it will be interesting to see in years to come if feminism in film and media is promoted the same as it is today.

Human communication methods, such as films, have a great impact on society as a whole. Gender norms and stereotypes are created through such content, maintaining a sense of unwritten order in a given society. The feminist media theory acts as a lens through which the patriarchal system is analyzed and scrutinized. These theorists have the goal of dismantling gender-based inequalities in the media industry and further propose a system far more just. Women in film obtain fewer roles, are correlated with less-ideal stereotypes, are sexualized, and on average receive far less pay than their male counterparts. Each of these examples is seen not only in film but also in the day-to-day life of a woman. The promotion of feminism in general has and will need to be carried on through generations to come if equality amongst genders is wanted to be met. Feminist media theory will call for continued research in order to contribute to a world of media that respects and reflects the diversity of women.

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