New Feminist Studies in Audiovisual Industries:
Feminism, Gender, Ageism, and New Masculinities in Audiovisual Content

Introduction

MIREN GUTIERREZ
MARÍA J. PANDO-CANTELI
MARÍA PILAR RODRÍGUEZ
University of Deusto, Spain

This Special Section offers an innovative and interdisciplinary approach to studying the new ways in which audiovisual content and advertising communicate gender identities today. This unique section focuses on advertising (i.e., *femvertising* and *menvertising*), television series, animation films, and social media platform content (e.g., GIFs) to look at crosscutting issues such as feminism, gender, ageism, and new masculinities. It combines multiple theoretical approaches from feminist studies, discourse analysis, framing theories, algorithm studies, and hegemonic masculinities, among others, to analyze texts, images, discourses, and communicative experiences.

Keywords: audiovisual, women, femvertising, menvertising, networking platforms

After having lost social weight and luster, lately there has been a renaissance of feminism; "feminism has become incredibly popular," argues Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 1); it has even "become cool" (Zeisler, 2016), and as Jessica Valenti stated in *The Guardian* in 2014, "feminists are everywhere these days" (Valenti, 2014, para. 1). But are we experiencing a genuine accomplishment of critical and intersectional feminism? Or are we witnessing some form of fake, marketplace, or commodity feminism, magnified and disseminated by social media platforms, commercial forces, and entertainment? What is the role of current audiovisual practices in the representation of gender identities and feminist interventions? How do the current feminist efforts for justice against violence and in favor of equality appear in audiovisual content? It is undeniable that the terms *feminism* and *feminist* have lately experienced a process of "destigmatization" due to the standardization of feminist discourse driven by the social mobilization impact of social media platforms, fashion, and entertainment (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Fraser, 2013; Zeisler, 2016). Both the institutionalization of feminism and

Miren Gutierrez: m.gutierrez@deusto.es
María J. Pando-Canteli: mpando@deusto.es
María Pilar Rodríguez: maria.pilar@deusto.es
Date submitted: 2020-11-24

its commodification have helped to mainstream it. However, it is as if feminism were exhibiting a kind of polyphony, taking divergent paths and addressing varied and even disparate matters.

Although the outrage ensuing the structural abuse and discrimination of women has fueled massive protests and digital activism, such as the #MeToo and #Cuéntalo campaigns, publicity and other audiovisual content offer stories that offer nominal equality in which, paraphrasing Rogan and Budgeon (2018), women seem to have attained economic, social, and political parity, not through collective action or political transformations, but through individual participation in the free market and of the self-affirmation related with the physical appearance (p. 6). In other words, the empowerment that before would have been associated with a critique of the structural discrimination of women on street protests and *tell-it* campaigns appears now in ads and other audiovisual content depoliticized and lacking collective commitment (Rottenberg, 2014).

The essays included in this volume draw on prevailing feminist theories as an entry point to examine the messages, contradictions, and manifestations of today's feminism by looking into audiovisual content and publicity and how these portray gender. These essays offer a new feminist and crosscutting insight into relevant, gender-related issues in audiovisual and media industries, such as representing new masculinities, ageing, algorithmic bias, or the rapidly changing leadership models in audiovisual content and employer branding. It employs a varied array of methods and tools—from automatized computing to content analysis—which also shows how feminist investigations are being developed. Finally, it offers an updated state-of-the-art review of the latest approaches to gender and audiovisual products and innovative pathways to further analysis.

Over the past several decades, many pages have been written on feminism and audiovisual content, including several articles devoted to this journal's topic (see, among others Losh, 2015; Mazid, 2018; Szulc, 2020). There are several critical contributing factors to this diverse ongoing focus over such a broad period. First, feminist methods have been theorized and explored in virtually all research fields, have transformed our world's understanding, and have influenced how research is conducted. Second, media in general, and audiovisual productions in particular, are especially impactful. A third significant reason for the sustained attention to feminist analysis in the area of visual studies is that researchers who are dedicated to this type of work are engaged in a continual effort to extend the scope of their studies to values such as egalitarianism, intersectionality, social change, and ethical challenges to notions of privilege and relations of power. As audiovisual industries represent one of the most dynamic and ever-changing practices in media, the academic community has constantly adapted conceptual and methodological frameworks to adjust to new realities.

A few relevant academic publications and venues for the type of research that this volume enforces are worth mentioning here. The journal *Feminist Media Studies* provides an open transdisciplinary forum for researchers pursuing feminist approaches to media and communication studies. Since 2001, it has published relevant contributions to the field with attention to local, national, and global contexts for critical and empirical feminist media inquiry. Thornham's (2007) book *Women, Feminism and Media* has become a reference for students in media and women's studies and offers a pedagogical approach to the most significant notions about subjectivity, identity, culture, and visual narrative. The collective volume titled *Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks, and Cultural Citizenship*, edited by Zobl and Drüeke (2012), explores how feminist media producers create and engage in participatory spaces, networks, and cultural practices and how they become engaged in processes of social change. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media is a research-based

organization working within the entertainment industry to "create gender balance, foster inclusion, and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media" (Geena Davis Institute, 2020, para. 1). This institute generates yearly reports looking, for example, at how the representation of diversity in films—including ethnicity, age, and gender—drives moviegoers (Movio, 2020). The European Commission has worked on gender representation in the audiovisual media sector, producing international reports which note that, in audiovisual content, women are often associated with the private sphere and defined by youth, slenderness, and beauty (e.g., European Commission, 2018). Many other contributions in other languages have offered insights worldwide. To give just one example in Spanish, a book by one of the contributing authors to this section, Bernárdez (2015), *Mujeres en medio(s): Propuestas para analizar la comunicación masiva con perspectiva de género* [Women in media: A proposal to analyze mass communication with a gender perspective] provides theoretical and methodological tools for analyzing media with a gender-focused perspective.

This Special Section embraces diverse methods and tackles multiple types of content (e.g., ads, algorithms, TV series). It explores the diverse forms in which advances to the cause of feminism are noticeable and surface in visual and discursive changes in audiovisual products that have modified previous representations associated with discrimination, open sexism, ageism, racism, and lack of diversity. In most cases, such modulations respond to the social and political transformations that operate in all areas of daily life. However, resistances to the advances of feminism represent a force of obstruction in integrating the gender perspective and seeking to preserve the prevailing order in a society instead of questioning it. New masculinities, new narratives, new biases, and the new divergent forms that feminism is adopting cannot be understood without tackling the advances of feminism, which have forced men to revise their gender roles and have offered novel avenues for women to claim and explore equality. However, as these articles show, equality has not yet been fully achieved, and consequently, feminism may still offer a valuable viewpoint. In many cases, articles included in this collection show an attempt to identify hidden forms of sexism that under the pretense of empowering women actually work against equality.

Three of the four articles analyzing gender portrayals in television series, although focused on different formats and identities (Cuklanz & Erol; Marcos & González de Garay; and Silvestre, López, & Royo) reach similar conclusions. Despite partial achievements in the visual and discursive portrayals of gender, male and female characters' stereotyping in physical appearance, professional occupation, family, and emotions still exist. Interestingly, the article by Neira-Piñeiro, del Moral, and Villalustre offers a more progressive incorporation of leadership in female characters in children's animation films. In some of the articles, both tendencies can be perceived; in the essay by Pando and Rodríguez, commercials that promote new portrayals of masculinities that deviate from or subvert hegemonic masculinity to offer a better image of gender equality are beginning to appear, and their conclusions on the shifting images of masculinity can be read in line with those by Cuklanz and Erol. Though an adverse reaction by a significant percentage of males' responses indicates that such efforts are often seen as threatening to the maintenance of traditional gender identities, Ronda and Azanza conclude that partial achievement is nevertheless seen in the new advertising campaigns on LinkedIn by individual companies that include profemale messages to develop women's talent and promote their careers.

This partial advance is often offset by automatized trends like algorithmic decision-making, proving to be a component in the antifeminist resistance. Gutierrez delves into the new challenges for equality presented by algorithmic decision-making based on audiovisual content. While all sharing and networking platforms incorporate biases, their algorithms are increasingly employed to offer jobs, loans, medical care, and other services and influence behavior, potentially harming women and perpetuating discrimination. Meanwhile, Álvarez, González, and Ubani reveal that platforms offer new ways of spreading sexism via artifacts such as reaction GIFs (graphics interchange formats) or brief animated clips, usually on a hypnotic auto-play loop, posted to convey emotions. In "The Portrayal of Men and Women in Digital Communication: Content Analysis of Gender Roles and Gender Display in Reaction GIFs," these authors conclude that the new visual lexicon of GIFs entails stereotyping through gender, age, ethnicity, and sexualized depictions of women, reflecting the complexity of current beliefs about the condition of women and girls.

This particular section is innovative because it considers dimensions of interdisciplinarity and globalization, examines the challenges of digital media forms, and explores intersectionality implications. To this end, each of the essays integrates feminist and gender studies with other theoretical disciplines or frameworks to produce new insights for understanding gender identities. This Special Section offers the opportunity to test new, hybrid approaches to feminist studies and reflect on them and their transformative potential. Encompassing all women's life stages, this monograph presents a polyhedral and interdisciplinary assessment of how mediated audiovisual and publicity practices represent gender identities and enforce or contest feminist efforts from childhood to old age. Interestingly, advances toward gender equality are connected with audiovisual products addressed to early and older ages and faded in others, including those oriented toward middle-aged audiences. Although age is not discussed directly, Gutierrez's piece on algorithmic gender bias is relevant because of girls' increasing exposure to online audiovisual content and its potential impact on their health, well-being, and futures. In other articles, resistance to gender equality is evident whenever middle-aged men are at the core (e.g., in Cuklanz & Erol; Pando & Rodríguez). Meanwhile, Álvarez, González, and Ubani note that GIFs are relevant for two reasons. On the one hand, sexualization and age continue to be significant variables in depicting women and girls. On the other hand, GIFs' depictions are part of young people's everyday gender socialization and identity development. A brief presentation of the articles included in this section follows below.

In the first essay, María Silvestre Cabrera, María López Belloso, and Raquel Royo Prieto examine the fourth wave of feminism to provide context to the rest of the articles. This article examines the image of women projected by *Game of Thrones* (Season 8) and *Stranger Things* (Season 3). By using the Bechdel–Wallace test and Butler's frames of reference and relying on highly audiovisual success (audience indexes), the authors explored fourth-wave feminism postulates: intersectionality, women's sexuality, empowerment, and technological revolution/social media. They conclude that though female characters' development encompasses features that align with the demands of fourth-wave feminism, there is an underlying contradiction expressed in the tension between these genuine demands and some conspicuous illustrations of patriarchal traits. This contradiction translates into the banalization of feminist demands.

No landscape of feminism and audiovisual content would be complete today without considering the relevance of algorithmic gender bias. Though academic attention to gender bias in texts is well-established (e.g., Criado-Pérez, 2019; Hitti, Jang, Moreno, & Pelletier, 2019), Miren Gutierrez offers an analysis focused

on audiovisual content, including images and speech, as there are relatively fewer studies on them despite their increasing relevance. Gutierrez is guided by the question, "How does gender bias happen when machine learning algorithms are fed with audiovisual data?" Both data sets and algorithms can be biased. These biases can be introduced by the algorithmic systems' designers and users, the selection of training audiovisual data, or historical data representing unfair past situations. Other factors include how and where women's representation appears online, how audiovisual data are aggregated, and how algorithms are designed to search for relevant content. These digital biases and the lack of incentives to prevent them can cause imbalances, disparities, and unfairness in the real world. That is, real-life gender discrimination embedded in audiovisual data can result in bias in the digital world; likewise, algorithmic gender bias translates into more discrimination against women in the real world, establishing a perverse circle. Gutierrez proposes a research agenda for this new challenge in attaining equality.

Diego Álvarez, Alejandro González, and Cristina Ubani analyze the significance of the fleeing animations sent in reaction to online messages known as GIFs. So far, little has been said about GIFs as communicative artifacts, but they configure a private space for symbolic messaging that can shape gender representation. As these authors argue, the relevance of this new type of content has forced companies such as Google, Facebook, and Microsoft to incorporate solutions into their services that enable users to search and share them with others. The analysis examines gender portrayal in 250 textual and visual GIFs. Drawing from the framing theory and aided by computerized analysis, these authors identify patterns including, among others, (a) a more significant presence of men than women, consistent with the literature on the underrepresentation of women in audiovisual content; (b) women predominantly exhibiting a youthful appearance, made-up, thin, adorned by jewelry, and in private settings; (c) less diversity in women than in men (e.g., skin color); and (d) a greater sexualization of female characters, showing more nudity and sexually revealing clothing than males. These authors conclude that exposure to such biased portrayals of women and girls may have harmful effects and "should not be considered a minor problem." Additionally, this study shows the value of combining human and machine coding and analysis. As the authors note, while human coders found it challenging to agree on the meanings of the GIFs, automated coding "has shown advanced precision and reliability." This study opens the door to the use of automated content analysis of nonverbal content.

The article titled "*Menvertising* and the Resistances to New Masculinities in Audiovisual Representations," by Maria J. Pando Canteli and Maria Pilar Rodríguez, reviews the recent attempts at defining trends in advertising that are oriented toward the advancement of gender equality. The authors follow the development of *femvertising* campaigns and adapt some of its defining indicators to offer an innovative method of inquiry for *menvertising* audiovisual commercials. The authors apply their definition and methodology in the first part of their article to three different international commercials that show different levels of commitment to the advancement of gender equality versus a commodification of what the brands perceive as an advantageous approach to gender portrayals. To adequately contextualize the methodological implementations, Pando and Rodríguez present a literature review of the study of gender portrayals in advertising and of the notion of hegemonic masculinity and explain the three principal reasons to explain men's lower identification with commercials that promote new portrayals of masculinities that deviate from or subvert hegemonic masculinity (resistance, reactance, and masculine gender role stress). This study significantly advances knowledge in studying recent trends in advertising by providing a new paradigm for the study of *menvertising* commercials.

Next, Lorena Ronda and Garazi Azanza propose *employer femvertising* to refer to a new organizational branding phenomenon that uses audiovisual material in job and networking platforms (e.g., LinkedIn) to position themselves as attractive companies for professional women. Based on the concepts of *employer branding* and *femvertising*, employer femvertising emerges as a set of messages and strategies through which an organization positions itself as an employer that demands and promotes women's professional development and fights the stereotypes, obstacles, and labor challenges women face in the workplace. A social media content analysis was conducted to explore the messages used in the employer branding campaigns published by four top employer companies on LinkedIn in the first quarter of 2020. The article offers a selection of the items that companies include in their campaigns: gender equality, female leadership, inclusive recruitment, female talent growth, and work-life balance. Such classification forms the basis for future studies and will allow analyzing whether such classification is maintained or other categories take preeminence in companies' future efforts to attract women's talent.

Television series are another area where new phenomena are being identified. In "The Shifting Image of Hegemonic Masculinity in Contemporary Television Series," Lisa Cuklanz and Ali Erol examine the shifting image of masculinity in TV shows that emerged during the 2000s and early 2010s, such as *24* and *Breaking Bad*. The authors identify an underlying narrative focused on revenge fantasies in which protagonists would rescue or avenge family members. However, a few shows display a masculinity performance that centers on caring and nurturing family while engaging in violence—not as a form of revenge, but rather as a means of protection. These shows, *The Mandolorian*, *The Witcher*, and *Prison Break*, they argue, offer a slightly different performance of masculinity, showing how the traditionally hypermasculine genres of westerns and prison dramas have evolved to include fatherhood and nurturing paternal behaviors in their constructions of hegemonic masculinity. These shifts in hypermasculine genres represent significant new developments that reflect feminist influence on programming content in relation to gender constructions. The article departs from classical visual images of hegemonic masculinity to underscore significant changes in gender representation, particularly in the depictions of fatherhood, which is an area in which both the article by Pando and Rodríguez and this one show ongoing transformations.

Asunción Bernárdez Rodal and María Isabel Menéndez Rodale capture the spirit of aging women in an exhaustive analysis of *Olive Kitteridge*, a four-episode TV miniseries directed by Lisa Cholodenko, and independently produced by and starring Frances McDormand. Audiovisual creation continues to be a challenging profession for women, especially older women. This article examines women's strategies to create opportunities for themselves in a market still dominated by men and their narratives. The article is based on a content analysis of the TV series, drawing from gender and aging studies. It offers a critical examination both of the process of portraying older women in film and of their role in the industry. It is particularly interesting precisely for the dialogue it establishes between the actor/producer's biography and the story of the character she portrays.

María Marcos Ramos and Beatriz González de Garay analyze the representation of gender in video-on-demand (VOD) Spanish productions. Particular attention is paid to whether there is an underrepresentation of character types and gender stereotyping concerning occupation, traits, attitudes, and conversations. Besides, these authors compare women's image on VOD platforms with their image in generalist television

channels. To this end, the authors perform a quantitative content analysis of 760 characters in Spanish fiction series produced by VOD platforms and broadcast between 2017 and 2020, looking at personality traits, violence, relations, personal goals, and sexual orientation. They observe a trend toward gender equality and increasing representation of the LGBT community in streaming platforms. However, confirming what other studies in this Special Section and elsewhere indicate, there are areas of resistance. For instance, male characters still hold higher status jobs (e.g., businessman, director) and are typically police officers, military personnel, skilled workers, religious workers, or criminals. The results prove that even though new audiovisual platforms tend to incorporate equality, the underrepresentation and stereotyping of female characters in professional occupation, family, and emotions persists.

Finally, in "Female Leadership Represented in Animation for Children: The Socio-Cognitive Learning of the Girls of the 21st Century," M. Rosario Neira Piñeiro, M. Esther del Moral Pérez, and Lourdes Villalustre Martínez analyze 10 animation films for children, offering a taxonomy of their educational, psychological, sociological, technical, and aesthetic strategies to depict female leadership. Due to their progressive evolution since the last century, female characters have acquired more prominence and presented examples of empowerment. Employing the Cartoons-L tool (Bass, 1981; Caldevila, 2010), this case study's qualitative research focuses on women-centered leadership models and considers three dimensions—personal and psychological, sociological, and communicative. The authors' analysis confirms the prevalence of charismatic, participatory, and emotional leadership, incarnated in professional, independent, assertive, determined, and courageous women who offer girls positive behavior models.

Together, the contributions to this volume provide a wide range of innovative and inspiring approaches to recognizable fields of academic inquiry. By combining insights and methods from distinct fields, new hybrid research designs are produced which may shed light on contemporary issues linked to audiovisual productions. These essays demonstrate how theoretical analyses based on feminist and audiovisual studies can be deployed to address contemporary situations and dynamics related to audiovisual productions. What these articles have in common is, first, an effort to both provide an intellectual challenge and blaze new trails in research either by reviewing previous theories and methodologies to add new contexts, perspectives, and concepts or by generating new fields of study through interdisciplinary research. Second, they all share a profound political commitment to working toward gender equality and social justice. Finally, all articles convey the need to push the boundaries of research and expand the limits of traditional academic writing to achieve new ways of investigating feminist methodologies.

We sincerely hope that readers share the passion that we, as editors, have experienced through the process of editing this monographic number, and that these contributions inspire and pave the way for other authors to advance on producing innovative and critically engaged readings of audiovisual products. To finish, we warmly thank Arlene Luck, Larry Gross, Kady Bell-Garcia, Kasia Anderson, and the editorial board at the *International Journal of Communication* for their invaluable help throughout this rewarding endeavor. Arlene Luck has been our guiding light from the beginning of the process, and we warmly thank her for her professionalism, dedication, and patience.

References

Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bass, B. M. (1981). S*togdill's handbook of leadership: A survey of theory and research.* New York, NY: Free Press.

Bernárdez, A. (2015). *Mujeres en medio(s): Propuestas para analizar la comunicación masiva con perspectiva de género* [Women in media: A proposal to analyze mass communication with a gender perspective]. Madrid, Spain: Fundamentos.

Caldevila, D. (2010). Estereotipos femeninos en series de TV [Female sterotypes in TV seris]. *Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación*. Chasqui, 111, 73–78. doi:10.16921/chasqui.v0i111.327

Criado-Pérez, C. (2019). *Invisible women: Exposing data bias in a world designed for men.* London, UK: Vintage.

European Commission. (2018). *Working report on gender representation in the audiovisual media sector*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/working-report-gender-representation-audiovisual-media-sector

Fraser, N. (2013). *Fortunes of feminism*: *From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis.* London, UK: Verso.

Geena Davis Institute. (2020). Who we are? *Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media*. Retrieved from https://seejane.org/about-us/

Hitti,Y., Jang, E., Moreno, I., & Pelletier, C. (2019). Proposed taxonomy for gender bias in text: A filtering methodology for the gender generalization subtype. *Proceedings of the 1st Workshop on Gender Bias in Natural Language Processing.* Association for Computational Linguistics. 8–17. Florence, Italy. doi:10.18653/v1/W19-3802

Losh, E. (2015). Feminism reads big data: Social physics, atomism, and s*elfiecity. International Journal of Communication, 9*, 1647–1659.

Mazid, I. (2018). Between violence and exclusion: Cinematic representation of gender politics in *Antarmahal* and *Water*. *International Journal of Communication, 12*, 4802–4820.

Movio (2020). I want to see me: Why diverse on-screen representation drives cinema audiences. *Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media*. Retrieved from https://movio.co/i-want-to-see-me/

Rogan, F., & Budgeon, S. (2018). The personal is political: Assessing feminist fundamentals in the digital age. *Social Sciences*, *7*(8), 132. doi:10.3390/socsci7080132

Rottenberg, C. (2014). The rise of neoliberal feminism. *Cultural Studies, 28*(3), 418–437. doi:10.1080/09502386.2013.857361

Szulc, L. (2020). Digital gender disidentifications: Beyond the subversion versus hegemony dichotomy and toward everyday gender practices. *International Journal of Communication, 14*, 5436–5454.

Thornham, S. (2007). *Women, feminism and media.* Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

Valenti, J. (2014, November 24). When everyone is a feminist, is anyone? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/24/when-everyone-is-a-feminist

Zeisler, A. (2016). *We were feminists once: From riot grrrl to cover girl, the buying and selling of a political movement.* New York, NY: Public Affairs.

Zobl, E., & Drüeke, R. (Eds.). (2012). *Feminist media: Participatory spaces, networks, and cultural citizenship*. Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript.