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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsifIt's a mad, mad, mad, ad world: A feminist critique of *Mad Men*Patrick Ferrucci^{a,*}, Heather Shoenberger^b, Erin Schauster^a^a Bradley University, Peoria, IL, United States^b University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, United States

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SYNOPSIS

The television drama *Mad Men* was an immediate critical hit when it premiered in July of 2007 on AMC. The multiple Emmy Award-winning program received a large amount of mainstream press for its depiction of 1960s Madison Avenue, complete with rampant sexism. This study utilizes feminist criticism to examine not only the explicit forms of sexism depicted on *Mad Men*, but also the implicit and more subtle ways the dominant ideology of patriarchy is normalized. While the program is a drama, *Mad Men* uses sexism for humor. This type of depiction of gender stereotypes and overt sexism encourages viewers to accept patriarchy as ideal and natural, finds humor in independent women attempting to break free of the dominant ideology, and trivializes gender bias as a laughing matter.

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Introduction

For a television show that, at its peak, reaches roughly 3 million viewers per week (Crupi, 2010), a number that would threaten cancellation at a major network, *Mad Men* has received an inordinate amount of press coverage (Lehnen, 2011), and has even inspired everything from a clothing line to paper dolls (Rosenberg, 2011). The AMC program is the only drama to win the coveted Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series in each of its first four seasons beginning in 2008. Not only has *Mad Men* received praise and attention from the mainstream press, but the show has also enticed scholars to take notice (e.g., de Groot, 2011; De Kosnik, 2010; Duffy, Liss-Mariño, & Sender, 2011). As a result of its popularity, a group of researchers published a book containing several scholarly studies about various aspects of the show (Carveth & South, 2010).

Based in and around a Madison Avenue advertising agency in the early 1960s, *Mad Men* is noted for its stereotypical depiction of that time period's rapid consumption of cigarettes, drinking in

the a.m., and preferences for fashion. *Mad Men* has received a lot of mass media attention for its depiction and implied approval of sexism. The drama has even been credited with spawning imitators in recent programs such as *The Playboy Club*, *Pan Am*, *The Hour*, *Halt and Catch Fire* (D'Addario, 2014; Elliott, 2010; Rosenberg, 2011; Stanley, 2007). Popular television's sexual objectification of women is not a recent phenomenon that began with *Mad Men*. A cursory scan of cable stations could result in a viewer finding such older programs still in reruns such as *Three's Company*, *I Dream of Jeannie* or *Married with Children* (Johnson, 2007).

Feminist criticism argues that women are oppressed by patriarchy and that women's perspectives are not incorporated into our culture (Foss, 1996). Feminist criticism, similar to feminism itself, is "aimed at improving conditions for women" (Foss, 1996, p. 165). Patriarchal ideology is so embedded in our culture that we are no longer aware of its existence; therefore, it is the job of the critic to acknowledge what is happening (Dow, 1996). This study examines the first season of the popular television show *Mad Men* through a feminist criticism. Despite ardent attention from mainstream media given to the program's depiction of women, scholars have yet to focus on its

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sexist content. The purpose of this study is to account for the sexism embedded in the program's depiction of women and identify aspects of the text to help viewers make sense of the sexism.

Literature review

Feminist theory

Dow and Condit (2005) argued that while feminist scholarship has become mainstream, the issues that it seeks to understand and illuminate remain. The existence of feminist scholarship indicates an ongoing pattern of sexist and gender discrimination that necessitates more studies of media messages (Fenton, 2000). Feminist criticism can manifest itself in numerous manners; not all feminist scholarship is the same (e.g., Dow, 1990; Sarikakis, Rush, Grubb-Swetnam, & Lane, 2009). Yet there are common concepts that distinguish feminism, including an examination of gender as a "mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them" (van Zoonen, 1994, pp. 3–4).

Foss (1996) identified three basic principles that most feminist critics agree on. First, she wrote that feminist scholarship is embedded with the notion that women are oppressed by patriarchy, a system of power that gives control to men and allows them to "dominate women so that women's interests are subordinated to those men, and women are seen as inferior to men" (Foss, 1996, p. 166). Second, women's experiences are different than men's experiences based on the fact that women are biologically different. The third principle is that women's perspectives are currently not built into our culture because men are the ones with the best chance to create culture. Dow and Condit (2005) surveyed the field of feminist analysis and found that the majority of studies examine gender ideology, which "is a central function of cultural messages," and researchers assessed how this manifests itself in media messages and affects society (Dow & Condit, 2005, p. 456). However, Dow and Condit (2005) stressed that there is a false tendency to classify all research pertaining to women as feminist scholarship, but only those studies aimed at achieving gender justice should be considered feminist scholarship. The goal, they argued, "takes into account the ways that gender always intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class" (p. 449).

van Zoonen (1994) posited that content analysis and other forms of quantitative research are lacking for feminist studies; she maintained that content analysis simply examines manifest content, but to truly see patterns of patriarchy and dominance of male representation, a researcher must look beyond the explicit and also include the implicit. Feminist criticism identifies the implicit through the "analysis of rhetoric to discover how the rhetorical construction of gender is used as a means for oppression and how that process can be challenged and resisted" (Foss, 1996, p. 168). In a quantitative study of television, researchers can only examine apparent data, primarily dialogue (van Zoonen, 1994). By doing this and focusing on the explicit, a researcher will not capture implicit data such as facial expressions, voice tone, wardrobe, staging and other implicit characteristics that allow viewers to generate a fuller perception of a character or scene. These implicit characteristics are vital to fully understanding a character or television show in general (Foss, 1996).

Women's voices and perspectives are either exceedingly rare or missing from dominant media (D'Acci, 1994; Dow, 1990; Durham, 2007; LeBesco, 2006; Watkins & Emerson, 2000). Stereotypes pertaining to women remain very frequent in the media (van Zoonen, 1994). The average woman on television is portrayed as passive, overemotional, and dependent on men (Murphy, 1998). Ott and Mack (2010) created a classification system to characterize how women and men are treated differently. First, they argue that men are active, while women are passive. Second, they found that men's roles are public, while women are confined to the private sphere. Harp and Tremayne (2006) found something similar, insisting that in the media "women are responsible for, best suited for, and belong within the private sphere of life—the domestic sphere of home, family, private relations, and sexual reproduction" (p. 249). Third, masculinity is linked to logic and level-headedness, while femininity is presented as emotional and sometimes irrational. Lastly, men are presented as sexually powerful, while women are sex objects and conquests. To conduct a full feminist study, a researcher must proceed with those four characteristics in mind (Ott & Mack, 2010).

Feminist television criticism

The emergence of feminist television criticism can only be rightfully placed historically after properly noting that feminist criticism and television studies were scholarly fields born together in the 1970s (Lotz & Ross, 2004). While both fields "struggled for a place in academic institutions, the youthfulness of television studies made it possible for feminist voices to emerge without having to overthrow an 'old guard'" (Lotz & Ross, 2004, p. 186). Lotz and Ross (2004) noted that many of the earliest television studies anthologies contain numerous examples of feminist television criticism (e.g., Baehr & Dyer, 1987; Brown, 1990; Brunson, D'Acci, & Spigel, 1997; Kaplan, 1983; Mellencamp, 1992). Scholars argue that there is no way to separate television studies and feminist criticism in today's world; and by the mid 1980s, a distinct field called feminist television criticism emerged (e.g., Brunson et al., 1997; Dow, 1996; Lotz & Ross, 2004; Ott & Mack, 2010; Sarikakis et al., 2009).

Dow (1990) recognized two distinct approaches to feminist television criticism. The first approach, she wrote, is the most prevalent form of scholarly research in the area and views popular culture as a sphere that has undervalued, underrepresented and "largely opposed valorization" of women in all forms. This approach argues that the dominant ideology in television is male-centric, with women included to support a male-dominated storyline. Research in this area focuses on how women are portrayed and how these portrayals affect society's view of women. The second approach to feminist television criticism examines the role of women as actors, producers, and audiences in television, largely focusing on how content affects women. Therefore, the two distinct approaches take on very different roles, one that interprets content and its stereotypical presentation of women, and one that examines how that content affects women. This study aligns strongly with the first approach, examining how content can affect stereotypes and views of women in general.

Gitlin's (1983) examination of prime-time television observed that while occasionally television will incorporate

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