

Flipping Tropes & Subverting Stereotype Priming in The *Hunger Games Trilogy*

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ABSTRACT

This is a review paper on the apparent force of commercial success and social media presence being a key in the changes of female representation in popular culture using The Hunger Games dystopian trilogy's global commercial success and its impact as case in point. It argues that the trilogy's commercial success is valuable in helping normalise the flipped gender roles or subverting the stereotypical gender primes. While dystopian literature supposedly features worlds and societies beyond typical real-life rules, many parts of that fictional world will still exhibit traits and beliefs contemporary to its author and resonate with its audience. The normalisation of gender stereotypes can often be seen in characters and social dynamics portrayed repeatedly throughout other forms of media communication. These and other literary works carry within it these stereotypical traits or behaviours a shorthand frame of reference which are called tropes. In this paper, the tropes are viewed through the sociological lens called stereotype priming which is the perpetuation of stereotypes through systemic means targeting certain behaviours, traits or beliefs. This paper looks at instances of tropes exhibiting priming functions within the dystopian world of not just The Hunger Games trilogy and how the commercial success of the empowered female has paved the way for more positive female representation in popular media culture since then. This lens has been expanded to take into account how The Hunger Games trilogy continues to have relevance post-pandemic regarding issues that current facts have brought dangerously close to dystopian fiction.

Keywords: *Dystopian narrative, gender, popular media, popular culture, stereotypes.*

INTRODUCTION

Literary idealised communities may have officially started from the classic text *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More in which the concept of such a society was brought to earth instead of relegated to dreams and stories of paradise. Yet, our historical inability to achieve a utopian dream of the perfect society without creating an opposite dystopian social nightmare for others has rendered stories of utopia and dystopia often inexorably linked, whether one is disguised or as a satire of the other (Featherstone, 2011; Klein, 2009; Milerius, 2011; Mohr, 2007) Since then, even though many utopian/dystopian texts are often categorised as science fiction due to the otherworldly settings of the stories, it is still fundamentally connected to this world through the readers' interpretation of the writers' vision (Fitting, 2010; Hunt, 2022; Machado-Jiménez, 2021). This symbiotic dynamic that is partly reflective of their beliefs, values and sociocultural or political situations is rooted in antiquity from the Greek myths and the now familiar tropes are even commonly referred to as the heroes' journey (Campbell et al., 1949). Most easily seen now in superhero stories or video games, these tropes are essentially literary shorthands which depend on activating certain schematic cues or 'primes' to facilitate the audience's ability to 'see' it in their mind's eye, to engage with the characters and stories,

even to cause their willingness to suspend reality or beliefs (Burke, 1941; Maclean, 2016; Maurin, 2011; Moi, 1991).

This same way is how many dystopian stories often depend on known variables such as tropes, elements of plot lines to anchor the readers as they diverge from our reality in many other ways. There is usually enough familiarity for the readers to grasp and remain engaged as they discover the unknown worlds. Unfortunately, the repetition of familiar tropes or stereotypes in the midst of completely new input often engenders the effect of reinforcing it as 'truth', 'natural' or 'normal' (LeBlanc, 2014). These tropes and primes occur repeatedly in many reiterations both inside and outside of fiction as well as various forms of media inevitably conforming to the same stereotypes throughout the evolution of storytelling itself, in many guises but usually the same outcome and impact (White, 2021). By highlighting, then normalising or justifying them, these stereotypes become internalised and normalised as 'natural truths' to a degree that is key to their perpetuation (Kafai et al., 2008; Palmary & Kiguwa, 2009; Salzinger, 2004; Sullivan, 2014). These predisposes generations to pass it down through a phenomenon termed 'stereotype priming' or what is now categorised as generational or intergenerational traumas which aside from the extreme such as war and genocide, may include misogyny, racism, ignorance, poverty and others (Erll, 2022; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). These internalised beliefs, values and behaviours reflect the society within which it is situated, fulfilling the cliché of Art imitating Life and the vicious cycle of Life then imitating Art's stereotypical imbalances (Lustila, 2011). Given how entrenched these values and their outcomes can be, gender roles and portrayals of women especially have not diverged too far from it despite the outward accoutrements of empowerment. Yet, *The Hunger Games* trilogy flipped tropes normally assigned by gender to its main characters even while conforming to a largely familiar dystopian landscape of other recognisable tropes and many other following suit after its box-office success, this 21st century heroine's journey deserves a review of its impact on popular culture after more than a decade of its breaking the proverbial glass ceiling for its genre. The issues therein are even more pertinent in the aftermath of the gender issues highlighted by the pandemic and the massive impact it had for the people and children left behind to deal with their losses (Coker, Cheng & Ybarra, 2023; Unwin et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This review paper is constructed through the lens of comparing the sociological status quo spoken about in Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Reproduction from the scope of gender roles and stereotypes and how *The Hunger Games* trilogy's commercial success paved the way for female characters to be heroic main characters without necessarily conforming to previously held 'rules' of trope representation. First, we looked at the re-emergence of dystopian stories in popular culture, which given the state of the world in the last few years was understandable. The ongoing in current issues also gave rise to the reason why Katniss and her struggles to take on increasingly bigger roles; first to save her family, then her district, and finally her nation, all the while feeling like she has to do so in ways dictated by someone else are still relevant. As many young adults and older struggle with the losses and changes impacting them, the lockdown has seen reports of regression in women's empowerment issues. This is where the second part comes in, the Cultural Reproduction and perpetuation of imbalance. When we ostensibly strip away the freedoms that feminism has afforded women and put them right back in the home with the family dynamics of gender, we ended up with the reports of regression rights discussed later. This gendered dystopia happened in

many homes to many vulnerable groups. It is here we looked at the stereotypical tropes most often associated with women and how *The Hunger Games* trilogy has managed to flip them. Hopefully as we slowly emerge from this real-life taste of dystopia, the odds will be in our favour.

While how far we have come since the trilogy first came out makes it seem this is no longer an issue, after all, that glass ceiling has already been 'broken', and yet we see how easily the pendulum may swing back. We saw that after Obama, the USA ended up with Trump and Biden. It does not take decades to lose the ground we took centuries to gain as seen during the pandemic with reports of gendered violence and regression under media manipulation begs us to keep looking at these old stories and what they have to say about our own realities (Botting, 2021; Dubi, 2020; Machado-Jiménez, 2021). The fight for real change is still far from over, especially when we consider the fact that there are more aspects to empowerment (Van Bauwel & Krijnen, 2021; Kornfield & Jones, 2022; MacIntyre, 2020; Oldfield & McDonald, 2022).

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE IN POPULAR CULTURE FOR YOUNG ADULTS
Dystopian literary works often involve breaking new ground in imagination and rewriting of previously established social rules in order to make its point or deliver its criticism (Fitting, 2010; Stoner, 2017). Reconstructing society or reality means taking significant creative licences beyond what is usual in our world, and then postulating the 'what ifs' This sub-genre may also be found in traditional genres as a parable or satire, told as a story or fable about animals as in the *Animal Farm* by George Orwell first published in 1945 (Orwell, 2001) or narrated as religious revolution such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* originally written in 1985 (Atwood, 2016) yet its socio-political underpinning is usually still discernible. It may serve as criticism, a worst-case scenario warning of certain trends or even a vision of something better if only we had the wherewithal to achieve it. Yet, prior to the digital age, dystopian literature has never before enjoyed the level of concurrent global and multi-platform exposure or popularity it is currently enjoying for both the 21st century publications and their respective adaptations such as *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), *Ender's Game* (Card & Harris, 1991) and *Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2016), this rising interest has created interest allowing for new screen adaptations of much older texts such as *The Handmaid's Tale* as a television series or *High Rise* as a film release and a plethora of original screenplays featuring various post-apocalyptic scenarios. The releases of older stories being adapted for a new format also invites new audiences and interpretations of older materials. The lockdown has also contributed to the rising interest and new conversations regarding old dystopias. In some cases, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, the story now told in a television series is seen in new light in countries like the USA when taken in the context of their recent political struggle for women's health and reproductive rights and liberties (Hauser, 2017; Persio, 2017; Weigel, 2017). In the aftermath of the pandemic, the 'what if' became dangerously close to reality, the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* by the US Supreme Court has been considered by many a brush too close to Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 2022; White, 2022). It is not unreasonable to say that dystopian texts, particularly that featuring female protagonists have now become part of the 21st century feminist cultural zeitgeist, especially when it is invoked or used as emblems in real political protests (Asher, 2014; Finley, Connors & Wien, 2015; Palmeri, 2012; Sprague, 2014; Watterson, 2017) and as part of the millennium multimedia age of popular culture, it does have an impact beyond just its direct

audience or readers and that is thanks largely in part to the commercial success of young adult dystopian novels like *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Collins, 2012) which paved the way for other female oriented dystopian novels to be green-lighted such *The Power*, *The Clock* and *Vox* to name but a few (Gilbert, 2018).

If the 21st century was merely an imagined setting for many a dystopian tale written before the year 2000, the reality of it has emerged as a civilisation consisting of amazing digital technology, unprecedented instant gratification, but also rapacious depletion of natural resources and the real threat of apocalyptic climate changes being widely discussed in the various media platforms. When pitted against the background of too many fictional postulations they have already 'seen' or read, there is a sense of almost déjà-vu, which may now seem to many young adults as a harbinger of an actual dystopia waiting to happen (Pringle, 2013). The Covid-19 global pandemic gave us a real-life preview to a dystopian nightmare which left many communities in ruins (Hunt, 2022; Segalo & Fine, 2020). While dystopian literature has been around for centuries, the 21st century media consumption trends and global-villaging phenomena such as social media and online forums have virtually unified the audience in their ability to interact with each other as well as the literary material in its various formats. The popularity of dystopian literature among the young adults has made it a mainstream goldmine with various franchises attached to these behemoths of merchandise, online community/forums and spin-offs. While society has always been susceptible to trends and fashions, the speed, saturation and impact of millennial popular culture coupled with social media platform technology and pervasiveness is astounding (Fiske, 2003; Gibbons, 2011; Goren, 2016; Rodman, 2016; Ryoo, 2009). This wave of dystopian popularity in popular culture may carry with it the inherent stereotypical gendered imbalances in as well as aspects of real-life misogyny, yet we also have the third wave of feminism riding along. It is here we give thanks to the rise of the resistance via the emergence of the strong female protagonist with Katniss flying its banner. While she is no means the first, she does hold the honour of having the worldwide success of both print and film that broke the floodgates to green-light more female driven stories, even those previously thought to be better changed to a male protagonist such as *The Mortal Instrument* which was published earlier in 2007 to critical acclaim (Moccio, 2013; Palmeri, 2012). In the world of entertainment, *The Hunger Games* trilogy did for book franchises in 2010 what Wonder Woman did for female superhero films in 2017 (Chi, 2017) and Black Panther did for black superhero characters in 2018 (Chow, 2021). By being blockbuster successes, these works signalled to the market forces and changed how non-white male demographics are treated as audience/consumers. The brutal truth is that commercial success is a more effective catalyst for change than political or moral cause which was the platform gender had been fought on. Even if it becomes the content for memes, Twitter, or Tumblr, we know that being part of the conversation and used to push certain positions and meanings has an impact and keeps that conversation going for different demographics groups (Ariani & Rachmadani, 2020).

It is crucial to highlight and continue to push for such wins, as by and large, the more entrenched white skewed male cultural dogmas still dominate. Unlike previous generations, members of the digital generation are easily and instantly connected globally with people who are like-minded or with shared interests, this translates to a massive pool of potential influence. The impact of social media is significant enough that education institutions, businesses, world leaders and even religious heads have acknowledged the need to join them in order to remain relevant, connected and control their 'brand' images and narratives (Fuchs,

2015; Qualman, 2012; Shirky, 2011). The lockdowns brought this to bear with far more impact as the globe struggled to maintain control and manage the situation while the population were homebound. The evolving situation required extended and sometimes extreme measures of information and governance.

Essentially, elements which remain popular often have influence beyond simple entertainment or fiction. The quandary becomes more concerning when covert misogyny or framing bias (Entman, 2007) occurs even in supposedly feminist or empowered stories as they have been in the real-world media. Fighting for equal rights and opportunities spawned a backlash of conservatism in many countries and not just recently (Harker, 1984; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Kipnis, 2017.; Marome, 2005; Shirky, 2011; Van Den Neste, 2017). Discerning what lies beneath the packaged female empowerment stories now often requires critical understanding how stereotypes are framed, primed and perpetuated into normalcy and internalisation as part of the social status quo. Therein lies the value of *The Hunger Games* trilogy's success in breaking through the glass ceiling and bias against female protagonists in truly empowered roles, Katniss was not the perfect heroine, and her success made it acceptable for flawed females to be showcased in positive primary roles in this digital age. It is also important to note that the male characters of Peta and Gale are also allowed to be different from the usual dominant stereotypical male love interests or heroes. It sounds obvious as humanity is often equated with imperfection, yet females are typically expected to be paragons in their fictional and real world endeavours lest they be denied acknowledgement, even in victimhood (Morrison-Beedy & Grove, 2018; Naber, 1995).

CULTURAL REPRODUCTION AND PERPETUATION OF SOCIAL IMBALANCE

There are many matters that people all over the world have disagreed over and even gone to war and killed for. There are many variations in how we live our lives and the rituals we engage in over millennia of culture and traditions. We have, as a species, evolved beyond the imaginings of our ancestors in terms of technology and traditions. Yet some things which are perceived as a natural order of things remain hard to change in regional/local practice despite recent global developments, such as gender inequality, children's rights and the power imbalance in many socio-economic or political systems (Ali, Israr, Ali, & Janjua, 2009; Brandt, 2011; Deutsch, 2007; Glick et al., 2000; Jones & Pringle, 2015; Ridgeway, 2011; Samarasekera & Horton, 2014; UN-Women, 2020). Even when many other aspects in economics, politics and technology are embraced in our world rapidly and to a significant degree, the commonality of resistance to changes in specific areas affecting certain practices and beliefs require us to understand the most basic of motivations, the preservation of self-interest. The most common excuse for resistance or pushback against changes can often be traced to internalised binary dogmatic belief of what is natural and normal as justification for the preservation of these beliefs and practices. As Lord Acton once said, "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely", because the natural tendency for those who are in power is to do anything to stay in power. While he may have meant the individual ruler or leader, we know that corruption in various forms including moral and ethical corruption is infectious, and it spreads systemically all the way through society. Males have traditionally held positions of power in various strata of influence and society, and we see how social constructs perpetuate that dominance even at the expense of other minorities or non-powerful members. They assert this power in spite of evidence and appeals even in seemingly small issues such as women asking their health and safety to be prioritised over their

appearance wearing high heeled shoes during work (Bates & Parkinson, 2019; Mochizuki, 2019; Ueno, Hisako & Victor, 2019).

Once we understand the remarkable consistency in observable similarities in the outcomes of power dynamics and preservation of social imbalance, we understand why it has taken so long for us to consistently see truly positive and powerful representation of women and minorities in media and popular culture. Simply put, what Bourdieu termed as cultural reproduction encompasses the social structures and mechanisms such as stereotype priming ensuring the perpetuation of the culture, specifically aspects most beneficial to preserving the status quo of those in power or dominance. Like the fictional dystopian governance systems we read about, once the system is place, it will evolve and adapt to continue its primary objective which is to keep the status quo benefiting those who created it and allowing them to stay in power (Flemmen, 2013; Ignatow & Robinson, 2017; King, 2000; McCall, 1992). Even the fictional representation of power must conform to the realpolitik of power, so while we may have been appeased with powerful women in the media before, they still were subject to how the dominant powers allowed them to be represented. Their power must not substantially threaten or negate or impugn the status quo of the white, male and cis representation of power; any and all other versions must be sublimated, one way or the other. The stereotypical representation and multimodal repetition of these stereotypes reinforce the normalisation of these stereotypical beliefs outside of fiction, creating a dogmatic echo chamber which resonates and reinforces with those who identify with it the most. The traditional values, beliefs and practices continue to be passed down with the perpetuation of stereotypes in society, including via the media and popular culture that normalises the marginalisation of women and minorities in which we are finally seeing some changes (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein, 2002; Shapiro & Williams, 2012).

In many instances, democracy is illusory in the sense that the power players still remain in the same class and creed demographics despite changing faces, just like in Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Eras change and technologies advance, yet the underpinning principles of dominant values are being primed to be passed on and preserved continue to be perpetuated subconsciously (Wacquant, 2016; Dillabough, 2004; Harker, 1984; Nash, 2016; Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). Those in positions of power and social dominance at every level, from the smallest unit of a family home tend to exhibit the rejection of change combined with binary thinking in terms of win vs loss and strong vs weak, which often mean they tend to resist anything that may contribute to that loss of power, intolerant of even the perception of a power shift (Burgess & Borgida, 1999). We see this in President Snow and Coin in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, what Katniss does in the books, the books and films help do in real life, which is mobilise the resistance and provide a reference point for those resisting in their own ways, some through educating the next generation while others do so by speaking out (Cook & Myers, 2014; Livingstone, 2015; Lucey & Connelly, 2013; Moore & Coleman, 2015; Simmons, 2014; Woloshyn et al., 2013). The representation and inclusivity taken almost for granted now was hard fought, akin to the ubiquitous right to vote that the suffragettes quite literally gave their blood and tears for (Avdelidou-Fischer & Kirton, 2016).

GENDERED DYSTOPIA

One of the dystopian literature conundrum is that while the genre may showcase highly divergent forms and structures of fictional societies, many of their socio-cultural practices and beliefs, including the gender representation still consistently exhibit both overt and covert

gender biases (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Desmet, 2010; LeBlanc, 2014; Rutell, 2015) that is emblematic of the writers' and/or audiences' realities. It is telling that while great attention was paid to developing and differentiating other aspects such as economics, politics, technology, socio-cultural concerns, these gender-based tropes and stereotypes persist. Even when the writers consciously try to change, characterise or empower the gender representations, we may find the covert stereotypes coming through, further proof it has been internalised and normalised. Alternatively, sometimes the interpretations of the audience or nature of the adaptations make it so even when the original source may not seem so such as (Kirby, 2015; Smith, 2008; Woloshyn, Taber, & Lane, 2013). When women began showcasing the awareness in the struggle for more positive media, social and even political representation, it was for inclusivity against the overwhelming white male dominance. Fourth wave feminism is no longer just about females alone, it is about equity in society for all in ways that is appropriate and fair for them; and its most valuable distinction lies in the global voices made audible via digital platforms (Berry, Segall & Kagitcibasi, 1980; Roth, 2018; Sorensen, 2018; Vickery & Everbach, 2018).

These minority groups are often portrayed and discussed in tropes that reinforce the stereotypical perceptions as well as the social repercussions of breaking away from the norms. Given the new non-linear nature of dystopian fiction audience which span beyond the texts, inevitably including media adaptations, graphic novels, online communities with forums, cosplays and conventions, it is necessary to include these forms as part of the environment for systemic social reinforcement of dystopian stereotype priming.

i. The Beauty and Sexuality Clause

In many texts and adaptations, we often see stereotypical sexuality and beauty standards being featured or worse, being directly correlational to females' worth, such as Offred in *Handmaid's Tale*, set in extremes in ways reminiscent of fairy tales and females being saved or chosen by virtue of them the fairest one of all. Worst of all is also the implication found in stories such as that for women, beauty and sexuality is prized above all other traits such as strength, morals, intelligence and skills she may have that a male hero has, and often taken to such extreme that she has to be depicted as overtly sexualised beyond the extent to which males as subjected (Brown, 2015a; Samarasekera & Horton, 2014). The dystopian text featured how being charming and beautiful can literally be a life saver, such as when Katniss was being groomed to be a tribute in *The Hunger Games* book. She was told by both Effie and Haymitch (the adults mentoring them for the Games) that was what she needed to be likeable and beautiful in order to get potential sponsors to like her, without the necessary sponsorship she would most certainly die in the games. It is then repeated later in the second book, *Catching Fire*, where her wedding was utilised for propaganda and 'pregnancy' later as a ruse to save her life. Finally, it is highlighted in the third book, *Mockingjay*, when she was dressed and made up to be the face of the rebellion. Unlike typical stories however, this trope was subverted when Katniss is shown to overcome and win with her own grit, strength and determination. Even while the dress on fire or wedding dress was hyped, it was her actions to volunteer, to refuse to kill Peeta and to be authentic that caught the hearts of the people. Yet, again her power is undermined when the decision to accept her at her natural best was that of the adult male mentor Haymitch before the panel headed by the female Panem leader contender President Coin. The trope flipping continues in the same push pull dynamic of real-life struggles and compromise. Her success comes by way of her regaining her agency in spite

of all that ingrained as well as external coercion. Even her choices in clothing were symbolic, as herself she is covered up and utilitarian but shows disdain when forced to be dolled up.

The question remains, why is it that for female protagonists, their looks, sexuality and femininity become so significant that in many film adaptations, the makeover montage and subsequent reveal has become almost mandatory, whereas many male driven stories often feature and frame their hero transformation more pragmatically. The biggest and most obvious example for this would be the costume and poses the characters adopt. Males are often featured fully armoured, functionally covered and equipped for battle. In cases where his physique is irrelevant, such as young teenager Andrew Wiggins from *Ender's Game* (Card & Harris, 1991) it would actually be irrelevant, the focus would be on detailing his prowess. Yet, for many females, even teenaged characters, they are still required to exhibit the bombshell factor, in whatever the latest iteration that may be, resulting in focus including her beauty and sexuality (Brown, 2015a). Granted, these days the newer female protagonists are also wearing body covering battle wear, albeit still sexily form-fitting, with high heels built into their boots. The fact is, that it is still unusual so as to still be a victory each time a female character is fully clothed whereas a male character is understood to require full coverage in battle and vanity displays are done separately. As an original character Katniss was shown as not particularly feminised, and not smiling being her default expression with what could be considered typically male traits which was beloved and her box office success allowed for it to be the start of an option, even though the lack of a smile in the latest incarnation of the female Jedi Rey or Captain Marvel was still an issue for traditional fans (Brown 2015b; Damore, 2019; Furia & Bielby 2009; Oliver, 2014).

The issue of sexual dominance is also prevalent in dystopian texts, the idea of a woman may be held hostage by her sexuality is brought to the fore now that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* which has been adapted for television showed great success and relevance especially after the pandemic (Atwood, 2022; González, 2022; Machado-Jiménez, 2021). In the *Divergent* (Roth, 2011) book, in her fear simulator, Tris was nearly raped by her mentor and a man she was attracted to, and she fought him off by herself with no qualms being made about the fact that she may have like the initial interaction. This is unusual in that rape is often depicted being committed by strangers and the hero saves her, instead of the 'hero' being seen or feared as a rapist and being fought off instead of him backing down or her giving in. Granted it was only in her mind, but it is an important divergence from norm. Tris was depicted again standing her ground regarding her body after a boy who was supposedly her friend, apologised for trying to harm her the night before. This is truly empowering to see, yet its power comes doubly so from the rarity of its occurrence. *The Hunger Games* makeover scene like many others, feature the male authority, first Haymitch her mentor telling her to submit to the treatment if she wants to survive The Hunger Games, and then Cinna her stylist, directing how the female body should be 'processed' even down to the decision regarding her soon to be signature braid and Katniss was shown as being almost completely passive after being given repeated reminders to allow it by these authority figures whilst her body was subjected multiple painful and having little control over her physical privacy as she was made over and finally presented as worthy to him and by extension, the people of Panem. The fact that her survival was dependent on her submission to the process and their approval is an example of abhorrent gender priming practices not too far from the one depicted. Child-tribute rituals, female genital mutilation, traditional beauty practices such as foot-binding, neck or ear lengthening, scarification rituals are found and still practiced in many cultures around the globe, although some are no longer forced upon the child.

ii. *Second Fiddle Submission*

The usual default tropes and character arcs for women in science fiction or fantasy stories are often still relegated to stereotypes in traditional hero myths such as the second fiddle subordinate, supportive wife, girlfriend, friend, mother, mentor, teacher and so forth. They often have little sway in actively affecting the final decision making for the protagonist, more likely serving as a plot device to advance the hero's journey with little character development and personal arc fulfilment. We see this in the form of quests to win the hand of the damsel such as Victoria in *Stardust* a novel by Neil Gaiman (1999) or save the entire village, nation or Middle Earth such as Arwen for Aragorn in *The Lord of The Rings* by Tolkien (1991) in classic works. This persistent reinforcement of the subordinate role, of existing to serve and advance someone else usually male also continue to be seen even in dystopian works such as *Ender's Game* like Wu and Petra Arkanian who may have great potential but still reduced to mere help is also manifest in many societies in real life, carried over in fiction and its adaptations. So much so that even when we have new female characters taking centre stage such as Katniss in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, or Tris in the *Divergent* trilogy of books featuring new stories but also including the *Star Wars* film (Lucas, 2006) franchise evolved and featured Rey, a female potential Jedi, vocal conventional audience still feel they are merely shoehorned-in 'feminist agenda' and these characters are often rejected as a 'Mary Sue' or as fanfiction wish fulfilment proxies when closer comparisons will show that many iconic male heroes undertake similar journeys of being 'The One' as King Arthur (Britannica, 2023), Frodo Baggins in *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1991), James Bond (Flemming, 2022), or Harry Potter (Rowling, 2015), without being ridiculed for being male fantasy fulfilment. It is important to normalise these female-centric stories while pointing out the sexist inequalities therein instead of dismissing them outright so that girls and women would be able to engage in female oriented stories even if it appears as a self-flattering fanfiction. The power of the dollar is still the ultimate factor for many industries and female audience making it clear they want better stories, better costumes and casting have slowly come through for both text and their film adaptations (Bonnstetter & Ott, 2011; Chander & Sunder, 2007; Jones & Pringle, 2015; Pugh, 2006). In the end, it is the commercial success of the *Hunger Games* trilogy that spawned more of its kind and the billion-dollar box office takings of *Wonder Woman* that greenlighted more films driven by women on both ends of the camera (Smith, Pieper, Choueiti, & Case, 2015).

If we were to look at Judith Butler's (2006) concept of gender performativity, she contends that gender is culturally and socially constructed through discursive performances which consist of socially acceptable thinking seen via behaviour, speech and action. The systemic perpetuation of these performances constitutes the differentiation of men and women as masculine and feminine (Butler, 2006). For Butler, implicit within this structure is the inherent power relations between the genders encompassing behaviour, language even identity. Butler contends that discourse precedes identity, with gender existing as a concept within the language that conditions the subject's existence. We see this in works such as *The Handmaid's Tale* originally written in 1985 (Atwood, 2016) which showcase the Aunts brainwashing would-be Handmaids using the Orwellian technique of cognitive dissonant language in the Red Centre. In fact, a recent paper analysing the work showed gender identity as a tool for the consistent subordination of women in Gilead through discourse which are reinforced through behaviour monitoring by the authorities (Moosavinia & Yousefi, 2018). If we were to expand this practice to real world social policing of women, we would see the

parallels in body-shaming, mum-shaming, slut-shaming and other social behaviours that shape how females are perceived and expected to conform. *The Hunger Games* trilogy was especially good at showing the propaganda machinations at work while firmly being on Katniss' side and pointing out the waste and pointlessness of it despite remaining rather blunt befitting the point of view of her as an ill-educated teenager.

It may seem trivial but the fact that we are still fighting for actresses portraying female heroes not be forced to wear stilettos or glorified bikini costumes or padding for exaggerated figures or even the right not to smile in 2019, makes it a significant change back then (Damore, 2019). Even more concerning, the effectiveness of the stereotype primes in perpetuating the old standards of feminine ideals of appearance and behaviour in fictional contexts cause severe backlash in real life. Fans demonstrate this inability to accept empowered female portrayals that veer from their norm with heavy criticism of stories such as *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* for its empowered female characters such as Admiral Holdo (Martine, 2017) or worse generating real-life cyberbullying on the actor Kelly Marie Tran whose prominent character (Gray, 2018) did not conform to the usual stereotypes. It is a significant indicator of the deep-rooted bias internalised by cyber citizens despite the overt empowerment and acceptance we generally hear. This is experienced by girls and women in the reality of their lives and this effect is also evidenced in the different industries which perpetuate them even more (Fox & Tang, 2014; Scott & Brown, 2006; Swim & Cohen, 1997; Taylor & Setters, 2011; Whipple & McManamon, 2002).

iii. Emotional Volatility

There is also a component of hysteria or emotional fragility commonly associated with women characters throughout various cultures such the wailing widows of the east stereotypes or the madwoman in the attic the likes of Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* in their various media incarnations and adaptations. The depiction of women's emotional nature may vary greatly between how women are often shown as having to constantly battle their emotions and it being a weakness or chink in their armour, yet the common thread is that emotional instability is a facet of femininity and a hindrance for women. Here, the issue of framing the bias is pertinent, how women's emotions are framed and depicted, and then how these are dismissed and trivialised. A simple example would be framing how when a male exercises his right he is firm and stoic like Katsumoto in *The Last Samurai* but a female is stubborn and troublesome. A man may exact revenge after a slight such as the death of his pet dog or loss of a car in *John Wick* or refuses to back down from a daring rescue against all odds but Katniss was shown as hysterical in her defence of and desire to save Peeta, highlighted with the undercurrent of her being torn between the two males Peeta and Gale. We see these in gender research as well as media priming studies showing how differently the language, value attachment and biases used in the way males and females are presented and discussed both in real life situations and spheres, as well as media depictions (Brown, 2015b; Cacciari & Padovani, 2007; LeBlanc, 2014; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Verhaeghen et al., 2011). This is not new, but it is a sign that old practices of diminishing and dismissing women's emotional component in society are being perpetuated into the new era with new ways.

CONCLUSION

Research regarding how media consumption affects the audience is prevalent on both the case for and against the significance of its impact. The latest research in the context of the millennium's media and shifts in social dynamics however indicate that social media content

and interaction have a significant impact as we have seen in the paper. Changing opinions, influencing trends and starting certain cultural waves in politics, economics, fashion and standards of beauty (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007; Qualman, 2012). The analytics indicate the 'echo chamber' nature of constant exposure and reinforcement built into the way filters preselect suggestions of what consumers see and hear create an unnatural intensity of 'it' being the norm or trend or standard, a virtual reality of 'everyone is doing it' being translated into real life. The Kylie lip, A4 paper torso or bikini bridge challenge are merely examples of how these viral trends so quickly catch on in real life often with dire results (Fuchs, 2015; Strasburger, 2004) and how these are being leveraged into big business because it is no longer a question of IF there is media priming, these days it is an issue of harnessing media priming for profits (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009). In short, for us to get the heroines we want, we need to ensure more successes follow the path Katniss paved commercially, digitally and culturally.

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