

# Depictions of Gender on Primetime Television: A Quantitative Content Analysis

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To document current portrayals of women and men on primetime television, a quantitative content analysis was conducted. A 1-week composite of primetime television programming across 9 broadcast and cable networks was randomly sampled, yielding 89 programs and 1,254 characters. Consistent with prior findings, women were significantly underrepresented on primetime TV when compared with men. Analyses examined representations of gender in the realms of occupation, aggression, sexualization, and stereotypically masculine and feminine attributes, with comparisons drawn across different age groups. Contrary to popular belief, these findings suggest that the current state of primetime television does not represent a “golden age” for women. Although it appears that some gender stereotypes have declined when compared to previous decades, others (e.g., dominant men, sexually provocative women) have persisted. Implications are discussed in terms of cultivation and social cognitive theories.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a recent interview, Emmy-winning actress Julianna Margulies proclaimed, “It’s a wonderful time for women in television” (Scott, 2014). Margulies, who appeared on the acclaimed CBS legal drama *The Good Wife* (2009–2016), is not the first to suggest that a new age of primetime television is upon us—one that showcases and celebrates powerful female characters. Indeed, examples of strong and successful women currently on primetime come to mind with relative ease, as shows featuring prominent and influential women (e.g., *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*) have received much praise and attention in the popular press (e.g., Putnam, 2014). If these examples do, in fact, generalize to the primetime landscape as a whole, this would represent a notable advancement for women on TV (Scharrer, 2012). However, before definitive claims can be made regarding improvements in the status and standing of women on television, it is first necessary to systematically analyze the extent and quality of these depictions. The current quantitative content analysis endeavors to do just that. As such, this study marks the first broad-based quantitative assessment of gender portrayals, that we are aware of, in more than a decade (see Scharrer, 2012, for review). Given the small but consistent influence of media exposure on self-perceptions and broader gender conceptualizations, documenting these portrayals is of great social significance. Although effects cannot be determined from content analytic results, when coupled with theory they offer insights into the types of outcomes that can be expected and examined in subsequent experimental and survey studies.

### Media and Gender Stereotyping

Evidence from the realms of business, education, and politics (among numerous others) indicates that women continue to experience marginalization in the United States. Not only are women paid less than men at every educational level and in every job category (Coontz, 2013), but they are also consistently underrepresented in fields related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Saucerman & Vasquez, 2014). Such disparities are rooted in gender biases that privilege one group (men) over another group (women; Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010). Although there are numerous sociocultural contributors to these biases, media exposure is among the many factors that meaningfully influence gender-role conceptualizations (Scharrer, 2012). Indeed, a number of empirical studies demonstrate that media use, particularly television viewing, exerts a small but significant influence on gender role attitudes and gendered behavior (see Oppliger, 2007, for meta-analysis). More specifically, media exposure has been linked with a wide range of negative outcomes including (a) acceptance of beliefs regarding hypermasculinity among college men (Scharrer, 2005), (b) tolerance of sexual harassment and violence (Lee, Hust, Zhang, & Zhang, 2010), (c) acceptance of dysfunctional relationship

beliefs (Ward, 2002), and even (d) hampering women's educational and vocational aspirations (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein, 2002). Consequently, the definition of women provided by mass media content holds social significance.

Although the depiction of gender across a variety of media platforms remains a central focus of content analytic inquiry (e.g., Armstrong & Gao, 2011; Fowler & Thomas, 2015; Prieler, 2016), the last comprehensive, peer-reviewed analysis of gender on primetime television stems from a sample of programming that is more than 15 years old (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Certainly, the television landscape is likely to have changed dramatically since the time of *Seinfeld* and *Dawson's Creek*. Yet the contemporary status of gender characterizations on primetime TV is, regrettably, undocumented. The current investigation addresses this gap by examining depictions of gender in modern primetime television. To this end, the present study was guided by existing content analyses of gender differences in the media as well as by insights from prominent theories of media effects.

## MEDIA AND GENDER ROLE LEARNING

Despite the fact that television viewers are often unaware of the impact that media images may have on them, and may not even believe that media use can influence their attitudes, beliefs, and actions (Perloff, 2002), empirical evidence demonstrates that media representations *can* and *do* influence people's cognitions and behaviors, under certain conditions (see Nabi & Oliver, 2009, for review). Both cultivation theory and social cognitive theory (SCT) provide frameworks for understanding how and why the characterizations of gender offered by the media are meaningful.

Cultivation theory posits that long-term exposure to the messages, values, and standards provided by the media (and television in particular) shifts a viewer's worldview toward the television version of reality, with this effect being more pronounced for heavy viewers than for light viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Through the selective presentation of different groups (e.g., men and women) in terms of *how* and *how often* they are seen, the media shapes cultural perceptions and governs views about the composition of the social world (Gerbner et al., 2002). Accordingly, both the number and nature of media characterizations contribute to how consumers of media perceive the world around them.

SCT also emphasizes the critical role of media exposure in making sense of one's social environment (Bandura, 2001). In its simplest form, SCT suggests that the mechanisms through which people learn from media exposure are consistent with processes associated with learning from real-world models of

behavior. By observing the behaviors of others (e.g., peers, parents, media figures), an individual can develop rules that guide subsequent thoughts and behavior. This observational learning is governed by the principles of attention, retention, production, and motivation, with media exposure most likely to affect audience behavior when members are attending to attractive and/or similar models realistically performing uncomplicated, personally relevant, and rewarded behaviors.

When assumptions rooted in SCT and cultivation theory are taken together, they highlight the mechanisms through which media content can contribute to the construction of social reality and articulate how symbols in the media can potentially influence viewers' schemas of gender roles (Dill & Thill, 2007). For example, people are partially socialized to issues such as gender identity (or aggression, ethnic stereotypes, etc.) by observing media figures that model these concepts (Dill & Thill, 2007). Repeated exposure to these media messages encourages the learning of scripts or mental routines (i.e., schema) that can then become activated when a person encounters ambiguous or challenging social situations (Huesmann, 1998). Because of the influence of these media messages, understanding the exact nature of content that is shaping schema related to gender is essential.

## GENDER REPRESENTATIONS ON PRIMETIME TELEVISION

Existing content analyses examining depictions of gender on primetime television reveal two consistent patterns. First, women persistently appear at a rate below their proportion of the U.S. population. Second, women are largely confined to a narrow set of roles on television that emphasize sexuality, idealized beauty standards, and gender stereotypic occupations/lifestyles (Scharrer, 2012). Thus, disparities exist both in terms of the quantity and quality of gender portrayals on television.

### Quantity

Despite the fact that women constitute 50.8% of the population of the United States (U.S. Census, 2010), women have historically been underrepresented on television (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Given that the sheer quantity of images of a group in the media (e.g., racial/ethnic group, gender, etc.) conveys a message about its relative value and strength in society (Harwood & Roy, 2005), presence in the media is meaningful. If a group is relatively absent or underrepresented in the media, the implicit message is that this group cannot succeed and does not have a place in society (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). Accordingly, exposure to numeric disparities in representations has the potential to influence schemas

related to the relative importance of men and women in the real world. Given consistent patterns of underrepresentation across numerous media platforms, the following hypotheses are posed:

- H1: Male characters will significantly outnumber female characters on primetime television.
- H2: The proportion of females on primetime television will differ significantly from the proportion of women in the United States population.

## Quality

*Dominance and Sexualization.* One of the most prominent and long-standing themes associated with depictions of women on television (and across the media landscape) is that of sexuality (Scharrer, 2012). Broadly speaking, content analytic evidence indicates that portrayals of gender emphasize notions of “hypermasculinity” and “hyperfemininity” (Dill & Thill, 2007). Hypermasculinity can be understood as the exaggeration of *macho* characteristics, which include the acceptance of physical violence as an inevitable feature of male nature, hardened sexual attitudes toward heterosexual romantic partners, and a desire for action and adventure (Scharrer, 2004). Hypermasculine men tend to dominate women sexually and interpersonally. Conversely, hyperfemininity is the idea that a woman’s value is based on dependence on and submissiveness to men, with an emphasis on overt sexuality. To illustrate, women in the media are (a) more likely to be provocatively dressed than males (Davis, 1990; Glascock, 2003), (b) more likely to have their bodies emphasized than men (Grauerholz & King, 1997), (c) more likely to be depicted as underweight or with ultrathin body types (e.g., Levine & Harrison, 2009), (d) more likely to be depicted in the context of romance and sexuality (Scharrer, 2012), and (e) more often depicted as younger and more attractive than their male counterparts (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1982). Altogether, these findings reflect an ideal that suggests women, particularly young women, are meant to sexually titillate men (Connell, 1987). Given this, it is unsurprising that portrayals of women in the media are often described as circumscribed and negative (Collins, 2011).

In contrast to characterizations of women, males are more likely to be shown as dominant and in the prime of their lives (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). For example, Greenberg (1980) found that males gave more orders and made more plans than female characters in primetime programming. Research by Lemon (1977) parallels this finding, indicating that female television characters were less dominant than male characters. In the most recent inquiry into these portrayals, Glascock (2001) found that female characters

were significantly more affectionate and nurturing than male characters. In contrast, male characters were more verbally and physically aggressive. Again, the implication, based on theory, is that gender roles that reinforce notions of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity may be internalized if such characterizations are idealized in the media. When taken together, previous content analyses reveal that sexist content is prevalent in media fare, including both the sexualization of women and their verbal and physical domination by men. To explore whether current television portrayals continue to reflect these findings, the following hypotheses are posed:

- H3: Male characters will be shown as more dominant than female characters on primetime television.
- H4: Female characters will be presented as more sexualized than male characters on primetime television.
- H5: Female characters will appear as significantly younger than male characters on primetime television.

*Occupational Roles.* Occupational stereotypes have been well documented in previous content analyses of television, with the results indicating that women are often shown as submissive homemakers and wives (Collins, 2011). In a report on gender roles in the workplace in film and on television, Smith, Choueiti, Prescott, and Pieper (2013) found not only that male characters were more likely than female characters to be shown in the workplace but also that women on primetime television were less likely than men to hold high-status positions across all major industries. In addition, only 21.1% of women in primetime programs held positions in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, whereas 78.9% of men were shown in these fields. Given evidence indicating that exposure to gender stereotypes on television negatively influence women's educational and vocational aspirations (Davies et al., 2002), these patterns should not be ignored. With these findings in mind, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H6: Men will significantly outnumber women in high-status positions on primetime television.
- H7: Women will significantly outnumber men in caretaker and homemaker positions on primetime television.

*Masculine and Feminine Characteristics.* Distinct constellations of oftentimes stereotypical characteristics (both positive and negative) are linked with masculinity and femininity. Broverman and colleagues (1972) concluded

that positive characteristics associated with masculinity such as motivation, determination, and intelligence reflect the notion that men are competent. On the other hand, positive characteristics associated with femininity such as family orientation, likeability, and kindness imply that women are warm. Indeed, empirical evidence indicates that heterosexual men are often evaluated as competent and cold, whereas women are seen as warm and incompetent (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). These gendered characteristics are well documented in the media and are perhaps best exemplified by the housewife stereotype, which constrains women intellectually (and otherwise) to household chores and menial responsibilities (Russell, 1991).

Warmth and competence differences are especially relevant when comparing characters of different age groups. Age is commonly associated with wisdom and experience, but not for all TV characters. As female characters age, they become less central to the plot, whereas older men maintain their positions as active, settled, and mature adults (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980). If a woman has aged or is “past her prime,” she is no longer a viable sexual companion and enters the periphery of the media landscape, whereas older men retain high status and general competence, to an extent (for review, see Harwood, 2007). To test whether these stereotypical characterizations persist on modern television, the following hypotheses are posed:

- H8a: Male characters will be portrayed as more competent than female characters.
- H8b: Female characters will be portrayed as warmer than male characters.
- H8c: These relationships will be most pronounced when comparing elderly male characters to elderly female characters.

## METHOD

### Sample

To capture a representative week of television, a 1-week composite of prime-time programming (8–11 p.m. PST) across nine major broadcast and cable networks was constructed. The programs were randomly sampled over a 10-week period from September to December 2013. The following networks were included in the sample: ABC, AMC, CBS, CW, FOX, NBC, USA, TBS, and TNT. The cable networks included in the current study were selected because they aired the top-rated original, scripted television programming (among nonpremium cable channels) during the sampling period. All scripted and reality entertainment programs of all genres (e.g., sitcoms, dramas, reality based, etc.) were included (e.g., *The Big Bang Theory*,

*Nashville*, *CSI*, *Undercover Boss*), whereas special events, sports, and news programming were excluded from analyses (e.g., *Sunday Night Football*, *American Music Awards*). This resulted in a final sample of 89 programs that depicted 1,254 unique characters.

### Coder Training and Reliability

Four undergraduate students served as coders for course credit. They were trained for 3 hours per week for 13 weeks. All coders were trained on entertainment programming from outside the actual sample until acceptable levels of intercoder reliability were achieved via Krippendorff's alpha (Krippendorff, 2004). Coders were instructed that coding decisions should be based on how the average American television viewer would perceive the characters in conjunction with the conceptual definitions provided in the codebook. Conceptual definitions were based off of theoretical or reference-based definitions (as appropriate) and were adjusted as needed based on discussions during training. Final reliabilities were computed based on an overlap of approximately 17% of the programs in the sample ( $n = 15$ ) and are reported alongside each variable, to follow.

*Units of Analysis.* Coding was conducted at both the character and the interaction level. At the character level, main, minor, and background characters were included. Main characters were defined as recurring, regular characters who were central to the storyline and consistently appeared on the show. Minor characters were infrequent, semiregular, or one-time characters who played a supporting role in the episode. Background characters were noncentral characters with at least two lines whom one would not expect to appear in future episodes. Characters who had fewer than two lines were not coded and therefore are not represented in this study.

To examine the relative standing of characters compared with their peers, interactions were also coded. Of particular interest was whether hypermasculine men were portrayed as verbally dominant. An interaction was defined as an exchange containing at least four conversational "turns" or utterances. Nonverbal communication, unintelligible mumbling, and other indecipherable verbal expressions were not considered a turn. To be included in an interaction, each character must have uttered at least two lines. Thus, a two-person interaction included a comment by an individual, some response by another character, and subsequent replies by each person. The use of speaking turns helps to ensure sufficient character inclusion and presence in the program, for coding purposes (e.g., Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Mastro & Ortiz, 2008).

## Demographic Information

To determine the background and composition of the characters in the sample, the following demographic variables were included: First, the *gender* ( $\alpha = .99$ ) of the character was identified as male or female. The *race/ethnicity* ( $\alpha = .89$ ) of the character was identified as Asian American, Black, Latino, Native American, White, or other (specify). *Age* ( $\alpha = .85$ ) was coded per decade (i.e., 1 = 10–19, 2 = 20–29, etc.).

## Character Attributes

To determine whether a character's gender was associated with different patterns of media representation, several semantic differential items were included that measured stereotype-based attributes known to be associated with portrayals men and women in the media, in the domains of dominance, sexualization, occupation, masculinity, and femininity. These were derived from existing research and addressed the current study's literature review and hypotheses. Unless otherwise stated, the variables were rated on a 5-point scale, such that larger numbers were more unfavorable.

*Measures of Dominance and Sexualization.* Previous studies have concluded that patterns of hypermasculinity and femininity are prevalent in media content (Dill & Thill, 2007). To assess dominance (H3), conceptualized here as a character having aggressive influence and power over others, several items were used based on existing research (e.g., Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Ortiz, 2008). First, *verbal aggression* ( $\alpha = .80$ ) was evaluated based on the character's use of verbal assaults on other characters. *Physical aggression* ( $\alpha = .92$ ) gauged a character's tendency to physically attack or harm another character. The degree to which a character was a *bully* ( $\alpha = .86$ ), or someone who uses superior strength or influence to intimidate others, was measured, as well as the degree to which someone was *bullied* ( $\alpha = .82$ ), or the victim of such influence and intimidation. These last two variables (bully and bullied) were counts, such that the number of instances in which a character was a bully or being bullied (0 = never, 4+ = very often) was provided. Measures of bullying and being bullied (although certainly not orthogonal to verbal and physical aggression) offer additional insight and detail into some of the power dynamics that may be at play in these media depictions. As previously mentioned, interaction-level data were also coded. Interaction-based features including *respect*, *social status*, and *dominance* also were rated for each character in the context of the interaction. Unfortunately, only *dominance* ( $\alpha = .83$ ; modified from Mastro & Ortiz, 2008) remained viable after final reliabilities were calculated. This variable was defined as the extent to which a character is seen as the most important, powerful, or influential in an interaction.

To assess sexualization (H4, H5), conceptualized here as an emphasis on a character's sexual nature, several measures were used. The *body type* ( $\alpha = .88$ ) of the character was rated on a 9-point scale from 1 (*extremely thin*) to 9 (*obese*) using an established pictorial body scale (Stunkard, Sørensen, & Schulsinger, 1983). A character's *attractiveness* ( $\alpha = .70$ ) was also coded, which was defined as the extent to which character's appearance was appealing, alluring, and so on (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). The *objectification* ( $\alpha = .86$ ) item assessed the degree to which a character was seen as a sex object or sexually degraded. The *sexually provocative* ( $\alpha = .90$ ) measure was a count of instances when the character was engaged in sexually provocative behaviors (0 = never, 4+ = very often). This was defined as actions construed as having a sexual undertone or that is interpreted as intending to provoke sexual arousal or a sexual response. *Age* (previously described) was also used in the sexualization analysis, as scholars have concluded that the media's tendency to depict women as younger than men implies that their value lies in their youthful sexuality (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999).

**Occupational Roles.** To assess the prevalence of traditional workplace sex stereotypes (H6, H7), coders identified *occupation* ( $\alpha = .73$ ) based on a list of 20 predetermined categories (e.g., construction, medical profession, student, unemployed, retired, etc.), derived from Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005).

**Masculine and Feminine Characteristics.** Previous work has found that people tend to associate competence-related characteristics with men and warmth-related characteristics with women (Fiske et al., 2002), as exemplified by the housewife stereotype. These differences tend to be exacerbated, to an extent, when comparing older men to older women (Gerbner et al., 1980). In this study, to examine how male and female characters differ on masculine (i.e., competence) and feminine (i.e., warmth) characteristics (H8a-c), several measures were used. Previous content analyses of racial and ethnic minority depictions have used the variables *articulate*, *motivated*, *intelligent*, and *charismatic* to assess characters in terms of their competence (e.g., Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). The current measures were adapted from these works. In this study, *articulate* ( $\alpha = .81$ ) was rated based on the ability of a character to express him- or herself (e.g., intent, ideas, etc.) clearly and effectively. *Motivated* ( $\alpha = .81$ ) was assessed based on the degree to which the character was depicted as driven or inspired to action. *Intelligence* ( $\alpha = .92$ ) was coded based on the character's demonstrated intellect. *Charismatic* failed to reach adequate intercoder reliability and was not used in subsequent analyses.

To assess traditionally feminine (i.e., warm) characteristics, the following variables were used: *liked*, *family oriented*, *graceful*, and *kind*. These variables were selected because comparable constructs have been used in previous content analyses of gender and race/ethnicity to measure stereotypic media characterizations (e.g., Mastro & Stern, 2003). *Liked* ( $\alpha = .78$ ) was defined as degree to which a character

was found to be agreeable, enjoyable, or satisfactory by others. *Family oriented* ( $\alpha = .82$ ) was defined as prioritizing family and family interactions in everyday life and frequently engaging with family. Unfortunately, *graceful* and *kind* failed to reach adequate levels of intercoder reliability and could not be analyzed.

## RESULTS

To provide descriptive information regarding the characteristics associated with male and female characters, frequencies and chi-squares were used. To determine whether the gender of a character was associated with differences in how characters were depicted, *t*-tests and analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed.

Across the representative week of primetime television programming, 89 programs and 1,254 distinct characters were identified. Of these characters, 60.4% ( $n = 758$ ) were male and 39.6% were female ( $n = 496$ ). Given results from chi-square tests revealing that characters on primetime television were not equally distributed based on gender,  $\chi^2(1) = 54.74, p < .001$ , H1 was supported. When compared to the actual proportion of women in the U.S. population (see U. S. Census, 2010), women were also significantly underrepresented on primetime television,  $\chi^2(1) = 63.46, p < .001$ . These results offered support for H2.

### Dominance and Sexualization

To assess if men were shown as more dominant than women on primetime television (H3), independent sample *t*-tests were performed comparing the following variables: *verbally aggressive*, *physically aggressive*, *bully*, *bullied*, and *dominance* (Table 1). As men were significantly more verbally aggressive, physically aggressive, more likely to bully than women, and more dominant in interactions, H3 was largely supported. See Table 1 for all significance tests and descriptive statistics. Next, men and women were compared using independent sample *t*-tests for the following variables related to sexualization (H4, H5): *objectified*, *attractive*, *sexually provocative*, *body type*, and *age* (Table 1). Surprisingly, men were significantly more objectified than women, yet women were significantly more attractive, more likely to behave sexually provocatively, thinner, and younger than men. See Table 1 for statistical tests and descriptive statistics. When taken together, these findings offer mixed support for H4 and full support for H5.

### Occupational Roles

H6 and H7 posited that women and men would differ in the status and types of positions they held on primetime television. Frequencies suggest that there is some variation in the types of occupations that characters hold, though it must be

TABLE 1  
Gender Differences in Primetime TV Characters

Construct of Interest	Male <i>M</i>	Male <i>SD</i>	Female <i>M</i>	Female <i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i> -value	<i>d</i>
Dominance							
Verbally aggressive	<b>3.20</b>	0.46	3.15	0.44	1250	2.15**	0.12
Physically aggressive	<b>3.13</b>	0.22	3.05	0.22	1249	4.58***	0.31
Bully	<b>0.08</b>	0.30	0.03	0.20	1247	2.64***	0.15
Bullied	0.04	0.20	0.04	0.20	1246	-0.02	-0.001
Dominance in interactions <sup>a</sup>	<b>2.71</b>	0.58	2.78	0.54	1712	-2.36**	0.11
Sexualization							
Objectified <sup>a</sup>	<b>3.02</b>	0.15	3.10	0.36	1247	-5.41***	0.31
Attractive <sup>a</sup>	2.55	0.8	<b>2.12</b>	0.79	1251	9.44***	0.53
Sexually provocative	0.03	0.19	<b>0.07</b>	0.29	1247	-3.12**	0.18
Body type	<b>4.47</b>	1.23	3.76	1.12	1246	10.25***	0.60
Age	<b>3.46</b>	1.45	3.05	1.40	1246	4.99**	0.29
Competence							
Articulate <sup>a</sup>	2.38	0.57	2.36	0.56	1248	0.66	0.04
Motivated <sup>a</sup>	2.45	0.64	2.41	0.66	1249	1.04	0.06
Intelligent <sup>a</sup>	3.23	0.54	3.20	0.54	1249	0.11	0.06
Warmth							
Liked <sup>a</sup>	2.71	0.73	<b>2.48</b>	0.65	1249	5.69**	0.32
Family oriented <sup>a</sup>	2.80	0.50	<b>2.70</b>	0.56	1247	3.17**	0.18

Note. *M*: mean. *SD*: standard deviation. *df*: degrees of freedom. *d*: Cohen's *d* (effect size). Bold values indicate significantly greater levels of the variable of interest.

<sup>a</sup>Lower scores were associated with greater levels of the variable of interest.

\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

noted that for many characters, occupation was not made evident. Specifically, the professions of 24.5% of all characters (*n* = 305) were marked as "Unknown," with the occupation of women (29.6%) more frequently unidentified than men (21.1%). Men and women were most likely to appear as police officers, crime preventers, or military members, with 22.3% of male characters (*n* = 169) and 10.3% of female characters (*n* = 51) appearing in these roles. This is most likely a function of the prevalence of crime and legal drama programs on primetime, as these shows made up 25.6% of the sample (*n* = 23). Because of the lack of information on character occupation and the assumed heavy influence of genre, H3 and H4 were not supported.

### Masculine and Feminine Characteristics

H8a-c sought to explore if men and women differed in terms of variables related to competence and warmth, and the role that age played in these potential

differences. Again, independent sample *t*-tests were performed comparing male and female characters on both competence (*articulate*, *motivated*, and *intelligent*) and warmth (*liked* and *family oriented*) variables (Table 1). Male and female characters did not differ significantly in terms of intelligence, articulacy, and motivation, refuting H8a. However, female characters were significantly more liked and family oriented than male characters, offering support for H8b. See Table 1 for statistical tests and descriptives.

H8c predicted that elderly men would be portrayed as more competent than elderly women. Although H8a was not supported, research findings demonstrating the privileged status of youth on television suggest there is the potential for an interaction effect to exist between age and gender. To explore this, a two-way ANOVA (Age  $\times$  Gender) was performed with the following outcome variables: *liked*, *articulate*, *motivated*, *intelligent*, *liked*, and *family oriented*. Due to the small number of young children and elderly characters appearing in the sample, the age variable was collapsed from a 9-point to a 4-point scale in subsequent analyses to avoid violating statistical assumptions for ANOVA tests. Thus, characters 0–19 years of age were now clustered as *children*, whereas those in their 20s and 30s were deemed *young adults*. Characters in their 40s and 50s were coded as *middle aged*, and the *elderly* consisted of characters older than 60. Descriptive statistics revealed that most characters on primetime television were young adults, as 42.1% of men ( $n = 319$ ) and 53.2% of women ( $n = 264$ ) appeared in this age range. The second most common age was middle age, including 38.7% of male ( $n = 293$ ) and 27.0% of female characters ( $n = 134$ ), followed by children representing 11.3% of male characters ( $n = 86$ ) and 14.3% of female characters. The elderly were the least frequently appearing age group, with only 7.5% of men ( $n = 86$ ) and 5.4% of women ( $n = 27$ ) coded as being older than 60. No significant interaction emerged between age and gender for the variables *articulate*,  $F(3, 1249) = .06$ ,  $p = .98$ ; *motivated*,  $F(3, 1249) = 1.21$ ,  $p = .31$ ; *intelligent*,  $F(3, 1248) = .01$ ,  $p = .96$ ; and *liked*,  $F(3, 1249) = 1.18$ ,  $p = .32$ . Therefore, H8c was not supported.

## DISCUSSION

Documenting the prevalence and quality of television representations of women is a valuable endeavor for two primary reasons. First, it is socially significant to determine how and to what extent TV characterizes women, including an assessment of whether the current television landscape has changed from previous decades. Second, because television depictions of women are known to influence gender role attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Dill & Thill, 2007), examining overarching representations of women speaks to this issue. To these ends, results from the current study indicate that differences exist in terms of how women and

men are presented on primetime television, particularly in the context of male dominance. Furthermore, women remain underrepresented on primetime television, demonstrating little change across the past several decades with regard to proportional representation. When women are depicted, some troubling gender stereotypes have persisted, whereas others appear to be declining.

### Quantity

In terms of sheer quantity, women appeared significantly less frequently than men on primetime television, as 60.4% ( $n = 758$ ) of characters in the sample were male and 39.6% ( $n = 496$ ) were female. This observed proportion of males to female characters is nearly identical to the proportion reported by Signorielli and Bacue (1999) in their content analysis of primetime programming of the late 1990s, in which females represented approximately 39% of their sample. It seems then that males continue to outnumber women on television and that no meaningful improvements have emerged in the rate of representation in at least 15 years. The television proportion was also found to significantly differ from data available from the 2010 U.S. Census, which indicated that women make up 50.9% of the U.S. population. Thus, although the current television landscape has been lauded as a “golden age” for women to due to perceived improvements in the prominence and power of female characters (Pate, 2014), the sheer numbers tell a somewhat different story, as women are underrepresented on both a comparative basis (vs. men on TV) and an absolute basis (vs. real-world Census data). Cultivation theorists (i.e., Gerbner et al., 1980) argue that this disparity has important societal-level implications that warrant investigation in subsequent effects studies. From this perspective, sheer representation in the media is an indicator of the prominence of groups in society. As such, underrepresentation signals to audiences which groups warrant respect and status, ultimately encouraging and normalizing societal-level attitudes and behaviors in line with these views.

### Quality

Findings also revealed variations in the quality of representations of women on primetime. This study’s data indicated that gender was related to all measured domains of dominance except being a victim of bullying (i.e., *bullied*). These results support existing notions of hegemonic masculinity, which argue that stereotypical and exaggerated gender roles in the media exist to perpetuate the control and authority of men over women in many realms of society (Connell, 1987). If early evidence from Lemon (1977) and Gerbner et al. (1986) are any indication, the tendency for men to dominate women on primetime television has persisted for quite some time. Not only does this type of characterization have the potential to constrain women physically, socially, and professionally, but it

may also create numerous challenges to male social and psychological development ranging from imitation on one end of the spectrum to insecurity on the other.

Consistent with previous quantitative content analyses of primetime television, this examination revealed that the hypersexualization and hyperfeminization of women on TV appears to remain a staple in this content. These results are perhaps unsurprising, given commonly held notions that women should be “extreme physical specimens, visions of beauty, objects of men’s heterosexual fantasies” (Dill & Thill, 2007, p. 861). Yet this makes the current study’s finding that men were more likely to be objectified than women on primetime television even more curious. Perhaps this reflects recent trends, colloquially known as “hunkvertising,” in which men are the targets of sexual objectification in advertisements (see Giantasio, 2013). The tendency for the media to eroticize men has been noted in quantitative content analyses (e.g., Rohlinger, 2002) but still pales in comparison to the documentation of the sexualization of women in the media. Accordingly, although we may be experiencing an increase in the explicit sexual objectification of men (when compared with women), we would be remiss to suggest that the ongoing presentation of women as sexually provocative and attractive objects of desire represents a positive change in portrayals of women. In fact, theory and existing empirical evidence indicate that exposure to media portrayals such as those found here have the potential to influence a wide array of real-world outcomes ranging from beliefs about gender roles/norms to value systems to sexual arousal and even to sexual satisfaction (Harris & Scott, 2002). Accordingly, future research should not only examine the implications of exposure to the ongoing sexualization of women but also consider the potential effects of viewing sexually objectified *men*, as this is a relatively new form of representation that has not been a highly examined area of inquiry.

It was also predicted that men would outnumber women in high-status positions, whereas women would outnumber men in homemaker/caregiver roles. Although our ability to fully explore this assertion was constrained by the unexpectedly large number of unidentified occupations in the current analysis, these data reveal that the most commonly noted professions for both female and male characters were those associated with law enforcement. As our occupational measure did not distinguish between different types of law enforcement positions (e.g., a patrol officer vs. a police chief), we cannot draw conclusions about the status of these jobs. Nonetheless, this result is meaningful, as it indicates that the primary occupational role for women on primetime TV is something other than homemaker/caregiver. It should be noted that only one randomly selected episode of each program was used to create the representative week of primetime television. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that if coders had been exposed to multiple episodes, more information about characters’ occupations may have been provided.

Next, age was considered, as previous studies have revealed that older men are often portrayed as more competent than older women (who are depicted as having lost their utility as their youth and sexual appeal have faded; Gerbner et al., 1980; Harwood, 2007). Results indicated that women were portrayed as significantly younger than men on primetime television, but contrary to expectations, men were not more competent than women. Furthermore, no interactions emerged between gender and age, suggesting that elderly male and female characters were of comparable articulacy, intelligence, and motivation across all age ranges. Although the elderly were still the least prevalent age group on television, there did not appear to be any significant gender biases in these portrayals. This represents a possible improvement from the television landscape that led Gerbner and Signorielli (1982) to conclude that older men were often depicted as wiser than women. Still, the fact that men were significantly older than women may suggest that television is implicitly perpetuating the standard that a woman's value is in her youth. As Prieler (2016, p. 292) argued, this "double-standard of aging" may have important social consequences in terms of how older women perceive themselves and their societal value, as well as how people from other age and gender groups perceive them. In this context it should also be noted that women were found to be more family oriented than men, which may explain their high levels of likability and offer limited support for the notion that women in the media are stereotyped as warmer than men, as exemplified by the homemaker/housewife stereotype (Collins, 2011).

### Concluding Comments

When considered together, these results paint a complex picture of how men and women are portrayed on primetime television. Unfortunately, it seems that the current offerings on primetime television do not signal a "golden age" for women despite the fact that the popular press continues to proclaim this as reality. Certainly, shows like *Madam Secretary*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away with Murder* are notable for featuring powerful female leads; unfortunately, these examples seem to represent the exception and not the norm in primetime programming. Instead, young, submissive, and sexually provocative women appear to commonly populate the TV landscape. Of course television is not the only societal force that influences gender socialization. However, these results may illustrate a possible contributing factor when it comes to the disparate treatment of women (vs. men) in the United States. Still, it must be noted that some improvements in the relative status of women have been documented in these data. These positive changes possibly indicate that although we may not currently be in a golden age for women on television, one may be on the horizon. Yet it bears repeating that women are still underrepresented on primetime in terms of sheer presence, and harmful stereotypes that have existed for decades

remain troublingly evident. Until this changes, lauding the current state of women on television seems premature.

As is the case with all content analytic work, effects cannot be determined from these data—instead these results offer a picture of how men and women are being portrayed on primetime television that can and should be used to shape ongoing experimental and survey-based effects studies. From a cultivation perspective, our findings suggest that heavy viewers of primetime television may internalize notions of female submission, male dominance, and hypersexuality but may be less likely than in previous decades to develop ageist gender biases or notions that men are universally more competent than women. However, the invisibility of women of certain ages and in certain domains of television may discourage societal changes when it comes to issues such as normative career roles and upward mobility. When considered from the perspective of SCT, these results suggest that there is the potential for viewers to learn problematic gender norms of submission and dominance from primetime content. As media exposure has been linked to several deleterious outcomes, including the hampering of women's educational and vocational aspirations (Davies et al., 2002) and tolerance of sexual harassment (Ward, 2002), continuing to explore the content of media images of gender and their potential for enabling the learning of problematic gender role norms is significant.

With these considerations in mind, the implications of exposure to characters on primetime television are likely to vary (possibly even dramatically) depending on the programs typically viewed by an audience member. It seems plausible that some viewers may be exposed to characters that capitalize on long-standing media stereotypes such as the young and sexually provocative woman or the hyperaggressive man. Others may encounter counterstereotypical portrayals of women, and even images of sexually objectified men. Because of the complexity of the current media landscape and the array of gender depictions therein, future research in this area may benefit from sampling and analyzing programming in line with existing viewership patterns. This would provide a more sophisticated understanding of the frequency and nature of gender depictions within content being viewed by known audience segments, and in so doing facilitate the development of targeted effects studies.

Finally, this study offered a much-needed update to the scholarly literature examining gender portrayals on primetime. Again, to our knowledge, the last comprehensive examination of gender on primetime is from a sample of programming that is now more than 15 years old (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Although it was initially predicted that current television content would have greatly changed from the days when shows like *Friends* and *Home Improvement* dominated primetime ratings, our findings revealed only slight improvements from studies of that period (as well as earlier decades). We hope that content analyses of gender remain an active area of empirical inquiry and that this study will inspire other rigorous, content analytic examinations of mass media offerings.

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