



# Gender and Education in Luxembourg and Beyond

**Local Challenges and New Perspectives**

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# **#LearningGender – Media Representations of Gender and Their Effects on Gender Socialisation**

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Perspectives

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Melusina Press 2021

Veröffentlicht durch die Universität Luxemburg - **Melusina Press**, 2022  
11, Porte des Sciences  
L-4366 Esch-sur-Alzette  
<https://www.melusinapress.lu>

Verlagsleitung: Niels-Oliver Walkowski, Johannes Pause  
Lektorat: Carolyn Knaup, Niels-Oliver Walkowski  
Cover und Layout: Valentin Henning, Erik Seitz  
Umschlagsbild: This cover has been designed using resources from Flaticon.com

Die digitale Version dieser Publikation steht unter <https://www.melusinapress.lu> frei zur Verfügung.  
Das PDF und die Druckvorlage werden mit Hilfe von princeXML erzeugt.  
Der Druck und Vertrieb erfolgt durch BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt.

Bibliografische Information der Nationalbibliothek Luxemburg: Die Nationalbibliothek Luxemburg verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Luxemburgischen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über [bnl.public.lu](http://bnl.public.lu) abrufbar.

ISBN (Online): 978-2-919815-31-9  
DOI (Publikation): 10.26298/melusina.k4j9-c733-l-mr  
DOI (Band): 10.26298/melusina.k4j9-c733

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# Introduction

“I have a son and two daughters, until they tell me otherwise.” – Glennon Doyle, *Untamed*

Gender has become a topic that has led to a heated debate not only in the scientific community, but also in society and across popular media (Mersch, 2016). A concept that for many years was mostly seen as simple and clear as the sex assigned at birth, has proven itself to be significantly more complex and multifaceted, once viewed outside of the traditional beliefs of what Western society and culture believe to be the normal and well-established binary of male and female. Gender is not the same as biological sex. It is not necessarily predetermined genetically and can vary over the life span. It is part of a person's identity and as such prone to developments and changes throughout life, just as other parts of a person's identity (Bussey, 2011). However, gender identity and especially the ways in which one chooses (or feels comfortable) to express it is still strongly influenced by societal norms and stereotypes (e.g., Howansky et al., 2019; Whitehead, 1996).

Gender stereotypes refer to socially shared knowledge about the characteristic features of men and women in the form of cognitive structures, thus serving to identify and categorise perceived persons as belonging to a group. Often, this involves attributing characteristics to a group (e.g., women) and to all persons perceived as belonging to that group, ignoring individual characteristics, and subsuming them to the group membership (Jussim et al., 1995). Gender stereotypes develop from gender roles or the ideas that people have internalised about those roles (Basow, 1992). Social role models and the associated social normative concepts of masculinity and femininity, in relation to oneself and in relation to others, influence our perceptions from early childhood on (Zosuls et al., 2011).

Cognitive structures such as gender roles manifest themselves primarily through social learning. In the beginning, role models are mainly parents or other primary caregivers, later the peer group and different forms of media become additional relevant socialisation instances and agents (e.g., Appel, 2008; Coyne et al., 2016; Witt, 2000). Studies in cognitive psychology have revealed that from the age of 19 months, children linguistically refer to the gender distinctions male and female (men/women, boys/girls), they also frequently play with gender-stereotyped toys (Zosuls et al., 2009), and they experience their own gender as part of their self-image (Baldwin & Moses, 1996). Between the ages of two and three, children acquire rudimentary stereotypes regarding gender (Kuhn et al., 1978). They perceive gender differences related to property, external appearance (e.g., tie and shirt), role distribution (e.g., daddy goes to work, mummy cooks), toys, activities, and also some more abstract attributions (e.g., toughness as masculine, gentleness as feminine) (Leinbach et al., 1997; Weinraub et al., 1984).

Stereotypes are specific pieces of knowledge some of which are not consciously accessible. Therefore, gender stereotypes are classified as implicit and explicit attitudes (e.g., Smeding, 2012; Steffens & Jelenec, 2011; M. J. White & White, 2006). Explicit stereotypes are based on conscious, rationalised knowledge and introspection (Fernández,

2011). In the case of implicit stereotypes, cognitive schemas are activated subconsciously and automatically. These, in turn, can also influence subconscious and automatic processes, such as experience, perception, thought, action, and emotion (Brunel et al., 2004).

Gender stereotypes also differ in their content as well as the extent to which they are socially considered problematic, socially accepted, or even good manners (i.e., chivalry). Some of these stereotypes are hostile (e.g., ‘women only use men for their money’) and relate to specific contexts such as the so-called Rape Myth Beliefs (Burt, 1980). These are problematic attitudes about rape, in some cases blaming victims for the crime or interpreting rape reports as female manipulation. Other stereotypical attitudes are known as benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), characterising attitudes and behaviours that value women but at the same time portray them as weak and in need of protection by men. These benevolent attitudes and behaviours are more socially accepted and sometimes even interpreted as good manners to be preserved and learned as socially desirable attitudes and behaviour.

The effects of gender stereotypes have been widely documented for different areas of life. From career or college choices, such as the fact that women are less likely to be interested in so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) disciplines (Cheryan et al., 2013), to studies indicating that traditional role models and hostile stereotypes are associated with greater stigma in cases of rape and sexual assault (Hill & Marshall, 2018), far-reaching consequences have been demonstrated. Other examples include the negative impact on self-esteem and objectification of one's body, especially among women (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015), as well as labour market inequalities such as gender bias in evaluating job performance (Heilman, 2012).

## **Gender Representations in Contemporary Media and their Effects**

Representations of gender in contemporary media often still endorse and reinforce gender-based stereotypes. This is despite the fact that there is a substantial amount of research on the detrimental effects of learning and internalising stereotypical gender roles and beliefs. Also, there is ample evidence for the significance of media as an important context in which social learning takes place. The following sections discuss such biases and stereotypes in representations of social gender role norms in the popular contemporary media forms of film/television, video games and social media.

### **Gender Representations in Film and Television**

Learning about gender and gender roles through media begins at an early age (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Looking at one example of the most successful, long-lived, and popular film franchises geared at children, the Disney Princesses, there has been a clear evolution from earlier films, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell, 1937),

through the middle films, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale, 1991), to the newer films like *Tangled* (Greno, 2010) or *Frozen* (Buck, 2013). The earlier princesses are depicted to be the stereotypical helpless damsels in distress, almost completely reliant on the Prince Charming to save them. Princesses are more independent throughout the middle films and finally depicted as strong women fending for themselves in the newer films (Davis, 2014). Despite this general progression from helplessness to independence, as well as becoming more inclusive by incorporating princesses of more diverse ethnical backgrounds, such as having a Black princess for *The Princess and the Frog* (Clemants, 2009), there is still a plethora of gender stereotypes portrayed in the contemporary Disney Princess films (England et al., 2011; Coyne et al., 2016). The Disney Princess franchise includes 13 main films to date (excluding sequels or motion picture adaptations) and a multitude of toys, clothes and other merchandisable items. A longitudinal study by Coyne and colleagues (2016) finds that engagement with Disney Princesses through films or items has an influence on the gender stereotypical behaviour children develop. Girls display stronger traditional stereotypical female behaviour. However, the same is true for boys. They too exhibit an increase in stereotypical traditional female behaviour, indicating that these kinds of representations can also further non-traditional gender role behaviour. The same study also finds that discussing the content of the films with parents can increase these effects. However, this study did not specifically investigate whether parents discussed this content in a critical manner and which messages in particular were discussed, which would be interesting to know. A recent study revealed that some girls, who identify with the princess characters because they empower them, feel more confident and believe in their own potential (Robinson et al., 2020). This finding seems to mirror the evolution within the franchise towards a more independent portrayal of the princess character described by Davis (2014).

So-called *twens* (children between approximately 9 and 13 years) make up a significant part of the TV audience. Yet, studies find that content especially designed for this demographic exhibit not only a significant underrepresentation of female characters in programmes geared towards boys, but also very stereotypical representations of female characters in shows geared towards females as well as those made for a male audience. Girls and women were portrayed as particularly attractive, as well as concerned about their appearance. Furthermore, they also received more comments on their 'looks' than male characters did. Male characters were portrayed especially stereotypical in the action-adventure genre geared towards tween boys (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014).

However, biased gender representations are not only found in films and television programmes for younger audiences. A content analysis conducted on US primetime television across 89 programmes including 1,254 characters revealed that although certain stereotypes appear less (e.g., significant differences in intelligence between men and women), women are still significantly underrepresented. In contrast, other characters – especially dominant men or sexually provocative women – are still strongly represented (Sink & Mastro, 2017). Other inequalities in gender representations on television refer to the underrepresentation of women in high-status as well as low-status manual and industrial occupations (especially women of ethnic minorities), which does not reflect reality (Jacobs et al., 2015). Similarly, there is an unequal gender distribution in TV

shows on superheroes (Baker & Raney, 2007) and Saturday morning cartoons (Signorielli, 2008).

There is a pronounced trend towards the over-sexualisation of female bodies in many different forms of media, including television (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015), video games (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009), and social media (S. E. Davis, 2018). This can be seen both as a consequence of stereotypes prevalent in society and, from the perspective of social learning theory, as a reinforcing factor in media consumers' learning or perpetuation of stereotypes. The content or genre of prime-time TV programmes is a lot more influential regarding attitudes towards masculine gender roles than the mere time spent watching television (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018). Viewing genres such as sports or reality TV is connected with the endorsement of traditional masculine gender role norms. This is in line with recent findings from media psychological research based on the uses-and-gratifications theory of media effects, indicating that content, and motivation of media consumption are more relevant in many areas than mere quantity of consumption (Rubin, 2002). People use media for different reasons and these motives can also influence the type of content they choose and how they use it, which in turn is more important for media effects than the mere time a person spends consuming media content.

Another area of television in which gender stereotypical representations are very common is advertisement. A study conducted on German TV programmes revealed that this is equally true for private as well as public channels, despite the latter having a public mission to avoid this (Knoll et al., 2011). A study by Eisend and colleagues (2014) argues that one reason for this may be that humorous stereotypes in advertisement have proven to be especially effective. Some countries have taken concrete measures to fight stereotypical representations specifically in advertising. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) put a regulation into place in 2019, banning stereotypical role distributions and depictions in advertising (Advertising Standards Authority, 2019). According to this regulation, presenting stereotypes such as a man overburdened with the household or his role as a father, or a woman who is having difficulties with parallel parking, is no longer allowed.

A lot of studies in the area of gender representations in television, as in many other areas are focused on cisgender, heterosexual, White persons. However, there are studies indicating that the racial makeup of television shows is significant and that there are specific stereotypes for intersectional populations, such as the strong Black woman schema. If a person watches more mainstream TV programmes with White centred casts and storylines, they are more likely to endorse mainstream gender roles, whereas when they watch Black-oriented programmes, they are more likely to endorse specific intersectional gender stereotypes (Anyiwo et al., 2018).

Even though there has been a shift towards more youth having gender identities other than the traditional male-female binary, such as transgender, genderqueer or gender nonbinary (White et al., 2018), there are very little representations of these gender identities in mainstream film and television media, which is a reason a majority of studies do not include them in content analysis (e.g., Walsh & Leaper, 2020). Despite an increase in trans and queer/nonbinary character visibility with the rise of TV shows



such as *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013), *The L-Word* (Chaiken, 2004) or *Pose* (Murphy, 2018), the lack in *quantity* in representations of these gender identities, especially trans men and genderqueer/nonbinary persons, is still obvious. Even in shows that feature trans characters, they merely make up 7% of screen time. However, the quality of these representations has changed. Earlier depictions of transgender characters in popular film and TV media focused mainly on the issue of the wrong body, whereas storylines in more recent depictions of transgender characters have become more diverse and less one-dimensional (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). This is paramount not only in order to challenge existing stereotypes, but also to make it possible for persons with transgender identities to have meaningful representations of themselves in popular media. Overall, there is not only a lack in intersectional and non-cisgender, non-heterosexual gender representations in popular film and TV media, but also in research in this area. It is not only crucial for media to become more diverse and inclusive, but also for media research to do so.

## Gender Representations in Videogames

In the US in 2020, over 40% of video game players were women (ESA, 2020), whereas in Germany women (48%) played games at a rate nearly equal to men (52%; game, 2020). However, video games were and still are considered a 'boy domain' (Lucas & Sherry, 2004), with the majority of video game titles featuring a male hero, with women underrepresented. Only 13.5% of the 597 game characters Beasley and Collins (2002) coded in 47 games were women. More recently, Downs and Smith (2010) found only 70 female characters (14.3%) in 60 video games.

But it is not only the numerical advantage of male over female game characters that video games have been described as a breeding ground for gender stereotypes (Fox & Tang, 2014). Rather, male characters are typically portrayed in a hypermasculine way as strong, muscular, ruthless, and aggressive (for an overview, see Scharrer, 2013). This 'male gaze' is in line with the culturally shared view and the result of social roles in a patriarchal society, where dominance is allocated to men. In contrast, female game characters are often displayed as attractive and sexually suggestive with revealing clothing or at least partially nude leaving the thin, yet curvaceous body largely uncovered (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Downs & Smith, 2010; Ivory, 2006). Because many women perceive these depictions and the assigned female roles negatively, they may thus be discouraged from gaming and eventually avoid the video game medium (Lynch et al., 2016).

In addition, female game characters are more often than not just expandable side-kicks or mere embellishment for the male protagonist, and the percentage of primary female characters has not grown over time (Lynch et al., 2016). For women interested in playing video games, the absence of (leading) female game characters means a lack of opportunities for identification. However, identification with game characters is essential not only for girls' gaming motivations in role-playing games (van Reijmersdal et al., 2013) but for video game enjoyment in general (Hefner et al., 2007). And even in rare cases where female game characters are indeed portrayed as powerful, the way they are

shown can be problematic. For example, some of them either signify the hostile sexism of the *femme fatale*, with their portrayal as sexually manipulative and dangerous, whereas other female characters appear as sweet and innocent yet sexualised young women in a fantasy world. The latter form of female representation resonates with benevolent sexism, because they delimit women's empowerment to the realm of fantasy (Tompkins et al., 2020).

Video games are an interactive entertainment medium and designed for iterative play. In line with social structural theories (e.g., Eagly & Wood, 1999; Wood & Eagly, 2012), playing video games may enable repeated and distributed learning about gender roles with enduring effects. According to the social structural approach, playing gender-role congruent content in video games will positively reinforce learning of gender-related stereotypes. However, there are substantial gender differences depending on game content. With regard to gender role incongruent content (e.g., shooter games), for example, young women are discouraged from such gaming activities through social rewards and sanctions because the game content is viewed as stereotypically masculine (Lucas & Sherry, 2004). This finding is consistent with observations of parents, teachers, and peers rewarding gender-typical play and punishing gender-untypical play (Etaugh & Liss, 1992). In other words, stereotypic representations of male and female game characters are role models for social learning (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). The idea of social learning – and gender role learning in particular – by way of playing video games is also in line with cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1980) that repeated exposure to media content influences how social realities are perceived and understood.

As already mentioned above, a lot of women *do* play video games. Therefore, it is important to look at the gender differences in what games men and women prefer (e.g., Cruea & Park, 2012), and how they play (Poels et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2009). Similar to physical violence (Archer, 2004), there are significant gender differences in that males are more likely to prefer violent video games than females (Hartmann et al., 2015). Violent games provide a perfect way to enact the male gender role, which includes demonstrations of 'heroic deeds' and the satisfaction of the male need to display competence through competition and achievement. In contrast, women prefer games that allow playing for social reasons, like relationship expression and maintenance, which is compatible with the female gender role (Williams et al., 2009). In addition, women may be more repelled by stereotypic roles and behaviour patterns, including violent fighting, as well as sexualised portrayals of female game characters.

Does exposure to video games in fact predict gender stereotype endorsement among gamers? Experimental findings address the question of causality in the context of playing video games and their potential effects on gender socialisation among youth. In this context, Behm-Morawitz und Mastro (2009) reported that after playing a sexualised version of the *Lara Croft* character in the *Tomb Raider* action video game series for 30 minutes, female participants felt less self-efficient and indicated less favourable attitudes about women's physical capabilities than their female colleagues who played a non-sexualised version of the same character. Also, exposure to sexualised avatars led to more self-objectification and greater endorsement of rape myths in women (Fox et al., 2013, 2015). Similar outcomes were found for male participants watching video clips that

showed sexual objectification of women and violence against women in video games (Beck et al., 2012). In contrast to these short-term effects, results from the few longitudinal studies on the relationship between video game use and gender beliefs and attitudes are mixed. In one study, long-term exposure to violent video games was related to greater acceptance of rape myths (Dill et al., 2008). In a different study, there was no evidence for a cultivation effect of playing video games on sexist beliefs and attitudes over a 3-year period (Breuer et al., 2015).

Nonbinary characters or LGBTQ+ characters in video games are still scarce, although the number of instances of queer characters has increased. Also, a substantial correlation was found in video games between nonbinary and gender non-conforming characters with bisexual ones (Utsch et al., 2017). Nevertheless, in many cases, games do not explicitly define these characters' sexualities (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). This is true for *Lev*, for example, a transgender character in the immensely popular and top-selling game title *The Last of Us II*. Although the character's background story reveals aspects of the character's chosen gender identity as well as the dramatic consequences of her choice, the word 'trans' itself is never said in the game. In the light of (slight) changes in the representation of nonbinary characters in video games, the current lack of scientific studies on how these characters are portrayed and dealt with and, even more important, how they affect gamers' emotions, cognitions (i.e., regarding their attitudes and beliefs), and behaviour, is deplorable. This is especially unfortunate because there is a growing number of fans recrafting video game narratives to include more diverse gender representation in so-called *fan fiction*, that is, narratives that expand the boundaries of video game culture (Dym et al., 2018). It appears that the video game industry has been reluctant to address the issue so far, presumably to avoid scaring off large groups of potential customers.

## Gender Representations in social media

Social media platforms have become more and more prevalent in recent years, especially for the younger generations. German teenagers spend an average of 4.3 hours a day online and visit platforms such as YouTube or Instagram on a daily basis (mpfs, 2020). So, it is not surprising that this medium has become another important socialising agent when it comes to learning gender roles. A study conducted with adolescents and young adults in Luxembourg revealed that especially girls and young women themselves attribute a significant role to social media when it comes to the development of their own stereotypes (Melzer et al., 2019).

Girls and women in social media contexts are often displayed as sexualised objects, striving for male attention and young women perceive social network sites as a setting in which stereotypical self-exposure can be indicative of popularity and social success (Bailey et al., 2013). Social media users are not only the audience passively receiving representations of gender, but they have the opportunity of active participation. This also gives them the possibility to express their gender identities and a space to actively *perform* gender roles online. Recent research discovered that especially the widespread so-

cial media practice of posting selfies is a popular way of replicating feminine social cues for women, often in very exaggerated and stereotypical ways, because these tend to elicit more feedback in form of likes and comments (Butkowski et al., 2020). This form of typical self-generated content makes social media unique as a medium, as the user is audience and actor/content creator at the same time. This means that gender roles are not only displayed in content from celebrities, or so-called influencers, but can also be reinforced by content that is created and shared by the own peer group. Interestingly, social media users present themselves less gender stereotypical in their online profiles than they see themselves in real life (Oberst et al., 2016). One possible explanation for this seeming contradiction may be that most studies do not compare across platforms but limit their research to one platform. Therefore, more research is needed to compare gender representations across specific popular platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter.

Not only are stereotypical gender representations common on social media (e.g., Bailey et al., 2013; Tortajada-Giménez et al., 2013), but they are also sometimes aggressively reinforced on social network sites and non-compliance with traditional gender role expectations can respectively be punished. A recent study on Twitter found an average of 419,000 sexist slurs (e.g., ‘bitch’, ‘slut’, ‘cunt’, ...) per day on the social media platform. Tweets reinforcing female stereotypes raised negative sentiment significantly in reactions, particularly for those tweets reinforcing feminine beauty norms (Felmlee et al., 2019).

Intersectionality is rarely featured in research on gender representation and stereotypes in social media contexts. However, the limited research suggests that specific intersectional stereotypes about Black women on social media, such as the strong Black woman stereotype, are related to a stronger endorsement of this ideal and may negatively impact mental health and self-esteem of Black women (Stanton et al., 2017). Intersectionality between race and gender should be an important factor to consider for all genders in future research in this area, especially given the evidence on negative effects on persons of colours’ well-being that racial stereotypes in other media forms elicit (e.g., Adams-Bass et al., 2014).

Transgender persons have become more and more visible on social media and specific transgender influencers and activists such as Ashlee Marie Preston, Laverne Cox, or Munroe Bergdorf have significantly increased trans-visibility on social media in recent years (Glover, 2016). Notable about this is that this increase in representation is mainly led by trans-women of colour, similar to the Stonewall uprising<sup>1</sup>, a historically significant event in the fight for LGBTQIA+ liberation and equality. Trans-women of colour experience an exceptionally high rate of gender- and race-based violence and hate crimes (Lee, 2017) but appear to be leading in trans-representation and activism. There is, however, a significant lack of publicly notable representations of trans-men and gender-

1 The *Stonewall uprising* or *Stonewall riots* took place on 28 June 1969 in Greenwich Village in New York City. They describe a number of spontaneous demonstrations and protests by members of the LGBTQIA+ community in response to a police raid. This event was considered as an important starting point for the LGBTQIA+ liberation movement in the USA and is celebrated in form of gay pride celebrations and parades on the anniversary of that day around the world.

queer or nonbinary persons on social media. Furthermore, there is hardly any research on representations of any non-cisgender identities and how they are represented on social media at all, what little research there is mainly focusing on trans-women.

## Media as a Resource

The biases in gender representations in media discussed above may give the impression that media is mainly a negative influencing factor on gender socialisation, filled with stereotypes and hypersexualisation. However, this is not the entirety of the matter. Media representations are indeed influential, but this influence can go in multiple directions. Media representations can have strong positive impacts and be great resources for diversity, inclusion and even activism. While biased and stereotypical media representations of marginalised groups can be very harmful, having more representations of societally marginalised groups in diverse ways could be very beneficial (e.g. Allen & Bruce, 2017; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). The success of newer TV shows, such as *Pose* (Murphy 2018), portraying black, trans and queer characters dealing with meaningful life events implies that not only can there be more inclusive and diverse representations on television (or video streaming platforms), but they can actually be successful. The well-known *#MeToo* movement is just one example for the many ways that anti-sexism and feminist activism can be very successful online. Not only does social media offer easy ways to spread information, but also to endorse causes through shares, likes or comments and even measures such as online petitions (e.g. Change.org) or fund raisers can be promoted and acted on through social media (Burns & Eaton, 2016). Social media has also provided a platform for intersectional activism. The Hashtag *#SayHerName* was used over 400,000 times on Twitter according to a study by Brown and colleagues (2017), years before the killing of Breonna Taylor<sup>2</sup> led a number of professional athletes to call for further attention to it in the year 2020. It is used to call attention to police, non-police and state-sanctioned violence against Black cisgender and transgender women, highlighting the intersectionality with gender identity. Furthermore, social media provides a community and important resource for the LGBTQIA+ community, especially trans and gender questioning youth helping them discover, express, navigate and cope with experiences related to their non-cisgender, non-traditional gender identity (Jenzen, 2017; Tortajada et al., 2020).

2 Breonna Taylor was a 26-year-old Black ER technician who was fatally shot by two white police officers while asleep in her apartment on 13 March 2020. A number of professional athletes used the Hashtag *#SayHerName* on their uniforms and on social media to raise awareness about police violence against the Black women. Her name also became integral part of the Black Lives Matter protests that started in the USA and became widespread over the world following the killing of George Floyd in 2020.

## Conclusion

Different forms of popular contemporary media can have a significant impact on how we learn concepts about gender and gender roles from an early age on. There are a number of research findings suggesting that problematic stereotypical representations of gender are still prevalent across television, video games and social media platforms. This is especially true for depictions of women. Representations of transgender, gender queer or nonbinary persons are hardly found at all in video games, scarcely on television or on public social media profiles with a large following. Although there has been an increase in representations of trans-women on television and on public social media profiles, trans men, gender queer and nonbinary persons are hardly ever represented in any of the media forms. When looking at the impact of such representations, research is often focused on cisgender White males and females, often disregarding the important impact of intersectionality with race. The studies presented and discussed above suggest that stereotypical representations, as well as a lack of representation in media can reinforce existing stereotypes or discrimination and have detrimental effects in many areas of life such as self-esteem, well-being or career choices. However, especially social media has become an important resource as a platform, space and community for marginalised gender groups and gender activism. Nonetheless, considering the importance and prevalence of contemporary media in the lives of especially the younger generations, an increase in diverse and realistic representations of all genders could bring many benefits in various areas of life for all genders. It could help further a realistic less biased education on gender, and could potentially help increase gender equality and decrease marginalisation or discrimination based on gender.

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