

Portrayal of women
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Portrayal of Women Changed in Horror Films Since The 1920's

Introduction:

Fear is the most powerful emotion in the human race and fear of the unknown is probably the most ancient. You're dealing with stuff that everybody has felt; from being little babies we're frightened of the dark, we're frightened of the unknown. If you're making a horror film you get to play with the audiences feelings.

The main purpose of horror films is to entertain, frighten and to invoke our repressed worst fears, in a terrifying and shocking way, while captivating and entertaining us at the same time. Horror films feature a wide range of styles, from the use of shadows and mise-en-scene within the early classic horrors films to the psychotic human serial killer and CGI monsters and aliens present in today's horror movies.

The horror film genre is nearly as old as cinema, with the first silent short film directed by Georges Melies in 1896: *Le Manoir du Diable*. It only lasted for a few minutes and the audience adored it and it left them wanting more due to the way he made supernatural events the main aspect of this film. German filmmakers started to produce horror films and the first feature length vampire horror film was F. W Murnau's *Nosferatu* released in 1922. However it was down to the genius work of Robert Wiene director of *The Cabinet of Dr. Calligari* released in 1920 that lead the way for the 'serious' horror films. In the early 1930's the Universal studios created the modern horror film genre and brought a series of successful gothic-horror including <https://assignbuster.com/portrayal-of-women-changed-in-horror-films-since-the-1920s>
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Dracula directed by Tod Browning and Frankenstein directed by James Whale and both were released in 1931 followed by numerous sequels. In the 1950's the horror film genre shifted from gothic to more modern horror. Aliens and monsters threatened to take over the world and humanity had to try and overcome the threats of these invasions. In the late fifties horror films became gorier which saw the remakes of traditional horror stories such as Edgar Allen Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher & The Raven which starred the iconic actor Vincent Price.

The early 1960's took the audience much deeper into the world of horror films, with the release of Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho in 1960 which used a human as the monster and killer instead of a supernatural one to scare audiences. According to Prince (2004), the deeply disturbing admission, which undermines the audiences belief in rationality, with an existence where terms can be controlled or at the very up-most understood. With it's savage attack on the audience and belief system, Psycho provided the path for modern horror and for our contemporary sense of the world. It seems that Monsters today are everywhere, and they can not be destroyed. (Prince, 2004. p. 4)

The psychological aspects that this can cause on the viewers is it can allow them to find their " Dark, unnatural, hidden self." (Skal, 1993, p. 17). This is because:

So much of our imaginative life in the twentieth century has been devoted to peeling back the masks and scabs of civilisation, to finding, cultivating and projecting nightmare images of the secret self (Skal, 1993, p. 18)

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This means that changing and developing the monster into a psychotic killer, externalises the viewer's fear as the murderer could be anyone they know, right down to the person sat next to them in the audience in the cinema or at home. It makes the film seem more realistic and that it could actually happen to them. Tudor 1989, uses key words to explain how the viewer is feeling and shows how they move from an 'external' threat, 'monsters are not real, so this won't happen to me', to an 'internal' threat, the killer seen as a human and 'could be anyone they know'. This moves them from a sense of 'security' to 'paranoia'.

In 1975 a young Steven Spielberg directed Jaws, which became the highest grossing film to that time period. In the late Seventies filmmakers started to produce disturbing and gory films such as Texas Chainsaw Massacre directed by Tobe Hooper in 1974. This saw humans being ripped a part by other humans who have psychotic tendencies.

Women seem to be portrayed within these horror films as merely sexual damsels in distress who usually get murdered within the first few minutes of the film. This is clearly demonstrated in the film Jaws, directed by Steven Spielberg in 1975 where a young drunken girl goes skinny dipping in the sea and gets eaten by the great white shark that haunts the waters of Amity Island. Scream shows a blonde, naive young girl (played by Drew Barrymore) who is home alone with no neighbouring houses near, wearing only a jumper and pyjama bottoms. The killer sees this as a weakness due to the girl being at her most vulnerable and uses it to ring and terrorise her. She is unaware of his intentions and talks back to him on the house phone until he tells her he wants to know her name so he can know who he is looking at! She is the <https://assignbuster.com/portrayal-of-women-changed-in-horror-films-since-the-1920snportrayal-of-women-changed-in-horror-films-since-the-1920s/>

perfect horror victim because she is defenceless and weak and the attack is unexpected. She continually screams at the top of her lungs for someone to rescue her when she is confronted by the killer, but who is she screaming to? No one is around her or within hearing distance of her cries for help, so they seem wasteful, useless and unnecessary even though in a situation where your life depended on it, it would seem necessary and practical that you scream helplessly for your life no matter if anyone could not hear or help you; it is a part of our survival techniques. This girl does not clearly demonstrate any survival techniques or skills. Instead it takes her a while to hang up the phone. When she eventually does she doesn't phone anyone she knows for help or comfort, like family or friends or even the emergency service who would be reliable sources of help and survival. Instead she chooses to scream and run around the house and garden where no one can hear her as a better option for survival, which it is not, as it ends abruptly with her hanging from a tree with her internal organs hanging out. The film/scene portrays women as being merely weak and incapable as she struggles to run for her life in order to get away from the killer. She falls over constantly and trips over her own feet. The character also portrays the image of the dumb blonde as well being stupid and incapable of looking after her self. Horror films rarely seem to feature women in a non-exploitative way. Even in modern movies such as Jennifer's body directed by Karyn Kusama, released in 2009 and exploits women in a sexual manner, as it shows Megan Fox's character 'Jennifer' as a loose sexual canon who is thirsty for men, but with a murderous twist. With all this in mind this dissertation intends to look at how the portrayal of women has changed in horror films and if it has at all.

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This dissertation intends to look at some of the films listed in this chapter to see if the portrayal of women in horror films has changed or developed over time from some of the first horror films to present day.

In chapter one I intend to look at early horror films and the portrayal of women within them. I will analyse Tod Browning's *Dracula* 1931, Rob Reiner's 1990 *Misery* with the award winning Kathy Bates, *Bride of Frankenstein*, Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu* and Robert Wiene's 1920 *The Cabinet of Dr. Calligari* and explore the way in which women are portrayed and represented within these films. Then in chapter 2 go on to look at more recent films such as *Alien*, *Scream*, and *Psycho* and see whether or not any changes have taken place or if women are still portrayed in the same way. This dissertation intends to explore and find out about the role of which women where and are portrayed in within horror films. This dissertation seeks to developed the depiction of whether or not women were or are now being treated fairly within the film industry and If there are any changes in the portrayal of them and if not why not.

Chapter 1: Early Portrayal of Women.

A horror film in which isolated psychotic individuals (usually males) are pitted against one or more young people (usually females) whose looks, personalities, and/or promiscuities serve to trigger recollections of some past trauma in the killer's mind (Hutchings, 2004, p. 194).

The stylish, imaginative and eerie 1920 film *The Cabinet of Calligari* explores the mind of a madman, set against an evil doctor who falsely incarcerates a hero in a lunatic asylum. Robert Wiene's clever framing means the audience

is never quite clear who is mad and who is sane. Wiene's distorted take on reality is a disturbing experience, heightened by the rugged and harsh asymmetry of the mise en scene. If viewers were to watch this film nowadays they might find the pace slow, with long takes and little cutting between scenes. This is because the diegetic world is entirely artificial. The film takes the audience on a twisted, dreamlike tale, where all the scenery and objects take on a menacing new shape. It is not reality, and the stylised performances reflect that.

Nosferatu the first successful adaptation of Dracula is the first vampire movie, and presents Bram Stoker's novel, Dracula. Murnau changed the main character name to Count Orlok. He did this because the studio could not obtain the rights to the original novel. The Count is grotesquely made-up, with long curling fingernails that can curl around the limbs of his helpless victims. Nosferatu gives us a far more frightening movie than any other of its time by using an early mastery of lights and shadows along with the stop motion special effects which created a very eerie and haunting film for its audience and for its time period.

In both of these movies the female character is portrayed as merely a weak, dependent individual, who constantly runs for her life but in the direction that will lead her to the villain/ killer, and when she is confronted with what she was running from she faints. Instead of running in the opposite direction and trying to save her own life it is as if she just gives up. This is showing women as weak, unintelligent and incapable of looking after themselves. It seems that all they are capable of doing is running, screaming and falling down:

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In our culture men are taught the need for dominance and competence while women are taught warmth and expressiveness. The reciprocal stereotype thus develops that men are competent and assertive while women are submissive, and that women are warm and gentle while men are cold and rough

(McKillip, & DiMiceli, & Luebke, 1977, p. 82).

It seems that the female characters within these early classical films do not seem to be able to think critically and/or logically when it comes to trying to solve their problems, even when it comes to a matter of life or death. It seems instead they rely on their emotions to guide them rather than their logic. They often choose to run into dark rooms and hide in places where the killer can easily find them or get to them. Even when there is a large group of people that could help them they seem to run in the opposite direction, which results in their ideas for salvation failing and makes them come across as damsels in distress who cannot think for themselves. In the early years of filmmaking, movies that were produced seemed to operate under a social value system to control and monitor women's sexuality. It seemed that the female roles were to be kept as virgins for men to use them for pleasure and to dominate them. They were merely there to serve the male desires. Feminists identified the way that women were portrayed in film as sexual objects, a concept called 'male gaze'.

The 'male gaze' is in some aspects the power that men have over women. This is very much a male dominated profession, directors, camera person, and runners are mostly male. It seems that without knowing and meaning to

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be, they are being sexist. They do bring the male gaze by making assumptions about what the audience want to see which female directors may not do or may do differently. It can also be classed as a form of visual harassment where men can watch women and fantasise over them in private or in public. Women in early films used to wear tight fitting corset dresses which clinched them in at the waist giving them an hour glass figure, giving them curves in all the right places, whilst also lifting and bringing together their bust making their assets seem much bigger and thus drawing the main focus in on them. It allows the male viewers to fantasise about what lies under her clothing and what it would be like to be with and have a woman like that.

The appearance of the female remains youthful, angelic, beautiful, thin, sexy, well-groomed, neat and nicely-dressed throughout the film even in the moments of their death or final struggle with the killer. They even seem to wake up looking beautiful, not a single hair out of place or a bit of their make-up smudged. They look and seem perfect, their clothes are not ripped or tarnished, and they do not sweat during strenuous activity.

In the original 1933 version of King Kong, directed by Merian. C. Cooper and Ernest. B. Schoedsack. The character Ann Darrow, played by Fay Wray, Clearly shows the passive female who is constantly screaming to be rescued by her male associates. It seems she is incapable of escaping from the grasp of the monster; she has to call upon the assistance of the stronger male sex. She is symbolised as a sexual object throughout the film for the monster and heroic male characters when her white dress is ripped and torn by the

monster, revealing more of her flesh. This allows men to fantasise over her and her body and imagine what is under what little is left of her garments.

Tod Browning's 1931 classic, *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi has a similar representation of women. Near the start a male character speaks about 'Dracula and his wives' implying there is more than one and no one seems to be fazed by the comment as if it is something of the norm. Women within the film are heavily made up with make-up, especially around their eyes. It seems they have tried to make their eyes more bigger looking to make them more eye catching to the opposite sex as it is a well known fact that men are attracted to and like women with big bright eyes. They even go to bed and sleep in full heavy make-up and their hair looks immaculate with not a single strand out of place. The way they lay in bed, in a vulnerable position, one arm above their head, their neck fully on show just invites a vampire to bite down on their sweet fragrant neck. It is no wonder that the role of victims go to Female characters if they leave themselves carelessly open and vulnerable to the killer. Female characters clothing is long and floating but fitting around the waist to bring attention to the chest and outline of their upper body. Their hair is kept out of their face so that their facial features can be seen and the vampire women have an eerie persona around them and a not to be trusted atmosphere with there large staring eyes. They do as they are told and instructed to do so by Dracula in order to please and satisfy him. There seems to be not a lot of camera focus or time given to female character roles, except showing them in distress, worry and being vulnerable. The main female role, Mina, is not even taken seriously. She tells her fiancé and his associates about a 'dream' she had the previous night and

how scared she was and still is. They tell her to forget it, saying it was not real. They do not seem to want to believe her or her thoughts and worries; they don't seem to be valued or cared about. She is then advised by her father, whilst in the middle of speaking to Dracula that she is to go to her room and to bed immediately and then is said to be crazy by her fiancé. Male characters always seem to interrupt a female character in mid-sentence or in mid-thought as just shown. All major professions in the film seem to be run by men, for example all the doctors are male with female nurses to assist them and the servants and maids are female showing them running around after people and keeping things tidy as if it was a woman's job to do so. Women faint and scream at the slightest thing and go to the male characters for comfort, reassurance and safety. Mina screams to be rescued and saved by what has happened to her (being turned into a vampire by Dracula) and cries to show her vulnerability and inability to cope and look after herself in strenuous situations. Women are looked upon as being ditzy, crazed, vulnerable, and unable to look after themselves and needing to be cared for, 'everything is ok because I'm here' spoken by Mina's fiancé in Dracula. This statement shows Mina's fiancé to believe everything will be alright because everything will be stable and safe when a male figure is around because they are the main source of protection, security and without them women would not be able to cope or be able to live. It's as if women are under a spell or some power as they are attracted to Dracula, sending out the message to the audience that men have a hold and power on women within the film. At the end of the film when Dracula is being killed, Mina is sexualised as she starts to hold and caress her body showing she feels Draculas pain which is giving the male viewers a chance to fantasise over her.

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James Whale's 1935 sequel *The Bride of Frankenstein* portrays women as either servants or sat around an open fire sewing, which is a stereotypical view of women. They wear long floating floor length dresses that nowadays look as if they are something you would wear to a special occasion not everyday just lounging around the house. This shows that a woman's appearance in early horror films was very important. The dress is fitted around the waist and chest area and their hair is swept up out of their face to allow their facial features and expressions to be seen. Women are also seen to do what is right by their man in order to please them; they won't leave their man's side unless they are told to do so by him. They are also represented as being clumsy, careless and unaware and seeming to not have a clue of what is going on around them. For example this can be seen when a young women is faced with Frankenstein the monster and walks backwards off a small cliff resulting in her being vulnerable to the monster and having to scream to be rescued by a male passer by. This gives the message that women are incapable of looking after themselves and need to look to a man for protection. *The Bride of Frankenstein* is very clumsy in appearance; she falls over her own feet and sometimes over nothing. Her balance is very off so she seems unstable and needs to be supported by men and her facial expression is vague. This film portrays women as clumsy, vague individuals who just would not be able to function properly without the help and supervision of a man.

This chapter has argued that women had no real main part or position within early horror films, only to be there to act as the main prize for the male

leading role that happens to save her life and at the same time look good and give the male audience something alluring to look at.

Chapter 2: The new view?

Female characters do seem now to be receiving a more positive representation and women can be routinely seen to defeat male villains and showing strength and intelligence, moving from victim to heroine. It seems that women are coming into their own and showing that they are as strong as men and are not just sexual objects that they once used to be perceived as, through more strong assertive roles in films such as Ridley Scott's phenomenal and classic film, *Alien*, released in 1979. This film reverses the traditional role of women from the passive and powerless heroine who is constantly screaming for her life in order to be rescued by the dominant male figure, to an active and more powerful feminine character. The role of the main character Ripley, who happens to be a female despite having a male associated name, is an authority figure on board the ship, whose main task is to guide her seven crew members to a nearby planet to answer an SOS. All the terror and action unfolds around her and she ends up being the only survivor, out-living all the male characters. The male characters are represented as being weak and naïve which is shown by the mistakes they make and the failures to properly do their duties and tasks which consequently results in their brutal deaths. As with women in early horror movies these males' deaths occur comparatively early in the film. Ripley is the only one who outlives what is trying to kill her and her crew due to the fact that she makes the best judgements and thinks about her actions and plans out her escape. Due to the early deaths of Ripley's crew members,

most of the main action of the film is based on and happening around her, making Sigourney Weaver's character, Ripley the star and hero of the film as she is the only survivor at the end, along with her cat. The somewhat passive, fearful, and dependent female role figure is continuing to slowly disappear from our screens within horror films with a few exceptions: or has it? Women are still being shown as merely an object of desire that needs to be saved and protected by a male figure. This dissertation argues that the role of Ripley is still a female sex icon for the male audience, she seems to be placed there to fulfil the male sexual needs to have a half naked, toned female body strolling around on screen in order for them to enjoy the film more. Has men's taste in women changed? To some extent it may have. There is a media generated image now which sells the idea of healthy toned sexuality. This is partially replacing the previous curved and voluptuous body. Take Marilyn Monroe for instance. She use to drive men wild with her size 12/14 curves, however nowadays some men just don't find this attractive. It seems that men prefer to see slimmer women in films because it allows them to look at and fantasise over another woman's body that is maybe different to the one that they 'have' in their own life, be it their wife or girlfriend. This could be why women are concerned with their physicality because it also allows the female audience members to dream and fantasise about the perfect body, which they too could have. The old horror films looked at female and male relationships and it seems that in nowadays horror films there is a new way of seeing these relationships but is it a new way? At the end of the film Ripley strips down to her underwear and wears a tight fitting top with no bra. Her compromising moves and her hot sweaty and toned body gives the male viewers something interesting to look at and <https://assignbuster.com/portrayal-of-women-changed-in-horror-films-since-the-1920snportrayal-of-women-changed-in-horror-films-since-the-1920s/>

fantasise over. It seems to comply with and fulfil all male audiences' requirements; it has aliens, fighting, guns, bloodshed and, of course, the hot female who gets semi naked. So has the role of women actually changed or have male expectations of female behaviour changed? Do men find sexually aggressive women attractive in our world? Do men secretly love to be dominated by the opposite sex or does it make them feel inferior? Or is this a truthful picture of the sexualised feminist role model of our age? According to Lehmann women's lives were dominated by their sexual reproductive functions (Lehmann, p. 9) (http://psychology.about.com/od/sigmundfreud/p/freud_women.htm. 20th November 2009)

Freud believed that women envied men for having a penis; 'penis envy'. He suggests that during the phallic stage (aged 3-5) girls distance themselves from their mother; as they blame her for the lack of a penis and due to this devote their affections to their father. (Budd, Susan . 2005. P. 142-143)

This could explain why the writer wants Ripley to surround herself mostly with a ship full of a male based crew because the writer wants to show the envy women have over men. What the male crew members have and what Ripley is missing and also other females, women may start to become to see it as a disability. Perhaps it is because Ripley starts to realise that because of this disability, she is still able to be one of them and like them if not better. This could be argued that it is proven at the end of the film by outliving all the other male crewmembers.

In a paper entitled 'The psychical consequences of the anatomic distinction between the sexes' written in 1925, Freud wrote that:

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Women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own.

(Freud, 1925) (http://psychology.about.com/od/sigmundfreud/p/freud_women.htm. 20th November 2009) (Budd,

Susan . 2005. P. 142)

The slasher film genre involves a repressed male killer who stalks and brutally murders his victims in a graphic and random manner. The unfortunate victim tends to be a teenager or young adult who lives in the middle of nowhere away from any type of civilisation, meaning there is no one around them or there for them to call upon when they need help. These types of films tend to begin with the murder of a young helpless woman and ends with the heroic female character surviving by managing to outsmart the killer after having some sort of life- depending struggle and being psychologically victimised for an extended amount of time by the killer, forcing her into an uncontrollable stage of paranoia and terror. However usually the killer doesn't die or someone else takes over from where the last killer left off resulting in several sequels. The director has a tendency to introduce at the beginning of the film the main heroic female character as being resourceful and determined even though throughout the film she finds her friends and relatives dead. This could almost be the plot summary of what happens in the 1996 teen horror *Scream* directed by Wes Craven and released in 1996. The main character that just so happens to be female but has a male associated name, " Sidney" watches as one by one her high school classmates and friends start to be killed off in a sadistic manner. This links in with Ripley in *Alien*. They both have male associated names and watch whilst the people they care for and those around them are killed and

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they are left to try and defend for themselves. However, even though Sidney is the only one who outlives the killer(s) and ends up in all the *Scream* sequels she is still portrayed as a slightly weak female who requires help and comfort from the friends she still has and from those who have not already been mutilated. Where as Ripley relies on her own knowledge and survival skills to save her self from death.

Rob Reiner's 1990 *Misery*, starring the award winning Kathy Bates, shows Kathy's character, Annie Wilkes, as a very caring and kind women at the start of the film as she rescues a novelist called Paul Sheldon by pulling him free out of his car in the middle of a blizzard storm. As she is a nurse she nurses him back to health by re-setting his legs as he has a compound fracture of the tibia in both legs and the fibula in the right leg is fractured as well. He also has a dislocated arm which she manipulates back into place. She shaves him, feeds and waters him and also bathes him, which shows her taking on the mother role of wanting to take care of and look after him as if he was an incapable child and not a grown man. The audience also learns at the beginning of the film that she is a fanatic fan of this author and that the blizzard prevented her from taking him to the hospital as it has caused road blockages. She starts to become slightly scary when she tells Paul that she would follow him to his hotel where he was staying and stare up at his window and wonder what he would be doing and that is how she found him in his un-conscious state in his car down the side of an embankment. The audience then start to learn that Annie has a very sort temper when she reads his new novel and is upset by the profound language he has used and starts shouting and ordering him to change it but then snaps back into being

all nice and apologies, making the audience think nothing else about it. However as an audience when we start to realise that she is very unstable when she informs him that no one knows that he is there with her as she hasn't informed anyone like she says she has and that the roads and telephone are not blocked and that he better hope that nothing happens to her because if she dies then so will he as he will have no one to look after him. Again this is showing her unstable and psychotic side. As the film goes on we realise she is living her life through one of the characters within his novels and eventually the film ends with her killing the sheriff who becomes suspicious of Annie and investigates her house and eventually finds Sheldon. Annie kills the sheriff by shooting him and then plans on killing herself and Paul so they can live together in peace without anyone trying to find them and interfering in their lives. However it doesn't end with a happy ending for Annie as she and Paul get in a fight to the bitter death which results in Paul hitting her over the head with his type-writer that Annie bought for him and surprisingly doesn't kill her or knock her out. She attacks him and they end up in a locked fight on the floor leaving the audience in suspense on who is going to win. Eventually Paul manages to grab one of Annie's large ornaments that just happen to be lying near by and smash it into her head which eventually kills her leaving him to get free. Misery portrays women as weak, unstable; reliable on men as Annie, who throughout the film always asks for reassurance from Paul along the lines of 'Am I doing it right?' Other women in the film such as the sheriff's wife, works for her husband and does what he tells her, it's as if it is expected of women to do what ever is told of them from a male character, as if it is the male characters who hold all the authority. They are also portrayed as being crazy, unsuitable and able of

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being on their own and looking after themselves. This is shown in the film when the audience become aware of the fact that Annie's husband left her (however later on in the film we are lead to believe she may have killed him) which could be because he didn't want to be with her anymore and she couldn't deal with the fact of being on her own not through a choice of her own but that of a man's. Annie becomes suicidal and starts telling Paul she is thinking of killing herself when she gets depressed because of the rain or other reasons or factors that are out of her control, which makes her seem as a control freak who needs to be in control of everything and have things going her way otherwise she is unable to cope and becomes unstable.

So let us return to the question of whether the portrayal of women has changed. It may be thought that the role of women within horror films has somewhat developed and changed. There still are movies that wish to show the female sex as weak and insignificant figures within society. This can be seen in the Scream films which show the main female and 'so-called' heroic character screaming to be rescued and looking for comfort by male companions or from those around her. Are the female character roles in films slipping back into the old way of how they were portrayed? Is this a reaction against the up-front controlling woman that was emerging in films such as Alien. Are men reasserting their status?

It has been found that men tend to reduce women in television and film to three basic categories: homemaker, professional and sexual object. It has also been found that men tend to feel threatened when certain subgroups, of women, such as feminists or female athletes, express non-stereotypic

behaviour in the media. These two subgroups of women in particular can threaten men's economic success and physical strength.

(DeWal, Altermatt & Thompson, 2