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Olivia Green

St. John Fisher University, omg00276@sjfc.edu

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The Bachelor Franchise: Every Rose Has Its Thorn

The Bachelor Franchise: Every Rose Has Its Thorn

“I only have guy friends because girls are too much drama.” It is a simple phrase, an explanation used to justify one’s preferred friend group. Maybe you have overheard a girl saying this to subtly flex who she spends time with while simultaneously dissing other women for being too gossipy. Maybe you have absorbed this notion from countless media portrayals that paint women to be ruthless and “catty.” Maybe you have even said this phrase yourself, feeling that the words were true but misunderstanding the implications of the claim. This phrase reeks of internalized misogyny, but we cannot blame women for buying into it when the world crams these ideals down our throats, suffocating us until we can no longer see past the false generalizations. From such an early age, society engrains gender stereotypes and stigmas, such as this one, into young, impressionable minds. Once an individual internalizes these harmful notions, they begin to dictate every facet of their life. This can vary from trivial things like what clothes they wear, what friends they pick, and what mannerisms they adopt to larger decisions like what occupation they pursue or what social role they should fill. These beliefs hold so much power, yet there is no escaping them; they are embedded in every part of our society. We learn the concept of gender performativity from our parents, family, and peers and then these ideas are reaffirmed by what we see in various forms of media. While society has become increasingly more accepting of a less rigid gender binary, representation in television shows and movies lags behind this progressive agenda. Among the television shows that sustain traditional gender roles, reality television, such as ABC’s *Bachelor* franchise, remains one of the biggest offenders. Although this may seem like an unlikely source of influence due to

the mindless nature of the shows, reality television greatly contributes to stereotypes associated with masculinity and femininity. Arguably, by advertising these programs as unscripted, real-life they have a much greater impact on teaching gender performativity to its vast viewing audience. No exception to this, *The Bachelor* franchise upholds misogynistic and sexist ideals in society by perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and heteronormativity.

The impact of misogyny and sexism extends to every social institution and enhances the belief that women are inferior beings. Oftentimes, these prejudices result in a general decrease in the quality of life for women. Decreased opportunities. Decreased respect. Decreased self-esteem. Although there is a plethora of stereotypes that attempt to constrict the definition of femininity, the most harmful representations usually pertain to one of three categories: social role, personality, and appearance. The following section of this research paper will further discuss common traits associated with each category and explore the real-life consequences and implications of said stereotype. Concurrently, I will explore how *The Bachelor* franchise exemplifies the discussed stigmas and gender norms.

Generally, in media, there are specific social roles that audiences are more receptive to if they align with society’s gender expectations. Traditionally, women are seen in nurturing, domestic roles in which they often serve as the caregiver in the household or hold social service-oriented positions. Comparatively, men have been deemed the breadwinners or the head of the house and are expected to provide for their families. Even though there has recently been more crossover between gender roles, such as more men becoming stay-at-home

dads, the feminine and masculine characteristics that provide the foundation for traditional gender roles still frequent the media. For example, femininity is commonly associated with sympathy, being helpful to others, and sensitivity which is why it can be incredibly difficult for women to be taken seriously in a professional environment. Furthermore, there appears to be a general notion in society in which women's labor is undervalued in comparison to a man's labor. Tangibly, this inequality can be seen in the gender wage gap, but it also expresses itself through employer bias and discrimination towards female employees. Most notably, this prejudice can be seen through the selection of hosts throughout the history of *The Bachelor* franchise which I have taken note of as a returning viewer. From the premiere of *The Bachelor* in 2002 to Matt James' season in 2021, Chris Harrison hosted both *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* and practically became the face of the reality program. After the franchise distanced itself from Harrison following controversy and backlash, Tayshia Adams and Kaitlyn Bristowe took over as co-hosts for two seasons of *The Bachelorette*. However, the franchise decided to go in a different direction for *Bachelor in Paradise* and ushered in a variety of male celebrity guest hosts, such as Lil Jon and David Spade. Now, devoted watchers may disregard or pay no attention to the implicit message behind these selections because they understand that the franchise was in shambles after Harrison's departure and desperately needed people to fill in as host. When taking a closer look, one may notice a displeasing pattern that presents the idea that two women are needed to fill the job of one man. Whether intentional or not, the franchise's consistent casting of a singular male host and then, when finally opting for a female host, forcing two women to share the

position firmly upholds the belief that women are less capable and qualified workers. When considering the masculine characteristics associated with being a successful host, such as leadership, charisma, and problem-solving abilities, it is apparent that women are, once again, being penalized for the less domineering attributes connected with femininity. Therefore, it seems undeniable that the producers of the show were influenced by implicit biases and gender stereotypes when deciding to cast these conventional male hosts.

This incident not only exposes the existence of such stigma in society but also reveals the real-life occupational consequences that occur when rigid gender norms are upheld. Adhering to traditional gender expectations and characteristic traits allow for the persistence of the glass ceiling because the "differences in the expectations toward gender-based roles lead to prejudice toward female leaders and potential female leaders," (Weyer 486). In other words, structural barriers, which are influenced by gender stereotypes, exist, and they prevent women from advancing to higher corporate positions. Since women are not regarded as authoritative or confrontational, they are not considered "qualified" or the preferred candidates for leadership positions. In the rare incidents when women are promoted, they are more likely to receive negative evaluations from employees who deem them too aggressive, ambitious, or cut-throat. If rigid gender stereotypes did not exist in society, women would not be criticized for being demanding and expressing more masculine attributes. Additionally, women often internalize these gender roles which can cause them to experience "imposter syndrome" in which they doubt their authority and abilities in this environment (Weyer 488-489). When the media constantly portrays women in assistive positions, co-hosting rather than hosting, it

is no wonder that their ambitions of becoming CEO would seem unrealistic. All in all, rigid gender roles are incredibly detrimental to women's ambitions because they lower their self-esteem and society's overall perception of their capabilities.

Beyond the professional world, another gender stereotype that affects a woman's day-to-day life is the presumption that females are overly emotional and dramatic. Repeatedly, this belief is upheld through the media which tends to paint women as irrational for entertainment or comedic purposes. No stranger to this, *The Bachelor* franchise constantly exploits footage of contestants crying or expressing their emotions to create previews for future episodes and keep viewers coming back each week. If you have ever seen a commercial for the show, you would know that they have practically become montages of women breaking down into tears, confessing their feelings of unworthiness, and hopelessly proclaiming that they are unlovable. Even though these types of dating shows thrive off drama, it is damaging to portray women in this way because it undermines their integrity and strength. Many contestants, female and male alike, are criticized for having emotional outbursts and consequently labeled "unstable" or "ridiculous." During Colton Underwood's season of *The Bachelor*, one fan tweeted, "*Spoilers* if you're wondering which of these overly emotional girls isn't getting engaged at the end of this season, it's Colton," (@AdamFries). Ultimately, this viewer is ridiculing Colton for being too emotional while simultaneously belittling the female contestants which is destructive in many ways. First, the Twitter user refers to grown women as "girls" which demonstrates how feminine stereotypes decrease society's respect for women and reveals how sexist language can be used to make women feel

small. Next, by shaming Colton for expressing his feelings, this tweet contributes to a culture of toxic masculinity in which men are berated for embracing vulnerability and displaying emotions other than anger and happiness. Lastly, and most prominently, this insult is based on the premise that femininity and womanhood are inherently substandard. As young boys grow up and learn about gender, they are socialized to exhibit strength, independence, assertiveness, and courage and told that it is unacceptable to be passive, sensitive, or vulnerable. In other words, men are taught to not be women. All the traits that are deemed "unacceptable" for men to possess, the ones they have grown to scoff at, are characteristics associated with femininity. How can we expect men to respect and uplift women when society teaches them to hate the very idea of being equated to one? We cannot live in a world where language allows femininity to be used as an insult *and* women are valued and celebrated. These events are mutually exclusive. They cannot happen at the same time. Hence, we need to stop stigmatizing women's emotions because there are drastic consequences.

While playing into this stereotype may make for "great" reality television and increased viewership, the notion that women are overly emotional significantly affects their health, both physically and mentally, by infiltrating the healthcare system. Throughout history, women have been mistreated and oppressed by medical professionals, often with the aid of their husbands, through harmful treatments and wrongful diagnoses. Although controversial diagnoses, such as hysteria, have since been removed from psychiatric diagnostic tools, there remains the stigma that women exaggerate their pain or that it is mostly mental rather than having a physical basis. Due to the gender stereotype that women are hysterical and overly emotional, "medical

professionals take longer to address women's pain, and do less to address it when they eventually do, even when they have the same symptoms as men," (Fenton). Therefore, women are receiving reduced care because hospitals dismiss their medical concerns thinking that they are nonexistent. Ironically, women are thought to have higher pain endurance even though femininity is often associated with weakness and vulnerability. Nevertheless, this belief also contributes to the gender pain gap phenomenon that causes this discrepancy in wait time and patient care. In addition to less immediate attention, doctors are also more likely to prescribe women sedatives as treatment rather than pain-relieving drugs which further reveals that their pain is thought to be caused by an irrational state of mind. Overall, gender stereotypes that characterize women as hysterical, overly emotional, and dramatic have been overplayed in the media. Although many would like to think that television does not yield extraordinary influence, this corresponding pattern of medical bias indicates otherwise and should not be ignored.

Lastly, the arguably most common gendered depiction of women portrays them in an oversexualized manner and focuses heavily on their appearance. Among many things, Western culture greatly emphasizes an imperative need for thinness and achieving the unrealistic, idealized body type. Unfortunately, our society tends to equate one's self-worth and value with their size and weight. For this reason, women are often evaluated based on their appearance and how closely they adhere to the narrow beauty standards rather than the content of their character. Unsurprisingly, this superficial style of judgment is a common theme in episodes of reality television and dating shows. In *The Bachelor* franchise, this concept is most evident through the

group dates, in which multiple contestants partake in an activity or competition to spend time with the bachelor or bachelorette. In the most recent season, Clayton Echard's season, the female contestants were forced to vie for extra one-on-one time with Clayton by participating in a *Baywatch* challenge. During this segment, the women were asked to rub sunscreen on each other, and, afterward, they all wore the iconic red swimsuit and ran toward Clayton in the drama television's trademark slow-motion manner. Lastly, *Baywatch*'s Nicole Eggert judged the women's struts and determined which contestant she felt had performed best for Clayton ("Episode 3"). This episode reaffirms the idea that a woman's best asset is her body and that she should use it to attract the attention of a man. Instead of planning activities that allow the bachelor to learn more about the ambitions, interests, and values of one of his potential fiancés, the women are selected by how seductively they can frolic through the sand. Even though the franchise is not necessarily known for building long-lasting, genuine relationships, it is incredibly harmful to portray women being rewarded with male validation and screen time for performing degrading and shallow tasks. Women are more than their bodies and appearance. It is time that the media changed this narrative.

Constantly fixating on women's bodies makes them more prone to being hypersexualized and exploited in society. In a world in which sex sells, women become the gimmick. Magazines and advertisements frequently center their campaigns around scantily clad women in provocative positions to draw in buyers and increase sales. Some women and feminists have begun to embrace this sexualization as empowering because it undermines previous notions that made female promiscuity taboo. However, increasing research has shown

that there are numerous negative consequences to self-sexualization as it creates a false sense of power while simultaneously affirming women's subordination. Evidence demonstrates that enjoying sexualization causes women to perseverate on their bodies which often leads to self-objectification rather than self-appreciation and confidence. Furthermore, this fixation on appearance increases body shame and vulnerability to developing depression and eating disorders while decreasing self-esteem and well-being (Liss et al. 56). Therefore, embracing one's sexual nature is counter intuitive. Rather than owning an aspect that was once a source of oppression and objectification, women are mistakenly contributing to a culture of harassment and perpetuating the idea that their value derives from their bodies. Going forward, it would be beneficial for the media to shift its focus and celebrate other aspects of women, such as their accomplishments and intelligence, rather than their appearance.

Closely related to this theme of over-sexualization and excessive emphasis placed on physical qualities, *The Bachelor* franchise deeply subscribes to and abides by the Eurocentric, heteronormative beauty standards when selecting its contestants. Due to this, the representation in the show lacks diversity and variety in terms of race, ethnicity, age, and body type. For years, most of the contestants could all fit into one category; they were white, skinny, and in their mid-twenties. While some may argue that the show has become increasingly more diverse throughout the seasons, this is disingenuous and could not be further from the truth. If you were to solely look at a picture of all the contestants from the first season of *The Bachelor* to the most recent season, it would appear that the franchise positively responded to criticisms by increasing the diversity among the

contestants. However, the outdated show is participating in tokenism by giving the appearance that the contestants reflect society's demographics when, in actuality, the producers are not concerned with promoting equity and inclusion. When watching the show, this can be seen through people of color receiving less screen time during the episodes and advancing less in the "competition." Furthermore, there has yet to be a bachelor who has proposed or given his final rose to a Black woman. In addition to the lack of authentic representation, many contestants of color have since come forth and criticized the franchise after their contracts ended. Among these individuals, Rachel Lindsay, the first Black bachelorette, has spoken out saying, "When I signed up, I knew I was alone. When I cried in that moment, I knew I was alone...My tears weren't going to conjure up Black producers to help me along this journey," (Lindsay). Here, Lindsay is describing how the franchise and the producers were not qualified or educated enough to support her as a Black woman and understand her additional struggles. During this season, the producers required Lindsay to maintain a balance between white contestants and contestants of color, but the franchise failed to cast enough men of color for this to be plausible. Moreover, the producers did not bother to inquire whether the men of color were attracted to women of color, so she was forced to send several men home because of their utter lack of chemistry. Lastly, it was revealed that the contestant, Lee Garrett, had a history of tweeting harmful comments toward Black individuals and minorities, and this prejudice was evident through his instigating of battles with other contestants of color in the house (Lindsay). It is appalling how negligent the franchise was in the process of vetting and performing background checks on the individuals in Rachel Lindsay's

season. Thereby proving that the television show truly does not value uplifting people of color or taking the steps to correct its ignorance and eurocentrism.

By refusing to combat heteronormativity and hegemonic ideals, *The Bachelor* franchise perpetuates the narrative that happy endings and romance are only for the dominant culture in society. Essentially, the show asserts that “‘fairytale love’ is only had by heterosexual, white, young, good-looking people who abide by patriarchal standards,” (Rando). In our heteropatriarchal society, this storyline helps to uphold the power dynamic that places straight, white men at the top and people with differing identities beneath them. In order to promote equality and acceptance, media representation needs to accurately reflect our diverse society. Young individuals of color and LGBTQIA youth find it difficult to watch *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette* and relate to the contestants or see the intersecting aspects of their identities celebrated in the shows. As a result, these individuals continue to feel ostracized or that they are “other” in society. Since the media is an important source of representation and *The Bachelor* franchise has such a vast audience, it is crucial to display unique, diverse love stories for all to enjoy. Historically, there has been a stigma and bias towards couples who do not fit in the “white-picket-fence” mold; many people have subconsciously evaluated heterosexual or non-white couples as “unstable” or claimed that they undermine traditional family values. For example, society often stereotypes Black families as “broken” families or assumes that the father must be absent or uninvolved. If the franchise embraced different relationships, such as interracial or LGBTQIA couples, and

appreciated their love stories, it would help reduce this stigma in society. To do so, the show must promote true diversity by creating a safe and inclusive environment, rather than just casting an equal number of people of color, and abandon its adherence to heteronormativity and rigid gender stereotypes.

Despite appearing as a magical, romanticized dating show, *The Bachelor* franchise is, quite frankly, a thorny bush of misogyny and sexism intertwined with racism and homophobia. Remarkably, a program that so many sit down to mindlessly enjoy on Monday nights manages to perpetuate a wide variety of gender stereotypes and heteronormative ideals. As a result, individuals have internalized these notions and regurgitated them back out to the world where they have infiltrated and harmed every aspect of a woman’s life. We are pitted against ourselves. We are pitted against each other. We are pitted against society. However, this paper is not just about women’s issues. Realistically, these harmful feminine stereotypes and subscriptions to rigid gender norms affect every individual in society. If we continue to stigmatize female characteristics, then men will never be accepted for embracing vulnerability and emotions. If we continue to reaffirm traditional, binary ideas of femininity and masculinity, then gender non-conforming and non-binary individuals will never be validated. If we continue to cling to Eurocentric representation, then individuals with intersecting racial and ethnic identities will continue to suffer and go unheard. Therefore, change needs to occur both within this franchise and the media altogether. Not just for women’s sake but for all of us.

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