Gender roles and Stereotypes in The Big Bang Theory

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Zadar, 10. rujna 2024.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In modern media, sitcoms have a big cultural influence and play a role in constructing how society views gender roles and stereotypes. *The Big Bang Theory* (TBBT) stands out among other sitcoms, not only for its great success, but also for its representation of gender dynamics and stereotypes. Throughout the twelve seasons, the sitcom reflects the social and cultural shifts of the early 21st century. This paper will focus on the representation of stereotypes and gender roles in *The Big Bang Theory*, particularly through the lens of Stuart Hall's representation theories.

Stuart Hall (1997) explains stereotype as an assumption about someone based on a variety of characteristics such as race, culture, sexual orientation, gender, etc. Stereotyping classifies people according to a norm, and those who do not fit that norm are classified as 'other' (Ibid 258). Gender roles are characteristics that are associated with feminine or masculine behaviour (Baker & Raney, 2007). After the introduction, in the part about the theoretical background, stereotypes and gender roles will be more thoroughly explained, as well as their representation in media (with a focus on sitcoms). Also, Hall's representation theories, such as the constructionist approach, and encoding/decoding model, will be explained.

In the third part of the paper, the focus will be on the character analysis. The seven main characters will be analysed, mostly using Hall's representation theories. By using Hall's theories, which state how media can both reflect and construct public opinions and social hierarchies, this analysis will explore how the characters both reinforce and challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

In the fourth part, some of the most important recurring topics concerning gender and stereotypes will be analysed. Those topics are nerd culture and masculinity, women in STEM fields, and relationships and gender.

In the conclusion, the aim of the paper will be restated, and the portrayal of the characters will be concluded by observing their representation connected to the period in which the sitcom was created.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before analysing the sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* (*TBBT*), through stereotypes and gender roles it is important to know what stereotypes and gender roles are and their influence on media (with the main focus on sitcoms). Throughout history media, and, with that, also sitcoms, reinforced the traditional gender roles and stereotypes, but nowadays there is more diversity and breaking of preexisting, fixed gender roles and stereotypes. It is also important to mention Stuart Hall's representation theories because of their role in constructing, reinforcing and breaking gender roles and stereotypes through media and cultural representations which has an impact on social norms and individual identities.

2.1. Gender roles and stereotypes

Gender is a social construct which defines masculinity and femininity in a given society (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). Gender is dependent on interactions within social groups and structures (Dennin, 2021). Butler (2004) questions the nature of gendered behaviour stating that it is a learned practice which is forced upon us by normative heterosexuality. As already mentioned, gender roles are characteristics that are associated with feminine or masculine behaviour (Baker & Raney, 2007). On the other hand, gender role stereotypes are rigid and oversimplified views about the traits, qualities, and behaviours associated with men and women (Eagly & Wood, 1999). The main difference between gender roles and gender role stereotypes is that gender roles provide a framework for social behaviour based on gender, while gender role stereotypes reinforce traditional gender roles by endorsing fixed ideas about masculinity and femininity.

Stereotypes can simply be explained as fixed, general beliefs about a particular group (Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012). According to Hilton and von Hippel (1996), stereotyping arises in a variety of circumstances to serve certain roles dictated by those circumstances. Hall (1997) describes stereotyping as a process which fixes and divides differences known as the 'other'. He also states that stereotyping occurs when there is a noticeable imbalance of power, where that power is directed against the excluded group (the 'other') (Ibid 258). From that, we can conclude that stereotypes are very important in making and maintaining social hierarchy.

2.2. Gender roles and stereotypes in media

Throughout history, gender roles have been present, but today they are maintained by the media which serves as a socialising agent (Yi & Kaur, 2019). The main factor of characterisation in sitcoms is gender. Before the 1970s (impact of feminism) leading roles in sitcoms were always men, but since then more and more women in leading roles have shown up (Stafford, 2004). According to Eagly and Steffen (1984) differences in gender between men and women can be explained using two terms: communal and agentic. Selflessness, empathy and desire for social connections are qualities used to describe the communal type, which is associated with women, while the term agentic, which is associated with men, is described using qualities such as self-assertion, need for dominance and self-expansion. Holmes (2006) in her work about gendered talk also shows that there is a difference in the way people interact based on their gender. The masculine style of interaction is more competitive, direct, and confrontational with aggressive interruptions, while the feminine style is more indirect, collaborative, and helpful with supportive feedback. Women in media are often portrayed based on their looks and roles as daughters, wives, or mothers, rather than being shown as individuals, while men are portrayed as dominants in all aspects of life (Carter & Steiner, 2004).

Medhurst and Tuck (1996) state that sitcoms simply cannot function if there are no stereotypes because in a short interval (usually twenty to thirty minutes) a character needs to be recognizable as a set of ideas or as a cliché to immediately be funny and relatable. They also state that a similar character to the one found in the nineteen-century novel would never work in a sitcom even though stereotyping was the reason for a show to be dismissed as an "unimaginative masses-fodder" (Ibid 112). Even though stereotyping has become vital in sitcoms, it can be its downfall due to criticism of its representation. Because of that, something that is not supposed to be stereotype can be perceived as such. From that, it can be concluded that stereotypes and their influence are "in the eye of the beholder" (Marcin, 2010, p. 29).

Some of the most common gender roles and stereotypes represented in media are housewife vs. working husband, jock vs. geek, emotional women vs. strong and unemotional men, also some racial stereotypes such as smart Asians or a stereotype about Jewish mothers, who are described as mothers with no boundaries when it comes to their sons (Rubin, 2019). Walsh et al. (2008) in their paper explain the

stereotype about beauty and the patriarchal beast, which is a very common stereotype represented in sitcoms. That stereotype shows how attractive, funny and witty women end up in relationships with men who are out of their league. The stereotype about a ditzy blonde and, in contrast, a demure and smart brunette is also very common in sitcoms. Banks (2007) states that while blondes are seen as more outgoing and energetic, the brunettes are more shy, mysterious and nerdy. Brunettes fit into the crowd and are not noticeable while blondes stand out.

2.3. Hall's representation theories

According to Hall (1997), representation is a key part of the process through which meaning is created and communicated among members of a culture. It involves using language, symbols, and images to stand in for or signify different things. He argues that meaning is not transmitted but is actually constructed through representation. In other words, he advocates for a constructionist approach to representation, rather than the reflective (meaning is found in the object in the real world while the language functions as a mirror) and intentional (the author/speaker gives his own meaning to the world through language) approach. In the constructionist approach the media constructs and shapes how we perceive reality through the use of language, codes and symbols (Ibid 24-25).

It is important to mention Hall's encoding/decoding model which is very important in media and cultural studies, and it shows how media messages are produced and interpreted. Encoding is a process in which media producers construct and convey messages, they use specific codes and signs to convey meaning. Decoding is a process in which the audience receives and interprets the media message. Both encoding and decoding are influenced by political, social and cultural context. There are three ways or positions to decode a message: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional. The dominant-hegemonic (or preferred) position is when the audience receives the message exactly in the way it was intended. The negotiated position is when the audience accepts the given message but also adjusts it according to their personal experiences. The oppositional position is when the audience completely rejects the meaning of the message and interprets it differently (Hall, 2015). This can be connected to Marcin's statement that stereotypes (and with that, representation) are "in the eye of the beholder" (Marcin, 2010, p. 29).

According to Hall, stereotyping is also one of the representational practices. Stereotyping reduces people to a set of oversimplified traits and ideas, which often reinforces power dynamics and creates certain types rather than individuals. As already mentioned, he argues that stereotyping occurs when there are great imbalances of power which creates the concept of the 'other' (Hall, 1997). Representation is closely linked to power and ideology. Hall also mentions the Marxist concept of hegemony which he uses in the analysis of media and culture. According to him, hegemony is a process when dominant social groups maintain consent and power through ideological and cultural shaping of the ideas and values which appear natural and certain. Media representations often reinforce the ideas and values (also stereotypes and gender roles) which are beneficial to the dominant social groups (Ibid 259).

3. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Big Bang Theory was one of the most-watched TV shows globally, with millions of viewers over its twelve-season run. Given its vast audience, the way the show portrays gender roles and stereotypes has a significant influence on how people perceive and understand these issues in real life because when a popular show reinforces certain stereotypes and gender roles, it can normalize and perpetuate those views in society.

The sitcom is about four socially awkward and geeky friends, Sheldon, Leonard, Raj, and Howard, who are scientists and work together at Caltech. The show starts with Leonard and Sheldon, who are roommates and best friends, getting a new neighbour Penny. She is a very attractive aspiring actress who works at the Cheesecake factory as a waitress. Later, Amy and Bernadette also join their friend group as love interests for Sheldon and Howard. The show focuses on their everyday lives, social interactions and relationships.

3.1. Dr. Sheldon Cooper

Sheldon is one of the main characters in the show and, without a doubt, the most famous one. He has an eidetic memory and an IQ of 187 which puts him well above the genius level. He works as a theoretical physicist at Caltech University studying String theory. His roommate and best friend, Leonard Hofstadter, once

described him as "one lab accident away from being a supervillain" (Lorre, Prady, Glickman & Cendrowski, 2008). It was never confirmed, but it is suspected that Sheldon is on the autism spectrum, particularly Asperger syndrome.

In the sitcom, he represents the stereotype of the eccentric genius. If we analyse this through the constructionist approach, the producers constructed his character in a way that represents and highlights the connection between intellectual brilliance and social awkwardness. Sheldon struggles with understanding social cues and often makes comments that are almost always blunt and inappropriate. He also shows signs of OCD which can be seen in his need for rigid routines such as strict bathroom schedules and his Roommate and Relationship Agreements. He is unable to empathise with others and feels that he is intellectually superior to everyone. It is safe to say that he lacks emotional intelligence, and with that, social connections. He prefers relationships that are not emotional at all, but rather very lucrative for him. He once said to Leonard: "Frankly, if I could afford the rent, I'd ask you to leave" (Lorre, Prady, Aronsohn, & Cendrowski, 2007).

This character representation can be seen as a way to reinforce the eccentric genius stereotype, but that also depends on the way how the audience receives or decodes the given representation. The audience can accept this representation as funny and enjoyable, but also, some could see the negative impact of the representation while still engaging with the character. On the other hand, some could fully reject this representation because they believe it reinforces the negative stereotypes about intellectuals and people with autism.

Sheldon is very aggressive with his self-assertion, he is very loud about his wants, and he doesn't care how it will affect anybody else which puts him in the agency role, which, as already mentioned, are characteristics associated with men (Eagly and Steffen, 1984). On the other hand, he is very codependent which is shown in his friendship with Leonard, and Penny, and, also, in his relationship with Amy. There are numerous scenes in which they are taking care of him, such as Leonard driving him everywhere, or Penny taking care of him and singing to him while he is sick, but later Amy takes over as his 'caretaker' which she is happy to do in order to have a romantic relationship with him (McIntosh, 2014). With that behaviour, he breaks the traditional masculine gender role stereotypes where men are shown as the dominant ones in relationships.

3.2. Dr. Leonard Hofstadter

Leonard is an experimental physicist working at Caltech University and he is also Sheldon's best friend and roommate. Even though Sheldon, Raj and Howard can also be described as geeks, Leonard is the one who best fits the geek stereotype. The way he looks constructs the message that reinforces the geek stereotype. He wears hoodies, graphic T-shirts and glasses which classifies him as a 'nerd'. He lacks social confidence and spends most of his time reading comic books. He can recognise social cues and can be very empathetic, but also sometimes cannot understand normal social conventions and struggles with day-to-day communication.

Throughout the sitcom, his character evolves, which is partly due to his relationship with Penny. He is also encoded as a sensitive intellectual who craves relationships, either platonic or romantic. This representation breaks the simplicity of the geek stereotype and allows for a different decoding. The preferred position for the decoding of Leonard's character is that he is sensitive and lovable, but also funny in his geekiness, while the oppositional position is that the audience sees his character as a negative and problematic representation that reinforces the stereotypes about nerds and geeks.

Even though Leonard can be competitive and self-assertive, especially when talking to his friends, he doesn't completely fit the agency role, mostly due to his awkwardness when talking to women. He tries to do everything to make Penny stay with him, and at times he comes out as desperate. Also in their relationship, Penny is often shown as more masculine and in later seasons is earning more money than him, which brings a different dynamic to their relationship and breaks traditional gender roles about men being the dominant ones in the relationship. Also, in the show he is represented as the sensitive one, and even though it is portrayed mockingly, it breaks the stereotype that men cannot show emotions. It is said by Sheldon, in the episode called "The Spaghetti Catalyst" that Leonard cried after Penny broke up with him:

> "**Penny:** So, um, was Leonard okay with you coming over?
>
> **Sheldon:** Oh, yes. In fact, he said, I'm fine, I don't care. And he in no way said it in a manner which would lead one to believe that he was covering up feelings of anguish and betrayal.
>
> **Penny:** Well, good.

Sheldon: I'm also pleased to report that he's all cried out over you.

Penny: He's been crying?

Sheldon: Oh, I believe that was something else I wasn't supposed to mention."

(Lorre, Prady, Aronsohn & Rich, 2010).

3.3. Penny (Hofstadter)

Penny is an attractive young woman who moved from a small town to pursue her dreams of becoming an actress. She moves in next to Sheldon and Leonard and quickly becomes a part of their friend group. Even though she serves as a loveable and relatable character, her representation raises questions about how women, beauty and intelligence are portrayed in media. If we analyse her character using the constructionist approach, we can say that she embodies the stereotype of a ditzy, attractive blonde, who is not very bright but has her looks to make up for it. Her physical attractiveness often overshadows her other qualities which can be seen as a construction that shows a woman's value only through her looks, which is a common representation in media. According to Burton (2005), blondes always evoke desire. He states that blondes show power in a feminine way. Penny is shown as a seductive woman and everyone except Sheldon tries to win her over.

Penny's character is encoded to represent the contrast between beauty and brains since she is not as academically inclined as the other characters which perpetuates the gender stereotype that women can either be attractive or intelligent. Her character is also encoded to provide comic relief as the 'normal' one in their friend group. Her funny reactions to other characters are similar to what the audience might feel. The preferred decoding of Penny's character is that she is relatable and that the ditzy blonde stereotype is just part of her character's humour. Also, her romantic relationship with Leonard can be seen as her character evolving and maturing. The negotiated position of decoding is that even though her character is relatable and funny, the way she embodies the gender-focused stereotypes is a negative representation. The oppositional decoding of Penny's character is that her representation is regressive and harmful and that it reinforces outdated ideas about women. Moreover, they could also criticise the representation of her as a woman who finds happiness and fulfilment in her relationship and marriage with Leonard. Especially because in the episode "The Procreation Calculation" (Lorre, Prady,

Holland & Cendrowski, 2018) Penny said that she doesn't want to have kids, but in the end, she ends up pregnant which reinforces the idea that a woman's fulfilment comes from starting a family.

As already mentioned, according to Holmes (2006) feminine style of interaction is: supportive, helpful, indirect, affectively oriented and collaborative. We can see how Penny uses this style of communication while talking to the male protagonists (Yi & Kaur, 2019). She is also very empathetic and has a strong need for social connections which are the qualities of the communal type, which is associated with women (Eagly and Steffen, 1984). On the other hand, while Penny has a feminine style of communication, she is very masculine regarding physical and practical tasks. For example, in the episode "The Big Bran Hypothesis", Penny builds her media centre by herself, while the guys are arguing about how to build it (Lorre, Prady, Cohen & Cendrowski, 2007). Her behaviour is sometimes also very masculine, which breaks traditional gender roles between men and women, especially in her relationship with Leonard. One example of that is from the episode "The Date Night Variable":

> "**Leonard:** I just know the longer we wait to talk about it, the weirder it gets.
>
> **Penny:** Sweetie, can I just be the girl tonight?
>
> **Leonard:** Absolutely. You're the girl, I'm the guy. Now, you watch your football game while I make you a little plate here." (Lorre, Prady, Molaro & Cendrowski, 2012).

3.4. Howard Wolowitz

Howard is an engineer with a master's degree, who also works at Caltech University. He is the only one among his friends (other than Penny) who does not have a PhD for which he is constantly teased about:

> "**President Siebert:** Mrs. Latham, I'd like you to meet three of our outstanding young researchers. This is Dr. Leonard Hofstadter, Dr. Rajesh Koothrappali and Howard Wolowitz.
>
> **Mrs. Latham:** Well, what happened to you, Wolowitz, couldn't stick with it long enough to get your PhD?
>
> **Howard:** I'm an engineer. Most engineers don't bother with a PhD. But you may be interested to know I designed the zero-gravity waste-disposal system for NASA.

Mrs. Latham: Got it. You're a space plumber." (Lorre, Prady, Kaplan & Cendrowski, 2011)

His character is also constructed to embody the geek stereotype. He is very intelligent, but socially awkward, which fits the stereotype. But his character is also very flamboyant when it comes to fashion. He wears all kinds of turtleneck dickies and belt buckles in all kinds of shapes, some of them even representing characters from comic books. His character also presents himself as someone with a lot of sexual confidence and is very self-assertive and aggressive when it comes to flirting which is surprising considering his lack of love life. In season one (Lorre, Prady, Molaro & Cendrowski, 2007), he said: "Love is not a sprint, it's a marathon, a relentless pursuit that only ends when she falls into your arms - or hits you with the pepper spray." (Lorre, Prady, Molaro & Cendrowski, 2007).

As already mentioned before, stereotyping reduces people to a set of oversimplified traits (Hall, 1997), which we can see in Howard's character and in the way he represents the archetype of a geeky Jew. According to Rubin (2019), Howard is literally the epitome of the Jewish man, he is thin, awkward, has a big nose, and is a complete mamma's boy. He still lives with his mother, who babies him quite a lot, and she also fits the stereotype about Jewish mothers who are overbearing and without boundaries. Howard's mother was a character that we never saw, and never knew her name, but she was always described as being obese and very protective of Howard. He is very dependent on his mother, and even later when he marries Bernadette, he expects her to take care of him like his mother does. Even his surname portrays the stereotype. His surname Wolowitz, from which the word 'wallow' can be derived, implies the whiny nature of Jewish men according to stereotypes (Ibid 328). This kind of representation, although humorous, reinforces the negative stereotypes about Jewish men and masculinity.

His character is encoded to provide humour, but it can be decoded in various ways. Some may decode his character as funny and enjoyable with his comments and the way he dresses, but some can find his representation insulting and a way to reinforce social and gender stereotypes.

3.5. Dr. Rajesh Koothrappali

Raj is the only main character in *The Big Bang Theory* who is not American, but rather Indian. He is Howard's best friend, and he works as an astrophysicist at Caltech University. Raj's character is an example of how sometimes stereotypes are exaggerated to create a type rather than an individual. His character is constructed to fully embody the stereotype of an Indian man who is represented as 'other' in his environment. He has a heavy accent and wears unbecoming, seemingly cheap clothes, but he comes from a very rich Indian family. Even in their friend group, Raj is always described as the "other". For example, in the episode "The Precious Fragmentation" Sheldon tells Leonard that all four of them have a role in their friend group:

> "Well, it's very simple. In our ragtag of scientists with nothing to lose, I'm the smart one, Wolowitz is the funny one, and Koothrappali is the lovable foreigner who struggles to understand our ways and fails, and that leaves you, by default, as the muscle." (Lorre, Prady, Molaro & Cendrowski, 2010).

To construct Raj's identity as an Indian in America, the show often made jokes about Indian customs, food and religion which were often very simplified and exaggerated because of the Western audience's very limited knowledge about Indian culture. The preferred decoding of Raj's character is that he portrays South Asians in a humorous and accurate way, while the oppositional decoding rejects this representation on the premise that it reinforces the negative stereotypes about South Asians. The decoding depends on the viewer's cultural background and awareness.

Raj is very anxious, and his way of communicating doesn't fit the masculine style or the agency role. For the first few seasons he couldn't even talk to women without getting drunk due to his selective mutism: "Beer. The magic elixir that can turn this poor, shy Indian boy into the life of the party." (Lorre, Prady, Goetsch & Cendrowski, 2010). He is also not financially independent, and his father pays for everything. All of this shows how he does not fit the traditional masculine role in which men are dominant, self-assertive and independent. Also in his friendships, especially with Howard, he holds more of a stereotypical feminine role. For example, when he and Howard are fighting, he always has stereotypical responses which are associated with women, like telling him he never listens or accusing him of leaving him to go hang out with other girls.

3.6. Dr. Bernadette Rostenkowski (Wolowitz)

Bernadette's character was introduced into the show as a love interest for Howard. She was working at the Cheesecake Factory alongside Penny until she got her PhD in microbiology, after which she got a job in the private sector. She is petite with a very high-pitched voice and is often dressed in floral dresses which reinforces a stereotypical feminine appearance. Her identity is constructed through her profession, relationships and personality traits. She is very intelligent and successful in her field which challenges the gender stereotypes about women in STEM. She also portrays the blonde stereotype but in a different way than Penny. While Penny portrays the ditzy, but hot blonde, Bernadette is more of a 'girl next door' blonde. According to Young (2009), a 'girl next door' blonde is the one who men perceive as harmless and sweet.

Although she is portrayed as sweet and feminine, she also has an assertive and temperamental side. This constructs her identity as both nurturing and authoritative which can be seen as balancing the traditional gender roles with the modern expectations. The producers encoded her character as a woman who is successful in her personal and professional life, in other words, a woman who can 'have it all'. She is in a happy marriage with Howard, has two kids and has a very successful career. This is the preferred decoding of her character which promotes the hegemonic ideals of female empowerment within traditional gender roles. The oppositional decoding can be that the audience sees the representation of her character as a negative representation of strong women. For example, her assertiveness and dominance are sometimes portrayed through the stereotype of the 'nagging wife' which can be criticised as the wrong portrayal of strong women in media. Also, the representation of her as a woman who can 'have it all' can be criticised as something that promotes unrealistic standards for women that they need to be perfect in every aspect of their lives.

3.7. Dr. Amy Farrah Fowler

Amy was introduced into the show as a love interest for Sheldon. She has a PhD in neurobiology, and in later seasons also gets a job at Caltech University. Sheldon and she met on a blind date which was arranged by Howard and Raj. She is

portrayed as highly intelligent, but socially awkward, maybe even more than the other characters. Her quirks, awkwardness and lack of social skills are often exaggerated for comic effect. This construction reinforces stereotypes about nerds, particularly those in the STEM field. She is shown as badly dressed (until the last two episodes of the TV show), sometimes cold, and masculine. There are scenes in the sitcom showing Penny and Bernadette teaching Amy how to do make-up or pluck her eyebrows.

Amy's character defies traditional hegemonic ideas of femininity. At first, she doesn't fit the conventional standards of beauty or behaviour typically associated with women on television. As the series progresses, she starts to embrace the more stereotypically feminine traits, such as her relationship with Sheldon and her desire for social connections – while still maintaining her unique personality and professional identity.

As opposed to Penny and Bernadette who portray the blonde stereotype, Amy portrays the brunette stereotype. As already mentioned, Banks (2007) states that while blondes are seen as more outgoing and energetic, the brunettes are more shy, mysterious and nerdy. Brunettes fit into the crowd and are not noticeable while blondes stand out. Concerning the stereotype of dumb blonde vs. smart brunette, we can say that Amy was introduced as the complete opposite of Penny, with looks and also intelligence.

Because the decoding depends on the audience's background, beliefs, and experiences there are various ways how Amy's character is perceived. Some might see her as a positive role model for women in science, while others might critique the show for eventually "normalizing" her to fit more traditional gender roles. Also, the way she looks, and acts can be criticised as a way to reinforce the idea that women cannot be both attractive and intelligent.

4. RECURRING TOPICS

The detailed analysis of the main characters in *The Big Bang Theory* shows how they individually reinforce and challenge gender roles and stereotypes, but that can also be connected to wider, recurring topics throughout the series. To fully grasp the show's approach to gender roles and stereotypes, it is essential to analyse those

topics, which are: nerd culture and masculinity, women in STEM, and relationships and gender.

4.1. Nerd Culture and Masculinity

Nerd culture and masculinity are very closely linked in *The Big Bang Theory*, often exploring and challenging traditional masculine gender roles. As already mentioned in the character analysis, the male characters are all constructed as extremely intelligent, but also socially awkward. Their love for video games, science fiction, and comic books goes against traditional hegemonic ideas about masculinity and how men are supposed to act.

Sheldon, with his asexuality and lack of interest in romantic relationships (until he meets Amy and their relationship evolves), represents a masculinity that is completely devoid of sexual or emotional expression which goes against hegemonic masculinity (Blosser, 2018). Leonard struggles with his insecurities when comparing himself to other men, especially due to his lack of athleticism and health issues (he has asthma and is lactose intolerant). As already mentioned, his looks embody the geek stereotype which is the opposite of what masculine men represent. Also, his sensitive and romantic side is something that is not usually connected with masculine gender roles.

Howard's extremely sexual behaviour from earlier seasons can be explained as a way for him to cope with his insecurities which shows how society forces men to overcompensate when they do not fit the hegemonic ideas of masculinity. Raj represents the sensitive and emotionally expressive side of masculinity which is not very accepted in society. Even though media has become more diverse when it comes to masculinity, the characters who represent a softer and more vulnerable form of masculinity are still socially and culturally misunderstood (Blosser, 2018).

By breaking and challenging the traditional masculine gender roles, *The Big Bang Theory* shows how there are different expressions of masculinity.

4.2. Women in STEM

By introducing strong female lead characters who work in STEM, the sitcom contributed to the representation and visibility of women in STEM fields in media.

Nevertheless, their portrayal was both praised and criticised. The sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* may seem very progressive since it shoves women as scientists and in high-paying positions alongside men, but still, the focus is more on their gender roles rather than on their professions (McIntosh, 2014). Amy and Bernadette are two female lead characters who both work in STEM. They are both biologists and very successful in their respective fields. Some might see Amy and Bernadette as positive representations of women in STEM, but if we compare them to the male scientists in the show, their characters can be decoded as reinforcing negative stereotypes about women's social skills or value in the workplace. All male scientists in the show are physicists and there were numerous times in the show when biology was considered a lesser science. For example, in the episode "The Shiny Trinket Maneuver" Sheldon completely disregards Amy's work achievement because it is in the field of biology and, therefore unimportant:

> "**Penny:** Okay, Amy just told you some exciting news, and you acted like it was no big deal.
>
> **Sheldon:** Oh, I see why you're confused. No, her news sounded important, but what you're forgetting is, it was an achievement in the field of biology. That's all about yucky, squishy things." (Lorre, Prady, Molaro & Cendrowski, 2012)

Also, since both of them were introduced into the show as love interests, a lot of times their work is only mentioned when it is connected to Howard and Sheldon (McIntosh, 2014).

In *The Big Bang Theory*, male characters are often at the centre of all scientific discussions and discoveries, unlike the female characters who often fall into the second plan. This reinforces the hegemonic idea about male dominance in STEM fields and the social norm that men are more central when it comes to science.

It is also important to mention a side female character, Leslie Winkle, who is the only female physicist in the sitcom. Her character is constructed to embody the stereotype of the female scientist who is cold, pragmatic and very masculine. She is portrayed as very successful and dominant, especially in her interactions with Sheldon which can be seen as challenging the hegemonic idea of men in STEM, but by not giving her a permanent role, the show subtly reinforces the hegemonic idea. Sheldon is very dismissive of her work and believes she should focus on more traditional roles for

women. In the episode "The Bat Jar Conjunction", it is mentioned that Sheldon told her she should "abandon [her] work with high-energy particles for laundry and childbearing" (Lorre, Prady, Cohen & Cendrowski, 2008).

4.3. Relationships and Gender

All relationships in *The Big Bang Theory* break the traditional gender roles about masculinity and femininity and, also, reinforce certain stereotypes. It is important to mention that all the relationships evolved and matured throughout the series.

If we analyse Leonard and Penny's relationship, we can conclude that there is a dynamic that is not traditional according to the hegemonic ideals and values about masculinity and femininity. As already mentioned, Penny is more masculine and 'tomboyish' while Leonard is sensitive and romantic. Humorously, but also stereotypically, Leonard is portrayed as 'the girl' in the relationship. Their relationship also represents the stereotype, explained by Walsh et al. (2008), about beauty and the patriarchal beast. It describes a stereotypical relationship represented in sitcoms in which the woman is more attractive and successful than the man. It was humorously shown multiple times how Penny is more attractive than Leonard, but in later seasons she also becomes more successful and earns more money than him as a pharmaceutical sales representative:

"**Leonard:** Hang on, if you're making all this money, where is it?

Penny: In a safe place.

Leonard: What does that mean, under your bed?

Penny: No, it means a diversified portfolio of stocks and bonds. I'm not overly conservative. I'm young, so my guy said I can afford to take some risks.

Leonard: Wait a minute, you have "a guy"?

Penny: Don't you have a guy?

Leonard: Why would I have a guy?! I don't have any money!" (Lorre, Prady, Molaro & Cendrowski, 2015)

Bernadette and Howard's relationship can also be explained through the stereotype about beauty and the patriarchal beast since Bernadette is also more attractive and more successful than Howard. Bernadette takes on a more dominant role in their relationship and is also in charge of their finance which breaks the traditional

gender roles. In the episode called "The Expedition Approximation" we can see their domestic dynamic, where Howard is more like a child who gets an allowance and gold stars for doing his chores (Lorre, Prady, Reynolds & Cendrowski, 2014).

As already mentioned, Sheldon is very codependent, and Amy was happy to take on the role of his 'caretaker'. McIntosh also states (2014) that it is clear to see how Amy indulges Sheldon and lets him believe he is smarter than her. Their relationship is sometimes unclear when it comes to reinforcing and challenging gender roles. Amy craves the traditional relationship, but she is the one who often has to push for their relationship to move forward. On the other hand, when it comes to their relationship, Sheldon sometimes exhibits the more traditionally dominant traits connected to masculinity.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to analyse the representation of gender roles and stereotypes in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory,* which serves as a good example of how gender is connected to media. The sitcom uses traditional gender roles and stereotypes for comedic purposes while offering complex characters who either challenge or reinforce those norms.

As already mentioned in the introduction, *The Big Bang Theory* reflects social and cultural shifts of the early 21st century, primarily in terms of accepting diversity, challenging traditional gender roles and the growth of the geek and nerd cultures. At that time, there were a lot of movements for gender equality which were fuelled by the need for inclusion, such as protests for LGBTQ+ rights and the third-wave feminism movement. Those movements led to discussions about exploring masculinity and femininity outside of patriarchal ideas. The period in which the sitcom was created had an impact on the representation of the characters.

When it comes to the male characters in the sitcom, their representation is completely different from the stereotypical representation of masculinity. They portray emotionally vulnerable men who are geeks and scientists and who defy the hegemonic ideal of the 'alpha' male, as previously mentioned in the section Nerd Culture and Masculinity. This kind of character portrayal brought on a cultural shift where intelligence and unconventional interests are also seen as valid expressions of masculinity.

Female characters also break stereotypes and traditional gender roles about femininity. They are portrayed as complex and successful individuals. Penny evolves throughout the seasons and moves on from the 'ditzy blonde' stereotype. Her assertiveness in her platonic and romantic relationships and, also, her work accomplishments challenge the patriarchal ideas about femininity. Portrayals of Amy and Bernadette are very important because they show women in STEM fields which was previously not common or non-existent in sitcoms. But, as already mentioned in the part Women in STEM, even though their representations seem very progressive, they are still defined by their romantic relationships and their gender, which shows how there is a conflict in media between modern, diverse representation and the influence of traditional gender roles.

Stuart Hall's representation theories provide an excellent foundation for analysing these characters and their representation. Especially his encoding/decoding model, which demonstrates how there can be different interpretations (decodings) of the representation that the producers encoded because of the audience and their cultural and social backgrounds. Some viewers may decode the show as something that reinforces outdated gender roles and negative stereotypes, while others may find it engaging and humorous.

In conclusion, *The Big Bang Theory* shows how media can represent and construct social views on gender. Even though the sitcom can be described as very progressive, it still perpetuates some traditional and outdated ideas. The representation of characters encourages the audience to question the traditional gender roles and stereotypes that shape society and individual identities.

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7. GENDER ROLES AND STEREOTYPES IN *THE BIG BANG THEORY*: Summary and keywords

The aim of this paper is to analyse the representation of gender roles and stereotypes in the popular sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, mostly focusing on Stuart Hall's representation theories. Sitcoms, like all media, shape society and their beliefs, and *The Big Bang Theory* stands out for its representation of stereotypes and gender dynamics. The main characters, Sheldon, Leonard, Penny, Howard, Raj, Bernadette, and Amy, at the same time reinforce and challenge the traditional gender roles and stereotypes. By analysing the representation of the characters and the recurring topics, such as nerd culture and masculinity, women in STEM, and relationships and gender, we can see how the sitcom uses humour to show gender dynamics and stereotypes. This paper concludes that, while the sitcom offers a progressive and diverse representation, it still reinforces some of the outdated and traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

Keywords: Gender, Stereotypes, Stuart Hall, The Big Bang Theory, Representation, Masculinity, Femininity, Nerds

8. RODNE ULOGE I STEREOTIPI U *TEORIJI VELIKOG PRASKA*: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Cilj ovoga rada je analizirati reprezentaciju rodnih uloga i stereotipa u popularnom sitkomu *Teorija Velikog Praska*, fokusirajući se na Stuarta Halla i njegove teorije o reprezentaciji. Sitkomi, kao i ostali mediji, oblikuju društvo i njihova uvjerenja, a *Teorija Velikog Praska* se ističe sa svojom reprezentacijom stereotipa i rodnih dinamika. Glavni likovi, Sheldon, Leonard, Penny, Howard, Raj, Bernadette, i Amy, istovremeno i jačaju i izazivaju tradicionalne rodne uloge i stereotipe. Analizirajući reprezentaciju likova i učestale teme, kao što su kultura štrebera i muškost, žene u STEM-u, romantični odnosi i rod, možemo vidjeti kako se u sitkomu koristi humor da bi se prikazali stereotipi i rodne dinamike. Zaključak ovoga rada je da, iako *Teorija Velikog Praska* nudi naprednu i različitu reprezentaciju, i dalje podupire neke od zastarjelih i tradicionalnih rodnih uloga i stereotipa.

Ključne riječi: Rod, Stereotipi, Stuart Hall, Teorija Velikog Praska, Reprezentacija, Muževnost, Ženstvenost, Štreberi