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**Mass Communication Case Study**

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**Convergence Culture and Social Media's Impact  
on the Representations of Women in Music  
(WIM) and the Consequences it Has on Their  
Mental Health : A Case Study of Jesy Nelson's  
"Odd One Out"**

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## **Introduction**

Women's history is full of trailblazers in the fight for equality. Pre-digital activism welcomed movements by suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who persistently fought for women's right to vote. Wolf argues that the archaic beliefs about feminine roles have been overthrown (1991) despite digitalisation presenting new feminist issues as a consequence of social media. The creative industries places a pressure on women that's more harmful than progressive. This paper will serve to investigate how convergence culture and social media has influenced the representations of women in music (WIM) and the consequences of misogyny in mass media communications. Specifically, the investigation will focus on *Jesy Nelson: 'Odd One Out'* - a journey of rehabilitation as she opens up about the abuse she has suffered at the hands of cyberbullies and their effect on her mental health (BBC, 2019). The documentary is a qualitative study of the phenomenon of social media, serving as a 'media stunt' to successfully capture attention on the topic. This was demonstrated when *'Odd One Out'* broke the viewing record for BBC Three, achieving 1.87 million requests within seven days. Also airing on BBC One, the documentary drew in 3.3 million viewers, meaning it's the most popular show for 16-34-year-olds on the BBC (Radio Times, 2019). Nelson conducted empirical research where she exposed herself directly to the manifestation of the social phenomena of convergence culture.

## **Background**

Music was first acquired by the male and female progenitors of mankind for the sake of charming the opposite sex (Darwin, 1871). Sexuality is inextricably linked to music and performance, especially in our consumeristic and commercial society. There's ever-increasing sexualisation of gender portrayals within these mass forms of media due to an unbalanced power dynamic that is damaging to cultural and social perceptions of gender roles (Cherwell, 2019). A stereotype is a fixed overgeneralisation of a concept or social category that are universally shared ideas formed in adolescence through media, peers and family (Basow, 1992). WIM have suffered years of artistic control and oppression. The 1980s saw several company mergers take place, thus came an interest in music production and distribution. Integration occurred alongside the ideology that WIM are commodities or sex objects (Basow, 1992). Research on links between media and WIM primarily focus on News and TV serials with plots reinforcing myths, namely music being a male-dominated workspace. In an economy of attention, sensational and negative stories are central to narratives, with the illusion of choice allowing the public to ignore content homogenisation, narrowing

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society's mainstream agenda. Consequently, marginalisation takes place as conglomerates will favour content that can benefit them and reinforce algorithms of oppression that become part of people's cultural repertoires.

## **Key Issues**

### **Public environment**

The media we consume is a process of categorisation or framing that reflects the heteronormative ideologies of those producing it. In a male-dominated industry, WIM representations are one-dimensional, such as the 'playboy bunny' (Basow 1992). This places appearance as the key attribute to femininity and a woman's self-worth (Wolf 1991). Consequently, active scripts are produced based on male expectations. The problem of representation is that media content doesn't simply present the world as is but continues to wrongly represent people and their environment in the same way over and over again. Thus, representations match the misogyny presented in the hegemonic public environment. Due to conglomeration, fewer corporations own the mainstream media meaning male ideology is dominant and content choices are strategic. As a result, the perpetuation of gender ideals is a conscious choice by media conglomerates. Castells argues that representations have "been captured in political institutions predominantly tailored for the convenience of dominant interests and values" (2012) This means the media as a political space reflects the society's political space. For example, globally there are 27 States in which women account for less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses, including 3 chambers with no women at all (UN, 2019) - media landscapes will reflect this.

Change in media logic perpetuated obstructive representations through tabloids' emphasis on sensationalist media to satisfy their paying readers. Sexualising WIM can be a result of traditional media struggling for public visibility (McQuail, 2020). Sexist gatekeeping of media is demonstrated in feminist film theory by Mulvey. 'The Male Gaze' invokes sexual politics and suggests a sexualised way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. The female's feelings, thoughts and her own sexual drives are less important than her being "framed" by male desire. (Mulvey, 1975). Therefore, WIM has the preconceived notion that they must strive for beauty to be successful in a male-orientated industry (Wolf, 1991). However, it can be argued that tech and globalisation have displaced traditions, beliefs and institutions meaning WIM can create a new narrative.

### **Social media - Lack of regulation**

Convergence culture has accelerated the flow of media content and there is an internet-based technological revolution. With shifting media consumption, audiences watch content on their own terms (Lotz, 2009). Traditionally, media is hierarchal but in the age of globalisation, there has been a flattening of such hierarchies through participatory culture. Despite the positives of digitalised communication, new media has paved the way for abuse. Trolling occurs due to the lack of regulation and removes the person from the statement they're making. Dr Mark Griffiths, Professor of Behavioural Addiction at Nottingham Trent University said: "Most people troll others for either revenge, for attention-seeking, for boredom, and personal amusement." (2021). Media outlets commodify the users who produce the content, including the abuse. Thus, convergence culture functions as a legitimising ideology with toxic effect because the freedom created by social media can be misused - platforms are vehicles for psychological narcissism and opinion-based discussion (Berger, 1974).

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

Social Constructionism Theory was originally cultivated by William Isaac Thomas and Alfred Schutz. They argued that traditions, religions, economic roles, and cultural expressions are socially reproduced (Berger and Luckman, 1996). This thesis is relevant as it offers an explanation as to why sexism in mass media occurs. Female stereotypes reoccur in media frames that communicate the salient and perpetuate a particular narrative set by male producers. Consequently, social constructionism theory gives insight to the construction of meaning through mass communication processes. They are important as they influence what people think and do. In addition, relevant literature includes the cultivation theory as it can be applied to the case study. For example, the understanding that the symbolic media environment becomes part of personal experience through which individuals learn about the world; such as stereotypes and gender roles. TV is a 'cultural arm of the established industrial order' that serves primarily to maintain and reinforce rather than challenge conventional beliefs and behaviours (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). Expanding on this, Propp's structure of media narratives argues myth and novels explore how narrative structures shape acts within particular cultures (1985-1970). Applying this to the western world, media organisations structure their stories according to patterns that are recurrent and result in predictable narratives. For example, the sphere of action for women is the 'princess' or 'damsel in distress', potentially dreaming them as something vulnerable in need of saving. Therefore, WIM representations in the media will fit these ideals.

### **Analysis**

*Jesy Nelson: 'Odd One Out' (2019)* helps to understand the objectification of WIM through social media platforms. For example, social media was compulsory when Little Mix won X-Factor in 2011. Naturally, they were compared to each other and their peers. Jesy was described in Instagram comments as “abnormal looking” and “the ugliest thing” a random user had ever seen. This helps us to understand why objectification takes place through the social construction of what a WIM should be/look like. In making these comments, it validates the ‘nomos’ of these stereotypes as we are more capable of visualising how, when and where these expectations are formed - specifically on aesthetic mass media platforms such as Instagram. Returning to X-Factor in 2013, it was never about the performance for Jesy but rather her image. The sexualisation of WIM has led to extreme criticism from those in the public eye. On the night of the show, Katy Hopkins reinforced the nomos of what a WIM must look like by tweeting “Packet Mix have still got a chubber in their ranks. Less Little Mix. More Pick n Mix”. Hyper-sexuality of WIM led to online responses about Nelson’s performance focusing on appearance rather than her talent as an artist. Before media, the press acted as a watchdog with mass media being a vehicle for citizenry. However, modernisation has seen mass communication processes commodified and moving away from the 4th estate. The case study pays homage to global meta-problems of a negatively globalised culture. Band-mate, Jade Amelia Thirlwall comments that Jesy “looks like a goddess but she won’t be told”, reflecting the pressures WIM face from the public sphere. Consequently, the ‘Diva Complex’ arises as guard against being hurt. Defined as a ‘conscious decision to be really high-maintenance’ (Urban Dictionary, 2011), many WIM use this perceived attitude as a mask to adhere to societal expectations of them. Body image specialist, Liz Ritchie, explained Jesy’s reasoning for this defence mechanism; “A creative persona serves a purpose” and as her media mask is perfected to gratify audiences’ needs, the past is the reality but is forgotten about. Facing the media will always be challenging for any woman in the spotlight as they have to adhere to misogynistic expectations - describing the past as ‘old Jesy’, Nelson misses a time when no-one had an opinion of her. X-Factor and social media were the shifts in emotion when the pressures of being a WIM became too much.

In addition, *'Odd One Out'* highlights how the freedom of press can be dangerous. Jesy stated that she can’t deny that she posts pictures for other people, not herself. Platforms are a polysemic phenomena within hash-tag politics. Social media platforms provide the infrastructure for people to participate online however, transitional movements can be abused as users act as protagonists.

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Internet-based media creates an absence in space and time constraints of analogue media, consequently making room for alternative perspectives. Person-to-person text based tools lead to interaction but also unprecedented 'feedback', creating decentralised nature of networks. Alongside the positive of intending to end censorship, internet-based media presents the opportunity to misuse the newly acquired power and freedom. An example is highlighted in *'Odd One Out'* when techniques of trolling were discussed. Lack of regulation allowed bullies to make fake 'back from the dead' accounts of Sian Waterhouse - aged sixteen, she was a victim of online abuse and took her own life as a result. Porter and Bogusky (2006) argue that co-creators and their new online freedom can be positive but inject a level of uncertainty due to less control on the message of the media.

### **Discussion**

There's various dimensions to the problem of study; the media environment, public environment and the transformation of the documentary genre. Firstly, the case study demonstrates convergence culture's impact on mental health isn't limited to WIM and looks at online abuse as a wider issue. *'Odd One Out'* is an empirical unit with subjects of evaluation embedded to add comparative and evaluative purposes. The case study puts emphasis on the impact trolling can have on anyone. We live in a "social media obsessed world" that impacts all walks of life. For example, females are "just there to be used" and males place too much emphasis on gym culture. An existing paradigm occurs suggesting that convergence culture causes mental health issues in young people who are more exposed to social media. This is evident when Jesy states "public eye or not, you can't escape from social media". Within her narrative, external issues are key talking points, such as the response to online abuse taking the form of anti-bullying charities. These campaigns look at the permanency of words and what preventative measures can be taken against online abuse. Evaluating such points recognises that social media also has positives. For example, the main purpose of *'Odd One Out'* was to emphasise that young people are not alone in their insecurities. With help from other online abuse victims, Jesy realises "talking about stuff is like throwing it away". Looking forward, the wider issue of online abuse can be counteracted through using social media as a platform to help others; Jesy ended the documentary by uploading an 'inspiring' post that reached 272,444 likes on instagram.

### **Documentary as an overlooked genre**

The case study presents the problem of emotion. Typically fine within tragedy, documentary is seen as a serious genre. Creating a bias through emotion can be deemed as unethical as using artifice to

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make an impression is a low cost but high impact strategy of content production. Despite this, the problem of emotion in '*Odd One Out*' can be justified as a response to competitive pressures in a busy economy of attention. The focus on suicide as a result of social media is represented as a human tragedy. Sian Waterhouse's story is an observation and illustration that's revealing of a complex reality that few know or understand. The emotional component may trigger empathy for the subject, producing feelings that put the viewer in the victims shoes. As a consequence, documentaries are suitable materials to source public education and change, meaning the case study isn't simply a source with systematic observation and inductive reasoning. To better test Nelson's theories and hypothesis, technological convergence has allowed multiple angles to the case study from alternate mass communication processes. Consequently, each point is evidenced and reformulation takes place, paving the way for new questions to be asked. Directed at particular communities, we can research more about convergence culture, social media's impact on the representations of WIM and the consequences it has on their mental health.

### **Conclusion**

Following this paper's analysis, social media may appear free but through media consolidation and illusion of choice, there's a deliberate attempt to dominate, invade or subvert the 'cultural space' of others and suggest a degree of coercion in the relationship (McQuail 2010). Specifically, male dominated media pushes a patriarchal ideology reflected in WIM stereotypes. Jesy Nelson felt continuous scrutiny on her appearance simply because she was in the spotlight. Ultimately, convergence culture isn't dangerous as it creates a deliberative democracy with plurality of ideas. However, harm is done by those who use it. Social media allows different sectors of society to interact, reason and decide with the common good in mind. Unfortunately, content tends to be human-made and globality has taken us beyond modernity as we face the consequences of aggregate human activities (Albrow, 1996). Jesy simply acts as a claim maker who seeks to mobilise the public through calls to action.



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