

# Preexisting stereotypes found to influence entertainment selection

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Entertainment media has increasingly featured diverse representations that have the potential to combat harmful social stereotypes, but a new University of Michigan study raises questions about how effective they

can be in the current media landscape.

The study, which appears in the *Journal of Media Psychology*, found that [entertainment media selection](#) was predicted by preexisting beliefs in a survey of nearly 300 people. Specifically, greater endorsement of gender-related stereotypes about intelligence was associated with a decreased tendency to choose TV shows that featured a brilliant woman (the counter-stereotypical representations) over shows that featured a brilliant man.

"Findings indicate that those who could benefit most from these representations are less likely to be exposed to them, undermining the utility of mass [media](#) in the widespread reduction of harmful stereotypes," said study lead author Matea Mustafaj, a graduate student in the U-M Department of Communication & Media.

Across four genres ([science fiction](#), crime fiction, drama, comedy), Mustafaj and colleagues created several TV show descriptions—half featuring an exceptionally intelligent (or "brilliant") character, the other half featuring a character that was not exceptionally intelligent. Sets of four show descriptions, all belonging to the same genre, were presented to participants. The descriptions featured either all brilliant or all nonbrilliant protagonists, with an equal distribution of men and women characters.

The study assessed the number of times participants selected shows with women protagonists when all characters were brilliant while also controlling for the instances where shows with women protagonists were chosen among those featuring nonbrilliant characters. One week prior to making their TV show selections, participants' intelligence-related gender [stereotype](#) endorsement was measured.

The study's results revealed that the more strongly an individual

associates intelligence with men than with women, the less likely they are to later choose a TV show that features a highly intelligent woman over one that features a highly intelligent man. This relationship persists even when controlling for a general preference for men or women characters.

The participant's own gender identity did not affect the relationship between preexisting beliefs and the selection of shows featuring highly intelligent women. In addition, race was significantly associated with the selection of counter-stereotypical representations. White respondents, compared to respondents of other races, showed a decreased tendency to select the counter-stereotypical representation, according to the research.

These results are significant because, with the advancement of media technology, viewers can choose from an endless array of content, Mustafaj said. The current study shows that the beliefs someone already has (in this case, stereotypes about gender and intelligence) can lead to the selection of entertainment content that aligns with those beliefs.

If counter-stereotypical representations are mostly reaching those who do not endorse the stereotype in the first place, the stereotype is likely to persist at the cultural level—or, at least, will not be strongly influenced by an increase in counter-stereotypical media representations alone, Mustafaj said.

Despite these findings, Mustafaj and U-M co-author Sonya Dal Cin are still optimistic about the potential of narratives to have a positive impact. They note that given the complexity of narratives and the other factors that go into selection, entertainment media is still a promising route through which people may be exposed to experiences and ideas different from their own.

**More information:** Matea Mustafaj et al, Preexisting Stereotypes and

Selection of Counter-Stereotypical Genius Representations in Entertainment Media, *Journal of Media Psychology* (2023). DOI: [10.1027/1864-1105/a000377](https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000377)

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