The mass media underpins the network of media organs disseminating messages to wider society (Wimmer and Dominick, 2013). These messages embody ideologies – ideas portrayed or hidden as 'truths' (Long et al., 2021:370) – and the mass media plays a role in shaping the meanings behind them. Therefore, today, where the media is individuals' primary source of information, the potential distortion of messages to empower or marginalise certain social groups can have significant impacts regarding how they perceive social phenomena (Hodkinson, 2017:266). Consequently, this essay addresses the ideological content of the mass media by examining the ways in which it alters individuals' conceptions of norms and values. This is done firstly through a traditional Marxist lens, which explores how media content is shaped by capitalism and consequently operates in its interests by blurring the working-class's perceptions of reality (Marx and McLellan, 2000). Neo-Marxist analysis, drawing on Althusser's (1971) work, is then utilised to emphasise how the media, although serving ruling-class interests, merely encourages individuals to acquiesce to subjugation, highlighting its power to construct individuals' realities. Furthermore, feminist media theories, primarily Mulvey's (1975) exploration of the media as facilitating patriarchy, and critical race theories, namely the work of Johnson, Dolan and Sonnett's (2011), finalise the essay by accentuating how gender and ethnicity, alongside class, are targets of media ideologies that maintain power imbalances. Additionally, this essay employs the concept of 'hashtivism' (Long et al. 2021:381) to suggest that the content of the mass media can be used to challenge distortions perpetuated through ideology, highlighting the complex relationship of audiences and media messages.

Firstly, traditional Marxists believe the content of the mass media is ideological as it serves to uphold the status quo in society by subordinating the working-class masses – the proletariat – through the perpetuation of ruling-class – bourgeoisie – ideology (Long et al. 2021). Capitalism, Marx argued, is a system characterised by the bourgeoisie minority who own the 'means of production' (factories, tools, machinery), forcing the proletariat to sell their labour for survival (Hodkinson, 2017: p100). Marx and McLellan (2000) suggested that this capitalist economic base present in industrialised societies shaped the superstructure above, comprising social institutions like the media in contemporary society, coinciding with it reproducing bourgeoisie ideologies that served to repress the proletariat by upholding false class consciousness. Herman and Chomsky (2002:26) apply the traditional Marxism to mass media content today, for example, the journalistic media operates under the filter of 'flak', whereby radical, potentially revolutionary opinions that contradict the bourgeoisie media owners' ideologies are stigmatised and silenced, hampering ideas that challenge capitalism from surfacing, deterring social change. This accentuates the importance of traditional Marxism as a platform that illuminates the idea of mass media content as being ideological, due to it blurring the proletariat's picture of reality, encouraging them to accept bourgeoisie ideas conveyed to them as common-sense norms, maintaining the unequal social class divide and stabilising the capitalist system (Hodkinson, 2017:pp.100-101). Nevertheless, Marx's ideas are perhaps less relevant than the theories presented by more recent neo-Marxists, such as the structuralist thinker Althusser (1971:130), who argued that Marx was economically deterministic: failing to highlight how the economic base and superstructures like the media can operate separately, underpinning 'relative autonomy'. Althusser (1971:136) elaborated how the 'ideological state apparatuses' such as the media can only persuade individuals to acquiesce to oppression, meaning that social institutions like the media can propel social change, contrasting Marx's assumption that the superstructures of society are directly moulded by the economic base (Marx and McLellan, 2000). Thus, although Marx importantly underlines the ways in which the media subjects the proletariat to bourgeoisie ideology, the fact he was writing prior to the expansion of the mass media signifies how more contemporary, neo-Marxist approaches are more significant in interpreting the role of the media in today's capitalist societies.

Therefore, when assessing the ideological functions of the mass media, neo-Marxist perspectives offer a crucial insight. Adding to the prior evaluation of traditional Marxism, Althusser (1971:136) noted that the media is a form of 'ideological state apparatus', operating separately from the economic base of society, whilst also conveying bourgeoisie ideology. Through interpellation, underpinning the process by which social institutions construct individuals' roles within society, the media positions individuals 'by and within ideology' (Long et al., 2021:381), shaping them in accordance with ruling-class values. Marcuse (1964) perpetuates Althusser's argument by exploring how the consumerist ethos promoted by the mass media in capitalist society encourages individuals to strive for false needs – desirable yet unnecessary products endorsed by transnational brands – which in turn fuels the capitalist system with economic capital and determined workers desiring to labour for irrelevant services. Moreover, Klein (2000:xvii) adds that this masks the exploitation of working-class labourers forced into producing such products, often in 'abusive sweatshops', blurring the proletariat's picture of reality, halting a large-scale revolution. This shows that dominant, ruling-class ideologies, from the neo-Marxist perspective, are inextricably a feature of the mass media, serving to encapsulate individuals within a shared set of values which encourage them to accept inequality as a natural phenomena. As exemplified by the consumerist ethos (Marcuse, 1964) promoted by media outlets such as magazines emphasising 'niche lifestyle groups' (Hodkinson, 2017:107), the content of the mass media conveys what exhibits normalcy in society, and it is these norms that are internalised by the proletariat, surreptitiously causing them to accept the agenda of the bourgeoisie. However, even though Althusser (1971) outlines how the content of the mass media can perpetuate power differences in terms of social class, he, and Marxism generally, overly emphasises the oppression of the working-class through the media, disregarding the ways in which the mass media reinforces gender norms and patriarchal stereotypes (Mulvey, 1975). Neo-Marxism, subsequently, although being a more contemporary theory that illustrates how the content of the mass media suppresses working-class autonomy, is perhaps only equal in significance to feminist approaches, underscoring how media ideologies oppress an array of social groups within society and not just the working-class.

Feminism, therefore, outlines how the content of the mass media is ideological as it relays patriarchal ideologies that hinder gender equality and female autonomy. Mulvey (1975:6) reinforces this, arguing that media outlets such as films operate through a male gaze, perpetuating the 'unconscious of patriarchal society'. This underpins the idea that women are designed in film to be 'looked at and displayed' (Mulvey, 1975:9) through erotic clothing and body language, which is directed by patriarchal film producers intending on objectifying women and presenting an image of femininity revolved around docility. Furthermore, McRobbie (2000) agrees with Mulvey, arguing that the media plays a central role in shaping women's perceptions of gender, but adds that it is not just the film industry that conveys this ideology by highlighting the oppressive functions of media texts such as girls' magazines. In her content analysis of the girls' magazine 'Jackie' in the 1970s, McRobbie (2000:81) concluded that men were deliberately presented as 'granite jawed heros', brainwashing female viewers into absorbing heteronormative ideologies and aspiring relationships over independence, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles and maintaining the patriarchal status quo. This demonstrates that the content of the mass media from the feminist lens serves to symbolically 'annihilate' women's perceptions of identity and gender (Tuchman, 1978:3). By transmitting heteronormative ideologies and ideas about femininity as being characterised by passivity and subservience to men, the media shapes notions of gender roles and hampers women from having autonomy over their sexualities and identities. Having said that, both McRobbie (2000) and Mulvey (1975) were writing prior to more contemporary developments in the media, such as 'hashtivism', which underpins the idea that hashtags (tags on social media platforms that group

messages according to shared themes), such as the '#MeToo' movement, which has contributed to the unveiling of the stories of sexually exploited women, can be used to challenge the patriarchal status quo (Long et al. 2021:381). This idea has been furthered by Ureta and Terradillos (2021), who highlight the use of Twitter hashtags during the 2016 Basque Parliamentary election as a form of 'Feminist hashtivism', (2021:1) perpetuating a model for 'opposing the male archetype traditionally dominant in the political sphere' (2021:10), coinciding with more women being elected in Basque Parliament than men for the first time in the nation-states' autonomous history. This shows that the content of the mass media can be used by oppressed groups in society to voice stories of repression and drive positive social change. Therefore, the media, albeit an ideological tool conveying patriarchal discourse (Mulvey, 1975), has debatably been forced to undergo significant change in the ways in which it represents certain social groups. As a result of movements like 'hashtivism', Hodkinson (2017) believes the media has begun to diversify representations of women, contrasting once ubiquitous notions of femininity conveyed in the films and magazines analysed by McRobbie (2000) and Mulvey (1975). Thus, despite the pivotal contribution of feminism to the understanding of the mass media as a transmitter of patriarchal ideology, 'the presence and popularity of images of single, financially and sexually autonomous women' in the media today should not be disregarded as a signpost of female empowerment (Hodkinson, 2017:247).

Alternatively, although examining class and gender is essential to understanding the ways in which the media ideologically controls norms, ethnicity, as a social characteristic that is also manipulated by the media, should be considered equally (Hodkinson, 2017). Hall (1997:258) argues that the content of the mass media 'naturalizes and fixes' racial inequalities in society through stereotyping, causing ethnic minorities to become stigmatised as a racially inferior, internally homogenous group. Johnson, Dolan and Sonnett (2011) exemplify this with television broadcasts being utilised as an ideological method of oppressing Black refugees and survivors impoverished after the 2005 Hurricane Katrina. They state '79%...of the 104 looting scenes featured African American participants' (2011:310), and only '4% of speaking time' was dedicated to Black reporters, despite New Orleans, the site of the atrocity, being a predominantly Black region in America (2011:317), accentuating how the media, as a predominantly white, middle-class institution, both misrepresents and underrepresents ethnic minority groups to perpetuate the segregation of Western society into racialized categories. This links to Said's (1978) concept of orientalism, which refers to the fostering of an us-and-them mentality amongst the ethnic majority and minority in society. This relays the significance of considering ethnicity as a social characteristic when assessing the ideological nature of the mass media, as Hall (1997) and Johnson, Dolan and Sonnett (2011) reveal how the media serves to construct notions of race, so that ethnic minorities in society are subordinated, upholding metanarrative ideologies of white supremacy in Western society. Johnson, Dolan and Sonnett's (2011) study particularly is crucial, as when reinforced by Cohen's (1973) earlier concept of media folk devils – groups that are portrayed in a deliberately negative manner to symbolise societal problems and perpetuate segregation – the content of the mass media today persists to oppress ethnic minorities and perpetuate social division, highlighting the contemporary nature of media stereotyping as an ideological tool that shapes individuals' perceptions of race. Some sociologists, however, have highlighted flaws in the arguments put forward by these thinkers. Evaluation is embodied by the work of Wigger (2019), who draws on the Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory to highlight how the experience of ideological domination is underpinned by the combination of different social characteristics. Wigger (2019:249) exemplifies this through stereotypical print media depictions of Islamic, Black men as 'sexually deviant and dangerous criminals' in German society, demonstrating, in this instance, how the media specifically targets the facets of gender and ethnicity to direct the process of marginalisation towards certain intersected social characteristics.

Hence, although the ideas displayed by Marxists, feminists, and critical race theorists are vital to unveiling how individual social characteristics, such as class, gender and ethnicity, are ideologically manipulated by the media in a variety of ways, it is perhaps more beneficial to highlight how social characteristics intertwine within society, meaning that the experience of media propaganda and stereotyping is inextricably tied to several social factors, making the incident of ideological media manipulation ungeneralisable.

To conclude, this essay has demonstrated the ideological nature of the mass media through the examination of traditional and neo-Marxist, feminist, and critical race theorist insights into the hierarchical structuring of society, and the subsequent reproduction of ideas favouring the maintenance of society's unequal structuring through the media. Although these theories vitally demonstrate how the media shapes individuals' conventions of normalcy through ideological distortions of the truth (McRobbie, 2000; Hall, 1997), the most significant contributions to this debate comprise intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and hashtivism (Long et al., 2021). On the one hand, intersectionality importantly underscores how examining the oppression of social groups based on individual social characteristics ignores their interlocking nature, and resultant idiosyncratic experiences of subordination perpetuated by media ideologies. On the other hand, hashtivism illustrates how individuals are not passive recipients of media messages and resist them to challenge the inequalities they transmit. Therefore, in inspecting the media's ideological nature, it is crucial to highlight the ungeneralisable nature of the effects and responses that ideologies generate from audiences. Although the mass media has the power to shape individuals' social behaviour, the rise of the active audience, as exemplified by Ureta and Terradillos's conception of 'Feminist hashtivism' (2021:1), has perhaps subverted the overwhelming power of media ideologies today.

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