

Professional Project

Media's Depiction of Women and How It Influences the Church: A Podcast

Jeri Bozeman

M00023833

Middle Tennessee State University

Advisor

Dr. Katie Foss

Middle Tennessee State University

Introduction

According to a poll from 2017, approximately 23% of adult churchgoers are single, either never married or divorced (Chiu, 2017). While single people make up almost a quarter of active church attendees, single women make up 53% of the US population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Chiu (2017) writes that the church needs to develop a better way to reach the single community by addressing ways to incorporate single members into leadership roles, connect them to married members, and provide a safe space where they feel noticed and served. Due to the structure of many church communities, single women sometimes feel pushed to the periphery of the church's population experiencing exclusion from social gatherings and other activities (Gaddini, 2019). The marginalization of single women in the church can feel even more isolating in an environment that was meant to provide an alternative family. By including women from different church backgrounds, Gaddini found that women felt excluded from social gatherings or that they continued to fight against the norm of women's roles in the church.

Yet, as single women have expressed, staying in the church can help to change the status quo, broadening the community to be more inclusive (Gaddini, 2019). Thus, more attention to single women in the church is needed. As such, this professional project explored single women in the church through a series of podcast episodes. Specifically, the podcast episodes addressed the roles of media representations as connected to single women in the church.

Background Section

The discussion of single women in the church contains elements of gender studies and feminism by addressing the traditional roles of women in the church as a reflection of media representation. The project used these theories in a Christian context and was based on Biblical scholars' application of the theory to the modern church. Without dissecting the importance of

women in the Bible, the church misses the opportunity to recognize strengths the female community brings to the everyday life experience.

Gallagher (2004) conducted a survey to determine Protestants' opinion on feminism. She found that two-thirds of the people interviewed were "cautiously appreciative of feminism" as they recognized the important advances that had been made through the efforts of feminists in the past to create the rights they enjoyed today (Gallagher, 2004). The subjects specifically noted the importance of feminism in the lessening of domestic abuse and violence in the home. The group interviewed acknowledged that there was a common reaction to say that all feminists are bad when there are important and progressive measures that were led by feminists that could be applied to relationships in the church and in the home (Gallagher, 2004). Recognizing the feminist influence throughout the church's history allows the opportunity to recognize where there is still a need for improvement.

Single and the Church

The people of the church have often created an expectation of responsibilities and personality of women in any marital status. Gaddini (2019) found that even single women thought the Christian woman should be compliant, passive, and calm. Even though Gaddini's subjects in her interview attended church regularly, they did not believe they possessed the exact traits that should be found in the ideal Christian woman. The women also felt that those traits contributed to a stronger appeal to the Christian male (Gaddini, 2019).

Not only is there the idea of the single life not being appealing, but studies have also found that the idea that women, themselves, who are single are lonely and uncaring (Hertel et al, 2007). These opinions stigmatize and marginalize their life choices, and it makes women susceptible to a harmful criticism that is not based on fact. Single women have found they must

explain their singleness in order to feel comfortable in social gatherings (Sharp and Ganong, 2011). They consider themselves both visible and invisible. They are put on display in social gatherings that seem to announce their singleness, for example, a bouquet toss at a wedding. In contrast, they feel invisible around groups who are focused on what their role should be in the family setting (Sharp and Ganong, 2011). This is not to say there has never been an acknowledgement by the church of the need to minister to the single community. Houck (2007) encourages churches to attempt to create an environment for the church's single members that fosters close friendships, spiritual uplifting, and acknowledgement of their individuality while affirming they are loveable and a gifted part of the community.

Women in the Bible

Witherington (1984) acknowledges the limiting of the importance of Biblical female leaders, such as Priscilla, in the New Testament by Western interpretations of the book of Acts. He remarks the interpretation of the original Greek into the English verbiage of several passages removes the significance of the females mentioned or represented to a less prominent figure compared to their husband or male equivalent and is inaccurate and anti-feminist (Witherington, 1984). The reduction of the female role in these texts creates a stunted view of the female role in the church and incorrectly limits the female's ability to be a part of the church's movement.

Discussions and studies of Scripture bring a stronger support of female influence and importance among Christ and His followers. N.T. Wright (2006) observed that while the argument is very commonly made that Christ's apostles were twelve men, His closest followers abandon Jesus at His darkest moment, and it is the women of that story who are first to the tomb, first to see Him risen, and the first to be "entrusted with the news that He has been raised from the dead." Wright challenges the male's superiority by addressing the fact that Christ's closest

and dearest companions were women. They were women who not only helped Him as an individual but also were instrumental in His ministry.

Literature Review

The attention paid to single individuals is limited. The social science community has acknowledged that the subject of singleness only has a few areas studied including a single person's mental state, management of their single life, and a comparison of the single life versus the married life (Gordon, 1994; Lewis, 1997; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Koenig and colleagues (2010) found that authors of self-help literature "emphasized that women are socialized to prioritize the search for a partner, and receive messages that they will be unhappy until or unless they do." The study concludes that therapists need to consider the level of comfort their client has in their single life before letting any bias the therapist might have on singlehood infiltrate the discussion (Keoing et al, 2010).

Single Women and Media Representation

Media representation of single women often affects the public's opinion of the demographic and not always in a positive way. Timmermans and colleagues (2019) studied the effects consuming romantic content had on both singles and couples. People feel the single woman is often portrayed as desperate and lonely as opposed to their married counterparts who seem to be fulfilled and content (Timmermans, et al, 2019). The study concluded that it is necessary for more "positive portrayals of single women (Timmermans, et al, 2019)." Additionally, the character conversation around single women changes tone when age enters the discussion. Once a single woman character reaches a certain age, her depiction in media is portrayed through charity or service to others. Blackford (2018) reflected on the presence of the "spinster" in a community by their social missionary behavior toward relatives and causes.

Referring to Marilla Cuthbert in *Anne of Green Gables*, Blackford explained that the spinster character in a story, specifically by the twentieth century, became someone “suspected of repression and unfulfillment (Blackford, 2018).” As depicted through media, the aging single woman finds herself even more limited in her contributions to society.

Media representation may also be shown through the single female’s professional tendencies. While discussing the single female detective portrayal, K.R. Gilchrist pinpoints how this character depiction still connects to the generalization of the single female professional in any field. Gilchrist (2022) explains that the single female detective often exhibits characteristics of disconnection and coldness while her coupled female colleagues are portrayed as emotional, empathetic, and compassionate. Her personality traits, such as lack of emotion and independence, are both what have led to her being successful professionally while still remaining single (Gilchrist, 2022). Using this characterization in media, the audience becomes acquainted with a single woman who lacks the necessary warmth to have a relationship.

Yodovich and Lahad (2018) studied media depictions of single women who had died, specifically, through the narrative of single women who were not discovered until some time had passed. They referenced *Bones*, *Sex and the City*, and *Six Feet Under* using certain episodes when a single woman’s character died followed by the discussion of the other characters about the dead woman’s life. The other single female characters in the show have an a-ha moment and fear they will also die alone (Yodovich and Lahad, 2018). In *Six Feet Under*, Yodovich and Lahad observe that the single female character’s “loneliness and misery is only speculated upon rather than confirmed (Yodovich and Lahad, 2018).” By portraying the death of a single female character through the assumptions of those surviving characters, the narrative is presented that

the single woman had a lonely and sad life and therefore, must have had a lonely and sad death, a fate that is guaranteed for all single females unless they find a lifetime love.

Gerbner and his team (1979) showed that repeated stereotypical media portrayals create the viewpoint that these personalities hold some level of truth. Hefner and Kretz (2021) researched Disney movies and found that this genre can influence viewers at a young age. It can lead to developing the opinion that being single is unappealing and that it would be better to be in an unhealthy relationship than to not be in a relationship at all (Hefner and Kretz, 2021).

Timmermans and colleagues (2019) conclude that romantic entertainment perpetuates the fear of being single in those female individuals who are single at the time of viewing.

Single Women and Expectations

The single woman's treatment in the church is very connected to the single woman's treatment in media representation. There is a belief that single people are seen as less loving or less mature; however, additional studies show the single person is found to have a better connection with community (Timmermans, et al, 2019). On the contrary, the research finds that in reality the single person has "more friends, are more likely to socialize, and more often exchange help, are healthier, and score higher on personality characteristics associated with better psychological well-being (Timmermans, et al, 2019)."

While marriage was once the expected outcome of one's life, studies show that views on marriage have changed. Our society has seen a shift from marrying for financial stability or gain to people now viewing the main reason for marrying as love. Even with the changing opinion on marriage, a woman can still be stigmatized in her singleness because there is the belief she has not chosen her single life but rather, she has been found not attractive enough to gain a husband (Koeing, et all, 2010). Former parish minister and Associate Professor, Dr. Houck, makes the

observation that single people see themselves living in a married world (Houck, 2007). Single people feel the church presents singleness as a stepping-stone and not as a place to receive fulfillment.

By reflecting on depictions in different media formats, the project acknowledged previous studies done to improve the representation of the single woman. At the same time, the conversation filled in the gaps where research and study failed to fully remedy the current situation. My project directly addressed the importance of women in the Bible while recognizing the disrespect most single women experience in their life, through media and through the church. The series centered around an aspect of this topic. It culminated in a deeper discussion of how the church has been influenced.

Methodology

The discussion of media representation's influence on the church was discussed in a series of podcast episodes of the existing podcast, *Bless Singleness Podcast*. *Bless Singleness Podcast* was started in 2018 as a relaxed discussion about single individuals in the church. The hosts are three single women, Charity Spencer, Meredith Darsey, and myself, who have been involved in a Christian church for the majority of their life, all varying denominations and locations but seemingly with the same experiences as single women. The previous topics have varied from the difficulties of the Christmas season and the awkwardness of Singles Ministry social gatherings. The goal of the podcast was to appeal to the single community as a whole to let anyone living a single life know they were not actually alone in their struggles.

My background is in the Protestant Christian church, specifically the United Methodist Church. While I have attended or been an active member of four different church communities throughout my life, they have all been a part of the United Methodist denomination. My

engagement has ranged from passive attender to being an active participant in youth groups, leadership, worship, and Bible Study groups. Charity grew up in the Baptist church. Her family moved around quite a bit when she was little, but the churches were primarily small Baptist churches. Since living in Nashville as an adult, Charity has been an active member of a more charismatic church family which is also much larger than anything she experienced while growing up. She serves in the choir and on the worship team. Meredith has been an active member of Southern Baptist churches for most of her life. Currently, she is a part of a Christian church that is not affiliated with any particular denomination. She has been active in youth and collegiate groups, Sunday School, worship, and Bible studies. Additionally, she has filled in for various Bible study teachers from time to time.

Why Podcasting?

Providing specialized programming, podcasts have become a means for selective consumption of content that appeals to the individual (Perks, et al, 2018). Categorized by the theme, podcasts give someone the opportunity to discover discussions that show new insight into a topic that speaks directly to the listener. With time being such an important commodity these days, people are in control of the subject matter and timing of the experience and can work listening into their everyday life (Perks, et al, 2018). Additionally, research shows that the podcast audience is nearly equal across gender lines and closely proportional to the racial-ethnic make-up of the United States (Statista, 2019; Webster, 2018). Due to the popularity and practicality of the podcast format, the topic would find a broader audience.

With the abundance of the use of smartphones, tablets and other various digital devices, podcasts have seen an increase in popularity over the past 5 years (Casares, et al, 2021). Research has found that almost 68 million Americans listen to a podcast a week and 104 million

listen to a podcast monthly (Casares, et al, 2021). Podcasts can provide entertainment, information, or a different perspective on a topic.

Driving Questions:

The podcast as a whole is driven by the discussion surrounding the following questions.

- Where do single women belong in the Christian church?
- Is the church influenced by society?
- Is society influenced by the mainstream media?
- How do we find different denominations and churches within the denomination treat single women?
- Where do single women feel the safest and where do they feel the most heard?

To clarify, this discussion focused on the Christian church. The term “church” can mean any form of organized gathering within a uniform doctrine. The use of the term “church” did not limit the discussion to a single building or even to a single denomination. The individuals involved represented several different denominations, supporting the speculation that this issue is not simply isolated to one place. The project used the term “single” as one who is unmarried. There was a combination of research to support the existing stigma of the single woman and a connection on how the current public opinion may affect and determine the way single Christian women are limited in their church experience.

Instead of treating each episode as its own conversation, this season took a targeted look at media representation and the presence of women in the Bible. Rather than a segmented conversation, this conversation lasted four episodes to provide a longer and deeper discussion into the need to address this topic. *Bless Singleness Podcast* discussed the overarching concept of

how the mainstream media's bias and stereotypical depiction of the single woman has influenced society and the Christian church's treatment of single women.

The Series

My podcast discussed the Christian church's approach to the single woman. We looked at how the church is a reflection of the mainstream bias and stereotypical portrayal of the single woman in media. The conversation showed how the church should be a leader in the respectful and honoring treatment of the female based on Biblical standards that have previously been ignored or downplayed instead of following the example of mainstream media. The goal of the podcast was not to be a condemnation of the church, but it was a commentary on how growth and change are accessible.

Episode 1, "Grace. Give it, Receive it, Share it, Show it"

The first episode of the series discusses the topic of what single people think about other single people, whether they are in the church or outside of the church. The ladies admit that age and gender can determine the answers. The ladies state they can feel pity for someone or even judge that they think the person is flawed and question what has kept the other person from being with someone. Going further the question is raised whether women should have had a relationship by a certain point in life. The ladies observe that as women they need to start to feel confident in who they are as people and show others that same grace. Single women would like to not be thought of as only focused on getting married and thinking about it all the time. The perception is what bothers us, but women tend to perceive others in the same way they do not want to be perceived. Ultimately, the ladies decide that women need to show grace to others *and* ourselves.

Episode 2, "Heads will roll"

Episode 2 dives into the mainstream media's coverage of single women and how that may influence the church's treatment of single women. The observation is made that social media is the big machine that tells us what to care about as most print media is a thing of the past. Women, in general, can be easily over-sexualized and that can be especially true for single women. Touching on purity culture and modesty culture, the ladies admit that those are not okay as they are based on shame, but there still needs to be respect for ourselves as individuals. Additionally, social media is consumerism as those with followers are still trying to make money and are still trying to sell something. The expectation based on representation on social media is that single women are travelers or partiers or wear expensive and wonderful clothes. Additionally, single women are shown as having a glamorous life, and it is not a realistic view of

the single life. We have to find out how to love ourselves for who we are in Christ, but we rest in the fact that we can be ourselves. We need to love ourselves, but we also need to get over ourselves.

Episode 3, “Happy You’re Still Single Day. Good Job”

In episode 3, the ladies discuss film, TV, and book portrayals of single women and how they can be problematic or how they can be healthy. Giving different examples, they explore how these stereotypes can lead to negative connotations and opinions of single women. From immature, to quirky, to crazy cat lady, the episode identifies different ways popular programs depict single women. Honing in on Disney princesses, the ladies further discuss the “need” for the damsel in distress to be rescued. Observing, they heard in the church ladies are to wait on the husband and not protect and guard our hearts for God. The discussion further dives into the idea of a man saving a woman from a life of loneliness and not feeling fulfilled in life. The ladies come back to finding our identity in God and not in the “perceptions” of others.

Episode 4, “Rahab, the Brave”

In this episode, the ladies discuss the fact that believers really should be influenced by the women of the Bible and how God treated them or how God provided/protected them. Churches should be using these examples as how we need to treat women in general. A couple of pastors were polled and asked why we do not speak about women in the pulpit more, specifically, why do we not use women from the Bible as the subject for sermons more often. After reading Joshua 2, the Biblical story of Rahab, the ladies determine rather than be labeled as the harlot or the prostitute, Rahab should be labeled as Rahab, the Brave. Applying the Scripture to today, the ladies further discuss how we can apply this text to our own lives and determined that being faithful in the everyday things will equip us for the moments when God calls us to bigger challenge.

The Process:

Before recording our episodes, we discuss where we would like the conversation to go.

While we want to provide the listener with an organic progression of topics, we do have certain points we want to make, so we create a broad outline and take a few notes on anything that we feel needs to be addressed. However, we still allow for the conversation to be led by our natural interaction as opposed to a rehearsed dialogue.

We record our podcast episodes via Zoom. The two main advantages of Zoom is convenience of meeting location as not all members of the podcast are in the same location.

Additionally, it allows the user to record video as well as audio. While the audio file is easier to edit after the fact, the video element provides visual content for YouTube or any social media platform. Following the completion of our discussion, we download the files for editing. Charity is our editor and uses Twisted Wave to edit and iZotope RX7 to master the file. All of this is done on Charity's home computer.

After editing and mastering, we upload our files to Podomatic.com which is our host site that feeds to many of the popular streaming platforms, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Play, etc. It is a paid subscription, but it is very convenient and easy to use. This site provides many different diagnostics to help us keep record of where our podcast is downloaded and keeps track of the number of downloads. Our schedule is every two weeks we release a new episode. We have a presence on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, and we use these platforms to advertise each episode.

Conclusion

Media representation of the single woman is very rarely portrayed as a positive example of this demographic. Unfortunately, this representation can filter into multiple areas of society where the single woman can be discounted or cast aside. This professional project sought to reveal blatant mischaracterizations or generalizations of the single woman in the media while also addressing the often unfair, though not always malicious, treatment received in many aspects of a single woman's life, mainly the church.

A podcast discussing how single women in the church are treated can provide an opportunity for an open-ended conversation. While there may not be a definitive answer or conclusion, the topic is introduced by presenting opinions, experiences, and studies to support the theory that the church needs to address the concerns of its congregants. This project was

designed to familiarize the audience with the concept that single women deserve to be portrayed, represented, and treated as comfortably and thoughtfully as those in the married or coupled community. The podcast is never meant to divide the two groups further, but it attempts to expose where there is a discrepancy in attitude toward the single women, especially in the church.

By using Biblical references, the discussion will continue past these episodes to further dissect the presence of women in the Bible. The podcast will address many different women who may not receive the attention deserved while pursuing the argument that the church should be led by the Bible and not pop culture or mainstream media in how they view and treat women, especially, single women.

This particular series is merely starting an exploration into the subject, and many different perspectives need to be added to this initial discussion. As this series was from the white, heterosexual single Christian perspective, the topic of single LGBTQIA+ and women of color should be explored. Additionally, a deeper look into the different denominations and their beliefs on female participation would provide a more thorough comparison on how women are treated based on doctrine and theology. It would also be beneficial to include different versions of single status. The ladies in the podcast have all never been married, so perspectives from those who are divorced and widowed are also worthy of further discussion.

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