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## Showtime: Pop Culture's Impact on Society's View of the LGBTQ Population

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## **Showtime: Pop Culture's Impact on Society's View of the LGBTQ Population**

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### **Abstract**

Popular culture is an influential aspect that shapes society. Popular culture's impact on society's view of the LGBTQ population was examined in the context of video media representations. Students at a Mid-Atlantic university (n = 7) were presented with representations of LGBTQ individuals in television media during two focus groups. Participants completed pre-and-post-test qualitative surveys regarding their impact and perceptions. Responses were coded to identify themes of the target populations. Misrepresentations, perpetuated stereotypes, changing perspectives, advocacy, personal connection, differing types of media representation, and lack of representation were themes identified throughout participant responses about the varying popular culture mediums.

*Keywords:* popular culture, culture, LGB, LGBTQ, impact, view, perception

### **Introduction**

We live in a society that is inundated with popular culture. Media, in some fashion, is a part of almost everyone's daily routine, and because of this, popular culture is a powerful and influential force for each individual in our society (Croteau, Hoynes, & Milan, 2012; Gross, 2001). Television is a "key source of information about the world," (Gross, 2001, p. 6). Media coverage and portrayals, regardless of quality and accuracy, are highly modeled and valued by those who partake in any form of popular culture. Unfortunately, there are several groups of individuals that "suffer unequal treatment both in and outside the media," and one of those groups is the LGBTQ community (Croteau, Hoynes, & Milan, 2012, p.212). Several studies indicated that the influence popular culture has on individuals both within and outside the LGBTQ community is striking, as LGBTQ individuals were likely to be portrayed in a negative, homophobic, or stereotypical manner (Croteau, Hoynes, & Milan, 2012; Cowan & Valentine, 2006). Portrayals of LGBTQ individuals in the media have been increasing and are becoming less stereotypical over time, but realistic portrayals are still quite rare (Croteau, Hoynes, & Milan, 2012; GLAAD, 2012).

That being said, not all of popular culture has a negative impact on society. Popular culture has been shown to help some LGBTQ individuals who are in the process of forming their sexual identity. Positive and realistic portrayals can be beneficial to individuals who seek information about sexual identity, especially to those who are coming out as LGBTQ (Bond,

Hefner, & Drogos, 2009). Overall, it is important to realize that popular culture has the power to make changes in societal beliefs about LGBTQ individuals, but this depends on the quality of portrayal of such individuals in the various forms of visual media.

This phenomenological research study sought to explore the impact of various portrayals of LGBTQ individuals, within popular culture, on self-identified LGBTQ individuals at a mid-Atlantic university. Researchers hoped to discover personal experiences and opinions surrounding popular culture and to gain information about the depiction of LGBTQ populations in various forms of media.

As a result, the researchers' purpose was to have a better understanding of how the LGBTQ community and allies of the community perceived LGBTQ portrayal in the media and how media shapes or changes one's beliefs and attitudes about this community. This research was also conducted as part of the National Organization of Human Services (NOHS) Conference presentation and may be used in future manuscript publications.

### **Literature Review**

Popular culture, or the culture of everyone in society, is defined as the cultural world around us (Wilson & Wilson, 2001). This includes our attitudes, habits, actions, what we eat and wear, our buildings, roads, and means of travel, our entertainment and sports, our politics, religion, and medical practices, and our beliefs and activities and what shapes and controls them; in other words, it is the world we live in (Wilson & Wilson, 2001). Naturally, such an overreaching influence can often be a topic of controversy. At the helm of one of those controversies is the representation of the LGBTQ population in popular culture.

According to a Williams Institute review conducted in April 2011, approximately 3.8% of American adults identified themselves being in the LGBT community; further, 1.7% identified as lesbian or gay, 1.8% bisexual, and 0.3% transgender. This corresponded to approximately nine million adult Americans, roughly the population of New Jersey, identifying as LGBT (Gates, 2011). However, percentages regarding this population are often unreliable and fluctuate according to acceptance and increased awareness. For example, the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior conducted in 2009 produced the highest estimate of adults identifying as LGB at 5.6% (Gates, 2011). Regardless of the range in percentages, this population represents a significant portion of the United States population.

Despite a growing presence and visibility, this does not mean LGBT individuals are represented properly in society. Out of 101 movies released in 2012, only 14 contained identified LGB characters and none contained transgendered characters (GLAAD, 2013). In fact, representations of transgendered individuals in the media have been years behind the curve (GLAAD, 2013). Notably, only 4% of those films from 2012 contained LGBT individuals in significant roles (GLAAD, 2013). Instead, LGBTQ individuals are likely to be portrayed in a negative, homophobic, or stereotypical manner (Croteau, Hoynes, & Milan, 2012; Cowen & Valentine, 2006).

As the culture surrounding the LGBTQ community progresses, changes in popular culture are taking place. Portrayals of LGBTQ individuals in the media have been increasing and are becoming less stereotypical. Even so, realistic portrayals are still quite rare (Croteau et al., 2012; GLAAD, 2012) and those that are present in media are often very subtle. Advertisers, afraid of alienating the heterosexual target market have had to find ways to speak to homosexual consumers that may go unnoticed, e.g., gay “window dressing” or “gay vague” images (Borgerson, Isla, Schroeder, & Thorssen, 2006).

Although popular culture has the power to elicit a negative impact on the perceptions of LGBTQ individuals, it has also been known to help individuals in the process of forming their sexual identity (Bond et al., 2009). Through continued exploration, understanding, and acceptance of the negative perceptions portrayed, popular culture can be used as a tool to fight for equality. As society continues to shift towards acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, popular culture may begin to reflect the negative and positive realities of being LGBTQ in today’s world.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

University students (4 females, 3 males; age range: 22-43 years) were recruited with emails and flyers posted throughout the campus of a Mid-Atlantic university. Participants ranged from freshman to senior level students who were exposed to a range of 10-40 hours of social media weekly. Five of the seven participants identified as European American/White while two identified as African American/Black. Participants were part of two separate focus groups. Participants in the first focus group identified as Pansexual (n = 1) and Gay (n = 3); participants in the second focus group reported their sexual orientation to be heterosexual.

### **Procedure and Materials**

This study, phenomenological in nature, was examined from the social constructivist paradigm. Researchers were looking to examine how popular culture impacts society’s views of the LGBTQ population, how accurate the depictions of LGBTQ are in the media, and in what ways do the depictions of this population impact society. Two focus groups were conducted, during which participants were presented a slideshow containing facts and statistics about LGBTQ and popular culture. Additionally, the slideshow contained video representations of various LGBTQ portrayals on current television shows. Participants were then asked to write responses to questions pertaining to the impact the video clips had on them and their perceptions of the accuracy seen in popular culture. Responses were collected at the conclusion of the presentation. In order to identify themes present within the data, the first two authors initially coded responses independently. Then, the two authors consensus coded to determine accuracy of identified themes.

A pre- and post-test self-report questionnaire was designed for the study. The pre-test consisted of eight demographic questions (e.g., age, gender identity, sexual orientation, education level), and fifteen questions focusing on the type of popular culture each participant is exposed to, and how LGBTQ populations are depicted in each of those forms of media. The post-test was comprised of five questions focused on the participants' perceived belief or accuracy of the depictions they viewed during the study, and society's depiction of the LGBTQ population and the role the media plays in shaping these perceptions. Questions included:

- Were there hidden messages?
- How accurate was the depiction?
- How do these depictions impact society?

## **Results**

Analysis centered upon identifying themes within participant responses during the focus groups. Themes that were identified included target populations, misrepresentations, perpetuating stereotypes, changing perspectives, advocacy, personal connection, different types of media representation, and the lack of representation present in popular culture.

### **Target Populations**

The university's location in a southern, more conservative state is notable given that participants may not have as much exposure to the LGBTQ population. Younger generations are becoming dependent on social media; data from pre- and post-test questionnaires showed that those between 16-25 years of age are most susceptible to accepting the representations of the LGBTQ community shown in popular culture. This group was also more likely to be impacted due to personal experiences forming a sexual identity. The increase in technological dependence may enlarge the reach and impact of popular culture on identity formation and views of the LGBTQ population.

### **Misrepresentation**

Popular culture is often misrepresenting the LGBTQ community and utilizing their character roles for shock value. LGBTQ identified individuals are often dramatized, overemphasized, and romanticized in the media. LGBTQ characters are often portrayed with stereotypical behaviors and jobs and in play roles that are joking or comical in nature. Likely seen as characters prone to being misunderstood, group generalizations lead to LGBTQ characters being portrayed as victims.

## **Perpetuating Stereotypes**

The stereotypes of the LGBTQ community are perpetuated in popular culture and have a strong influence on the perceptions of viewers. The mixture of ignorance and limited additional knowledge about this community leads to the acceptance of these stereotypes as truth. The result of such polarized opinions can often be seen in the bullying of LGBTQ youth and adults.

## **Changing Perspectives**

Though popular culture has historically led to negative perceptions of the LGBTQ community, accurate representations are limited. Individuals in popular culture who personally identify with the LGBTQ community offer appropriate empathy and portrayals regarding the difficulties in coming out, fleeting family support, and labeling. Though popular culture is slowly changing depictions of the LGBTQ community, on screen and throughout other media, changes are moving in the right direction.

## **Advocacy**

Media play a large role in society's treatment of the LGBTQ population, having the power to create empathy, awareness, and equality throughout society. As on-screen representations of LGBTQ individuals are growing and the fight for equal rights continues, influential advocates such as Ellen DeGeneres are utilizing popular culture as an avenue to promote social change.

## **Personal Connection**

LGBTQ representations in popular culture may also aid in the development of personal connections with those represented in the media. The self-disclosure of personal experiences with struggles faced by LGBTQ individuals in powerful media positions has the potential to create a strong sense of unity and understanding. Popular culture is also playing a role in normalizing feelings and reinforcing that the amount, or quality of, exposure as an LGBTQ individual or to the LGBTQ community is a personal choice.

## **Different Types of Media Representation**

The first forms of popular culture that come to mind include television, movies, and social media, but there are a variety of other media through which portrayals of LGBTQ individuals are impacted. According to participants, books may present a more accurate depiction than any other form of media. Additionally, it seems that LGBTQ individuals are

seldom represented on television in an accurate way. There is also representation in commercials or ads, but they have, in the past, had very little impact on participants' perceptions.

### **Lacking Representation**

With the extensive impact popular culture has on perceptions of LGBTQ individuals, many aspects are underrepresented in the media. Individuals who identify as transgender are hardly seen in any popular culture mediums. Representations of loving LGBT families and realistic relationships are also consistently missing in popular culture. While changes are being made to better represent this population, the reality of the struggles faced by LGBTQ individuals is lacking in representation.

### **Conclusion**

Media, in some fashion, form part of almost everyone's daily routines. Popular culture continues to be an influential force impacting perceptions of members of society. The LGBTQ community remains one group that is portrayed in a negative, homophobic, and stereotypical manner throughout media. Therefore, more research is needed to understand the impact popular culture has on society's view of the LGBTQ population. This research has only begun to collect data and scratch the surface of understanding the dynamics present. As the LGBTQ population moves to the forefront of the equal rights movement, it is imperative that the impact popular culture has on society's perceptions of LGBTQ individuals be examined. Future research can provide insight and a deeper understanding of the need for change in society.

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