

Curved TV: The Impact of Televisual Images on Gay Youth

Victor D. Evans

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This paper outlines the conclusions of the author's dissertation, which examined how the current portrayals of gays and lesbians on network and cable television affect gay youth as they come to terms with their sexual identities. Content analysis was performed on specific episodes to determine the authenticity of the gay character and the character's integration into the storyline. This data was triangulated with interviews of media professionals and gay youth.

Images of gays and lesbians in the media have practically become commonplace in the 21st century. While not welcomed by all, it is apparent that gay images are becoming increasingly accepted within the U.S. This was clearly evidenced in 2005 with the release of the critically-acclaimed film *Brokeback Mountain* (a love story between two cowboys in 1963), which was widely accepted by U.S. audiences, grossing over \$83 million (Box Office Mojo, 2006).

Television is the final frontier. Gays and lesbians started gracing the small screen more beginning in the 1990s than in any other time in television history; however, the question becomes: what type of gay and lesbian characters make up this new visibility? Television is quite pervasive in the United States; the media images associated with certain lifestyles can definitely have an impact on the viewing audience.

Just as the popular press of the 19th century was responsible for the creation of the mass reading public and thence the political public, so TV has become the place where and the means by which, a century later, most people have got to know about most other people, and about publicly important events and issues (Fiske & Hartley, 2003, p. XV).

Additionally, television theorists Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore (2001) state in their book *The Medium is the Message*,

“The media works us over completely... so pervasive are they in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected or unaltered” (p. 34).

Despite the fact that there is now a larger number of gay and lesbian characters on television, the depictions have not changed. Many of the shows on the big three networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) continue to use stereotypical characters. For example, popular shows like NBC's *Will and Grace* have stock stereotypical gay characters of the past. The 'Will' character is seemingly straight and is rarely seen dating or within a gay relationship, but mostly hanging with his gal pal Grace. Then there is 'Jack,' his over-the-top, effeminate and flamboyant best friend who is strictly used for comic relief. The typical 'sad young man' character that Dyer (1994) and Gross (2001) both discuss in their research is still alive and well on the tube and can now also be seen in female form with characters such as Carrie Weaver on NBC's *ER*. In his book *Up from Invisibility*, Gross (2001) notes that even the more positive gay character on *Dawson's Creek* (Jack McPhee) is reminiscent of the familiar 'sad young man' character, with one notable difference: “he is not alone – although his father reacts with hostility, his sister and his friends are supportive” (p. 176).

Even Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* exaggerates stereotypical gay sensibilities, much to the show's success. The portrayals noted above are by no means entirely inaccurate. There are real people in gay and lesbian communities whose apparent

characteristics suggest the stereotypes, but one cannot forget that stereotypes by definition can never fully capture the complexity of these real individuals. The dilemma arises because usually these shorthand caricatures are the only characters seen on television, representing the community as a whole, so members of the viewing public who have yet to have any meaningful connections with gays and lesbians (including gay and lesbian adolescents) receive a dangerously incomplete view of gay and lesbian communities.

“Eighty-eight percent [of children] live in homes with two or more TVs, 60 percent in homes with three or more. Of the 99 percent with a TV, 74 percent have cable or satellite service... Forty-two percent of all American households with children are constant television households [homes in which TV is on ‘most of the time’]” (Gitlin, 2001, pp.17-18). The place of media in the lives of children is particularly noteworthy, not only because children are uniquely impressionable, but also because they are continuously inundated with these images, thus helping shape their perceptions of the ‘real world’ (Gitlin, 2001).

In her book on gay visibility in America during the 1990s, Suzanna Danuta Walters (2001) discusses this discrepancy between “the images of gay life” embraced by network television and the “realities of gay identities and practices in all their messy and challenging confusion” (p.24). So with television being as ubiquitous as it is in American society and the medium in which society’s values and visions of reality are formed, reinforced and circulated, understanding why gays and lesbians are or aren’t depicted on television as well as what messages and/or beliefs are conveyed about gays within these characterizations is crucial to all viewers of the content, particularly gay and lesbian youth who often seek out these images for validation during their ‘coming out’ process (McKee, 2000) and (Kleeman,1995).

This paper particularly focuses on how gay and lesbian teens are affected by these images. The primary research question for the study is: how do the 21st century gay and lesbian images on network and cable television affect gay and lesbian youth as they come to terms with their sexual identities?

Research and Methodology

Based on the author’s doctoral dissertation, this study includes both quantitative and qualitative research. The primary research includes multiple methods of inquiry, including content analysis, interviews, and a focus group.

Content Analysis

The author conducted a content analysis examining the portrayals of gay and lesbian characters in a few of the most popular shows watched by gay youth, as outlined in a preliminary survey of just under 100 self-identified gay youth. The television programs chosen were The N’s *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, WB’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson’s Creek*, and Showtime’s *Queer as Folk*.

Degrassi: The Next Generation is a Canadian television series shown on the adolescent and teen-centered cable station The N. The show is actually a spin-off from

the original series *Degrassi Junior High*, which aired on PBS stations in the late 80s and early 90s. Like its predecessor, the show centers on a group of junior high and high school students as they deal with a variety of real-world issues, including drug use, domestic abuse, sex, pregnancy, abortion (note: The N opted not to show this episode on the cable network), and homosexuality. One of the primary characters, Marco, has recently come to terms with his sexuality, forcing him to deal with friends' and family reactions. He is also in a relationship with another "out" gay student in the high school. Episodes were purposively selected from the second and third season to analyze in the study.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a WB show (now in syndication) that features a young girl from Sunnydale (or the "Hellmouth" as it is most commonly known) who realizes she is the chosen slayer of vampires and demons who consistently infiltrate her town. She must learn to juggle her slayer responsibilities with the unavoidable tasks of being just a teenage girl; these latter responsibilities include school work, dating, college, etc. Her best friend is a witch named Willow who, in the fourth season, realizes she is a lesbian and begins dating girls. Episodes were purposively selected from the fourth season for the study.

The WB's *Dawson's Creek*, also in syndication, features a group of teenagers growing up in a small town; they deal with the same issues as in *Degrassi*, usually coming-of-age stories related to sex, love, school, and, mostly, self-identification. One of the characters, Jack McPhee, is introduced in the third season as a homosexual male who comes to terms with his sexuality; this storyline is continued until the end of the series. Episodes were purposively selected from the second and third season for the study.

Showtime's *Queer as Folk* is the first one-hour drama specifically featuring young adult gays and lesbians. The show centers on the professional and personal lives of five gay men (one a gay teenager) and two lesbians who are raising a child. Throughout the three seasons, the gay teen character has dealt with "coming out" to his parents, moving in with a much older love interest, and being the victim of a hate crime. Episodes from the first season were purposively selected for the study.

The only other show that was also frequently mentioned on the preliminary survey was NBC's *Will and Grace*; however, because all the other shows are more dramatic in nature, and *Will and Grace* is a sitcom, it was decided the difference in genres could unfairly alter the research results, so it is not included in this study.

Six episodes of each program were watched and coded, answering the following questions about the gay and/or lesbian characters:

1. How are the gay and lesbian characters portrayed in the selected programs, specifically looking at what they say and how they act? Are their characteristics stereotypical or more representative of the diversity within the gay and lesbian communities?
2. Are the gay and lesbian characters an integral part of the storyline in their shows?

3. Are the values and limits of these depictions different from other programming featuring homosexual characters?
4. Are gay and lesbian characters' romantic relationships depicted in the same way as their heterosexual counterparts?
5. Do the other cast members acknowledge the gay and lesbian character's sexuality and if so, negatively or positively?

In order to ensure reliability, coding results were verified by at least one other independent coder who followed the coder instruction guidelines created by the author.

Focus Group and Interviews

The results of the content analysis were augmented by qualitative research, namely, interviews and a focus group. A purposive sample was selected and included three distinct groups: gay and lesbian adults, gay and lesbian teens, and television and media experts, academics who teach media/film/communication studies at major U.S. universities and/or media professionals who work in the industry.

The interviews with the gay and lesbian adults were conducted in a focus group format. The four individuals, three gay men and one lesbian, were purposively selected on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, television viewing habits and availability. They were asked a set of questions that were framed in such a way to ascertain the following:

- 1) how they felt about the gay and lesbian images they saw on television as they were beginning to realize they were gay or lesbian;
- 2) how those images affected how they felt about themselves because of their sexuality, and if this affected when they decided to "come out"; and
- 3) how they feel about today's depictions of gay and lesbian people on television and if they think that today's images would have been beneficial for them to have seen when they were adolescents.

The self-identified gay and lesbian teens were purposively selected after implementing numerous advertising strategies, including the disbursement of flyers at a Seattle gay teen club, an advertisement in the *Seattle Gay News*, online postings on Craig's List and on a film casting website, and solicitation letters sent to gay youth organizations in Seattle, Dallas, and Austin, TX. The six individuals who were asked to participate in the in-depth interviews were selected based on the answers to the preliminary teen survey, as well as their gender, ethnicity, television viewing habits, and availability. They were asked questions which addressed these areas:

- 1) which television shows they watch on a regular basis and if they watch any of them specifically because they include gay and/or lesbian characters in the cast;
- 2) how they feel about the gay and/or lesbian characters in these shows and if they can identify with any of them;
- 3) how these characters affected their "coming out" process;
- 4) how these gay characters affect their perception of the entire gay and lesbian community; and
- 5) what types of gay and/or lesbian characters they would like to see on television.

The ten television and media experts were all solicited via email and selected based on their gender, area of expertise (which had to be in the areas of television, film, media, youth or gay and lesbian studies), and availability. Each was asked a set of questions which sought to explore the following areas:

- 1) the pervasiveness of television in today's U.S. society;
- 2) the role television images play during adolescent development, and if there is value in youth seeing images like themselves;
- 3) their opinions of the current gay and lesbian portrayals on television and if they feel these depictions represent the richness and diversity within the gay community, as well as how current images compare to images of gays and lesbians on television in the past;
- 4) if they feel the images aren't reflective of diverse community, why they feel television fails to be more representative; and
- 5) what type of gay and lesbian images they would like to see on television?

Results and Conclusions

Figure 4.1 outlines the number of same-sex displays of affection that occurred within each show in the study.

Figure 4.1

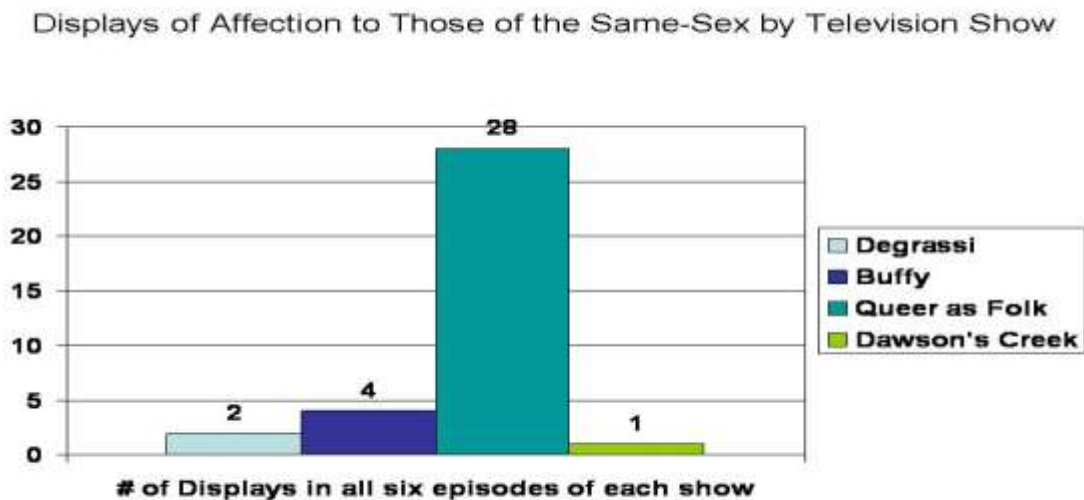


Figure 4.2 shows the percentage of the same-sex displays of affection in comparison to all the shows in the study.

Figure 4.2

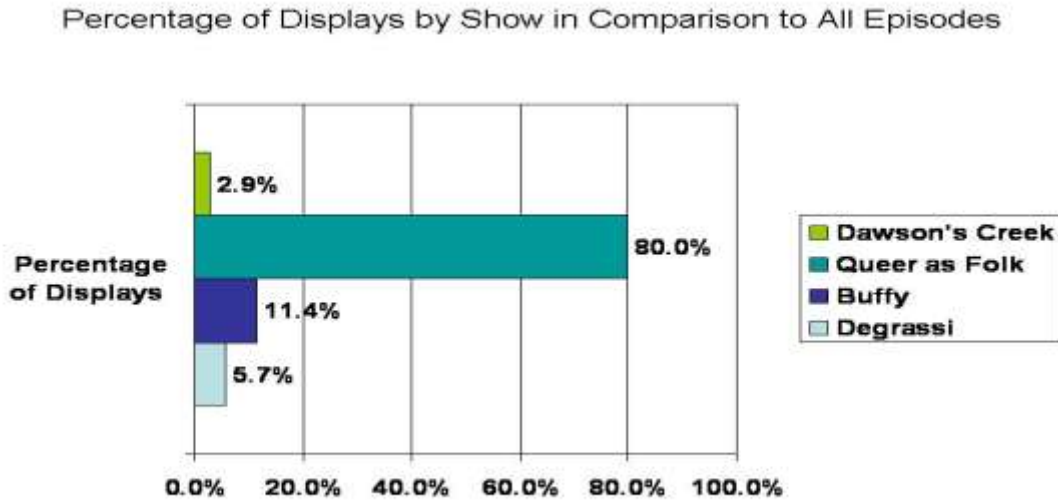


Figure 4.3 outlines the number of acknowledgements (i.e. dialogues within the program with other characters in regard to their sexuality and/or epithets that are directed at the character which address his or her sexual orientation) and whether these acknowledgements were negatively or positively responding to the gay character's sexuality. Figure 4.4 shows the comparison of these acknowledgements (positive and negative) among all the shows in the study.

Figure 4.3

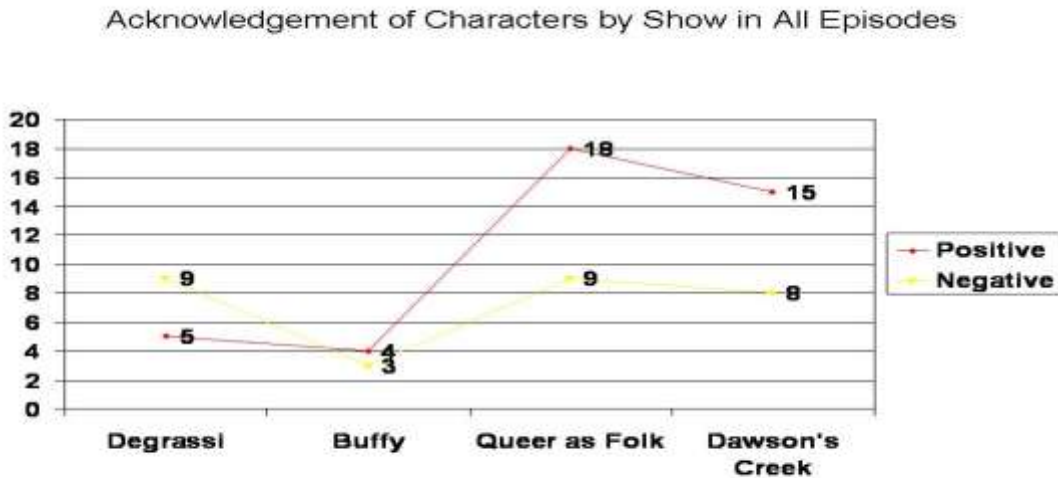
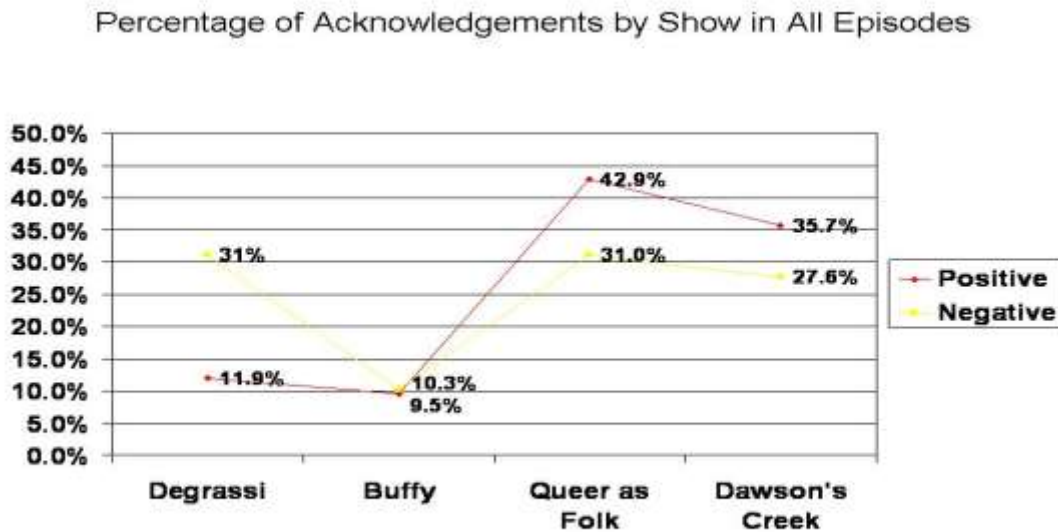


Figure 4.4



Content Analysis Conclusions

The content analysis illustrated that displays of affection between gay and/or lesbian characters are still not prevalent on network television. Of the six shows evaluated, 80 percent of the displays of affection were from the series *Queer as Folk*, which airs on Showtime - a pay cable channel. The network channels rarely showed the gay and/or lesbian characters displaying affection to their significant others (if they even had any) and, when such displays were shown, it was hand-holding or a single kiss. Whereas, on *Queer as Folk*, the characters were frequently seen kissing and engaging in many other sexual activities. These findings substantiate the media expert co-researchers' comments on how network television fails to show sexuality among gay characters due to the risk of losing profits. So it falls on the pay-cable networks to show authentic displays of affection among the gay characters in its programming.

These results also uphold the theories of both Fiske (1987) and Casey (2002) regarding the economic structure of television and how programming is often chosen based on the number of viewers they can bring to the advertising. Controversial issues are usually not something the executive producers desire within their network programming because it could decrease their potential audience. Staiger (2000) uses the term "Least Objectionable Programming," which is an industry construct of why people decide to watch which programs on television, and studies have shown that some individuals do chose the LOP or even what industry insiders consider the LOP channel. And according to Gross (1989) since sexual minorities are considered to be on the fringes of society and often "objectionable," it is best for these type of characters to be left out of the programming, and if they are included, they need to be assimilated in a way that does not bring them unwarranted attention (Croteau, 2000). Walters (2001) further elaborates on this point using Will on *Will and Grace* as an example:

He may be funny and witty and compassionate, but he also poses no sexual threat or disturbance to the heterosexual status quo. And he is joined by his campy friend Jack, his subcultural doppelganger who gets all the good lines. While Will is out and kind of proud, he certainly has none of the active sexual life of best buddy Grace, and few other gay friends aside from his object of derision, Jack (pp. 100-101).

The content analysis also confirmed that all the shows that featured gay and/or lesbian teen characters who were first disclosing their sexuality and attended high school received the most negative acknowledgements (*Degrassi*, 31 percent; *Queer as Folk*, 31 percent; and *Dawson's Creek*, 27.6 percent). *Buffy*, which featured a college-aged lesbian character who was coming out of the closet, received the least negative acknowledgements.

These results are similar to the research presented by D'Augelli and Patterson (2001), which discusses how peer interactions are extremely important in a youth's development and during adolescence; essentially, they can greatly affect the youth's self and sexual identities. This can be particularly difficult for LGBT youth, resulting in peer ridicule, ends to friendships and harassment. So when looking at the shows from this perspective, these depictions mirror the real life experiences of many LGBT youth.

Queer as Folk was also the show that featured the highest number of stereotypical gay characters. The cast included one effeminate character, Emmett, and showed the gay men frequently engaging in stereotypical activities such as promiscuous sex, heavy drug use and constant bar-hopping. This is not to say that all shows need to provide an accurate survey of all types of characters. There are many shows with straight characters who are portrayed as extremely erratic, violent, manic and delusional. However, straight characters within the 2005-06 television season make up 98 percent of all characters on the broadcast networks, so there is definitely a greater variety of representations that audiences have to choose from, while this is not true for gay and lesbian characters, so the type of LGBT characters that are represented is much more significant.

Despite the stereotypical portrayals, *Queer as Folk* was the only show in the study that showed the gay and lesbian characters interacting with the larger gay community, which Walters (2001) also notes very prominently in her text. The characters on the other shows were very isolated from the gay community and only interacted with their mainstream cast members; but on *Queer as Folk*, the characters were constantly shown at gay bars and clubs, at gay-friendly restaurants, and interacting with other gay people.

Because the cast members on the other programming were teens and young adults, they were too young to gain access to drinking establishments, which is often thought of as one of the common places for gays and lesbians to congregate. The *Queer as Folk* characters were all adults, other than the one teenager, so they were old enough to be shown in that type of environment.

Another reason for this distinction relates back to the differences between network and cable television. In order to get a viable audience, network television's traditional formula is to include gay characters among a cast of heterosexual characters and downplay their sexuality by forcing them to constantly interact with ONLY their straight counterparts, which often fails to represent reality. The pay-cable networks, having a different financial structure, do not have to worry as much about commercial advertisers, or more specifically worry about special-interest groups lobbying advertisers to not support controversial programming, as a basis for their advertising revenue. Therefore, they are able to take more risks and create more authentic gay and lesbian characters who uninhibitedly express their sexuality without worrying about alienating or offending viewers.

However, the content analysis also shows that all the gay characters in all the shows evaluated were well integrated in the series storyline and not sidelined from their mainstream counterparts, which constantly occurred in shows of the past that featured gay and lesbian characters. This was very prominent in shows (such as *Melrose Place*) in which the gay character had his own storyline and barely interacted with the major cast members except the only other minority character on the show. This change at least shows that there has been some improvement in the television landscape for gays and lesbians.

Media Analysts Interview Conclusions

Each scholar discussed how television is ubiquitous in the 21st century and plays a significant, but non-agreed upon, role in the morals, beliefs and perceptions of the viewers. This is especially true with younger viewers who have less life experience and can sometimes take the images they see on television at face value.

The analysts also spoke of the importance of people of all ages and racial/ethnic backgrounds in society being able to see characters like themselves on television to whom they can relate. In addition, they stressed how this was more critical for gay and lesbian youth because, unlike racial and ethnic minorities, they are not usually born into a family of others like them and they cannot easily distinguish gay and lesbian individuals within society. These insights corroborate Gross' (2001) work, which also cited the isolation of adolescent sexual minorities because they often have few opportunities for interactions with others like them. However, this trend is changing as more teens of this century continue to come out and support each other, especially with the help of organizations like gay-straight alliances (Savin-Williams, 2005).

Many of the scholars discussed the WB's Television Network's strategy and how they purposely sought a younger audience and because of this were able to become the first network to successfully integrate gay and lesbian characters with mainstream cast members in much of their programming. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek* and *Felicity* were a few of the shows mentioned.

All the experts think that gay and lesbians characters in the 21st century are definitely better than the extremely negative and very stereotypical images of the

previous decades; however, they all agree that the current images could still be improved upon. Many of them feel that *Queer as Folk* and *Will and Grace* are still quite stereotypical, especially when characters are very effeminate, engaging in negative behavior (i.e. promiscuous sex and drug use) or are simply used as comic relief. They all said sitcoms, given their format, were the most common offenders. These findings support Tropiano (2002) who also discusses the difficult task sitcom writers have; while they are often trying to dispel myths about homosexuals, they often use them as the source of their humor – because, above all, a sitcom must keep the audience entertained. These statements also uphold and elaborate on Medhurst & Tuck's (1996) study which discusses the prevalent use of packaged “types” in sitcom formats, specifically gay characters who are often used as the punch line.

The scholars also said that, without a doubt, cable television is able to show more diverse images of gay and lesbian people in their dramatic programming, much more so than network television; this is mostly likely attributable to the many economic and political constraints that bind broadcast networks. Due to their unique revenue structure, HBO and Showtime were able to create shows with non-traditional gay and lesbian characters, such as *The L Word* and *Six Feet Under*. They also feel the rise of reality television has increased the visibility of gay and lesbian people and, in some cases, have even provided more positive and well-rounded images, most notably MTV's *Real World*, *The Amazing Race*, and *Survivor*.

They all believe that economics plays a large part in the type of gay and lesbian images available on television. They said that, while there are many socially and politically conscious people in Hollywood who want nothing more than to create interesting and thought-provoking gay and lesbian characters, network television is a commercial entity in the U.S. Because of this, networks must attract the largest possible audience in order to attract advertisers and improve upon profits. By using gay characters in their programming, they are risking the resultant backlash that would jeopardize revenue streams – so they don't do it.

For example, the show *Will and Grace* has numerous gay and lesbian writers who work for the show, but, given the constraints of the industry as well as the constraints of the genre (the sitcom format), they are charged with the impossible task of trying to create authentic, psychologically well-rounded characters, while still trying to get laughs and not offend the majority of viewers.

According to GLAAD's recent study, there has been a major drop in gay and lesbian characters on network television during the 2005-2006 fall television season. Many of the scholars believe whole-heartedly that the decrease is a direct result of the current political climate in the USA, which was created by a conservative presidential administration as well as the very recent tightening of FCC regulations due to the 2005 Janet Jackson Super Bowl 3-second breast exposure incident.

A perfect example of this is the recent show *Book of Daniel*, starring Aidan Quinn, which aired as a mid-season replacement on NBC during the 2005-2006 Fall

television season. The show was considered controversial for many reasons. First, the show centered on an Episcopal priest who was addicted to pain killers and often talked to Jesus, played by another actor. Second, the priest had a gay, young-adult son whom he wholeheartedly accepted, as well as a married sister-in-law who had an affair with a woman and declared she was a lesbian. She was also supported by Quinn's character and the rest of his family. Not to mention, the Bishop of the church, played by Ellen Burstyn, was having an affair with a married Cardinal, the father of Quinn's character.

Many religious-right and other conservative groups were upset by what they considered blasphemous depictions of religious officials as well as the supportive homosexual content within the show, so they immediately began a writing campaign to the network as well as the advertisers, asking them to withdraw their funding of the program. The campaign succeeded. Advertisers began to pull out of the show and NBC was forced to cancel it, after airing only three episodes. However, cable networks have expressed an interest in picking up the show, which again reiterates the difference in economic structure between network and cable television and why cable television is better equipped to air shows featuring controversial content.

The experts also all discussed the need for more LGBT programming because they all believed the richness and diversity of the community was currently stifled. They said there was still only a sprinkling of LGBT characters on the entire television landscape, and there was no way these images can speak to the entire gay and lesbian community. They thought the only way to really show the true diversity in the community was for more LGBT programming to be created.

Gay and Lesbian Youth Interview Conclusions

Ninety percent of the teens interviewed agreed that, as they were coming to terms with their identity, they were specifically watching television looking for gay and lesbian characters as acknowledgement of who they were, which completely upholds Gross' (2001) assumption of how gay teens are not born into families like them, so they look as much as they can, wherever they can, to see others like them. This also directly contributes to the work of both Williams (1975) and Meyer (2003) who, in their studies, outlined the importance of minority groups using media to assist them in becoming functioning members of society as well as looking for others who share their common experiences, which is especially crucial during adolescence.

They stated that the shows they watched most with gay and lesbian characters were *Queer as Folk* and *Will and Grace*. Many of the teens watch *Will and Grace* because they thought it was funny, but feel that Jack's character is overly exaggerated and used as comic relief.

They also have mixed feelings about *Queer as Folk*. They like that the show features lead gay and lesbian characters who are active in the gay community, but they also thought it was too sexually explicit and very unrealistic. One teen even stated that it encouraged him to have sex more because that is what he saw the characters on the show

doing. Yet most teens continued to watch the show because they said it was one of the few shows on television that featured characters like them.

The youth also stated that they worried about the perceptions of their family and friends who often take the stereotypical images found within *Will and Grace* and *Queer as Folk* at face value and assume they represent the entire gay and lesbian community.

These conclusions illustrate the power of these images and the effect it can have on gay and lesbian youth as well as the rest of society, which directly contributes to the theories of media influence proposed by McLuhan and Fiore (2001), and it also reiterates the importance of having more LGBT content on television. This would give gay and lesbian youth the option to watch gay programming for self-identification, without always having to see stereotypical or negative images that can ultimately influence them to partake in harmful or psychologically destructive behaviors, such as promiscuity and illegal drug use. Additional LGBT content on television would also allow all viewers to truly see the diversity of the gay community instead of letting their perceptions of gays and lesbians be influenced by the more popular shorthand negative depictions currently found on television.

All the teens had nothing but positive things to say about WB's *Buffy* and the lesbian character "Willow" who was featured on that show. They thought she was a very authentic gay image and they all identified with her; some were even empowered to come out because of her portrayal. These findings uphold Tropiano's (2002) praise of the character as well.

Buffy creator Joss Whedon has ushered the representation of gay characters on television into the next millennium with the "coming out" of Willow. Both Willow and Tara are prime examples of how gay and lesbian characters, teens as well as adults, can be fully integrated into a series without their homosexuality ever being an issue (p.184).

They all wanted to see more characters like "Willow" on television. They want to see more realistic and diverse portrayals of gays and lesbians on television, including gay super heroes and regular people doing regular everyday things who just happen to be gay.

One major revelation of the gay and lesbian teen interviews is that though many of them admitted to watching programming that was targeted specifically to the teen audience, the majority stated they watch those programs much less than gay and lesbian programming targeted toward adults such as *The L Word*, *Queer as Folk*, *Six Feet Under* and *Will and Grace*. This supports Mary Kearney's theory that teens are just now beginning to watch teen programming and that many of them prefer to watch programming that features adults because it allows them to think of themselves in the future and the type of adult they will become, which correlates exactly with the adolescent development process outlined by D'Augelli and Patterson (2001).

Gay and Lesbian Adult Focus Group Conclusions

The adults discussed the negative images of gay and lesbians they remember seeing when they were teenagers, using specific examples such as *Soap* and other shows that featured gay characters only as comic relief.

They all agreed that today's portrayals are much better than the images of the past, but they are far from perfect. The adults had the same mixed feelings as the teens had about *Queer as Folk* and *Will and Grace*. They said they specifically could not relate to the negative stereotypical behavior seen in *Queer as Folk*, including having a lot of sex, clubbing all the time and doing drugs. However, in terms of gay and lesbian visibility, they felt that 21st century television has more images of gays and lesbians to choose from than what they had as teenagers in the '70s and '80s. Yet they are still not positive representations.

They unanimously said that their coming out process would have been much more positive if the images of the 21st century had existed when they were coming to terms with their identities. They said that during their adolescence they definitely did not have the acknowledgement that gay people existed and could have normal lives, and that if they could have seen such depictions, the experience would have positively influenced their understanding of gay and lesbian people, much like McKee (2001) found in his research. Like both the media analysts and the teens, the adults discussed the need for more LGBT programming, specifically shows that are more racially diverse and really show the range of people within the LGBT community.

The fact that these individuals unanimously stated that because of the lack of positive gay and lesbian images during their teenage years, they did not feel comfortable coming out during their adolescence, and their agreement that seeing more positive images would have helped them to feel much more comfortable with themselves and the gay community reiterates the need for attention to be paid to the power of these images on television. Their words affirm the importance the images and characterizations of authentic, well-rounded queer characters that will replace the stereotypical images that have been so common in the past.

Recommendations for Future Study

Since this study only focused only on gay and lesbian images on network and cable television, a future study analyzing the depictions of bisexuals, transsexuals, omnisexuals, pansexuals, etc., on network and cable television would be an addition to the field and complement this research. Given the fact that these sexual minorities are even more invisible in many ways within the media than gays and lesbians, it would be quite beneficial to see how the few images this group has affect their self-identities.

A reception analysis study investigating how LGBT images affect heterosexual viewers and their perceptions and views on the gay and lesbian community would also be quite useful. It would be very enlightening to see how the increase in gay and lesbian images is affecting heterosexual audiences, and to study whether this increase fosters

more positive or more negative perceptions of the gay and lesbian community in the straight mainstream.

A researcher who had the necessary access could conduct research in Hollywood to ascertain how the writers and producers negotiate the creation of gay characters on network and cable television. Such a study should explore how much control the networks have on what these characters can and cannot do, as well as what the writers and producers must do to work within tight boundaries and attempt to create authentic, well-rounded gay and lesbian characters. The researcher could also take a few shows that have been successful in this area, such as *Buffy*, *Six Feet Under* and *My So-Called Life*, and conduct an in-depth study on each of them, determining which factors were in place to create more authentic LGBT characterizations.

Another possible addition to the field would be an in-depth look at how gay and lesbian characters of color are portrayed on network and cable television. Historically, most depictions of gays and lesbians, particularly of gay men, are often young adult middle class whites, while sexual minorities of color are often invisible. Walters (2001) notes that recurring or continuing gay characters are rarely seen on television, with the only exceptions of note being the African-American gay male character (Carter) on *Spin City* and the Hispanic gay male character (Javier) on *Felicity*. However, in the past few years, more gay and lesbian characters of color have appeared in shows such as the very short-lived *Emily's Reasons Why Not*, *Six Feet Under* and *The L Word*. Are television creators actually growing more aware and concerned about diversity across racial and sexual orientation lines? Or is it just their method of trying to capitalize on multi-audiences by creating characters of dual minority status to fill quotas and appease the watchdog groups? The answers to these questions as well as how these depictions are received by gays and lesbians of color would be informative.

Last, with the rise of specialty channels, particularly gay and lesbian channels such as Logo, HereTV and QTV, a study of how this new trend will affect the future inclusion of gay and lesbian images on the broadcast networks would be a contribution to the field as well. This would also need to be conducted by a researcher who can gain access to these executives to ascertain their views on their role in diversity, and if they feel committed to creating a new landscape of specialty television and cable channels for numerous social groups – groups that have been left out of programming -- to change the face of network and cable television as we know it today.

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