An Analysis on the Influence of Fictional Gay Television Characters on the GLBT Community

Annie Kanter

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Professor Pallavi Kumar
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ABSTRACT

How much does entertainment television influence audiences from various communities or demographics? The visibility of the GLBT community has particularly progressed in recent decades and the media has been an essential tool when measuring the GLBT communities' social status. This study investigates whether current mainstream fictional television accurately depicts and represents the GLBT community, and if gay and lesbian individuals are impacted by these television portrayals. Through in-depth interviews with gay and lesbian individuals, the research findings revealed GLBT television depictions are not completely accurate and have varying effects on GLBT audiences. However, this evidence is significant to the entertainment industry when creating fair GLBT character portrayals that could be positively receptive by the GLBT community.

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As Suzanna Danuta Walters (2001) states, "TV has become our national cultural meeting place, a site of profound social meaning and effect" (p. 27). Most people spend a majority of their leisure time watching television, (Raley & Lucas, 2006) as it was recently reported that Americans spend 147 hours a month watching TV (Kang, 2012). Television audiences are often exposed to many of the societal and cultural issues and topics that are currently represented throughout our vastly, fragmented media. It has also been noted that compared to movies, television is evolving more quickly and is often seen as a more accurate depiction of real life (Gilbert, 2011). However, the study of GLBT issues on television is seen as complex and many scholars and television critics disagree over whether television is particularly reflective of the cultural realities of its represented audience (Walters, 2001).

Since the start of television programming, the appearances of gay and lesbian characters in entertainment or popular culture have both been limited; if they did exist, they were either exaggeratingly stereotypical, or associated with criminality or deviance. All the way through the 1980s, gay characters were seen on television as cameo roles with particular "problems" who hold almost non-existent lives, absent of desire or relationships. Into the 1990s, gay and lesbian characters started to be seen as reoccurring characters in comedies and dramas. But these shows often experienced many negative feedback and boycotts from conservative groups, and even disapproval or punishment from their sponsors, claiming they are just looking out for the American—or primarily heterosexual—public. This usually resulted in the prime-time network pulling the show or the character, or preceding the episode with a "viewer discretion advised" warning (Dow, 2001).

By 2000, gay and lesbian characters in American media had become more visible and mainstream. The growing numbers of gay and lesbian characters in the media are demonstrating a possible growing acceptance of the community by mainstream America (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). As journalist Benjamin Svetkey mentioned in his 2000 article in Entertainment Weekly, "gay characters are so common on television, so unexotic, that their sexual orientation has become all but invisible to most viewers. It is, in a sense, the ultimate sign of acceptance..." (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, p. 89). Gray (2009) has even called media's visibility and representations of homosexuals as a "remedy to LGBTQ cultural marginalization" and a reason to rejoice in its livelihood and progress of the community (p. 1163). Many saw this growing trend as an increasing acceptance and appreciation for the GLBT community among mainstream America. Even those opposing the GLBT movement recognized this trend and blamed the entertainment industry for developing a particular agenda aimed at altering attitudes about the gay community (Rice, 1997). Therefore, this increasing visibility has made it evident that homosexuality is normalizing not only in television, but also in society.

Many researchers and television critics have applauded our current television media for their strides in gay and lesbian visibility and depiction, but is it still ideal? The Gay, Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is a leading organization that lobbies the media and entertainment industries to depict accurate images and represent the diversity of the GLBT American community. Each year, GLAAD compiles a quantitative report, "Where Are We In TV?" to discuss the current trends of GLBT characters and issues on the current television season. In the 2011-2012 season, 2.9 percent of all characters in scripted television were gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLAAD, 2012). Whereas for the 2010-2011 the number of

GLBT characters on scripted television was 3.9%, a slight increase from the year before (GLAAD, 2011). Even though this is a slight decrease in characters from the previous season, it is still more than prior years. These low percentages only slightly contrasts the actual rates of GLBT Americans. The Human Rights Campaign reported there to be roughly 9 million open GLBT Americans, or 4 percent of the total population (HRC, 2012). GLAAD's (2012) research highlighted how lead characters on prime-time television shows do not represent the sexuality—and even racial and ethnic—make-up of the general public. But, GLAAD (2012) both applauds and criticizes television's growing efforts in creating diversity in people and situations. Gay men (67 percent) are seen as more prevalent characters than lesbian women (33 percent), but only one bisexual and no transgender characters exist on prime-time television. However, cable television has depicted greater diversity that is reflective of the general public, with more people of color and sexualities than prime-time television (GLAAD, 2012).

Yet as GLAAD's report alluded, the number of gay and lesbian characters depicted on television is not as reflective of the American population and these depictions may still possess traditional cultural stereotypes of homosexuals (Raley & Lucas, 2006). If GLBT people make up 4 percent of the U.S population, the number of GLBT fictional characters on modern, mainstream television is close, but does not mirror the amount of individuals who identity within the GLBT community. This is true in the amount of diversity within the characters as well, yet this element has dramatically improved over the years. Even though these categorized images may not be as evident as previous decades and even in the 1990s—a climax for GLBT visibility on mainstream television—they still exist. These stereotypes are more subtle or unrecognizable,

but their undertones deliver a particular message to its audience about the represented GLBT community.

This analysis will examine the role the depiction of gay and lesbian characters on television play upon the self-identification of gay and lesbian individuals. The secondary research and in-depth interviews will discover if there is a direct correlation between television narratives and the attitudes and lifestyles of its American audiences, particularly gay audiences, and how they are influenced by what they see on TV. The key research questions that will be addressed are:

R1: How does the GLBT community perceive gay and lesbian characters on TV?

R2: What specific factors of gay television characters influence a gay or lesbian individual, if any?

The conceptual significance of this capstone is to understand the level of impact fictional gay television characters have upon its audiences, particularly those viewers who share a commonality. Extensive research has been conducted regarding groundbreaking television shows for GLBT visibility like Will and Grace and Ellen during the 1990s and into the 2000s. However, little research exists in the past couple years regarding more recent television shows and their depictions, especially as the general attitudes towards gay rights are gradually shifting towards more accepting. American television has witnessed a significant increase in GLBT characters and issues, but the lack of research hinders the recognition of the accurate representations and the understanding of the impact of current character portrayals. In order

to develop positive attitudes, further advocacy for equal rights, and eliminate the social and legal marginalization of the GLBT community, the media should recognize and understand whether their current GLBT character and issue portrayals mirror social realities. In addition, knowledge regarding if and how audiences are affected by these media images could influence the visibility of positive role models, and diverse sexual and personal experiences, and play a major role in sexuality education. This information would create and improve accurate character depictions and further impact young GLBT individual's self-perceptions and acceptance of the community. The 18-25 year-old demographic chosen for this study will be significant because this period, described as emerging adulthood. During this time, one may experience the most instability or confusion about their identity, independence over their life decisions, and feelings of invincibility over their lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media's Influence

In his research, Gross (2001) discusses the power the mass media has on its audience and culture. Viewers obtain the knowledge about their culture through the media, because it takes audiences to places they have never been, with characters they have never met, or into situations they have never encountered (Gross, 2001). American culture is told through stories, images, words, music, and dance, and in modern-day society, the media corporations are the leaders who produce and develop this culture. As entertainment is a major obsession for American audiences, the media and its advertisers take advantage of this cultural addiction. Thus, to understand the effects the media and television have upon its audience, the theories of cultivation, gender schema, social cognitive theory need to be evaluated.

Television is now a dominant provider for audiences to both receive information and enjoy entertainment. Many people, especially Americans spend most of their time watching television. It is accessible, does not require education or skill, and can easily show a story. Also, television has been key in defining, developing, sharing and cultivating a collective set of values and perceptions (Gross, 2001). With this information, Gross (2001) acknowledges "those who watch more television are more likely...to project television's versions of reality on to their conceptions about the world, its people, and how they function" (p.6). This concept is otherwise known as the theory of cultivation, and it is an instrumental model when studying the effects of media on its audiences. This theory has found that especially young and impressionable audiences who watch a lot of television believe men and women follow specific stereotypical behaviors (Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, 2009). The dominant group and their

ideology place their own conceptions about social realities into the media, particularly into television, and onto the general public, which has a negative impact on the marginalized, minority groups (Bailey, 2006).

Holz Ivory, Gibson and Ivory (2009) examine the theory of gender schema, especially with its role in television, and propose that children process and organize information about masculinity and femininity based upon societal definitions. These definitions are learned through a set of associations, and subjects apply these definitions when recognizing and understanding information (Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, 2009). Therefore, through the media, people tend to conceive stereotypes on men or women, by labeling them to be either masculine or feminine, based upon their characteristics or attributes. This is how perceptions and attitudes are developed regarding gender.

This theory supports Madon's research on the common perceptions of gay men, who suggests the characters and behaviors stereotypically associated with homosexuals challenges defined male gender roles and reflects female qualities (Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, 2009). This concludes why people are most likely to create gendered stereotypes if they lack the knowledge of the particular group (Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, 2009). Therefore, this notion is reflective on the common generalizations American audiences place upon the gay community, by portraying feminine personalities, behaviors or lifestyles.

Albert Bandura (1977) asserts his social cognitive theory by emphasizing how individuals learn behaviors by vicariously observing others (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Standard gendered behaviors are mediated through television, which demonstrates "their gender identity, knowledge about sex roles, and norms for gendered behavior by observing sex-role models"

(Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, 2009, p. 177). According to Fisher, Hill, Gruber, & Gruber (2007), television develops scenarios in which the audience can vicariously experience, even when these experiences are limited in the audience's real life. Therefore, television has the ability to impact the audiences' beliefs, attitudes and behaviors especially when it comes to new sexual situations (Fisher, Hill, Gruber, & Gruber, 2007). Also, entertainment takes advantage of the social cognitive theory by creating role model characters in their narratives (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007).

Brief History of Homosexuals in Television

Society has always had a general fear or disdain for homosexuality. That is why the media tended to support the already common perceptions, instead of challenging them (Montgomery, 1981). Up until the 1970s, homosexuality did not openly and positively exist in the media. Any allusion to homosexuality in the 1940s to the 1960s, was in a comedic form of exaggerated feminine men or murderous villains (Netzley, 2010). If it was discussed, homosexual individuals were seen as perverse, unfortunate or promiscuous (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). It was not until the 1970s that gay characters began appearing in television shows like All in the Family or That Certain Summer. This gradual increase of visibility was a result of the growing GLBT advocacy and politicization (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). However, these characters were only guest or cameo appearances, and usually involved the main characters journey from disapproving to accepting this "problem" (Dow, 2001, p. 129) of their sexuality (Netzley, 2010). Television never portrayed these characters in their communities or in any romantic relationships (Dow, 2001).

Yet, as the visibility of homosexuals, and even women and minorities started to shift, so did the shift in societal ideology, which was now driven by the younger and "prime demographic" (Gross, 2001, p. 5) audiences. Also, with the spread of the AIDS epidemic, starting in the 1980s and into the 1990s, homosexuals were portrayed in more substantial, reoccurring roles (Netzley, 2010). However, if they were not seen as asexual, undesirable, or sympathetic, the result of the AIDS epidemic prevalent within the gay community often implicated the controversial behaviors of homosexuals on television (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). After groundbreaking series Will and Grace and Ellen in the late 1990s, gay and lesbian characters started to appear more and more in prime-time television with supporting or lead roles. The number of gay, lesbian and bisexual characters seen on television programming in 1997-1998 television series increased by 23 percent (Rice, 1997). These appearances on prime-time network television were slower than cable shows, because networks were trying to appeal to the mass public, a mix of religious conservatives and progressives (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). Yet, gay and lesbian characters always acted in tasteful manners with limited sexual interaction, or else it would be labeled as 'viewer discretion' (Dow, 2001). But even into the early 2000s, media with gay themes or characters was still seen as minimal (Gross, 2001).

Depictions of Homosexual Characters

The media exists for the audience and is funded by advertisers, who aim to appeal to audiences. Therefore, those media corporations and businesses decide how reality is portrayed and how social groups are depicted. Prime-time networks want to gain the largest audience, so throughout modern-day history the media has been relatively conservative to match common traditional ideology (Montgomery, 1981). And if a situation, issue or group is not visible in the

media, their power and even existence is undermined. That is why these representations in the media—which relies heavily on advertisers, who in return, relies heavily on the appeal of the audience—must attract the largest audience by being generic and safe. They must rely on tradition or what has been successful in the past (Gross, 2001). So if radical, progressive or previously invisible social groups or issues are visible in the media, they must be depicted to mirror the values, ideologies and interests of the "powerful people who define the public agenda," (Gross, 2001, p. 4) and their largest audience. These 'powerful people' usually include white, middle-aged, middle-class, and heterosexual men, especially leading up to the late 1990s. That is why gay and lesbian depictions were always seen through a traditional heterosexual perspective (Fejes & Petrich, 1993).

In 1972, theorist Clark developed the four stages of media representation of minority groups, which begins with non-representation. This is when the minority group is excluded from any media visibility. When these individuals do become visible in the ridicule stage, it is usually in a form of mockery or humor. The next stage is considered regulation, when the group is narrowly depicted in a socially acceptable manner. The final stage, respect, is when the group is normally portrayed in their daily life, with both positive and negative undertones (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Based upon these stages, it seems as if current television has past the non-representation stage and aims to overcome the ridicule stage. Yet depending upon the show's script, plot, characters and issues presented in the show, current shows seem to vary between the regulation and respect stages.

The depiction of homosexuals is especially different than other gender, racial or ethnic groups because homosexuals are self-identifiable, and usually discover their sexualities after or

during adolescence. Homosexuals have always been viewed as a controversial threat to society, so their media appearances have often been limited (Gross, 2001). However, according to Walters (2001), these depictions also differ because the GLBT community has known to be more easily assimilated into mainstream society. Both homosexual and heterosexual audiences can equally enjoy a show featuring a homosexual narrative, whereas particular series targeted towards different racial and ethnic groups are usually only appreciated by the group represented (Walters, 2001).

In addition, the media provides context for how homosexuality is defined in popular culture. As theorist Bonnie Dow (2001) claims, the number of gay and lesbian characters on television may give insight into the social progress of our culture. But how these groups are represented in these cultural mediums and how they fit into our primarily heterosexual society should really be an indication of the GLBT communities' social and political status (Battle & Morrow, 2002). Therefore, these fictional portrayals have given the GLBT community a reason to celebrate its progress.

Treatment

As supported by Clark in his second stage of media representation, gay and lesbian characters are often portrayed as ridiculing their own stereotypes of the homosexual community. In comedies, these characters often provide the comic relief by placing themselves in the brunt of the jokes and mocking their own qualities or behaviors often associated with being homosexual. Many critics acknowledge the coming-out story of the lead character of Ellen in the 1997 sitcom, Ellen, to pave the way in representing open and positive same-sex

relations and characters with little opposition on television, which then influenced the narratives of Will and Grace and Dawson's Creek (Dow, 2001). However, even though these seemingly progressive shows were the cornerstones to issues of homosexuality in entertainment, many factors still mirror earlier homosexual depictions in the media: Ellen's confession comes to be a "problem" to overcome by her friends and family (Stark, Newman, Driscoll, Savel, 1997), and there is no evidence of relations with other lesbians or a community with other homosexuals. In addition, to ease this "problem" into the legal sphere, the show seems to weaken the political status of the GLBT community by placing it in a comedic context. When the issues move from personal to political, for example, the issue of discrimination turns into a joke. The issue of discrimination and oppression among gay and lesbians in America is not fully addressed, and gay and lesbian activism is then undermined (Dow, 2001).

Mass media seems to follow the gender standards set up by our society, which include our "normal" perceptions on the traits and behaviors of men and women. In 2001, Gross purports that if gay and lesbians are portrayed in the media, it is in a narrow, stereotypical manner. Since most television programs are presented by a heterosexual perception to a usually predominant heterosexual audience, critics and academics claim gay and lesbians are often shown in a gendered manner. For example, if gay men are not particularly athletic or masculine, they possess the desire to be a woman or hold careers that would stereotypically be held by either gay men or women, like Marc from Ugly Betty who works at a high-fashion magazine (Gaitan, Horta, 2006). Lesbians are even seen to model men by appearance and behavior or to be the very opposite: sexually feminine (Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, 2009). The character of Snoop on The Wire best resembles these characteristics, with her masculine

appearance, voice, behaviors and style (Simon, 2002), as opposed to the beautiful and feminine Emily on Pretty Little Liars (King, 2010).

According to Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, homosexual couples are also often portrayed as gendered, which means one partner is usually more masculine and the other more feminine (2009). The reason for this could be because of the relatively gendered roles of heterosexual characters and couples on television. Heterosexual male characters can be portrayed as more dominant characters, who can easily be more independent, high-powered and successful compared to female characters. However, as more homosexual couples are being seen on current mainstream television, these gendered roles are not always as defined. Callie and Arizona on Grey's Anatomy are both feminine women who seem to act as the equal breadwinners for their family (McKee, 2011). This subject has even become an issue in a Modern Family episode, as Cam and Mitchell's fathers both argue over which character is more feminine and womanly, or more "the wife," until Cam and Mitchell made it clear that the traditional roles do not exist in their relationship (O'Shannon, Corrigan, Walsh, 2012).

In addition, heterosexual characters are often viewed as questionably homosexual if they fall too far from the gendered boundaries (Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, 2009). Homosexuality on television is often associated with edgier behaviors, attitudes or even interests. If any character, even heterosexual, is seen interested in a particular activity, their sexuality can be questioned. In the popular television show Glee, popularity and typical high school activities are associated with heterosexuality (Murphy, Falchuk, Brennan, 2009). The conceivably alternative activities like the glee club is associated with homosexuality, in a sense that even the sexuality of the heterosexual characters in the club are questioned (Meyer, 2010).

In 1998, Will and Grace became the first American television show to portray a gay male as the lead role. Hollywood has always paralleled male homosexuality with a lack of masculinity in an industry that places heavy emphasis on masculinity. But the creators of Will and Grace felt the only way the American public would accept the two gay characters, Will and Jack, was if they were depicted in comfortable conventions of associating homosexuality with a lack of masculinity. Will is depicted as different than the straight men because of his non-masculine qualities of not being "man enough" (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002), and Jack is seen as the typical flamboyant and feminine gay man. But this perpetuates the stereotype of gay men's inability to be masculine. The characters of Ellen, Will and Jack are likeable, white, and middle-to-upper class, but this typical portrayal of homosexuals by the heterosexual public, is a way of isolating the rest of the GLBT community (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). But still, Will and Grace, along with Ellen are seen as the turning points of GLBT depiction in modern television, and as examined by GLAAD's 2011 TV report, recent series do depict more of a diversity of gay and lesbian characters.

These are more subtle occurrences than shows in previous decades, but they can further perpetuate the stereotypes of gay and lesbian individuals that can possibly turn into homophobic comedy (Raley & Lucas, 2006). There are some television series with gay characters depicted in a positive, ordinary manner, but these ridiculed portrayals do still exist. A 2007 content analysis on the prime-time television season found most homosexual content was seen in a humorous manner that often portrayed negative or stereotypical depictions (Fisher, Hill, Gruber & Gruber, 2007). Shugart (2003) supports this notion by agreeing homosexuality is seen as a little more comfortable and safe in comedies because of its ability to ridicule.

In addition, gay and lesbian television characters can be treated as their sexuality being the central factor that defines their character (Netzley, 2010). Netzley's (2010) content analysis found this more common with network shows rather than cable shows. Cable show characters are often seen in their daily life, experiencing situations similar to many heterosexual people. Those stories and situations where characters were often defined by their sexuality were more prevalent in prime-time network television (Netzley, 2010). At the beginning episodes of Glee, Kurt's sexuality is central to his character and all significant stories relating to his character are in regards to his homosexuality (Murphy, Falchuk, Brennan, 2009). But, this does still occur on cable television shows, like The Secret Life of the American Teenager, as almost every scene with Griffin highlights his sexuality, so much so, that any other personality characteristic is unknown (Hampton, 2009).

Furthermore, in many television shows, narratives consist of a heterosexual understanding how a homosexual character influences their own feelings and identity. This may seem as a way for heterosexuals to accept the homosexual lifestyle, but instead it further marginalizes the GLBT community. Audiences will start to recognize and understand homosexuals in a heterosexist viewpoint (Shugart, 2003). On teen show, Degrassi, as Marco comes out to his friends, the other heterosexual characters must slowly start to come to terms with his sexuality. Storylines emphasize how this revelation affects Marco's friends, particularly Spinner, as he treats Marco differently because of it (Moore, Schuyler, 2002).

Relationships with Heterosexuals

In many current television shows, gay men in particular have served as a foil to separate from the heterosexual mainstream, with intentions of being useful to heterosexuals and validating of their sexual identity, until their purpose is fulfilled. Once this purpose is achieved, the homosexual character does not seem to have a true purpose anymore (Meyer, 2010). This purpose can be as simple as stabilizing the heterosexual identities within the narrative or gaining access to the female characters. The relationship between the gay male and straight female has now been enjoyed throughout popular culture (Shugart, 2003), and this particular relationship model has been seen with Carrie and Stanford in Sex and the City, Marc and Amanda in Ugly Betty, and Will and Grace on Will and Grace. Shugart (2003) explains how these gay characters often have an ambiguous sexuality because their loyalty lies in their relationship with the heterosexual woman, which is full of romantic nuances. But there still exists some paternal undertones, as the heterosexual woman can be depicted as dependent on the homosexual male. But, Meyer (2010) does assure that this representation has been changing to more stable characters. Gay and lesbian characters have been adopting behaviors and values that used to only be seen with heterosexual characters: a dedication to monogamy, and desire and ability to have a family.

As previously discussed, Ellen's sexuality in Ellen was almost viewed as a problem that she along with her friends and family must overcome. Her public self-discovery is viewed as an individual and relational anxiety that affects the heterosexuals around her (Shugart, 2003). According to Walters (2001), the homosexual narrative featured in many shows reveals the evolutions of the straight character's understanding and acceptance of homosexuality. These

scenarios deem the heterosexual character as central or instrumental to the homosexual narrative (Walters, 2001). But her coming-out episode does convey an overarching theme that "being gay is okay" (Dow, 2001, p. 134).

Sexuality

For many years, gay television characters were not seen displaying their sexuality or involved in romantic relationships. Characters were rarely seen proudly announcing their sexuality and their romantic behavior with a partner was usually passive and lacking passion. This strongly contradicts common behaviors seen among heterosexual television characters, even those in unmarried relationships (Raley & Lucas, 2006). These homosexual characters can be labeled as asexual or possessing an inability to be in romantic or committed relationships. A study conducted by Raley and Lucas (2006) on the 2001 television season found there was no difference in the number of displays of affection seen between gay and lesbians compared to heterosexual couples, but the degree of affection was different. This could show how heterosexual characters are depicted as more expressive with their sexuality (Raley & Lucas, 2006). On the other hand, a 2007 content analysis on prime-time television shows determined that the amount of time spent discussing or showing homosexual situations on television were relatively small, compared to the heterosexual discussion and sexual behavior (Fisher, Hill, Gruber & Gruber, 2007).

According to Fisher, Hill, Gruber and Gruber, (2007) prior research of gay characters in television have identified them in an asexual manner: Will and Grace and Ellen are known to show homosexual characters in typical stereotypes interested in same-sex individuals, but do

not show them in sexual situations like their heterosexual counterparts. The gay and lesbian characters of other television shows are often seen without a sexual or romantic partner (Netzley, 2010). In more recent years, homosexual sexual behavior has been more visible on television. But it seems female same-sex sexual behavior is more common than male, possibly because heterosexual men are more likely to feel threatened by gay men than lesbian women (Netzley, 2010). New research by Netzley (2010) challenges previous rates of homosexual behavior on television, when it discovered homosexual characters of the 2005-2006 television season were more likely to be seen in sexual situations compared to heterosexual characters. The reasons behind this difference could demonstrate that when a gay or lesbian character does exist on television, instead of being seen as an ordinary character, the focus is on their sexual orientation, whereas straight characters do not always explicitly discuss their sexuality (Netzley, 2010).

When homosexual characters are open with their sexuality, it seems like gay males are more confident about their identities, whereas lesbians are sometimes unsure (Meyer, 2010). A popular example of this situation is in the commonly used example, Glee, in which the characters of Kurt and Blaine are sure of their homosexuality compared to the characters of Britney and Santana, who are slowly discovering themselves (Murphy, Falchuk, Brennan, 2009). This example demonstrates there is not only a difference between the depictions of the sexualities between heterosexual and homosexual characters, but even between gay and lesbian characters.

Bisexuality

Bisexuality is unique because it has been slow to be adopted in the television landscape and bisexual representations have found to greatly differ from homosexual and heterosexual media representation. Meyer's (2010) analysis found most fictional, bisexual characters on current prime-time television are women and non-White. Male bisexuals are rarely represented and this could support Meyer's (2010) earlier theory about gay characters being more certain of their sexuality compared to lesbians. Also, there is more of a cultural acceptance towards experimentation for women over men. These bisexual characters are more fluid because they usually were previously heterosexual, but they are guided to develop their identities through other characters. Their bisexuality is insignificant and often goes unfazed, which sharply contrasts homosexuals' sexualities. They are portrayed as having seemingly 'unstable' sexual identities that are contrasted by the stable heterosexual identities (Meyer, 2010). These characters can be portrayed as confused or uncertain about their sexual identity because of a complicated past, or a negative experience or crisis, like infidelity or abuse. As previously discussed, more stable gay characters have been evident in television narratives, and bisexuals have now replaced homosexuals as possessing the unstable, conflicting identity (Meyer, 2010).

Coming-Out Experience

The coming-out experience seen within television narratives has presented contradictory effects. Most importantly, the visibility of this narrative in popular culture has been a strong force in shaping gay life and identity. It provides a space where audiences can witness and understand these experiences from these characters and it also provides a model

for particularly homosexual audiences, of the process and emotions one might encounter. This can be a form of celebration for the gay and lesbian community for the representations and visibility into a homosexual's life.

On the other hand, for most coming-out stories on television, the focus remains on the reactions and feelings of the heterosexual characters and not the celebration of the homosexual character's true identity. The plot line is centered on how the parents or friends come to terms with this new discovery and their process of acceptance towards the homosexual's sexuality and lifestyle (Walters, 2001). While these narratives have intentions of combating homophobia, it can instead emphasize the anguish and grief from both the homosexual and heterosexual characters that comes with coming-out. This particular "coming-of-age" phase for the homosexual character differs from a heterosexual's "coming-of-age" moment, because the homosexual needs to explain their lifestyle and yearns for acceptance, whereas heterosexuals are already understood (Walters, 2001).

According the Walters (2001), the portrayals of the coming-out experience also differs between gays and lesbians. Once gay characters discover their identity and become part of the gay community, it becomes a social experience as they are often seen as socializing with other gays and going out to bars and clubs. But for lesbians, it is depicted as more of a personal, romantic experience, as the characters "happen to fall in love with a woman" (Walters, 2001, p. 208), or involves a 'free-spirit's' sexual experimentation. If a lesbian community is seen, it is usually full of stereotypically masculine or tough women (Walters, 2001).

Family Situation

In recent television, shows such as Modern Family, Glee and Grey's Anatomy portray a gay couple as parents. However, it took many years for television to include these scenarios in their plotlines. This concept is demonstrating to audiences that gay, lesbian and bisexuals can be in committed relationships and have children just like heterosexuals. Gay and lesbian couples are now seen in monogamous relationships, often times with children of their own, and these depictions are cast as ordinary and normal. This challenges common myths prevalent in previous and even in many current television series, and compares homosexuals to a concept primarily reserved for heterosexuals and their partners. The lack of gay and lesbian parents on television reinforced historically rooted stereotypes of gay and lesbians inability to have children (Raley & Lucas, 2006).

Walters (2001) explains how many homosexual parents on television are portrayed as parents from a previous heterosexual relationship, who just so happen to discover their new sexuality. But these parents continue to be parents after their revelation. These depictions are thought to be common on television because these parenting experiences have often mirrored the psychographics of the American audience. Yet these portrayals place the emphasis on the sexuality of the character while narratives with already established gay or lesbian parents highlight the family life (Walters, 2001). On popular 90s and early 2000s sitcom Friends, Ross' wife Carol, discovers she is a lesbian during their marriage and after the birth of their son, Ben, and this family situation is constantly ridiculed. After their divorce, they share custody of Ben, but their family life seems disjointed (Crane, Kauffman, 1994). Whereas the family life featured

in Modern Family, Glee, and Grey's Anatomy do not focus on the sexualities of the parents, but instead depicts a loving, cohesive unit with a purpose of being a family.

Influence on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Individuals

The fact that television and the media have an influential effect on its audience and culture is not a new concept. This is even seen throughout history, as television has an impact on the thoughts and behaviors of the American people, and it is a valuable source when generating, shaping and cultivating cultural values (Raley & Lucas, 2006). It is particularly affective towards the emerging adulthood demographic, because they are still in the process of understanding and recognizing their personal identities, and cultural or media factors often shape their attitudes, behaviors and identities (Meyer, 2010). O'Neil (1984) established the basis to media visibility and homosexual identification when he found homosexuals will not define their sexuality until they have seen it in the media (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003). Therefore, the depictions of gay and lesbian characters, the GLBT community and the issues associated with this group have discovered to have a profound effect on their own representations of themselves and how they fit in society.

Understanding and Discovering Sexuality

Television does provide a cultural space for gay and lesbian youth to understand sexuality. Gray's (2009) research subjects revealed their exposure to gay and lesbian characters and subjects on television was how they knew homosexuality existed and what their interactions involve. The media also displays to these youth what homosexuals look like, how

they act, where they live and what they say (Gray, 2009). Many people, both gay and straight, do not receive the information in their own environments about homosexuality, so they rely on the media's depictions—even stereotypical depictions—to learn about gays and lesbians (Gross, 2001). Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, (2009) even reported gay and lesbians were more influenced by less stereotypical depictions of their community on television, in terms of self-discovery (Holz Ivory, Gibson, Ivory, 2009). For example, in a recent episode of Glee in the 2011-2012 season, the subject on bullying and suicide associated with homosexuality led to a 300 percent increase in Web and hotline traffic for the sponsoring organization, The Trevor Project (Wong, 2012).

Netzley (2010) argued that television could teach gay and lesbian individuals about different gay issues, or establish role models that might be difficult to find in heterosexual communities, since more of these situations exist in the media than ever before. This research suggests the increase of gay characters, especially those with substantial character qualities on cable television shows, have provided more role models for gay youth and have developed the feeling of acceptance (Netzley, 2010).

A contradictory theory suggests that it seems current television does not provide influential role models for gay youth. As researcher Gross (2001) claims, our media landscape is a "symbolic annihilation" because the lack of positive gay characters demonstrates the exclusion and isolation the media places on sexual minorities, making them more negative or less common. This has an effect on gay youth, who might already feel isolated from their primarily heterosexual community, because they are not receiving information and guidance from gay characters in the media (Fisher, Hill, Gruber & Gruber, 2007). But as the visibility of

gay characters is increasing, this symbolic annihilation that exists within television could slowly be disappearing and a clearer understanding of this community could be more accurately represented.

Many gay, lesbian or bisexuals may not discover their sexuality or "come out" until adolescence, and because lack of knowledge or interaction with homosexuals, these youth often times look to the media they are consuming to understand how they might be viewed to others or how they should behave. These youth can form their identities based upon the heterosexual depictions of homosexuals by modeling their behaviors or self-perceptions after these sometimes negative stereotypes. This situation is often how and why these stereotypes are disseminated through the GLBT and greater community (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Gray's (2009) research found many of his homosexual subjects were first introduced to homosexuality on television and discovered how they could relate. Television depictions may of sparked homosexual youth's self-discovery, especially among rural youth who are not as exposed to homosexuality, but the inauthenticity of the characters is not known to shape their identities; the immersion into the actual community has more effects (Gray, 2009).

The coming-out process of modern-day youth is thought to be more common than older generations of homosexuals because of the more prevalent homosexual cultural images (Walters, 2001). Recent research in the United Kingdom found teenagers are coming-out at an earlier age, as the average coming-out age has drastically decreased. The average age for individuals currently in their 30s, was 21 (Williams, 2010) and now it is common for individuals to be as young as 14 to come out (Wong, 2012). These decreasing rates could contribute to

children and teenager's earlier and more increased exposure to GLBT characters or celebrities

in the media (Williams, 2010).

However, Walters (2001) suggests this is not to say the process and experience for the

individual is particularly easier, but the individual's friends and family are hit with more cultural

representations of homosexuals, making homosexuality not seem like a disease, as it was once

commonly perceived. Through Walters' (2001) research, she discovered the visibility within the

media has both aided and hindered the coming-out experience for many individuals; media

representations have generated homophobia or stereotypical attitudes, provided resources or

developed empowerment. Television viewers can recognize and understand the internal

struggles homophobia or anguish can have on a gay or lesbian individual after coming-out,

making it more of a fear to do so. It can also reveal the heartache and distress the heterosexual

characters around them may endure after this revelation (Walters, 2001).

However it can also depict a celebration of gay life, and give homosexual audiences the

confidence and power to accept their identity. This is because many of these depictions have

also validated or shaped the way homosexuals and even how the greater mainstream

community view homosexuality. The series, Ellen was seen as successfully impacting with the

theme surrounding her coming-out episode. Stark, Newman, Driscoll, and Savel's (1997)

episode demonstrated "that gays and lesbians need to accept and value themselves and to

expect the same from their loved ones" (Dow, 2001, p. 134). Therefore, even though

inaccurate, negative or partial representations were obviously evident in these initially

progressive fictional television shows, there were still glimpses of positive experiences that

were valuable to both homosexual and heterosexual's attitudes towards GLBT self-confidence and acceptance.

Sexuality Visibility and Diversity

Various scholars, including Gross, agree sexual minorities are depicted differently in the media, than their majority heterosexual counterparts, and these depictions often affect the group represented (2001). Fejes (1993) mentions the representations and interactions of the GLBT community within the media contribute to how gays and lesbians view themselves and their community. American television is so focused on sex. But when gay and lesbians are rarely portrayed having sex, it makes homosexuals seem as if they are "sexless" and "freaks" (Walters, 2001, p. 113). The media representations of homosexuals as different or an outsider to heterosexuals, have placed that same notion onto real-life gays and lesbians (Gross, 2001). Even if there is little to no visibility, it furthers their feeling of isolation from the rest of society (Netzley, 2010). But when these characters are seen in sexual interactions, it reinforces to gay and lesbian audiences of their similarity to heterosexuals and legitimizes their right to their sexuality.

As previously discussed, Raley and Lucas' (2006) content analysis found the amount of displays of affection between homosexual and heterosexual couples was insignificant. This could demonstrate homosexual interaction is becoming more accepted and the norm. While applying Bandura's social cognitive theory, it can be assumed that homosexual youth receive a lot of their information and model their sexual behaviors off of what they see on television. Research has suggested that 1 in 5 teens even claim they receive most of the sexual

information from entertainment, because they lack the sexual knowledge and experience

(Fisher, Hill, Gruber, & Gruber, 2007). In terms of bisexuals, since these characters are usually

women, it demonstrates to audiences that females have more freedom to explore their

sexualities and males are more constrained within homosexual versus heterosexual boundaries

(Meyer, 2010). This is influential towards the young adults because they are in this phase of

identity and sexuality exploration.

The 2011 GLAAD television report along with the support from various scholars mention

gay and lesbian fictional characters vary by race, ethnicity and religion. This is seen as highly

beneficial to the television audience, because it demonstrates there is not just one type of gay

man or lesbian woman and represents a more accurate homosexual makeup of America.

However, what television has failed to do is represent homosexuals in all environments. Since

gay and lesbian characters are often seen in progressive cities or even some moderate or

conservative suburbs, these characters are rarely depicted in rural environments. This is

isolating to the rural community who often need the most exposure and knowledge, causing

rural GLBT communities to form their own communities or look elsewhere for support (Gray,

2009).

Community Effects

Gross (2001) acknowledges all minority groups have adopted some form of the

mainstream, majority culture in which they live in. The isolation, subversion and resistance the

media has placed upon gay subjects, has allowed homosexuals to adopt heterosexual attitudes

and behaviors, and even often hate homosexuality (Gross, 2001). But oftentimes, the result of

negative or subversive depictions of homosexuals in the media has led to community solidarity (Gross, 2001). Dating back from post-WWII, a form of resistance the gay community has developed in response to unrealistic portrayals, as been to create their own media communities or channels (Gross, 2001). This is resulted in the creation of television stations like Logo, or television shows such as Queer As Folk or The L Word, two of the first television shows with primarily homosexual characters, popular among gay audiences, but not among mainstream viewers. These alternative channels are not targeted to the general public, but a specific niche market, in this instance, the GLBT community. In these instances, the roles are reversed, as straight audiences can now see the world in a homosexual viewpoint (Walters, 2001). In addition, these niche television shows are successful at highlighting the GLBT community rather than their sexuality. This gives homosexuals audiences a look into an alternative lifestyle which is often absent or hidden behind the traditional depiction.

This literature review describes the gendered stereotypes, cultural marginalization, and lack of accurate diversity seen in these television narratives. Characters vary between being stable, ordinarily depicted in typical families with being the "problem," lacking sexual visibility, and central to homophobic comedy. For many characters, their sexuality is often the forefront and only unique quality of their character. These various media portrayals are often thought to have both positive and negative effects, with the potential to be role models or a source of information, a celebration of the community, or a cause of isolation, alienation and distress.

Based upon this data, it is expected that stereotypical portrayals have a negative effect on the viewer's self-esteem and self-identification within their society. However, the visibility and positive normalizing portrayals is expected to also be beneficial for the individual's self-discovery process and to the GLBT communities' social progress. The following research will determine which theories are relevant in the current television trends, by examining exactly what type of character and situational depictions of gay, lesbian and bisexual characters in modern-day, mainstream television are significantly noticeable and influential on the self-identification of gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans and their community.

METHODOLOGY

In-depths interviews were conducted with GLBT individuals to examine their perceptions of GLBT character and issue portrayals on current mainstream fictional television. Interviews were used as the primary form of research in order to examine current GLBT entertainment television visibility, and to explore and further understand these attitudes and perceptions. These interviews looked at television depictions and the effects—if any—on the coming-out experiences and self-identification of GLBT individuals. The interviews were evaluated to affirm if these insights had any correlation with GLBT individuals' self-identification, attitudes, and lifestyles, as well as their perceptions towards the GLBT community.

Sample questions included:

- Do you feel GLBT visibility in today's mainstream media is prevalent? Does it accurately describes/represents the GLBT community? Or do you feel it does not accurately represent or describe the community?
- Do you notice a difference between how gay characters are treated or portrayed on TV, compared to straight characters?

Sample

Ten subjects participated in in-depth interviews. All participants were between the ages of 22 to 25 and identified as members of the GLBT community. The age range of the participants was significant because as young adults, individuals are still forming their own

identities. Many GLBT individuals are still in the process of coming-out and forming their own

sexual identities, so this group would be highly susceptible to the evaluated components of this

research. Approximately 30 percent of participants were female and 70 percent of participants

were male. All participants identified as homosexual. Most participants resided in large, urban

areas on the east coast, including the Washington, D.C. area and New York City. One participant

resided in California and one participant resided in Georgia. Eight of the participants were

Caucasian, one participant was Asian and one participant was African-American.

Sampling Method

All interviews were conducted in private, confidential settings during March of 2012.

Some interviews were conducted via phone or video-chat, using Skype, but a majority were

conducted face-to-face. Participants were found through personal contacts or through

snowball sampling. Interview appointments were either scheduled through email or in-person.

The interviews took about 15 to 40 minutes to complete, based upon participant discussion.

For more information on the in-depth interviews, including the list of interview questions, refer

to the Appendix.

RESULTS

Besides learning through interactions from friends or acquaintances, or researching on

the Internet, many of the participants felt a main source of their knowledge and information

on GLBT sexuality came from the media during their adolescent stage. Very few participants

received the guidance and knowledge from parents or role models who taught them about

homosexuality, so these participants looked towards an easily accessible medium: the media. In

this case, the media is defined as entertainment or news reporting on television, radio, novels,

or film.

> And I guess from the media because I guess that is really the only other exposure I would have from it—Male, 25

> I love the L-Word and that was a big part of my coming out experience, and also, learning about sexuality—Female, 23

> I really think pop culture is where I got my information from, because it really wasn't discussed or talked about in my home town—Male, 23

In terms of current GLBT visibility in current mainstream television, almost all participants agree

it is getting better, and representation is gradually improving. However, it is just not there yet.

> I think it is definitely moving in the right direction. I do not believe it is a good representation—Female, 23

> It is not accurate at all and it really could be better—Female, 22

> The media does portray there are gay people and this is what they do, etc. I don't think the media portrays the diversity of gay people. The diversity of the type of gay person a gay person can be—Male, 25

But, many participants did discuss how the portrayals and representations on current

mainstream television of GLBT individuals still possess stereotypical depictions. This is even

evident in some of the shows viewed as 'groundbreaking' and 'progressive' for GLBT issues,

including shows such as Modern Family and Glee.

> I guess it is good that while there are more gay guys, but I still don't like that idea that when the media puts gay guys in various roles, not every role but a lot of roles, they feel they need to be like a very extreme flamboyant, stereotypical person—Male, 25

Several participants commented further, providing their take on negative depictions of GLBT

characters on modern-day television. The more common depictions visible are associated with

flamboyance and superficiality, as participants claim:

> The tough part is, gay relationships are never the feature relationships, so the glimpses you do see, from what I gather, they are always scrabbling or arguing over something minor, like someone's shoes or like "ohmygod you thought she was good in that show? She was awful! I mean, come on!" There is different subject material. But what you are given is very fluffly, very trivial, which I think downgrades or takes some credit out of the relationship–Male, 25

> I think that gay characters are portrayed as being more emotionally unstable, almost. Or more emotional in general. It's either a high or a low—Female, 23

> I don't like the idea of being gay is being associated with child molester or you are inappropriate with minors—Male, 24

> I just feel every single time there is a gay character on television, it is this flamboyant person who is best friends with a girl and is her style consultant—Male, 24

> And then there is the whole problem with gay characters often portrayed as essentially accessories for heterosexual women or bitchy, very feminine, asexualized. In Glee, Kurt is very flamboyant and very interested in fashion, very superficial, very feminine...That is sort of how a lot of gay characters are. There is no romantic subplot, they are very two dimensional—Male, 22

> When you watch shows, there are not many main characters. I hate to say it but it's kind of like when they have the ethnic friend. They show clearly we are a diverse show, we have this...and I feel like we are almost treated in that way, in that minority. It's like 'oh, you are clearly that main characters gay best friend, obviously she has one of those,' who she kind of shops with. I also wish they would have more relationships—Male, 24

Females in particular notice the gender difference between gay male characters and lesbian

female characters.

> I also think what has happened through the entertainment world, unfortunately in terms of LGBT persons and characters, is it has become 'trendy' to be a gay man. Those stereotypes that are now associated with being a gay man are attractive, dressed well, successful, good haircut, money, things that in general, society views as positive things. And I think truthfully, the stereotypes associated with being a gay woman are butch, wearing camouflage, throwing footballs, driving trucks, just awful, sort of horrible things. So I do think it is moving in the right direction but in terms of the entertainment world has made it flashy and trendy to be a gay man. And not as much to be a gay woman. But that is changing—Female, 23

> Almost every lesbian I see in a movie or even if it is just an actress or someone portrayed in the media, if she is pretty they are always portraying her as she is not entirely sure about her sexuality, or she is bisexual and still into guys. I almost feel like there is this confusion over there being good-looking lesbians out there. And also on the other side, for the butchier lesbians, you rarely see them and if they are they portrayed and if they are, it is always negative—Female, 23

However, some participants disagreed on the existence and extent of stereotypical depictions,

stating that Hollywood's entertainment characters do resemble real life.

> For what we have now I think it is pretty accurate portrayed—Male, 23

> I think Hollywood represents a community better than mainstream news organizations do. When a TV station covers a gay pride parade or anything to do with LGBT issues, the typical shot you see is a man dressed up in an angel costume, half-naked on a float. That is not representative of the gay community as a whole. And how often do you see that on Modern Family? You don't. In ways I feel like Hollywood gets it more than mainstream news media—Male, 23

Similarly, some participants suggested that GLBT portrayals on mainstream media and as

aspects of popular culture are demonstrative of social progress.

> I think the fact that it is even there on television, upfront in peoples' faces, is definitely good enough—Male, 23

In addition, some participants mention the positive effects current television portrayals have

upon audiences.

> I like the idea of having a gay couple [on Modern Family]. Growing up I never thought marriage was an option for me, I never considered it. So it's cool to see that they are portrayed as a couple—Male, 24

> I think for me, I liked seeing someone uncomfortable because I like seeing that is not just me. That was nice. On the other hand, it's good to have people very open with their sexuality just to see there is a comfort with who they are. When someone is so comfortable, I think that's awesome that they are so comfortable, but it is good to show someone struggling as well—Male, 24

However, growing up, the depictions seen in the media did influence the way these participants

felt about the GLBT community and therefore, their identities. These participants felt

characters similar to them were not represented on television, which hindered their coming-

out experience and attitudes about themselves.

> Unfortunately I don't think it assisted me in coming out, I think it made it more difficult. It was the effeminate guy who lived on the outskirts or society, in certain neighborhoods with other gays. So that is what I saw, and I think if anything, it hindered it. It set me up for, if I was gay, I was suddenly that person. I couldn't be me—Male, 25

> I would see certain characters on TV. I used to watch Dawson's Creek. I would see that character on TV, and he was closeted but also wasn't a stereotypical gay guy...So I felt kind of weird that I wasn't like most of the characters I saw on TV, but he was one I related to—Male, 24

> The lack of media presence of LGBT characters while I was growing up, played a significant role in how uncomfortable I felt with my sexuality. There weren't many role models—Male, 22

> It had an impact in terms of there just not existing. Because when I was growing up there were not depictions of any gay people in the media, besides shows that were specifically for gay people... So that had an influence in terms of me really feeling like I was alone. Also in terms of me feeling like because I was gay, I could not become anything important or more significant. I also realized I was gay, and part of the political atmosphere and the lack of any sort of role models in the media or politics, that

I had to stay in the closet if I wanted to do anything. That's how I felt. So that was the main impact, the lack of media portrayal—Male, 22

Most participants agreed the media did have more of an influence on their attitudes and behaviors when they were younger, but experience and age allowed them to be more comfortable with their sexuality.

I would say [the media influences my sexuality] less so, but it is also because I am less involved at my age. Three years ago I probably would have had a little different answer. I am very, very proud of who I am –Female, 23

The media is negative for anything, so I really can't look at that to justify how I will feel about the lesbian community until I actually was actually a part of the lesbian community. The media did not have any influence on me—Female, 22

I think that at this point in my life, it does not have much affect on how I behave. But I think that...one of the reasons it took long for me to feel comfortable with being affectionate in public and holding hands, was the lack of positive portrayals or the lack of any same-sex couples in the media at all when I was growing up. So I think in that sense yes, it did have a significant effect, but not at this point in my life, at least not consciously-–Male, 22

I always would feel like oh, I should be interested in guys if they are interested in me. It confused me because I would see in the media or with celebrities, like you would see Amber Heard in the media. All the guys would be like 'oh, she is so hot.' So then I would feel I should like guys. But as I've gotten older and have become more comfortable with who I am, it doesn't really impact me-–Female, 23

I think now I am more comfortable, but especially when I was coming out, I was uncomfortable and I didn't like the way it was portrayed. There are people who fit that stereotype, of being very effeminate, but I guess I was always nervous that my friends would see me as that way and I would get pigeonholed into that stereotype. That was a wrong perception on my end, but it was definitely a barrier and I didn't want that to be what people think me as-–Male, 24

Since most of these participants did not directly feel that current television directly impacts their behaviors and attitudes at this stage of their lives, they also felt that the media does not influence their current attitudes and behaviors.

It helps, absolutely [me feeling comfortable with my sexuality.] More people are exposed to that—Male, 23

I don't think the media has anything to do with me feeling comfortable about it, but I guess it is nice people are being more accepting. I think I've just gotten more comfortable with age—Male, 24

So I don't think it really has any effect on how I live my life—Male, 23

Seeing a couple make-out on TV, doesn't make me more...I guess it is nice to see and for me, more people are going to see that and think of it more as normal and be comfortable with it—Male, 25

I think just them being on television has made me more comfortable in public, just because seeing that it is more in the mass media and more of a conversation, more people know about the lifestyle being shown, I think yes, it has made me more comfortable –Male, 23

Some participants, however, admitted what they see on television negatively has an impact on

their self-perceptions and personal behaviors.

With the TV and movies I grew up with, if it is not met favorably, I am less inclined to hold hands or make out in public. Like if they are either struggling or fighting some uphill battle, or if they are overly effeminate or a stereotype, I am more hypersensitive to how I come across. So I will avoid engaging in that behavior because I don't want to be seen in that light. I don't want to become, "oh that guy is kissing that guy, he must be just like that guy on TV. He must be just like Will [from Will and Grace] because he is holding his hand." So I will avoid that—Male, 25

I think the media definitely has something to do with it. But I think women in general are most affected by it because there is not anything mirrored as acceptance or cool in front of them in the way that it has in some, not all, [gay men]... and not that it hasn't been easy for gay men also—Female, 23

DISCUSSION

The key factors this research aimed to discover were how GLBT audiences perceive the current fictional television landscape and whether these depictions are reflective of the represented demographic. Even though the GLBT visibility on fictional television shows has increased in the past couple of years, the representations are still not accurate and diversified, and traditional stereotypes are still prevalent. Yet some contradictory evidence did suggest television shows to closely resemble reality. In addition, these depictions do have some influence on the attitudes and behaviors of GLBT young adults, but not as much impact as it did when they were younger. However, if these depictions were negative, they seemed to have more of a negative impact on GLBT audience's attitudes and behaviors, more so than positive depictions. Positive portrayals had an effect on audience's attitudes, but not so much their behaviors. This either reveals the diversity of opinions and variety of effects television has upon an audience, or it demonstrates that more research would have to be conducted to determine the accuracy and influence of GLBT television portrayals.

Based upon participant feedback, it seems as if gay and lesbian adolescents find the media to be a primary source of receiving information about sexuality and being exposed to a GLBT lifestyle. Similar to Gray's (2009) research, viewers relied on the media for information on homosexuality, if it did not directly exist in their environment. This is found to especially be true for adolescents who were not surrounded by other homosexuals or who grew up in a community where homosexuality was rarely, if ever, discussed. Television shows are essential resources for gay and lesbian adolescents to discover various behaviors, characteristics and lifestyles of GLBT individuals. Yet if these portrayals are depicted in a certain way, particularly

with a stereotypical emphasis, it can influence GLBT audiences' self-perceptions and attitudes towards the GLBT community, and make it difficult to relate to any television characters. This evidence supports Holz Ivory, Gibson and Ivory's (2009) research that stereotypical depictions are less influential to GLBT audiences, especially in a positive manner. But some television shows have addressed some universal issues to the GLBT community, such as bullying, coming to terms with sexuality, coming-out, and acceptance, that allow GLBT audiences to recognize how others are experiencing similar circumstances and to give insight into how to handle a particular situation.

Despite the evolving exposure of GLBT characters and issues on television in the past couple of years since the late 1990s and early 2000s, the diversity and representations of GLBT television depictions do not seem to be as accurate as they could be; yet they are getting better. Even though gay and lesbian characters are rarely seen as a central lead character to a current show, they are most recently seen as equal members of an ensemble cast. The diversity of demographics has slightly improved, but is not yet accurate. Even though GLBT visibility has supposedly expanded, participants at times could not think of many current television shows besides Glee and Modern Family that place a gay or lesbian character or issue at the center of a major plotline. As GLAAD reports in their 2011-2012 TV Report, of the GLBT characters on current television season, 15 percent are people of color and 67 percent are gay men (GLAAD, 2012). These numbers prove television does not reflect the demographic makeup of the U.S., and this is evident to their GLBT viewers. Also, participants recognize the lack of GLBT characters that do not reside in large, urban cities, which makes it seem as if GLBT people do not live in rural areas in middle America.

It seems very obvious to these participants that the stereotypical flamboyancy portrayed by a majority of gay characters still exists. These stereotypes are derived because "gay people have certain tendencies but they are embellished maybe more so on TV." This reveals how even though visibility of GLBT characters and issues on mainstream television has drastically increased since the late 1990s during the reign of Ellen and Will and Grace, those similar depictions are still prevalent throughout mainstream television shows. Even in television shows like Glee and Modern Family that are often applauded for their GLBT characters and issues, these shows still portray some traditional stereotypical characteristics that are obvious and sometimes uncomfortable for GLBT audiences. Participants recognize there are gay and lesbian individuals, who are similar to these stereotypical depictions, and they do deserve to be represented, but they "just wish it wasn't just that."

However, these overly exaggerated stereotypes seemed to have a negative effect on participants, as they claimed these characters were vastly hard to relate to, despite their visibility. These negative portrayals often contribute to society's discrimination or marginalization of the GLBT community. This has caused GLBT audiences to feel uncomfortable about their sexuality, have a negative opinion or animosity towards the GLBT community, or try to conform to traditional heterosexual mainstream because they want to prove that just because they share a commonality with these characters on television, does not mean that is who they are. The lack of positive portrayals and accurate representations did seem to have an isolating effect on participants, as mentioned by Netzley (2010) and Fisher, Hill, Gruber and Gruber (2007). Therefore, if these GLBT fictional character portrayals are perceived as obviously

stereotypical and different than heterosexual characters, gay and lesbian viewers do not want those characters to shape their identity and to therefore, be seen as those characters.

The difference between gender portrayals are also obviously noted, which seem to have more of an ingrained detrimental effect on lesbian audiences rather than gay audiences. Lesbian character portrayals seem to be more complex, as viewers note they are usually depicted as masculine in a negative manner; if they are feminine and attractive, they are often viewed as having a fluid sexuality. This is different than gay male characters, as females feel gay characters are thought to be 'cool' or 'trendy,' and remain within the homosexuality boundaries.

On the other hand, GLBT audiences have appreciated the expansion of not only character portrayals but character issues, which have seem to have a positive effect on the perceptions and attitudes towards the GLBT community. This has demonstrated how far society has come towards interest and acceptance of the GLBT community. Particular stories or situations that seem to be most effective are depictions of gay couples with families or characters with successful careers or confident personalities.

> "With Grey's Anatomy when there were lesbians, it was always like 'oh my god, there are lesbians on this show!' People were threatening to stop watch it. Now it has totally passed that. Now it is more of 'this is the gay couple on the show' and eventually it will hopefully move to, this is just another couple—Female, 23."

If anything, the increased visibility and exposure of GLBT culture in American society has alleviated fear and allowed GLBT individuals to be comfortable in public and in their own skin. GLBT audiences feel the exposure is often seen as a contributing factor to GLBT social progress,

which is placing the GLBT community at the forefront of society and influencing mainstream's acceptance.

All participants agreed the most effective homosexual character on fictional television would be someone who is not only portrayed in a positive light, but is not defined by his sexuality and more of who they are as a person and their purpose in life. The character's sexuality should be a secondary quality to his character. Obviously "like gay relationships and gay people, we are human beings, [who] have the same wants and desires as heterosexual people and aren't played up for a laugh," but television does not often depict these realities.

As seen above, many of the participants do not feel influenced to think or behave a certain way because of what they see or do not see on television, and this is partly contributing to their age and life experience. As Gray (2009) determines GLBT individuals may receive their information about sexuality from television, but it does not define who they are, and participants feel television does not currently shape their identities. Whereas when these participants were in their pre-teen or teenage phases, the characters and issues seen on television might have had a lasting impression on their attitudes and behaviors, or were more likely to be role models, as Netzley (2010) suggests. This might have been particularly apparent when participants were coming-out, as television depictions, especially those that highlight GLBT stereotypes, were often a hindrance to these audiences. Walters (2001) does argue GLBT visibility in the media can both aid and hinder an individual's coming-out experience. While no participants claimed it helped them to come-out, many discussed how it did hinder them, because they did not want to be labeled as the negative stereotype seen in popular culture.

In addition, based upon these interviews, another factor that seemed to be particularly effective and even relatable to GLBT audiences is when openly gay actors portray heterosexual characters. This notion demonstrates how one's sexuality should not define their occupation, as well as their appearance, personality and lifestyle. Homosexual, bisexual and transgender actors should not be typecast by television directors within plotlines, to only be portrayed as homosexual characters dealing with issues of sexuality.

> I think the bigger win are the actors who play straight characters on TV, like a Matt Bomer. Amazing. He is gay but plays straight characters, but not just like his sex appeal runs the show. Every show, there is this new woman he is wooing. But at the end of the day, he goes home to his husband and three kids—Male, 25

However, it is interesting that participant's notice when a heterosexual actor is portraying a homosexual character because their portrayal is usually visibly stereotypical.

> They [Modern Family] are just doing it the wrong way. And not that it has to be cast as a gay man, but I think it is very interesting that in that couple, Mitchell is the gay one in real life. He is perfect. The straight guy in real life is all over the place and totally blowing it all out of proportion—Female, 23

Furthermore, many participants mentioned the normalcy and confidence a gay actor or celebrity, such as Ellen DeGeneres, Neil Patrick Harris and Matt Bomer, present in the media and pop culture, and they are seen to be a valuable influence to both homosexual and heterosexual audiences.

> Matt Bomer never lied about it, he just didn't wave the flag about it. He was a normal human being. And to me, that is how you gain acceptance, to be normal. I find that more often than not, the people who play someone straight I real life turn out to be gay—Male, 25

The limitations of this study were the diversity of the participants. A majority of participants were white, gay males in their early to mid-20s, who resided in large, urban cities,

which does reveal the attitudes of a variety of different GLBT individuals and is not

representative of the GLBT community. Time restrictions contributed to the number of

participants, as more allotted research time would have called for a larger sample size.

CONCLUSION

A general assumption is that the media and television not only shape public opinion and popular culture but mirror real life as well. The media, particularly entertainment media has been known to influence attitudes, behaviors, and trends, as audiences often look to entertainment to introduce different people and situations, recognize common perspectives and understand certain experiences. But throughout history, the media has been known to fail when accurately representing and depicting certain minority groups, and in this case, members of the GLBT community. While plenty of research from a decade ago exists on GLBT media portrayals, little evidence on the very current media landscape is available, which is particularly important as the attitudes and exposure of GLBT issues in popular culture are constantly evolving. This research analysis set out to examine GLBT American's perceptions towards fictional GLBT character depictions on current, mainstream television and if these depictions have any influence on the attitudes and behaviors of the GLBT audience. This information will demonstrate to media corporations and their television producers, the significance of their representations of GLBT characters and if the characters have developed beneficial or detrimental effects on its audience.

To gauge exploratory evidence on this topic, in-depth interviews were conducted on ten young adults who identify as gay or lesbian. Based upon this research, it was discovered despite the gradual increase of GLBT visibility in mainstream television in the past decade, representations are not yet accurate and stereotypical characterizations seen throughout GLBT television history still exists in many mainstream television shows. Also, the impact these portrayals have upon GLBT audiences is complex, as depending on the sentiment or storyline,

negative depictions seemed to have more of an impact on audiences' attitudes and behaviors than positive portrayals. However some perceptions and degrees of influence do differ and contradict one another. Media depictions are also not as influential to young adults in the early and mid-20s, as opposed to teenagers and pre-teenagers, who are still forming their sexuality identities.

As seen throughout this analysis, the results of this study demonstrate divergent attitudes towards the media representations of GLBT fictional television characters, and therefore, current characters and television shows must still be further examined. However, this study does give preliminary insight into the accuracy and fairness of these character depictions and the influence on its GLBT audience. Besides GLAAD's quantitative TV report, little research exists that gives an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the television landscape and its effects, since the premiere of the 'groundbreaking' television shows for GLBT visibility, Ellen and Will and Grace in the 1990s. However, these discoveries can provide television producers with strategies of how to portray a gay or lesbian character effectively, so the character will be highly valuable, relatable, and influential to GLBT viewers.

Since current fictional characters are still depicted in a stereotypical manner, despite more exposure, GLBT audiences would still like to see "a fair portrayal, maybe less of the exaggerated stereotypes and just more of a level playing field, [and] have them portrayed as anyone else would."

> There is not anything really different. We have jobs and lives and families and kids and bills, and things to worry about like everyone else does. I think there is a place for storylines, for things like acceptance because that stuff does happens and people are really going through that. Some peoples coming-out aren't as good. I would like to see a storyline where the family is not accepting of their gay son or daughter—Male, 23

GLBT characters should also convey a large spectrum of demographics, personalities and

behaviors, which is actually reflective of the GLBT community, and should not be categorized

into the same typical depiction.

> If you are going to further those stereotypes, you are only going to be met with rejection when people try to tell their parents. If that is what my parents are seeing on TV, then that's what I am. If I say suddenly I'm gay, then I am this character on TV...that bitchy gay who does the rainbow snap, and there are enough of those, we get it—Male, 25

> It seems as if there should be a balance between a gay or lesbian character either

struggling with their sexuality, particularly during high school, and being open and proud.

Participants would like to see characters who are "comfortable with who they are" or as an

"attractive, successful guy no one thought was gay, and here he is standing up for it" to contrast

the usual victim role, and do appreciate when these characters are prevalent on mainstream

television. But, it is always beneficial to portray a gay or lesbian teen being bullied at school or a

family not accepting the sexuality of their child because that is the reality for many GLBT

individuals, and these stories are more relatable.

GLBT audiences hope some day GLBT characters will be treated like heterosexual

characters, without always having a storyline that relates to their sexuality. Like heterosexual

characters in mainstream television, stories associated with that character do not always relate

to sexuality. These characters are featured in an unlimited variety of stories, which homosexual

characters have not yet truly found that luxury.

> I have this fantasy that one day they will make an action movie, and it will feature a typical male character, and at the end of the movie, instead of getting the girl, he gets the guy, or a female lead who winds up with a girl instead of a guy. As important as it is to have a representation of the diversity of the LGBT community, I think it is also important for there to be a real presence that does not conform to the stereotype—Male, 22

A celebrity or character within pop culture becomes a role model when they reveal their lives in the most normal way possible. These figures can be effective at advocating for equal rights, but a bigger success is when they are portrayed and represented like everyone else. "Presenting [GLBT issues] to not always being a gay pride parade" and is not always the most effective way of representing a community.

> I think Ellen DeGeneres is the best person alive. I look up to her more than I can say because her message is not gay rights, gay rights, gay rights. Her message is how can we be good to one another every single day. How can we create peace with one another. Coupling that with one of the funniest people on TV. I think that is the most effective way to present gay persons, gay characters and gay issues—Female, 23

This information can now become a foundation for further research. An extensive, nation-wide survey on mainstream television and their effects on its audience should be distributed to a larger sample within the GLBT community, in order to truly recognize if these attitudes are widespread and to understand its influence on the community as a whole. Since the demographics of these participants did not accurately represent the nation's GLBT community, this further research will be able to gauge information from other demographics that were not represented.

Most of the participants felt the media does not directly influence their attitudes and behaviors as they have aged into their mid-20s. Even though, the 20s is a period when one is starting to form their own identities, these participants felt they now have a better sense of their identities and life purpose. Research on teenagers and those entering early adulthood—a time which is now popularly considered a peak coming-out age—would also be able to determine if the evolving GLBT character and issue portrayals on mainstream television is affecting one's self-discovery, coming-out process, acceptance of their sexuality and

confidence. In addition, other factors discovered to be influential were openly gay and lesbian

celebrities or public figures who are evidently comfortable with who they are. These real-life

individuals could possibly be more effective than fictional characters, so research to explore this

topic should be conducted. It would also be interesting to examine how the evolving GLBT

visibility and depictions influence the perceptions and attitudes of heterosexual audiences. This

would be beneficial at a time when GLBT equality is becoming a leading topic in popular culture

and policy reform, and positive views towards homosexuality are slowly becoming more

accepting throughout the general population.

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APPENDIX

Consent to Participate in Research

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study
You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Annie Kanter from American University. The purpose of this study is to explore the role gay characters on television play upon the self-identification of gay and lesbian individuals, and upon the GLBT community as a whole. This study will contribute to the student's completion of her master's thesis.

Research Procedures
Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants in various locations. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your sexual orientation and your thoughts on its visibility within mass media. Your interviews may be videotaped.

Time Required
Participation in this study will require 30-45 minutes/hours of your time.

Risks
The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study. The investigator perceives the following are possible risks arising from your involvement with this study by ensuring all interviews are confidential and non-judgmental.

Benefits
Potential benefits from participation in this study include significant verifiable research and evidence for advocacy towards equality for the GLBT community, particularly in their treatment and representation in mass media.

Confidentiality
The results of this research will be presented at a classroom or possibly published in a scholarly journal. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers, including audio/video tapes, if applicable, will be destroyed.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any individual question without consequences.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Interview Questionnaire

<u>Age:</u>
<u>What is your sexual orientation?</u>

- Tell me about your coming-out experience.

    o How old were you?

    o Who were among the first people that you came out too?

- Where or how did you get the information or knowledge about your sexuality?

    o Do you think that the mass media had any influence? Which types?

- Do you feel GLBT visibility in today's mainstream media is prevalent? Acurately describes/represents GLBT communiuty? Or do you feel it does not accurately represent or describe the community?

    o If prevalent, does this make you comfortable with your sexuality? Meaning: Does the media have anything to do with this?

    o If could be more, does this make you uncomfortable with sexuality?

- Is there any particular character in current fictional gay character(s) on television do you identify with? Or feel a similarity with? Why?

- What/which current fictional gay character(s) on television do you least identify with? Why?

- Do you notice a difference between how gay characters are treated or portrayed on TV, compared to straight characters?

- How would you like gay characters to be portrayed?

- What stories or characters on television do you think are the most influential?

- Do you feel like you often model after or follow the behaviors of gay characters you see on TV? If you see a gay character proudly announcing his sexuality or being affectionate in public, (or vice versa), do you follow suit?