Media's Portrayal of Homosexuality and Rape as a Reflection of Cultural Acceptance?

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Abstract— The study focuses on media's portrayal of homosexuality as a reflection of cultural acceptance in the society. The first representation of gay men in the United States to a national audience occurred in 1967 with the airing of a documentary titled "The Homosexuals," which is filled with harmful, derogatory stereotypes etc. The fact that homosexual characters were mostly guest stars as opposed to leading characters also suggests that gay activist were taking a less radical approach by attempting to improve acceptance of homosexual. In Nigeria, homosexuality is a taboo, abnormal and not accepted. The media can and has with some degree of success helped break down the cultural taboos associated with sensitive sexual topics and bridge some gaps in our sexual knowledge. The paper adopted empirical secondary data, and employed cultivation theory. It proved that the media have power in shaping people's belief and perception, and can form or modify the public opinion in different ways depending on what the objective is. For example, Pakistani media influenced the opinion against the Taliban in Swat by repeated telecast of a video clip showing whipping of a woman by a Taliban. Before that, the public opinion over the military action against the Taliban was divided, but repeated telecast of this short video clip changed the public opinion overnight in favor of the government to take action. The paper recommended that the media should take a firm stand, not playing two-edge sword on the reportage of homosexuality, and should remain a 'watchdog' and the 'mirror' of the society.

Index Terms— Media, Homosexuality, Rape and Cultivation Theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to former CNN correspondent Alwood (1996), the first representation of gay men in the United States to a national audience occurred in 1967 with the airing of a documentary titled "The Homosexuals," which is filled with harmful, derogatory stereotypes (Hart, 2004). In that documentary, homosexuals were portrayed as "being sick" (Alwood, 1996) and "perpetually unhappy" (Hart, 2004, p.242). In the 1960s, homosexuals were often depicted as murderers or murder victims, and it is argued by some that their appearances on television not only generated uncomfortable feelings among audiences, but also reinforced stereotypes about homosexuals (Netzley, 2010; Hart, 2004).

In the 1970s, although the number of homosexual characters increased, stereotypical portrayals were not diminished considerably (Netzley, 2010). While homosexual

characters such as those in the 'All in the Family' were introduced as guest stars and interacted with heterosexuals (Netzley, 2010), it was still considered appropriate and even encouraged to include derogatory comments and jokes about homosexuals to enhance the entertainment effect (Hart, 2004). The fact that homosexual characters were mostly guest stars as opposed to leading characters also suggests that gay activist were taking a less radical approach by attempting to improve acceptance of homosexual portrayals week after week (Capsuto, 2000).

Michele (2011) submits that, representations of homosexuals within mass communication are capable of swaying the majority of perceptions. The extent to which homosexual stereotypes and archetypes have evolved is in absolute authority of the media at large. Through media published reports that linked homosexual behavior to mental illness, the public perception of gays shifted towards a fear of the unknown. Various media outlets that display the more stereotypical representations of homosexual are met with a high acceptance rate by males, while female directed programming, such as soap operas and situational comedies are also met with high acceptance rate (Calzo and Ward 2009). Based on the results, it was discovered that a mainstreaming effect on the media could result in an overall accepted perception of homosexuality. If multiple media outlets were displaying information with similar views on homosexuality, the majority would accept a larger, more similar view.

Rowe (2009), the portrayal of homosexuality by the media (television, movies, magazines) is a representation that homosexuality should be widely accepted in the society. For example in the movie *glee*; Blaine and Kurt, Santana and Brittany. The media portrayed homosexual beings as something normal and a culture to be accepted by different groups of the society. The real question is should the media promote homosexuality or should they kick against it? According to the American Psychiatric Association, homosexuality is a mental illness affecting a particular group of people. By perpetuating the idea that homosexuals were "deeply disturbed deviants in need of treatment" the media was able to construct a fabricated fear within the minds of America (Horton, 1995). This fear is best described as a moral panic.

Potter and Kappeler (2006), describe moral panics as occurring when "a group or type of activity is perceived as a threat to the stability and well-being of society". In order to properly devise a societal moral panic, the media must first exaggerate and in some cases fabricate information

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regarding the group or activity at hand. The spotlight placed on this particular group then creates an overwhelming amount of scrutiny towards their every move. This however signifies that the first introduction of homosexuality was shunned by the media. In fact, the media created fear in the minds of the audience and portrayed homosexuality as a mental illness. What then has changed? Why would the media shun homosexuality and later embrace it?

Example, *Will & Grace* stands as a representation of when homosexual relationships portrayed by mass media—radio, television, and movies—began to be broadly accepted within society. From the breakthrough *Will & Grace* helped establish, homosexuality is slowly finding accurate representation within mass media today.

Shows such as “*As the World Turns*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Greek*, *Ugly Betty*, *Modern Family* etc. depict homosexual characters that are actively engaged in onscreen relationships that closely reflect the heterosexual relationships with which they share the screen. In discussing *Will & Grace*, recognition must be given to one of its greatest predecessors. Ellen DeGeneres’s critically acclaimed role in *Ellen* is generally regarded by most as a breakthrough within media and culture. *Ellen* presented audiences with the realization that homosexuality was very much a part of culture, which may have opened the door for the reception of *Will & Grace*.

However, *Ellen*’s point of view was not largely attract viewership or prestigious recognition, as was garnished by *Will & Grace*. It was then rare to see homosexuality portrayed on the media screen, not of speaking about a homosexual identity, it has proven difficult to do so without some form of stereotype. In mass media, especially on the television or movies shows portrayed homosexual character, there is an idea of what to expect from the show, even if this idea is once again, an extension of the stereotype, simply because what was once invisible has been cast onto the visual screen.

For instance, identities of the male homosexuals are formed from stereotypes of femininity and which may not be the true identities. They have perhaps been formed by need to no longer be invisible in media productions, and hence, the public have allowed the stereotype to take over the homosexual identity in order to make it easier to understand this very identity. Though, the visual culture has made accepting the homosexual male easier than before. Before television and film, there was no real visual connection with homosexual traits that could be made in a public domain. Yet, there is an awareness of a struggle to make the visual more visible. This struggle has caused television networks to take notice and try and connect homosexuals with a primarily heterosexual audience.

(Calzo & Ward, 2009; Wright, 2009). Over the past several decades, homosexuals have become more represented in films and shows, and while that may signal a growing acceptance of homosexual lifestyles (Bonds-Raacke, Cady, Schlegel, Harris, & Firebaugh, 2007; Fisher, Gruber, & Gruber, 2007). The current investigation

examined the influence of the media on gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) identity using both survey and in-depth interview approaches, in Texas indicated that the media influenced their self-realization, coming out with current identities by providing role models and inspiration. The study further revealed that media role models serve as sources of pride, inspiration, and comfort. While, the findings suggest that increasing the availability of GLB role models in the media may positively influence GLB identity. However, the portrayal of rape in movies sometimes is nothing to write home about. Studies have shown that female viewers who repeatedly watch or view violence against them begin to feel helpless or weak within them.

Michele (2011) posits that, movies do more harm than other forms of media. This is because the emotive power of the narrative. Writer, director, cinematographer, editor, composer all heighten the sense of impending, appalling harm to sharpen the dread. Rape is best characterized as torture which uses sex as a weapon. Like a torturer, the rapist uses sexual acts to dominate, humiliate, and terrorize the victim. To deny the role of sexual humiliation in rape is to deny the victims the horror of what they have been through. The media must look to provide a more accurate and factual coverage of rape, thus raising the quality of its reports and simultaneously exposing the myths and the lies which surrounds the subject. As a major source of sexuality information, television content plays an important role informing and reforming social attitudes of the general public.

II. CONCEPTS ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION AND EXPLANATIONS

A. Review Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory is a social theory which examines the long-term effects of television. It means that watching TV affects viewers’ attitude and beliefs. Also, Professor Edward Schiappa and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota have found that the presence of gay characters on TV programs decreases prejudices among viewers, make them have more open point of view toward them. Therefore, these programs help the viewers to see the similarities, not the differences between “we” and “them”. They seek for more understanding, more toleration of the society for the gay people. An example is *Modern Family*, a very popular show in the US that has a gay couple in the process of adopting a second child. They face the same problems, they struggle with the issues that any “straight” people struggle with. Actually, we consider gay as “strange, weird” just because we don’t see so many of them in the media, so they are considered the “minority”. Gay characters appear on regular TV programs to show people that they are just like any normal straight people. They have the same problems to deal with, but they face more difficulties because of their sexual orientation.

B. What is Homosexuality?

Homosexuality was coined from Ancient Greek, meaning “same”, and Latin *sexus*, meaning “sex”. It is the romantic attraction, sexual attraction or sexual behavior between members of the same sex or gender. As a sexual orientation, homosexuality is an enduring pattern of emotional,

romantic, and/or sexual attractions primarily or exclusively to people of the same sex. It also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions. The most common terms for homosexual people are lesbian for females and gay for males, though gay is also used to refer generally to both homosexual males and females.

Homosexuality encompasses a variety of phenomena related to a same sex sexual orientation. Although definitions of the term often focus mainly on sexual acts and attraction between persons of the same biological sex. Homosexuality also refers to patterns of same sex romantic an emotional bonding, identities and communities based on same –sex desires and relationships, and the shared culture created by those communities.

Homosexuality is usually understood as the counterpart to heterosexuality with bisexuality applied to individuals who manifest both heterosexuality behavior and attraction. Such labels, however represent an oversimplification. Not all people display consistency among their sexual feelings, behavior, and identity; some experience considerable fluidity in their sexuality throughout their lives. Nevertheless, most adults in the United States report that they never made a conscious choice about their sexual orientation and they have always felt the same type of sexual attractions and desires. They experience their sexuality as a deeply-rooted and unchangeable part of themselves. Some research data suggest that this pattern is more common among men. With women somewhat more likely to perceive their sexuality as fluid and involving some degree of choice.

C. Rape

Oxford Advanced Dictionary (2010), rape is the act of forcing someone to have sex with you when they do not want to by threatening them or using violence. It is in the code of conduct that when the media most especially newspaper should be sensitive when reporting rape related stories. The identity of the victim should be undisclosed to prevent damage to the individual's reputation.

The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1976 Applies to:

- Rape.
- Attempted Rape.
- Aiding or abetting either of the above.
- Conspiracy with the intent of rape.
- Burglary with the intent of rape.

The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1992 applies to:

- Indecent assault on man or woman.
- Buggery and assault with the intention of committing buggery.
- Incest by a man or a woman.
- Intercourse with a girl under the age of 13 or between 13 and 16.
- Intercourse with or procurement or a mentally handicapped person.

- Indecent conduct towards a child.
- Procurement of a woman by threats or false pretenses.
- Administering drugs to obtain intercourse with a woman.
- Incitement by a man of his grand-daughter, daughter or sister under the age of 16
- To commit incest with him and
- Attempts to commit any of the above offences.

There are special cases relating to buggery and incest, that is to say, if the victim of an offence of incest and buggery is accused of the same offence, he or she will only have anonymity up to the time he or she is accused of such an offence.

D. Levels of Protection

The Sexual Offences Acts provide that anonymity runs from the time the complaint is first made. However, there is a distinction on the reporting restrictions between the time of the first complaint and the time the defendant is accused. The sexual Offences Acts provide that from the moment when an allegation has been made that a sexual offence has been committed neither the victim's name nor address nor a still or moving picture of that person may be published during their lifetime if it would be likely to lead members of the public to identify him or her as a victim. The prohibition applies irrespective of whether or not criminal or civil proceedings follow.

The prohibition applies to a victim of male rape. Once a person is accused of a sexual offence, it is likely to lead members of the public to identify a person as the person against whom the offence is alleged to have been committed can be published during the victim's lifetime. This means for example, prohibition as part of a crime report, of the victim's job, place of work or name of any family member would be prohibited if it would lead to the identification of the victim. The reason for the less stringent restrictions prior to the defendant being accused is to allow the publications of information that might bring forward witnesses or otherwise help

The fourth branch of the government which is the media, has a responsibility just as the other branches to help put an end to the crime of rape. That the media is doing it wrong is evidenced by angry responses to CNN'S rapist centric coverage of the Steubenville case. In the media coverage of rape causes globally, there are usually caveats of "don't get drunk or get raped". But the cautionary message is more insidious than it appears. Media should start with the fact. They could describe the terrible consequences for the rape survivors as well as offering concrete numbers on how prevalent rape is.

Research shows that the overwhelming majority of rapes are never reported. Many survivors do not share their story with people they know or love. They become part of a silent mass of traumatized survivors who are all around us, but who keep quiet about their suffering for fear of being not

believed or worse, bullied, shamed, blamed, for their own raping. Society teaches the survivors to be ashamed, the media reflects society –it is society. If media wants to stop rape, they need to focus on the survivors, the prevalence of rape and sexualized violence, the underlying reasons why men rape.

E. Role of Mass Media in Homosexuality

The media amongst others have educative and persuasive functions.

- They contribute to enlightening; broadening and deepening one's perspective, suggesting alternative ideas and to entertainment.
- Thus, the mass media is important in the dissemination of information on Homosexuality and Rape. In an era when issues of Homosexuality and Rape have become important and sometimes threatening to human existence, it becomes therefore imperative to examine what the media published concerning these issues.
- Knowledge of the nature and quality of publications is important as a basis for developing strategies on how to influence the media to disseminate the type of information which is educative and empowering so as to achieve a safe, responsible, respectful and pleasurable and not life threatening sexual life.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The media should be sensitive in the coverage of homosexuality and rape cases. They should stop making the victims feel ashamed but survivors of a wrong deed done to them. Besides the fact that the media is given freedom to disseminate whatever information they choose, certain events should be treated differently and anonymity. The names and faces of the victims should not be broadcasted and perpetrators should be considered as criminals or worse because of their exhibited behavior. Media practitioners should also keep in mind that media portrays can be as powerful in influencing implicit attitudes as they are in influencing explicit attitudes, and implicit attitudes are at least as important as and likely far more important than explicit attitudes in affecting social perceptions of certain groups in the society.

IV. CONCLUSION

The media shape people's belief and perception of the society. The prominence given to news or information gives the audience an idea on the importance that phenomenon should be accorded. Media in the past shunned the practices of homosexuality and rape and was capable of instilling fear in the minds of the audience by representing homosexuals as

people with mental illness. However, in recent times the media has accepted the culture of homosexuality and this in fact takes a toll on the perception of media audiences. The media has the effect of telling us what to think about by the way certain phenomenon is portrayed. The constant portrayal of homosexuality by the media gives the audience a different view point of the issue and in some cases audience may be confused on what stand to take.

Appendix
Appendixes, if needed, appear before the acknowledgment.

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