Impact of Compulsory Sexuality on LGB and Asexual Media Consumers

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Since the beginning of communication, mankind has used stories to explore constants in the human condition and explore universal themes. Among these themes are the concepts of sexual and romantic love, both of which have become increasingly prevalent in modern storytelling via television and movies, which routinely frame these experiences as integral to one's humanity. Media and cultural scholars have led studies exploring the ways in which audiences, especially youth, glean information about love and society from these images, receiving a type of sexual socialization that helps shape their self-concepts and general understandings about sexuality. However, for the past few decades these media messages have been almost exclusively heterosexual, leaving lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) audiences drastically underrepresented. At the same time, aromantic asexual (ace) viewers, those who experience neither romantic nor sexual attraction, are almost entirely unrepresented in these stories due to their inability to connect with the experience of romantic or sexual love. As a result of the prevalence of straight sexuality and romance in modern media, LGB and ace people suffer exclusion from human stories and struggle to develop positive sexual self-concepts and situate themselves within the rest of society.

Since the advent of print, media has become an increasingly integral part of modern culture in the United States. From newspapers and magazines, to radio, television, and the internet, mediated messages are now ubiquitous in everyday life. As a result, people spend several hours a day consuming media. Now mediated messages inform social attitudes and customs in such a complex reciprocal process that determining whether cultural trends originate in the public or in the media is akin to "the chicken or the egg" conundrum.

According to renowned media theorist, George Gerbner (1978), "Culture is the system of messages that cultivates the images fitting the established structure of social relations" (p. 47). Therefore, because television, a visual medium which is constantly creating and establishing images of social norms, is used consistently by so many people, television itself is the culture (Gerbner, 1978). However, this claim was made in 1978 when televised media was unparalleled in both its desirability and accessibility. In the 21st century this framework can feasibly be expanded to include the internet. Since the creation of smart-technology, the internet is arguably the most relied upon source of information and entertainment around the world, encompassing all other forms of media including print, aural, and visual. This means that since the late 20th century, the vast majority of the populace has had near-constant access and exposure to what

Gerbner refers to as "the common culture" through which they learn what constitutes a normal society both implicitly and explicitly.

The process of learning social customs and beliefs is known as socialization. Traditionally, the primary agents of socialization were religious institutions, schools, and families. However, Em Griffin (2003) referred to television as "a key member of the household, with virtually unlimited access to every person in the family," (p. 366). Susan Bordo (1995) claimed, "people no longer learn primarily through verbal instruction in this culture, but through pictures and images" (p. 3). Furthermore, head of African American Studies at UCLA, Darnell Hunt, asserts to the *Huffington Post,* "the accumulated effect [of watching TV] is to make you feel like what you're seeing is somewhat normal" (Boboltz & Yam, 2017). A widely-accepted idea amongst media theorists is that visual media, specifically television, plays a large role in establishing normative standards or perceptions of reality.

Over the years, communications scholars have introduced theories about the media's ability to shape popular worldviews. One such theory, created by George Gerbner, is known as Cultivation Theory and is based on the idea that "television viewing cultivates a way of seeing the world" (Gerbner, as cited in Griffin, 2003). In Gerbner's original study, which focused on consumption of violent media, he found that those who regularly watch violent television shows are more likely to believe the world is dangerous than those who do

not watch such shows. Likewise, other studies found similar results with women reporting lower self-esteem after viewing models in advertising campaigns (Worsham, 2011), and soap opera-viewers believing most single moms live comfortably as result of how these mothers are portrayed in the programs (Brown, 2010). The results of these studies as well as Gerbner's original research suggest that television-viewing has a measurable effect on perceptions of reality.

Two specific aspects of Cultivation Theory are "mainstreaming" and "resonance" (Griffin, 2001, p. 372). "Mainstreaming" refers to the homogenizing effect media have on the worldviews of the audience. Regardless of diverse life experiences, the consumption of common media tends to draw viewers towards a shared perspective which affects everyone to varying degrees. "Resonance" refers to the extent to which a consumer is able to identify with the media content. Those who see their lives reflected in the media are more likely to have their perceptions heavily influenced than those who do not believe the media is an accurate reflection of their life experiences. However, as previously stated, Gerbner's research suggests all consumers are affected to some extent.

It follows that because TV plays such a large role in the creation of culture and social understanding, society would take cues from media even concerning the most private aspects of life such as sexuality and intimacy. Since the inception of television, sexual content has steadily increased over the decades as censorship standards have

changed, allowing increasingly explicit sexual content and more sexually centered plotlines. Keren Eyal et. al. (2007) found, "…the general television environment in the early 2000s indicates that slightly more than 65% of television programs across network and cable channels contained some form of sexual content," (Eyal et. al., as cited in Carpentier, Stevens, Wu & Seely, 2003, p. 690). With TV filling the role as the primary medium through which humanity represents itself to itself, audiences look to television to learn about the human condition. Therefore, if even half of what one learns about humanity involves sexuality, the cultural message taken from this is that sexuality is an integral part of what it means to be human.

As previously stated, all regular consumers of media are impacted by these messages, but the group that is arguably most susceptible to agents of identity formation are children and adolescents. The American Psychological Association refers to prepubescence and pubescence as a time when young people begin to seriously consider who they are and who they wish to be (Gentry & Campbell, 2002). A large part of this process includes sexual exploration as teens for the first time become consciously aware of their sexualities. The tools of socialization which guide cultural norms, family, church, school, and the media, play a large role in adolescents' sexual socialization.

The family is the first exposure to socialization young people experience and it is here that they begin developing their ideas about sexuality. Parental musings about future grandchildren, questions about the child's dating life, and offhand remarks about infants being "ladies' men" or "heartbreakers" all carry sexual undertones. Even the traditional discussion of abstinence is not an admonishment not to have sex, but simply to wait to do so. All of these messages point towards the assumption that one day their child will be a sexual being. Even the Church, which is associated with abstinence and celibacy, is not "anti-sex" but rather "anti-premarital sex" similar to many parents. Thus both the family and church contribute to children's understanding of the seeming inevitability of sex and romance in their lives.

Another arena in which adolescents receive sexual socialization is at school. Most schools still traditionally teach abstinence in the classroom, however "[teens] learn more about sex in the hallways than in the classroom" (Steele, 1999). This means that in the course of the day, it is not through lectures about sexual responsibility that teens receive most of their sexual socialization, but in locker rooms and conversations about who is "hooking up" with whom. From peers, many young people receive largely sex positive messages and even social pressure to engage in sexual activity. School, like church and the home, helps to frame the general idea that not only is sexuality good, but that it is a necessary part of maturing.

The fourth sexual socialization tool which impacts many teens is the media. As previously stated, sexual content exists in over 65% of primetime television. J. D. Brown, Carolyn Tucker Halpern, and Kelly

Ladin L'Engle (as cited in Carpentier, Stevens, Wu, & Seely, 2017) claimed, "During our transition from childhood to adulthood, we learn from the lessons media, and television in particular, teach us about our sexual selves" (p. 687). Steele writes in her study on teenage sexuality and media, "teens' media practices should be understood as integral part of… the production and reproduction of sexual norms" (Steele, 1999, p. 335). Bradley Bond (2014) found, "Media may serve as influential sexual socialization agents, providing vital information about sex…." These quotes fall in line with Gerbner's Cultivation Theory. Each suggests that audiences, in this case teens, are highly susceptible to normative messages in the media and that it is partially through media that they learn socially acceptable sexual behaviors and perceptions. As previously mentioned, media effects are more significant for those who see their realities reflected. Therefore, for most teens, the heterosexuality they consume on TV and in movies resonates with them, and as a result they more readily accept what they are shown.

For straight youth, the sexual messages they receive are a source of validation, affirming their personal experiences with sexual desire and essentially giving them permission to act on these feelings. Nearly every depiction of heterosexuality in entertainment media is positive. Even in illustrations of sexual misconduct, it is rarely the sexuality itself that is the issue, simply the form it has taken. This framing of straight sexuality encourages teens to adopt the notion that straight sex is positive, an integral part of the human condition, and ought to play a significant role in one's life.

The LGB community, especially LGB youth, have historically been unable to experience this type of resonance with the media's representations of sexuality. In the decades preceding the 1990s, homosexual representation in the media was almost nonexistent. According to Bond's study concerning LGB media representation for queer adolescents, "The absence of interpersonal sexual socialization agents increases the importance of the media for sexually questioning teens" (Bond, 2014). The lack of role models available to many queer or questioning youth causes them to rely heavily on media representation of sexuality as a source of education and affirmation.

From the 1990s into the 2000s, more positive representations of LGB identities began to appear on television and in entertainment media. With shows such as *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word,* and *Glee,* unique in its depiction of queer youth, LGB adolescents are increasingly able to find themselves in the media and. Further, studies suggest that Cultivation Theory, specifically the mainstreaming effect, are supported by the fact that increased positive LGB representation correlates with more positive attitudes towards homosexuality (Calzo & Ward, 2009).

With this increased social acceptance, LGB slogans such as "Love is Love" and "Love is what makes us human"

rose in prominence. These taglines sent the message that although queer and straight people may be different, they are all just humans seeking love. According to C. Winter Han (2015), "…the modern gay rights movement has largely abandoned its emphasis on *difference from* the straight majority in favor of highlighting their similarities to the straight majority… Thus, a 'good gay' came to be… one who wanted to be married" (p. 190-191). This sentiment of equating the capacity and desire to love with one's belonging in society is a direct reflection of the implicit messages in sexual media. It is possible that part of the reason this approach was so successful in gaining wide support for the LGB community is that the larger society had already accepted this association between love and humanity, and therefore it was not a leap to recognize the validity in such claims as "Love is what makes us human." The problem with this slogan is that it further bolsters the larger perception of sexuality as a necessary condition for humanity and as a result aids in alienating another subset of the queer community, asexuals.

Ace youth experience sexual socialization in a unique way from heterosexuals and LGB individuals. As previously stated, sexuality is either implicitly or explicitly encouraged in some way by every major agent of socialization. While LGB youth often deal with stress related to not conforming to the "right kind" of sexuality, they can still relate to the general sentiments expressed by their peers and families. However, asexuals exist outside of this aspect of society. Starting from the first stages of puberty with discussions of crushes all the way to the adolescent "hook-up" stage, asexual youth remain unable to engage in what has been framed as an integral part of both "coming-of-age" and life itself.

As everyday support for LGB youth increases with the rise in media representation and popularity of school organizations such as Gay Straight Alliances, asexuals lag behind in this process and continue to lack role models with whom to identify. Therefore, like LGB youth, asexuals desperately need media representation and have historically struggled to find any. However, unlike LGB youth who have gained more representation over time, asexuals remain largely unseen in mainstream entertainment media. As a result, most ace youth spend years feeling confused and isolated. Lacking images to validate their lived experiences, many are unable to resonate with the sexual media they consume and do not have the language necessary to understand or explain their feelings.

Gerbner and Larry Gross conceptualized the effect of being unable to see oneself reflected in the media as "symbolic annihilation," saying, "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation," (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Individuals who cannot find themselves on screen receive the message that they are unimportant, alone in their experience, or simply do not exist at all. This is especially harmful for ace youth because as with all other adolescents, they

are seeking identity and affirmation especially through social comparison, yet are unable to find any content to suggest that their experiences are valid or acceptable.

On the rare occasion that asexuality is mentioned in mainstream media, it tends to occur in harmful contexts. The first time a major television program featured an asexual character was on Fox's hit show, *House M.D.* In an episode entitled "Better Half" which aired January 23, 2012, a married, self-identified asexual couple is admitted to the hospital. Over the course of the episode, the main character, Dr. House, insists that the husband's asexuality is a result of a medical disorder and is proven correct when it is discovered that the man has a pituitary tumor which is the source of his diminished sex drive (Yaitanes, Shore & Lingenfelter, 2012). By the end of the episode, it is also revealed that the wife had been feigning her asexuality to please her spouse. The overall message of the episode is that asexuals are either faking or ill because sexuality is an inherent part of every healthy human's identity.

There have also been news and talk show segments over the years where television personalities discuss asexuality, however these too tend to be problematic. For a short stretch in the early 2000s, David Jay, the creator of the first and largest online asexual community, Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), went on a string of television interviews to explain asexuality and faced remarks such as "I'm sure you'd like it if you tried it," "If you're not having sex, what's there to talk about?," and "Well, maybe it's repressed sexuality"

(husongshu, 2006). Just like the *House M.D.* episode, these comments reflect a deep ignorance concerning asexuality and a general skepticism about its validity as a sexuality.

As mainstream media implicitly exclude asexuals from society, and the LGB community continues to equate love with humanity, asexuals' ability to develop positive self-concepts suffers greatly. Many ace people identify as members of the asexual community and the queer community. According to Han (2015), "how [one] views himself depends largely on the meaning he gives to the various groups to which he belongs. If he evaluates his group positively, he is likely to have a positive sense of self… while if he defines his group negatively, he is likely to have a negative sense of self..." (p. 168). Therefore, in order for queer-identifying asexuals to have a positive self-evaluation they must have positive conceptions of both of the queer community and asexual community. This is difficult to achieve, however, when the media and LGB community continues to explicitly and implicitly promote anti-asexual messages. As a result, asexuals are alienated from their queer identity and shamed for their ace identity. In this context, developing a positive sense of self as a member of both groups is extremely difficult and forming a positive sense of self as a queer asexual can be a challenge.

Although failures in media have contributed largely to the isolation experienced by many asexuals, in recent years mainstream media creators have begun to make legitimate attempts at asexual

representation for the first time. In 2010 the short-lived ABC Family series, *Huge,* featured a brief scene wherein a character comes out as ace to a friend (Keene & Reaser, 2010). Though the scene received moderate backlash from the ace community as disingenuous and a conflation of asexuality and aromanticism, many still appreciated the attempt. In 2014, the USA network television comedy, *Sirens,* dedicated a whole subplot to a character's asexuality (Ensler & Sloan, 2014). The year 2017 saw unprecedented asexual representation in popular media. The show, *Shadowhunters*, which is based on Cassandra Clare's widely popular book series, *The Mortal Instruments*, recently revealed that they would stay true to the source material by keeping Raphael, a character who was ace-coded in the literature, asexual in the television series (Messiano, 2017). Meanwhile the smash hit, *Riverdale*, based on the classic comic book series, "Archie," dealt a huge blow to the community when the show writers decided to rewrite Archie, one of the most iconic asexual characters in popular culture, as straight (Alexander, 2017). This artistic choice was widely condemned by the ace community as many believed this was an act of deliberate erasure.

In the midst of this controversy, however, one of the most unanimously praised pieces of asexual representation was found in the dark comedy Netflix series, *Bojack Horseman*. One of the main characters, Todd, discovers his asexuality and comes out to his friend who responds with a simple yet validating, "Oh, well, that's okay" (Winfrey & Bob-Waksberg, 2016). The season features an asexual support group, a diverse range of ace people, an in-depth explanation of the orientation, and points to the possibility of a happy and fulfilling life outside of sexuality and romance. Though some criticized the show for once again assuming asexuality also denotes aromanticism, this small misstep was easily overlooked in light of the overwhelming positivity of the episode.

In light of the significant role the media has in shaping individual identities and larger cultural perceptions, the gradual inclusion of asexuals into popular media suggests a future where asexuality is widely acknowledged and accepted, much like LGB identities are today. There are, however, unique hurdles to acceptance which the ace community will have to overcome. One of them is the size of the community itself. Research suggests that asexuals make up only 1% of the global population (Miller, 2015). Though this percentage may be smaller due to many asexuals being unfamiliar with the identity and therefore neglecting to self-identify as such, the actual size of the community is likely not much larger. Unlike the LGB community which makes up a significant portion of the global population and therefore has the ability to mobilize massive social and political power with allies acting as welcome additions, the ace community would need to rely almost entirely on allies in order to achieve comparable size and strength. Furthermore, while accepting homosexuality required heterosexuals to augment their views on what constitutes sexuality, accepting

asexuality would require a redefinition of what constitutes a human.

Along with the classic evolutionary arguments that all non-straight people hear concerning reproduction, there is also the notion of "love" with which asexuals must contend. If one cannot love in a sexual or romantic sense, then soon their ability to love at all comes into question. For this reason ace people are often compared to robots and plants, called "cold," and generally accused of heartlessness. Despite these challenges however, many in the asexual community are optimistic about the future of ace representation. Receiving acceptance from major queer organizations such as the Gay Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and increasing acceptance by the queer community as a whole, many in the ace community hope this will lead to increased political and social power as well.

Ultimately because the media controls such a significant portion of the dominant cultural narratives, securing positive, inclusive representation is crucial for the well-being of minority groups. Both LGB and ace youth in particular rely heavily on media images as a source of validation and a gauge for how they themselves are perceived by the larger society. Therefore, when heterosexuality dominates sexual messages on television, queer audiences are liable to experience a level of isolation and erasure, likely reinforcing negative attitudes in the larger culture. Asexuals experience this in a unique way due to persistent associations of sexuality with humanity and the widespread exclusion of asexuals from mainstream media. As a result, ace people have the added challenge of asserting their existence and challenging the notion that sexuality is a necessary part of life. Despite the different ways LGB and ace people are impacted, compulsory heteronormative sexuality leads to underrepresentation and social ostracism for both communities as they are excluded from cultural narratives and consequently struggle to create positive self-evaluations and locate themselves within society.

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