

The New Age of Acceptance:

*Successful Representation of Sexual Minorities in Popular Television Shows*

Danielle Stickler

Saint Louis University

### **The New Age of Acceptance**

America was founded on the principles of diversity. The European nations of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were grounded in oppression and tyranny. The founders who took bold steps and pushed for equality in the New World promised the people a change. They promised a society far different from the one they came from; they promised freedom and equality. At the time, this meant the social acceptability of all economic classes; a system where all men and woman were equal and no longer were people labeled aristocrats or peasants. The founding fathers prided themselves in the fact that all Americans had equal opportunity and freedom to live a life without a ruling class. As a consequence for this push for freedom, American people ended up divided and diverse (Moen et al., 1999). America became a united country full of diverse people from different classes and origins, however, what came along with this now diverse country was hostility and racism of those who did not look to be of Aryan race or class.

America is a nation of uncommon racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. People have been socialized into certain groups based on gender, race, and sexual orientation (Gibson, 2006). Like it or not, America classifies people based on what is seen in the media (Gibson, 2006). The media has become of the main outlets for stereotypical images and messages. The consumers of media are forced to believe that what they see on TV to be true and real and that the characters in the shows reflect real people in everyday life. Therefore, this leads to perceptions about certain groups and minorities to be altered and untrue.

It is a fact that Americans love to watch television (Moen et al., 1999). The images and messages seen on television are cultivated into mainstream society and perceptions about certain minorities can be traced back to certain television programs (Gerbner, 1976).

George Gerbner's Cultivation theory addresses the idea that television has become the main source of storytelling in today's society and that over a long period of time the images and messages influence the consumer's perceptions on everyday life.

Television's representation of sexual minorities has influenced the way Americans think and understand homosexuality (Gross, 2001). Americans are aware of different forms of inequality. This awareness can be traced back to stories told in the mass media (Perrucci & Wysong, 2003). Media stories and text can deeply influence and drive stereotypes about sexual minorities and the media has set a strict frame for all gay characters. When these frames are over generalized or when they become too exaggerated; they become a stereotype.

A stereotype is a belief that reflects the traits applied to members of a certain group (Lind, 2004). Stereotypes about minority groups can be traced back to the start of the New World. Stereotypes are an important component of prejudice and have the tendency to attach negative emotions to a group (Lind, 2004). The stereotypes and prejudices seen in the media often lead to discrimination. Discrimination occurs when people are treated different and unequally just because they belong to a certain group (Lind, 2004). Media not only helps maintain the status quo in society, but it also reinforces and dictates the stereotypes of particular minorities, especially homosexuals. The groups that have the power and privilege to promote the dominant ideology are constantly framing and stereotyping homosexuals. This leads to media consumers believing that all homosexuals are like the characters they see on television. However in recent years, certain television shows are pushing against the norm and cultivating new images and messages that are more positive toward sexual minorities (Lind, 2004).

Before the shift in new portrayal of gay couple on television in the 1960s and early 1970s gay couples represented on television were full of derogatory comments and jokes. Television producers feared public uproar, so they did not show any acceptance toward homosexuality (Gibson, 2006). The early shows that had the subject of homosexuality first appeared in the mid-1950s. These shows appealed to the fears and curiosity of audience members and showed how the gay community was subject to diseases and how homosexuality led to the demise of children (Gibson, 2006).

Throughout the years homosexual minorities were shown were little in television (Gibson, 2006). It wasn't until 1998 with *Will & Grace* did mainstream and prime-time TV have exposure to a gay couple. As years went on, shows little by little starting integrating more gay characters into their shows. But, still the characters that played the 'gay role' were playing into the stereotypes that the dominant ideology reflected. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which popular drama television shows (*Grey's Anatomy* and *Glee*) portray sexual minorities and how they challenge preexisting frames and stereotypes already dictated in the media. It is intended to find stereotypes that go against the "norm" and to see if any of the characters in these shows play into certain stereotypes.

### **Literature Review**

According to Healey (1995), media consumers make snap judgments about people and things, this is necessary because since consumers live in a complex society they do not have time to think about the whole person. So media consumers are constantly categorizing people into their most obvious characteristics and these classifications dictate out behavior towards them. Television writers only have 43 minutes to make their program understandable to the audience. So they feed on stereotypes and broad generalizations of a

social group in order for the audience to fully grasp the key characteristics of that character without going into great detail.

When these generalizations become too simplistic they become stereotypes. Stereotypes reflect the characteristics of a group that people think are the most important and that apply to all members of a group. They deny the presence and importance of any real and unique individual characteristics. Many common stereotypes of gay and lesbian characters in television are the overly flamboyant male who is the best friend with the lead woman and share the same attributes of a female. On the other side, lesbians are often stereotyped as overly masculine by wearing baggy clothes to hide all femininity. Television is moving along and common stereotypes are shifting and the representation of sexual minorities is changing once again and giving the gay community a positive foothold in television.

A growing number of television programs feature homosexual characters (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2007; Bonds-Raacke & Cady, 2007; Gibson, 2006; Raley & Lucas, 2006). For example, Battles & Hilton-Morrow (2007) concluded that the current images of homosexuals are changing the dominant stereotypes. They argue that the character of Will, from *Will & Grace*, could be threatening to the ideology of heteronormativity because he offers a different side and image of a homosexual. They also argue that not only does *Will & Grace* present the acceptance of gays it offers a different image and model that goes against the stereotypes and frames set up by other television shows. Gibson (2006) found that in the past, before shows like *Will & Grace* offered a new façade to the gay characters, they were separated into five different stereotypical categories: 1) the villain or pervert, 2) the tragic and suicidal person, 3) the overly dramatic and outgoing comedian, 4) the educator and

spokesperson for the gay community, 5) the best friend. Throughout the course of history homosexual characters have stepped out of these frames and have become a more central part of the program and the characters are leading to a new acceptance of homosexuals not only in television, but also mainstream society.

Television frames of homosexual characters dictate and perpetuate the stereotypes of mainstream society (Entman, 2007; Jagosh, 2002; Lind, 2009; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Entman (2007) found that framing is the process of gathering elements of perceived reality and putting them together to promote a particular interpretation and that fully developed frames influence and dictate stereotypes. Jagosh (2002) interviewed 20 parents of gay children and asked them to uncover what their experiences had been after finding out they had a gay or lesbian child. He concluded that when a child comes out to their parents there is often a negative response evoked because mass media have outlined a gay stereotype that is not “okay”. Parents are fearful that their child will be categorized and put into the framework of the gay and lesbians seen on television. Mass media has contributed to the oppression of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. For parents who have grown up with culturally negative messages of homosexuals depicted in the media have made their process of accepting a gay child to be extremely challenging. However, with new frames being enforced within the media, the understanding and accepting of homosexuals is changing and is leading to this new age of acceptance.

Television's representation of sexual minorities has influenced the way Americans think and understand homosexuality (Holtzman, 2000; Gibson, 2006; Gross, 2001; Lind, 2004). Lind (2004) found that much of what we know about care about, and think is important is based on what we see in the media. Lind's article discusses how television sets

a particular discourse and ideology in the understanding and thinking of certain groups of people. TV is a global connection that brings people together and allows for people to share a similar set of beliefs system. The media helps maintain the status quo in which certain groups in our society have access to the power and sets the tone for the rest of the world to see. Since more recent television shows are offering a new frame of homosexuality it is leading to the widespread acceptability of the gay community. Holtzman (2000) found that the issue of homosexuality is a challenging topic because it is slowly starting to be culturally accepted and with sexual minorities growing presence in the media, homosexuality is becoming more accepted in society. The dominant hegemonic belief has been that heterosexuality is natural and homosexuality is unnatural. The scarcity of gay and lesbian characters and themes and negative stereotypes have been popular in media's contribution to this ideology and Holtzman argued that with the more images of gay character being shown on television the dominant ideology is changing and is influencing the way Americans think and understand homosexuality.

Research already dictates that a growing number of television programs feature homosexual characters and that televisions representation of sexual minorities has influenced the way Americans think and understand homosexuality. As television is moving into this new age of acceptance and more gay, lesbian, and bisexuals are making their way into popular prime-time television stereotypes are changing and the media frames that homosexual characters were one categorized have disappeared.

It was until 2005 with Shonda Rhimes' hit TV show *Grey's Anatomy* did consumers of the hit drama see a new image for sexual minorities and a new type of "gay" that broke away from the previous stereotypes and showed the normalcy of homosexual couples. The

lesbian couples in her show were very different from anything ever seen before on TV. This new portrayal of homosexuals marked a turning point for television. Today, it is rare to hear about shows like *Glee* and *Grey's Anatomy* getting complaints about the nature of their gay couples. This paper will examine the particular media frames: the 'gay couple', the 'gay kid', the 'lesbian', the 'bisexual', and the 'lesbian couple'. In doing so, there will be some characters in the shows that play into these roles and stereotypes and there will be others that totally break away from these stereotypes and offer a new side to the 'homosexual' character that has not been seen before in the media.

### **Media Examples & Methods**

*Grey's Anatomy* is a widely popular American drama series. Since it first aired in 2005 audience members have been captivated by the many twists and turns that happen within the walls of Seattle Grace hospital. Shonda Rhimes, the writer of the show, created a cast of characters that is full of minority groups and sexual minorities. Part of the reason why this show was chosen to be analyzed is because of its the many portrayals of gay couples. Two of the main characters in the show, Callie Torres and Arizona Robbins, are not only a vital part of the power structure within Seattle Grace Hospital, but they are a lesbian couple that is beloved by all the other doctors. For four out of the nine seasons, viewers of the show have been following the lives of this couple and have watched as the many dramatic events of their relationship has unfolded. This couple goes against all stereotypes that have been portrayed in the media before and gives a fresh new insight on the homosexual community.

*Glee*, on the other hand, is a popular teenager drama series that follows the lives of high school teenagers and the many challenges they face on an everyday basis. The cast is



full of social outcasts that have been deemed unpopular by the other kids at school. The show is full of important messages ranging from anti-bullying to acceptance of homosexuals. The homosexual characters in the show play into certain stereotypes already dictated by the media, but some of the characters challenge these stereotypes.

To analyze these shows a frame analysis will be used to see if the characters fall into certain frames and stereotypes and if others fall outside of those confines and recreate these frames. The data will be analyzed to identify common themes and patterns that emerge in media text by the use of Netflix. The frames that gay characters are fitting into are changing which in return may be changing the perceptions that people have on gay couples. Framing in the media reinforces the dominant public culture and ideology. Framing focuses on to what extent something or someone is presented, and it has the power to create meaning and context. If the context is changed by a frame, then the meaning is changed. The homosexual characters in *Grey's Anatomy* and *Glee* both play into certain frames and create new frames. An analysis of these frames will try to explore if certain stereotypes are reinforced or if new ones are created.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

The concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text (Entman, 1993). Framing involves two key components: selection and salience (Entman, 1993). To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text. Frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is subject to communication. Salience means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. An increase in salience enhances the chances that the information will be received, processed, and understood by media consumers (Entman, 1993).

Frames will only be effective if it stays within the guidelines of the receiver's belief system (Entman, 1993). These frames and closely related concepts such as categories, scripts, or stereotypes call upon mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide an individual's processing of information. Frames select and call attention to particular aspects of the reality described, which also means that frames direct attention away from other aspects. The concept of framing directs media consumer's attention to the details of how a certain character should act and look. Framing not only reinforces stereotypes but also creates them (Entman, 1993).

### **Grey's Anatomy & Glee Analysis**

When *Grey's Anatomy* first aired in 2005 people across the nation fell in love with the many characters and their dramatic and captivating lives. The wide range of characters made the show so applicable to diverse audiences and showed a mash up of characters that people could not help but fall in love with. The show has its many frames that characters fall into: 'the best friend', 'the lover', 'the hater', 'the know it all', 'the jock', 'the sweetheart', but this analysis goes deeper into these frames and looks at how specific characters are creating their own frames that have never been seen in the media before; particularly analyzing the 'gay couple', 'the bisexual', 'the lesbian', and the 'lesbian couple' frames; and how the characters are redefining these preexisting stereotypes.

It was not until season four did viewers of *Grey's Anatomy* first get exposed to the many different frames of gay couples and homosexual characters. In season four episode, The Becoming, viewers were not only watching Callie figure out her sexual orientation but viewers were also entranced with a sub-plot of a gay military couple. This episode was the first episode to have a gay couple that broke away from the once existence frame that all

‘gay couples’ in the media used to play into. When the episode first started audience members hearts bleed for the war hero who could no longer serve his country. Then as the episode progressed the man’s best friend comes into picture. However, this was not his best friend, this man was tall, dark, and handsome. The kind of man that every woman dreams of. However, he was not the patient’s best friend, but his lover. This gay military couple went against what audience members thought they knew about homosexual couples and offered a new side to homosexual couples that had never been seen before on television. It was rare on television to see two men love so deeply and for both of them to be hyper-masculinized. These military men torn apart by law, made viewers sympathetic to their love and showed a new side to homosexual couples that broke away from current stereotypes and ideas that viewers had. *Grey’s Anatomy* offers the audience a new set of frames of homosexual characters that has never been explored by other television shows before.

Callie Torres, one of the main characters and doctors, offers a new frame for the ‘bisexual’ that took audience members by surprise. When Callie first joined the cast of *Grey’s Anatomy*, viewers watched her fall in and out of love with George, a fellow doctor. So when this overly feminine character was trying to discover her feelings for women, *Grey’s Anatomy* broke yet another frame that was previously dictated by the media, ‘the bisexual’. In shows before *Grey’s Anatomy*, the ‘bisexual’ character was not widely popular. Shows either had a full gay character or fully lesbian character. So, when Callie Torres found out she loved women over men, *Grey’s Anatomy* became the first show to offer a new frame and stereotype for the ‘bisexual’ character. In season four’s episode, Freedom Part: I, Callie and viewers discover that she loves women more than men. Since the end of season

three, audience members have struggled with Callie's dysfunction marriage and her unhappiness, so when she finally finds love and happiness it was a bittersweet moment.

*Grey's Anatomy* broke another frame when the character of Arizona Robbins came into the show in season five. Since season four the steady flow and sub-plots of gay characters had made their way into the show. But it was not until season five did Grey's finally fill the role of the 'lesbian'. Arizona Robbins, an attending surgeon and main character, is a blonde hair blue eyed bombshell that loves to love women. Her spunk and charisma made her irresistible and so loveable to the audience members. In season five's episode, Beat Your Heart Out, 'the lesbian' frame was broken when she kissed Callie. No longer was a lesbian character in the media seen as the overly masculine female, instead Arizona Robbins' character showed the complete opposite. *Grey's Anatomy's* love relationships have taken audience members for a wild ride, but when Callie and Arizona fell in love it just seemed natural and not out of the ordinary.

In the season seven episode, White Wedding, for the first time in prime-time television drama, there was a lesbian wedding. Standing at the alter were two women dress head to toe in white expressing their love for one another. The frame of the 'lesbian couple' previously set forth by the media was changed. Audience members had come to know that a lesbian couple was made up of two women, one of those two being very masculine and almost manly. So when two very attractive women get married it went against the preconceived notions of gay marriage and showed the love that Callie and Arizona shared for each other.

*Grey's Anatomy* is an extremely popular drama series on prime time television. Its plot line and characters make the show captivating to viewers. Not only is *Grey's Anatomy*

known for its prime-time success, it is known for the social issues it conquers and the stereotypes it breaks. Previous shows have set certain frames for 'gay couples', 'bisexuals', 'lesbians', and 'lesbian couples'. *Grey's Anatomy* broke all preconceived notions and ideas about these certain groups of people and shed light onto a new side of the homosexual community that media consumers had yet to be exposed to. It broke down stereotypes and recreated new ideas and images of homosexuals in the media.

*Glee* has taken television dramas to the next level and has tackled many controversial topics ranging from bullying to school shootings since its start in 2009. *Glee* has become a hugely successful series and the characters within the show not only fall within the confines of the stereotypical high school frames, but also it has been successful in recreating stereotypes and media frames. In *Glee's* Pilot episode viewers were introduced to all of the main characters. And each of the main characters fell into a particular frame that media. Writers were sure to include in their cast 'the jock', 'the bimbo', 'the annoying girl', and 'the gay kid'. Each character fell into their frame and audience members knew exactly who they were without the writers having to script it in.

When viewers were first introduced to Kurt Hummel, 'the gay kid', audience members could immediately tell he was gay. He was dressed in a bright blue shirt with sunglasses on it, his hair was perfectly intact, and his collared shirt matched perfectly to his tee shirt. And then once he opened his mouth and began to speak audience members first impressions were confirmed to be true. His overly feminine voice made it a fact that he was gay. Kurt Hummel never once said out loud that he was gay, it was always just assumed to be true it was not until the third episode, Acafellas, did he come out and say he was gay. The way the character of Kurt Hummel acted and presented himself played into every stereotype

that has been seen in the media since the 1970s. He was flamboyant, dressed to perfection, the best friend to the female lead, and he loved to sing. With all of these things put together *Glee* had successfully filled the role of the ‘gay kid’ perfectly. *Glee* did play into a frame that media had previously dictated, but what *Glee* had also done is shed a new light on the gay community and brought attention to a wide range of gay characters that were framed differently than the gay character in media before them.

*Glee* has had many twist and turns throughout its four seasons, the characters of McKinley High have stood strong in the face of adversity and harsh bullying. In season two’s episode, Born the Way, viewers were sent a clear message about accepting people the way they are. In the episodes concluding moments the Glee club sang the hit song *Born This Way* by Lady Gaga. In their performance they all wore shirts that had an expression written on it that society deemed a flaw. In the final scene, viewers saw Santana, a strong female lead in the show, wearing a shirt that says ‘lesbian’. She was framed to be the popular girl that had all the boys falling for her the entire first season. So, when she finally showed her true self, she broke away from the stereotypical ‘lesbian’ frame and offered a new representation to homosexuals in the media.

When season two’s episode, Rumors, aired everything that consumers once thought they knew about lesbianism was shattered. Santana Lopez came out of the closet and told fellow Glee club members that she was gay. Santana, also, played the character of ‘the head cheerleader bitch’. She was rude and mean to other kids that were below her on the social status hierarchy. She was popular, beautiful, and envied by all of the other kids. So when she became ‘the lesbian’ on the show, it sent a shockwave through media perpetuated stereotypes that were once known to be true. How could it be, that this bombshell babe be a

lesbian? Her character challenged every single stereotype and frame of lesbians that came before her. She was hyper feminized and in no way showed any sign of masculinity. Her character offered a new side to lesbianism that was very rarely seen on television before. The only other character on television at the time that also offered a new side to lesbianism was Arizona Robbins from *Grey's Anatomy*.

Glee has played into certain frames like 'the gay kid' with Kurt, but it has also broken a preexisting frame of 'the lesbian' with Santana. It has also broken another preexisting stereotyping and frame with 'the bisexual'. Brittany, Santana's love interest, is a fellow cheerleader and popular kid. She is sexually confused and has had her fair share amount of male counterparts. But her true happiness is with Santana. In season three's episode, I Kissed A Girl, Brittany confesses her love for Santana. Her and Santana's relationship broke all ideas about 'lesbian couples'. Instead of focusing on how each person looked or acted, *Glee* focused on the love their relationship was about. They showed viewers that to be lesbian is nothing to be ashamed of and that people should be free to choose who and how they love.

*Glee* and *Grey's Anatomy* are two popular television shows that are showing successful representations of sexual minorities. These shows are moving away from the frames and stereotypes previously set forth by the media and they are recreating the image of the homosexual. By these shows showing the normalcy of these gay characters, they are contributing factors to the social acceptability of the homosexual community. *Glee* and *Grey's Anatomy* are reframing the 'gay kid', the 'lesbian', the 'bisexual', the 'gay couple', and the 'lesbian couple' and are offering a new side to these frames that have never been seen before in the media.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the extent to which popular television shows (*Grey's Anatomy* and *Glee*) portray sexual minorities and how they challenge preexisting frames and stereotypes already dictated in the media. While analyzing several episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* and *Glee* and the frames of sexual minorities within these shows, the results showed that they successfully portrayed sexual minorities. They both go against the preconceived hegemonic ideas that media consumers have been accustomed to.

Much research has found that television's representation of sexual minorities has influenced the way Americans think and understand homosexuality and that media stories and text can deeply influence and drive stereotypes about sexual minorities. The media has set a strict frame for all gay characters. When these frames are over generalized or when they become too exaggerated; they become a stereotype. The stereotypes that are dictated by the media directly affect how media consumers view the gay community in real life.

In the future, a study can be done to test if media consumer's perceptions homosexuals have changed after watching the episodes analyzed in this study. A pre-test can be given to participants asking them about their ideas and stereotypes they know of about 'gay couple', 'a gay kid', a 'lesbian', a 'bisexual', and a 'lesbian couple'. Then they would be asked to watch the shows. After watching the shows they will be asked a series of questions to see if their ideas about those groups of people have changed in any way. If this study works effectively the stereotypes they listed before the media intervention would be changed after.

When the frames become stereotypes they directly influence the way people think about sexual minorities. This analysis of *Grey's Anatomy* and *Glee* has shown that these



shows break away from these frames and stereotypes held by many media consumers. And the characters in these shows offer a new side and image of the gay community that has never been seen before. It is the breakdown of these frames that will perpetuate new and more appropriate stereotypes for homosexuals.

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