Abstract

The portrayal of gay male characters on television has changed since the introduction of the subgroup in 1969. Since that time, four main eras of gay male representation have been established: the Stonewall Era, the GRID Era, the DOMA Era, and finally the Marriage Era. Although a background on all the eras is provided, the main focus of the textual analysis of television shows containing gay male characters comes from the latter time period, the Marriage Era. The progression in acceptance of homosexuality by the heterosexual majority is evident through the changing eras. The Stonewall Era exhibited gay males as mentally ill; the GRID Era displayed gay males as victims and spreaders of the AIDS virus; the DOMA Era depicted gay males as highly promiscuous, but also wonderful friends; and the Marriage Era characterized gay males as seeking long term romantic relationships with the final outcome of obtaining children.

Introduction

It is undeniable the influence society holds over television. Since the introduction of the medium, major cultural events and movements throughout American history have not only defined whole generations, but have also shaped the content and dictated the course of popular television programming. From 9/11 to the civil rights movement, major cultural developments have been reflected in individual episodes throughout scripted television, as well as affected entire season arcs, led to the introduction of supporting characters, and influenced the creation of entirely new programs.

The latest of these movements to be reflected in television programming is the gay rights movement. Known as the civil rights movement of the millennium, the battle for gay rights has actually been developing in the United States for over forty years (Walters, 2003). In that time, cultural events have taken place that have both influenced the attitudes of American citizens as a whole, as well as dictated program content, and more particularly, character development as pertained to the homosexual community. Important cultural events such as the Stonewall Riots in 1969, the AIDS
epidemic starting in 1982, the passage of the DOMA act in 1996, and the granting of same-sex marriage licenses in San Francisco, California in 2004 have all led to the formation of different eras of the gay male character on television. Within each of these eras, these homosexual characters can be seen exhibiting stereotypical characteristics that emulate that era’s societal sentiment on the issue of homosexuality at the time.

**Background/Context**

*The Stonewall Era:*

The Stonewall Riots both wrought on the creation of the gay rights movement itself, as well as initiated the introduction of homosexual characters to television (Walters, 2003). On the night of June 27th, 1969, four cops raided the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar in Greenwich Village that at the time was owned and operated by the Italian mafia. Raids of homosexual bars were a common occurrence during the time period, and considered a result of the stereotypical belief that homosexual men were weak, feminine, and incapable of defending themselves (Myrie, 2005). New York policemen consistently entered gay bars in order to “arrest transvestites, scare patrons, and collect bribes” (Walters, 2003). Although there is no definitive explanation for what initiated the Stonewall riots, the outcome has been considered the collective awakening of the gay liberation movement. Homosexual patrons of the Stonewall Inn reacted to the raid by throwing bottles and other objects in the direction of the four policemen. As a result, additional policemen were called to the area in order to curb the destructive response of the patrons, which instead, only worked to further provoke the crowd. Soon, the riot moved to the streets and bricks were added to the objects being hurled at the police (Gamson, 1998). By the end, dozens of rioters were arrested and beaten severely by the New York City police. The result was a universal banding of the homosexual community in order to battle discriminatory acts against gay men and lesbians. This conviction came to commonly be known as the gay rights movement, and brought the plights of the homosexual community to a national and eventually international level.
Although considered a triumph in the history of the battle for homosexual rights, immediately following 1969 the increased focus on homosexuality wrought on stereotypical and unrealistic views of the community by the heterosexual majority (Russo, 1997). These stereotypical sentiments were reflected best within television programming during the time period. Declared the Stonewall era of television, homosexual characters were displayed as “mentally unfit perpetrators of sodomy, particularly against children” (Wasdin, 2006). Not yet influential enough to demand leading roles, homosexual characters were reserved for story arcs that lasted no longer than an individual episode. Throughout the 1970’s, popular shows such as N.Y.P.D, and Marcus Welby, M.D. showcased gay characters that fully embodied these maniacal stereotypes.


In season two, episode 22, immediately following the Stonewall Riots, the popular ABC drama N.Y.P.D. established and illustrated the first era of gay male characters on television. In the episode “Everybody Loved Him” written by Heywood Gould, the homosexual male character Nick Gipetto, played by Walter McGinn, is depicted as a closeted elevator operator with psychopathic tendencies. Within the episode Gipetto targets a successful television producer living within the building in which he works (Russo, 1997). The initial climax within the episode occurred when Gipetto is seen murdering the attractive and heterosexual television producer within the victim’s high-rise apartment. The deranged characteristic’s of McGinn’s character is explained as a result of his homosexual attraction to the heterosexual male target. The character’s insanity and murderous rage is a prime example of the stereotypical portrayal of homosexual male characters during the era.

**1974: Marcus Welby, M.D. – “The Outrage”**

Perhaps the best-known depiction of disturbed homosexual characters during the Stonewall era came from another popular ABC drama during the time period, Marcus Welby, M.D. Within the episode “The Outrage,” a young high school boy by the name of Ted is sexually molested by his male science
teacher Bill Swanson, played by Edward Winter. Bill, who blatantly identifies as homosexual, urges the young boy to keep silent about the altercation. However, later in the episode Bill is caught attempting to sexually molest another male classmate of Teds. Upon his own request, the teacher is transferred to a mental hospital, solidifying his insanity while simultaneously explaining it as a result of his homosexuality. The episode was a fervent attack on homosexual males across the nation and undoubtedly influenced the national view of homosexuality as a deranged illness (Hart, 2000).

Furthermore, the closing scene of the episode consisted of a patriarchal police sergeant comforting Ted by reassuring the young boy that he handled the situation “like a real man,” as opposed to a homosexual man.

**The GRID Era:**

The AIDS virus is perhaps the greatest epidemic of the present international landscape. However, prior to any factual understanding of the disease, the virus was universally considered a product of the homosexual community. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, gay males were initially among the infected due to the increased risk of bleeding during homosexual intercourse, blood being the transportation system of the virus (Creekmur & Doty, 1995). In July of 1981, Dr. Conant of the Center for Disease Control issued a statement in The New York Times stating “there was no apparent danger to non homosexuals from contagion” of the AIDS virus (Andreoli, 2005). Immediately the disease, which had yet to be officially named as AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, by the CDC was instead declared the “gay cancer” or GRID, better known as gay-related immune deficiency. Fear enveloped the nation, particularly the fear of homosexuals. Prior to an accurate understanding of the transmission of the AIDS virus, heterosexual counterparts chastised the homosexual community, predominantly gay men, for developing the disease as well as transferring it to innocent heterosexual victims. Nowhere was this sentiment better displayed than on national television at the time.
Following 1982, the year terms such as “gay cancer” and GRID shrouded the nation; gay male characters on television began an obvious shift from the mentally unstable and psychopathic characters of the Stonewall era. In its place began an equally as stereotyped transition into the second era of gay male representation on television, known as the GRID era. Within this time period gay male characters were portrayed as victims and spreaders of the AIDS virus. Although increased focus on the homosexual community was evident, due to the negative attitudes toward the minority group, gay male characters continued to remain in supporting roles within individual episodes of various television programs. However an increased frequency of such characters was apparent (Walters, 2003). Television shows such as St. Elsewhere and Midnight Caller included storylines with homosexual characters both battling and transmitting AIDS, or as it was commonly known then, GRID.

1983: St. Elsewhere – “AIDS and Comfort”

The popular NBC drama, St. Elsewhere, was the first medical drama on American broadcast television to deal with the AIDS pandemic (Hart, 2004). Within episode nine of the second season, Boston politician Anthony Gifford, played by Michael Brandon, checks into St. Eligius Hospital, the setting of the series, and is immediately diagnosed as suffering from AIDS. Instant panic fills the hospital due to a lack of knowledge on how the disease is transmitted. Major characters declare their fear of contraction while Gifford privately admits his past sexual encounters with men, implying his path of infection was a result of his homosexuality. The episode resembled the national paranoia of the time that homosexuals were nothing more than carriers of an infectious fatal disease, and should be treated as such.

1988: Midnight Caller – “After it Happened”

In episode three of the first season of the NBC drama Midnight Caller, Jack Killian, the protagonist of the series, played by Gary Cole, is approached by his pregnant ex-girlfriend who claims she has been infected with AIDS. The female character would like Jack’s help in finding and informing
the man who both impregnated and infected her with the disease. However, once Jack locates the man, Mike Barnes, played by Richard Cox, he learns that Barnes is fully aware of his infection and is knowingly spreading the disease to other people. Although many of Barnes victims are discovered to be women the character nevertheless identifies as homosexual, even abandoning his former partner Ross once he begins displaying symptoms of the fatal virus (Gamson, 1998). Barnes is not only portrayed as a victim of AIDS, but serves in establishing the heterosexual viewpoint that homosexual men are knowledgeable spreaders of the disease; a viewpoint that unfortunately embodied the GRID era of gay male representation on television.

**The DOMA Era:**

Three years prior to the enactment of the DOMA act, better known as the Defense of Marriage Act, in the 1993 case *Baehr v. Miike*, the Supreme Court of Hawaii ruled that “the state must show a compelling interest in prohibiting same sex marriage” (Doty, 1993). Following the ruling, a national panic ensued among opponents of same sex marriage. Their fear was that Hawaii was heading in the direction of legalizing gay marriage, and that due to the Full Faith and Credit Clause of the US Constitution all other states would legally be required to recognize any marriage, homosexual or not, from the state, even if the state itself had not legalized gay marriage (Andreoli, 2005). As a result, in order to free states from the obligation of recognizing homosexual marriage from other states, the DOMA act was formed and signed into law by President Bill Clinton on September 21st, 1996. Once enacted, the act not only freed states from the Full Faith and Credit Clause, it also contained a section in which marriage was federally defined as a legal union solely between a man and a woman, excluding same sex partners from the definition.

Although the DOMA act was a colossal blow to the gay liberation movement, it nevertheless increased the focus on the issue of gay rights. On television, gay characters were no longer reserved for individual episodes only. Popular shows such as *Sex and the City* brought gay characters to pivotal
supporting roles that lasted over whole seasons and in some cases throughout entire series. The NBC hit sitcom *Will & Grace* established that a gay male character in a principal role on television was a recipe for success (Kanner, 2003). Regardless of the enactment of DOMA, popular shows across all television networks solidified that the acceptance of homosexuality and equalized rights was on the rise and that television was its vehicle.

Although tolerance towards homosexuality was increasing, the gay male characters comprising the DOMA era were rarely allowed to display same-sex romantic relations. Characters within this time period, no matter their prevalence, utilized their homosexuality as comic and emotional support for their character’s heterosexual counterparts, originating the term “gay best-friend.” Rarely seen in functioning, stable relationships, gay male characters were instead depicted as overtly promiscuous and incapable of commitment. It was not until the turn of the millennium that two gay male characters were even seen kissing on television, and not surprisingly, the kiss was done between two friends rather than a romantically involved couple (Kanner, 2003). However, although gay male characters within the DOMA era were restricted from realistic portrayals, the growing pervasiveness of these characters on television was not only evident, but a precursor of what was to come.

**1998 – 2006: Will & Grace**

The greatest triumph for the gay liberation movement during the DOMA era came from the NBC hit, *Will & Grace*. To this day the sitcom remains the most successful television series with gay characters in principal roles (Kanner, 2003). Unfortunately these characters are also the best illustration of the DOMA era of character representation and the lack of realistic portrayals that embodies the time period. The character of Jack McFarland, played by Sean Hayes, was the epitome of promiscuity. His flamboyant and superficial nature led him from relationship to relationship without any sign of settlement. Will Truman, the lead character played by Eric McCormack, was considerably less promiscuous, but often single throughout most of the show’s run (Kanner, 2003). However, even as Will
finds love near the end of the series and Jack continues his loose nature, neither character is seen physically interacting with their romantic counterparts. A lack of physical and romantic touch among homosexual characters was considered a result of society’s discomfort with the subject. In response to this obvious lack of interaction, particularly same-sex kissing, *Will & Grace* responded by initiating a kiss between Jack and Will in season 2’s episode, “Acting Out.” However, the fact that Will and Jack were friends and not lovers and that the kiss was not romantic in nature, meant that what was intended to be a triumph for gay rights, was actually another example of the heterosexual community’s uneasiness with the subject (Kanner, 2003). Furthermore, in order to supplement the lack of homosexual romantic relationships within a show that focused on such, both Will and Jack were given female counterparts in order to replace the need for romance. Will is seen as a support system for best friend Grace’s many romantic involvements, directing her down the right path that he himself cannot follow. Jack at one point jokingly declares Karen to be “the only gay man for him,” effectively declaring that his character will never find a stable relationship. *Will & Grace* truly was a victory for the gay rights movement; however, the unrealistic and subdued portrayal of the sitcom’s leading gay male characters was a direct result of the national sentiment toward homosexuality during the DOMA era.

**1998 – 2004: *Sex and the City***

Another pertinent example of the “gay best-friend” pattern exhibited throughout the DOMA era came from the popular HBO series, *Sex and the City*. Although the show focuses on four women and their close friendship, two of the women maintain close relationships with gay male characters. Carrie, the focus of the show, possesses a strong friendship with the gay character Stanford Blanch, played by Willie Garson; Charlotte, one of the four leading women, befriends Anthony Marentino, a gay event planner played by Mario Cantone. Both gay male characters are rarely seen in romantic relationships (Vilanch, 2005). Instead, the characters exist as therapeutic support systems for their female counterparts, stereotypically providing the women with both relationship and fashion advice. Anthony
in particular discusses his promiscuity on several occasions but is never seen with a partner on screen until the release of the second film based upon the series in 2010. Stanford maintains only one romantic relationship throughout the televised series, but is never seen engaging in physical interaction with the man. Considering the racy nature of the show, the fact that both gay male characters are reserved for unrealistic supporting roles works to reflect the nature of the DOMA era.

**The Marriage Era:**

The final era of gay male character representation and the focus of this qualitative study are the San Francisco, California same-sex weddings in 2004. Between February 12 and March 11 of that year, newly elected San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom issued a directive to the city-county clerk to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples (Wasdin, 2006). Although the request directly violated state laws claiming marriage to between one man and one woman, Newson declared that denying homosexuals the right to marry clearly violated California’s Equal Protection Clause that outlaws all forms of discrimination. By the time the California Supreme Court halted any further marriages to take place; nearly 4,000 same-sex couples had been issued marriage licenses. Although the legality of the marriages was later void on August 12, 2004, the incident is considered a landmark achievement for the gay rights movement (Wasdin, 2006). Months later the state of Massachusetts’s officially legalized gay marriage. Since then 4 other states: Iowa, Connecticut, Vermont and New Hampshire, began granting gay marriage licenses as well (. The recognition of gay marriage and the granting of such rights instantly hit its largest platform following the events in San Francisco and nowhere better was this visible than on the largest platform of all, television.

Following the San Francisco marriage affair, gay male characters on television entered the final era to be analyzed, the present day Marriage era. Throughout this time period, an increased focus on stable homosexual male romantic relationships has appeared across the television medium. Characters have been seen addressing the issue of same-sex marriage rights directly well simultaneously exhibiting
heterosexual inspired relationships, such as entering long term relationships, getting married, and even having children. The shows to be later analyzed within this era are Queer as Folk, Modern Family, and Glee.

Theory and Literature Review

In order to understand why cultural events in society have led to shifting portrayals of the homosexual male character on television, major theories must be applied that provide a proper framework for this particular study. Through the Feminist Critique Theory, the following research intends to provide evidence showing that the portrayal of homosexual males in television programming is stereotypically weak and effeminate in nature, supporting the patriarchal mainstream view of masculinity as being derived from the heterosexual male. Due to this fact, homosexual male characters have remained in stereotype led positions that are the basis of each of the aforementioned eras, shifting between eras based upon the heterosexual masculine viewpoint at the time. From this establishment, Social Learning Theory will be applied to explain how the stereotypes and issues comprising each era are perpetuated through the modeling aspect of the theory.

Feminist Critique

History and Definition:

The Feminist Critique is a critical theory that examines how female characters are portrayed within media, exposing the patriarchal ideology implicit in television programming, and demonstrating that attitudes and traditions reinforcing systematic masculine dominance comprise characters within such programming (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). The theory has followed what some theorists call the three waves of feminism: First Wave Feminism occurred from the late 18th century to the early 20th century with female writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft (A Vindication of the Rights of Women, 1792) emphasizing the inequalities between the sexes, and activists such as Susan B. Anthony contributing to the women’s suffrage movement; Second Wave Feminism lasted between the early 1960’s and the late
1970's through feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir (*Le deuxième sexe*, 1972) establishing the framework for the diffusion of feminist theories. Finally, Third Wave Feminism began in the early 1990's and is considered to be the feminist wave of the present, explained through an increased focus upon contemporary gender, race, and sexual orientation issues that have developed through the patriarchal stereotypes that comprise the majority of media programming (Cleary, 2003).

**Theory Application to Topic:**

Throughout each era of gay male representation, the feminist critique can successfully be applied to explain the stereotypical characteristics that comprise each era, as well as the lack of fully realistic portrayals.

**Stonewall Era:**

Within the Stonewall era, gay male characters were represented as mentally ill and perpetrators of sodomy, particularly against children. When considering the Feminist Critique Theory, this stereotype is best explained as a result of the masculine driven society in which each of these eras exist. Throughout the Stonewall era, not only did laws prohibiting homosexuality exist, but it was not until 1973, four years following the commencement of the gay rights movement and the Stonewall Riots, that homosexuality was stripped from the American Psychiatric Association’s list of mental disorders (Hart, 2000). Therefore, the portrayal of homosexual characters was based upon the heterosexual masculine viewpoint. Gay characters were portrayed as closeted, deranged criminals with an affinity for heterosexual men (Lucas & Raley, 2006). This attraction in turn perpetuates the feminist ideal of the masculine heterosexual male as containing a sexual magnetism that all other social subgroups cannot resist (Hart, 2000). These stereotypical portrayals effectively raised fear in the heterosexual population. As a result of this fear, the homosexual community faced discrimination and hatred, ultimately giving support to the heterosexual masculine majority that is the basis of the Feminist Critique.
**GRID Era:**

Early on, the AIDS virus was referred to as GRID, standing for “gay-related immunodeficiency,” linking the disease directly to the gay male population. Although the Centers for Disease Control quickly adopted AIDS as a more appropriate term, the damage was done. Homosexuals who were already stigmatized as “dangerous deviants” were now additionally found to be “lethally contagious,” and a significant health threat to the “innocent” heterosexual male majority (Hart, 2004). During this time period, prime-time television shows such as *St. Elsewhere* represented AIDS in individual episodes with homosexual male characters as the infected, solidifying the illness as a solely homosexual disease. This supposed connection between AIDS and the homosexual community worked to support the heterosexual masculine population by further damaging the homosexual minority.

**DOMA Era:**

Throughout the DOMA era, the dominant image of gay men on televised programming was the “limp-wristed effeminate drag queen, who walked with a swish and talked in a high-pitched voice,” (Hart, 2000). Additionally, gay male characters were portrayed as therapeutic support systems for female counterparts. Nearly all romantic relations between homosexual characters was virtually ignored or systematically hidden from televised view (Fouts & Inch, 2005). Through each of these images gay male characters were effectively transformed into females. Due to this gender conversion, as gay characters were viewed guiding their female companions through their heterosexual relationship woes, the masculine male majority became the primary focus (Hart, 2004). Nowhere was this more evident than in the popular sitcom *Will & Grace*. Will consistently supported Grace through her many heterosexual relationships while simultaneously denying his own self of romance. The heterosexual focus on a homosexual oriented sitcom works to support the Feminist Critique by highlighting society’s heterosexual masculine dominance.
**Marriage Era:**

Perhaps one of the most interesting elements of the Marriage era of homosexual representation is the “heterosexualization” of gay characters. Homosexual characters comprising this time period have been seen attempting to assimilate to the heterosexual lifestyle of companionship, marriage, and developing offspring (Doty, 2002). Although this present era has succeeded in abolishing many of the past fear inducing clichés that enveloped the Stonewall and GRID eras in particular, this act of adaptation clearly supports the masculine heterosexual lifestyle that is the foundation of the Feminist Critique Theory. Furthermore, homosexual characters have continued to display effeminate characteristics such as an affinity for fashion as well as heterosexual men (Doty, 2002). In particular, the character Kurt from Glee, played by Golden Globe award winner Chris Golfer, maintains a sexual attraction to his heterosexual step brother Finn Hudson. Due to Finn’s status as quarterback for the high school football team, the character stands as a clear patriarchal symbolization of the masculine majority. Therefore, Kurt’s infatuation with such a character successfully supports the Feminist Critique Theory of heterosexual male dominance.

**Social Learning Theory**

**History and Definition:**

According to Rosenberry and Vicker, “the concept of role models is the basis behind Social Learning Theory,” (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009); the idea that “individuals are creature of imitation and learn to do things by watching and copying the behavior of others” (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). Albert Bandura is the name most frequently associated with Social Learning or Modeling Theory as it is also known. Bandura is a Stanford university psychologist who first achieved fame for the Bobo Doll experiments in the 1960’s. Children were exposed to an adult who played with a clown doll in either an aggressive or gentle manner. Those children who witnessed the doll being played with aggressively behaved in an equally aggressive manner, thereby validating Social Learning Theory (Rosenberry &
Vicker, 2009). The validation of the theory meant the validation of cognitive learning through observation rather than just experience. One of these sources of observed information is the mass media. According to Rosenberry and Vicker, Bandura maintained that the media teach people in three ways, through observation, inhibition, and disinhibition (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). However, central to the idea of social learning theory is the concept of reinforcement. That what we witness on television for example, will become part of our moral makeup depending upon the positive or negative reinforcement of an observed behavior.

Theory Application to Topic:

Throughout each era, Social Learning Theory can be applied to explain how the portrayal of homosexual characters within each time period perpetuates the stereotyped viewpoints of the heterosexual population. A focus on the heterosexual viewer’s response to homosexual characters interaction with heterosexual counterparts will be the focal point within the discussion of each era.

Stonewall Era:

Following the Stonewall Riots in 1969, gay male characters began appearing on television. Portrayed as “sexual deviants,” the American population witnessed heterosexual characters not only being attacked, but murdered by these “homosexual criminals.” In considering Social Learning Theory, heterosexual viewers were taught that the homosexual population was to be feared and alienated from society (Hart, 2004). Modeling this behavior, campaigns such as singer Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children were developed in order to keep homosexuals marginalized, and to halt legislation prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation (Fouts & Inch, 2005). These campaigns effectively attempted to shadow the gay liberation movement by igniting the fear that the American heterosexual population was being negatively reinforced with throughout television programming. This negative reinforcement of mentally unfit homosexuals and the resulting modeling behavior exhibited by the heterosexual population is the foundation of Social Learning Theory.
GRID Era:

Similar to the Stonewall Era of gay male character representation, the GRID Era also generated tremendous fear in heterosexual viewers of programming depicting homosexual characters. Unlike the previous era however, heterosexual viewers were now taught to fear the contraction of AIDS, of which homosexuals were the carrier. Television programming, such as Midnight Caller, depicted homosexual characters knowingly and carelessly spreading the virus to heterosexual victims (Doty, 2002). The heterosexual population learned to be terrified of the homosexual community’s presence, modeling programming in which heterosexual characters separated themselves from homosexual transporters of the AIDS virus (Hart, 2000). Society shunned the homosexual population, which in turn perpetuated the portrayal of such stereotyped beliefs on television.

DOMA Era:

The enactment of the Defense of Marriage Act, no matter its negative implications for the homosexual community, had an igniting effect on the portrayal of homosexual male characters on television. Homosexual male characters began appearing in leading roles that were integral to the plot formations of major television programs during the time period (Lucas & Raley, 2006). Unfortunately, the “gay best-friend” syndrome that plagued the era had an incredibly influential effect on society’s view of the homosexual community. In season 3, episode 21 of the sitcom Will & Grace, titled “The Young & The Tactless,” Sylvia Walker, played by Ellen Albertini Dow, is the step-mother of series principal, Karen Walker. Within the episode the elderly woman declares herself a “fag-hag,” a gay slang phrase referring to a woman who either associates mostly or exclusively with gay men. This idea was the central theme behind both Will and Jacks strong relationships with their female counterparts, Grace and Karen. The term proliferated through society and in no time heterosexual female viewers were pining for their own personal homosexual male in order to gather advice ranging from fashion to romance. This modeling behavior is the groundwork for Social Learning Theory. Due to these portrayals
of gay male characters and their effects on female viewers, the female population effectively continued programming depicting homosexuals as female replications and therapeutic support systems.

**Marriage Era**

Within the present day era of homosexual representation, the majority of gay male characters are represented as heterosexual impersonators battling for equal rights, particularly the right to marry. An opinionated view on gay marriage rights is the best display of the modeling behavior exhibited through Social Learning Theory within this time period. Television programs such as *Queer as Folk* have addressed the issue directly, reinforcing society’s view of the homosexual population as desiring to appear “normal.” Heterosexual characters within such programs are viewed as either supporting the issue of gay marriage, or attacking it with full force. Therefore, the heterosexual population is taught to assist the cause or fervently condemn it rather than maintain a neutral stance (Fouts & Inch, 2005).

According to the Pew Research Center, as of January 2011, 41% of the American population support gay marriage rights, 47% disagree, and 10% remain unsure (Gorton, 2011). The small percentage of Americans uncertain about their allegiance is a result of the reinforced idea demonstrated within television programming, displaying heterosexual characters as opinionated supporters or detesters of gay marriage rights. The result has been a national focus on the matter that in turn perpetuates television programming focusing on the issue of same-sex marriage.

**Method**

As stated prior, the focus of this qualitative study will be the last and present era of gay male character representation on television, the Marriage Era. Through textual analysis, three prominent television programs with leading gay male characters will be analyzed: *Queer as Folk*, *Modern Family*, and *Glee*. Research questions must be devised in order to provide framework for such an evaluation. The following research questions will guide the textual analysis of these programs:
R1: How has the portrayal of homosexual male characters on television during the Marriage Era been displayed?

R2: How has the San Francisco same-sex weddings incident influenced the portrayal of homosexual male characters on television during the Marriage Era?

In evaluating these programs, the characteristics of homosexual male characters will be analyzed in order to discover specific traits embedded within portrayals during this time period. Traits deriving from the issue of same-sex marriage rights will be the primary focus of the evaluation. Such traits include physical display of romantic interaction, the achievement of long-term relationship, and the formation of a family. Within these programs, specific scenes will be presented that display this act of “heterosexualization” among gay male characters within the era, followed by an analysis of how these traits are presented, as well as how the event that sparked the era has influenced these portrayals.

**Findings and Discussion**

In discussing the aforementioned television programs comprising the Marriage Era, each of the characteristics encompassing this time period will be separated into segments. Each segment will contain one of the television programs displaying the respective characteristic, followed by further discussion on how the event that sparked the era influenced these portrayals. It is noteworthy to understand that these characteristics work in progression, from the initial display of physical romantic interaction to the formation of a child producing family.

**Physical Romantic Interaction:**

The portrayal of physical romantic interaction among gay male characters is an attribute virtually confined to the present day era of gay male representation, the Marriage Era. The most
notable display of this characteristic is the act of kissing. Although such a display actually began within the DOMA Era of gay male representation, it was not until the present day Marriage Era that kissing was limited to gay male characters involved in committed romantic relationships.

_Glee:_

In the episode “Original Song” within the second season of the series, the characters of Kurt, played by Chris Colfer, and Blaine, played by Darren Criss, are viewed kissing for the first time after several flirtatious incidents during past episodes. What is notable about this event is the way the kiss is portrayed. In past eras of gay male representation, the act of kissing was limited in time, passion, and realism. However, in this episode the gay teens, Kurt and Blaine, are seen embracing one another for a prolonged amount of time, passionately kissing in a manner that not only resembles previous heterosexual portrayals on television (heterosexualization), but is also incredibly genuine and more importantly, realistic.

The influence of the San Francisco same-sex weddings incident on the display of physical romantic interaction among gay male television characters is astronomical. With the heightened focus on homosexuals during this present day era, and the increasing acceptance of the heterosexual community towards the subgroup, this physical display of romance was inevitable. National media outlets had already presented various photographs and videos from the event depicting gay couples engaging in physical interaction, such as kissing. Therefore the decreased sensitivity to such relations allowed for the first characteristic of the Marriage Era to be presented to American society.

_Long Term Relationships:_

The greatest example of the long term relationship characteristic presented on television is the achievement of marriage between homosexual male characters. It is also a prime example of the “heterosexualization” of gay male characters on television. By gay characters attempting to obtain marriage, they effectively position themselves as products of traditionally heterosexual values.
Although the act of marriage remains illegal for the majority of states within the US, several television shows have addressed the issue fully. The finest example of this portrayal comes from the Showtime hit, *Queer as Folk*.

*Queer as Folk:*

In season 4, episode 14 of the popular gay-oriented television series, the gay male characters Michael, played by Hal Sparks, and Ben, portrayed by Robert Gant, are seen attempting to cross into the United States following the couple’s marriage ceremony within Canada. However, the couple was denied permission of entering as married spouses due to the United States lack of recognizing same-sex marriage. The obviously homophobic border patrolman is seen rolling his eyes and portraying disgust toward not only the couple, but their heterosexual adopted son Hunter as well.

The display of gay male characters achieving marriage is directly influenced by the major cultural event that sparked the Marriage Era. The direct attack on the issue presented within the episode speaks volumes to the influence the San Francisco incident maintains throughout this era of gay male representation. Just as American society held witness to homosexual couples embracing in physical romantic interaction, so too did society witness the satisfaction committed homosexual couples portrayed after being granted the ability to wed. The display of such long term relationships on television was a characteristic never seen in prior eras that presented gay male characters as highly promiscuous and incapable of achieving such relationships. Therefore, the portrayal of married or committed homosexual characters can be determined as directly influenced by the San Francisco, California same-sex wedding event.

*Formation of Family:*

The final area of progression within the display of characteristics comprising the Marriage Era is the formation of family, including the obtainment of children. Although the traditional method of child rearing in achieving offspring is the standard among the heterosexual community; for the homosexual
community, adoption is the foremost path in obtaining such an accomplishment. This is no different in discussing the portrayal of gay male characters involved in the formation of a family. Several television shows have discussed the issue of adoption, including the aforementioned *Queer as Folk*. However, the preeminent and most recent example of this trait comes from the hit ABC series, *Modern Family*.

*Modern Family:*

In “Unplugged” the fifth episode of the second season of the series, the gay male couple Cameron and Mitchell are seen participating in one of the greatest examples of the “heterosexualization” characteristic that comprises the Marriage Era. The gay men, portrayed by Eric Stonestreet and Jesse Tyler Ferguson respectively, spend the episode searching for a preschool superior enough for their adopted daughter Lily. The display of a homosexual male couple embracing their adopted daughter in search of a fitting preschool was an experience never seen on television prior to this episode.

In considering the influence of the San Francisco incident, the national heterosexual majority’s exposure to the homosexual community following the affair increased the understanding of the plights of gay men and women throughout the United States. It was evident that these homosexual couples were not only searching for the right to marry, but also the right to grow families without discrimination or attacks of bigotry. This growing acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex families following the event directly led to the ability of portrayals emitting such characteristics to take place.

**Conclusion**

It is incredible the effect a singular event can have on the course of history. From the Boston Tea Party to the attack on the World Trade Center, American culture has been dictated by these remarkable incidents. For the course of the gay rights movement, this phenomenon is no different. Major cultural events from the Stonewall Riots to the San Francisco same-sex weddings have influenced not only the progression of the homosexual community, but also the understanding of the heterosexual
majority. Without these events, the course of history would be drastically different, but more pertinent to this discussion, without these events the gay male character on television would be drastically different. It is not true that society only dictates television, but also that television dictates society. Through the growing positive portrayal of gay male characters on television within the last era of homosexual representation, it becomes plausible to believe that the homosexual community will soon be considered equals to their heterosexual counterparts.

Future Research

If research were to continue, an in depth analysis of all television shows comprising each era would have to be examined. Each era of representation lasted over ten years with the exception of the present day era that is still continuing. Therefore, it would not be surprising to find that several eras within these assigned eras exist with varying portrayals of homosexual male characters. Also, a larger handle on the issue of effeminate portrayals by gay male characters would have to be addressed, as well as a possible explanation of the portrayals of lesbian characters. In addition, a division between gay teens and gay adults should be addressed considering the recent enveloping of homosexual teenage issues on television.
References


