

**Media Representations of the LGBT Community and
Stereotypes' Homophobic Reinforcement**

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The Coast is Queer

“The Coast is Queer”: Media Representations of the LGBT Community and Stereotypes’ Homophobic Reinforcement

“...No matter how comfortably the homosexual sits within the skin of his own identity, he never ceases to be an unnerving, unstable, ultimately alterable confusion of roles and identities.”

--- Luis S. David, “The Politics of the Personal in Michel Foucault” (1999)

How about we call a man wearing a pink top “gay”? When we see him lifting his pinky finger as he holds the glass to drink, let he be called effeminate. Let’s take two girls, one who dresses without style, and another girl one who is *kikay* above everything else, and let’s call them lesbians. How about we label each person, like how you’d mark with permanent ink your container jars, just because they look or dress a particular way.

Almost every day, we are exposed to images that force us to create a “template” or a “category” for people who look like this or that. We see gay men on television, and once we see similarities of that character in real life, we are quick to label that person as gay. Lesbian and transvestite characters in films are often feared, or ridiculed, almost always negatively portrayed, and so at the instant we see a person that so much as looks like that character, we label her without hesitation.

Curiouser and curiouser: The Queer

Coming across a man dressed in a woman’s tank top and skimpy skirt, or a woman dressed in a man’s shirt and rugged pants, is not a big deal for most us, especially in our culture. We actually embrace – tolerate – the gay community, but we have yet to accept them completely. But that’s another story to tell. Some of us may have gotten used to walking past them, seeing models in magazines dress androgynously, or have watched television shows that cast in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) characters. Yet, some of us become or remain homophobic, because of the peculiarity of the queer. Homophobia, for one, is an “irrational fear [or rather, hate] towards the [LGBT] community.” (Ahmad & Bhugra, 2010)

Homophobes may have perceived that gays are immoral, are evil, are impractical to have, based on what they see on television and film. Moving images are proven effective carriers of ideology, especially if it hits mainstream. This becomes problematic because these representations may cloud their judgment, thus

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reinforcing irrational behaviour towards the LGBT community.

Sexuality, as personal as it sounds, is as big a deal as proclaiming to the world who or what you are. Nowadays, it has become the ideal to “tell the world” if you’re straight or gay just so to avoid speculation and rumours.

More often than not, sexuality is superimposed with the reproductive organ that you are born with: if you’re born with a penis, you’re a male. The “lack” of it, as Freud would say, and you’re a female. The crucial part is what happens after birth – where and how you are raised, what were the things you were most fond of, what was the culture and environment, etc. – builds and determines your gender: either you are masculine or feminine. Sexuality then becomes ambiguous, for instance, when a female acts like a man, or a male effeminate.

And so the permutations of so-called sexuality flood in, so modernity has forced society to rename it, still “categorizing” the world into two orientations: the heterosexual and the homosexual. In terms of sexual preferences, heterosexuals, or “straight” people, are more attracted to the opposite sex. Homosexuals, on the other hand, prefer partners of the same-sex. The homosexual or queer community is composed of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender or simply, the LGBT.

Issues ensue when the almost-always dominating heterosexual society marginalizes the homosexuals. It has been a long-standing matter of discussion that homosexuals are discriminated for their way of living, and this could be traced down to the roots of particular stereotypes perpetuating in our hetero-centric society.

Walter Lippman first used the term “stereotype” in 1922 to illustrate the image formed by in the minds of people when thinking of a particular group. The word “stereotype” comes from two Greek words, *stereos* meaning “firm or solid”, and *typos* meaning “impression.” It also has another place in history: stereotype, hence stereotyping is a method of printing in plate. Contemporary scholars now redefine the word and brings it to a more psychological level. Sheng Kuan Chung (2007) quotes Nachbar and Lause in defining stereotypes as “mental cookie cutters,” forcing us to generalise complex information, hence simplifying mental images. Stereotypes make it easier for us to classify and organise a group because they share a common feature.

The danger with stereotyping is the over-generalisation that comes along with it. Stereotypes, therefore, carry with them negative connotations and attitudes

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perceived by those who labelled them as such. These “cultural elites” use this type of segregating to dehumanise cultural groups who stand lower than their ground.

Upon us are a myriad of representations – gender and sexuality, stereotyping a discriminated community, effects culture – and we are forced to grapple on what we can, while we can because as images, they move and shift before we can even comprehend the idea.

Background of the Study

In terms of media consumption, visual culture is prevalent in every household, in the form of television. Television genres range from talk shows, to situation comedies (sitcom), to soap operas. Commercials are also included in this visual culture. Access to local theatres and cinemas also warrants us the privilege to watch lengthier motion pictures or, as we call them, movies. Yet, no matter how far they seem to be, we face these fictional characters in our favourite sitcoms and drama shows, and find ourselves somehow relating to them, even treating them as our friends. Our exposure and access to these visual mediums are almost effortless, and we cannot escape them. Today’s generation sees television as the new storyteller: it makes you laugh, it educates you, it exposes you a particular reality you thought never existed. George Gerbner (1998) on his study on the culture of television viewing in the United States said that:

Television enters life in infancy; there is no ‘before exposure’ condition. [It] plays a role in the formation of those very ‘predispositions’ that later intervene (and often resist) other influences and attempts persuasion.

Now, consider this power of television infused with the gender and sexuality stereotyping mentioned beforehand. How do homosexuals play in the field of visual culture, and how do the audiences respond to it? Does this stereotyping reinforce homophobic behaviour, feelings? How do we even begin to retaliate the growing culture of misrepresentation among the LGBT community, if the visual culture is persistent in showing these?

To understand the effects of television to its audiences, Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory will be applied to understand the subject further. Constant exposure to recurring patterns of representations in stereotyping may have consequences to its viewers, which may affect their attitudes on the long run.

We are examining media representations of the queer community in a country

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that is greatly influenced by an iron-fisted Church, therefore religiosity, principles and ethnicity play an important factor in analysing particular effects. In a country that believes they can “pray away the gay,” what role does the media play in the Filipino’s acceptance – or rather, tolerance – of the queer?

Stereotyping the queer

Although this paper aims to debunk a discriminating stereotyping of the LGBT community, we must understand first what stereotypes are present.

The queer community in the Philippines has many faces, but the one most used frequently seen is the parlor gay stereotype. Dressed in the most flamboyant clothes, with the color palette of every bright color there is, while adorned with plastic jewels and glass beads, as they walk off the world with pride and ardour – the very reason why they are the facade of the LGBT community. The parlor gay is a staple in almost every comedy show, characterized by his fluent gay lingo, with moves that borders graceful and seductive. Parlor gay stereotypes need not be in parlors per se, but gays that are very expressive in the way they dress are also part of this stereotype. You can even see them practicing their runway walk, hoping that one day they’ll make it to beauty pageants.

Usually, parlor gay stereotypes are the most ridiculed because they are represented as overly made up, or exaggeratedly made to act out-of-this-world gayness. Usually, young gay characters in films are shown as parlor gay stereotypes first, wearing their mother’s skirts and using her make-up and accessories as well.

Other gay stereotypes include the macho gay and the closet gay. These two stereotypes are often tools in masking the true identity of characters in films. Macho dancers look real masculine and tough from afar, but when you begin to interact with them, they show inclinations towards the same sex. Macho gay stereotypes are most prevalent in Philippine bomba films as macho dancers, particularly independent films or avant-garde/art films.

Closet gay stereotypes are characters that are afraid to come out because of the anticipated rejection and discrimination. This stereotype usually creates an image of a coming-of-age genre for the queer community: how will s/he tell his/her parents? How will she love, how will she be accepted, how will she handle shame

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and disgust?

Looking closely at the way these stereotypes are represented, it's not difficult to understand why coming out in the Philippines is a challenge, a struggle. First, because the Philippines is a pre-dominant Catholic country, which means that any sort of same-sex relationship is discouraged by the Church because of it being immoral, an act against nature as stated in one of the stories of damnation in the Bible. Second, considering that we are a patriarchal society, every man should be true to what he is perceived to be: masculine and virile. Any male who does not fit these "specifications" of being a man is not at all a man, but a homosexual, or gay. It would be impractical for a man to be with another man, when he has a penis that can be used to procreate if paired to a woman. There is a functionality issue of the genitals, and it necessarily gets in the way of how homosexuals deal with their lives.

What we get from the assumptions of homophobia is a negative stereotyping of homosexuals based on their lifestyle and disposition. Unfortunately, these assumptions are continuously perpetuated in television and film, particularly the way they are written and written about. Jerel Calzo and Monique Ward (2009) suggest that "frequent media consumption lead viewers to cultivate beliefs about homosexuality that coincide with those portrayed media." This becomes problematic when the media representation of LGBT is only one-dimensional: the character possesses only one personality type – often not substantial even – and it stays that way until the end. The study also showed that most, if not all, portrayals of gays in television and film continue to perpetuate stereotypes as promiscuous, unstable in handling relationships, and ridiculous.

Importance of Genre Selection

Choosing the particular genre where the queer can play also plays an important factor upon considering media representations.

For example, gay stereotypes in comedy are usually sillier and laughable than gay stereotypes found in drama. Homosexuals in these comedy films are usually the jesters, the laughing stock, the source of comic relief, because they have a "colourful personality," whatever it may paint. "Exotic" would be a proper term for them in these films, because they are particularly outstanding nonetheless when placed in precarious situations.

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Drama, on the other hand, portrays homosexuals as victims of crime, faint and vulnerable, helpless. Unlike the usual heterosexual characters, queer characters often have another layer of drama under their sleeves: a father that beats him up for being gay, a brother who has traumatized her, and so on. There is too much reality going on, that sometimes it has become fictionalized, untrue, scripted. Media portrayals, this is way, have overlooked at the possibility of adding depth in characterization. Depth, meaning gays are granted their own plot, their own script, their own story that actually is fair portrayal.

Queer in Visual Culture

Some films that are themed for the queer community actually try to experiment and think outside the box for a good story to shoot and screen. These alternate representations come from the queer community, having queer play queer, have queer dress queer – no script.

The hardest target when it comes to aiming queer films is the mainstream cinema. Majority of the audience refuses to watch films that tell the story of two people of the same sex falling in love. Some homosexual-themed films that made it to the mainstream cinema, include Joel Lamangan's much-loved "ZsaZsa Zaturannah Ze Moveeh" (2006), based on Carlo Vergara's graphic novel "Ang Kagilagilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni ZsaZsa Zaturannah"; and Gil Portes' "Markova: Comfort Gay" (2000) that tells the story of homosexuals turned comfort women, and then raped by Japanese soldiers during the World War II. In "Zaturannah," the gay protagonist (that turns into a beautiful girl superhero) was played by no other than Rustom Padilla, otherwise known as BB Gandanghari. "Markova" was different, because the main character was portrayed by King of comedy Dolphy, a straight man.

In the past year, a queer film staple, known to us as Vice Ganda, seemed to have won the hearts of the "madlang people" as he would call it. Vice Ganda starred in both "Petrang Kabayo" (2010) and "The Unkabogable Praybeyt Benjamin" (2011). His latest movie is currently the highest grossing local film in the Philippines, earning 331.61-million pesos of total box-office revenue. Vice Ganda, or Jose Marie Vicencio, started out as a stand-up comedian at a comedy bar, and then got discovered in television for his talent in *okrayan*, a necessary skill of a comedy bar entertainer. Although Vice Ganda is often ridiculed for the shape of his face, or his

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long legs (co-hosts would refer to him as *kabayo* or a horse), he exudes confidence and can articulate fairly well when it comes to serious matters.

If there was a place where homosexual-themed films were accepted (and made, perhaps) it would be in the independent scene. Examples of a better queer cinema in the Philippines proliferate in independent film festivals, plainly because it lives on the stories of reality, of poverty, of those at the seams of society. This was essential “poverty porn” for most indie filmmakers.

Independent movie titles that have been recognized both here and abroad include Auraeus Solito’s masterpiece, “Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros” (2005) that tells the story of a pre-adolescent gay who falls in love with a cop twice his age; and, the more recent, Alvin Yapan’s “Ang Sayaw ng Dalawang Kaliwang Paa” (2011) that won 7 Gawad Urian Awards in 2012. The lead character in “Ang Pagdadalaga” tries his best to be who he really is in the midst of a society that treats him as a disgrace, a sickness. It’s a coming of age indie film, that also inculcates family values and personal ideologies that come into play when we talk about sexuality of a young boy. On the other hand, the format of “Ang Sayaw” is quite different: it mixes poetry and music together as a background of a love triangle between two male students and a woman teacher-dancer.

What’s notable about gay roles in independent cinema is that it tries to bring to life the very experiences of the gay that are unknown many. Although it does not suit everybody’s palate, it makes its point and tells the story anyway in any imaginable format possible.

What is striking is that the media industry today is in the business of making profits, not in raising social consciousness. Stereotypes help tell the story more efficiently, because there are “cookie-cuttered” images in the minds of its audience, but what about characters that negatively imply that queers are like this, or like that? Media programmers continue to portray gay roles in one-dimension because the program can’t risk exploring complex characters [the gay] that belong to the minority. To sustain business, media men stick with this to meet consumer expectations. (Chung, 2007)

In a smaller scale of things, television shows are goldmines for notable gay celebrities. Notable talk show hosts also include Boy Abunda, Ogie Diaz, Lhar Santiago, and John Lapus. Originally stand-up comedians like Allan K. and Ate Guy

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also make appearances in variety shows and sitcoms. It's interesting to note that in this type of media genre, gays are more liberal and are not afraid of saying what they want, contrary to the weak and vulnerable façade they exude in scripted dramas and comedies. These gays may already know their way in the world, what about their viewers? How do they present themselves to new viewers?

Framing the Research Question

In an attempt to study the effects of the stereotype reinforcements of the queer, it would deem necessary to analyse the content of the media, and who watches it. In this study, we analyse the relationship between media representations of the LGBT community, following its styles in reinforcing to the Filipino feelings of tolerance or further homophobia.

Visual media in the Philippines is particularly powerful because no doubt that every household owns a television set. In just a matter of hours, sitting idly and watching the television can affect the attitudes of the viewer. He is exposed to a media that is image-saturated (Chung, 2007) plus the influx of popular opinion in print and audio media. Chung reiterates that "although exposure to these particular topics may lessen the public's discriminatory attitudes, it becomes problematic when these media sources are the central means by which the public learns about gay people in a depersonalized way." Provided these parameters, how does one become a responsible and sensitive viewer?

Representations of LGBT include the stereotypes that were mentioned above, and other short or extra roles given to gay characters in media: the gay best friend, enchanted creatures whose sex is unknown, the ugly but very kind gay, and so on. Given that these images are everywhere, do these media representations reinforce a particular tolerance, or increase or decrease the audience's acceptance of homosexuals?

The Filipino's attitude of acceptance is important because we have to note that the country is under the great influence of a Church that discourages homosexuality. What are the other factors that influence this tolerance? Where does it begin, and how do people respond to it?

Study Objectives

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- To identify issues concerning the LGBT community
- To understand the importance of regulating media consumption, considering its effects and consequences
- To lessen, if not totally eradicate, the notion of negative stereotypes towards the LGBT through proper media representation
- To highlight the importance of evaluating media genres
- To identify the stereotypes frequently shown in these visual mediums, and explain why these were sketched in particular

Related Literature

Studies have been done in an attempt to find the relationship between media consumption and attitudes toward homosexuality. A number of them may well be replicated in the Philippine setting.

The primary related literature source is Gerbner's "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview," that explains television culture in the United States and its effects to the viewers. Gerbner originally applied this theory to the growing violence seen in television, and how viewers relate this to their everyday life. Results indicated that the viewers found the world to be unsafe and dangerous after prolonged exposure to violent television programs. In this overview, Gerbner discusses the concept of mainstreaming and resonance that are major forces behind the theory. The mainstreaming effect, if applied with the LGBT stereotypes being discussed, is the increased media exposure that draws large groups together towards a more similar viewpoint of homosexuality. The resonance effect, on the other hand, is more personal because it occurs when repeated symbolic patterns of, in this case, gay discrimination, cause viewers to replay it in their daily lives.

The following related literature goes back to Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, primarily because of the representation done in visual media, as well as the analysing the viewer's response regarding the subject.

Calzo and Ward's "Media Exposure and Viewers' Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: Evidence for Mainstreaming or Resonance?" explored the connections between media use and college students' attitudes of acceptance towards homosexuality. The result of the study supported Gerbner's Cultivation theory, particularly the mainstreaming effect. Cited in their work is Raley and Lucas'

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(2006) findings that gay male and lesbian characters were represented in 7.5% of the dramas and comedies on the studies. Calzo and Ward also noted that there are particular variables to consider: ethnicity, gender, and religiosity. These aspects of the viewers provide for pre-existing attitudes that may conflict or coincide with the program's over-all theme. Results of the study suggest that the consumption of particular media genres are associated with levels of acceptance, although these associations are not related to the greater acceptance of homosexuality. It is important to note that this study did not include other visual mediums such as the Internet, newer cable programs, and homosexual-themed shows.

In Ahmad and Bhugra's "Homophobia: an updated review of the literature" (2010), they revisited the assumptions of two theorists in the 1976, noting that much has changed in terms of perceiving the gay community. Cited in their work is Bancroft's four themes in examining homophobia, and Dressler's assumptions of the homosexual stereotype. Bancroft (2009) suggests that there are four themes in framing homophobia:

- (1) the continuing persecution and suppression of homosexuality;
- (2) the medicalisation of homosexuality (particularly in the male);
- (3) the gradual emergence of a campaign by homosexual men and women to protect their human rights and by some professionals to de-pathologise homosexuality; and
- (4) the legal status of homosexuality and homosexual relationships.

To further understand this framework, Dressler (1979, cited in Ahmad & Bhugra 2010) identified assumptions about homosexual stereotypes:

- (1) Homosexuality is an illness.
- (2) Homosexuals frequent professions such as the arts and that male nurses and muscle-builders are usually homosexual.
- (3) Homosexuals are transvestites.
- (4) Homosexual men and women are unreliable.
- (5) All homosexuals are effeminate and lesbians 'mannish'.
- (6) Homosexual males are promiscuous and, as a result, venereal disease is a greater problem among the homosexual than the heterosexual population.
- (7) Legalisation of homosexual conduct will cause increased homosexuality.
- (8) Homosexual individuals evangelistically recruit others to their sexual preference.
- (9) Homosexual males prey on children by seduction and rape.

Ahmad and Bhugra (2010) also tried to formulate new assumptions on homosexual stereotypes based on Dressler's list:

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- (1) Homosexuals are all knowledgeable and open about sex.
- (2) Homosexuals (males particularly) are sexually very active and enjoy sex of all types more readily than heterosexual counterparts.
- (3) Homosexuals have more disposable income than heterosexual counterparts and earn well.
- (4) Homosexuals are hedonistic and are not weighed down by responsibilities (like their heterosexual counterparts).
- (5) It is desirable for heterosexual females to have a 'gay best friend' and they are conversely labeled 'fag hags'
- (6) Gay men are (overly) concerned with their physical appearance and are always well groomed, dress well and stylish.
- (7) Civil partnership and gay parenting are ways of homosexuals fitting into society more effectively.
- (8) Gay men are funny and cheerful.
- (9) Lesbians either wish to look and act like men or are feminine 'lipstick lesbians'.

The study concluded that there have been drastic changes in the way the media perceives and represents the gay. This in turn also shifts the way viewers – now real people who interact with other – connect with real life homosexuals, may it be political, social or cultural. Anti-homosexual attitudes are still visible, and is now more of discrimination than fearing the homosexual. (Ahmad & Bhugra, 2010)

Damien Riggs and Amy Patterson in “The Smiling Faces Of Contemporary Homophobia and Transphobia” (2009) tries to highlight the media representation of gay and transpeople in tabloid talk shows. He gives two examples: a commercial that repeatedly says “That’s so gay!” that catches on even outside the sphere of media, and two celebrities finding shame in seeing themselves as transvestites. The study concluded that “contemporary iterations of homophobia have become both more subtle and more complex,” further blurring the line of what we may find offensive and not. Joshua Gamson (1999), as cited in the article, suggests that “inclusion of queer people within [TV talk shows] functions either as assimilationist tokenism or freak-show.” There is a recurring dichotomy of the liberal “Yes, we are equal” with the heterosexuals, and the “See we really are freaks” and turning the issue into something more personal.

Chung (2007) on deconstructing gay and lesbian stereotypes in the media reiterates that the generation today get most of their social reality from popular culture mediums like television and films, when in fact they should be learning these things from their parents or peers. Chung makes a good point that:

The current generation learns about social issues from characters and scenes

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depicted in [media]. They are likely to develop false assumptions and prejudiced attitudes.

These false assumptions may be carried on even after their pre-adolescent years, which may become harmful once they begin dealing with the real world. The goal is to help become critical and informed citizens in an increasingly image-saturated media environment. Chung also introduces to us the value in stereotyping, and how we should try to lessen the use of negative stereotypes. Instead, we should start using these stereotypes with a more positive sense, so as not to dehumanise those who are stereotyped. Chung states that it is impossible to rid of stereotyping altogether, so we have to be more sensitive and responsible in “categorizing” or “cookie-cutting” certain people. In dealing with gay mediatypes (gay media stereotypes), Chung concluded that the “stereotyping overlooks the unique characteristics of an individual...which may result in negative social categorisations or prejudice.”

Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas’ “Stereotype or Success? Prime-Time Television’s Portrayals of Gay Male, Lesbian, and Bisexual Characters” (2006) raised two important methods to which we can understand fully the effects of media representation and stereotypes. Clark (1969) named four stages of media representation for minority groups. His work originally involved the Blacks as a minority:

- (1) Non-representation: outright exclusion from media;
- (2) Ridicule: formerly unrecognized groups are shown on media, but only as objects of humor. The group feels better because they are no longer ignored;
- (3) Regulation: minority group is represented but in limited acceptable roles; and
- (4) Respect: members of the minority are presented in both positive and negative roles of everyday life.

In this study, Clark believes that the LGBT are moving from Non-representation to Ridicule stage, given that the media already has role stereotypes for the gays. Berry (1980), on the other hand, devised three periods based on how television portrays the Blacks. Berry’s results regarding the portrayal of homosexuals may vary depending on the genre:

- (1) Stereotypic Age (as the name suggest);
- (2) New Awareness: positive qualities to recompense past stereotypes; and

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- (3) Stabilization: settled phase movement toward more realistic characters.

Study Framework

At least two theories can be used to study the variables of the subject. First is Gerbner's Cultivation theory, and Daniel Chandler's (1999) Genre Theory.

Discussed earlier in this paper is how Gerbner's theory can be applied in seeing how media representations affect how society stereotypes the homosexuals. Gerbner points out that:

...television neither simply "creates" nor "reflects" images, opinions, and beliefs. Rather, it is an integral aspect of a dynamic process. Institutional needs and objectives influence the creation and distribution of mass-produced messages which create, fit into, exploit, and sustain the needs, values, and ideologies of mass publics. These publics, in turn, acquire distinct identities as publics partly through exposure to the ongoing flow of messages.

Chandler's genre theory focuses more on the content and how media representations themselves are categorized, almost like stereotyped, according to their content. It was mentioned earlier that the studies often include the media genres as a variable in determining the effects the show has on its viewers. In retrospect, the results to this are likely to reflect how viewers consume media. Chandler makes a point when he suggests that

...the interaction between genres and media can be seen as one of the forces which contributes to changing genres. Some genres are more powerful than others: they differ in the status which is attributed to them by those who produce [media] within them and by their audiences.

Gramsci's media hegemony will also come to light, if we attempt to understand how heterosexuals dominate the society with their hetero-centric ideology. (Chung 2007) But the first two theories are more applicable, and can be tested in a shorter period of time.

Indicators and Variables

On a theoretical level, we can assume that media's negative representations can result to an either high or low acceptance attitude towards homosexuals. Stereotypes control particular reinforcements, and so if we are careful enough to recode these stereotypes into a more appeasing and homosexual-friendly characterization, then this will in turn result to good outcomes.

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Likewise, television and films, or visual mediums in general that uses the queer or has homosexual characters in its cast could create false assumptions in terms of activity and personality of the LGBT community. As consumers of media, we must be on the lookout for media programs that are manipulative in nature – the media, in fact, is in the business of making profits, hence it gives very little effort to allot room for sensitivity.

As we go about our daily activities, and upon the chance we meet or encounter a gay man or a lesbian woman, the chances that we become tolerant or acceptant of it depends on what we see in our media. Misinterpreted images of queer people in media could distort or cloud our judgment, even if we have yet to know him.

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