

# The Influence of Homosexual Media Portrayals on the Identity of Homosexual Young Adults

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**Abstract.** Currently, the media has become a commonly used tool for communication between individuals. Although the homosexual population has been through the process of “being illegal” to “were accepted by some countries”, stereotypes are still unavoidable. Therefore, this paper focuses on the influences of homosexual media portrayals on the identity homosexual young adults, including how homosexual adolescents are viewed by the prevailing trend of the public. According to the research, the homosexual group is not portrayed in the media as realistic as the heterosexual people are. Gays and lesbians are described as opposite sex characteristics respectively. Negatively speaking, as a result of the one-dimensional portrayals, misconceptions about homosexuality are conveyed to the young public. In some extreme cases, young homosexuals may be traumatized and diagnosed with emotional disorders. On the other hand, a more open online community has been created by social medias. Young generation are able to clarify their sexual orientations better and to create better understanding of the homosexual population for the straight population.

**Keywords:** Homosexual; Identity; Media Portrayals.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, medias gradually become one of the main communication tools and primary sources of information. Meanwhile, the attention aggregated to social minorities, causing the homosexual representations proliferated widely throughout various medias [1]. Gender identity refers to one’s sense of oneself as male or female [2], and homosexuality, being one type of gender identities, is having sexual attractions towards members of same sex [3]. Throughout the flow of history, the homosexual populations were forced to face the discrimination and stigma that the society has exerted on them. The homosexual populations have been through the process of “being illegal” to “were accepted by more and more countries legalistically” [4].

Although the bias against the LGBTQ+ populations, including the homosexuals, is slowly diminishing, stereotypes of LGBTQ+ community still exist [5]. Furthermore, as mass media prevails, medias’ influences aggregate especially on social minorities [6]. The media users concentrated on young adults [7], referring to age 19 -23 and beyond. Hence, homosexual young adults are one of the most targeted population from any possible effects from medias. Researches claimed that individuals with higher self-stigma are easier to be found in the homosexual population, especially ones with lower self-esteem. As a result from higher self-stigma, lower self-concept clarity would also appear in those cases [8]. Identity is defined as the acceptance of self-identity, the recognition of the belonging social groups, as well as the comprehensive psychological courses combining the accompanied emotional experiences and one’s behavioral patterns [9]. The negative correlation between self-concept clarity and identity clarity is illustrated in the definition. Hence, homosexual individuals with lower self-esteem would have more possibilities end up with lower identity clarity.

This paper will then discuss whether the era with mass media prevalence would further impact homosexual populations’ identity based on gender. As identity is characterized by the composition

of both self- and environmental-recognition [9], besides discussing the influence of media portrayals on identity from gays and lesbians, the paper will also evaluate medias' effects on homosexual individuals and general attitudes towards the homosexual community. With the general research topic being introduced, research gaps must be considered when deciding the specific areas that are going to be concentrated on. Throughout the literature review, some research gaps that need to be solved urgently still exist. For example, there is no clear data on the extent to which media influences the self-identity of sexual minorities in early adulthood. In addition, these papers do not mention the positive influence of media portrayals on gay and lesbians separately and the behavioral changes brought about by these influences which means there's not enough data to study lesbians or gay men alone. Also, these studies do not clearly point out the differences in self-identity and possible behavior change between lesbians and gays in the influence of media portrayals. Thus, based on the prior research, three research questions are raised: 1) How are homosexual people portrayed on media based on gender? 2) Do male and female homosexual young adults receive different impacts in viewing identity from media portrayals? 3) What are the positive and negative impacts of media portrayals on the identity of homosexual young adults based on gender?

## 2. Homosexual Media Portrayals

Media, as one of the most prevalent ways for the masses to obtain the lives of different groups of people, impressed public's cognition and attitudes of the homosexual group directly [10]. This means that how the public media presents the homosexual group is playing a crucial role on the public cognition. Nowadays, the homosexual group have found themselves appeared and represented in the mainstream media. However, although some TV programs aimed at teens, such as Dawson Creek, have recently added gay characters, the phenomenon of "compulsory heterosexuality" still prevails [11]. In this regard, there is a gap, which is that whether the phenomenon of forced heterosexuality is the majority in TV programs or there are other preventative attitudes towards homosexuality in the programs.

### 2.1 The Portrayals of Lesbians

Some previous researches have demonstrated the images of the lesbian community in TV series are easily to be sexualized and formatted. Lesbians are divided into six categories: the butch lesbian, the hot lesbian, the closeted lesbian, the out lesbian, the bisexual lesbian, and the feminine lesbian. Among all, the hot lesbian gets the most screen time of lesbian characters' appearances, seemingly the most popular type. Some well-known TV shows, such as *Desperate Housewives* (DH), also shot the hot lesbian, Robin, from a full-body perspective while her girlfriend, the butch lesbian was only shot from a shoulder-up perspective, which was seen as a sexual inaction of lesbians. Like Robin in *Desperate Housewives*, lesbian characters are often depicted sexually as a kind of performance, and some films and television films only focus on their sexual life as lesbians rather than. The decision they make in daily life as a complete individual. Their relationship was seen by the producers as an experiment that deviated from heterosexuality rather than a real earning fuel relationship. It is worth mentioning that lesbians in TV programs still have another image. They are shown in a heterosexual way, which is very attractive and feminine. One explanation for this phenomenon is that their feminine characteristics can remold the lesbians more receivable towards the audiences who are not in the homosexual group.

Homosexual relationships have been disguised as close friendships between girls, which can also be judged by clothing, appearance or physical performance. This is a deliberate ambiguity between lesbian and female relationship, which represents the permission to allow lesbians to be heterosexual to some extent. And this also defines lesbians as an formal sexual orientation. The mysterious nature of lesbian sex often enters the sexual fantasies of heterosexual men and women. This is called "lifestyle lesbian", which may lead to the invalidity of real lesbians. Therefore, it is very important to evaluate the stereotype of lesbian groups to promote the status of lesbians [10].

Moreover, the media always presents the traits that are manly, such as autonomy, dominance, and confidence are attributed to lesbians, instead of presents them to straight women and gay men [12].

Such a way is a kind of blurring of the real characteristics of lesbians, which may bring the audience an image of lesbians that is not as actual. The behavior and practices of lesbians in some films are not as without stereotyping as those of heterosexual groups, which is why there are few gay protagonists in popular TV dramas [10].

## **2.2 The Portrayals of Gays**

As for the gay group, their images are usually presented in two portrayals: the flamboyant, over-dramatic one (e.g. Cameron from *Modern Family* or Jack from *Will and Grace*) and the white, nonsexual, typical one. They are more seen holding hands or embracing each other, and rarely showing sexual behavior. Although some stereotypes have disappeared, there are still impressions. For example, the flamboyant feminized gay men. Moreover, under normal circumstances, gay men rarely show that they have all life choices on TV, and most of them appear as funny or promiscuous supporting roles who cannot find true love [13]. The presence of these two fields types of gay men rather than diverse types may lead to the phenomenon that people may tend to hold more stereotyped opinions toward gay men if they watch TV more frequently. In addition, multiple studies have confirmed that people often think feminine traits, such as sympathy, maturity, and sentiment are attributed to homosexual men more frequently, instead of attributing them to straight men or heterosexual women [12]. This apparently proves that this kind of phenomenon happens to both gays and lesbians.

## **2.3 The Overall Portrayals of the Homosexual Group**

From an overall perspective, media is the main factor in the formation of the public's concept of homosexuality. Because repeated exposure to information systems will affect people's perspectives and thoughts on reality, particularly when people lack certain experiences. Controversial topics such as homosexuality can put people to shame and upset during their conversations with their surroundings. This offers a cause for people to get information about homosexuality and create attitudes through media [10]. As for the conclusion of the homosexual group is not portrayed in the media in the same way as heterosexual people [13], which has caused a stereotypical ubiquity in the public's minds—homosexual women are more masculine than feminine and homosexual men are more feminine than masculine [12]. Also, the formatted image expression is also a major feature of the media on the image of homosexuality. This phenomenon inevitably confuses homosexuality of different sorts of homosexual people in different ways. For example, an analysis shows that, on the whole, if people watch TV more frequently they are easier to put stereotyped opinions toward homosexual men.

Under such a biased presentation of homosexual images, the emotions of the homosexual groups are also being influenced. In an experiment, 178 lesbians are recruited to see the portrayals of hot lesbians. As a result, the lesbian participants reported their feelings of physical unhappiness and disrespect and experienced strong physical objectification [10].

In the impression of film and television works, family relations often require one to become a masculine role in family relations, who need to have a stronger personality and larger body size. While the other one needs to play a feminine, gentle and dependent role on the masculine one. Such a division of labor in the family is realized by showing the imbalance of rights in homosexual relations. However, in reality, homosexual couples will achieve the equality people want in their relationships more possibly than heterosexual couples do. Therefore, it is misleading to portray such a homosexual family image [14].

### **3. Influences on the Identity of Homosexual Young Adults**

#### **3.1 Negative Influences on the Homosexual Population's Identity**

As society becomes more and more democratic and free, nowadays people turn to be more open-minded. Vulnerable groups on some sensitive topics have become received the right to speak out loud, such as gays and lesbians. However, the negative impact of most of the media with prejudice and stereotypes on the homosexual community cannot be ignored. Therefore, this part will be mainly divided into three parts, discussing the adverse effects of the media on the homosexual population's self-identity, the public's viewpoints, and psychological issues.

##### **3.1.1 Obstructing young homosexuals' self-perception**

Young homosexual adolescents face more specific challenges than their heterosexual friends because of the stress of being sexual minorities [18]. The media often attribute the image of the homosexual community to inappropriate terms such as sparse, pathological, and so on. This phenomenon leads to huge differences and conflicts between sexual minorities' knowledge of themselves and their portrayals. In this case, their courage in showing self-identity is kept obstructed and prevented in society. To be specific, being a member of minorities may lead to the experience of prejudice, bias, and stigma, which cause sexual minorities to conceal their self-identity intentionally. In this case, it can be claimed that media has a direct influence on the homosexual population's identity. Some media will choose to prevent the spread of the so-called "wrong sexual orientation" to the public, any posts or information related to homosexuality will be banned both online and offline. Moreover, since the media will always limit the context of information, it becomes difficult for homosexual adolescents to find people who support them or people who belong to the same group as them initially. As a result, under this special circumstance, most homosexual populations are forced to hide their real sexual orientation. Undeniably, this phenomenon is getting better currently. In some circumstances, the media wants their attitudes toward homosexuality to be fair and democratic, and they deny their biases. Nonetheless, in the actual reports, gays and lesbians are always listed as a third special group, rather than being told together with the general public [19].

A study shows that sexual minorities face relatively more discrimination on social media such as Facebook than heterosexual people [15]. In some dating apps, concepts of body typing, racism, masculinity, and HIV stigma are emphasized by mainstream ideology, which indirectly denies homosexual communities' self-identities. In addition, the underrepresented adolescent gays and lesbians gradually characterize themselves as vulnerable and victimized instead of self-efficacy [16]. Therefore, the self-identity of homosexuality as a whole is suppressed by the ideology of mainstream society. Since they do not want to be judged and discussed and are even more unwilling to be discriminated against, they are afraid and unwilling to show their self-identity to the public.

##### **3.1.2 Misconceptions about homosexuality are conveyed to the young public**

Traditionally, media concentrates on certain topics that cause the public to perceive matters as more consequential, which means the media always provides people with what to think about [17]. Providing topics and cases that audiences do not know about attracts readers, which is an effective method to spread news and information. However, how the media frame the information is a vital factor that will influence the public's minds. Framing can create mental perceptions through psychological, sociological functions and so on [17]. In this case, the public will be easily led to think in a specific way.

Despite the fact that there is an increasing representation of the homosexual community in contemporary media, most homosexual youths are kept being characterized by one-dimensional portrayals in many old offline sources, including movies and television [16]. These types of media are influenced by traditional stereotypes and bias toward sexual minorities, which indirectly forms the negative portrayals of homosexual groups to the public. It is worth noting that in some official documents, people often link homosexuality with the spread of AIDS, which to a certain extent leads to a one-sided understanding or even misinterpretation of the homosexual group by the public [19].

With the development of technologies and new approaches to communicating with each other in society, online media becomes a prevalent platform for the public to both receive information and share personal opinions. The rapid spread of information is one of the results given by this improvement. Since some of the articles and news criticize homosexual populations based on their sexual orientation, outfits, and behaviors. For example, when talking about a gay, some critics will say that he does not have masculinity, which is “unacceptable”. As a result, the misconceptions contained in the traditional sources of media can easily be passed to audiences and the young public. Consequently, the misunderstanding of homosexual minorities causes the public to treat them from a negative perspective.

### **3.1.3 Young homosexuals are traumatized**

Some studies illustrate that the rate of negative mental health problems of sexual minorities is usually higher than that of heterosexual communities. Speaking specifically, the data illustrates that the risk of trying suicide and depression or mental anxiety is around 1.5 to 2 times higher than heterosexual counterparts [15]. Sexual minority youth will unavoidably experience stressful circumstances in which they have to negotiate during a challenging period: adolescence [16]. Since sexual identity disparity is an issue that exists in society severely for a long period, the marginalization and discrimination experienced by sexual minorities cause chronic stress in their minds and gradually cause the appearance of negative mental health issues. For instance, a result from one survey shows that there is always a relationship between discrimination and mental distress among the homosexual population [15]. Studies clearly show that the research participants claim that they experienced more than one kind of discrimination in the past few years, in which sexual nature becomes a common source of discrimination [15]. In addition, discrimination is also mentioned in other areas such as gender, race, and religion.

The homosexual minority population may feel depressed because of some external factors, including the public’s negative comments, the wrong information spread by TV shows and movies that are related to them, and so on. Like offline interactions, discrimination has been related to heavier mental distress and less mental well-being [15]. Homosexual adolescents face unique challenges in making the decision of disclosing private sexual orientation on media, which their friends, families, colleagues, and many other people may be able to see [18]. If everyone starts judging their self-perception, it is easier to lead to mental health problems, in which case the media turns into an unsafe place for them to express their identities. Therefore, media support is indispensable, thereby releasing the consequence of being traumatized.

## **3.2 Positive Influences on the Homosexual Population’s Identity**

Media portrayal has a huge impact on sexual minorities, which has a subtle influence on the thoughts of the gay community. In modern times, with the development and progress of society, information technology and media have occupied a large part of people's life. Similarly, with the development and formation of media and the improvement of people's open-mindedness, more and more movies and dramas and social media will portray the image of gay people. There is clear evidence that social media has created a rich platform for gay and lesbians, which has had a very positive impact on their self-identity and sense of belonging. The following article will respectively introduce the positive impact of social media's image depiction of homosexuals on their identity on two points.

### **3.2.1 Providing a more open platform**

A study by Zheng Jiaran and Wen Qianru concluded that new media provide a more open platform for homosexual people [20], it allows them to communicate more directly. It is important to know that living as a gay person has many more difficulties than straight people. They have to deal with the difficulties of not being accepted by others, the denial of their identity, and the fear of coming out. In this case, these young people can use social media such as Instagram or YouTube to share their experiences and help each other with emotional enlightenment. When they find themselves

surrounded by people who share their sexual orientation, it makes them realize they are not freaks and gives them a greater sense of belonging, which can also improve their self-identity. There is a study that focuses on lesbian coming out videos on YouTube which says that these videos are good for the identity of sexual minorities [21]. By sharing the video with others in their community, gay people who watch the video can gain a lot of encouragement and confidence in their own identity. This encouragement and confidence may embolden them to deepen their identity.

### **3.2.2 Helping with defining sexuality**

There are a lot of young adults in a period of identity uncertainty who are not sure about their sexuality. When they see depictions of the gay community in the media, they may become more explicit about their sexuality, which can have a positive impact on them. For example, some young people who are uncertain about their sexual orientation may find that they have something in common when they see a gay character portrayed in a movie or TV show. At the same time, after seeing these videos, they become more positive about their sexuality and thus strengthen their sense of identity. When their sexual orientation is confirmed by seeing the characters portrayed in the media, they have a deeper sense of their own identity because those characters can be seen and validated.

A Spotify playlist was studied in a paper. The theme of this playlist is the gay and queer community. The songs are shared and integrated by other people of the same sexual orientation [22]. When gay people who are unsure of their sexuality hear these songs, they may feel the same emotions, confirming their own sexuality. At the same time, they get the strength of these playlists, knowing that there are other people in this sexual orientation group, which can also have a positive impact on their identity.

### **3.2.3 Making the homosexual population more acceptable to heterosexual young adults**

Young adults in a period of identity uncertainty may feel resistant to unfamiliar gay people. This sentiment can easily turn homophobic. However, when they see the image of the gay community in the media, they will have a deeper understanding of the gay community, so that they will not have an incomprehension or resistance to the gay community. When straight people are more accepting of gay portrayals on social media (by watching movies, TV shows, or watching YouTube), it also has a more positive impact on the gay community. They are no longer afraid to reveal their sexuality to others, and they feel less pressure. It also helps to make peace with straight people and reduce the incidence of homophobic violence against the gay community.

## **4. Conclusion**

Therefore, it could be concluded that the homosexual group is not portrayed in the media in the same way as the heterosexual people. Instead, gay men and lesbians are described as opposite sex characteristics respectively, meaning that gays are often portrayed as more feminine, while lesbians are shown as more masculine. These images would blur the real characteristics of homosexual populations, creating a static stereotype. These wide-spread stereotypical portrayals would cause limited accepting attitudes among the general society point of views.

According to the current researches, media has negative influences, such as, for example, limited information, isolation in social media, and lack of support, on young homosexuals' self-perception. There are some traditional ideologies that take root when people see men or women presenting an image that doesn't match the social image. The misconceptions about homosexuality are conveyed to the young public from one-dimensional portrayals and socially-generated stereotypes. There is still a lot of prejudice against homosexuals in society and media, which has a great negative impact on their identity. In extreme cases, young homosexuals may be traumatized. Diagnosis with emotional disorders is an usual example caused by negative comments and discrimination on social medias.

However, if viewing the phenomenon from a different perspective, besides the negative side, social medias have also created numerous positive influences on the identity of homosexual young adults. A more open communication platform, which allowed homosexual young adults having more sense

of belongings, is a successful product of the increased prevalence on social medias. In the media, many representatives of SEXUAL minorities can speak out for them, which makes them no longer feel inferior about their self-identity, and enables them to better accept themselves. In addition, straight people also have better understanding of the homosexual population and are more inclusive of them.

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