

Portrayal of Homosexuality in the Media

By:

Adam Shapiro
Megan Schultz
Christina Roush
Cassandra Shofar
Emily Shilling
Tawnia Simpson
Natalie Sampiller

Everywhere you look nowadays, you cannot avoid the topic of homosexuality. It is in the news, television shows, movies, books, magazines, and as we have most recently seen, in politics. Being a minority group, homosexuals are viewed very differently by society. Though many people think there is nothing wrong with being gay, there are many who still believe it is immoral and unnatural. With all the conflicting views floating around about homosexuals different portrayals and stereotypes can be seen everywhere. These portrayals send intentional or even unintentional messages to the people witnessing them, thereby molding how people view gays. Since the media has such an immense impact on how gays are viewed, it is extremely important that we look at these stereotypes and understand the various messages they send. This project focuses on the portrayal of homosexuality in politics, television, movies, and magazines.

Homosexuality in Politics

By Cassandra Shofar and Emily Shilling



Recently homosexuality has become very visible in politics. The election played a major role in how homosexuality is represented in the media. Both candidates had the subject of legalizing gay marriage on their platforms. People could vote for Bush if they were in a favor of a constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage, or they could vote for Kerry who was against it. This proved to be one of the most controversial elections, in part because the issue of homosexuality was brought to the forefront. The media played a large role in the debate over this topic, contributing to the perception that homosexuality was an important moral and ethical issue.

In this past election homosexuality was portrayed merely as an issue, or in other words, just something that needed to be dealt with. It was dehumanized in a way that allowed the public to forget about the real people behind the issue – the gay community. The media depicted how both candidates used it as a means of gaining votes for their place in office, instead of focusing on the homosexual public itself.

The media's constant coverage of gay rights activists, the candidates' views, other politicians' views, and religious figures' takes on the subject, all caused the issue to become highly controversial. It also caused homosexuality to be a main determinate in this election, along with some other moral issues. Many news articles and articles in gay

or lesbian magazines such as “The Advocate” contained more biased views on the gay marriage and gay rights issue. This tended to sway audiences to the more liberal side of the issue.

On the other hand, religious figures and conservative newspaper opinion articles tended to sway the audiences towards a more moral outtake about the gay rights issue. It seems as though the media not only brought forth an issue such as this and caused it to become one of the main determinants in this past election, but they also played a part in further dividing the people onto one side of the issue or the other.

Many people who were apathetic towards the gay rights and marriage issue couldn't help but become wrapped up in the controversy. The many forms of media used to address the issue-- such as newspapers, television, and the internet – flooded the public with debates on the issue, and it became almost impossible ignore them. The media's power of persuasion and controversy has always shown throughout the decades, but in recent politics and especially within this past election, its power was very much highlighted and emphasized.

In short, the media’s portrayal of homosexuality in politics was heightened as of late, mainly because of the election. It was portrayed as being controversial, especially concerning moral and religious beliefs. The media also created a kind of wonderment on how to deal with it as a situation. In the media homosexuality was shown as impersonal, and it divided the viewers based on their opinions over what should be done about it. Now that the election has passed, the hype might be lowered, but the opinions still stand. Through the media, politics has brought the issue of homosexuality to an inescapable new level.

Homosexuality in Television

By Christina Roush and Tawnia Simpson



The new century has brought about various changes to the growing world. Among the most talked about topics is the issue of homosexuality. This once taboo topic is now more common as homosexuals feel more comfortable and open with their sexuality. Perhaps the greatest reason for this is because of the rise of new shows on American television that feature gay individuals. Homosexuality and relationships are increasingly common due to the evolving coverage in the mass media.

The first reality show to portray the life of a homosexual on national television was MTV's "The Real World" in 1992. The announcement was first seen as a shock; however, as cast members and viewers got to know the gay male cast member on a more personal level, they realized he was just a typical person. "The Real World" continues to lure viewers into the lives of seven randomly chosen strangers each year. Out of those seven, each season brings with it the promise of a new gay or lesbian character that the viewers will come to know.

"The Real World" is not the only television show that has contained homosexuality. "Will and Grace" is a sitcom mainly based on characters that are homosexuals. In this show, Will and Jack are both homosexuals who do not have a sexual relationship, but are close friends. Grace is a heterosexual female who lives with Will and

is very accepting of his lifestyle. This shows how the homosexual lifestyle is increasingly becoming more common and accepted in society. Another reality show, like “The Real World,” that often contains homosexuality is “Survivor.” In 2000, when self-described “fat naked fag” Richard Hatch emerged as the first-season winning contestant of the phenomenally popular, reality television show *Survivor*, he credited his survival success in large part to his homosexuality.

Television shows also try to show that they do not always stereotype homosexuals on television. For example, on this season’s “The Real World,” two homosexuals were put on the cast, instead of the usual one. One of the homosexuals was more flamboyant and was, therefore, considered a more stereotypical homosexual. The other was more conservative so the other roommates were shocked when they found out he was gay because they were not expecting him to be a homosexual. This illustrates the stereotypes that society tends to put on gays.

Because of the acceptance shown in these television shows, the casting of homosexuals in various TV shows has skyrocketed. Today there are around 22 television shows on major stations with a homosexual cast member as the main character of the show. This is proof that homosexuals are not only on their way to full acceptance, but also that people are willing to celebrate them for their openness and bravery.

Homosexuality in Movies

By Adam Shapiro and Natalie Sampiller



With all of the current media coverage homosexuals are receiving it should come as no surprise that more and more gay characters and gay-themed movies are emerging from Hollywood. These characters and movies often tend to fully personify the homosexual stereotypes that exist in our society today. Many gay-themed movies have made their way into the lime-light and gay characters are popping up in dozens of mainstream movies. By looking closely at these movies and characters we can see the different messages Hollywood is now sending out about gays. Though homosexual stereotypes are emerging in the movie industry, the stereotypes being generated are extremely different from one another. The gay-themed movies often create one picture of homosexuals, while mainstream movies tend to paint an entirely different picture. Gays are portrayed in perceivably negative ways in some movies and in others their characteristics are emphasized in a positive light.

Mainstream movies, nowadays, often include minor characters that are gay. With the addition of so many minor, gay characters, endless stereotypes abound in these mainstream movies. Unfortunately, mainstream movies often focus on the negative

stereotypes that have already been generated by society, thereby furthering the impact they have on people's views towards gays. The movies focus on surface-level aspects of homosexuals like the way they act, look, and talk. Most often the movies don't delve into the deeper sides of these characters, thereby sending the message that gays are one-dimensional. Some strong examples of stereotypes in mainstream movies are *Mean Girls*, *As Good as it Gets*, and *My Best Friend's Wedding* – all movies that a large number of people have seen.

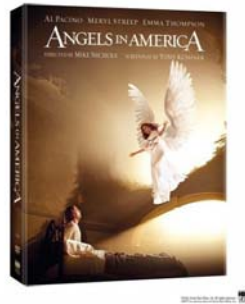
In *Mean Girls* Damien, who is played by Daniel Franzese, is shown as always being into what the girls are wearing and if it matches or not. He acts, talks, and gesticulates in a flamboyant and colorful manner. The film even makes a point of showing us that his favorite article of clothing is a light pink polo shirt. In *As Good as it Gets* Simon, who is played by Greg Kinnear, is portrayed in a very similar, feminine manner. He even owns a tiny, yipping dog, which is often associated with women. The movie basically shows the audience that Simon is a painter who likes to garden and therefore he is gay, or vice versa. His whole lifestyle and environment all seem to point to his feminine aspects. Lastly, in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, George, who is played by Rupert Everett, is also portrayed in a stereotypical, feminine way, with his flamboyant laugh and his song number, "I Say a Little Prayer for You." This feminine stereotyping of gays is only perpetuating the myth that gay men are flamboyant and basically women trapped in male bodies. In truth, these ongoing stereotypes (that gay men are feminine and lesbians are masculine or "butch") are far from adequately representing the gay population in America today. In actuality it is estimated that only 15 percent of

homosexual men fall into this stereotype, while only five percent of homosexual women do (Byer 386).

On the other side of the movie spectrum are gay-themed movies. Unlike mainstream movies, these often portray gays in more human aspects. They look deeper into the lives of homosexuals and open a door into their thoughts and feelings, not simply focusing on what they wear or look like. Unfortunately most of these movies are never viewed by conventional audiences. Some examples of gay-themed movies that portray homosexuality in a different light than mainstream movies are *Angels in America*, *Beautiful Thing*, and *Big Eden*.

Angels in America focuses on the 1980's era when AIDS began ravaging the gay community. The movie portrays gays in a variety of ways allowing viewers to see the spectrum of diversity that exists in the gay community. The gay characters consist of a masculine Jewish man, a couple of ex-drag queens, a closeted Mormon, and a famous, right-wing lawyer. With such a variety in personalities and tendencies gays are portrayed as a truly diverse group, which in reality they are. In this movie we also see a very real and emotional side of homosexuals. They are presented as real people, with real fears and real dreams just like everyone else. Gays are represented in a similar manner in both *Beautiful Thing* and *Big Eden*. Though these movies focus more on the genuine relationships that gays can share with one another, they also portray gays as more like "normal" people. The characters are just like normal men except they choose to have relationships with other men rather than women. Once again we see that they have emotions and feelings that are just as real as heterosexuals.

With all the conflicting stereotypes of gays in movies today, it is extremely important that people step back and look at the big picture. They should view some of the lesser-known gay-themed movies so they are presented with a more real look at homosexuals. Too often people try to peg homosexuals as definitively acting one way or another, and if we only view movies that perpetuate stereotypes than our personal ideas of homosexual behavior will most likely remain. Instead, it is important for people to understand that, outside of who they sleep with, gays are no different from everyone else.



Homosexuality in Magazines

By Adam Shapiro and Megan Schultz



With all the external homosexual stereotypes out there, it is important to look at some of the internal stereotypes as well. Mainstream gay magazines are a good source to look at when trying to understand how homosexuals portray themselves through media. It is important to understand that these magazines are geared towards gays and are, most often, produced by gays. There are a wide range of gay magazines out there, but the most common are ones that focus primarily on gay men, such as Out, Instinct, and Genre. The Advocate is also a popular magazine and is much more generalized. Like so many other forms of media, gay magazines generate extremely different stereotypes. On the one side you have gays being portrayed as sexy, wild, party animals, while on the other they are portrayed as intelligent and cultured political motivators.

Magazines like “Out” and “Instinct” stand out from the other mainstream gay magazines, and they have many things in common. These magazines are some of the raciest on the shelves. “Referred to as a clever mix of Cosmo and Details for gay men, *Instinct* is funny, hip, and irreverent!”(instinctmag.com). Both magazines are very blunt about their topics, very candid with their photographs, and very intimate with their stories. The overall themes of these magazines appear to be sex, style, and money. Though entertaining, these magazines create a very shallow picture of what it is like to be

gay in America. The stereotypes generated in these magazines perpetuate the idea that gay men are sex-crazed and constantly looking for sexual pleasure. However, gay men are generally no different from straight men when it comes to sexual activity. Curtis Byer, author of “Dimensions of Human Sexuality,” states:

Whether people are heterosexual or homosexual, they exhibit a great range of sexual desire and activity. Before the advent of AIDS, there was a small segment of homosexual males who were extremely active - exceeding the capacities of almost all straight men. However, they are the exception rather than the rule. Outside of this small group, homosexuals and heterosexuals are similar in their levels of sexual activity. (386)

Magazines such as “Genre” and “The Advocate” are not as racy as the homosexual magazines like “Instinct” and “Out”. “The Advocate” is more focused on events happening in the world and topics of concern for the homosexual audience. This could be compared to Newsweek magazine which covers all different topics. Another magazine that is less racy would be “Genre”. This magazine focuses on topics that an everyday person would read. “Genre provides images and ideas that inspire, while shedding relevant insights on the various aspects of How We Live: career, culture, relationships, technology, finance, design, health, travel, transportation and personal style. Genre acknowledges and respects the diversity of our readership with no intention of defining or restricting it” (genremagazine.com). “Genre” and “The Advocate” are typical magazines that are targeted at the homosexual audience, yet they are also able to relate to heterosexuals because they deal with topics that concern everyone. In doing so, an entirely new depiction of homosexuals is created.

In truth, these stereotypes are only how a small sector of homosexuals wish to be portrayed. Just like in other forms of media, gay magazines seem to portray very different images of homosexuals. Magazines such as “Out” and “Instinct” spread the idea that gays are shallow, sexual creatures, while “The Advocate” and “Genre” portray homosexuals as intelligent and cultured. Though these stereotypes may hold some truth in certain individuals of the gay community, they do not represent the whole homosexual population. We must remember that even if homosexuals portray themselves in a certain way, that is not necessarily the way all homosexuals are.

Conclusion

By looking at all the different stereotypes and portrayals generated through various media channels, hopefully we can all come to better understand the media's influence on how society views homosexuals. We are constantly being presented with entirely different views of gays, which leads many of us to wonder, "Which is the correct portrayal?" Perhaps, all of them are correct portrayals. Yes, some gay men are feminine and some lesbians are masculine, but the same thing can be said of both heterosexual men and women as well. Yes, some gay men are vain, trendy, and sexually active, but in our consumer-driven society that describes a large part of the population. Hopefully you get the point. After all, if we look at any other group of people, minorities or not, we can still see all the varying personalities and behaviors that exist within that group. Therefore, it is senseless and often harmful to peg a group as specifically being one way or another. The truth is everyone is different, and stereotypes are only tiny pieces of every person. As a society, we must open our eyes and look past these stereotypes in order to truly appreciate the diversity that exists all around us.

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