

1. The Limited Presentation of Bisexuality- Media Representation and Conversation

Katy Perry's hit single *I kissed a girl* seemed to spark a media discussion of girls that kiss each other for the social status and or attention (*The Tyra Banks Show*). Much like 'sexting' same sex experimentation (SSE) was discussed as scandalous and trendy. Often these discussions included interviews with high school aged young women who participated in this 'trend' (Wilkinson). Discussion of this experimentation would include the consumption of alcohol and other party substances. By presenting SSE in such a manner gives the activity the same appeal as drug, alcohol or other risky behaviors considered rebellious amongst teens. This type of understanding of SSE creates a trend primarily aimed at teenage and young adult women (Wilkinson). In the discussion of this 'trend' much attention was given to the motives behind these girls' choices of behavior, many stated that their male peers found this activity attractive (*Tyra Banks Show*). This discussion sparked by Perry's song lyrics treats SSE different from and as more scandalous than heterosexual experimentation. This song only is about kissing yet the amount of scandal attached to the song treats it as much more involved. When the motivation behind SSE is male attention the activity becomes less about human nature and curiosity and focuses on appeasing the young male 'fetish'. In addition to the focus on appeasing male pleasure the discussion of girls kissing normalizes and promotes female SSE but excludes males entirely. In this paper I will argue that media presentations of SSE are dominated by a singular image, additionally these presentations and conversations often contribute to the erasure of bisexuality as well as the perpetuation of other forms of oppression such as heteronormativity, sexism, racism, euro centrism and ageism.

Before proceeding further with my arguments I will address key concepts that I will reference in this paper. First, the concept of this exclusively accepted image: white, fitting with a

female cis-gender presentation, fitting a western image and behaviors. Secondly I want to make clear that my argument is framed in a western context, meaning my understandings of ways in which bisexuality had been disregarded has occurred via observations and understandings of theories of oppression that pertain to western culture, attitudes and traditions. The argument aimed at 'the media' as a vague institution is illogical, by simply stating that oppressive social phenomena such as sexism, heteronormativity, racism classism, monosexism, cissexism and racism is because of 'the media' is a prime example of the straw man fallacy. This reductionist understanding is too simple for the complexities of cultural norms and attitudes. The media [presents norms to the mass public but these presented images are created by individuals. An example of this televised newscast and written news sources are often regarded as fact, when in fact this is not always true. This is why I wish to make very clear that as I discuss 'the media' I am referencing cultural norms that lead the creators of said media to present SSE/bisexuality in this light.

Bisexuality is often portrayed as a cultural trend; this type of presentation is incorrect because as history proves (Greek sexuality for example) bisexuality is not just an occurrence of our culture. Because of increased media attention it can be argued that people have been more aware of bisexuality but this does not equate acceptance. Additionally it can be argued that increased attention does not report the trend, rather it creates it to claim bisexuality, as a trend does not grant sexual identity permanence in consideration as part of human sexuality as a whole. Looking at these media presentations and reports closer it can be seen that this 'trend' is being reported amongst a limited scope of individuals. This presentation to the general public, especially youth culture in this fashion acts as a way to normalize the scandal surrounding one image of bisexuality. This normalization is not

liberation or acceptance and should not be claimed as such.

The concept of *biopower*¹ is one created by Michel Foucault; this along side with *disciplinary powers*² can be applied to ways in which media representations of bisexuality and SSE are limiting and problematic. *Biopower* can be found in the way that SSE is treated as scandalous, also it can be used to explain how these public presentations acts as a form of social control over bodies. This is seen in ways that SSE is treated and discussed as scandal, as if a persons sexuality is to be rightfully deemed acceptable or unacceptable by the mass public, by considering human sexuality in this way excuses homophobic and monosexist views of human sexuality. This concept of control is an example of Foucault's *repressive hypothesis*³. The current treatment of bisexuality/SSE in the media is both a form of repression but also an example of the response to repression. Repressive aspects to media discussion of bisexuality can be found in the way that it is discussed as trendy SSE and not bisexual behavior of; individual this ignores the existence of the sexuality entirely. Additionally media discussions of same sex experimentation often operate according to the gay/straight matrix, this is seen in the way that bisexual activities are assumed to be experimental actions or motivated by social status or reward, rather than a faced to ones sexuality. By acting as if one is being progressive in addressing the subject in such a manner designates queer person to the position of the other in opposition to heterosexuality. This results in continued reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality and therefore continues to disempower and oppress queer individuals. If this matrix of gay/straight is solely presented in media depictions/conversations

¹ A form of social power that emerges out of the 18th cen. in order to manage populations, this form of power is enforced by controlling the birth, death, reproduction and illness of a population.

² Mechanism of power that regulates a population's behavior. This is reinforced by regulation of ones time, space and behaviors.

³ With the rise of the bourgeoisie having sex for enjoyment was condoned, to become liberated from this one must speak more freely and enjoy sex more often. Foucault finds this hypothesis to be incorrect.

the erasure and bisexuality continues. Bisexual erasure is harmful for many reasons, one being the direct impact that it has on bisexual individuals. If one is told by society that their sexual feelings as abnormal, this creates a sense of isolation and can lead to serious mental health problems. The disregard and prejudice against bisexual individuals has been present in the LGBTQ community, the erasure of bisexuality

Common representations of bisexuality/SSE reinforce heteronormativity, I will address Suzanne Pharr's *Racism-A Weapon of Sexism*. In this book the author presents the important point that forms of oppression are interrelated, as displayed in this quote:

“It is virtually impossible to view one oppression, such as sexism or homophobia, in isolation because they are all connected: sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, albinism, anti-Semitism, ageism. They are linked by a common origin— economic power and control.”(Pharr, 64) In this passage, Pharr explains the interconnectedness of oppression. For example the commodification of bisexuality is homophobic because it disregards queer sexuality in a way that heterosexuality would not. Sexism, ageism and often racism can be found in these representations as well because it is common for younger white women to be the center of this discussion. Additionally the discussion of bisexuality as a ‘trend’ implies that this sexuality is a western phenomenon, which is incorrect and Eurocentric. Eurocentrism is problematic in regards to societal concepts of human sexuality in the way in which monogamy is considered the norm and or ideal. Looking at two-spirit ideates an example can also explain how not all cultures uphold the ones ideates must be either male or female. By disregarding the variety of understanding of the world and human existence in different cultures limits the possibility for the expansion of knowledge and ways to better exist as a society.

In *Bisexuality- 'a la mode'* author Sue Wilkinson discusses how bisexuality is presented to women (heterosexual and homosexual) as being 'in fashion', as demonstrated in this passage,

"...Bisexuality is being marketed to lesbians and straight women alike as "a la mode." Mainstream newspapers and women's magazines sport articles entitled "Why girls just want to have fun with each other" (The Observer), "Want to get ahead? Get a girlfriend" (The Guardian), or "Sappho So Good" (Harpers & Queen). "Lesbian chic" (New York, Diva, Everywoman), "bi-girl frisson" (Elle) and "sexual tourism" (Harpers & Queen) are trendy. What's different about this "new" bisexuality is that it rarely speaks its name and it actively reinforces the sexual identities "lesbian" and "straight." It's more trendy to have sex with a man if you're a lesbian than if you're a straight woman (who is, after all, just doing "what comes naturally"): for a lesbian to have heterosexual is to be "transgressive." Similarly, it's more chic to have sex with a woman if you're straight than if you're lesbian (the lesbian is also doing "what comes naturally" for her): the risqué glamour of a girlfriend is marketed as the latest fashion accessory for the heterosexual woman. "(Cite)

This passage describes how media discussions of bisexual activities have codified the orientation by comparing it to a trend or the latest fashion, as argued before this does not allow bisexuality permanence.

Pharr defines ways in which tokenism as the "method of limited access that gives false hope to those left behind and blames them for "not making it""(62) She claims "Tokenism is a form of co-optation. " It takes the brightest and best of the most assimilated, rewards them with position and money (though rarely genuine leadership and power), and then uses them as a model of what is necessary to succeed, even though there are often no more openings for others who may follow their model."(63) When considering the role that tokenism plays into media representations/conversations of SSE in relation to bisexuality the erasure of the sexuality can be better understood. Often bisexual activities of individuals are discussed or framed as being either straight or gay depending on who their partner is in the conversation, this does not recognize the individuals self identified sexual orientation and defining it for them on a situational basis. An example of this is the recent attention given to British diver Tom Daley who announced he was dating a man via a YouTube video, conversation surrounding this video framed his as gay, even

though he very clearly implies that he is bisexual, he even states that “of course I still fancy girls, but I mean, right now I am dating a guy.”(Daley) Media coverage has tokenized Daley’s sexuality by presenting him as gay when in fact he does not seem to have sexuality that meets the definition of being gay; he is simply dating another man. Additionally it is assumed that his partner is gay because of their relationship status. It is a stereotype that same sex couples are both identify as homosexual.

In relation to tokenism Pharr also addresses the harmfulness of stereotypes, “This distortion and lack of knowledge of the other expresses itself in stereotyping, that subtle and effective way of limiting lives. It is through stereotyping that people are denied their individual characteristics and behavior and are dehumanized. The dehumanizing process is necessary to feed the oppressor’s sense of being justified and to alleviate the feeling of guilt.”(Pharr,59) Stereotypes, as explained in the above passage can negatively effect one’s personal and romantic relationships as well as their one understanding of themselves. One example of this is the stereotype that arose out of the 1980’s aids crisis that bisexual people acted as carriers of aid/hiv between straight and queer communities. Another stereotype is that bisexual individuals are unable to be monogamous or faithful in their relationships

Thus far, I have discussed how current media portrayals of bisexuality codify the orientation as well as normalize only one accepted image. Using Foucault's theories of power and social control I explained why current portrayals and discussion of bisexuality are not liberating. In addition I have presented evidence of how current depictions of bisexuality can reinforce other forms of oppression. Lastly I presented two more accounts of the harmful aspects to media portrayals of bisexuality that exemplify why current media discussions of bisexuality are problematic. In the second section of this paper I will address considerations for moving

forward in conversations of bisexuality and strategies combat the negative images presented in popular media.

2. Moving Forward-- Social Interventions and the Importance Of Community

Contemplating and critiquing current media representations of bisexuality leads to the question of what can be done to combat these harmful stereotypes. Upon proceeding with this conversation it is important to note that because of intersecting identities people can be simultaneously oppressed. Because of this I do not wish to claim to know a definitive 'solution'. I will address different strategies individuals can adapt in order to call out and question misconceptions of bisexuality and why these practices are valuable, additionally I will argue for the importance of community support amongst bisexual individuals.

*Social interventions*⁴ can often be successful and worth attempting on a situational basis, one might feel as if they are in physical danger for questioning an oppressive comment or statement. If this is so other strategies can be adopted to speak out against one's experiences or observations later on. But if one is in a social situation where they feel comfortable doing so, oppressive comment or actions of others should be pointed out, questioned and discussed. The strategy of *social interventions* can be used as a tool to problematized common stereotypes of what bisexuality looks like. By questioning and asking for reasoning behind incorrect statements creates a space for open dialogue and debunking of myths. This practice can also be beneficial to bisexual persons because they are a way for people to indirectly stand up for themselves a social context without having to reveal any personal information.

⁴The act of attempting to engage in a conversation with a person making/perpetuating oppressive views, this can be as simple as asking why they find their statements to be true.

Another important form of resistance against these harmful views of bisexuality is to create community support amongst bisexuals as well as other commonly oppressed individuals.

Building communities is effective in not only supporting queer individuals but also works to create a public presence for marginalized group. In her novel *Real Live Nude Girls - Chronicles of Sex- Positive Culture* bisexual activist Carol Queen discusses her experiences organizing and leading discussion amongst the bisexual community.

“To my surprise, the bisexual women and men who attended that workshop had slightly different agenda. Many of them were young and just coming out, but they didn’t want to just talk about bisexuality. They wanted to address coming out, identifying, and getting support as abuse or incest survivors; people with disabilities (especially “hidden” ones like environmental illnesses); of different culture, particularly those who were mixed race... it dawned on that a sexual identity, were passing the sexual to talk about wanting to “come out:” as themselves.”(Queen, 20)

This observation shows how building community can create a space for open dialogs that can then further lead to discussions of other oppressive aspects of culture that are equally important to consider as one's sexuality. These progressions in dialogues are valuable because of the potential to expand upon understandings of several forms of oppression and their intersections on a more person basis.

Often bisexual individuals feel unaccepted by both gay and straight communities. In *Bi Any Other Name Bisexual People Speak Out*, a collection of stories and poems. In *Two Way Closet* Michael Brewer expresses his experiences with acceptance. “ I quickly learned how to function in both worlds with smooth efficiency. No one in the gay bar would ever guess I had a girlfriend, and the same went for my straight friends. Why did I keep these two worlds apart? For safety.”(Brewer,140) This experience of Brewer is not uncommon amongst bisexual individuals, in order to feel safe in social situations one's own actions, appearance, and even language can be monitored and thus as a way to reinforce one's own oppression. As Nate Brown states in his story piece *A gift to myself* he identifies as bisexual as a way to increase bisexual visibility as see

in this passage: "My sexual orientation is defined at last, so much so that it need not necessarily be labeled. But my gift to myself and to the community is to acknowledge that I am physically and emotionally desire to be with whomever I wish, and I call myself bisexual to define this quality of my life, and to acknowledge that we do exist as a separate but coexistent entity within the straight and gay world"(Brown,65) In this passage Brown explains that despite his full understanding of his sexual identity without the label bisexual he chooses to describe himself as such in order socially acknowledge the existence of bisexuality with both the gay and straight 'worlds'. This topic of visibility is important when considering strategies for fostering acceptance of bisexual individuals. Why many bisexual people choose to identify themselves as such varies but often, much like other oppressed individuals negative stereotypes play a factor in the closeting of one's true identity. Queen discusses negative stereotypes of bisexual persons and argues against ways in which bisexual's have attempted to deny and disprove these stereotypes.

" We are sexually adventures, even sexually elite. We are open-minded. We will fuck anything that moves. In some respects the contemporary bisexual movement can be said to have organized according to these beliefs; we constantly refer to them. Like gay and lesbian movements before us, we begin by asserting, "We are *not*" to cultural images we take as myths or half-truths: not swingers, not promiscuous, not kinky. And yet many of us *are* these things, just as some of us are shy and celibate, and some are monogamously coupled and intend to stay that way. But because we have been defined not culturally, not even emotionally, but sexually-- particularly in the absence of a visible bisexual movement to emphasize all the other things we are. Even those who are widely and diversely sexual feel the limits of being recognized for that along."(Queen, 39)

In a community focus of debunking stereotypes it can reinforce the oppressive power that is being fought against. Some people may fit stereotypes but this is irrelevant and coincidental and should not be considered damaging to the acceptance of one's sexuality. Because of this bisexual activism and community building should embrace a pro-sex, body-positive culture rather than defending what society has negatively stereotyped as bisexual, which often are connected to practices of non-monogamy as a negative and harmful as well as creates fear of one's sexuality

and body.

As I concluded this section of my argument I would like to point out that upon reading *Bi Any Other Name* a common theme was that these bisexual persons were not aware of other bisexual individuals, and even often, the existence of the sexuality in general. What most of these writers reporting have learned about bisexuality came from academic literature. In order to adequately support bisexual individuals creating communities must be considered equally as important as proceeding further with epistemological study of human sexuality. The creation of community along with bisexual visibility is a tool that can empower individuals of all different privileges and social locations, human relationships are can be used as tools of empowerment.

Building community amongst bisexual individuals and the LBGTQ community is an important force of resistance against discrimination. It is important that the erase of bisexuality is discussed as a human rights issue. Stereotypes of bisexuality should also be questioned but not regarded as untrue as this can shame persons that do fit certain stereotypes. That is often in opposition to Eurocentric ideals (being non- monogamy) and thought of as being shameful or dirty. Increased visibility and acceptance of social taboos can function to encourage self-acceptance and increase the concern for bisexual visibility and acceptance.

“WE KNOW THAT IT IS VERY DIFFICULT. WE KNOW EXACTLY HOW WE FEEL.
WE CAN HELP YOU.JUST STEP OVER HERE TO THIS
NICE LITTLE BOX WE HAVE FOR YOU.THATS IT, STEP INSIDE. COZY,
ISN'T IT? THERE NOW, NOW WE'LL JUST PUT ON THIS LID NICE
AND TIGHT. IF YOU BREATHE REAL
SHALLOWLY, THERE SHOULD BE JUST ENOUGH AIR
TO LIVE ON.

NOW, DOESN'T THAT FEEL BETTER?”

Works Cited

Daley, Tom, dir. *Tom Daley: Something I want to say...* Tom Daley, 2013. Film. 1 Feb 2014.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJwJnoB9EKw>>.

Gervais , Sarah J. "Girls kissing Girls Why do straight girls hook up with each other in public?."

Psychology Today. 9 6 2012: n. page. Web. 1 Feb. 2014.

<<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/power-and-prejudice/201207/girls-kissing-girls-0>>.

Hutchins Loraie, Loraine, and Lani Kaahumanu. *Bi Any Other Name Bisexual People Speak Out*
Los Angeles, New York: alyson books , 1991. Print.

Pharr, Suzanne. *Homophobia- A Weapon Of Sexism*. Expanded. Berkeley, California: Chardon Press, Print.

Queen, Carol. *Real Live Nude Girl:Chronicles of Sex-Positive Culture*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
San Francisco, California: Cleis Press, 1997. Print.

The Tyra Banks Show - "Girls kissing each other". 2008. Film. 31 Jan 2014.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NU4n7ZmU0c>>.

Wilkinson, Sue. "Bisexuality "a la mode"." *Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University*. 19.3 (1996): 293-301. Print.

<<http://www.sciencedirect.com.ezproxy.proxy.library.oregonstate.edu/science/article/pii/S0277539596000167>>.