

Media & Psychology (Societal Acceptance of Homosexuality)
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Hypothesis: - "Closeted homosexuality is a consequence of fixated disgraceful representation of homosexuality by the various forms of media."

"The wrong way he talks is better than a hundred right ways of others"-Rumi, Moses and the Shepherd.

Under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with a man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment of life, or with imprisonment of either description for term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

Fire, Deepa Mehta's film which threw light on closeted homosexuality, hiked protests. The moral brigade criticized the "indecent" portrayal of housewives and questioned the names of the lesbian characters (Sita and Radha). (1997). My Brother Nikhil, a small budget film which made big news for its underlying homosexual inclination and HIV-AIDS stigmas, was appreciated in the newspapers for the subtle representation of a homosexual. (2005). Ugandan tabloid newspaper Rolling Stone published the names and pictures of gay activists in the front page with the heading "Hang Them!". Three months later, David Kato was found murdered at his home. (2011)

The Oxford Dictionary defines a homosexual as "a person who is sexually attracted to people of their own sex". Homosexuality is the form of love which breaks the barriers of the societal norms by connecting people of the same sex not just physically but emotionally as well.

In the forefront mainstream life, the attraction, the affection and the love between a man and a woman has always been celebrated. This does not however, mean that the love of a man for a man or that of a woman for a woman, no matter how intense or consummate, is any less or depraved.

Homosexuality in History:

In the ancient Hindu text, Ramayana, Maharaja Dilipa's death encouraged his two wives to make love and conceive a child, Bhagiratha, with the blessings of Lord Shiva to have an heir for the Sun dynasty. Kamasutra describes the techniques by which masculine and feminine types of the third sex perform fellatio. It also describes the feminine-type and the masculine-type homosexual. Jesus Christ believed in the sanctity of marriage and taught about the relationship of a man with a woman. He considered lust a sin and was clear about his ideas on sexual immorality. However, his silence cannot be mistaken as contempt for homosexual behaviour but the Bible considers any relationship outside the realm of marriage of a man with a woman as a sin.

The Quran vehemently condemns homosexuality but it acknowledges the fact that homosexuality was prevalent in the Muslim community. However, this rules out the claims of Hindu extremist groups that homosexuality is a new age western concept.

Media and Stereotypes

Media plays a solid role in formation of stereotypes in our minds. The definition of stereotypes is "characteristics ascribed to groups of people involving gender, race, national origin, sexual orientation etc." Media stereotyping is inevitable, especially in advertising, entertainment and news industry. Stereotypes act like codes that give audiences a quick, common understanding of a person or group of people—usually relating to their class, race, gender, sexual orientation etc. But stereotypes can be problematic. They can reduce a wide range of differences in people to simplistic categorizations, transform assumptions about particular groups of people into "realities", be used to justify the position of those in power and perpetuate social prejudice and inequality.

Homosexuality in television

Media educators Larry Gross and George Gerbner argue that the media participate in the "symbolic annihilation" of gays and lesbians by negatively stereotyping them, often consigning them to the margins of entertainment media, playing either "colourful" and "flamboyant" characters or dangerous psychopaths, the lesbians often ascribed the roles of either the over-sexed temptress or the over-masculine, loudmouthed butch.

However, there has been some improvement in the representation of homosexuals in mainstream television with the popularity of shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Though mainstream television and movies continue to "sanitize" the portrayal of gay and lesbian life, *Queer as Folk*, a UK miniseries portrayed homosexuals as over-sexed.

Homosexuality in Films

Homosexuality has been present in Indian cinema since ages. Though it has been continuously argued that films like *Andaz* and *Sangam* are about the love between the two lead heroes and the heroine(s), the third angle of the love triangle, have been used to keep the love between the men veiled, it was never really accepted. The first out and out gay character, Pinku in *Mast Kalandar* (1991) played by Anupam Kher was appreciated by the public. However, it cannot be ignored that he was portrayed as overtly feminine, dressed in bright coloured clothes and always laughed upon.

Also, portrayal of homosexuals is almost always negative with movies like *Basic Instinct* (in Hollywood) portraying them as dangerous psychopathic serial killers. Such a depiction promotes homophobia among the common public. Also, in movies, there is a serious lack of character development of the gays and the lesbians; often delegated the unimportant side-roles or used for comic relief.

During the years of 1930s to 1950s, the religious and women's groups criticized Hollywood movies for contributing to immorality. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the homosexuals were becoming more vocal about their rights in reality but their depiction in the films was increasingly homophobic.

The first serious gay film in India was *Bomgay* (1996) which focused on the underground and complex nature of gay identity in urban India. However, *Fire* (1996) was the first film which made news for its homosexual storyline. Even though the love between the sisters-in-law was illustrated with subtlety, the Hindu extremist groups protested against the "unnatural" relationship between two women.

In *Page 3* (2005) and *Life in a Metro* (2007), one of the female leads played by Konkana Sen Sharma, in both the films, discovers that her boyfriend is gay. Fear of ostracization pressurizes them to conform to the societal norms.

Kal Ho Naa Ho (2003) had the stereotypical but inoffensive scenes of misunderstood intimacy between the two male leads by the maid. *Dostana* (2008) focused on two straight men who pretend to be gays in order to get a rented apartment. In the film, Abhishek Bachchan's mother, who is a typical Indian mother, is shattered when she comes to know that her son is gay. This film, however, renders homosexuality in a positive light.

My Brother Nikhil (2005) covers the social stigma of HIV AIDS along with homosexuality. The protagonist played by Sanjay Suri is the state all rounder swimming champion and his friends and family adore him. When they learn that he is HIV positive, they start treating him as an untouchable and the Goa public health keeps him in isolation. His sister and his secret boyfriend are the only ones who support him in the time of crisis. They run an AIDS assistance organization, Positive People, despite the threats from the community. He wins back his respect and his homosexuality is also accepted.

Memories in March (2010) depicts a mother who deals with the bereavement of her son and soon discovers that he was in a relationship with a man. She is horrified by the news and feels that she was responsible for this "abnormality". Later, she realizes that her son may not be in love with a woman but his love for the man, played by Ritoparno Ghosh, was true and equally beautiful.

Homosexuality and the News

News is that channel of media which strive to provide the most accurate information. However, at times, it tries to facilitate the way we think. Critics argue that news media still systematically ignore and distort the lives and experiences of gays and lesbians.

In a 1998 study that analyzed 50 years of coverage of gay and lesbian issues in *Time* and *Newsweek*, Lisa Bennett found that news media reinforce prejudice and discrimination against gays and lesbians. She observes that gays and lesbians are often linked to deviant or criminal behaviour without evidence to support such claims; and that the media often reprint offensive and homophobic comments.

Activists and academicians such as Simon Watney, Douglas Crimp and Jan Zita Grover argue that news coverage of HIV/AIDS has consistently drawn on negative stereotypes about gays and lesbians reflecting mainstream society's fear of and dislike for the gay community, essentially blaming gay men for AIDS.

Homosexuals in Advertisement

In 1994, furnishings company IKEA aired an advertisement which showed two gay men shopping for a dining room set. IKEA was the first company to use gay-positive advertising. Their target group was gays and lesbians living in cities with a large amount of disposable income.

Case Studies:

ADAM LAMBERT- He is an American songwriter, singer and an actor. During the American Idol competition, he was clicked kissing a man and he later accepted that he is gay. At the American Music Awards (2009), Adam Lambert kissed a male bassist, grinded a dancer's head against his pelvis and grabbed the crotch of another dancer. He wanted to promote freedom of expression and art. In August 2011, he was honoured with the Equality Idol Award during the Equality Awards for being a role model for the LGBT community. He and his mother were given the honour of authentic voice at the PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) National Los Angeles. He gave a video message for It Gets Better campaign which discourages suicides and bullying among the youth dealing with their identity. He said that there is more to a person than his/her sexual orientation. He launched his own Peace pendant and the proceeds from it went to The Trevor Project. He is a part of GLAAD, HRC, GSA, GLSEN, The Trevor Project and It Gets Better.

RITUPARNO GHOSH- He is a director and an actor. He is open about his homosexuality and a major part of his cinema focuses on the acceptance of such relationships. He gathered the courage to come out of the closet after his mother passed away. Also, while he was editing an article on Singur, he realized that if he could write against the Tata Nano group, he had the strength to admit that he is gay. In Memories in March, he plays a gay ad film maker who deals with the sad demise of his lover. He does not dress up in the stereotypical gay manner and is not effeminate. The film won the National Award for Best Feature Film. In Just Another Love Story, he plays a transgender documentary film maker who is in a relationship with the married bisexual cinematographer of the film. They work on a film on the life of Chapal Bhaduri, a transgender theatre person. Once he said "Kolkata can't ignore me. Nor can it accept me completely".

TYLER CLEMENTI- He was an eighteen year old student at Rutgers University, New Jersey. He confessed to his parents that he was gay and his father accepted him. At the college hostel, his roommate Dharun Ravi suspected that Clementi was "awkward" and joked about him with his friends. Ravi's harassment reached at its peak when he left his webcam on before leaving Clementi and his boyfriend alone in the room on the nights of 19 September and 21 September. Ravi and his friend watched them kissing on another computer and posted about the incident on

Twitter. On the night of 22 September, Clementi went to the George Washington Bridge and sent his final message on Facebook saying that he is committing suicide and apologised for it. Five minutes after Clementi's post, Ravi messaged him apologizing for what he had done and did not mind him being gay. However, it was too late and Ravi faced the consequences for this invasion of privacy. In The New Yorker, Ian Parker has accused the media for exaggerating Ravi's role in the incident as the video was not uploaded on the internet and Clementi was not closeted.

Online Hate Crimes against Homosexuals

According to FBI, hate groups have a "primary purpose to promote animosity, hostility, and malice against persons belonging to a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity/national origin which differs from that of the members of the organization." Few of the hate groups are:-

1. Abiding Truth Ministries- Formed by Scott Lively

This particular group accused the homosexuals for running the Nazi Party and vehemently fought for terming homosexuality as an "abnormality". According to him, the gay movement is an aggressive, anti-social, evil institution aimed at destroying a "marriage-based society" and propagating promiscuity. Ironically, during the Nazi regime, homosexuality was a crime; with its punishment only death.

2. Americans For Truth About Homosexuality (AFTAH) - Formed by Peter LaBarbera.

LaBarbera in 2002 compared the alleged dangers of homosexuality with those of "smoking, alcohol and drug abuse". LaBarbera also accused gay men of pedophilia.

3. Concerned Women For America- Formed by Beverly LaHaye

LaHaye has blamed gay people for a "radical leftist crusade" in America and has occasionally equated homosexuality with pedophilia.

Closer home, Baba Ramdev claimed that homosexual activities are not only against public morality, public health and a healthy environment but also against the interest of the society. He feels that it could be treated like any other congenital defect through yoga, pranayam and other meditation techniques.

Interviews of Homosexual and Straight Individuals

Three individuals of different orientation and gender were taken and their views asked. The responses that we got were as follows:-

A: 19 years old, straight female feels that media distorts the depiction of homosexuals. They do not necessarily dress up in pink clothes or hit on every member of their own sex. Films like Girlfriend shows the issue in the most vulgar way and to some extent, the filmmakers are scared to portray the issue. One of the few films that handled the topic well was Page 3.

B: 51 year old, straight male feels that the different forms of media do not go to the roots of the subject. Homosexuality has been prevailing for a long time and is the basic right of an individual. What two people do inside a room is of no concern to us and the media should also not cross the line.

C: 19 years old, homosexual female feels that the media believes in the two prototypes of human species, male and female. It tries to “heterosexual-ise” homosexuals by presenting gays as comical and lesbians as “dirty and witchy”. She finds such a picture derogatory and offensive.

On being inquired about their own views on homosexuality:

A: They are not very different from us. She argues that if they do not have a problem with us being straight, we should not have a problem with them being homosexuals. In a society where honour killings are accepted, letting someone live their lives is not.

B: They should be allowed to live their lives peacefully. We are no one to judge their private activities and we should respect the individuality of an individual.

C: Such labelling is not required. The society would not be appreciative of her sexuality but it is, in no way, different from heterosexuality.

On being asked about the actual representation of homosexuals:

A: They should be shown in the same light as any other actor. There is no need to dress them up in a particular way. It is not necessary that the homosexuals are over-seductive or over-sensitive.

B: Just as we do not go out of our way to show straights in a special light, same treatment should be given to the homosexuals. They have their own style of expression, we have our own. They do no crime in the society, they are not criminals.

C: A gay is not feminine or a lesbian is not masculine. They cannot be generalised as every human being, despite his/her sexuality, has his/her own way of dressing up or behaving in the presence of others.

On being asked about the rights that should be granted to the homosexuals:

A: They should be granted the basic human rights and parental acceptance. Since God has made them like that, we should accept and love them and not try to change them. They are not deviant or weird, and the religious bigots should be jailed for their foolish statements.

B: They should be given the rights of equality, freedom of expression and brotherhood.

C: The citizenship rights have been made for a healthy, heterosexual man. She questions how her sexual preferences define her thinking.

On being asked about their reaction if they found out that a close family member was homosexual:

A: I would be a little surprised, but would overcome it. The sexual orientation would make no difference and I would want that person to be in a healthy and happy relationship. Homosexuals should also accept themselves as who they are and not feel ashamed about themselves. Also, in a country where religion is embedded into our psyche, the religious leaders should also give the correct angle on homosexuality.

B: I would be surprised at first and feel why this happened to me. Then, I would try to change the orientation, which would be a futile exercise. In such a case, counseling of the family members becomes critical.

C was asked about her friends' and family's reaction to her homosexuality. She said that she confessed she likes a woman but it was not accepted by her family and some of her friends. Also, she accepts that she would not be able to come out of the closet as she fears the reactions of the society.

All in all, with the proliferated acceptance of homosexuality and films like 'I Am' winning the National Award, it can be said that homosexuality is finding its way into the lives of common people. But, the bottom line is — closeted or open, the 'third gender' remains alienated by the mainstream, marginalized, emotionally abused and misunderstood because they have the courage to choose and to live by their choice.