

Introduction

“The pervasiveness and persistence of heteronormative ideology is not surprising when considering the social psychological mechanisms that contribute to its entrenchment and maintenance”¹

In recent years, despite the increase of lesbian visibility, the “western ‘labelling machine’ has striven to create a complete hetero-centric binary structure”², which continues to force an unrealistic and one dimensional narrative of lesbianism. Constructed around the gender-binary which places women in a subordinate position, lesbians are stereotyped based on their level of conformity to traditional feminine roles and behaviours. This in turn attaches stigma to any form of self-expression which conflicts with the normative power of heterosexuality, while any ‘positive’ attitudes from heterosexual men are partly attributed to the fetishisation of feminine lesbians. Overtime, lesbianism has been appropriated by institutionalised heterosexuality, as media has “simultaneously commodified and devalued”³ the identity by socialising a whole culture of men to perceive it as a performance rather than a viable sexual orientation.

Hence, my hypothesis proposes that *“Heteronormativity is enforced by the patriarchal and male chauvinist institutional structures underlying society, creating narrow social constructs of lesbianism and the fetishisation of their sexuality”*. Therefore, the objective of this study will be to investigate the multifaceted nature of lesbian social exclusion through the relationship between patriarchy and women’s sexuality. Although “significant social, cultural and legal changes about sexuality”⁴ have occurred, this study will also analyse how heterosexist perceptions of lesbianism are normalised on a macro scale through media. Regardless of increased lesbian visibility, the quality and accuracy of representation should be questioned, as the male gaze continues to dominate media.

Secondary research was conducted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, using sources like *“Social Exclusion and the Stigmatization of Lesbians”* by anthropologist María CU. Cuesta, which explores the causations of stereotyping by analysing social constructs. Meanwhile, *“The eroticization of lesbianism by heterosexual men”*⁵ by Kristin Puhl and *“The Frequency of Stereotypical Media Portrayals and Their Effects on the Lesbian Community”*⁶ by Arienne Annati, provided an

¹ Van der Toorn, J. Pliskin, R. and Morgenroth, T.(2020). Not quite over the rainbow: the unrelenting and insidious nature of heteronormative ideology. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, pp.160-165

² Cuesta. M. (2014). Social Exclusion and the Stigmatization of Lesbians. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 161, pp.77-81

³ Annati, A. (2020). The Frequency of Stereotypical Media Portrayals and Their Effects on the Lesbian Community. In BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects. Item 318

⁴ Scanlon, J. and Lewis, R., (2016). Whose sexuality is it anyway? Women’s experiences of viewing lesbians on screen. *Feminist Media Studies*, 17(6), pp.1005-1021.

⁵ Puhl. K (2010). The eroticization of lesbianism by heterosexual men. WWU Graduate School Collection. 57

⁶ Annati, A (2020). The Frequency of Stereotypical Media Portrayals and Their Effects on the Lesbian Community. Bridgewater State University, Thesis

academic evaluation of the performative quality of lesbianism in media made for male consumption, acting as support for my primary research.

Further contributing to my knowledge, primary research included an online questionnaire⁷ which gathered 113 valid responses, being beneficial when investigating perceptions of lesbianism despite being a meso-level analysis. To study lesbian fetishisation and stereotypes, a visual content analysis was conducted on the promotional poster of *Below Her Mouth*⁸, with an additional quantitative content analysis conducted on *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*⁹ to investigate the devaluing of positive film representations. Furthermore, a focus group¹⁰ was conducted with 6 participants to gain a personal insight into sexuality while interviews were conducted via email with Dr Whitney Monaghan¹¹ and social activist from WEALL Scotland, Denisha Killoh¹², and via phone call with Dr Kerryn Drysdale¹³, providing detailed and authoritative insights into gender, sexuality and the impacts of discrimination on the lesbian community.

This Personal Interest Project will investigate sexuality as a cross cultural component as lesbians' experience womanhood differently to straight women who are "sheltered by the social support system that accompanies heterosexuality"¹⁴. This topic is therefore relevant as it investigates how the lesbian existence is defined by a society inherently rooted in heteronormativity, while analysing how patriarchal institutions contribute to prejudice and social exclusion by enculturating stigmatised beliefs.

*"[lesbian] voices and experiences are silenced, distorted and obscured in a phallogentric or patriarchal culture"*¹⁵

⁷ Questionnaire – See Appendix A –

⁸ Visual Content Analysis – See Appendix B –

⁹ Quantitative Content Analysis – See Appendix C –

¹⁰ Focus group – See Appendix D –

¹¹ Interview (no.1) – See Appendix E –

¹² Interview (no.2) – See Appendix F –

¹³ Interview (no.3) – See Appendix G –

¹⁴ Frye, M (1983). *The politics of reality*. Trumansburg, N.y.: Crossing Press.

¹⁵ Mooney-Somers, J & Ussher, JM (2000). *Young lesbians and mental health: The closet is a depressing place to be*. JM Ussher (Ed.), Wiley-Blackwell pp. 3