

Media Literacy Art Education: Deconstructing Lesbian and Gay Stereotypes in the Media

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Abstract

Popular media such as films, television programmes/commercials and magazines have become the dominant source through which children learn about others and their world, develop attitudes and beliefs as manifested in media expressions, and formulate their sense of identity. Popular media have enormous influence on children who are constantly immersing themselves in value-laden media images that perpetuate over-generalised representations of cultural groups, in particular, lesbian and gay stereotypes. By critically examining media images in the art room, media literacy art education offers art teachers and their students an opportunity to nurture their aesthetic sensibilities, social awareness and the media literacy necessary to resist and challenge prejudiced, dehumanised or unjust social practices. This article explores issues of lesbian and gay stereotypes in the media, and proposes using media images as a pedagogical device to help students deconstruct them.

Introduction

Exposure to popular media may be the dominant means by which children, as well as most adults, learn about others and acquire and internalise social norms, values and beliefs as manifested in the expressions and presentations of the media [1]. Most likely, the media generation learns about social issues like homosexuality not from direct contact with gay people or from their parents, teachers and peers, but from characters and scenes depicted in films, television programmes, fashion magazines and commercial advertisements [2]. When viewers are constantly immersing themselves in value-laden media images and are consistently exposed to the stereotypical portrayal of lesbian and gay people, they are likely to develop false assumptions and prejudiced attitudes, possibly even discriminatory behaviour, toward lesbian and gay people.

Media representations shape children's definitions of social reality. Moritz [3] points out that American television both reflects and creates cultural expressions as well as political, economic and social realities. In other words, media images and programmes not only market products, ideas, values and worldviews, but also provide socially acceptable behavioural guidance for children. Because visual images and messages are omnipresent in the popular media, a growing number of American art educators such as Chung [4], Duncum [5] and Freeman [6] have strongly advocated a visual culture approach to art education that fosters media literacy in children to help make them critical, informed citizens in an increasingly image-saturated media environment. Media literacy art education offers an opportunity for art students to critically examine and interpret media texts so that they have the critical knowledge necessary to resist problematic representations. Media images can be used to help students problematise stereotypical portrayals and examine prejudiced social practices. This article thus explores issues of lesbian and gay stereotypes in the media, and proposes using media images as a pedagogical device to help students deconstruct lesbian and gay stereotypes.

Function and process of stereotyping

Stereotyping is a cognitive process by which humans simplify complex information and make sense of the world. Humans tend to generalise complex information by attending to selected features of whatever object or person they are perceiving. This process of simplification leads humans to develop categories, concepts and generalisations for efficiently managing and utilising the vast amounts of available data [7]. Stereotypes are, accordingly, simplified mental images. People recall information more easily and efficiently when it is consistent with the pre-constructed categories of stereotypes [8]. From a sociocultural perspective, stereotyping is the process of acquiring and transmitting social or cultural knowledge. According to Dovidio [9], Walter Lippmann, journalist and political commentator, first introduced the word 'stereotype' in 1922 to psychologists to illustrate the typical image that one formulates when thinking about a particular social or cultural group. Nachbar and Lause define stereotypes as

a standardized conception or image of a specific group of people...Stereotypes are 'mental cookie cutters' – they force a simple pattern upon a complex mass and assign a limited number of characteristics to all members of a group [10].

People use social categories to acquire, organise and process an increasing amount of information about their world and persons of other cultures. Unfortunately, these social categories are often constructed and perpetuated based on over-generalised characteristics.

Stereotypes reflect a culture's beliefs and values about other people or objects. Nachbar and Lause [11] argue that stereotypes are not mere descriptions of how members of a cultural group view outsiders, but, more importantly, are often prescriptions of how insiders perceive themselves by using prescribed stereotypes to internalise their cultural images which become part of their cultural identity. Members of a cultural group that initiate the classification of other peoples normally perceive themselves as superior to others [12]. Therefore, stereotypes typically contain negative

connotations or attitudes, because the perceivers often subordinate other cultural groups with whom they share little in common either physically or in terms of values. The dominant group or cultural elite uses stereotypes to dehumanise other cultural groups that differ in values, beliefs or physical characteristics to maintain its own political power and social control. Because of this tendency, stereotypes may be used to normalise unjust practices, behaviours and treatments of minority groups such as lesbian and gay people. Since stereotyping is a frequently used human way of grouping, labelling or categorising information, it is cognitively impossible for humans to avoid stereotyping altogether. But negative stereotypes can be challenged and replaced with other, more positive stereotypes.

Shifting the landscape

The most recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press [13] reveals a growing public acceptance of lesbian and gay adoption, marriage, and military service in the United States. Despite noticeable changes in attitudes towards gay rights in the past decade, the discussion of homosexuality remains 'forbidden' in most American political, religious and publicly funded learning institutions. Discrimination based on sexual orientation is openly encouraged and is legalised by US state laws. In the United States, eleven states ban same-sex marriage while one state allows it [14]. Although greater exposure to gay culture may lessen the public's discriminatory attitudes towards gay people, it becomes problematic when media sources are the central means by which the general public learns about gay people in a depersonalised way.

The number of television shows featuring gay characters or scenes is on the rise in English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and the United States of America). Wyatt [15] compiled a list of television network programmes that included gay/lesbian/bisexual characters in these countries. His extensive list unveiled over thirty television networks that have depicted gay characters, specifically documenting one gay character in the 1960s, 58 characters in the 1970s, 89 in the 1980s and 306 in the 1990s.

Although broader representation of lesbian and gay characters in the media helps to demystify homosexuality, the repeated portrayal of lesbian and gay stereotypes not only reinforces depersonalised images of gay people, but also miseducates children and the public about homosexuality. However, most media producers, writers and people playing lesbian and gay characters are heterosexuals who incorporate their own inaccurate heterocentric conceptions of lesbian and gay life into their programmes. Although recent 'reality' television shows like *Big Brother* (Australia/UK/US), *The Real World* (US), *The Amazing Race* (US) and *Survivor* (US) have attempted to represent all types of people equally, they have done so by selecting contestants who fit pre-existing stereotypes. Lesbian and gay stereotyping is thus a profit-making media practice.

The media industry is in the business of making profits, not in raising social consciousness. Indeed, the media rely on and purposefully construct stereotypical characters and images to tell a story efficiently [16]. The media industry understands that people learn about others through internalised images as stereotypes. Without stereotypes, a television sitcom or film would make little sense to the viewer. Stereotyping is a critical instrument for media programmes to survive in the fast-paced, profit-driven business arena.

Without prescribed stereotypes, the media would fail to meet consumers' expectations and to provoke anticipated outcomes [17]. Certainly, it is not in the media's best interest to explore the complexity of a prescribed character. Thus, the portrayal of gay and lesbian characters in media programmes is not just often misleading, but purposefully constructed to perpetuate gay stereotypes.

Gay stereotypes in the media

Television programmes and commercials featuring lesbian and gay characters or content attempt to make viewers perceive such people as a deviant group. Gross [18] noted that early media portrayals and discussions showed lesbian and gay people in negative ways. Many films and television shows today continue to perpetuate and glorify these stereotypes to produce dramatic results. In almost

every episode of *Queer as Folk* (US), lesbian and gay characters are portrayed living in an unrealistic, erotic lifestyle that evolves around alcohol use, drugs, club scenes and casual sex. In *Will & Grace* (US), the two gay characters, Will and Jack, embody the prescribed gay stereotypes that the media often perpetuate. For example, both of them tend to be obsessed with beauty and fashion; idolise young, handsome and masculine men; enjoy sunbathing, bar scenes, dance and attention. These gay media stereotypes (or gay 'mediatypes') are oversimplified, inaccurate representations manipulated by media producers to portray the values and behaviours of gay people. Mediatyping usually reinforces stereotyping, a process, according to Newton and Williams, that

typically diminishes the depth of human character, limiting the complexity of behaviour and communication, and imposing conscious, definitive boundaries, such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and other human characteristics, that are the bases for exclusion from the dominant cultural group [19].

Lesbian and gay stereotyping involves nuances of prejudice and dehumanisation and often subjects these characters to ridicule. The portrayal of lesbian and gay stereotypes in the media misleads the general public into thinking that being lesbian or gay is a matter of performance or lifestyle choice. These heterocentric mediatypes may have a negative influence on how lesbian and gay people are perceived by the general public. Newton and Williams have noted:

When stereotypes are manifested as visual mediatypes, their messages and characteristics are stored in our unconscious long-term memory and help shape our perceptions of reality and the decisions that guide our subsequent behavior [20].

The heterocentric media expression of homosexuality reinforces prejudiced and inaccurate representations of gay people, which depersonalises gay people as moral outsiders, a socially denied group deprived of equal rights and treatment.

Heterocentric ideology

Heterosexuals form the dominant group in society which holds the political power to legitimise and advance its own social, cultural, economic and educational agendas. The dominant group defines, governs and polices cultural values and social norms such as sexual relationship, marriage, family structure and parenthood from a heterocentric cosmology. Heterocentric ideology has been and still is the dominant force in most social practices, including the media industry.

The heterocentric characterisation of male and female roles has failed to realise the complexities of human sexuality. Under heterocentric ideology, males and females have discrete and conventional, if not sexist, roles and prescribed social behaviours; as a result, a feminine man normally elicits public ridicule while a masculine woman is socially unacceptable. This social protocol (feminine: man / masculine: woman) is often identified with gay men and women and is embodied in media expressions [21]. Alarming, the general public (both children and adults, regardless of sexual orientation) learn about lesbian and gay culture mostly from the media instead of from their parents or teachers [22]. When lesbian and gay youngsters are misled to associate this protocol with lesbian and gay people, they are bound to encounter problems as they develop their identities (e.g., a sense of belonging to or fitting in with their peer groups). It is not surprising that many lesbian and gay youth and adults remain in the closet partly because they have failed to identify with the stereotypical characteristics of lesbian and gay people portrayed in the media.

Stereotypes create expectations about how people should behave. They may help self-fulfilling prophecies or influence one's social interactions to conform to these expectations [23]. The heterocentric society expects males to speak in a masculine voice. Check asserts that

many straight people have distorted visions of homosexuality, and...gay people, in turn, internalise these perceptions, as they struggle with their own issues of safety and shame [24].

To avoid public ridicule, especially under dominant social norms and peer pressure, a lesbian or a gay man may imitate how heterosexuals act and attempt to change their identity to conform to heterocentric ideology. Newton and Williams maintain that

the stereotyping of human sexuality and gender roles into a misapplied masculine/feminine dichotomy has oppressed humankind, whether homosexual, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, or heterosexual [25].

Heterocentric gender roles have permeated the mainstream ideology that controls almost every social practice, including public schooling. The heterocentric school curriculum has had a detrimental effect on lesbian and gay youth as they struggle to understand their world and shape their own identity, such as trying to fit into a predetermined gender category. The emergent challenge in educating school children about homosexuality is to tear down the heterocentric gender boundary by

focusing on masculine and feminine as archetypes within all human beings, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, [which] frees us all of culturally imposed, stereotypical boundaries on the human capacity to feel, understand, interact, and dream [26].

The school curriculum that teaches students social norms, cultural values and human sexuality from a heterocentric cosmology is bound to deny lesbian and gay youth their learning performance, motivation, psychological development and social skills of interacting with others, as well as preventing them from successfully contributing to society. The lack of discussion about homosexuality or of a homocentric curriculum has forced school children to resort to the media for distorted information. A homocentric curriculum, as I envision it, denaturalises heterosexuality, explores human sexuality as social construct, normalises alternative sexual relationships and family structures and, more importantly, empowers non-heterosexual children to develop their own identities in a supportive environ-

ment. When school children have more informed knowledge about homosexuality, they may be more tolerant of, or more likely to accept, their non-heterosexual counterparts as normal human beings. Thus, the question arises: are teachers ready to tackle gay issues in the classroom?

Homophobic teachers

Many American public schools operate on narrow moral and religious beliefs that threaten teachers with dismissal for discussing homosexuality and other controversial subjects openly [27]. Prejudice and discrimination against lesbians and gays in school and in society at large is due in part to a lack of education about homosexuality and homosexuals [28]. Without informed knowledge on lesbian and gay issues, teachers are likely to conform to the dominant group's homophobic attitudes, which then naturally underlie their classroom practices. A general public acceptance of homosexuality has not occurred. Homophobic violence is often reported in the news media, and laws discriminate against lesbians and gays based on their sexual orientation [29].

From a sample of 191 participants in teacher preparation programmes, Sears found that most pre-service teachers were homophobic in as much as they expressed negative feelings and attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexuals – with a mean score of 65 on the Index of Homophobia ranging from 2 (most positive) to 99 (most negative) [30]. They showed a relative lack of knowledge about homosexuality, although those who expressed less homophobia were more willing to tackle lesbian and gay issues.

Discussion of homosexuality has been treated as a major threat to the heterocentric ideology that underlies most social, political, religious and educational institutions. The exclusion of lesbian and gay subject matter from the school curriculum forces the younger generation to acquire distorted information about homosexuality from the popular media [31]. Teachers have a professional responsibility to challenge unjust social conditions such as discrimination based on sexual orientation. Ill-informed heterosexuals unapologetically carry out homophobic, discriminatory behaviour to subordinate or disenfranchise their minority counterparts.

A recent anti-gay campaign was carried out by the American Family Association, along with eighteen other US pro-family organisations. The campaign called for a boycott of Ford Motor Company because Ford has sponsored lesbian and gay-rights organisations/events, advertised in lesbian and gay-oriented publications and supported lesbian and gay marriage [32].

In a culturally diverse school, teachers must be aware that not all of their young pupils are heterosexual [33] or share the same heterocentric ideology. A heterocentric school curriculum that labels gays as immoral, sinful, deviant and having a mental illness will stifle the psychological well-being and identity-formation of lesbian and gay youth. Moreover, it subjects them to shameful feelings about themselves as they fail to fit in with the dominant cultural ideal of the male/female role.

Lesbian and gay stereotypes in the media are a starting-point for exploring homosexuality in any setting of learning. The mass media provide a rich visual repertoire for examining and learning about lesbian and gay issues and stereotypes. Such media stereotypes are visual expressions and reflections of a particular set of cultural beliefs, values and attitudes toward lesbian and gay people. Thus, they can be analysed to examine their explicit and implicit messages about lesbian and gay people. Because of their multimedia, image-saturated representations, video segments from a television show that contains lesbian and gay characters or scenes can be used for exploration and discussion in the art classroom. Television commercials and print ads that depict lesbian and gay people or themes additionally provide a relevant source of material for investigating lesbian and gay issues. For example, segments from popular American television shows like *Will & Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* can be shown in the classroom to explore and discuss how lesbian and gay characters are portrayed and exploited, and how such portrayal or exploitation influences people's perceptions of homosexuality and homosexuals.

Media images as a pedagogical device

Visual images and messages relate to what are, or are not, appropriate gender behaviours and roles that permeate the everyday language we speak,

the school lessons we learn, the popular media we consume and the people we interact with in every aspect of society. Media images such as magazine advertisements, television commercials/shows and films that depict lesbian and gay people can be effectively used to counter gay stereotypes and examine gay issues in the classroom. A 'counter-type' is a positive stereotype used to problematise or 'counter' a negative stereotype that has previously been applied to a cultural group. Although countertypes are still oversimplified views of the group being stereotyped, they propel students to deconstruct stereotypes through a different lens. Countertyping like this should lead students to move beyond a simplistic view of lesbian and gay people and explore more in-depth, humanistic characteristics of lesbian and gay people that are often overlooked by the media.

Because of its omnipresence, media advertising is able to convey and reinforce lesbian and gay stereotypes and influence attitudes and beliefs, which may eventually lead to discriminatory behaviour based on sexual orientation. Because of its immense influence, media advertising may be one of the most persuasive educational forces in America [34]. Numerous American art educators have advocated the examination of media images such as commercial advertisements in the art room to foster media/visual literacy. As I have previously argued, through visual and textual manipulation, media advertising not only persuades people to buy the advertised product but also constructs false or questionable realities, beliefs and values in relation to that product. Through the message of product desirability, these questionable beliefs and values are offered to children, either intentionally or unintentionally, and become sites of ideological struggle [35].

To facilitate class discussion about gay issues, and about stereotypes in particular, teachers can obtain gay-related advertisements online from the Commercial Closet [36], an organisation that seeks to educate corporate advertisers and the public about homophobia, inclusion and lesbian and gay stereotypes in mainstream advertising. The Commercial Closet maintains an online image database of over 2,000 worldwide advertisements (mainly television commercials and print ads) with

direct reference to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people. The organisation's founder, Mike Wilke, believes that

advertisers are increasingly using gay themes as a way to stand out, find coolness and sometimes to be inclusive... Homophobia and classic stereotypes remain popular devices for comedy in commercials [37].

An instructional guide is also available on this organisation's website to help teachers engage their students in examining GLBT issues and stereotypes. Teachers are advised to review lesbian and gay media images for age-appropriateness before showing them in the classroom.

The use of media images as a pedagogical tool to deconstruct lesbian and gay stereotypes encourages students not only to understand what a stereotype is, but also to further investigate how gay stereotyping truly reflects and affects lesbian and gay people in society and, more importantly, how media images convey stereotypical messages that dehumanise others and may have harmful consequences. Class discussion can produce the most fruitful results while the media image is being shown. The following questions can be used for class discussion as they guide students to analyse and examine media representations of lesbian and gay people:

- What is the purpose of this advertisement/scene? (e.g., product sale, service, advocacy or viewpoint)
- What pictorial elements/design techniques are used to gain our attention?
- What is the scene trying to tell us? (viewpoint, plot, belief or value)
- What responses are the scene meant to elicit from the viewer?
- Are there other implicit messages in this advertisement?
- Is there a lesbian or gay character in this scene, and how do you know?
- What is the character doing? How is he/she portrayed?

- What assumptions do you make from the scene?
- What does the scene say about lesbian and gay people?
- What connections can you make between lesbian and gay people and what is advertised?
- Is the scene portraying a lesbian or gay stereotype? Which stereotype?
- How do we know the portrayal is a stereotype?
- What other lesbian or gay stereotypes do you frequently see in the media?
- Can we brainstorm some ways to challenge this stereotype?

People tend to talk more openly about sensitive issues such as stereotyping and prejudice in a supportive or non-threatening environment. Art teachers can cultivate mutual trust among, and respect for all class participants by inviting students to experience a variety of personal stories, childhood experiences of family or cultural origins. Once students are acquainted with one another in a supportive environment, they may be more willing to unveil their true feelings and beliefs about stereotyping, and perhaps share their experiences with being the perceiver or target of stereotyping.

Using media images as a pedagogical device can give students a different perspective on lesbian and gay issues, since the process offers them critical information, increases their self-awareness and helps them develop empathy toward stereotyped victims. According to Mckee and Schor,

information gives people the facts about prejudice and stereotyping as cognitive processes and about real differences among groups of people. Self-awareness leads to greater understanding of one's role as both the target and the perpetrator of prejudice. Empathy, when coupled with information and self-awareness, can lead to pro-social behaviour when dealing with people of diverse backgrounds [38].

In examining media representations of lesbian and gay stereotypes in the art room, art teachers can educate students about lesbian and gay issues by providing them with critical information on the processes of stereotyping and lesbian and gay stereotypes as discussed in the beginning of this

article. The class may begin by collaboratively brainstorming and generating a list of common lesbian and gay stereotypes. Students can then discuss how such stereotypes are formed and how they can be undermined. Class discussion should involve students acquiring knowledge and analysing common stereotypes together to challenge the stereotypical attitudes and ideals they hold. Self-awareness may be enhanced by reflecting on experiences as perpetrators and targets of stereotyping. For the studio project, students may be asked to create a work of art in any media based on their own personal experience with stereotypes or one that challenges others to re-examine lesbian and gay stereotypes.

Conclusion

Human beings cannot help but notice the salient attributes of different individuals. Stereotyping overlooks the unique characteristics of an individual or the complexity of human behaviour, which may then result in negative social categorisations or prejudice. Indeed, stereotyping involves nuances of prejudice, since perpetrators of stereotypes generally consider others inferior and therefore disenfranchise them. But stereotypical images about a particular social group can be undermined by providing information on the unique characteristics of the group.

Many people are ignorant and fearful of homosexuality and rarely have had an opportunity to discuss or learn about it in school. It is not uncommon to see school children use homophobic language to disrespect their peers or make purposeful malicious jokes. Teachers uninformed about homosexuality are likely to use heterocentric lesbian and gay stereotypes to suppress their homosexual students, or legitimise unjust attitudes and behaviour toward them. The lack of school education about homosexuality causes students to resort to inaccurate information from the stereotypical media representations.

Visual images when presented with music and words can be a powerful aesthetic experience for students, not only to enrich their aesthetic sensibility but also to learn about the beliefs and values the images manifest. The art classroom is an ideal setting for studying visual images, learning about

unjust social conditions and creating aesthetic work that is both personally and socially inspiring. Art educators can redress a homophobic environment by addressing such social issues as homosexuality and lesbian and gay stereotypes in the media.

Guiding students to identify and investigate lesbian and gay stereotypes in films, television shows/commercials and print advertisements may result in a more accurate understanding of lesbian and gay people and how these stereotypical images may have justified the unequal treatment of lesbian and gay people in society. Engaging students in analysis, discussion, aesthetic production and debate about lesbian and gay stereotypes in the media through a socially integrated art curriculum fosters their aesthetic sensibility, social awareness and media literacy. All these are the critical faculties children need to become more tolerant of people different from themselves, regardless of gender, age, disability, race or sexual orientation.

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