1997

The impact of media coverage on audience beliefs: the case of marriage in the gay community

Pamela Vazquez
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Vazquez, Pamela, "The impact of media coverage on audience beliefs: the case of marriage in the gay community" (1997). *Master's Theses*. 1609.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.v22f-ss3n>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/1609

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA COVERAGE ON AUDIENCE BELIEFS:
THE CASE OF MARRIAGE IN THE GAY COMMUNITY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of

The School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Pamela Vazquez

December 1997

UMI Number: 1388227

UMI Microform 1388227
Copyright 1998, by UMI Company. All rights reserved.

**This microform edition is protected against unauthorized
copying under Title 17, United States Code.**

UMI
300 North Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48103

© 1997

Pamela Vazquez

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "William Tillinghast", written over a horizontal line.

William Tillinghast, Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Robert Rucker", written over a horizontal line.

Robert Rucker

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "William Briggs", written over a horizontal line.

William Briggs, Ph.D.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Serena H. Stanford", written over a horizontal line.

ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA COVERAGE ON AUDIENCE BELIEFS: THE CASE OF MARRIAGE IN THE GAY COMMUNITY

by Pamela Vazquez

The homosexual community has a complex history with the media and with television in particular. One issue, same-sex marriage, has begun to permeate media coverage as the United States debates its legalization. This research implemented an experiment involving Journalism and Mass Communications students and explored student attitudes after viewing a televised segment on same-sex marriages and any impact that the segment may have had on attitudes toward the issue.

Subjects were enrolled in two Mass Communications core courses. T-test analysis revealed that responses to three of the central issues in the televised segment--stability of such relationships, notion of stereotypical roles in lesbian marriages, and age when marrying-- were significantly different between the experimental and control groups and chi-square analysis found that the results were not attributable to differences in demography. Implications for further research of media effects on this issue over an extended period of time were also noted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to Frankie John Vazquez. He has been with me from beginning to end of this process and has taken every step in between. There is no way that I could have finished this important work without him by my side.

I would like to thank Dr. William Tillinghast for his assistance in the completion of this thesis. I would also like to thank Professor Robert Rucker, for it was his courses in the subjects of media and minority coverage that led me to the research I have done here. A final thank you is extended to Dr. Serena Stanford who was willing to take time out of her busy schedule to guide me through the final revisions of this thesis. The support from my mother and Dawn-Marie was invaluable to me throughout this journey of research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	v
List of Tables	viii
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	1
Legal Implications	2
Historical Perspective	5
Significance and Value of the Study	6
Purpose of the Study	9
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Mainstream Effects	10
Ethnic Minority Portrayals	12
Gay Studies	14
Gay Identity and Outing	17
III. METHODOLOGY	21
Subjects	21
Procedure	24
IV. RESULTS	27
T-Test Analysis of Groups	28
Cross-Tabulation Analysis of Gender and Religion Variables	29

V. DISCUSSION 37

Conclusions 39

Strengths and Weaknesses of Research 40

Significance of the Research/Contributions to the Literature 41

Future Research 42

VI. REFERENCES 44

VII. APPENDICES 47

LIST OF TABLES

1. Mean Scores Across Groups in Response to Same-Sex Marriage Questionnaire Experimental/Control Group T-Test analysis	33
2. Experimental Group Responses to Questionnaire by Gender of Respondent Chi-Square Analysis	34
3. Experimental Group Responses to Questionnaire by Religion of Respondent Chi-Square Analysis	35
4. Responses to Same-Sex Marriage Questionnaire by Gender of Respondent Across Groups - Chi-Square Analysis	36

Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The media's impact on public beliefs is one of the most enduring areas of mass communications research. Within this sector of research emerges the effect of media portrayals of certain social groups, especially of those groups "who for one or another reason find themselves outside the mainstream" (Gross, 1989, p. 21). It is the gay and lesbian community that is often portrayed as being outside of the mainstream, a group that is increasingly emerging as one that insists on being portrayed less negatively. The power of the media to shape perceptions of a given group only adds to the gay and lesbian community's concern. Furthermore, the relationships between gays, lesbians, and the media has become a field of scholarship that has been commanding increasing attention (Fejes & Petrich, 1993).

Against this backdrop of emerging research, the issue of gay marriage is becoming one worth examining. This seems to be in part because when we speak of the same-sex marriage debate, we are also speaking of the marriage debate in general: The institution itself is such a central focus and part of self-understanding that it poses questions as to what the union of two people actually means and what it could stand for, and this is the case for anyone. Therefore, this issue in particular has captured the broader public attention, since marriage is an institution so close to people's hearts, and the debate over same-sex marriage is thus particularly heated. "And including homosexuals within the

institution of marriage would be conferring the highest form of social approval imaginable" (Sullivan, 1997, p. xx).

It is also worth examining actual public reaction to the debate over same-sex marriage. Legalization of same-sex marriage stands as the pinnacle of accepting homosexuality in the United States, yet it remains an elusive issue for most people. In 1996, according to a *Newsweek* poll, some 84% of Americans favored protecting homosexuals from discrimination in employment and 80% supported such protection in housing (Sullivan, 1997, p. xxii). This same poll illustrated that a large majority supports inheritance rights for gay spouses--61 to 29%--and a narrow majority even supports Social Security benefits for gay spouses--48 to 43%. And yet, a clear majority, 58 to 33% still opposes legalizing same-sex marriage (Sullivan, 1997, p. xxii). The only explanation emerging from such discrepant statistics indicates that Americans are not ready to equate the institution of marriage, clearly seen to them as strictly heterosexual, to that of a homosexual union. Accepting same-sex marriage would be a stark indicator of approval of homosexuality, which the majority of Americans are not willing to grant.

Legal Implications

However, such poll results do not necessarily mean that the United States will never legalize same-sex marriage. Recent developments in the legal arena are strong indicators that changes in legislation may soon grant homosexuals the right to marry. Although the United States Supreme Court has not yet come close to ruling on the same-sex marriage issue, it does loom in the background of the debate now taking place on a state-level. The state ruling that has captured the country's attention involves the

Hawaiian court decision that banning same-sex marriage violated the state constitution's equal rights clause. The specific case, *Baehr v. Lewin* which was brought to court in May of 1993, involved three couples, one gay and two lesbian, who were all denied marriage licenses by the state. In a landmark decision handed down in December 1996, Hawaii Circuit Court Judge Kevin S.C. Chang ruled that Hawaii could not deny marriage licenses to homosexual couples. Basically, the sex-based classification in the state's marriage law is unconstitutional.

It is worth examining the Supreme Court of Hawaii's response to this landmark case in a ruling that is as dramatic in its implications as it is conservative in its methodology. Andrew Sullivan (1997) has done extensive research on the subject of same-sex marriage in the legal and historical realm. He cited some of the statements made by the judges in this case, with one providing the core of the court ruling:

The fourteenth amendment to the United States Constitution somewhat concisely provides, in relevant part, that a state may not 'deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the law.' Hawaii's counterpart is more elaborate. Article I, section 5 of the Hawaii Constitution provides in relevant part that '[n]o person shall...be denied the equal protection of the laws, *nor be denied the enjoyment of the person's civil rights or be discriminated against in the exercise thereof because of race, religion, sex, or ancestry.*' Thus, by its plain language, the Hawaii Constitution prohibits state-sanctioned discrimination against any person in the exercise of his or her civil rights on the basis of sex.

(Sullivan, 1997, p. 102).

A media flurry followed this ruling. Many major newspapers gave the story front-page attention, including the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Examiner and the Washington Post. The following are examples of coverage from the

various papers: On December 5, 1996, the *San Francisco Chronicle* criticized opponents of same-sex marriage in an editorial stating that "as an appeal of the Hawaii case makes its way to the Supreme Court, there will be plenty more bluster about the threat to the foundation of Western civilization." Also, on December 5, 1996, the *Los Angeles Times* featured an offensive and simplistic attack on same-sex marriage by Cal Thomas, in which he stated:

while Hawaii has long been on the liberal fringe of many social issues, the struggle to maintain what remains of the social fabric will ultimately determine whether we continue to follow ancient Rome on the road to destruction, or come to our senses, turn around and re-enter a harbor of safety ordained by God for our own protection.

The reluctance to accept same-sex marriage that was apparent in the *Newsweek* polls is apparent in this type of newspaper coverage. Although there are those in the media that did support the ruling (for example, the December 9, 1996 issue of *USA Today* ran an editorial in favor of same-sex marriage), such support was not the norm in overall coverage. A sampling of coverage of the same-sex marriage issue, reveals that even some members of the homosexual community are against the idea. Frank Browning wrote an editorial in the New York Times outlining his opposition to the homosexual community's embracing the institution of marriage because the gay community tends to "organize [its] lives more like extended families than nuclear ones. We may love our mates at one time, but our primary families are often our ex-lovers and our ex-lovers' ex-lovers" (Browning, 1996, p. A-12). And that seems to be the case for a lot of the coverage concerning this

issue. More gay publications, as would be expected, have addressed the issue, whether taking on the pro or con side of the debate.

Furthermore, the volatility of the issue is also evident in the political arena. The Defense of Marriage Act of 1996 revealed "how politically dangerous it is for most politicians to endorse anything as contentious an issue as same-sex marriage" (Sullivan, 1997, p. xxii). President Clinton received quite a bit of criticism over the endorsement of the act and still receives criticism over his support for any gay issue. And, unfortunately, many still remain opposed to legalization. In many ways, although people appear to be more flexible about homosexuality than race, the issue of homosexuality is, on a deeper level, far more intractable. With the race issue, the broad public is not threatened on a moral level as it is with the issue of homosexuality. Because of the morality component, resolution of this issue, as is supported by other cited research, is that much more difficult to achieve.

Historical Perspective

Perhaps the most ironic component of the same-sex marriage issue is the notion that the very idea of it is such a radical departure from what historically constitutes the institution of marriage. When the historical perspective of marriage is reviewed, however, there is a very clear record of same-sex marriage from Western to Eastern culture. Sullivan noted that "in most civilizations, it has never taken the form of the modern institution of marriage, but in some, surprisingly, it has" (Sullivan, 1997, p. 83). He cited the examples of 17th-century China and 19th-century Africa where the institution of same-sex unions seems "identical to opposite-sex marriage" (Sullivan, 1997, p. 83). But

probably the most compelling historical example comes from Plato's *Symposium*, where the theme dictates that same-sex love is as ancient as human love:

And so, when a person meets the half that is his very own, whatever his orientation, whether it is young men or not, then something wonderful happens: the 2 are struck from their senses by love, by a sense of belonging to one another, and by desire, and they don't want to be separated from one another, not even for a moment

(Sullivan, 1997, p. 85).

One idea emerges clearly: This issue is not a modern invention. The need to balance human dignity and social norms is as old as civilization itself. Although much of the past history of this debate has been buried, recent developments in the legal arena and in portrayals in different forms of media are bringing the issue into the limelight. And in some ways, it is the kind of argument that will determine our national politics. It is therefore, imperative to examine media portrayals of this delicate subject, since media representations are usually the first source from which most Americans derive their individual views.

Significance and Value of the Study

The same-sex marriage issue has been covered by prime-time television shows such as *Babylon 5* which, within one season, began to depict realistic gay and lesbian relationships. Although gay marriage has been taboo for television, portrayals of gay and lesbian relationships are becoming more prominent on sitcoms and nighttime soaps such as *Melrose Place*. Further controversy has found itself on ABC's *Ellen*, where the main character on the show, Ellen Morgan, comes out and parallels the outing of the star, Ellen DeGeneres, in her private life. ABC has attached parental discretionary advisories to the

beginning of some of the first shows aired during the 1997 season, which not only has angered Ellen DeGeneres, but has also caused some to question ABC's motives when other programs are depicting violent scenes that are in far more need of such advisories. Again, it is the volatility of an audience being presented with same-sex issues that makes most media executives uneasy.

And this change in media portrayals of gays and lesbians has been quite a contrast to the way the media treated this community more than 35 years ago. "Prior to 1969, when not invisible in the media, portrayals of lesbians and gays were blatantly homophobic" (Fejes & Petrich, 1993, p. 397). Today, gays and lesbians are no longer in the "media closet" (Fejes & Petrich, 1993) in terms of images and these images do reflect greater tolerance. However, Fejes and Petrich believe that this change was not brought about by more enlightened attitudes. Rather, it is the activism of gays and lesbians in confronting and challenging any form of stereotyping on television that has been the catalyst for change.

Although it has been disputed whether there is a direct measurable relationship between media portrayals and their effect on attitudes and beliefs, it is still arguable that the mass media provide the broadest common background of assumptions regarding different minority groups and their lifestyles. Larry Gross (1989) furthered this idea by arguing that "the contributions of the mass media are likely to be especially powerful in cultivating images of groups and phenomena about which there is little first-hand opportunity for learning, particularly when such images are not contradicted by other established beliefs and ideologies" (p. 20). And it is the gay and lesbian community that

probably best addresses this lapse in the media's efforts to accurately portray this community and its ultimate desire to be recognized in same-sex marriages.

As a theoretical backdrop to the research being outlined, Gerbner's (1973) cultivation analysis, which is a segment of long-term media effects research, was chosen. Gerbner held that "television provides many people with a consistent and near-total symbolic environment which supplies norms for conduct and beliefs about a wide range of real-life situations"(Gerbner, 1973, p. 561). This also refers to a cumulative process; however, the research that has been done here measured a single point in time. Basically, television is providing a backdrop to submit its messages about reality, which in turn substitute for personal experience "and other means of knowing about the world" (Gerbner, 1973, p. 561). The similarity between this theory and the hypothesis that is being studied here is what Signorielli and Morgan (1990) referred to as the "Cultural Indicators Project, a research paradigm that investigates images in media content and the relationships between exposure to television's message and audience beliefs and behaviors" (Signorielli & Morgan, 1990, p. 16).

Purpose of the Study

Because interest in this research involves the variance of beliefs in regard to same-sex marriage, it is appropriate to review it in light of the effects of media as an interactive process between messages and audiences. Much of the first-hand information received about a minority group, such as the homosexual community, comes from television. Therefore, it is important to review the way in which television portrays a minority such as the homosexual community. Do the images that the media offer mediate a reality for those audience members who do not have direct contact with such groups? And if so, is it a realistic and impartial one? As the issue of legalizing same-sex marriage occupies the courts, television has the opportunity to offer its portrayals to an audience that can easily be influenced by the immediacy of television itself and its accessibility to a wide range of people.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Although there is a large literature on the effects of mass media messages on public beliefs, only a small portion of the research tests beliefs as they relate to the gay and lesbian community as a whole, and such research usually includes racial or ethnic minorities. Furthermore, much of the latter involves identity formation of the gay and lesbian community as the audience or breaks the research down into a smaller population, such as Kielwasser and Wolf's (1992) study on mainstream television portrayals in the formation of adolescent homosexuality and identity.

Mainstream Effects

A large part of the research involving the homosexual community's relationship with the media has been conducted by Noelle-Neumann (1984). Her "spiral of silence" model

assumes that the most pronounced effects of mediated communication are attributable to three unique qualities of certain mass communicated messages: *ubiquity*--specific messages are delivered virtually everywhere within the social environment; *consonance*--the same messages tend to be distributed ; and *cumulation*--not only do various sources distribute similar messages to all segments of society, but the process occurs again and again, causing a build-up of these messages.

(Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 158).

The result of such exposure is what Noelle-Neumann (1984) refers to as the spiral of silence. Its result is best described as a domino effect: When certain groups determine

that their lifestyles are outside the mainstream as defined by the ubiquitous, consonant, and cumulative messages generated by the media, those groups are less likely to stand up for their type of lifestyle. This only confirms the media's report that these groups are indeed marginal or outside the mainstream. "Thus, the spiral escalates as certain individuals become more quiet and the loud media continue to reinforce that silence" (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992, p. 353).

Noelle-Neumann's and Kielwasser and Wolf's research evolved during roughly the same period as Larry Gross's research did on mainstream effects in relation to sexual minorities and the media. Again, emphasis was placed on gay and lesbians as members of the mass media audience. Gross found that members of the gay and lesbian community, being sexual minorities, are "inherently problematic and controversial for the mass media" (Gross, 1989, p. 356). Furthermore, they pose a threat to the natural order of society, unlike other minorities that are simply based on race or ethnicity.

Gross's (1989) research did, however, recognize the mass media's influence on audiences as agents of views and values in relation to society. Furthermore, he wrote of Gerbner's (1973) "Cultural Indicators Project" as the theoretical basis for his work, where the enculturation component of this theory "isolated a consistent pattern which [he has] termed 'mainstreaming'" (Gerbner, 1973, p. 560). Gross saw this effect as a way that television tends to cultivate a commonality of views and outlooks in its viewers. Gerbner (1973) recognized that these viewers should be divided into heavy and light viewing groups, where the heavy viewers of television shared common viewpoints and often gave "television answers," in sharp contrast to those in the light television viewing group.

Ethnic Minority Portrayals

Although much of Gross's research dealt with sexual minorities, he did do broader research on general ethnic minorities as opposed to sexual minorities. However, his emphasis was primarily on the homosexual community. Researchers who did considerable work in the area of ethnic minority portrayals in the media were Wilson and Gutierrez (1985). They recognized that, in a media-dominated society such as the United States, "all of us depend on the media of communication to portray and define those things we have not experienced for ourselves" (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1985, p. 35).

In conjunction with what Wilson and Gutierrez found to be true in regard to media portrayals, Harold Lasswell pioneered mass communication research by describing the three major functions of communication:

(1) *surveillance* of the environment, disclosing threats and opportunities affecting the value position of the community and of the component parts within it; (two) *correlation* of the different parts of society in responding to the environment; and (3) *transmission* of the social heritage from one generation to the next.

(Lasswell, 1971, p. 86).

Therefore, Lasswell advocated that in a society containing several ethnic minority groups, the media have the responsibility of scanning the society as a whole and then must define the different minority groups that contribute to the entire society. Lasswell furthered his argument by stating that leaders of media systems may "behave differently when a threat is perceived, especially when a particular group has been identified" (Lasswell, 1971, p. 87). This idea directly corresponds to the current debate over the homosexual community posing the threat of attaining the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Wilson and Gutierrez (1985) also addressed the mainstream theory that Gross discussed in his findings: "The society of the United States, characterized by a melting pot mentality through which immigrants from different nations have tried to blend together, has often treated members of groups who had not blended or could not blend into the mainstream as outsiders" (p. 40). This can certainly be said of the gay and lesbian community, but Wilson and Gutierrez addressed this concept as it relates to ethnic minorities. These minorities whose skin color or facial characteristics differed from those of European whites were unable to assimilate themselves into the melting pot of the growing country.

Wilson and Gutierrez then furthered this observation by discussing how the mass media treated such groups. For the most part, they either ignored them or stereotyped them. These stereotypes included roles in movies, on radio programs, or in magazines as "Black mammy, an Indian maiden, a Latin lover or a sinister Asian warlord" (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1985, p. 40). Again, these stereotypes were the result of ignorance on the part of the media in portraying these different minority groups.

The growth in minority populations in the United States, according to Wilson and Gutierrez, has "forced the media to reexamine the ways it has traditionally dealt with minority groups" (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1985, p. 41). Interestingly enough, they see this fact as a growing problem for the media due in part to changes that will need to be made in business practices since it will become necessary to cater to diverse groups instead of ignoring them. Furthermore, media organizations will view the differences that these

ethnic groups possess as threats to traditional North American values (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1985, p. 41) that have predominated in the media in the past.

Gay Studies

Along with the emerging research done on ethnic minority portrayals in the media, numerous studies have also examined portrayals of the gay and lesbian community in general, without regard to the effect on the audience's beliefs. Although not intrinsically related to the research previously conducted, these studies did contend that although media representations of the homosexual community are now more positive, they still ask the audience to view the homosexual lifestyle as deviant. Brookey (1996) analyzed the film *Philadelphia*, and although he recognized its effort to depict the true lifestyle of a gay couple, he criticized it for relying on an adherence to family values. Brookey (1996) wrote that in order to challenge inaccurate representations of gays in the media, a reliance on films produced by gays and lesbians must be advocated. Furthermore, he found that the true culprit in the fight for authentic representation for the gay and lesbian community is the ever-present economic agenda. Brookey defined this economic agenda as one where the representations of homosexuals currently viewed on television are limited to particular ethnic groups and economic classes, which in turn may be validating the superiority and autonomy of the white, heterosexual middle class. He furthered this idea by commenting that as long as these type of representations continue unchallenged, then "all communities, both heterosexual and homosexual, will always look like *Philadelphia*" (Brookey, 1996, p. 55).

Research as it relates to the ongoing relationship between the gay and lesbian community and the media often cites Vito Russo, whose book *The Celluloid Closet* (1987) was made into a cable television program.. Primarily a depiction of gays and lesbians in American cinema, *The Celluloid Closet* opens with an image of two men--dancing as a third plays the fiddle--not an uncommon sight except for the fact that this image is taken from a film made in 1895. For Russo, there was yet another potentiality contained within that image: The first cinematic depiction of homosexual activity provides the tacit acknowledgment that gays and lesbians have always been here.

Vito Russo began his research in the 1970s by addressing the issue of how gays and lesbians throughout cinematic history were portrayed. Russo did touch on the concept of how images influence behavior. Underlying this concept is the assumption that the interpretation of images is always universal and unequivocal. Many of the commentators in *The Celluloid Closet* note the diverse ways in which images were interpreted by audience members like themselves. It is the interpretation of images that the media present that ultimately shape an audience's view of a community with which they may or may not have direct contact. As Gross noted, the gay and lesbian community is a prime example of a community outside the mainstream about which media images can dictate individual perceptions.

Marguerite Moritz (1996) sees the steady emergence of gay and lesbian coverage in the media as a double-edged sword: it is a long overdue development but it will not go unchallenged. Moritz's essay, *Marketing Hate Speech to Mainstream Media*, which was part of Jack Nichols' book, *The Gay Agenda: Talking Back to the Fundamentalists*,

outlined her view of seeing an anti-gay agenda perpetuating homophobic culture in the current media. She believes that the idea that “the Radical Right leadership itself has become more media savvy in pushing its message” (Moritz, 1996, p. 121). She cited the 1992 elections as an example of how a hate campaign can be made available to the mass media and its audiences. In the 1992 elections, hate speech stood at the forefront of political speeches, as candidates sought votes through an agenda that bashed the homosexual community.

Moritz sees the media’s responsibility as critical in the arenas of story selection, use of language, and selection of images. Her criticism is mostly with news coverage detailing gay rights marches such as the 1987 march that received virtually no media coverage. In contrast, the 1993 event was covered extensively by national and local news stations and emphasized “the peaceful nature of the march. Immediately, the charge came from the Radical Right that liberal media had sanitized the parade” (Moritz , 1996, p. 121). Speculation then was issued by media critics, questioning whether or not the media had indeed been hiding the true imagery of the real gay community.

Finally, Moritz believes that legal action will undoubtedly reconcile the conflicting images that news media present of the gay and lesbian community. As the legal debate gains recognition through the courts, it is her hope that media representation of the gay community will focus on more realistic portrayals, including same-sex marriage. However, she also recognizes that changes in the law do not necessarily translate to changes in a society’s practices, beliefs, and attitudes.

Gay Identity and Outing

Finally, another segment of the literature focuses on the identity of and outing of gay journalists in various media fields. Although media effects are not addressed in this research which deals with the politics of outing, it is an important facet of the overall problem of gay and lesbian portrayals in the media. If the reporters and the producers are not voices of the community itself, it would stand to reason that the depiction of the gay and lesbian lifestyle in print media or television would be severely compromised. Some of Larry Gross's (1991) research addresses such issues. He chronicled a history of journalists coming out as well as the exposure of gay celebrities. Whether or not it is viewed as a disloyal act to out a fellow homosexual as in the case of Signorile's "Gossip Watch" column in the gay weekly magazine *OutWeek* or the exposure of Malcolm Forbes's sexual preference, Gross saw this gay visibility as a provocation of a "reactionary backlash and that the gay movement cannot afford to maintain a narrow focus on the right to privacy" (Gross, 1993, p. 352). And as Gross saw it, the news media proclaim their devotion to truth and objectivity, yet they devote a substantial amount of attention to such "infotainment gossip." Again, the media are perpetuating information that will influence audiences, especially when a member of the audience happens to be a gay or lesbian not prepared to be taken out of the closet.

As early as 1982, Pierson discussed the very same issues that Gross (1993) saw as an integral problem within the media in general. The idea that gay and lesbian journalists and editors must stay in the closet to keep their jobs was already emerging as an ongoing problem even in the era of the post gay-rights movement. Again, the fact that their

absence would adversely affect the way newspapers would cover gay and lesbian issues was a prevalent concern. Pierson (1982) further shouldered the burden of resolving the problems with the actual editors who should create a newsroom environment that is conducive to the open exchange of ideas relating to gay and lesbian news coverage without the threat of exposing a reporter as homosexual. He, too, saw the importance of gay and lesbian reporters as being a part of the backdrop that puts forth the images and portrayals of their community to the mass media audience.

The existing literature, therefore, suggests that mass communication affects audience beliefs, although the perspective can take many forms. Furthermore, studies on the portrayals of marriage within the gay community are nonexistent. Whether reaching out to the gay or lesbian audience member in the form of identity formation or attempting to present a realistic gay or lesbian lifestyle, media portrayals of the community are, at best, problematic. The latter effort further poses many doubts as to whose reality the portrayal of the gay and lesbian community actually perpetuates.

Some issues addressed in the literature do provide an appropriate backdrop to the research being done here. The most prominent would be Gerbner's work with cultivation analysis, which found that television presents images about reality that, in turn, substitute for "personal experience and other means of knowing about the world" (Gerbner, 1973, p. 571). This concept was part of the larger scope of the "Cultural Indicators Project," a research paradigm that investigates images in media content and the relationship between exposure to television's messages and audience beliefs. In addition, Larry Gross's work in the gay and lesbian community, specifically, provides ample background to the research

being done here in relation to the homosexual community and the issue of same-sex marriage. Gross recognized the problematic nature of such portrayals and the role the media plays in offering images to some audiences who may have little first-hand experience with such minority groups. The combination of both cultivation analysis and television mainstreaming theory drives the hypothesis of this study and will hopefully offer support of its presentation.

The treatment used in the study was a segment of mainstream television not only because of its obvious ubiquity, but because television is typically free and often private in comparison to films, cable television, and newspapers which require financial resources. The analysis was further limited to prime time television since such programs are most heavily consumed and it is an obvious starting point for such research. Popular programs, moreover, achieve a status in the process of public belief and opinion that less visible forms of mass media do not.

This study uses as its dependent variable, public beliefs, rather than public knowledge, because knowledge would require a problematic measurement when coding the survey. Support for any of the propositions stated in the survey will directly determine an attitudinal change if the post-test measured direct opposition. Beliefs, as defined here, are the acceptance or rejection of specific propositions regardless of actual knowledge of gay and lesbian marriages.

In addition to choosing the appropriate format for testing the hypothesis, the form of variance must be explained. Consequently, most effects research is based on differences among individuals at a single point in time--hence the individual difference

methods. This component of the analysis was sensitive to this particular study. DeFleur (1970) often saw the inadequacy in such theory. McQuail (1983) also wrote, “account had to be taken of individual differences, since, even where expected reactions have been observed, their incidence varies according to difference of personality, attitude, intelligence, interest, etc” (p. 342). Therefore, it was important to conduct this survey during the first week of the semester so that students would not be influenced by class material that might make them sensitive to the issues posed.

Therefore, the hypothesis is relatively straightforward: Images depicting gay and lesbian couples planning to get married as presented in a prime-time television special will impact audience attitudes toward same-sex marriage.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Subjects

To study the impact of television portrayals of gay marriage on audience beliefs, an experiment was conducted with San Jose State University students during the fall semester of 1997. Approximately 140 students from the School of Journalism and Mass Communications were recruited for this study. The participants were enrolled in two different courses, *Mass Communication and Society* and *Mass Communication Research*, that are substantive core courses in the school. Both courses met on the same day but at different times. Therefore, in order to gather an adequate sample for the experiment, both classes agreed to meet at the same time with the afternoon class attending the morning segment. Students in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications take these courses in order to satisfy their program requirements within the school and these students were chosen in order to maintain an element of homogeneity. Of these 140 participants, 134 participants (60 male and 74 female) provided complete data for the experiment.

In the experimental group, the questionnaire measured student beliefs before and after viewing a segment of ABC's *Turning Point* entitled "For Better or Worse." Student viewers were comprised of undergraduate students with the majority being juniors and seniors. The program segment featured two gay and two lesbian couples who are interviewed as they plan their weddings. The one-hour segment presented the four couples as they went through the various stages of engagement to the actual ceremony.

The portrayal itself attempted an unbiased outlook as family members of the couples were interviewed and reactions to the marriages varied from enthusiasm to outright rejection. Parents of one of the male couples were particularly delighted with the engagement of their sons and viewed the entire experience as a positive one. One of the lesbian couples, in which the two women were older with children from a previous marriage, dealt with the Bible-toting sister of one of the women. The sister felt that the marriage was unnatural and violated God's laws. From the initial engagement to the ceremony and reception, this segment of *Turning Point* provided a realistic outlook on the same-sex debate. The pros and cons of such situations were illuminated by the reactions of real people, not characters in a sitcom with pre-established scripts.

After the television program, the questionnaire was submitted to the 115 student viewers and 19 students who served as a control group and did not view the televised segment. The 19 students volunteered to leave the room with the option to participate in an extra credit exercise as the treatment was viewed by the experimental group. The questionnaire that was used in the experiment can be found in Appendix A.

Pilot Study

A pilot test was conducted in order to pre-test the survey. Forty-three undergraduate students from *Lifestyles in the Media* served as the sample for the pilot. Some unforeseen problems were brought to the attention of the researcher at this stage and simple corrections were made as needed. It was found, for example, that the surveys used before and after viewing the *Turning Point* segment should be numbered in order to insure anonymity of the students. The survey was also scaled down to 10 statements

instead of 20 and statements addressing issues besides same-sex marriage were included. More detailed demographic questions were added covering matters such as political views, religious affiliation, and college status. Another adjustment was made related to the treatment itself; the televised segment was reduced to 45 minutes from the original hour to accommodate the instructor's lesson planning.

Another problem encountered during the pilot test was the timing of the treatment. The survey was conducted once classes had been in session for a few weeks. The original intent was to conduct the experiment during the first week of the semester so that the students would not be sensitive to the issues being presented in the televised segment. Once issues that pertained to minority lifestyles were introduced in class, student reactions to the issues raised in the *Turning Point* segment may not have been as naïve. Therefore, different courses were chosen whose students were less likely to be sensitized by the curriculum.

The sample size was also found to be inadequate. With only 43 participants, results derived from this sample would not permit the determination of any true patterns in attitude impact from the televised segment. Also, in an attempt to organize the class, a location for a control group setting could not be found. With time constraints becoming a part of the problem with this sample, the researcher then realized that appropriate planning for available rooms during the actual study would be a priority.

Procedure

Participants were verbally informed that their participation was completely voluntary. They were also informed that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time. An agreement to participate in research was then handed out to each student and they were asked to sign it if they were willing to participate in the study. A very brief introduction to the study was given to the class by the researcher. Following the introduction and explanation of the agreement form, the questionnaires were distributed to those students who had agreed to participate. There was no connection between the agreement form and the surveys in the data analysis.

The participants were instructed to follow the directions on each page of the questionnaire. The researcher also gave more elaborate verbal instructions for those items where it was deemed necessary. The questionnaire consisted of a one-page survey concerning the participant's attitudes prior to viewing the television segment. The 10 statements presented were as follows:

1. Homosexuals are not family oriented.
2. The welfare system today needs improvement.
3. Marriages happen a lot in the gay and lesbian community.
4. Abortion is an issue the government should not get involved in.
5. Only younger lesbian couples marry.
6. Gays and lesbians do not stay in relationships long enough to even consider marriage.
7. Abortion should only be legalized for rape victims or when pregnancy could endanger the life of the mother.

8. Families of gay and lesbian couples are not supportive of their marital plans.
9. Gay and lesbian couples are portrayed accurately in television shows.
10. Lesbians tend to have one partner act as the "husband" and the more docile partner as the "wife" in their marriage.

Response categories on the first 10 non-demographic questions were *strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, agree* and *strongly agree*. A demographics portion followed. This section contained questions that addressed, among other things, religious orientation and gender. Other questions were included that asked year in college and familiarity with the gay community. The gender and religion questions were included in the questionnaire as possible control variables in the experiment to determine if they impacted the results in any way. Finally, the questionnaire was handed out again after the experimental class watched the *Turning Point* segment. While the experimental group watched the televised segment, the control group had been moved to another classroom. Before the control group moved to the other room, they had been instructed by their professor that since they volunteered to move out of the room without any prior information, they would have the opportunity to turn in an extra credit assignment that involved watching a pre-recorded segment. A video on Michael Jordan's career was the segment shown to the control group while the experimental group was viewing the treatment segment. They were then handed the questionnaire to fill out. All participants were also encouraged to answer all questions completely (so that a full set of data would be received from each person involved).

Once the students completed their questionnaires, the researcher collected them and thanked the students for their participation. Participants were given a number where they could reach the experimenter in case they had any questions or concerns at a later time and were told that once all the data had been collected, the researcher would be happy to explain the purpose and findings of the study.

Results from this survey were instantly available; completed surveys from 134 students were used in the data analysis. Out of the 140 total completed surveys, six had missing data. In each case the last page of the demographics portion had not been answered. The response data was coded where strongly agree = 1 and strongly disagree = 6 with 2 and 3 indicating agree and slightly agree and 4 and 5 indicating slightly disagree and disagree responses.

Chapter 4

Results

Examination of students' responses to the 10 statements presented to them after the viewing of the *Turning Point* segment suggests that overall responses were in disagreement with statements that made assumptions about same sex marriage. That responses were not significantly affected by a student's gender or religious affiliation is perhaps one of the more surprising results of the survey.

T-Test Analysis of Groups

In the analysis of the data it is imperative to recognize that the disparity of size between the control and experimental groups did pose a problem for this study. Shavelson (1988) wrote that the homogeneity of variance assumption may be violated and yet not seriously affect the t-test if the test and control groups have approximately the same number of subjects. However, if there is a marked difference in size, such as the 115 to 19 ratio in this study, it seriously limits any discussion of causality of the treatment.

Despite the disparity in their sizes, the experimental and control groups were similar in their demographic makeup. The experimental group was comprised of 45% male and 55% female students while the control group was comprised of 42% male and 58% female students. Religious affiliation also found similarities between the two groups in that the experimental group contained 39% Catholic, 22% Protestant and 39% claiming no affiliation. The control group was made up of 37% Catholic, 26% Protestant and 37%

claiming no religious affiliation. Therefore, the group data did reflect a demographic homogeneity although their sample sizes were considerably different.

A survey was also taken by the experimental group before viewing the televised segment. The control group did not receive this pre-survey. This data was subsequently eliminated as it was not part of the analytical design which was a post-test only group comparison.

The group mean scores from Table 1 reflect a significant impact on attitude toward three of the ten statements : "Gays and lesbians do not stay in relationships long enough to even consider marriage" ($t(132) = 1.9, p = .031$); "Lesbians tend to have one partner act as the 'husband' and the more docile partner as the 'wife' in their marriage" ($t(132) = 1.5, p = .023$); and "Only younger lesbian couples marry" ($t(132) = 2.3, p = .002$). These three statements were part of the main issues addressed in the *Turning Point* segment would point to the influence of the televised segment if the disparity of group sizes was not an issue. However, the demographic similarities between the two groups still lends some validity to the impact of the televised treatment on the individual group responses.

The last statement on the survey, "Lesbians tend to have one partner act as the 'husband' and the more docile partner acts as the 'wife' in their marriage" produced the largest gap in agreement between the experimental and control groups. The experimental group tended to disagree with a mean score of 4.8 and the control group tended to agree with a mean score of 1.5. This difference in agreement may be attributed to the influence of the televised treatment. In the *Turning Point* segment this stereotypical view of lesbian

marriages was portrayed as inaccurate: both lesbian couples appeared to be partners and not segmented as a husband or wife. However, the control group was not exposed to the treatment and the data reflects that most still believe the stereotype.

Cross-Tabulation Analysis of Gender/Religion Variables

Among the independent variables, it was found that gender and religion did not influence attitudes toward the same-sex marriage issue in the experimental group (see Tables 2 & 3). A cross-tabulation analysis reported that male and female students responded similarly to 9 of the 10 statements presented to them. The analysis was done by re-coding the six-point Likert scale responses into two responses, agree or disagree. Levels 1-3 that indicated agreement were collapsed into "A" and levels 4-6 were collapsed into "D" in the statistical coding of the data. This re-coding was done in order to make the interpretation of the gender and religion variables' impact on responses less problematic. The statement, "Families of gay and lesbian couples are usually not supportive of their marital plans" resulted in males strongly agreeing with the statement (42%) and females strongly disagreeing (83%), but the majority of males disagreed. These results point to the fact that gender really has no meaningful influence over viewers' attitudes toward the portrayals of the homosexual community that they are exposed to on television.

Religious affiliations were collapsed into three categories "Catholic," "Protestant," and "No Affiliation" because they reflected more accurately the division of the classes (as opposed to adding categories for Buddhist, Jewish or other affiliation which only comprised a small percentage of the student population). With the introduction of the religion variable, there was not a distinct difference in students' agreement or

disagreement with the statements presented. As in the case with gender, only one of the ten statements reflected statistical significance, “Homosexuals are not family oriented” where Catholics disagreed with the statement (89%), Protestants disagreed as well but not as strongly (65%), and those with no religious affiliation disagreed the most (91%).

Even though there was demographic homogeneity across groups in gender and religious preference, the analysis looked at attitude toward same-sex marriage by gender differences across groups. Much like the results found within the experimental group, gender did not influence responses across groups. Again, a cross-tabulation analysis found that students responded similarly to 9 of the 10 statements, with the exception of the statement, “Abortion is an issue that the government should not get involved in” where 60% of the males in the experimental group agreed and 83% agreed in the control group. Interestingly enough, females responded similarly to this question in both groups with 57% agreeing in the experimental group and 60% agreeing in the control group. The extraordinary similarity in responses across groups rules out gender as a contributor and further adds to the likelihood that the treatment itself had some impact, even if minimal. In light of these results, cross-tabulation of attributes by religious differences was not done.

The hypothesis stated that images depicting gay and lesbian couples planning to get married as presented in a prime-time television special will influence audience attitudes toward same-sex marriage. While the disparity in the size of the experimental and control groups does limit any discussion regarding the real influence of the televised treatment, the demographic similarities between the experimental and control group responses allows a

conclusion that differences between groups indicate possible impact of the television program. Although the majority of responses did not reflect a significant impact on attitudes after viewing the *Turning Point* segment, three of the central issues addressed in the segment-- the stability of same-sex relationships, the notion that there are pre-established roles in a lesbian marriage, and the idea that only younger lesbian couples marry--found significant differences in attitude between the experimental and control groups not attributable to differences in demography. Therefore, the hypothesis received minimal support.

Table 1

*Mean Scores Across Groups in Response to Same-Sex Questionnaire
Presented to School of Journalism and Mass Communications Students*

Statement	Mean Response Scores		t	Significance (2-tailed)
	Exp. (N = 115)	Control (N = 19)		
1. Homosexuals are not family oriented.	5.3	4.9	.99	.236
2. The welfare system today needs improvement.	1.7	2.1	.98	.245
3. Marriages happen a lot in the gay and lesbian community.	3.1	3.8	1.2	.077
4. Abortion is an issue the government should not get involved in.	3.1	2.4	1.1	.117
5. Only younger lesbian couples marry.	5.7	5.1	2.3	.002
6. Gays and lesbians do not stay in relationships long enough to even consider marriage.	5.7	5.1	1.9	.031
7. Abortion should only be legalized for rape victims or when pregnancy could endanger the life of the mother.	5.1	5.4	.62	.309
8. Families of gay and lesbian couples are usually not supportive of their marital plans.	4.6	3.9	1.2	.086
9. Gay and lesbian couples are portrayed accurately in television shows.	5.2	4.7	1.1	.109
10. Lesbians tend to have one partner act as the "husband" and the more docile partner as the "wife" in their marriage.	4.8	1.5	1.5	.023

Mean scores are based on a six-point Likert response where agreement is perceived as follows: 1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=slightly agree; 4=slightly disagree; 5=strongly disagree

Table 2

*Experimental Group Responses to Questionnaire by Gender of Respondent
After Viewing ABC's Turning Point (air date November 1996)*

Statement	Male N=52	Female N=63	Chi-Square χ^2	Significance P
1. Homosexuals are not family oriented.	A=19% D=81%	A=8% D=92%	3.204	.073
2. The welfare system today needs improvement.	A=85% D=15%	A=87% D=13%	.172	.679
3. Marriages happen a lot in the gay and lesbian community.	A=52% D=48%	A=64% D=36%	1.568	.211
4. Abortion is an issue the government should not get involved in.	A=60% D=40%	A=57% D=43%	.072	.789
5. Only younger lesbian couples marry.	A=6% D=94%	A=6% D=94%	.017	.897
6. Gays and lesbians do not stay in relationships long enough to even consider marriage.	A=10% D=90%	A=5% D=95%	1.037	.309
7. Abortion should only be legalized for rape victims or when pregnancy could endanger the life of the mother.	A=19% D=81%	A=17% D=83%	.060	.807
8. Families of gay and lesbian couples are usually not supportive of their marital plans.	A=42% D=58%	A=17% D=83%	8.596	.003
9. Gay and lesbian couples are portrayed accurately in television shows.	A=17% D=83%	A=16% D=84%	.043	.837
10. Lesbians tend to have one partner act as the "husband" and the more docile partner as the "wife" in their marriage.	A=29% D=71%	A=21% D=79%	1.043	.307

A=agree D=disagree; 1df

Table 3

*Experimental Group Responses to Questionnaire by Religion of Respondent
After Viewing ABC's Turning Point (air date November 1996)*

Statement	Religion			χ^2	P
	Catholic N=35	Protestant N=20	None N=35		
No. 1	A 11% D 89%	A 35% D 65%	A 9% D 91%	7.510	.023
No. 2	A 94% D 6%	A 80% D 20%	A 86% D 14%	2.648	.266
No. 3	A 71% D 29%	A 55% D 45%	A 49% D 51%	3.937	.140
No. 4	A 60% D 40%	A 55% D 45%	A 57% D 43%	.147	.932
No. 5	A 6% D 94%	A 5% D 95%	A 3% D 97%	.355	.837
No. 6	A 3% D 97%	A 0% D 100%	A 11% D 89%	3.963	.138
No. 7	A 26% D 74%	A 10% D 90%	A 9% D 91%	4.519	.104
No. 8	A 34% D 66%	A 45% D 55%	A 29% D 71%	1.522	.467
No. 9	A 23% D 77%	A 20% D 80%	A 11% D 89%	1.651	.438
No. 10	A 23% D 77%	A 35% D 65%	A 17% D 83%	2.276	.320

A=agree; D=disagree; 2df

Table 4

Responses to Same-Sex Questionnaire by Gender of Respondent Across Groups

	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Experiment</u> N=115	<u>Control</u> N=19	χ^2	<u>P</u>
<u>Statement</u>					
No. 1	F	A 8%	A 5%	1.035	.308
		D 92%	D 95%		
	M	A 19%	A 17%	.060	.807
		D 81%	D 83%		
No. 2	F	A 87%	A 85%	.172	.679
		D 13%	D 15%		
	M	A 85%	A 17%	.041	.835
		D 15%	D 83%		
No. 3	F	A 64%	A 57%	.075	.791
		D 36%	D 43%		
	M	A 52%	A 60%	1.591	.321
		D 48%	D 40%		
No. 4	F	A 57%	A 60%	.072	.789
		D 43%	D 40%		
	M	A 60%	A 83%	8.546	.003
		D 40%	D 17%		
No. 5	F	A 6%	A 10%	1.036	.309
		D 94%	D 90%		
	M	A 6%	A 6%	.017	.897
		D 94%	D 94%		
No. 6	F	A 5%	A 10%	1.037	.309
		D 95%	D 90%		
	M	A 10%	A 19%	3.198	.071
		D 90%	D 81%		
No. 7	F	A 17%	A 16%	.043	.837
		D 83%	D 84%		
	M	A 19%	A 17%	.060	.807
		D 81%	D 83%		

(cont.)

Table 4 (cont.)

Responses to Same-Sex Questionnaire by Gender of Respondent Across Groups

Statement	<u>Gender</u>		<u>Experiment</u> N=115		<u>Control</u> N=19		χ^2	<u>P</u>
No. 8	F	A	17%		A	9%	3.195	.070
		D	83%		D	91%		
	M	A	42%		A	40%	.070	.785
		D	58%		D	60%		
No. 9	F	A	16%		A	13%	.171	.678
		D	84%		D	87%		
	M	A	17%		A	14%	.167	.671
		D	83%		D	86%		
No. 10	F	A	21%		A	29%	1.043	.307
		D	79%		D	71%		
	M	A	29%		A	26%	.072	.789
		D	71%		D	74%		

A=agree; D=disagree df=1

Male: N=8 Female: N=11-Control Group

Male: N=52; Female=63 - Exp. Group

Chapter 5

Summary of Major Findings

Discussion

The following section discusses the findings of this study, implications that may offer a greater understanding of the data, strengths and weaknesses of the research, and future needs in this area. As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to investigate attitude impact toward same-sex marriage in individuals who viewed a television portrayal of the components of the issue. It was hypothesized that images depicting gay and lesbian couples planning to get married in a prime-time television special would influence impact on audience attitudes toward same-sex marriage.

The hypothesis was minimally supported since differences across experimental and control groups responses to three statements were significant. The three statements were ones concerning the stability of same-sex relationships, the notion of established roles for lesbian couples in marriage and the idea that only younger lesbian couples marry. These issues were addressed at length in the *Turning Point* segment as the homosexual couples were in fact shown to be stable in their commitments to one another, the lesbian couples did not have established roles in their approach to marriage, and older lesbian couples were portrayed planning their weddings. Such issues may not be well known to a general audience, and so the actual portrayal of the issues in an unbiased presentation reinforces the potential effect on the audience. As mentioned previously, the disparity in the sizes of the test and control groups seriously limits any extended discussion of the causality of the

treatment used in the survey. However, demographic similarities between the experimental and control group removes at least two alternative explanations and adds some validity to the impact of the *Turning Point* segment on student responses. Gerbner (1973) found in his work with cultivation analysis that television images can present a reality for some in which a substitution for "personal experience and other means of knowing about the world" (Gerbner, 1973, p. 571) becomes influential. The results of this experiment minimally support Gerbner's theory.

Finally, Signorielli and Morgan (1990) found this to be true of media effects in current scientific inquiry:

the effects are usually sought to be those that occur immediately or soon after exposure to a single, specific message, often in a relatively artificial context of exposure and for subjects (such as college students in introductory communication classes) who are usually not particularly representative of the larger population.

(p. 17).

This statement describes the research that was done here and points to its inherent limits.

It is imperative that the ideas brought up in this experiment translate themselves to a broader population with a diverse background to truly determine the impact of television on its audience and their attitudes.

Conclusions

As one of the first researchers to examine the homosexual community and its relationship with the media, Gross related the power of the media to mediate messages about "groups and phenomena about which there is little first-hand opportunity for learning, particularly when such images are not contradicted by other established beliefs and ideologies" (1989, p. 211). The students from this experiment are from California and, perhaps because they reside in the Bay Area, are more sensitive to the issues of the homosexual community. However, there are still some segments of such audiences that rely on the media to offer portrayals of groups with which they would never have first-hand contact.

It is the researcher's hope that this experiment will be a point of departure for more studies that relate to media effects and sexual minorities. The results found in this research do reflect that televised segments documenting the lifestyles of same-sex couples do play a part in framing the attitude of audience members.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Research

The main strength of this research was supporting the literature related to the same-sex issue. The last year or so has provided much more information on research into gay and lesbian issues in general, and the actual portrayals of homosexual characters on prime-time shows have increased dramatically, adding to the urgency of examining such portrayals.

However, the unfortunate central weakness of this study was the disparity in the sample sizes of the control and test groups. The control group comprised a mere 19 participants which is inadequate in analyzing against an experimental group of 115 participants. Another weakness included some participants' interpretation of the questions, and some feeling that the scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" did not adequately address their responses to some questions. However, the high response rate to the questionnaire may be due to the fact that all subjects were college students trained to answer questions of this type, or it may be due to the controversial nature of the topic. After completing the survey, some participants felt it was necessary to add their own comments to demographic questions to add clarity to their responses. Although not measurable, such comments reinforced participants' commitment to getting their point across. All participants were currently college students and as such were more open to such controversial issues. Therefore, it is vital to find out their attitudes toward the same-sex issue because it is their input that will reflect changes in policy in the workplace and in real-life situations. Another possible weakness to the research may in fact be the

participant sensitivity to issues that are discussed on a college level so that responses may not be indicative of a random U.S. population.

Significance of the Research/Contributions to the Literature

Since literature on the studies of gay and lesbian portrayals in the mass media as they pertain to marriage is virtually nonexistent, the results of this study will hopefully encourage scholarship in this direction. However, as Kielwasser and Wolf (1992) wrote, "the research in this emergent agenda will not proceed casually. Gay and lesbian scholarship is often at odds with a research tradition that remains, more or less, confined by a positivistic faith in the 'value-free' science of human communication" (p. 350).

Even with such obstacles to further research, all scholars must agree that the mass media are a formidable component in the formation of public beliefs. Outside legal and political issues, members of the gay community are constantly urging that the media stand up and take notice of a community that wants to be recognized on realistic terms and not on terms set by a political or economic agenda.

The data supported the hypothesis in part, and it is the researcher's hope that television, primarily, will implement portrayals of the homosexual community in a forum that includes a production environment conducive to contributions from homosexual reporters and editors. If the portrayals are to be accurate, then what better source to rely on than the actual production staff?

Finally, the treatment of gay and lesbian portrayals in the media has come a long way. But there is room for improvement. This research may be a point of departure for further research into the direct effects of these portrayals over extended periods of time.

Regardless, all factions of society stand to benefit from a full appreciation of the homosexual community, and the mass media can best relay the message. As Noelle-Neumann (1984) stated in her early research, "the mass media provide the environmental pressure to which people respond with alacrity, or with acquiesce, or with silence" (p. 163).

Future Research

Future research should involve developing education material that includes unlearning misinformation that may have come in the form of television programs from 35 years ago or just general ignorance toward the topic of same-sex marriage. Most researchers discussed in the literature review felt that refining television portrayals by employing more homosexual individuals in the media is the solution. Perhaps the combination of both these suggestions is the preferred point of departure in dealing with this issue. In any event, television has come a long way in allowing the homosexual community a certain voice on the programs that are aired currently. Unfortunately, the AIDS crisis has also fueled the onslaught of homosexual depictions in the media. On the positive side, this has forced some news organizations to reexamine their assumptions and beliefs about homosexuality.

Fejes (1993) stated that the few reception studies that have been done provide a starting point in understanding the homosexual community in a society that wants to deny gays and lesbians their civil rights. Further, he believes, "commitment to any one methodological perspective is far less important than developing a body of knowledge that would have relevance in real life and that would strengthen an affirmative sense of identity

and community in all its diversity and creativity" (Fejes, 1993, p. 412).

References

- Allen, Margaret. (1993). Gay wedding coverage. *Editor and Publisher*, 126, 30-32.
- Anti-gay bias persists as court deliberated. (1996, December 5). *San Francisco Chronicle*, p. A-26.
- Bennett, William. (1996, June 3). Leave marriage alone. *Newsweek*, pp. 12-15.
- Brookey, Robert Alan. (1996). A community like Philadelphia. *Western Journal of Communication*, 60, 41-55.
- Browning, Frank. (1996, April 17). Why marry? *The New York Times*, p. 12D.
- Carmody, D. (1992, March 2). Gay, lesbian press starting to emerge in mainstream. *The New York Times*, pp. A1, D9.
- Cohen, J. R. (1991). The "relevance" of cultural identity in audience's interpretation of mass media. *Critical Studies in Mass Communications*, 8, 87.
- Davidson, Craig. (November, 1991). Can we end media bias against gays? *USA Today*, 72-74.
- DeFleur, M.L. (1970). *Theories of mass communication*. New York: David McKay.
- Dyer, R. (1993). Seen to be believed: Some problems in the representation of gay people as typical. *Studies in Visual Communications*, 2, 2-19.
- Fejes, Fred. (1996). Straight news: Gays, lesbians and the news media. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73, 768-769.
- Fejes, Fred & Petrich, Kevin. (1993). Invisibility, homophobia, and heterosexism: Lesbians, gays and the media. *Critical Studies in Mass Communications*, 63, 396 - 412.
- Gerbner, G. (1973). Cultural indicators: The third voice. In G. Gerbner, L. Gross & W.H. Melody (Eds.), *Communication technology and social policy* (pp. 555-573). New York: John Wiley.

- Gross, Larry. (1988). The ethics of (mis) representation in L. Gross, J. S. Katz, & J. Ruby (Eds.), *Image ethics: The moral rights of subjects in photographs, film and television* (pp. 188-212). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gross, Larry. (1993). The contested closet: The ethics and politics of outing. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 3, 352-381.
- Gross, Larry. (1989). Out of the mainstream: Sexual minorities and the mass media. In M. Wolf & A. Kielwasser (Eds.), *Gay people, sex, and the media* (pp. 19-32). University of Pennsylvania: The Haworth Press, Inc.
- Halsall, Paul. (1996). Lesbian and gay marriage through history and culture. *The Internet*, 2, 1-29.
- Hertog, James K. & Fan, David P. (1995). The impact of press coverage on social beliefs: The case of HIV transmission. *Communication Research*, 22, 545-570.
- Kielwasser, Alfred P. & Wolf, Michelle A. (1992). Mainstream television, adolescent homosexuality, and significant silence. *Critical Studies in Mass Communications*, 9, 350-373.
- Lasswell, Harold. (1971). The structure and function of communication in society. In Wilbur Schramm & Donald F. Roberts (Eds.), *The process and effects of mass communication* (pp. 84-99), University of Illinois Press.
- McQuail, Denis. (1994). *Mass communication theory*. London: Sage.
- Moritz, Marguerite. (1996). Marketing hate speech to mainstream media. In Jack Nichols (Ed.), *The gay agenda: Talking back to the fundamentalists* (pp. 120-125). Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. (1984). *The spiral of silence: public opinion, our social skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- O'Neill, S. (1984). The role of mass media and other socialization agents in the identity formation of gay males. In S. Thomas (Ed.). *Studies in Communication*, 1, (pp. 201-206). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Pierson, Ransdell. (1982). Uptight on gay news. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 1, 25-33.

- Russo, Vito. (1987). *The celluloid closet: Homosexuality in the movies*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Sharret, Christopher. (1992, April 16). Hollywood homophobia. *USA Today*, p. 93.
- Shavelson, Richard J. (1988). *Statistical Reasoning for the Behavioral Sciences*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Shoemaker, Pamela J., & Reese, Stephen D. (1991). *Mediating the message: Theories of influence on mass media content*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Signorielli, Nancy & Morgan, Michael. (1990). *Cultivation analysis: New directions in media effects research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Silk, Catherine & Silk, John. (1990). *Racism and anti-racism in American popular culture*. New York: Manchester University Press.
- Sullivan, Andrew. (1997). *Same-sex marriage: Pro and con. A reader*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Thomas, Cal. (1996, Dec. 5). Syndicate: Editorial. *Los Angeles Times*, p. E3.
- Wilson, Clint C. & Gutierrez, Felix. (1985). *Minorities and media: Diversity and the end of mass communication*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Appendix A

Instructions for *Turning Point* Segment Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this study. Your time and input are appreciated very much.

In order for your answers to be most helpful to me, it is important that you try to be as accurate as you can. Since I need complete and accurate information from this research, I hope that you will think hard to provide the information asked for. Please answer all questions as it is important to have a complete survey from each participant. Each survey will be numbered: please take the same number for the first and second surveys.

You can make any type of mark to indicate your answer to each question.

For example:

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Thank you.

Please begin the survey.

Appendix B

Likert Scale Responses to *Turning Point* Segment Used for Test and Control Groups

Section I

In this first section, please read the following questions carefully and mark your answer clearly.

Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

[illegible]

Appendix C

Demographic Questions

Section II

Please read the following statements carefully and mark your question clearly.

Age: _____ **Gender:** Male _____
Female _____

Marital status:

Single _____
Married _____
Domestic
Partner _____
Divorced _____
Separated _____

What is your major in college?

What is your status in college?

Freshman _____
Sophomore _____
Junior _____
Senior _____
Graduate _____

How much do you feel you know about the gay community and marriages within it?

<i>A lot</i>	<i>A little</i>	<i>Very little</i>	<i>Nothing</i>

How did you first learn about the gay/lesbian community (sources) Please check all that apply:

Television _____
Print media _____
Family _____
Workplace _____
Friend _____
Other _____ (please specify)

Appendix C (cont.)

How did you first learn about the gay/lesbian community? Please check all that apply:

Elementary school _____
 Junior high _____
 High school _____
 College _____

Are you acquainted with anyone who is homosexual? Yes ___ No ___

If so, is she or he:

A friend _____
 A family member _____
 A co-worker _____
 A fellow student _____
 An instructor _____

What is your religious affiliation?

Catholic _____
Protestant _____
Jewish _____
Mormon _____
Other (*specify*) _____

How religious would you consider yourself to be?

Very religious _____
Moderately religious _____
Not very religious _____
Not religious at all _____

How do you consider your view of society?

Very conservative _____
 Conservative _____
 Middle-of-the-road _____
 Liberal _____
 Very liberal _____

Appendix D

Agreement to Participate in Research

Responsible Investigator: *Pamela M. Vazquez*

Title of Protocol: *The Impact of Media Coverage on Audience Beliefs:
The Case of Marriage in the Gay Community*

1. I have been asked to participate in a research study investigating the effects of media coverage of gay and lesbian marriages on its audience.
2. I will be asked to watch a previously recorded segment of a news show depicting the marriage of gay and lesbian couples and then I will be asked to fill out a survey on my thoughts of the coverage and the issues in general. This study will take place in Dr. Tillinghast's MCOM 102 and MCOM 104 courses that meet on Mondays and Tuesdays during the Fall semester 1997.
3. No foreseeable risks or discomforts to the subjects are anticipated.
4. No discernible benefits to the subjects or to others which may reasonably be expected from the research is anticipated.
5. No alternative procedures will be implemented.
6. The results of the study may be published, but no information that could identify the subject will be included.
7. There will be **no compensation** for participation in the study.
8. Questions regarding the research may be addressed to the principal investigator at (510) 516-9517. Complaints about the research may be presented to the respective Department Chair, Kenneth Blase, at (408) 924-3240. Questions or complaints about research, subjects' rights, or research-related injury may be presented to Serena Stanford, Ph.D., Associate Vice President of Graduate Studies and Research at (408) 924-2480.
9. No service of any kind, to which a subject is otherwise entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if a person chooses to "not participate" in the study.
10. Consent is given voluntarily. A subject may refuse to participate in the study or in any part of the study. If a decision to participate is made, he or she is free to withdraw at any time without prejudice to the subject's relations with San Jose State University or any other participating institutions.
11. I have received a signed and dated copy of the consent form.

Subject's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

Office of the Academic Vice President • Associate Academic Vice President • Graduate Studies and Research
One Washington Square • San Jose, California 95192-0025 • 408/924-2480

TO: Pamela Vazquez
2266-A Almaden Rd.
San Jose, CA 95125

FROM: Serena W. Stanford
AAVP, Graduate Studies & Research

DATE: January 31, 1997

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

"Media Portrayls of the Gay/Lesbian Community:
The Marital Perspective"

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to any and all data that may be collected from the subjects. The Board's approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Serena Stanford, Ph.D., immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma and release of potentially damaging personal information.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2480.