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# Transgender Representation in the Media

Jessica N. Jobe

Eastern Kentucky University, [jessica\\_jobel@mymail.eku.edu](mailto:jessica_jobel@mymail.eku.edu)

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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Transgender Representation in the Media

Honors Thesis  
Submitted  
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By  
Jessie Jobe

Mentor  
Dr. Lisa Day  
Women and Gender Studies, Director

## **Abstract**

### Transgender Representation in the Media

Jessie Jobe

Dr. Lisa Day, Women and Gender Studies, Director

The media is pervasive in American society – more people have television sets than college degrees. For this reason, media is crucial in the spread of information. The way groups of people are represented in the media can be both reflective of and influential on society's (possibly stereotypical) perceptions of these groups. The transgender community often gets misrepresented in the media. As a whole, the transgender community faces a lot of prejudice in American society, and current transgender representation in the media has the power to reinforce negative stereotypes. Twelve examples of news, television, and movies from as early as 1975 and as recent as 2013 were analyzed both for their accuracy and fairness in their portrayal of transpeople and transgender issues. Nearly all samples utilized negative stereotypes of transgender people. Many samples focused on transgender characters in a joking nature, making light of transgender struggles and reinforcing common misconceptions and negative stereotypes of what it means when a person is transgender. Media outlets are irresponsible with their representations of the transgender community. Society needs to hold the media more accountable for the information it dispenses. As important, if not more so, is society holding itself accountable for what it chooses to believe.

*Keywords and phrases:* transgender, media, representation, stereotypes, prejudice

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## **Transgender Representation in the Media**

### **Terminology**

An understanding of basic vocabulary is crucial to the understanding of this thesis and its purpose. “Transgender” refers to a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with their birth assigned sex. It is an umbrella term and can refer to people at varying points in transition. “Trans” is often used as shorthand for transgender. Other variations include transperson, transpeople, transwoman, transman (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2009).

“Cisgender” is the counterpart to transgender. This term refers to a person whose gender identity and gender expression matches what is typically associated with their birth-assigned sex.

“Transsexual” refers to a transperson who has undergone either surgical, hormonal, or legal means to live full time as the sex opposite that of their birth assigned sex. “Transition” refers to the period of time in which a transperson learns to live as the sex opposite that of their birth-assigned sex (transhealth.ucsf.edu, 2013).

**Introduction**

In 2013, the media has become a primary educational tool. That's no exaggeration; the 2011 census reported that three in ten adults hold a bachelor's degree, while 99 percent of households in the United States have at least one television set (de Vise, 2012; Herr, 2007). Television shows and movies are not the only source of media constantly bombarding our senses. We have newspapers, magazines, the internet, and books to consume as well. Some programming is marketed to foster learning, such as *Dora the Explorer* and *Arthur*. However, media meant to educate is not the only media that consumers walk away from with new information. Many forms of media portray fictional characters in real life settings, and consumers often take for granted that writers, producers, and actors alike do not always represent real-life scenarios accurately and fairly.

If consumers base their expectations on what they see on television or read in books, they may inadvertently make assumptions about cultures or environments that are simply untrue. False assumptions become prejudices if they are reinforced often enough and can lead to discrimination. In a vicious cycle, these prejudices are reproduced and portrayed over again, reinforcing it further. In this sense, media both educates and reflects our society's beliefs, whether or not these portrayals and beliefs are accurate.

If media is so integrated into our lives and is so influential on our beliefs, informed viewers must make sure that the information and stories are grounded in ethics, and that they do not potentially lead to prejudice and discrimination.

The best way way to divert prejudices as a result of media is through proper education. If an adult watches a cartoon wherein the sky is green, that adult would be aware that the cartoon is inaccurately representing the world. When the media starts representing a culture or circumstance that requires more knowledge than the general population may have, a problem arises. For example, a forensic scientist knows how labs and crime scene analyses work. A high-schooler watching *CSI: Miami* has a very different belief and knowledge base about the forensic science field. This inaccurate portrayal of how fingerprinting and DNA sampling works has caused problems in the court room. Jurors expect expert witnesses to be able to provide solid, 100% positive proof of guilt, which is just factually unrealistic.

A more insidious effect of unrealistic depictions is the media portrayal of diverse populations. For example, the transgender community is fighting waves of discrimination in their medical, legal, work, and social lives, reflected in misrepresentation in the portrayal of transgender characters and figures in the media. Putting characters in drag is treated as a gag. The very detailed and painful, expensive process of transition is simplified into one day in surgery. Pronouns used in reference to a transgender are inaccurate, as if to say, "Hey, this man thinks he's a woman. Isn't that *funny?*"

It is not funny. It is not funny because many transgender people have not revealed their true identities to their own families for fear of rejection. They must present in such a way that upsets them because they do not want to lose their jobs. They must seek new



doctors because many health care providers do not want to work with the transgender community. Perhaps these fears would not exist if transgender characters were accurately portrayed. Friends and family members of transgender people are aware of what their loved ones go through, and, more importantly, are aware that transgender people are people. They have hopes, dreams, bad days, good days. They love. They hate. The only difference that should exist between a transgender individual and a cisgender individual is the congruence between physical sex and mental gender and how any inconsistencies may be addressed.

Many cisgender people may have never met a transgender person. These people may have no understanding of what it means to be transgender. Many people even equate being transgender and being homosexual, although gender identity and sexuality are unrelated. It is these people who develop a misunderstanding and prejudice of the transgender community based upon media portrayals.

This paper will be examining various media portrayals of transgender characters, figures, and issues. News stories such as medical findings, legal disputes, and current events will be examined along with movies and television shows. I will choose specific examples of each of these and analyze them based upon two factors: accuracy and fairness. Accuracy will be defined, for the purposes of this paper, as portrayal of factual information in a matter that is correct and grounded in fact. Fairness will be how the characters and scenarios are treated. Are they depicted humorously? How do cisgender characters react to and interact with the transgender characters? These factors are

important in ethical media portrayal and can have an influence on the perceptions of uninformed consumers.

The goal of these analyses is to demonstrate the misinformation and unfairness in media representation of transgender individuals that effects prejudice and discrimination of the transgender community.

### **News**

News is a form of media that viewers expect to be accurate and informative. These following examples demonstrate that news stories can be fraudulent and biased.

#### *The Johns Hopkins Fraud*

Johns Hopkins University is renowned for its work in research that fuels the medical field. Studies done there become well-respected news stories that the public is fairly willing to accept as fact because of the name attached to them. While the research at Johns Hopkins has been largely beneficial for the medical field's advancement, some fraudulent research has been sponsored by the university that sought to make political and social gains based upon the authors' biases, regardless of the medical inaccuracies.

John Money opened a gender identity clinic at Johns Hopkins University in 1970. Money believed that there was a separation between gender and sex (Denny, 2013), a premise known to be true now, but a new concept to the general public in 1970. Nine years later, Jon Meyer and Donna Ryder published an article through the university which claimed that there was no medical benefit to sex reassignment surgery. At the time this article appeared, it damaged the early transgender rights movement

Another member of the Johns Hopkins staff, Paul McHugh, was greatly opposed to the clinic and the research it was doing there. He worked with Meyer and Ryder to publish the article saying sex reassignment surgery was not medically beneficial. The article was methodologically unsound; the research cited within was flawed, but it still swept the nation and caused an uproar of people against the popularization and accessibility of sex reassignment surgery. Meyer and Ryder's influence led to other journals publishing the same information and the closure of the forty gender clinics initially opened under the direct influence of the Johns Hopkins gender clinic. Individuals who wanted to experience congruency between their inner and outer selves were denied that same right, an inborn right for every cisgender individual. The clinics that did stay open became incredibly selective about their clientele (Denny, 2013). McHugh's plan to close the clinic at Johns Hopkins and to limit the availability of sex reassignment surgery and gender therapy to transgender individuals with Meyer and Ryder's fraudulent article worked.

Since the 1970s, the availability of sex reassignment surgeries, hormone therapies, and various other methods to help the transgender population has increased. The terrifying moral of this story is that the scientific community wields an enormous amount of power to influence the public's opinion of medical practices. A researcher publishing an article with faulty and misleading information can ruin the lives of people who would actually benefit from the practices cited as ineffective.

There is still too little research to draw any definite conclusion on the long-term

benefits and risks of sex reassignment surgery. A study in Sweden by Dhenje, Lichtenstein, Boman, Johansson, Långström, and Landén (2011) suggests that sex reassignment surgery is an effective method of alleviation for gender dysphoria – the official clinical term for incongruence between physical sex and psychological gender – although more than surgery (i.e., psychiatric treatment) is needed for transgender people to live life as happily as their cisgender counterparts. The Swedish study acknowledges the need for further research. It uses proper scientific methods and does not suggest that any one method of treatment for gender dysphoria should be used by itself.

The inaccuracy of Meyer and Ryder's article in this instance speaks of its fairness. In scientific research, objectivity is the aim. If an article is purposefully inaccurate in order to meet a certain end, then it is not objective. It is an unfair representation of the transgender community to say that sex reassignment surgery is ineffective. While there are transgender individuals who do not believe surgery is necessary for them, many do strive for reassignment surgery. For some, it is a matter of money. For others, it is a matter of being able to take the time off work or to secure the after care available to them in the form of friends and family there to help. Whatever their reasons for getting or not getting surgical treatment, it is not due to the practice's ineffectiveness. To imply that people seeking help for themselves by undergoing a painful and risky surgery is ineffective implies that transgender individuals really are not going through severe emotional anguish being trapped in a sex and role that is incongruent with their inner selves. The problem with stories that are focused on why surgery is ineffective is the

residual impression that surgery is something frivolous and that being transgender is not significant. It implies that those who seek treatment via surgery are overreacting by undergoing surgical changes.

### *Transgender Prisoners*

Many prisoners find themselves denied access to remedies like hormone treatments and sex reassignment surgery, leading some individuals to perform surgeries on themselves (Lambda Legal, 2013). Cases have been made that argue that limited access to these health care options violates the eighth amendment regarding cruel and unusual punishment. Some transgender prisoners have been on hormone treatments for years before they become incarcerated, and getting cut off from their hormones leaves them in severe physical and emotional pain (Lambda Legal, 2013).

Cases such as *Fields v. Smith* have helped to make progress for the transgender rights movement (Lambda Legal, 2013). This case defined medical necessity of treatment as being left up to the individual and his or her physician. The importance of such court rulings are undeniable because there is a huge disparity in health care access for transgender individuals versus health care for cisgender individuals (Levasseur, 2013). This ruling is important in achieving equal access to health care.

The fairness involved in treatment of transgender individuals is complicated. On the one hand, these kinds of court rulings set precedents about the importance of health care for transgender individuals. The fairness of this representation is high in that it is leading to fairness in the health care field. On the other hand, these rulings are coming

about from court cases surrounding prison inmates. There has been a long standing stereotype that transgender individuals are deviants or prostitutes. With prisoners as the public example of what the transgender community is and who the health care is becoming available to, the uninformed cisgender population's perceptions of the transgender community involves criminal behavior.

The situation as it stands is that prisons provide the easiest environment to achieve these kinds of rulings because of their separate setting controlled by the government. Yet, government policies are easy to analyze in prisons; they are almost like a cross section view of public policy.

#### *Chelsea Manning*

Chelsea Manning was known as Bradley Manning when she served in the military. Transgender soldiers are not allowed to serve in the military with the current policies in place. She has been struggling with gender dysphoria as early as 2009, and she has recently been accused of releasing classified documents to WikiLeaks. She is currently being charged with treason. The defense claims that Manning's gender dysphoria and her inability to be openly out as transgender caused her such great distress that she committed the treason (Roller, 2013).

The accuracy of the information contained in this news story is based on the military's current stance on transgender soldiers and the defense's claims on behalf of Manning. The military views gender dysphoria as a medical abnormality of the genitalia (Roller, 2013), but being transgender is a neurobiological disorder (Raman and Reynolds,

2013). This inaccuracy lessens the seriousness of what transgender individuals go through.

It is unfair that Manning is the current news highlight on transgender soldiers. Twenty percent of the transgender population has served in the military, as opposed to ten percent of the cisgender of the population (Roller, 2013). Kristen Beck is a former Navy SEAL who performs positive campaigning for the transgender community, and there are many former soldiers who have served their country proudly and offer a positive representation of what the transgender community is capable (i.e., the same things as everyone else). However, Chelsea Manning is the one who has made headlines. Regardless of what anyone's opinion of her innocence or her motive, it is unfortunate that a story with such a negative connotation represents the whole transgender community.

#### *The Pregnant Man*

Thomas Beatie is a transman who made headlines in 2007 with his pregnancy. He had elected to keep his female reproductive organs and carry his and his partner's child (Halberstram, 2010). This story provided an opportunity to discuss what it means to be transgender. It became, however, a discussion of what is and what is not natural. A debate ensued about biology and mutilation, as well as the suitability of transgender parents.

The treatment of Thomas Beatie as a medical anomaly and/or an abomination of nature painted a negative light on transgender parents and distracted from transgender biology. This story created national headlines and had the opportunity to educate the

country on the transgender body and life. Similarly, a discussion on the suitability of transpeople as parents, a sensitive and often-debated subject, could have been sparked. The story, however, took its shallowest form and looked at Beatie's physical body and how it defies society's expectations.

### **Movies**

Movies are a popular form of media and comprise a multimillion dollar a year industry. The titles examined below experienced moderate success and feature trans characters in starring roles.

#### *Boys Don't Cry*

*Boys Don't Cry* is the 1999 film that tells the true story of Brandon Teena, a young transman in Nebraska. He finds a group of friends who take him in after he runs away from home and is kicked out of his friend's house. He forms a relationship with one of them. Nobody knows he is transgender until they see a court summons in the trash, with his female name, Teena Brandon, written on it. Two of his friends attack him and force his girlfriend to look at his genitalia. They later rape and beat him. He hides out at another friend's house before leaving town, but his attackers learn of his whereabouts and ultimately shoot him (Pierce & Bienen, 1999). The movie was wildly successful. It launched Hilary Swank's career and earned multiple awards (Rigney, 2003). The appearance of the film at the Oscars demonstrates the powerful effect it had on audiences. For the first time, a transgender character starred in a movie and was not a sexual offender or otherwise dangerous and unstable criminal (Rigney, 2003).



The film's director, Kimberly Pierce, admits to taking creative liberty with Teena's story, but he was a real person who was assaulted and murdered in Falls City, Nebraska, in 1993 (historyvshollywood.com, 2013).

The film made people aware of the transgender community and the violence constantly faced by transgender individuals, and it was the first time a trans character was seen as the hero of the story. The film's brutal rape and murder are tragic, and they greatly affected audiences. In Swank's acceptance speech, she acknowledged Brandon and his incredible, heartbreaking story (historyvshollywood.com, 2013).

However, the hero that Brandon Teena became was a hero for cisgender audiences. For transgender audiences, he became a warning of what could happen if they came out openly (Rigney, 2003). For a transpeople who have kept their identities hidden from all but themselves, *Boys Don't Cry* leaves a less-than-encouraging message about what can happen when they have the courage to do what is right for them.

This film did raise transgender awareness in America. Cisgender audiences were made aware that transgender individuals exist, and that they are persecuted for being who they are. The fact that a movie like this is seen as so revolutionary demonstrates the lack of focus Hollywood tends to devote to marginalized groups. Interestingly, the film also depicts a non-marginalized group as the film's antagonists. Cisgender characters are typically the heroes, and this movie created a role-reversal.

*Southern Comfort*

*Southern Comfort* (2001) is a documentary that follows the final year of Robert Eads' life. Robert was a transman who died of ovarian cancer; he had been refused treatment by two dozen different doctors because he was transgender. Although this is a clear violation of ethics that all doctors pledge to serve by, all 24 experienced impunity (Davis, 2001). The documentary shows how kindhearted Robert was. He served as a mentor for young transgender people in his community, and he was also a frequent attendee and speaker at the Southern Comfort Conference, held in Atlanta, Georgia, every year (from which the film gets its title). The film provides a very accurate look at the tragic state of available health care for the transgender community. As a documentary, it depicts a real story as it happens, and sheds some light on health care issues. Robert is portrayed fairly in the movie. He narrates it, and it is mostly from his perspective. While the documentary turns him into a tragic hero, his story is indeed tragic; however, this serves as yet another “warning” about what awaits an openly out transperson. Yet, with health care being one of the biggest struggles for the transgender community, bringing attention to the issue is very important.

This movie is a solid reflection of prejudice and its damaging effects. Unlike other examples, where the reflection is in the writing and fictionalized portrayal, this example reflects the real results of prejudice. Robert was denied healthcare afforded any cisgender citizen of the United States on a basis of prejudice. Robert Eads died as a result. His story is not the only one like this out there.

*TransAmerica*

*Transamerica* (2005) tells the story of Bree, a pre-operational transwoman hoping to gain psychiatric approval for sex reassignment surgery. Her therapist will not grant it until Bree meets the 17-year-old son she learns she has a week before the scheduled surgery. Bree journeys to New York to meet him, and throughout the film she is reluctant to be a parent. However, she becomes closer to her son as the movie progresses, and eventually the two form a bond and Bree is granted approval for her surgery (Tucker, 2005).

The movie is accurate in portraying Bree's sex reassignment process. She needs various forms of approval for her surgery, unlike entries that are to follow, which show transpeople showing up out of the blue for surgery. Bree also illustrates the wait list for surgery; it is minimally a one-year wait. Her strict hormonal regimen is addressed in the film, as well, giving audiences a more accurate understanding of what sex reassignment surgery entails.

For as accurately as the movie portrays the process, it is unfair in its portrayal of Bree and transgender issues. At times, the film comes across as a little too lighthearted about the struggles that can be involved in being transgender in a heteronormative society. The tension between Bree and her parents is downplayed. A lot of transpeople face difficulties with their families when they come out, and the film does not address the issue sufficiently.

Bree is also portrayed as a very reluctant parent. She is much more concerned

with having her surgery than she is about taking care of her son, who is prostituting himself and living in poverty. This behavior portrays Bree, a transgender character and thus a transgender representative, as selfish and unfit for parenthood.

This movie is somewhat reflective of society in that transgender issues are not taken as seriously as they should be, and it perpetuates the notion that transpeople cannot make good parents. This connotation is unfortunate, as *Transamerica* is often cited as one of the most sympathetic portrayals of a transwoman.

### *Soldier's Girl*

*Soldier's Girl* (2003) is a film based on the true story of Barry Winchell. Barry was a new recruit of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. On a weekend off in 1999, he meets Calpernia Addams, a transwoman night club performer. The two begin a romantic relationship. "Don't Ask Don't Tell" was still in effect, and when Barry and Calpernia's relationship becomes sexual, trouble ensues for Barry. Calpernia has not yet had her sex reassignment surgery, although she plans to. Another soldier discovers that the two are having a sexual relationship and attempts to report Barry for homosexual behavior. When this does not work out as the soldier has planned, he drunkenly beats Barry in his sleep with a baseball bat, and Barry dies as a result (Nyswaner & Pierson, 2003).

While this movie is based on a true story, it is sensationalized. Even though the events really took place, it is an unfair portrayal. Calpernia is frequently referred to as a "monster" and a "freak." Barry does little to defend her, despite his connection to her. It

also portrays Barry as having a sexual identity crisis as a result of his relationship with her. This feeds into the notion that there is something ambiguous about a transperson's gender, when it is in fact simple: Calpernia is a woman. This depiction reinforces the notion that gender identity and sexuality are somehow linked. It also perpetuates the notion that the transgender community is on the outskirts of society, and associating with a transperson will in turn make someone an outsider.

### **Television**

Television is one of the most common forms of media. Characters are serialized and plot lines are either stretched out to fit a season's worth of episodes or condensed to fit a half-hour time slot. The examples analyzed here feature transgender characters at some point in their air time.

#### *Friends*

*Friends* is a sitcom from the 1990s with which most television audiences are familiar. It is about six twenty-somethings and their quests for love and some sort of success in New York City. One of the friends is Chandler Bing, and his character uses humor as a form of self defense. He claims a messed up childhood because his parents divorced while he was young and his father is a bit unlike a majority of other fathers. His father's affair with the houseboy is what caused the divorce, and his father's gender nonconformity is what caused the rift between the parent and child.

Many episodes reference Chandler's parent's gender nonconformity. Monica, Chandler's fiancée, convinces him to invite his parent to their wedding in "The One with

Chandler's Dad." Chandler discovers that she is working at a burlesque drag show in Las Vegas under the name Helena Handbasket (Malins, Buckner, Jones, Bright, & Halvorson 2001). Even when she is not at work, Chandler's parent still dresses as a woman, as demonstrated in "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding" (Mallins, Kauffman, & Crane, & Bright, 2001). Many other examples occur throughout the series of Chandler talking about how his parent would wear dresses or make up that paint a picture that perhaps his father does not identify as male.

Season seven of *Friends* was viewed by 22.1 million people. This is the smallest number of viewers of any season of the show, but it is still a sizable piece of America's television audience. "The One with Chandler's Dad" garnered one of the lowest viewer numbers at only 17.2 million. "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding" is nearly double that with 30.1 million viewers, one of the most-watched episodes of the series (Ginsberg, D.). While these episodes represent two ends of the extreme, they still represent several *million* people watching the group treat Chandler's parent as a comedic tool, rather than as an equal character.

The group's treatment of Helena is not respectful and displays a very inaccurate knowledge of gender identity. They do not treat Helena as an equal character; they treat her as a story tool. A few jokes are made at her expense. There was the trademark Heartwarming Moment when Chandler invites her to the wedding, but it follows 22 minutes of "Is it him or her?" jokes. They consistently refer to her with masculine pronouns – he, him, his. The show never addresses whether Helena is transgender or a

crossdresser, but the proper etiquette either way is to refer to Helena with feminine pronouns. If she is transgender, then she is a woman and should be referred to as such. If Helena is crossdressing, then the proper etiquette would be to use the pronoun of the gender she is presenting as. Since she presents as a woman in every scene in which she appears, then the group should accurately use feminine pronouns.

The treatment of Chandler's parent in these scenes (and others where she is mentioned) is incredibly unfair to her as a character and to the group of people who get limited representation on prime time television.

Why didn't the writers use Helena's gender identity as a positive plot point – a chance for Chandler and his parent to reconcile and overcome a stigma society places on anyone who is not “normal” because underneath the genitalia and what some would consider confusing dress is a parent who cares deeply for her only son? The answer is in the question: this is a stigma instilled by society. If the key demographic did not respond positively to jokes that reaffirm transphobia, then those jokes would not be aired.

This mistreatment demonstrates the vicious cycle of misrepresentation of transgender characters. The jokes and characters are written to appeal to the demographic, and when they are presented they reaffirm any existing stereotypes a less knowledgeable viewer might have. Certainly it cannot be one individual's misconception if the misconception has made it through writing, editing, production, and broadcast process. It makes the statement that there are like-minded people out there who agree that transgender characters (and therefore transgender people) are not the norm and have

confusing genitalia and ways of dressing that are meant more to be a joke than something serious and very real.

### *South Park*

*South Park* (1997 - present) is an adult satiric cartoon set in South Park, Colorado, about a group of elementary-schoolers, their parents, and their teacher Mr(s). Garrison. Garrison is a main character throughout the entire series and goes through a complex journey in both sexual identity and gender identity as dictated by writers Matt Stone and Trey Parker. He is implied to be a closeted homosexual until the fourth season when he finally comes out (Parker, 2000). A few years later, in season nine, Herbert Garrison becomes Janet Garrison in “Mr. Garrison’s Fancy New Vagina” (Parker, 2005). A few seasons later, Ms. Garrison starts having sexual relationships with women (Parker, 2007), but she later transitions back to being a man and his sexuality remains ambiguous (Parker, 2008).

At an average of 3.1 million viewers per episode, *South Park* does not have the same high-volume audience as that of *Friends*. It has, however, received enormous fan and critical acclaim. It is one of iTunes’ top 100 show downloads and has been featured on the covers of *Newsweek* and *Rolling Stone*. It has been nominated for Academy Awards, Emmys, and Peabody Awards. It is a show that consistently pushes the envelope and has been praised for its Swift-like satire (Leonard, 2006). The show has built a reputation of attacking celebrities, politicians, and social practices. Its satire makes it difficult to objectively analyze, but if a show can have multiple interpretations, some of



them may be amusing, some may be thought-provoking, and some may be harmful. The fan base that has watched Garrison's transformations throughout the years is likely to take one or more of several probable messages from the show. According to commentary on the first season, Parker believes Garrison to have a soap opera storyline (Parker & Stone, 2003).

Satire or not, the inaccuracies portrayed about Garrison's transformation are irresponsible. The first, most common misconception portrayed in the show is that gender and sexuality are the same thing. In "Mr. Garrison's Fancy New Vagina," Ms. Garrison is surprised when her boyfriend leaves her (Parker, 2005). They started dating when they were both physically male. Mr. Slave breaks up with Garrison because he is a homosexual and is not attracted to women. Garrison behaves as though she believes their relationship will finally be real and acceptable if they are a heterosexual couple. The truth of the matter is that her sexual identity will remain independent of her gender – a common misconception about transgender issues.

Mr. Slave's shock at Garrison's sexual reassignment surgery leads to another point of inaccuracy: her surgery would not have been as sudden as it was portrayed to be. Surgery of any type will involve at least one consultation with the performing surgeon. The healing process following major surgeries such as sexual reassignment surgeries also involves considerable time and help from those around the person. Yet Garrison's live-in boyfriend had no knowledge of the surgery. He did not even know that Garrison was transgender. It is highly unlikely that a transwoman would not inform her closest

companion of her decision to undergo major surgery to change her physiology. Garrison, in preparation for this surgery and for living her life biologically as a woman, would also be made aware that she would not have any periods or the ability to become pregnant. Yet in this same episode, she is surprised to learn both of these things.

Garrison getting a second sex reassignment surgery is absolutely impossible. Sex reassignment surgery is not a whimsical procedure, and nobody would get it if they were not diagnosed with gender dysphoria and felt physically, emotionally, and financially secure enough to undergo it. It is not something that could be done if there was a possibility that she would have changed her mind.

The series is also unfair in its treatment of sex reassignment surgery. It is presented as something that can be done on a whim and reversed without any consequence. It also suggests that sex reassignment surgery sets precedence for outlandish surgeries, such as another character's surgery to become a dolphin. The episodes involve outlandish plot lines such as a child receiving Garrison's testicles as part of his height-enhancing surgery that explode upon impact or such as growing a penis on the back of a mouse that escapes a lab. The pairing of these ridiculous plot lines with something as serious and significant as sex reassignment surgery lessens the sex reassignment surgery's seriousness. It turns it into a spectacle and abuses the potential for education about the emotional, mental, physical, and financial toll that comes with sex reassignment surgery – a procedure that could be considered a milestone for a transgender individual.

It is a common misconception that there is a link between sexuality and gender, and *South Park*'s Garrison both mirrors that misconception and perpetuates it. By creating a character with such a dynamic storyline and turning it into a joke, *South Park* eliminates the urgency to learn anything about what "transgender" means. This lack of urgency then leads to the acceptance of the belief that transwomen are just gay men who want to be straight. The show also mirrors and perpetuates the line of thought that sex reassignment surgery is unnecessary, comical, immoral, or a gateway to other outlandish surgeries. As demonstrated with the Johns Hopkins scam, it is not hard to convince the public that sex reassignment surgery is a waste of resources.

#### *Family Guy*

*Family Guy* (1999 – present) is yet another animated adult cartoon detailing the antics of Peter Griffin and company. One of his best friends is Glenn Quagmire, whose parent, former naval officer Dan Quagmire, comes to visit in an episode. The audience then learns that the former officer plans on having sex reassignment surgery and that she has always felt that she is a woman trapped in a man's body. She plans to have the surgery while in Quahog. Brian Griffin, Peter's English-speaking dog and other best friend, has a one night stand with Quagmire's parent, now going by the name of Ida. When he learns of Ida's transgender identity, he vomits on-screen for thirty full seconds (Devanney & Michels, 2010).

The show's many unfair portrayals of transgender people has caused uproar in the LGBT community (Rosales, 2010). While still presenting as a man, Quagmire's parent

acts with very stereotypically gay mannerisms. The surgery itself is a quick and painless procedure. Lois refuses to accept any of the food Ida brings over, due to the stigma associated with transwomen. References to transwomen as sex workers are made. Brian reacts horribly to finding out that he slept with someone who was once biologically male. This single episode demonstrates a majority of the most harmful stereotypes and stigmas faced by the transgender community. McFarlane is reported as having said that this is one of the most sympathetic portrayals of a trans character on television today (Rosales, 2010). However, this storyline demonstrates not only the stereotypes that are held against the transgender community, but it trivializes them by turning them into jokes. Audiences laughing at Lois disposing of food made by a transwoman implies that being transgender is some sort of communicable disease, and people who honestly feel this way will feel validated by seeing their beliefs portrayed on a popular television show. Brian's disgust at Ida's former body also implies that she is not a real woman and that sleeping with her is more reprehensible than sleeping with someone born biologically female.

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) asked Fox not to air this episode again after its premier (Rosales, 2010). The LGBT activism group was horrified at the inaccuracies and unfair portrayal of a transgender character and wished for it to remain off the air so as not to spread the defamation of the transgender community. Fox did not listen and re-aired the episode a month later. IMDb.com has a 7.2 user rating for the episode and half of the user reviews echo the sentiments of series creator Seth MacFarlane, who believes this episode to be a sensitive approach to the topic

of transgender people. Other reviewers who have voiced their upset were met with oppositions and arguments like, “It’s just a joke.” One reviewer states that the episode might have gotten away with its intentionally satirical portrait of our society if the show had included its voice of reason usually added to combat bigotry (IMDb.com, 2013). No such voice or reason exists in the episode. Its only redeeming quality is Quagmire’s eventual acceptance of his parent and Ida’s refusal to back down from what she knows is right for her.

Yet again, sex reassignment surgery is portrayed as a one day, no-recovery-needed process, which takes the importance and life-altering dimensions of the surgery and throws them out the window in order to make room for jokes about how uncomfortable it is to be around a transwoman. Ida would not have walked out of that operating room fully dressed and ready to take on the world after a day of surgery. That is simply unrealistic regardless of the nature of the surgery. It takes two months to recover from sex reassignment surgery, and the first two weeks require full-time care (Jacques, 2012).

#### *America’s Next Top Model*

*America’s Next Top Model* (2003 – present) is the brainchild of supermodel Tyra Banks and is a reality competition show about hopeful models competing for a modeling contract. In cycle 10, an extra on set caught the eye of the judges, and the young model was invited to participate in cycle 11. This model was Isis King, and she became the first transwoman on the show. She even returned for the all-star cycle 17 a couple of years later (Banks, Barris, & Mok, 2003).

The show's portrayal of Isis is fairly accurate. As a reality television show, the focus is primarily on modeling. Isis is free to speak about her issues as she comes across them on shoots. She has difficulty with other contestants and experiences problems with swimwear – problems experienced by non-model transwomen. She provides the opportunity to show the world that she is a woman with a dream, not some delusional “he-she.”

The show's treatment of Isis is decently fair, although there have been some problematic points of portrayal. Conflict with other contestants who have problems with her identity as transgender have not been resolved. She has also been critiqued harshly on shoots involving swimwear, and she receives little sympathy when she explains her concerns had been during the shoot. In some ways, this demonstrates more of an importance on modeling than on Isis being a transwoman, because the show has had several contestants with personal struggles that the judges always tell them to work through it and with it in order to become a better model. So, in a sense, the show is just accepting that Isis is transgender and does not make it out to be a problem or cause for concern. However, her triumph for being the first transwoman on the show should have been celebrated more in order to get the audience to fully appreciate how the fashion industry – so famously discriminatory of the female body – has accepted a transwoman into its midst.

*America's Next Top Model* is an interesting entry because it is a reality show. It is

not scripted with plot lines meant to pull in ratings. Producers edit footage in the most dramatic way, but that still has not caused a negative light to be shed on the transgender community; it does not necessarily shed a positive light either. Isis is just another contestant with an interesting back story that could either make the audience root for or against her. For such a huge leap in the television and fashion industry, she has not gotten the full appreciation she deserves. Perhaps that is reflective of American society, because what transgender means is not very well understood, so no one could understand Isis's participation as a triumph. Not making it more significant certainly does not do anything to educate viewers at home.

### **Conclusion**

By and large, the media is unethical in its portrayal of transgender characters. Transpeople are used to sensationalize stories and to pull in higher ratings so producers can make more money. This co-opting comes at a cost. Stereotypes are employed and treated as valid assessments of human beings, and the struggles faced by the transgender community are downplayed and treated as little more than comedic props. These ideas then become reinforced in viewers, who have no other knowledge of what it means to be transgender. The media will not give more responsible and honest portrayals of transgender characters until the audience demands it of them. Hollywood depends on its source of revenue, and when society takes a stand and demands better programming, it will slowly but surely be delivered. Audiences are not responsible only for demanding the media's ethical behavior. Audiences should be held accountable for the knowledge

they choose to take away from a show, movie, or news story. There is great opportunity for independent learning. Stereotypes and prejudices should not be acceptable when we see how they are reflected back at us in the media. Fighting prejudice with knowledge is the first step to making the world a more diverse and accepting place for every group.



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