

“Girls Gone Wilde”: Cultivation, Socialization, and the Quagmire of Consent

by

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ABSTRACT

In a content analysis of 50 films, Bufkin and Eschholz (2000) noted, “The media have been implicated in the propagation of rape myths in American society.” The research for this thesis sets out to explore this issue through the analysis of media messages that crop up not just in Hollywood crime dramas but also in pornography and rape jokes. The study found that although Hollywood crime dramas and pornography, at least on the surface, appear to be on the opposite ends of the spectrum regarding attitudes toward consent, the combined message is actually quite clear: in order for rape to be considered as such, it must be an extreme case, brutal to the point of being cringeworthy. This, in turn, is likely to have contributed to the dismissive attitude toward sexual abuse that has paved the way for societal acceptance of rape jokes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY	5
CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW	7
Pornography	7
Crime Dramas	10
Rape Jokes	11
CHAPTER IV: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	13
Cultivation Theory	14
Socialization and the Sexual Self	15
Girls Gone “Wilde”	17
CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS	20
The Brutality Myth	20
Consensual Sex or Rape?	28
<i>The Assumption of Consent</i>	28
<i>The Crime Drama Connection</i>	29
The Quagmire of Consent	33
<i>Overview</i>	33
<i>Purpose</i>	34
<i>Defining “Rape Culture”</i>	35
<i>Sampling</i>	37
<i>Procedures & Analysis</i>	39
<i>Notable Family Guy Episodes</i>	40
<i>Notable South Park Episodes</i>	41
<i>Discussion</i>	43
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS	48
REFERENCES	51

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Content analysis results	37
Table 2: Rape Culture Index, by show	39

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

From our puritanical roots to our borderline-pornographic Hardee's commercials, we are somehow a society both obsessed with and discomforted by sex. While our discomfort surrounding sex is reflected in our unwillingness to openly discuss it as a normal part of the human experience, our obsession with sex is reflected in the entertainment and commercial media we produce and consume. The intrinsic connection between media messages (both explicit and implicit) and social norms in any given culture is largely underestimated by the masses, and yet, it is inarguably powerful – and when dealing with taboo topics, the ability for media messages to shape social norms is maximized.

Media depictions of sex and sexuality have been referred to by Brown, Halpern, and L'Engle (2005) as something of a collective “sexual super-peer,” particularly in lieu of adequate sex education (Brown & L'Engle, 2009) – and unfortunately, looking to media texts as a kind of informal sex education can lead to misinformation regarding what actually constitutes healthy sexuality. With the rise of more extreme, more brutal depictions of sex in pornography, this can also raise issues with regard to the general public's understanding of consent. Certainly, the word “consent” is thrown around often in this fourth-wave feminist era, and most people believe they have the ability to recognize sexual assault when it happens – but the ability to recognize it in all its forms may be hindered not only by the *assumption* of consent in pornographic depictions of sex but also by overdramatized Hollywood depictions of rape which seem to collectively

paint an inaccurate picture of how rape is most commonly carried out in the real world (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000).

In addition, most varieties of rape jokes, due to their “rape apologist” nature, contribute to dismissive attitudes toward rape and further blur the public’s understanding of consent; this brand of humor is, of course, sexual in nature, and due to its categorization as just another subcategory of sexual humor, it legitimizes rape as an acceptable form of sexual expression. Sadly, at this juncture, rape jokes constitute a large portion of sexually-based humor in entertainment media. They have become something of a cultural staple. Similar to how it seems impossible to disentangle sexuality from the brutality and degradation assumed to be inherent to it¹, it can be difficult for some to even imagine sexual humor that manages to avoid normalizing rape culture.

Fans of comedy are hesitant to criticize such jokes when the toxic ideologies present in them are brought to light. This is precisely how rape jokes gain their power as a vehicle for the perpetuation of rape culture. Points made by the party criticizing the media text are shut down; those opposed to rape jokes are viewed as humorless, as being opposed to comedy as a whole (Kramer, 2011), even as being opposed to sex as a whole. So frequently overlooked is the fact that while rape, by definition, involves sex, sex is *not* defined by the inclusion of rape. The assumption seems to be that without rape jokes,

¹ As Gail Dines so delicately phrased it in *Pornland*, “The more you can debase her, the more you can dehumanize her, then the hotter the sex” (Media Education Foundation, 2014).

there would be no sexual humor, but this assumption is rooted in a failure to distinguish between healthy sexuality and rape culture.

As sex is not inherently oppressive, there is no logical basis for the argument that rape jokes are a necessity for sexual humor as a broad category; however, it should be noted that the rather obvious anti-rape stance taken in this thesis is not an attempt to silence comedy writers when the topic of rape is relevant. Discussing the issue of rape in our society is actually very important – but if someone is to make light of a situation that alludes to or involves rape, it should be made very clear that rape *itself* is not a joke. Rape is an epidemic.

Collectively, then, the aforementioned issues raise three troubling questions: 1) How does pornography impact our societal perception of the link, assumed to be inextricable, between sexuality and brutality/degradation? 2) How do pornography and depictions of rape in crime shows and Hollywood dramas affect our culture's understanding of what constitutes consensual sex versus rape? 3) Are jokes that *normalize* rape culture a necessary evil for the continued existence of rape-related humor itself?

A primary task of this thesis is an examination of these questions; to this end, I analyze the role that mediated messages play in the perpetuation of rape culture as something of a three-pronged analysis. In my examination of pornography, of crime dramas, and of rape jokes in mainstream entertainment, I utilize a rather eclectic theoretical framework combining a few socialization theories (most notably, George

Herbert Mead's theory of the "social self") as well as certain branches of feminist theory and media theories such as cultivation and framing.

The intersection between sociology and gender studies is powerfully illuminating with regard to understanding how gender is socially constructed and reinforced – and when supplemented by an understanding that popular media serve as an agent of socialization, the analysis of mediated messages' more subtle themes through framing theory sheds a noticeably brighter light on the *implied* ideological messages hidden beneath the more overt messages that are cultivated through repeated exposure.

CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

In this analysis of pornography, crime dramas, and rape jokes, I apply a blend of qualitative and quantitative approaches. This includes a critical discourse analysis of pornographic depictions of sex, as well as an examination of the sociocultural repertoires that perpetuate toxic hegemonic structures based on specific insights from quantitative content analyses such as the Bufkin and Eschholz (2000) study and the Zillmann and Bryant (1982) study. The final section of this paper includes data from a quantitative content analysis comparing *South Park* and *Family Guy* in terms of what I will refer to as “Rape Culture Index.” In my discussion of the more quantitatively-focused data analyses, I also include an examination of the issues at hand through a more qualitative lens.

Studies surrounding media as agents of socialization will also figure strongly as I incorporate insights by feminist scholars and sociologists – including those who have focused less on media. These insights are still highly applicable to the overall understanding of ideological meaning formation and hegemonic masculine structures, as well as the understanding of internalized misogyny. The intersection of sociology and gender studies is an area many researchers have already examined; this is also the case for the points of connection between sociology and media studies. Still, a rather sparse area of research thus far is the *three-way* intersection between sociology, gender studies, *and* media studies. In the following pages, I connect all three with a theoretical framework that examines media as a socialization agent every bit as powerful as

traditional socialization agents (family, friends, the school system, etc.) and perhaps even more powerful with regard to sexual socialization.

The central issue I am trying to explore and illuminate is this: In a culture where sexual depictions are everywhere but where people still squirm at the idea of delivering a more thorough sex education to our youth (that is, beyond STI-based scare tactics and a clinical review of ovulation and blastocyst implantation, which completely ignores the social and sensual curiosity innate to being sexually active in the first place), it seems only logical that media would serve as a key socialization agent with regard to the more socially and sensually based parts of sex.

Pornography does not sit there and judge a person for being sexually curious – but it does provide misinformation. And in a society that does not properly deliver *corrective* information, this is problematic. The problematic nature of this is then compounded by other media depictions of sex framing rape as either something only ever carried out by a gun-wielding maniac in a dark alley, or worse – as something to be laughed off, or even laughed *at*, rather than as something to be reported to the authorities.

CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

Through a brief literature review of the three specific areas – pornography, crime drama, and rape jokes – I sketch the common themes, identify specific gaps, and argue for a more contextual exploration of these three areas in terms of their overlaps and interconnections. This is in keeping with the overall purpose of my thesis to study the three in their conjunctural relations and historical contexts in terms of media representations and social dimensions.

Pornography

Nearly two decades prior to Dolf Zillmann's 2000 study (cited by Brown & L'Engle in 2009), he co-authored an article with Jennings Bryant about the link between pornography and the trivialization of rape. This speaks volumes when considering that the majority of pornography released during the 1980's would actually be considered quite tame by today's standards. In the PornHub era, it can be rather difficult to find (heterosexual) X-rated content completely free from any acts that are done with the intent to degrade the woman rather than offer any legitimate pleasure. "As Rebecca Whisnant observed: 'In today's mainstream pornography, aggression against women is the rule rather than the exception ... hostile, aggressive content is so prevalent in contemporary pornography that it would be hard for a regular consumer to avoid it' (2007, p. 115)" (Tankard Reist & Bray, 2011).

Dr. Robert Jensen notes, "All of these acts are, at their base, about male domination and female submission, men's ability to do whatever they want to do to

women, and women accepting it – and [...] in pornography, not only [about] women accepting it but women *seeing it as part of their nature*” (Media Education Foundation, 2008). As disturbing of a dynamic as this is to consider, it is deeply relevant. In a brief explanation of George Herbert Mead’s theory of the social self, Holtzman and Sharpe note, “Essential to the development of self is our ability to imagine other people’s response to us” (Holtzman & Sharpe, 2014). This relates not only to the development of the “social self” but also to the development of what I will refer to as the “sexual self.”

We all want to be loved and admired – but what happens when every depiction of sex to which we are exposed ultimately shows violence or degradation as a part of the act? If heterosexual women want the physical companionship they crave, pornography would have them believe that accepting degradation or brutality is merely part of the deal. In fact, the willingness to accept it may even “set them apart” from other women who might then, in comparison, be deemed sexually uptight.¹ The social script that pornography writes has consistent implications that the more abuse a woman is willing to take, the better.

When analyzing portrayals of sex in pornography from a socialization-based theoretical framework, this is frightening; identification with such media messages is the result of an accumulation of consistent messages over time, eventually becoming

¹ Interestingly enough, according to 2016 findings, the “sexually uptight” women now comprise a whopping 37 percent of PornHub’s *gay male* pornography viewership (Bell, 2019) – leading me to suspect that the vast majority of 21st century “prudes” are simply women who don’t enjoy thought of being choked, slapped, and fish-hooked while they get railed from behind by any conceivable combination of step-father, step-brother, oddly presumptuous pizza guy, bedazzled speculum for some reason, step-pizza guy, etc.

internalized. This is quite similar to what lies at the heart of cultivation theory, as well as more socialization-based gender theories. Feminist theorist Gloria Steinem ushers in a harsh reality, asserting "Pornography is a marketing device for sex trafficking: It normalizes degradation and violence as acceptable and even *inevitable* parts of sex and uses the bodies of real women and children as objects. The difference between pornography and erotica is clear in the roots of the words themselves – ‘porne’ means female slaves, ‘eros’ means love – so pornography, like rape, is about violence and domination, not sex. Millions of lives depend on our ability to separate pornography from erotica, and to disentangle violence from sexuality²" (Steinem, 2006).

Importantly, anti-pornography arguments long predate the mainstreaming of what contemporary feminist theorists would consider “hardcore porn.” Still, Robin Morgan’s famed, decades-old phrase, “pornography is the theory, and rape the practice” (Morgan, 1980), remains a favorite in feminist academic circles due to its undying relevance. An assertion as disturbing as it is consistent with cultivation theory, Robin Morgan’s dictum is a bold claim worth investigating. Many have tried, but research is limited, and previous investigations into the link between pornography use and sexual violence are not without their problems. The vast majority of these studies were conducted in the late 20th century – years before gonzo porn took the Internet by storm, effectively transforming it into an X-rated minefield of girl-next-door bukkake videos and anal gaping GIFs. Additionally

² Tankard Reist and Bray (2011) point out that “[f]or many girls, naming and expressing emotional or physical pain is the new taboo because it transgresses the fake porn script of the continually up-for-it girl who takes it with a smile.”

(and perhaps even more importantly), many of the studies limited themselves by focusing on convicted rapists.

In a 2015 meta-analysis, Wright, Tokunaga, and Kraus noted, “While sex offender studies are suggestive, they assume that individuals who have not been charged with a sexual offense are sexually nonaggressive. Because most sexual assaults go unreported and a minority of reported sexual assaults lead to arrests, equating a lack of formal charges with a lack of sexual aggressiveness is problematic.” Rape is an exceedingly difficult crime to prove in a court of law, especially in cases of acquaintance rape (DeSantis, 2005). Extreme cases of aggravated, physically forced stranger rape are understandably easier to convict; the more brutalized the victim, the more clear-cut the case.

Crime Dramas

...Enter the crime drama connection. Depictions of rape in popular media like crime shows or Hollywood crime thrillers tend to “present a rather patriarchal vision of sex and rape. Rapes in the movies are committed by sadistic, disturbed, lower-class individuals who prey on children and the vulnerable. This unidimensional movie picture of rape may help to perpetuate the real problem of rape and sexual abuse in our society by ignoring the reality of most real life rapes” (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000).

The Bufkin and Eschholz study, although enlightening, does not take into consideration the opposite side of the same coin with regard to media messages that provide misinformation about rape. To be able to identify rape, one must also have a

solid understanding of consent. Ideally, when examining a belief in rape myths, the effects of crime shows and Hollywood dramas should be studied alongside the effects of pornography. In consideration of the fact that prior studies have already shown that “under controlled experimental conditions, massive exposure to pornography resulted in a loss of compassion toward women as rape victims and toward women in general” (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982), pornography’s contribution to the perpetuation of rape culture cannot be discounted.

Rape Jokes

Of course, even after taking standard Hollywood depictions of rape into account alongside pornographic depictions of sex, there still remains one question with regard to sexual violence depictions in media: What about when the media content in question is “just a joke”? Moreover, what if this “joke” seems to be *justifying* sexual abuse? Is it still “just a joke”? Or is it permissive, approving, encouraging of rape culture?

Pérez and Greene noted in a 2016 framing analysis surrounding the Daniel Tosh rape joke controversy of 2012 that “just a joke” seems to be a very common *defense* when a media text makes light of rape or other sexually abusive situations. The irony here is that it likely makes the embedded ideological message all the *more* powerful when delivered as a joke. I would posit that the majority of the time, as viewers lie back in a state of zombified bliss in front of their TV screens, the more discerning parts of their minds are not in the proverbial driver’s seat – *especially* when the chosen content is mindless humor.

Sex and laughter alike are nonrational, base instincts, leaving less opportunity for the conscious mind to barge in and ruin the fun with things like the ability to humanize others³ or the self-awareness to recognize the pathology behind some of our “kinks” as being rooted in internalized misogyny or unhealed trauma⁴ (Chu, 1992). Framing something as “just a joke,” serves as the audience’s cue to let their guards down – which would then effectively trigger their subconscious minds to assume their rightful positions as ideological sponges.

This is where theory comes in. The critical overview of streams of literature in pornography, Hollywood crime dramas, and rape jokes reveal several key elements in relation to the general orientation of the research purpose and questions of the thesis: My overall intent in sketching the literature is to point to the overlaps and intersections between and across their mediated representations, and this requires a detailed analysis to be carried out through an integrated theoretical framework connecting conceptual insights from sociology, gender studies, and media studies.

³ Cases like the Vanderbilt gang rape, for example, reveal volumes. Brandon Vandenburg, who spearheaded the gang rape, could be heard *laughing at the victim* in the video being captured of the assault as a bottle was inserted into her anus (Crockett, 2016).

⁴ A complex issue well beyond the scope of this paper, this is known as the “repetition compulsion,” a process whereby “[s]evere abusive experiences overwhelm the limited ego capacities of young children, leading to repression and dissociation of such experiences” which “do not remain unconscious, but emerge into current experience” (Chu, 1992).

CHAPTER IV: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I have already touched on framing in the prior section as this is a relatively easy theory to conceptualize and to grasp intuitively. Framing something in a certain way can serve two purposes: Firstly, it can affect how a viewer feels about the content being viewed. It can trigger a sense of terror, of safety, of pity, of relief, etc. with regard to the specific issue being addressed. Secondly, it can perpetuate hegemonic norms by *continuing* to position certain groups of people in a certain light. The word “continuing” is very important here...

Seeing something framed in a certain way in one isolated instance is unlikely to trigger a drastic change in the viewer’s thinking. It can act as confirmation bias, certainly, if the way that a certain issue is framed happens to already be in alignment with the viewer’s mindset or with the functioning of society as a whole as it relates to hegemonic values. But in isolated instances, framing alone seems unlikely to be powerful enough to create lasting change in a person’s thinking. Framing theory does *feed into* the other theories from which I have pulled throughout this thesis, but it is merely supplementary. It is used in this thesis to encourage a deeper understanding of the implicit messages being cultivated through repeated exposure as well as messages being relied on for sexual socialization.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory has been explored at length in terms of its impact on “mean world” syndrome (Morgan et al., 2009). It seems logical, then, that the reverse would be applicable. For heavy TV viewers to be afraid of the world due to a perception that the world is dangerous is indicative of cultivation effects; similarly, cultivation effects could also be implicated when viewers derive an inappropriate sense of encouragement to justify, engage in, or otherwise contribute to behaviors that really do harm to others.

While numerous studies have been done assessing the link between cultivation theory and views of rape in Western society, much of the focus has been either on pornography or on the fact that television dramas and less comically-oriented films portray rape in a way that suggests it is always physically forced, often carried out by a violent stranger or perhaps an abusive relative. There have been far fewer cultivation analyses examining the link between entertainment media and rape culture when the media content in question is “just a joke,” but this is an equally important aspect to consider as cultivation theory is not one-sided or limited to only one or two genres; the “monkey see, monkey do” logic that cultivation theory examines is not so discriminating. Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli explain, “Television viewing cultivates ways of seeing the world – those who spend more time ‘living’ in the world of television are more likely to see the ‘real world’ in terms of the images, values, portrayals and ideologies that emerge through the lens of television” (2009).

Certainly, if one were to ask a well-intentioned adolescent or young adult whether they would rape someone, the answer would be a solid “no.” However, in a society flooded with confusing media messages regarding what constitutes consent (for instance, numerous depictions of women playing hard-to-get, leading to the classic assumption that “no” simply means “convince me”) and morally vacant television and movie characters who exist, ironically enough, as comic relief in spite of their modus operandi being sexual predation (Glenn Quagmire from *Family Guy*, Steve Stifler from *American Pie*, etc.), there still remains the question of whether the person declaring themselves a non-rapist actually has a firm grasp on the concept of consent.

Socialization and the Sexual Self

Holtzman and Sharpe (2014) define socialization as “the total set of experiences through which children become clear about norms and expectations and learn how to function as respected and accepted members of a culture.” The process of socialization, however, does not come to a screeching halt after childhood. The formation of the social self must be understood to include the formation of the sexual self. Sexual socialization is not terribly likely to begin during a child’s monkey bar years – but the brain is still highly impressionable during puberty and for years beyond.

The decision-making center of the brain, the rational part, *does not fully develop until around age 25*¹. Recent research compiled by Joseph Campellone (M.D.), Raymond Kent Turley (B.S.N., M.S.N., R.N.), and Anne Fetterman (R.N., B.S.N.) of the University of Rochester Medical Center reveals that “adult and teen brains work differently. Adults think with the prefrontal cortex, the brain’s rational part. This is the part of the brain that responds to situations with good judgment and an awareness of long-term consequences. Teens process information with the amygdala. This is the emotional part” (URMC, 2019).

It should be made clear, however, that having a fully developed brain does not render adults 25+ impervious to the effects of pornographic depictions of sex or the internalization of rape myths. Dr. Richard Wolff of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst explained, “Pornography meets a real need that people have to somehow break out of their sexual loneliness, their sexual isolation, their failure to connect sexually with somebody – and as with every other basic human need that gets inappropriately dealt with, it becomes an opportunity for private enterprise to come in. That’s what private enterprises do – they make money off of human needs and wants and desires. And in the

¹ As an aside, a host of criticisms could be written here on the porn industry’s *ridiculously* predatory recruitment practices for the teen or “barely-legal” genre. An industry run predominantly by fully grown men is profiting off of the systematic targeting, manipulation, exploitation, and outright abuse of *literal teenagers* (Valenti, 2009) who, although technically “adults” in a legal sense, are still several years away from having the fully developed rational processing capabilities to assess the life-long consequences of *videotaped sex work* that will forever remain accessible to the public – the payment for which is typically just enough to cover a hospital visit if they incur any damage to an orifice or any other body part during more brutal scenes, which is not at all uncommon (Mendes, 2014; Tankard Reist & Bray, 2011).

process, of course, they begin to *shape* those needs and wants and desires” (Media Education Foundation, 2008).

Girls Gone “Wilde”

Far from being a sociological theorist but nonetheless wise and observant to human nature, Oscar Wilde once penned, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (Wilde, 1891). While it seems far-fetched to label pornography as an art form, the “imitation” to which Wilde is referring still applies. Taking a similar anti-mimetic approach in opposition to conventional Aristotelian wisdom, modern cultural and media scholars have since recognized entertainment media as a key agent of socialization, particularly as it relates to sexual development.

“In the context of a culture that provides little information about sexuality through conventional socialization channels such as parents, schools, and religion but condones a media environment replete with sexual content, the media have become important sexual socialization agents. Zillmann (2000) argued that, ‘because consensually accepted programs of sexual education are lacking, [sexually explicit media] have come to serve as a primary agent of sexual socialization’” (Brown & L’Engle, 2009). On both a grand cultural scale and in terms of individual interactions between two (or more) people raised under such conditions, this creates a very dangerous dynamic – especially considering pornography’s characteristic disregard for clear, affirmative, uncoerced consent.

Consent in pornography is merely assumed², rarely discussed – and, of course, when it is discussed, a coercive approach is usually taken. In the Media Education Foundation’s 2008 documentary *The Price of Pleasure*, Dr. Robert Jensen discusses this from a doubly relevant viewpoint as both a cultural scholar and as someone raised male in the culture described above: “In pornography, all women are available to all men for sex. But when you leave that pornographic world, you have to enter a real world in which all women are not available to you sexually. My own experience is knowing that in my head but still feeling, in my body, that reaction – and having to consciously say, ‘I am not in the pornographic world. I am in the real world.’ Now... I do that *consciously* trying to resist it. How many men *don’t* resist it? How many men leave the pornographic world and sort of seamlessly move into the real world [wherein] that which we *call* a ‘fantasy’ in the pornographic world is then *experienced* in the real world?”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, research on the effects of pornography would indicate the answer to that question is “far too many.” In this instance, Jensen is the exception rather than the rule. “As with other media effects [...] the reality projected in pornographic

² It especially important here, as well, to distinguish between *implied* consent and *assumed* consent. While not without its problems, implied consent does at least paint the image of a mutually beneficial sexual exchange right from the onset. Both parties are clearly interested in each other before anything sexual happens. We see this a lot in real life. *Assumed consent*, however, takes the form of one party’s entitlement leaking out in ways that *assume* the other party will be perfectly fine with whatever ensues, even if this takes the form of the entitled party walking up to a woman and groping her without even a “hello.”

Imagine this occurring in real life. Imagine sitting in the lobby at the bank or wherever else, and a stranger just walks over, sits down next to you, and without a single word, starts rubbing your chest. This is assumed consent in action. And whether you happen to be reading this as a male, a female, or a nonbinary person, I am inclined to think this situation would cause most people to feel alarmed and uncomfortable. In no conceivable scenario should groping and nipple-rubbing ever precede, “Hi, my name’s Bill.”

imagery mingles with that deriving from immediate and socially mediated experience; and to the extent that the two 'realities' differ, the projection is likely to modify experience-based assessments in a predictable way. If, for instance, the portrayal of violence on television misrepresents reality and thus can be expected to alter perceptions of crime in society and feelings of personal safety, pornography that misrepresents reality may likewise be expected to foster inappropriate perceptions and unwarranted dispositions" (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982).

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS

The Brutality Myth

Gendered power imbalances in pornographic depictions of sex such as those discussed in the following pages have perpetuated and even amplified a deeply ingrained societal belief equating the penetration of an orifice with brutalization – to the point where even feminist theorists sometimes fail to separate the two. Depictions of brutalization in pornography tend to be especially clear in group sex scenes featuring only one woman and multiple males – a dynamic the portrayals of which have become the modern quintessence of the age-old belief that "penis" is synonymous with "weapon of mass destruction." Sex, however, is not inherently brutal; ergo, group sex is not inherently brutal. Rather, *brutal sex* is inherently brutal. But if even those who have made it their lives' work to defend the dignity of women cannot differentiate between sex and abuse, it can only be due to certain framing patterns, the effects of which are then cultivated over time.

For this study, two pornographic videos were analyzed – one of them a double/triple/quadruple penetration compilation featuring several scenes with varying numbers of men and only one woman (courtesy of Christopher_34G, PornHub user), the other a compilation of scenes featuring varying numbers of women and only one man (uploaded to PornHub by self_lover). Although the majority of the scenes in the latter video depicted more than two women with one man, for the sake of brevity, the latter video will be referred to as the female-female-male, or FFM, video.

In every scene in both videos analyzed for this study, there is a rather obvious power imbalance among the participants due to the fact that the minority gender in each scene (i.e., the woman in the double/triple/quadruple penetration scenes and the man in the FFM scenes) is the obvious central focus, the supposed object of everyone's desire. The primary difference, then, is not *that* they are being touched by everybody else; it is *how* they are being touched by everybody else.

The males are depicted, across all scenes in *both* videos, as being in the power position. In the FFM scenes, the women fawn over the man, caressing him, stroking him, attending to his every physical need. These women, it seems, exist only to serve him, and the object of desire in this dynamic is the recipient of seemingly endless worship and admiration. In the double/triple/quadruple penetration scenes, however, the object of desire (the woman) is far from being the recipient of any kind of admiration or worship; instead, she is the recipient of abuse. In these scenes, anytime a woman is touched by a male hand, is it either to be choked, slapped, aggressively groped, to have her hair pulled, or even to be pinned down and yelled at to comply. There is no caressing, no stroking, or even any acknowledgment of the woman's desires aside from those that come out of her own mouth – e.g., “I love it when you *make me* fucking take it, take it, take it...!”

The internalized misogyny in the above quote is glaring; do note, however, that this is not a judgement but merely an observation. The woman's own desires in porn are in line with sociocultural scripts that encourage women to revolve their identities and desires around *male desires*. This is her use. This is her life purpose. Somehow, even

when the woman is everyone's central focus, she still only exists to serve the men by whom she is surrounded. Her desires, when voiced, revolve solely around the desires of the men inside of her – and sadly, in hardcore porn, this is the *best-case* scenario.

In one particularly disturbing quadruple penetration scene, the woman is slapped across the face more times than she is groped, and she *does not* appear to be enjoying herself as the men bark orders at her. She simply looks exhausted and downtrodden. Her hair is greasy, and her mascara is running. About halfway through the clip, in reference to the fact that she now has two men thrusting themselves into her vagina and one thrusting himself into her anus while yet another man inserts himself into her mouth, the cameraman comments, “*Now you're useful!*” Consider this in direct comparison to the FFM scenes in which there would appear to be *no question* regarding the man's worth; rather, it seems to be generally assumed that he is already useful, and that that is why multiple women are so devastatingly attracted to him.

At a certain point in the aforementioned quadruple penetration scene where it seems perfectly reasonable that the woman be distracted by the countless other penises flopping around in her personal space, one man shouts at her to “*keep stroking that fucking cock!*” as she breathes out a tired “*okay...*” in reply. Incidentally, the obligatory hand job for the entitled-looking man unable to find an available orifice to insert himself into was a recurring theme across most scenes in the double/triple/quadruple penetration compilation. Conversely, in the FFM video, there were no scenes including manual stimulation of female genitals by a male hand per her request (much less her entitlement),

presumably because her pleasure does not actually matter; she exists only to serve male desires. This “life purpose” remains consistent but is more violently depicted in the scenes with only one woman.

Perhaps the best example of this is another highly disturbing quadruple penetration scene shot by the same company as the former – HardcoreGangbang.com. This clip begins with a woman being held down by three men with her head pushed onto the floor as she cries, “I’m scared!” multiple times over. The men only stop holding her down when she starts to “enjoy” the two penises already inside of her and agrees to two more – one in her mouth and one in her anus. Once her anus is penetrated, however, she begins screaming in pain, and the men order her to “stay down” as one man holds her head down again. In both clips from HardcoreGangbang, there is a coercion and intimidation process that is either explicitly shown (“*You’ll have fun!*”) or implied (“*Told you you were gonna have fun!*”).

Of course, not all gangbang videos are this brutal, but they do all send the same message – that a woman who has sex with multiple men at once is unworthy of basic human dignity. Instead, she is utter trash. Why? Because she should not *want* to be with multiple men. In our society’s denial-based ideal, a “dignified” woman should not want to be with *any* men; rather, she should have to be talked into it¹. In *The Purity Myth*,

¹ If this sounds a bit problematic... that’s because it is. Really, this a basic tenet of rape culture: the cat-and-mouse game that is so crucial to “playing hard-to-get.” Unfortunately, even when done with good intentions from all parties involved, this still feeds into rape culture, the idea that “no” means “convince me.” Note that the game of cat-and-mouse, right down to the name itself, is reliant on a dynamic reminiscent of predator and prey.

Jessica Valenti analyzes our societal expectation of women to be “gatekeepers” of sex (Valenti, 2009) and how this is fueled by the age-old belief that a woman’s “moral compass lies somewhere between [her] legs.” Gender essentialism² would have us believe that this is because men are “naturally” more sexual and “naturally” more aggressive. In reality, of course, this is socially instilled – and one key aspect of Western culture as it relates to sex that Valenti did *not* explore is the troubling fact that our society tends to view sex and aggression as innately linked.

In Christine Helliwell’s essay “*It’s Only a Penis*”: *Rape, Feminism, and Difference*, she focuses primarily on the social construction of rape, but the findings from her anthropological studies among the Gerai tribe of Indonesia are still highly applicable to more general discussions surrounding the brutality assumed to be inherent to male sexuality. She notes, “A central feature of many writings about rape in the past twenty years is their concern to eschew the view of rape as a natural function of male biology and to stress instead its bases in society and culture. It is curious, then, that so much of this work talks of rape in terms that suggest – either implicitly or explicitly – that it is a universal practice” (Helliwell, 2000). In the Western world (and in most of the world, in fact), the phallus is viewed as something of a potential weapon – and the more destructive the penis, the manlier the man. However, what is commonly overlooked, even by

² This theory is defined by the belief that sex and gender are “timeless and unchangeable, part of the very essences of our being” (Ryle, 2011). Our culture is rife with gender essentialism, with the belief that men were born to be a certain way, and women were born to be a certain way. Conversely, this paper (obviously) takes a far more sociologically-based approach to gender, more in line with the theory of social constructionism.

feminist writers, is that this too is a social construct. Just as masculinity is constructed, so too is the tendency to associate male genitalia with brutality.

While nobody here is arguing that one should ignore the risks of having multiple penises aggressively thrust into every orifice until a pelvic or anal prolapse results [the adult film industry is rife with such “occupational hazards” (Media Education Foundation, 2014)], portraying the dynamic of group sex with only one woman as *inescapably* brutal is a problem. It furthers our already deeply entrenched societal tendency to associate sex with aggression – and works to ensure that women remain sexual subordinates who unquestioningly accept a more subtle, more hidden variety of male sexual ownership. While it has never been much of a secret that most societies have been unceasingly hellbent on controlling female sexuality for millennia, in contemporary Western society, women are no longer *overtly* considered property; however, a kind of indirect reminiscing for the “good ol’ days” is still rampant.

While it is easy to see pornography as oppressive in terms of violence, many still tout it as contributing to societal acceptance of female sexual expression – and unfortunately, the component that actually promotes *restriction* of female sexuality goes largely unnoticed. These aggressive gangbang videos are little more than scare tactics, cautionary tales, abuse depicted to safeguard male ownership of female sexuality. It is classic slut-shaming at its most insidious. What better way to try to promote female monogamy than by presenting threesomes or group sex with only one woman as a brutal, degrading experience? Of course, in a culture saturated with violent depictions such as

these, it can be difficult to imagine something like a non-brutal threesome with two men and one woman, but by no means does that make it an impossibility.

If one man can be unaggressive with a female sexual partner³, there is absolutely no reason two (or more) men could not treat her with respect. Of course, some may think the idea of “respectful sex” laughable and potentially devoid of passion, but it certainly does not need to be. What kind of world are we living in where passion is synonymous with aggression? Could it not instead be synonymous with the intensity inspired by a deep longing to be close to someone, to experience them intimately, to *appreciate* the body of another human being? Is that not *exactly* what is happening to the males featured in FFM scenes?

A 12-second scroll through PornHub or xHamster to look only at video titles reveals volumes about this disparity. A person would be hard-pressed to find a woman whose deepest intimate aspirations involve being a “cum dumpster.” Meanwhile, right alongside this collective slut-shaming fiesta, the viewer is presented with an avalanche of videos lauding men for their sexual escapades with multiple women. It creates a cruel and dangerous dynamic when the primary thing a woman is valued for in society is her sexuality, and yet, the adult film industry would have us all believe that she should never

³ Obviously, this can be difficult to find in pornography, even in more “vanilla” scenes, but it absolutely exists in real life. And certainly, the difficulty a consumer might experience when trying to find porn without abusive or degrading practices speaks for itself in terms the industry’s commitment to the production of misogynistic content. I have pointed this out many times only to be met with “porn isn’t made for women.” Granted. Rude, but granted. Now, what about the men who are not naturally inclined to revel in the abuse and degradation of a sexual partner? Where is the content made for them? Are they simply doomed to watch the least degrading pornography they can find until they become slowly desensitized to more frequent and more extreme levels of brutality?

be *shown* any appreciation for it. The ideal woman, according to pornographic depictions, should revolve her entire existence around being sexually attractive and pleasing men... and then be punished whether verbally, physically, or both when she fulfills the duties imposed upon her.

Consensual Sex or Rape?

The Assumption of Consent

In pornography, it seems all aspects of sex are explicitly shown. Unfortunately, the one key aspect that is not explicitly shown is among the most important: consent. On the surface, what is most immediately noticeable is the fact that pornography paints an image of flirtation or wearing revealing clothing as equating to a kind of consent to be groped; this alone is problematic... but this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. “Porn logic” – which is a glaring oxymoron if ever there was one – also sends the message that when a woman consents to one specific sexual act, anything and everything else the man (or men) may want from her is on the table⁴.

In addition, with regard to the rare occasions when consent *is* addressed, a coercive approach is taken, sending the message that a coerced “yes” counts as consent – because in the pornographic world, whatever is done to the woman is something she will at least *appear* to enjoy eventually. Furthermore, physical abuse in pornography is usually⁵ blended in with the sexual acts themselves rather than being shown as the starting point; this not only furthers the brutality myth but also masks the abuse as a kind of “kink” rather than a domination tactic.

⁴ To clarify... in pornography, this extends far beyond sex on an actual table. They are getting decidedly more creative at this point.

⁵ The word “usually” is important here. Though not as commonly found, there absolutely are more shamelessly violent videos reminiscent of physically forced rape from such sites as HardcoreGangbang.com

And traveling deeper still into the weirdly disturbing cyber-cornucopia of fake female orgasms, one can even find entire genres dedicated to such rape-y specifics as initiating sex with a woman who is asleep – and who then, of course, wakes up shocked yet delighted – as well as websites with names like “PunishTube” or “18 and Abused.” The consent issues present in these instances *should* speak for themselves – and they would to a better educated public. Combating the rampant, oppressive misinformation perpetuated by pornographic depictions of sex, as well as the apologist argument repeated ad nauseum that “porn is just a fantasy,” Dr. Gail Dines asserts, “We often make the mistake of thinking pornography is just an image of people having sex. What pornography is, is a worldview. It is an ideology. It is a way of understanding relationships” (Media Education Foundation, 2008).

The Crime Drama Connection

In a content analysis of 50 films, Bufkin and Eschholz (2000) explain, “The media have been implicated in the propagation of rape myths in American society. Such myths minimize the damage caused by victimization and remove blame from typical offenders, while rejecting the position that rape is a learned behavior in patriarchal societies where male domination and female submission are culturally taught, materially demonstrated, and socially rewarded (Brownmiller, 1975; Scully, 1990). These myths perpetuate the viewpoint that rape is just another form of sex, not a crime of violence. Broadly defined, rape myths include the following: (a) a psychologically or biologically dysfunctional man who rapes because he cannot resist his strong impulses (Groth, 1979; Karpman, 1951, Littner, 1973); (b) a victim who brings the rape on herself; (c) a victim

who lies about the rape; (d) a victim who really wanted to be raped⁶; and (e) a victim who was not hurt by the attack (Amir, 1971; Burt & Albin, 1981; Estrich, 1987; Schur, 1984; Williams, 1981). Collectively, these myths suggest two rape scenarios: A crazed offender attacks an innocent victim who fails to protect herself, or there was no rape and the alleged victim is a 'whore' who gets what she deserves (Benedict, 1992; Griffin, 1971; Madriz, 1997; Meyers, 1997). These projections of rape prime the viewing public to confuse all but the most brutal rapes with consensual sex..."

As a result, "[v]ictims of a typical rape may be less likely to report the rape to the authorities because they do not see their reflection in the media image of the ideal victim or because their attackers appear rather normal in comparison to television/movie perpetrators. Likewise, men may minimize the criminal nature of their actions because media constructed rape does not match their own patterns of behavior" (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000). This is especially important to consider when looking at the effects of these media depictions *in conjunction* with pornographic depictions of sex. Do the behavioral patterns of these men more closely resemble the aggression and brutality depicted in pornography? In how many instances had consent been merely assumed? In instances where consent was actually given, did these men assume that their partner was consenting to anything and everything? And was this consent given freely without coercion?

⁶ See also: "Porn logic"

While pornography and crime dramas, at least on the surface, *appear* to be on opposite ends of the spectrum regarding attitudes toward consent, the combined message is actually quite clear: in order for rape to be considered as such, it must be an extreme case, brutal to the point of being cringeworthy. In their study, Bufkin and Eschholz focused their attention on “how and if media images mirror common rape myths found in society. Several researchers (Estrich, 1987; Varelas & Foley, 1998) have found a relationship between the belief in rape myths and an inability to identify sexual victimization.” Moreover, “Epstein and Langenbaum (1994) found that jurors in rape cases often rely on popular conceptions of rape rather than legal definitions” (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000).

This issue has become somewhat personal to me in recent years; I was raped during my final semester of my undergraduate studies and was ultimately told by the district attorney’s office that my case had been dropped because they did not believe they could convince a jury of twelve that there was not consent. I asked why, and the response I received was (sadly) not at all surprising to me:

“Most people in this country are not as educated on this issue as you or I, and the way things are shown in movies and on TV, people tend to think of rape as a stranger breaking into someone’s house or jumping out of the bushes with a gun. Unfortunately, what happened to you is a lot more common *and* harder to prosecute, because people view it as a ‘he said, she said’ issue instead of a violent crime. Of course, it *is* a violent crime... but with the legal system set up the way it is, the verdict hinges on public opinion, not on how rape is legally classified.”

Translation: the way entertainment media depict rape holds more power than how the law defines it, *even in a court of law.*

The Quagmire of Consent

Overview

For the purposes of the following study, it is important to understand that the way mainstream television and movies present the issue of rape is not limited to crime dramas; in fact, it is not even limited to actual concrete *depictions* of rape or its aftermath. Discussing or alluding to non-consensual sexual acts in a way that frames sexual abuse as a joke still very much feeds into how we, as a culture, are socialized to view rape.

Brown, Halpern, and L'Engle's 2005 study analyzing media effects on the sexual socialization of teenage girls found that not only do teens draw certain expectations from sexually oriented media messages – they view the messages as affirming to their sexuality. These messages are viewed as permissive in a sense, as “approving of teens having sexual intercourse.” If this is the case for sexually oriented messages as a sweeping category, then it seems only logical that jokes rooted in rape apologism would be viewed as exactly that – as forgiving of, and even permissive of, rape. Although the Brown, Halpern, and L'Engle study did not address consent as a topic, if we are defining “sexually oriented messages” according to prevailing societal attitudes about consensual sex versus rape, then the following seriously needs to be considered: *Per rape culture itself, all but the most obvious, clear-cut, brutal rapes qualify as valid forms of sex; ergo, rape jokes fall under the umbrella of sexually oriented messages.* Rape jokes, then, are likely to be viewed as permissive of rape.

The following study examines the perpetuation of rape culture through rape jokes in a comparative content analysis of *Family Guy* and *South Park*. Twenty episodes of each show were selected at random and then analyzed using a “Rape Culture Index” to evaluate how problematic each episode was in terms of normalizing or encouraging sexual abuse.

Purpose

Shows in this genre are often rife with jokes that perpetuate this societal ill, presumably because bawdy humor is frequently sexual in nature, and in a society that has difficulty distinguishing between healthy sexuality and rape, it would seem logical that rape culture and bawdy humor would go hand-in-hand. By no means, however, should this be taken to mean that rape culture normalization is necessary for the existence of sexual humor – or even for rape-related humor. Rather, it may simply mean that the degree to which a show normalizes rape culture has less to do with the genre and more to do with writers’ and creators’ views on sex and whether *they* are able to distinguish between healthy sexuality and rape culture – as well as between simply discussing rape as opposed to normalizing it.

To examine this possibility, this study compares *Family Guy* and *South Park* (two long-running adult animated sitcoms known equally well for sexual humor and “gross-out” humor) in terms of rape culture normalization to determine if there is a significant difference. In addition to the comparative content analysis evaluating this issue

quantitatively, this study also seeks to qualitatively examine the potential for rape-related humor to exist without contributing to rape culture itself.

Defining “Rape Culture”

As there is no standardized definition for “rape culture,” for the purposes of this study, it was defined as: a society or environment that encourages, dismisses, or otherwise enables sexual abuse due to prevailing societal beliefs about gender and sexuality. Examples of this include but are not limited to:

- The idea that only men can be rapists and/or that rape must involve physical force in order for it to “qualify” as sexual assault;
- The fetishization of female virginity and/or neoteny as the standard of beauty for women, as these ideals encourage the sexualization of underage girls;
- The sexualization of girls who *actually are* underage or appear as such,⁷ including any sort of predatory “Is she 18 yet?”⁸ logic;
- The idea that sex is inherently brutal;
- Victim-blaming;
- Coercion or “convincing” someone to have sex;

⁷ Jessica Valenti explored this issue at length in *The Purity Myth*. Additionally, “Gail Dines argues that Pseudo Child Pornography, in which girls over the age of 18 are represented as children, normalises and eroticises child abuse. Dines believes that this form of sexualisation weakens the norms that define children as off-limits to sexual use by men. Catharine A. MacKinnon writes about living in a world made by pornographers, and explores the many ways in which pornography has colonised our world, such that ‘[t]he cultural politics of pornography become normalised to the point of invisibility’” (Tankard Reist & Bray, 2011). The overwhelmingly common “schoolgirl” fetish comes to mind as an example.

⁸ “Aggravated” and “statutory” are not the only types of rape in existence; so, kindly stop lying in wait with the same predatory tactics as a stingray in anticipation of the next barely-legal shrimp to wander by.

- The idea that women “owe” men sexual gratification;
- The assumption that men always want to have sex (with women) and/or the idea that there is something wrong with them if they would prefer not to;
- Minimizing catcalling and/or sexual harassment by portraying it as “no big deal” or even as something complimentary;
- Watching and/or taking pictures or video of someone without their consent when they have a reasonable expectation of privacy;
- Sexual blackmail or revenge porn;
- Giving someone drugs and/or alcohol with the goal of maximizing their sexual pliability;
- Intentionally rendering someone unconscious in order to have sex with them and/or having sex with an already unconscious person;
- Sex obtained through trickery or deceit and/or the idea that women need to be (and therefore *should* be) conned or manipulated into having sex;
- The idea that anal rape of grown men is funny because it disempowers and “feminizes”⁹ them (presumably because a “real man” would never “let” that happen).

⁹ The idea that disempowerment and feminization are viewed as one and the same is a problem on its own, but this, unfortunately, is an issue beyond the scope of both this particular study and this thesis as a whole.

Sampling

To ensure random sampling, data collection for this study involved the utilization of a random number generator (Random.org). This was employed to select 20 random episodes of *Family Guy* and 20 random episodes of *South Park*. As each episode was viewed, record was kept of the number of instances per episode that rape culture was perpetuated¹⁰. In the dataset, this was referred to as the Rape Culture Index (or RCI).

Table 1

Content analysis results

Family Guy			South Park		
Episode	Title	RCI	Episode	Title	RCI
136	Big Man on Hippocampus	7	36	Tweek vs. Craig	0
5	A Hero Sits Next Door	2	42	Chinpokomon	0
295	The D in Apartment 23	0	259	Where My Country Gone?	2

¹⁰ It is worth noting that episode 136 of *Family Guy* did involve a bit of a judgement call in terms of RCI as this episode includes an instance where Chris, an underage boy, runs outside naked, and a known pedophile in the community is audibly thrilled about it. While pedophilia is obviously a problem in our society, this was deemed irrelevant to this particular study for one key reason: while child molestation is indeed rape, our culture overall neither directly nor indirectly encourages this kind of predation if two males are involved. Therefore, this instance is inconsistent with this study's working definition of rape culture as it relates to "prevailing societal beliefs about gender and sexuality." It is also important to note that even in the show itself, the pedophile in question is never encouraged by surrounding characters to act in a predatory manner.

114	Baby Not on Board	1	120	Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes	0
92	Airport '07	4	270	The Damned	0
319	Hefty Shades of Grey	1	152	Go God Go XII	0
175	Meg and Quagmire	11	147	Make Love, Not Warcraft	0
283	The Dating Game	2	216	You're Getting Old	0
60	Model Misbehavior	3	99	Toilet Paper	0
278	How the Griffin Stole Christmas	1	127	Die Hippie, Die	0
311	Dead Dog Walking	2	279	Put It Down	0
219	Peter Problems	7	87	Red Hot Catholic Love	0
149	Excellence in Broadcasting	0	15	Cartman's Mom Is Still a Dirty Slut	0
87	Chick Cancer	1	255	Cock Magic	0
104	Padre de Familia	2	297	Bike Parade	0
291	Foxx in the Men House	0	119	Douche and Turd	0
132	Quagmire's Baby	1	33	Spontaneous Combustion	0
246	Once Bitten	0	103	Red Man's Greed	0
97	It Takes a Village Idiot, and I Married One	2	198	Medicinal Fried Chicken	0
194	Lois Comes Out of Her Shell	2	243	Ginger Cow	0

Procedures & Analysis

An independent samples t-test assuming unequal variances was conducted using SPSS. The independent, nominal variable was the show (*Family Guy* or *South Park*); *Family Guy* was categorically coded as 0, and *South Park* was coded as 1. The dependent variable was the Rape Culture Index; no categorical coding was necessary here as the dependent variable was a scale variable.

The t-test showed a significant difference between *Family Guy* and *South Park* in terms of rape culture normalization ($t = 3.659$, $df = 19.944$, $p < .05$). *Family Guy* averaged an RCI of 2.45 instances per episode ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 2.837$) while *South Park* averaged an RCI of 0.10 instances per episode ($M = 0.10$, $SD = 0.447$).

Table 2

Rape Culture Index, by Show

Family Guy			South Park			$M_1 - M_2$	$t(38)$	p
n	M_1	SD	n	M_2	SD			
20	2.5	2.8	20	0.1	0.4	2.4	3.66	0.002

Notable Family Guy Episodes

Arguably, one of the most interesting findings was the fact that, due to the specific element of rape culture they were normalizing, some Family Guy episodes with an RCI of only 1 or 2 (which would be considered only marginally problematic in a quantitative sense) were among the most problematic episodes *qualitatively*. “Baby Not on Board,” for instance, had of an RCI of 1, but the level of victim-blaming present in the joke was horrific. The cutaway gag in question features a woman being tackled and raped on a beach as she cries and screams for help. Aquaman then appears and (after several unsuccessful attempts to chase the rapist off) pointedly says to the woman, “Well, maybe you shouldn’t have led him on.” Similarly, in “It Takes a Village Idiot, and I Married One,” only 2 instances were recorded, but the element of rape culture being normalized was the sexual assault of unconscious persons.

Other notable episodes include “Meg and Quagmire” and “Peter Problems,” which contained 11 instances and 7 instances, respectively. In the former episode, Glenn Quagmire, a well-known sexual predator in the neighborhood, begins preying upon his close friend Peter’s daughter the day she turns 18¹¹. Peter is understandably upset; however, it is made very clear that he only takes issue with the situation because it involves his daughter specifically. At first, Peter finds his friend’s antics humorous, saying: “Look at Quagmire hitting on that skank. You *know* he’s gonna close the deal!”

¹¹ His attempts to get the girl into bed are collectively considered 1 instance of rape culture normalization unless it includes an additional element of abuse such as overt pressure or coercion or a *specific* lie. Instances that merely include time spent with the girl in order to trick her into believing he cares for her are scored collectively as 1 instance.

The family dog then points out that the “skank” in question is his daughter, and the entire mood of the scene shifts accordingly.

Further adding to the culturally toxic nature of this episode, the girl’s mother seems for the majority of the episode to be the voice of reason... until the girl leaves for the weekend to go to the older man’s cabin. In response to this, the mother says: “Everyone knows if you go away with a guy for the weekend and don’t have sex with him, you’re a huge bitch!” While episode 219 (“Peter Problems”) is not as *overtly* problematic as the former, it does still contribute to a very toxic culture in which men are expected to want sex at all times – to the point where they are viewed as somehow defective as men overall if they are either not in the mood or if they are unable to maintain an erection.

Notable South Park Episodes

A total of 2 instances of rape culture normalization were recorded for episode 259 of *South Park*, although it should be noted that this episode could be argued as containing 3 instances as the children of South Park Elementary encourage one of the young boys to date (and possibly engage in sexual relations with) a Canadian transfer student, referring to the situation as a “Hot Cosby.” It is contextually apparent, however, that the children do not understand the Cosby reference as relating to rape. None of the students are suggesting that the boy rape the girl. In fact, the situation arises out of a desire to unite the Canadian transfer students and the Colorado-born students after a teacher at the school makes several comments about a widespread societal need to “fuck immigrants to

death,” comments which were collectively considered 1 instance of rape culture normalization for this study as this does absolutely further the perceived link between sex and brutality.

Interestingly, these comments were supported by several adults in the community but not by the children, all of whom (save for Eric Cartman whose views are frequently dismissed throughout the series as intolerant and sociopathic) were understandably horrified by the suggestion. The other instance of rape culture normalization occurs at the end of the episode when the elementary school teacher in question illegally enters Canada and rapes the Canadian prime minister (who bears an unmistakable resemblance to Donald Trump) to death. At this point, South Park’s Canadian immigrants appear delighted and return to Canada.

Other notable *South Park* episodes in this sample include episode 36 (“Tweek vs. Craig”), episode 87 (“Red Hot Catholic Love”), and episode 270 (“The Damned”). “Tweek vs. Craig” contained some problematic elements relating to toxic masculinity; however, as none of these instances were of a sexual nature, they were deemed irrelevant to the study. “Red Hot Catholic Love” was a particularly interesting episode for this study as the storyline revolves around child molestation allegations in the Catholic Church. The entire town is appropriately disgusted by the thought of religious officials molesting children, and the local priest is no exception. Throughout the episode, the only characters who approve of sexual abuse are guilty priests, and this is treated by more reasonable characters as deplorable. Another episode full of potential to be problematic,

“The Damned” was refreshingly tame in terms of rape culture normalization. The story is centered around an Internet troll who has been sexually harassing women; this eventually results in a woman’s suicide. Save for the Internet troll himself, none of the characters act as though the cyberbullying instances were funny... and as soon as the news of the woman’s suicide breaks, the character responsible is immediately filled with regret, horror, and shame.

Discussion

This study sheds light not only on content differences between *Family Guy* and *South Park* but also on possible ways to incorporate sexual abuse-related pop culture references into a comedic storyline without contributing to the toxic culture itself. With the exception of episode 259, *South Park* appears to do a good job navigating these rocky waters without sacrificing humor. Comedy can be a tool for exposing toxic culture, or it can be a tool for perpetuating it. Importantly, the way surrounding characters *respond* to a sexually abusive instance can actually be the determining factor with regard to whether or not the content being viewed is contributing to rape culture.

The fact that a character like Glenn Quagmire (*Family Guy*) seems to never be punished, legally or socially, for his predatory sexual escapades is a problem. This is not to say that predatory characters should be banned from TV, but they should not be portrayed in a light that demonstrates the abuse as being linked to any kind of social reward or encouragement from the community that surrounds them. *South Park*, in contrast, seems to take a different approach to its portrayal of sexual abuse, at least as a

general rule. Episode 87 of *South Park*, for instance, includes literal rape jokes, jokes surrounding rape as a topic – but they are not *problematic* rape jokes. And this is not simply due to the fact that homosexual child molestation does not fit neatly into a definition for rape culture that specifies “prevailing societal beliefs about gender and sexuality.” It is due to the fact that the jokes portray the rapists as being social undesirables – as they should be.

Certainly, this can be a bit trickier of a situation in instances like, say, stand-up comedy. With no surrounding characters to show either encouragement or disdain, a stand-up comedian who is consciously trying not to normalize rape culture is presented with the challenge of ensuring that it is clear which party is being ridiculed. If we are to make light of an act against another human being that is as abominable as rape, we should be laughing *at* the rapist, not *with* the rapist. And certainly, we should never be laughing *at* the victim. The script can be flipped here. Comedians and writers who make victim-blaming rape jokes are not only contributing to rape culture, they are also taking the lazy route to “comedy” and passing up an ideal opportunity to make fun of a truly problematic group of people who actually *deserve* to be called out for their abhorrent practices.

There is a comedic *goldmine* to be found in satirically picking apart the psychological processes and behavioral abnormalities of some weirdo who finds joy in assaulting people – especially in stand-up comedy, which affords the opportunity to exaggerate body language and vocal tone to imply a clear sense of *derision* toward the

person being mimicked. By satirizing a rapist's bizarre depravities, not only do we find an outlet for rape-related dark humor, but a joke framed in that light is a call for sexually abusive people to feel uncomfortable, to feel a little ashamed of their tendencies rather than empowered by them. No, comedy is never going to cause a rapist to suddenly grow a conscience, but at the very least, it can serve to disrupt whatever kind of ego boost or power trip they typically derive from their actions.

Dr. Marie Bruvik Heinskou, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Copenhagen, notes, "Shame is a hugely influential force in people's memories and feelings – more influential than you would think." She explains that "the shame associated with sexual assault has multiple layers," the first and most obvious of which being that "it's really shameful to be a sex offender" (Bachlakova, 2016). *Good*. Rapists *should* be ashamed to be rapists, and expanding this particular category of rape jokes could even help to illuminate the fact that *all* forms of rape are, in fact, still rape – that there are different types of rape, that a person does not necessarily need to be jumping out of dark alleyways, brandishing a butcher knife at a random woman walking alone at night, in order to qualify as a rapist.

In an overwhelming number of cases, rapists do not even consider themselves to be rapists (Bachlakova, 2016). Many of the recent rape cases that received heavy media coverage (the Stanford swimmer case, the gang rape at Vanderbilt, etc.) surrounded the assault of unconscious young women, but the men who committed these crimes seemed to not even understand why their actions were so deplorable. They seemed not to

consider their atrocities to be a form of rape, dismissing their actions as “party culture” gone wrong. Having sex with someone who is unconscious absolutely *is* a form of rape, but the rapists’ assumptions seemed to be that they were simply “having fun,” that they were just normal, 20-something-year-old males who had had a bit too much to drink. *Really?* This is not a “normal” side effect of alcohol consumption, and yet, defendants in cases like these would have us believe that this is the key factor involved in the sudden, presumably otherwise inexplicable, death of one’s conscience. Apparently, society en masse is supposed to simply agree that *alcohol* is the real problem – lest we forget the barrage of TV ads that so rudely interrupt our cable-viewing experience with “*Bacardi: Drink responsibly and try not to rape anyone.*”

Not a single well-adjusted human being on Earth, no matter how drunk, strolls casually through a party, spots a woman dangling corpse-like off the sofa with vomit-drenched hair and a false eyelash stuck to her cheek, and thinks, “Oh, good! *She’s* unconscious and attractive! Don’t you hate it when you’re having sex with a woman and she’s awake and interested?”¹² Obviously, my goal in opening this discussion is not to imply that *all* jokes surrounding the issue of rape are bad. They can actually be quite helpful in shifting a culture if the right party is made out to be the butt of the joke.

Comedy can be a tool for social revolution as well as a tool for healing, and I do maintain that just about *any* topic can be funny when presented in the right light. Shortly

¹² At this point, I would be remiss if I failed to point out that rape is typically far more about power than it is about sex, but within the context of satire, this is irrelevant.

after my own assault, for instance, I had to go through the standard rape kit at the E.R. after filing a report with the police. The nurse spoke to me gently and explained, “This is basically going to be the longest pelvic exam of your life.” Unfazed by the thought of a mere pelvic exam after everything else I had just endured, I simply looked out over my stirrup-strapped feet at the array of Q-tips and glass slides on her wax-paper-lined examination lunch tray and said, “That’s fine. I’ll probably still have more fun with you than I did with him.”

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS

As a collective whole, what are the sociocultural implications of how sex and rape are depicted in 1) pornography, 2) crime dramas, and 3) the more problematic varieties of rape-related humor in mainstream entertainment? These issues have been explored at length, one by one, throughout this paper using an integrated theoretical framework, considering the overlapping themes analyzed through framing as the potential point of connection between all three media genres which, then, collectively manifest as a kind of cultivation effect with regard to how people tend to differentiate between sex and rape. These messages that have been cultivated then become a reference point in the formation of the sexual self. Still, more studies are needed with regard to cultivation and comedy, as well as with regard to the brutality presented as integral to sex in pornographic depictions.

As I had limited space in this thesis to address the brutality in pornography alongside the effects of representations of rape in two other mainstream genres, the former is an issue I plan to explore in greater depth in the future. Examining common themes across different types of group sex scenes is telling, and it serves as an excellent starting point for examining scenes that are less *overtly* problematic. Once it is known how specific patterns manifest between men and women in group sex scenes at both extreme ends of the MMF/FFM spectrum, it becomes far easier to identify more watered-down instances of the same themes in more “vanilla” scenes. In general, more current

analyses should be done on the effects of pornography; one of the most logically sound articles I could find on the topic was written in 1982.

I would further assert, as did Wright, Tokunaga, and Kraus, that researchers examining the effects of pornography on the prevalence of rape should take care to avoid assuming that convicted sex offenders are an ideal population to study with regard to these effects. I might suggest civilians as a research sample, examining their pornography-viewing habits in terms of frequency and genre – and rather than involving questions that use the word “rape,” I would instead suggest asking the research subjects whether they would engage in (or have engaged in) certain behaviors that *qualify* as rape. The ignorance of the public with regard to what constitutes rape can actually be quite beneficial for studying this particular area. Similar studies could also be done with regard to the effects of comedy and cultivation.

Thankfully, there are wonderful studies that have been conducted for use as reference with regard to studying rape myths in crime shows and Hollywood crime thrillers. This, of course, is not to imply that no further research is needed; this will be an area that requires ongoing research as movie trends continue to evolve and rape continues to remain a prevalent issue. As Bufkin and Eschholz (2000) noted, there is a frighteningly strong link between a belief in rape myths and an inability to identify instances of sexual assault. I have personally been on the unfortunate end of this issue. Still, I maintain that in order to understand how rape myths are perpetuated, one must look further than obvious media depictions of rape.

It is equally important to examine media depictions of sex that are assumed to be consensual as well as instances where sexual abuse is brushed off as a “joke.” Comedy is far more powerful than most people realize. It can be a tool for social revolution. It can be a tool for healing. Or it can be a tool to maintain the same toxic status quo. Additionally, the disturbing fact that consent is merely assumed in pornographic depictions of sex cannot be dismissed as irrelevant when examining rape myths, because one cannot fully understand rape without also understanding consent. This issue, of course, is further confused by the sexual brutality that has become so commonplace, even expected, in pornography. If sex is framed in such a way that there is always a conqueror and a conquest, an aggressor and a victim, one party emerging victorious from the exchange while the other party is left degraded, all done in the absence of explicitly clear consent, how can we possibly expect people to be able to distinguish between mutually beneficial sexual exchanges and sexual abuse?

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