

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS IN CANADIAN MAINSTREAM
MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

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In this Major Research Paper, representation of lesbian relationships was examined in Canadian newspaper articles using a critical discourse analysis. Lesbian representation in mass media has mostly conformed to heteronormative norms. This research aimed to illuminate themes present in newspaper articles from 2018 and 2019 about lesbians. Three discourses were present in these articles. They included a focus on sexual assault and sexual behaviour, the word lesbian paired with words that were sexualized or inappropriate, and the stories of coming out and facing isolation. Identifying and examining these discourses will show social workers what assumptions and prejudices lesbians may face in their lives and in representations they see. Understanding these discourses will aid in the knowledge needed to work with lesbians with intersecting identities.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

How individuals are represented in the media can affect how they view themselves (Boboltz & Yam, 2017). Representation also shows that people's identities are valid and how they might live their lives. As a lesbian woman, it has been important for me to see representation of lesbian individuals in the media. This has helped me to form my identity and to imagine and understand how similar individuals might be living their lives. However, I have found that in the representation available for lesbians, and indeed queer people in general, has been limited. In my personal view, this limited representation has made it difficult for me to understand how other queer individuals live their lives. As well, negative stereotypes in the media about lesbians, especially as I was growing up, contributed to a delay in my acceptance of my identity. Although representation in movies and television shows has increased in recent years, there still seems to be limits to who is represented from the queer community. For example, gay cis men are much more prevalent in the media while trans individuals or racialized queer people are much less represented (Schwartz, 2011). In this research, I examine how lesbian relationships are in media in Canadian newspapers. A focus on print news media will grow the understanding of how lesbians are viewed in mainstream media sources. In particular I explore what representation is available of lesbian relationships in Canadian mainstream print news media.

There is an increase in lesbian representation in the news, however lesbians are still not represented in a diverse way (Nolke, 2018). Lesbians are often represented as either conforming to heteronormative ideals, or are sensationalized for the male gaze (McNicholas-Smith & Tyler, 2017; Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009; and Scanlon & Lewis, 2017). This creates a double bind

whereby the representation available to lesbians in media is either heteronormative or exoticized. This narrow range of representation in media contributes to how people, in this case lesbians, construct identities as well as how media determines how lesbians are viewed in the general public (Fairclough, 1992).

I use critical discourse analysis to examine what has been printed about lesbian relationships. Discourse creates power structures that show what representations and identities are acceptable in the social sphere. Discourse analysis aids the researcher to show how power has been constructed both historically and in the current context (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). By using a discourse analysis framework, I can examine how language, images, and the stories told in news articles about lesbians has shaped the social possibilities for lesbian lives and how lesbians are viewed in society. Discourse analysis is a component of anti-oppressive practice. Anti-oppressive social work includes challenging existing knowledge and disrupting existing prejudices and oppressions (Massaquoi, 2011). Analyzing the discourse available on lesbians, who are an historically marginalized group, will illuminate how harmful discourses can be challenged. Throughout this paper, I will use the term LGBTQ2S+ to refer to the larger queer community since that is the terminology most of the articles I am reviewing use. The + indicates that it is inclusive of other identities. Including the 2S for 2-Spirit in the acronym is important for me because as a colonial settler on stolen land it is important to acknowledge the identities of Indigenous people. For the purpose of this MRP the term lesbian will include any cis or trans women who engage in relationships or sexual activity with other women or non-binary individuals, or are identified as lesbians in the newspaper articles.

In this MRP I will first review available literature on lesbian representation in the media. This includes television and movies. This will show what the dominant discourses are in the

academic literature around representation for lesbians and other LGBTQ2S+ people. I will then base my MRP in the theoretical framework of social constructionism and queer theory. Social constructionism shows that reality is constructed through language and discourse (Witkin, 2017). Queer theory adds to this by highlighting the fluid nature of reality and how it changes over time. It also focuses on the experiences of queer individuals and how their identities are constructed (Butler, 1990). This theoretical framework will allow me to analyze the newspaper articles using critical discourse analysis. In the findings section, I then go through and make observations about what discourses exist in the literature. I identified three discourses, which are a focus on sexual behaviour and assault, a pairing of the word lesbian with “scandalous” or sexualized words, and a discourse around coming out and forming identity. These three discourses are then analyzed to show how they may influence lesbian lives and the lives of the average reader of newspaper articles. Analyzing the discourses present in these articles shows how mainstream society may view lesbians and what ways they are expected to behave. This is especially important in social work while working with marginalized groups.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

News media is one way that language and discourse are disseminated through our society. For lesbians, a lack of representation may influence how they are able to view themselves and create identity for themselves. More recently there has been more analysis of the media representation available for LGBTQ2S+ individuals, for instance the recent Netflix film *Disclosure* that discusses transgender media representation (Feder, 2020). However, there is still a lack of representation that focuses specifically on lesbians, especially in the academic literature. Print news media also lacks representation of lesbians. Because of the lack of academic literature that focuses on lesbian representation in print news media, in this chapter I will draw from media analysis of LGBTQ2S+ as a whole, as well as analyses of visual media to obtain a sense of how lesbians are being portrayed and what gaps are present in the representation available.

Language and discourse produce possibilities for how people engage with their sexuality (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). This engagement with someone's sexuality can come from a claiming of identity as well as certain behaviours. Some of the aspects of identity that individuals think of as integral to their experience are actually performative actions. Performativity is a concept introduced by Butler (1988). She proposes performativity in relation to gender. Gender is not a stable identity but rather through a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, pg. 519). For instance, gestures and movements can construct gender identities. Through these actions, gender becomes constructed and both the audience and the actors come to believe in the performance. These performances construct gender norms over time, as well as construct identity. The repetitive acts create the identity for the individual and therefore the actors become to believe in this illusion of the gendered self (Butler, 1988). Performativity also applies to

actions that relate to heterosexuality. Heterosexuality often includes actions and language that characterize it as being monogamous and/ or tied to reproduction. Some troubling discourses characterize homosexuality as promiscuous and/or non-procreative (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). The language used in popular media, such as print media, can reinforce these discourses and dominant ideas about sexuality. By unpacking the discourses found in print media, we can understand and unpack dominant ideas about sexuality and gender. By looking at print media we can identify ways that popular discourse does not remain open to differences within the lesbian population. This allows us to more clearly describe sexual and gender categories and come to an understanding of what knowledge of sexuality exists. This shows how discourse about lesbian experiences fits into practice and theory.

Print news has the ability to influence people's popular beliefs. This happens by popular opinions influencing what is written in the news as well as what is written in the news affecting what popular opinion. Therefore, the way print news influences popular beliefs is a cyclical process (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Newspaper content is influenced by larger social structures because the journalists that write this content do not exist in a vacuum and themselves are influenced by social discourse (Sellers, Desmarais, & Tirotti, 2014). Media discourse therefore would affect how lesbian relationships are perceived by the general public. This effect of how the news influences attitudes is part of *media framing*. *Media framing* occurs when a news story is presented in a way to create particular meanings and create specific attitudes about an issue by selecting certain content (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Because news reflects and informs public attitudes towards a particular topic, understanding how lesbians are represented in the news is an illustration of what types of discourses exist about lesbians. This awareness of discourses can also help one reveal the dominant discourse that illuminates what kinds of

assumptions exist about this minority group as well as what type of counter-narratives might need to be explored. This is important for social work because being aware of dominant discourses can identify where anti-oppressive work needs to take place.

There is a lack of literature exploring how print news in particular represents lesbian relationships. Therefore, in this literature review, I review articles focusing on representations of lesbians in other types of media. At the same time, the existing literature that looks at representations of lesbians in the media often looks at LGBTQ2S+ individuals as a whole community rather than focusing lesbians in particular. This grouping of LGBTQ2S+ individuals together in the media means that there is less data on how each individual group is represented. Although in recent years representation of LGBTQ2S+ individuals have increased, information on how lesbians are represented and discussed in mainstream media is still lacking. This is compounded by the fact that men and women are also represented at different rates in the media with men being represented much more often than women (Armstrong, 2004). This is true also for gay men and lesbian women with gay men represented much more frequently than lesbian women (Schwartz, 2010). This difference is important because many people learn about LGBTQ2S+ individuals from the media. If only one group or type of LGBTQ2S+ person is represented, that would be the only group that the audience would learn about. In addition to making the diverse groups of LGBTQ2S+ individuals invisible, by only representing gay men it also makes women underrepresented and erases their unique experiences (Gross, 2001).

Most available literature on lesbian media representation investigates how lesbians have been portrayed in visual media such as television shows, movies, and visual advertising (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015; Nolke, 2018; Wargo, 2017). There is a focus on identity formation, representations of lesbians in the media, and how lesbians in the media are viewed by

other people (Nolke, 2018; Fox & Ralston, 2016). As well, much of this literature lumps together LGBTQ2S+ individuals as a whole rather than focusing on lesbians specifically.

LGBTQ2S+ individuals seek out representation in different forms of media. At the same time research show there is a limited representation of LGBTQ2S+ experiences in media. When adequate representation is not available, LGBTQ2S+ individuals will consume the media that is available. Floegel & Costello (2019) use semi-structured interviews to investigate how queer individuals view entertainment media such as movies and television. Although the participants reported that they made use of available queer media content because it was available not because it represented their experiences well, they continued to search it out because of wanting to access any representative content (Floegel & Costello, 2019). Similarly, Reed (2018) discusses how LGBTQ2S+ parents experience seeing representation of themselves in the media. Using qualitative interviews, the participants reported that, similar to Floegel & Costello (2019) findings, there is limited representation of LGBTQ2S+ people, parents in particular, that lesbians in particular are vilified, and that non-gender conformity was erased. Nolke (2018) explores advertisements of LGBTQ2S+ people. Nolke (2018) conducted a longitudinal analysis of advertisements and found that the majority representation was of white gay men. LGBTQ2S+ individuals who were not white gay men that were represented in advertisements were shown to be in committed monogamous relationships. White gay men were the only LGBTQ2S+ individuals who were not shown in committed relationships (Nolke, 2018). Representation of LGBTQ2S+ individuals that only represent one experience continues to be shown through McNicholas-Smith & Tyler's (2017) research, where they conduct a discourse analysis of the lesbians represented in the television show *Coronation Street* (Granada/ITV, 1960–present). The researchers find that there is erasure of butch identities and that the lesbians represented conform

to heteronormative bridal culture (McNicholas-Smith & Tyler, 2017). Heteronormative bridal culture includes the Western cultural focus of having a white wedding. The priority of spending money on a wedding, and conforming to heterosexual gender roles make up bridal culture. This includes conforming to wearing a white gown and Western beauty ideals that include thinness and whiteness (Ingraham, 1999). These articles show the importance of representation in the media by the fact that LGBTQ2S+ individuals still seek out representation of themselves even though that representation is inadequate.

Heteronormativity is a concept that is common throughout these articles.

Heteronormativity is when heterosexuality becomes the societal norm, and it becomes the natural or ideal way to engage with relationships (Peterson, 2013). LGBTQ2S+ individuals who engage in a traditional nuclear partnership or family structure are both affirming the value of heteronormative values such as marriage, as well as challenging these values by engaging with them in a way that they have not traditionally been shown in public culture. Heteronormative family structures are upheld by policy and media representation in Western culture (Peterson, 2013).

As well as representing a limited view of the diversity of the LGBTQ2S+ experience in analysis of the media, studies in this area also explore how media contributes to identity formation. Wargo (2017) conducted textual and visual analysis to show how three youths compose images that construct identities on Instagram and Tumblr, and found that these mediums were very good for youth being able to form their own narratives. Similarly, Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia (2015) conducted qualitative interviews of youth to show how media influenced LGBTQ2S+ youth's sense of resilience. They found that media helped youth cope through escapism, finding online community, and engaging in online activism (Craig,

McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). These two articles show how online media can be helpful for youth in creating their LGBTQ2S+ identities on their own terms and being able to construct their own narrative. Fox & Ralston (2016) examine through qualitative interviews what types of learning experiences LGBTQ2S+ people have on social media, and find that individuals look for information about their identities as well as engaging in experiential learning about their LGBTQ2S+ identity (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

Other articles examined how LGBTQ2S+ experiences were viewed in the media by individuals. Bond (2015) interviewed teens to see what television was made for LGBTQ2S+ teens and how this differed from television that was not geared towards a LGBTQ2S+ audience. They found that depictions of sexuality were less common and less demeaning in television made for a LGBTQ2S+ audience (Bond, 2015). Jackson & Gilbertson (2009), Nolke (2018) and Scanlon & Lewis (2017) were the only articles I found that focused on lesbians. Scanlon & Lewis (2017), investigated women's experiences of viewing lesbians on screen. They found that when it was only women viewing lesbians on screen, they could acknowledge that lesbians on screen were often shown for the male gaze, but that viewing with other women felt like a safer space (Scanlon & Lewis, 2017). The male gaze is where women or lesbians are made to be conventionally attractive or sexualized for a male audience (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). This concept of the male gaze is also explored in Jackson and Gilbertson's (2009) article. They conducted focus groups with high school students to explore how lesbians are constructed in the media. The high school students found that lesbians that were portrayed were often shown as "hot lesbians" for the male gaze and that they were positioned within a heteronormative framework (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009).

The vast majority of the literature I found about lesbian representation literature comes from a communications and media perspective. This might leave out a social justice lens that would perhaps come with looking at media from a social work perspective. As well, the focus on visual media, which seems to be the majority of articles that are in this field, might leave out how LGBTQ2S+ individuals are portrayed in print media, which is what I want to focus on in my MRP. This review of visual media representation would transfer to print media as well. The themes present in this literature review, such as a focus on heteronormativity within the representation and a grouping together of LGBTQ2S+ people also would be present in print media because these themes come from societal discourses, and in turn inform discourses in the media (Foucault, 1972). How these discourses are formed happen in the same fashion with print and visual media, however there may be some aspects of the discourse that are not transferable between print and visual media.

The articles reviewed here focus on LGBTQ2S+ individuals as an entire group. This might lump diverse experiences together, and therefore the analysis in these articles could be erasing less well represented groups, such as female identities as well as transgender individuals. As transgender individuals are underrepresented in the media, so the lack of focus or mentioning them further leads to their underrepresentation in the literature. Similarly, only a few of these articles focus on lesbians (see Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009; Nolke, 2018; and Scanlon & Lewis, 2017). Again, lesbians have individual experiences that are separate from the entire LGBTQ2S+ community. There is a good distribution of focus between youth and adults, with some of the articles focussing on youth experiences and some focussing on adult experiences. However, in these articles it seemed that the participants were not involved in formulating the research questions. There was not a participatory action component to these articles. In this discourse

analysis I am focusing on lesbians in particular which will help address this gap in the literature. By addressing the gap in the literature, this will also address the recent lack of articles in this area. Since some of the articles present in this literature review are from over ten years ago, there have not been many articles written about this topic. My MRP will contribute to this lack of literature. As well, the acceptance of LGBTQ2S+ individuals has changed in the past ten years. For example, Canada has added a nonbinary gender marker to passport documents in just 2019 (Government of Canada, 2019). This shows one of the ways that the diverse experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals are accepted in Canada. Because of the changed acceptance of LGBTQ2S+ individuals, the lived experiences of LGBTQ2S+ individuals may be different than what is represented in the literature as well as in current media. Representation may not have caught up to lived experiences. My MRP will investigate if this gap exists.

Mckenzie-Mohr & Lafrance (2017) discuss how narratives categorize things in our lives. In these articles included here, it is shown that there is one way of portraying lesbians in media, with the vast majority being white, heteronormative and femme. Portraying and finding counter-narratives can offer resistance to this dominant narrative (Mckenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017). I hope to show how both dominant narratives and counter narratives are portrayed in print media, which is missing from the literature. I will explore the question about how white and heteronormative the dominant portrayals of lesbians are in the media. Chilisa (2012) discusses how research is still ignoring marginalized groups, and how the marginalized groups that are portrayed are shown as being a homogenous group, such as what is shown here through grouping all LGBTQ2S+ individuals together. Not only in these articles are the different sexualities and gender identities lumped together, but there is also no discussion on how the race of the individuals portrayed or the individuals viewing the media might influence the representation.

By focusing on lesbians, I will add specificity to the literature and address a gap in the literature by not lumping lesbians in with LGBTQ2S+ individuals. In my MRP, I hope to honour all individuals who might be portrayed in the media and make sure not to erase part of their intersecting identities.

Theoretical Framework

Many of the available articles in the above literature review use a positivist theoretical framework. A limitation of a positivist theoretical framework is that it assumes there is an absolute truth and that learning these truths can help individuals control events (Neuman, 2006). However, since media can shape public opinions into its version of the truth, when discussing news media and representation both the individual's experiences of reading the media as well as the language used in the print news articles to shape the readers' experience must be considered. This means that there is not a single universal truth when interpreting the discourses in news media.

Language used in news media shapes the perception of truth and is based on what the writer is trying to convey. The language used to describe certain things and certain groups of people can affect how those groups, such as lesbians, are viewed by the dominant group. This in turn can affect how they are treated. The language used creates knowledge. This viewpoint aligns with the theory of social constructionism, where knowledge is seen as contextual and produced in language (Witkin, 2017). Social constructionism is the lens by which I view these articles. Social constructionism is a way of viewing these articles and the truth they create by focussing on the language used and how it creates reality. However, these realities can be fluid and change over time. Knowledge in social constructionism is built by social and cultural phenomenon

(Witkin, 2017). This creates a social reality through everyday practices, such as reading a newspaper and creating knowledge through the language that the writer has chosen. Print media can make meaning about existing knowledge and create new knowledge through the stories told. Storytelling is a cultural and social process that invites engagement with the reader. In this engagement, knowledge is created in a socially constructed way (Witkin, 2017). In social discourse such as in the newspaper articles used in this MRP, truth is not an objective reality to be discovered but rather created between people and between the language used and the reader (Moffatt, 2019).

Social constructionism is congruent with postmodern and post structuralist thought. These theories include the idea that our social and cultural context is created by human interaction. There is no pre-existing truth or social structure, but people create social and interpersonal relationship contexts by individuals interacting with one another. This also means that discourses and common knowledge within a society are culturally specific (Fairclough, 1992; Witkin, 2017). How people perceive the social world dictates how they respond to it. This link between perception and action is important in social constructionism, and reinforces the idea that there is not one universal truth (Houston, 2001).

Discourse also shapes views of reality as well as possibilities of reality. The role of discourse in human experiences is based on the thought of Foucault (1972). Foucault (1972) was interested in examining knowledge and power structures and how they influence individuals and society. In his examination of power, he showed that power is present throughout all levels of society and benefits people who are already in control. Power is also linked to language and discourse. Discourse explains reality and also creates reality. It creates social reality by a strategic link between power, language and knowledge to create possibilities for social reality.

This means that the way knowledge is presented shows people how they are able to understand their own identities and how they are able to express their identities (Moffatt, 2019). This also means that without a discourse it is arguable that a person cannot exist (Moffatt, 2019).

Discourse defines how people are able to define themselves, and by growing the understanding of how identity and self-expression is constrained by language, we can see where the dominant narratives available in discourse are not complete and need to be expanded to encompass the human experience, specifically queer experience (Moffatt, 2019).

Social constructionism, with its focus on how language affects people's experiences and creates reality, has lent legitimacy to theories about language and knowledge construction that are also proposed by critical race theorists and feminists (Strega, 2005). Social constructionism discusses how there are multiple truths and that this is a way to show differences and how knowledge is socially constructed. Some truths are more valued in the current cultural context when they are stated and endorsed by the dominant group. When people are oppressed, such as lesbians and especially racialized lesbians, this truth can be ignored by the dominant group because it is considered less valuable. Showing how different groups of people such as the dominant group are able to state truths with more value can help to examine power structures and the ways that knowledge is created and maintained (Strega, 2005).

Besides using social constructionism to examine discourse, I will also use a queer theory lens. Queer theory fits well with social constructionism as it also looks at how language influences possibilities for identity, constraints on identity, the nature of oppressive relationships and knowledge about queer persons. As well, I will use queer theory to address some of the gaps in social constructionism, including incorporating an analysis of power structures that are used in discourse and how this might contribute to oppression.

Butler (1990), was one of the first theorists of gender theory, and argued that although the existing belief was that categories of sexuality were contingent on binary gender categories, these assumptions should be challenged and sexuality and gender should not be linked to binaries. Butler (1990) explores how sexuality and gender are linked to social categories and rules, and proposed challenging this binary. As well, Butler (1990) examines how these concepts of identity are performative acts. Queer theory also focuses on the concept of heteronormativity and how that influences behaviour. This is the structures and systems that make heterosexuality privileged and the norm in society (Berlant & Warner, 1998).

Until recently, queer theory has been left out of social work (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). Sexuality in social work has often let preconceptions about heteronormativity as well as racial bias within LGBTQ2S+ theory prevail (Mackinnon, 2011). A more nuanced discussion of heteronormativity also needs to be examined in social work, including the concept of homonormativity (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). The concept of homonormativity proposed by Duggan (2003), begins to address this concern within the LGBTQ2S+ community by outlining how behaviours and relationships often do not challenge a heteronormative model. Queer theorists argue, for instance, LGBTQ2S+ politics often do not challenge a neo-liberal viewpoint within government. This produces a view of normative homosexuality that complies with neo-liberal values such as capitalist consumption. This means that certain ways of being homosexual are permitted and certain are not in order to comply with societal norms (Duggan, 2003). For instance, neoliberal norms such as heteronormative values in relationships like monogamy and the concept of the nuclear family are valued in this worldview (Duggan, 2003). These norms can permeate queer relationships. Queer theory helps us break out of normative assumptions (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016).

Examining these values within homonormativity as well as focusing on instances of racial stereotypes within queer community and including a focus on language and power are all components of queer theory in social work. This aligns with social constructionism's focus on how language creates reality and how power structures are built within our society. Using these two theories together will allow me in this MRP to use both social constructionism and queer theory to examine how language and stories create reality in the discourse that surrounds lesbian relationships, as well as using queer theory to focus on heteronormative values in lesbian relationships. Both of these theories will be used to examine the power structures within discourse and how this influences perception of and social possibilities for lesbian relationships.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This study will use critical discourse analysis to explore newspaper articles to show how lesbian relationships are represented in mainstream media. Critical discourse analysis explores how texts can represent social relationships (Fairclough, 1992). This methodology is an analysis that focuses on and intervenes in social relationships. This focus on social relationships means that critical discourse analysis as a methodology includes analysis of how power dynamics in social relationships and social settings can be used against oppressed groups (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). I hope to show how power is exercised through texts and images and how this can construct reality (Foucault, 1972). Exploring how language and images are used in mainstream media illustrates how the media shapes dominant attitudes towards an issue, a concept, a community or a group of people (Fairclough, 1992). Analyzing mainstream media with respect to lesbians will show how both lesbians might construct identity for themselves as well as what discourse exist that define what the general public understands about lesbians.

Fairclough (1992) uses a discourse analysis that uses Foucault's frameworks but departs from it in specific ways. Foucault uses a poststructuralist approach that includes centering the discourse in history and culture, whereas Fairclough mixes some elements of a Foucauldian approach that includes analysis of power relations but then also includes an analysis of language. Critical discourse analysis has a political stance and shows that specific discourses are located within a specific cultural context. This means that the news articles about lesbian relationships are specific to this culture, and that ideas about lesbian relationships have changed over time and within different cultures. The identification of the social problem, which in this case is the representation available for lesbian women, is the first step in this type of discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis is the "analysis of the dialectical relationships between semiosis

(including language) and other elements of social practices” (Wodak & Meyer, pg. 27). For the purposes of this Major Research Paper I will look at the language used to describe lesbians. Currently, LGBTQ2S+ individuals are gaining more visibility in Canadian culture. However, visible representations of them are still limited. As well, lesbian specific representation, as opposed to representation that focuses on gay men is lacking (Schwartz, 2010). As well, heteronormative ideals are still prevalent in representation of lesbians (McNicholas-Smith & Tyler, 2017). Highlighting what these gaps in representation are and what language is used to describe lesbians will lead to a greater understanding of how lesbians are accepted in our culture.

Critical discourse analysis involves looking at both the structure of the discourse analyzed as well as the language used. The first step in this methodology would be to describe the social problem and identify how the texts describe the social relationship, as was done in the literature review. This includes identifying the current cultural context in which the discourse is produced. This then moves into conducting an analysis of the context in which the discourse is created, and then a focus on linguistic features of the discourse. This will be done for each article as well as analyzed between articles to look for similarities and differences (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Because critical discourse analysis often does not have a specific methodology, unlike other types of research, self-reflection in this type of research is very important (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Self-reflection will help me stay aware of my own biases and assumptions when reading and analyzing these articles, and will therefore strengthen the analysis (Moffatt, 2019).

Between February and April 2020, I looked at newspaper articles by searching through the Proquest Canadian Newsstream database for articles published within the years 2018 and 2019 using the search term “lesbian”, and “lesbian relationships”. This database includes all Canadian newspapers, movie reviews, advice columns. Articles about the LGBTQ2S+ as a

whole were not included in these articles. Only articles that discuss lesbian relationships or women in relationships with women are used for this discourse analysis. Because of my focus on lesbians, I used the search term lesbian rather than the more general LGBTQ2S+. This was to keep the focus on lesbians in particular. Seven articles were used for this discourse analysis. These articles were initially scanned in the database to check if they were relevant to the topic area and discussing lesbian relationships.

This data collection will involve a reflexive approach in which all collection of the newspaper articles may not be completed before the data analysis begins. In critical discourse analysis, data collection does not have to be a specific phase in the analysis but can be a reflexive process that continues throughout the research (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Therefore, I will start with analysis of the first articles I have selected and use a reflexive process to go between those articles and possibly go back to find more articles or more relevant articles depending on the information available in the articles and what comes up in the analysis.

As well, since discourse analysis involves interpretation on the part of the researcher, I am not a neutral party in this process. Therefore, the discourse analysis process involves reflexivity on my part as the researcher. My own political stance involves believing that the discourse about lesbian relationships does leave out a diverse viewpoint on representation, and how the discourse about this topic socially constructs reality. This aligns with my theoretical framework of social constructionism and queer theory. Because of my personal stance on this issue, I am also influenced by the discourse available. This means that during this process I have had to stay open to finding results that I may not expect in the articles, and continue to be reflexive and careful in the analysis (Moffatt, 2019). Critical discourse analysis helps to illuminate some discourses that are dominant, and are privileged in use. This means that as a

researcher I have to be careful to self reflect at each part of the research process because of the risk of promoting these inequalities. This is why description of the discourse and interpretation of the discourse are done in two separate steps in order to retain transparency during the analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Reading and re-reading these articles will help me to understand them and include analysis that I may have missed in the first reading. As well, through discussing the articles with my supervisor I am able to engage in a verbal reflective process and check my own biases.

Included in this self-reflection is the possibility of growth or transformation for myself. My own critical reflection on this discourse will illuminate the oppressive structures that are part of the discourse that surrounds lesbians, and will challenge the system. This challenge to the status quo comes from individuals who reflect and question the existing systems (Foucault, 1979). Through this research I hope that the reader, along with me, will reflect on their own positionality and assumptions about what they read about lesbians in the media. Questioning is the first step to challenging the status quo to stop reproducing an oppressive system (Foucault, 1972).

Ethics

This research was not presented to the Ethics Board, as newspaper articles are a publication that are publicly promoted through which there is no expectation of privacy. As well, since discourse analysis focuses on how stories are told and the language used rather than the individuals that the news article is about, this does not involve a privacy risk to the people who the story is about. As these articles are part of the public domain, they are already available.

Critical discourse analysis often uses existing texts that were not produced for the purpose of research, so this MRP follows in that trend of working with existing texts.

Another ethical consideration that I have continued to reflect on throughout this MRP process is the risk to myself and the readers. Reading articles that are so one-sided in their viewpoint on lesbians may bring harm to myself and readers, and increase the negative stereotypes about lesbians. Since I am not an objective researcher but rather involved in the discourse analysis and this MRP process, I will continue to be transparent about my own biases and political positions throughout this research. As well, I am a white settler on this land. I have more privilege than many people who use the word lesbian to describe themselves, such as racialized, Indigenous, or trans lesbians. Because of my own position of privilege, it is important that I conduct research that combats oppression. In this context, this includes research that illuminates how marginalized groups are currently represented in the media, and how voices of these groups could be centered. Examining how diverse stories of lesbians can be better represented in the media will help those who do not currently have a strong voice in mainstream discourse, such as racialized or trans lesbians, be better accepted and represented.

Some limitations of this research include the small sample I am drawing from. Since this discourse analysis only looks at a small number of articles from a specific selection of Canadian newspapers, as well as within a short period in time of the last two years. Looking at articles only over the past two years means that I am unable to conduct a more historical analysis of the change in the discourse. However, only looking at more recent articles keeps this within the scope of the MRP. It will also clearly show the state of the current discourse about lesbian relationships. The analysis of visual television shows, advertisements, and social media present in the literature review also all come from a North American and British perspective, which

leaves out how LGBTQ2S+ individuals might be portrayed in other parts of the world, particularly the Global South.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The articles found using the search terms “lesbian” and “relationship” for the years 2018 and 2019 included seven articles. I searched Canadian Newsstream, the Proquest academic database for newspaper articles in Canada. These articles were from Postmedia, which included the Toronto Sun, the Calgary Sun, the Winnipeg Sun, and the Toronto Star (2 articles).

Postmedia is generally a more conservative newspaper group, whereas Toronto Star writes in a more liberal viewpoint. During the search for these articles, I included articles that mentioned lesbian relationships. I utilized the search terms “lesbian” and “relationship” to narrow down the search to what I was looking for. However, these terms also pulled articles that discussed LGBTQ2S+ lives in general, including book reviews, articles about pride month, and advice columns. These were not included in this discourse analysis. I was surprised to find very few articles that discussed relationships as a central component. Instead these articles focused on the relationships as a secondary component of the news story. This is because I did not include opinion or advice columns. Therefore, these articles included events that were considered “newsworthy”, which rarely focused solely on the lesbian relationship. Hunter (“Female Teacher Escapes Jail, 2018) talks about the sexual relationships that a teacher who is out of jail on probation engaged in with teenage girls. A different article by Hunter (2019) discusses the conviction of a female coach engaging in sexual assault of her team (“Coach used team as personal harem; jailed 2 years for sexually assaulting players”). The article entitled “Baby’s coming home: UK mom arrested for alleged child abduction” (Texiwala, 2019), discusses how a mother is arrested for the abduction of her child, which is considered a form of child abuse. These three articles all discuss forms of abuse, which is one of the themes that I found in the discourse. Another article focuses on loneliness associated with being a lesbian and how it is

more difficult to build relationships (“Same sex love and loneliness in Simcoe County”, Ramsay, 2019). The remaining three articles focus on coming out, discussing the lesbian relationships that the celebrity Whitney Houston had engaged in (“Whitney’s lesbian lover tells all”, 2019), how the wrestling star Sonya Deville came out by talking about her relationship with a woman (“Gay reveal ‘spontaneous’”, Hunter, 2018), and how a woman in Ontario was removed from her church for coming out as a lesbian (“Gay Bowmanville woman kicked out of Oshawa church’s membership”, O’Meara, 2018). Through reading these articles, three discursive themes emerged. These articles centered a focus on sexual assault and sexual activity as the focus of lesbian behaviour within their relationships with others. In this research, this discourse will be called “sexualization and criminalization of lesbian relationships”. Another theme that emerged in reading these seven articles is a theme of talking about how lesbians come out and form their identity. This discourse is called “coming out and identity”. The final theme that emerged in this discourse is how the word lesbian in these articles was paired with “scandalous” words, giving it a negative connotation. I call this discourse “scandalous words”. These three themes that have emerged in this discourse will be outlined below.

Sexualization and criminalization of lesbian relationships

Three of the seven available articles printed in the previous two years on lesbian relationships used language that highlighted sexual assault that lesbians engaged in. This came through because of the words chosen to describe sexual assault in these articles. Although the focus on sexual assault does not specifically align with my topic of lesbian relationships, it did come up in the database based on my search terms. As well, I have included them here because of the lack of other representation of relationships that was available in the newspapers in the last two years.

Showing how sexual assault and sexual relationships is represented illuminates what discourse is available on lesbians and what behaviour in their relationships they engage in. All three articles that focused on assault or abuse used moralizing language. For instance, both articles that focus on sexual assault of minors discuss the amount of times that sexual behaviour occurred. Hunter (2018, “Female teacher escapes jail for romps with girl, 15”) starts the article stating how a teacher “confessed’ to having sex “many times” with a fifteen year old student. The number of times that the sexual behaviour occurs is also brought up later in the article, where they state “the pair had sex between five and ten times”. This focus on the number of times the sexual behaviour occurs highlights each time that it is mentioned that the behaviour is deviant. Detailing the number of times the sex occurs highlights the sexual focus in the article.

The focus on the number of times that sexual behaviour occurs is also present in Hunter (2019, “Coach used team as personal harem: Jailed 2 years for sexually assaulting players”). Here, a basketball coach engaged in “prolonged sexual relationships” with teens on the basketball team. This article also details that the sex occurred “about 50 times” with the older girl, and “at least 20 times” with the younger girl. This focus on the number of times sexual activity occurs offers details of an assault in a way that highlights the apparent deviance of this action.

Mentioning sexual details in a newspaper article constitutes a taboo in Western society (Gudelunas, 2005). The discussion of sexual acts in public spaces serve as a measure of social control. Talking about sex allows individuals to police other’s sexual acts (Foucault, 1972). This is occurring in these two newspaper articles when they mention the amount of times the individual has occurred in sexual behaviour. It is policing what how much sexual behaviour is acceptable for lesbians. Although sexual behaviour is much more openly talked about than it

used to be, discussing sexual acts in a public forum is still considered taboo (Gudelunas, 2005). Even though these articles focus on sexual assault, an unacceptable sexual behaviour, the language that reports the facts while offering up a moral judgement of lesbian relationships.

Another way that these articles focusing on the sexual relationships of lesbians makes moralizing judgements is how the women who engage in these acts are described. Hunter (2019) states that the basketball coach who assaulted her team members turned her team into her “private lesbian harem”. Then Hunter (2019) states the perpetrator “seduced two teen schoolgirls”. This imagery conjures up a popular pornography trope. “Teen” was the 12th most searched term on Pornhub in 2019 (Pornhub Insights, 2019). This article does bring a pornographic type of focus to the discourse, through the use of words like “teen schoolgirls”. This trope continues to be portrayed by statements like “under-aged pair”. This language reminds readers that the sexual assault was on underage individuals. Given the prevalence of underage tropes in pornography, the focus of this article on the underage discourse brings a sexualization aspect to the article. Hunter (2019) mentions the age of both the perpetrator (38) and the two underage girls again, stating the perpetrator “began having sex with a 17 year old student” and then “indecent contact... with a 13 year old”. This focus on age not only highlights the taboo of underage assault but also brings a discourse of sexualization of minors. Hunter (2018) also details the number of times sex occurs in the other assault article (“Female teacher escapes jail for romps with girl, 15”), stating, “the pair had sex between five and 10 times”. This focus on the number of times the sex occurs keeps the focus on the sex acts in these articles. In relation to lesbian relationships, this means that how lesbian relationships are discussed in these news articles is particularly focused on illegal sexual behaviour.

The sexual behaviour is also described in great detail in these articles. Hunter (2018; “Female teacher escapes jail for romps with girl, 15”) describes the underage assault as a “two month relationship” and a “lesbian affair” despite the fact that it was non-consensual. The use of non-criminalizing language contributes to the discourse about lesbian relationships in the media. Although the relationships described in these two articles is with underage minors and non-consensual, these words are not used in the Hunter (2018) article. It states that the sex was consensual, despite it being with a minor and therefore the minor being unable to consent. It also describes the relationship as a “lesbian affair”. This language legitimizes the relationship even though it is underage assault. This type of language also exists in Hunter (2019), where it outlines the sex acts of “touching kissing, and progressing to showering together until there was penetration”. This not only describes the assault as sex acts that do not convey the inappropriateness of them, but provides details that can only be meant to draw the reader in to the article. The details of sexual contact become the social definition of a lesbian relationship.

The titles of these two articles also lead the reader to assume particular outcomes from the language chosen. Hunter (2019) titles the article “Coach used team as personal harem; jailed 2 years for sexually assaulting players”. Here, the lesbian nature of this relationship is not mentioned in the title. The words “personal harem” gives the idea that the women being assaulted belong to the assaulter. In English, the word harem has connotations associated with women belonging to a polygamous man (Miriam Webster Dictionary, 2019). To use this phrase while discussing a lesbian sexual encounter suggests more of a predatory nature of the women. Despite the fact that this coach assaulted two players, the title indicates that it was the whole team. Hunter (2018) uses the title “Female teacher escapes jail for romps with girl, 15”, also conveys a particular image of the women. Here, it is clear that they are engaging in a lesbian

sexual interaction. The use of the phrase “escapes jail” indicates that she broke out of jail, when in fact she is out on parole. As well, she does not leave jail to go back to the fifteen year old girl, but rather out on parole and to register as a sex offender. The lesbians are characterized as predators with heteronormative undertones through using words such as harem. Furthermore, they are characterized as vile sexual threats.

The focus on sex in these two articles about sexual assault give an indication of how lesbian lives are portrayed in newspapers. Given that the only mention of sex in these articles relates to criminal cases involving sexual assault with minors, this gives a very specific type of impression of lesbian behaviour in relationship with others. It influences the perception of women in general as well as lesbians in particular. For instance, Hunter (2019) reports that the judge in this case “wondered aloud whether the plea deal was too lenient. He also wondered whether a man accused of the same sordid crimes would have gotten off so easily”. Given that in Canada, approximately only one percent of sexual assaults that are experienced by women that are perpetrated by men or women lead to a conviction in court, this case is in the minority for actually being prosecuted (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2020). The fact that so few sexual assault cases are convicted indicates that contrary to the judge’s statements, both men and women are “getting off” for these crimes. The focus on the assault of minors as the only way that lesbian sexual relationships have been reported on in the media in the last two years shows the prevailing discourse about lesbians is focused on criminal behaviour. A reminder that my search was for the discursive representation of lesbian relationships more generally yet the discourse by topic and wording fits the of troubling stereotype of ‘sick sexuality.’ Sex is such a preoccupation that specific acts are described.

Another article that also focuses on criminal activity that lesbians engage in during their relationship is “Baby’s coming home: UK mom arrested for alleged child abduction” (Texiwala, 2019). This article is published in the Toronto Star. This article states that a “mom who allegedly fled from her lesbian ex with their daughter three years ago has been arrested” (Texiwala, 2019). The fact that they are lesbians is immediately stated in this article. The article details how one of the wives left Canada with the daughter while “keeping up the pretence with Brown that she and her daughter were still in the country”. As an article that discusses a lesbian couple, it details a volatile relationship that, similar to the sexual assault articles, also details a crime. The author illustrates the volatile nature of this relationship through using the statements “fled from her lesbian ex”. As well the phrases “estranged partner”, “ex partner”, and “lesbian ex” also reiterate how the relationship is over, and that this lesbian relationship is not continuing. This frames lesbian relationships as not as stable. The focus on criminality and the instability of relationships is highlighted in this article. In this article, they also detail parts of the relationship that are not related to the news story. For instance, Texiwala (2019) states that the two individuals “had their daughter through a sperm donor”. Statements like this that are unrelated to the language in the rest of the news story and serve to, as in the previous articles, detail parts of lesbian lives to add either curiosity, shock value, or to identify how lesbians are different than the general public. Both the sexual assault case articles and this child kidnapping articles highlight negative views about lesbian relationships through the language that is used in the article characterizing lesbian relationships as criminal and perverted.

Scandalous Words

The second theme that emerged through reading these articles was the use of the word lesbian paired with scandalous words. Lesbian is placed next to particular words in these

articles, and these are often words that have “scandalous” meanings. I use the word scandalous here to mean words like romps, affair, lover, and harem, which are all words used in the articles next to lesbian. For instance, in Hunter (2019; “Coach used team as personal harem; jailed 2 years for sexually assaulting players”), lesbian is worded as “private lesbian harem”. The word private placed next to lesbian indicates that lesbian sexual relationships should remain private. The word harem also influences the word lesbian by giving a specific type of negative connotation to the word lesbian. In this article as well, the words “teaching temptress” and “manipulative predator” are also used to describe the woman who is described in an article. These words reinforce the viewpoint that the lesbian described in the article is highly sexualized and criminalized. Using words like this reinforces identity stereotypes about lesbians that include the sexualization of this group of people. This trend continues in Hunter (2018; “Female teacher escapes jail for romps with girl, 15”), with language used including “lesbian affair”. This indicates that the reader is reminded again of the sexual component of the relationship. It also takes the focus away from the fact that this is an underage sexual assault case, and instead discusses the sexual component of the relationship separate from the assault. Other words that highlight the sexualization of this article are “after-school hijinks”, and “romps”.

The choice and placement of words certainly sets the tone of the articles and sets the sexualized tone of the article at the outset. The word “romps” comes up many times in the selected articles when discussing sexual behaviour of lesbians. In “Whitney’s lesbian lover tells all” (Calgary Sun, 2019) the first words of the article is “lesbian romps”. In this article, other words that bring focus to the sexual aspect of the relationship between Whitney Houston and Robyn Crawford are “lesbian lover”, “secret lover”, “serial cheating”, and “shocking revelations”. These phrases again highlight the private nature of relationships in these articles

when discussing lesbian lives. As well, the fact that “romps” is mentioned in multiple articles indicates that it is used often to discuss lesbian sexual relationships. The word romps has the connotation that these relationships were not serious and rather just focused on sexual behaviour.

This fits in with the theme of lesbian being paired with scandalous words that bring attention to the sexual nature of the behaviour described in the articles. The words that bring attention to the sexual nature of the relationships, as well as the words that highlight the private nature of the relationships, suggests that the relationships lesbians engage in happen in a private setting and are primarily sexual in nature. Hunter (2019; “Coach used team for personal harem”), also has an example of this, saying that the assaults took place in a “secret love nest”, again illustrating the privacy necessary in this relationship. “Scandalous” words are also used in Hunter (2018; “Gay reveal spontaneous”). This article uses the words “brunette bruiser” to describe the wrestling star that came out as a lesbian on television. Although “bruiser” is primarily referring to her status as a wrestler, the imagery that the words “brunette bruiser” conjures up includes references to the person’s appearance and actions. This fits with the scandalous words theme because of how it continues to focus on physical actions of the women in these articles

Texiwala (2019; “Baby’s coming home; UK mom arrested for alleged child abduction”) when describing how one partner abducted her child to go live in another country, describes in the first line how the woman “fled from her lesbian ex with her daughter”. The use of the word fled increases the urgency of what is being portrayed. This woman left the country with her daughter, which was illegal, but not because she was trying to get away from her partner. The words “lesbian ex” pairs the word lesbian with ex, which focuses on how this relationship was not continuing and immediately orients the article around how it describes the relationship these women are in as a failed relationship. They continue in this theme with “ex-

partner”, again bringing a focus to the negative outcome of the relationship. Although these words do not necessarily focus on the sexual aspects of the relationships, as in the other articles, the way the article pairs words like ex-partner with lesbian again brings a more negative connotation to the word lesbian and the relationships lesbians engage in.

The pairing of these “scandalous” words with lesbian reinforces the idea that lesbian lives as told in these articles have a focus on sexual behaviour. This focus on sexual behaviour creates an othering phenomenon for the lesbians represented here. It shows that lesbians have volatile relationships as they are portrayed in these articles. In both themes the behaviour and physical actions of the women are emphasized rather than any social cognitive or affective attachment. Furthermore, scandalous language illustrates how the articles have constructed a viewpoint on how lesbians lead their lives. In these examples, a focus on sex and the privacy required for sexual behaviours of lesbians is a central focus. In addition to sexual behaviour, these scandalous descriptive words also portray the relationships that lesbians engage in as negative behaviour including criminal activity. The words also make it clear that the relationships have ended, which focuses on the non-permanence of the lesbian relationships presented here. This discourse suggests again that lesbian relationships are mostly about sex and troubled relationships.

Coming out: Privacy, isolation, authentic self, and identity

The final theme that I will discuss is language use around coming out and identity. This was the main theme in some of the articles already discussed as well as the articles not yet mentioned. Language around coming out involved an “all or nothing” coming out of the closet approach, and repeating language that discussed the subject discovering themselves. For instance, Hunter (2019; “Gay reveal “spontaneous”) starts the article with how the wrestling star

“opened up” about “coming out as a lesbian”. The language “opened up” sets the tone of the article where it focuses on the coming out process. It indicates how the person must reveal something about themselves to come out. The subject of the article stated that it “seemed like the time to tell the truth” and that she was “nervous” about it. This language indicates a confessional discourse around coming out and needing to disclose a personal private fact about themselves. She states that she “has a girlfriend, but she’s not my wife yet”. In this article, the subject used her relationship status to disclose her identity. The article goes on to state “her advice for other LGBTQ2S+ people is to be true to yourself”. Focusing on how it might be extra important for LGBTQ2S+ people in general to be more authentic to themselves occurs in this article. This discourse indicates that it might not be as natural for LGBTQ2S+ people to be authentically themselves. This identity of being queer is formed around having an existing relationship.

In addition to these articles focusing on how coming out involves disclosing something personal about the subjects, it also involves an element of secrecy or privacy. Since coming out involves disclosing something personal, it means that before coming out this was a private or secret matter. This is illustrated in “Whitney’s lesbian lover tells all” (Calgary Sun, 2019). It states that Whitney Houston’s “longtime friend and secret lover” is revealing their relationship. The word secret indicates that it is a private matter and continues to show that coming out is about revealing something private about yourself.

Ramsay (2019; “Same sex love and loneliness in Simcoe County) also discusses the coming out process as being authentic about the lesbians being their true selves. This article also uses language that focuses how the lesbians have to be true to themselves, stating “a lesbian who isn’t shy about her true self” needed to have “gumption” to come out and find friendships in a smaller town. This focus on needing to be true to yourself to reveal something about the

subject's identity comes out in this article as well. The subject's outgoing personality is highlighted here, with words such as "bold personality", "true self", and "gumption" and "outgoing". These words also tell a story of how the person must be in order to come out, for instance needing to be so outgoing and bold. The article states that even with an outgoing personality it has been hard for the subject of the article to find friends and relationships in the small town that she lives in (Ramsay, 2019).

The lesbian subject states that she is "almost" shocked at the state of the gay community in the town. The word shocked shows how expected it is in communities like this that the gay community is isolated. This article then focuses on how isolated gay communities are in general, which is an interesting pivot for this article rather than focusing on the subject's own experience with isolation as in the first part of the article. The article states that LGBTQ2S+ people are at a higher risk of being "socially isolated", particularly elderly LGBTQ2S+ people (Ramsay, 2019). This social isolation is proposed in the article to be because older LGBTQ2S+ people believe it is "better to keep their sexual orientation or gender identity a secret" (Ramsay, 2019).

This fits in with the theme of privacy, discussed earlier- that coming out is something that is personal that needs to be disclosed. The article continues to discuss how LGBTQ2S+ people, especially elderly people, are "cautious about interacting with others" (Ramsay, 2019). This article changes from discussing a woman who is not shy about her challenges to find a relationship to discussing how it is hard for LGBTQ2S+ people, especially seniors, to be themselves. This shift in the discourse within this article focuses on the difficulties facing LGBTQ2S+ people, and only focuses on the risks they face with coming out and being themselves rather than any strengths or positives. It also moves away from discussing the

individual issue of finding a relationship that the subject has in the first part of the article. It also uses historical data to highlight the negative views that people have of LGBTQ2S+ people coming out, such as stating that “society’s views on same-sex relationships have progressed since it was decriminalized in 1969” (Ramsay, 2019). This information highlights the decriminalization, which is a dated information source. The language used in this article surrounding isolation and difficulties that LGBTQ2S+ people face shows how the discourse is focused on negative experiences. Also, it again lumps all LGBTQ2S+ experiences together under one umbrella, without taking into account different experiences some might have, such as lesbians. The shift from focusing on the one subject, who is not elderly or particularly isolated because of her outgoing nature, to focusing on elderly LGBTQ2S+ people who are isolated. This creates a certain view of LGBTQ2S+ people as isolated and facing difficulties.

The issue of coming out and facing consequences is discussed in O’Meara (2018; “Gay Bowmanville woman kicked out of Oshawa Church’s membership”). The language “kicked out” used right in the title of the article indicates how serious it was to be kicked out of church. The article starts with stating that the woman was “thrust into the role of gay rights advocate after she came out”. This reinforces the idea that coming out is an all or nothing process that has consequences. These consequences in this article are not only social consequences of being kicked out of church but also having to take on a new identity as not only publicly out but also as a gay rights advocate. Something else noteworthy in this article is that the word lesbian is never used. Although the article does detail the relationship between the subject of the article and her partner, stating “the couple has been together for four years”, it does not use the word lesbian. This is different from the other articles that pairs the word lesbian with the scandalous words. This could be because this article is trying to portray the women as having a stable

normative relationship, and in the discourse in the other articles the word lesbian does not indicate having stable normative relationships. The author details the furnishings in the couple's house to further illustrate normativity (O'Meara, 2018). The article, similar to the other articles reviewed here that discuss coming out as being linked to disclosing a personal identity, states "she wasn't able to be true to herself" and so she came out at her Bible study group. Being true to yourself is a theme that has come up in numerous articles and shows how the coming out discourse involves that need to be authentically disclosing something about yourself.

This article, in contrast to the article by Ramsay (2019) goes on to detail the positive response of the public once she had been kicked out of church. The subject states she was "overwhelmed by the outpouring of support" on Facebook and the internet once she went public with her story. This contradicts Ramsay (2019) statements saying that LGBTQ2S+ people would face isolation when they came out. However, in this article the subject does still face isolation from her church. This article pushes a normative view of a lesbian relationship as fitting in with heteronormative ideals, such as with the details of the house the couples live in and the length of time they have been together. The avoidance of the word lesbian is especially noteworthy here given how it was used to identify non-normative relationships in the other articles. A number of discourse group around the notion of coming out including the importance and protection through privacy, isolation, the need for authentic self, and the troubled nature of lesbianism.

CHAPTER 5. IMPLICATIONS

In reviewing these seven articles I identified three discourses. These included the word lesbian paired with scandalous words, the coming out process being an important part of forming identity and personal disclosure, and the focus on sexualization and criminalization of lesbian relationships. All together the articles available discussing lesbians and the relationships they have were surprising to me because they often did not focus on relationships as a central component. However, these were the articles available that mentioned lesbians and their relationships in Proquest Newsstream in the last two years. This indicated to me that what is available in print news focuses on more salacious or negative news of lesbians and the relationships they are in. for instance, sexual assault and being forced out of church, or even focusing on the isolation of lesbians in small communities. The fact that this is print news media may influence the type of articles that are published.

Compared to fictional television, which is where most research on LGBTQ2S+ representation takes place, news articles are reporting on things that they consider newsworthy. This also contributes to the discourse. The things that these articles consider newsworthy include sexual assault, coming out stories, and stories of difficulties that lesbians face being themselves. There is a limited view of lesbians that are available in print news. Contrary to popular belief, this is not because print news is usually consumed by an older generation or a more conservative population. In fact, due to the rise of readership on digital devices, the readership of newspapers in Canada is high. 90% of people ages 54-72 read newspapers weekly, and 88% of those age 18-38 read newspapers (Media in Canada, 2019). Newspaper reading is increasing in Canada. The only difference in age groups is that the older generation reads newspapers in print and the younger reads on phones. This indicates that the newspaper articles are catering to a wide

audience with diverse viewpoints. This means that these articles on assault that show that lesbians as they are portrayed in the articles are focused on sexual behaviour and inappropriate sexual acts are read by a wide audience and create an identity for lesbians that include the focus on sexual behaviour. For lesbians reading these articles, this means that they are only offered social discourse with a focus on inappropriate sexual behaviour, and that coming out is an “all or nothing” process that involves private disclosures to address inadequacies such as loneliness, isolation, or lack of authentic self.

Given that print news does cater to a wide audience, its goal is to be as accessible and attention grabbing as possible to most people. That means that articles such as those about sexual assault and being isolated in a small town, or being removed from church have a goal to grab attention at the headline so that people read the articles. In the literature review of this MRP, most articles focused on representation within television shows and movies. In television shows and movies that show lesbian relationships, usually the viewers are choosing to watch this content. If they did not expect to see LGBTQ2S+ content, which might occur in a show that does not solely focus on LGBTQ2S+ lives, such as *Coronation Street* and the lesbian wedding that is represented there (McNicholas-Smith & Tyler, 2017), people may choose not to watch it anymore.

With print news, many people would read an article who would not otherwise engage with LGBTQ2S+ content. This may be their only exposure to LGBTQ2S+ lives and identities. News articles that focus on sexual assaults, pair the word lesbian with words like romps and private harems, and identify isolation and other difficulties lesbians face in their relationships create a specific view of lesbians. It shows to the general public that lesbians are engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviour and facing marginalization because of their identity.

It also tells a story of what coming out is supposed to look like. In these articles, the stories that revolve around coming out involve disclosing personal statements about oneself and having a one-way direction to coming out. In these articles, coming out as a lesbian is seen as an irreversible thing that is done. This is contrary to seeing LGBTQ2S+ identities as more fluid and changing over time. Coming out is also often done in relation to an existing relationship, such as in Hunter (2018; “Gay reveal spontaneous”) and in O’Meara (2018; “Gay Bowmanville woman kicked out of Oshawa Church’s membership”). In these articles when the subject comes out it is through mentioning a partner. This creates a particular discourse around coming out, both that it involves risks like being kicked out of church or facing increased isolation, and also that coming out is done around mentioning a same-sex partner and is closely tied to a lesbian relationship. In this discourse having a same-sex partner legitimizes the experience of coming out and, at the same time, being in relationship prompts coming out.

These concepts such as the discourse around coming out and the focus on sexual inappropriateness can construct reality for LGBTQ2S+ people. As social constructionism shows that discourses create reality, a reality of lesbians only being allowed to have a coming out story that follows the discourses in these articles and in other media, and that their sexual behaviour can be inappropriate can constrain the possibilities and ways that lesbians can live their lives and how they are viewed in public (Witkin, 2017). In order to act in an acceptable way in a heteronormative society, lesbians may engage in performative actions (Butler, 1990). Performative actions may include coming out in a particular way or conforming to heteronormative ideals in the way they engage in relationships.

The articles reviewed in this analysis also show the same gaps as the articles reviewed in the literature review. The literature review highlighted the focus on

heteronormativity within lesbian relationships. This was shown in particular in McNicholas-Smith & Tyler (2017) when they discussed bridal culture. Heteronormative approaches both within the visual media identified within the literature review as well as the articles shown in the discourse analysis create a powerful message that shows that heteronormativity is still seen as the correct way to act in this culture. This is shown by the focus on finding a romantic partner, present in Ramsay (2019), as well as the details about a monogamous romantic partner present in O'Meara (2018) and Hunter (2018). Heteronormativity includes the focus on a goal of finding a monogamous romantic partner. These articles do not show the full diversity of lesbian relationships with their focus on heteronormativity, coming out, and sexual assault. These discourses have limited rather than opened up the possibilities that lesbians have for seeing themselves in the media.

These articles also show a particular discourse because of who they are written by and also who they are written for. As mentioned earlier, these articles were found in the Canadian Newsstream database that mentioned lesbian relationships from the years 2018 to 2019. This database contains most Canadian newspapers. However, although the newspapers are Canadian media publications, the subjects of these articles included in this discourse analysis are often not Canadian. The only three that discuss Canadian individuals are O'Meara (2018), Ramsay (2019), and Texiwala (2019). Both O'Meara (2018) and Ramsay (2019) detail examples of what it is like for lesbians finding or being in relationships in small towns in Ontario. These were the only such articles like this in the past two years from across Canada. Here, I notice that they have a more positive view of lesbians than the other articles, by identifying how a community of support has been created for the individual who was kicked out of church, and the other article showing how the individual has been trying to create a queer community for herself

in a small town despite facing isolation (O'Meara, 2018;, Ramsay, 2019). Showing this type of narrative as specific to reaching publications in smaller town Ontario indicates a more positive view of queer people in that geographical location. These types of articles not being published about lesbians in the rest of the country may indicate that other parts of the country are not as interested in hearing about local lesbian lives.

On the other, hand, articles about the sexual assault cases, featuring individuals who do not reside in Canada, were cross published through all Postmedia newspapers across the country. This indicates that this discourse of “scandalous lesbians” is a popular theme that people will read about. As well, one of the authors, Brad Hunter, published both of the sexual assault articles as well as “Gay reveal spontaneous”, the article about the wrestling star coming out (Hunter, 2018). Having three of the articles that fit in the inclusion criteria for this discourse analysis be by the same author invites a particular type of discourse, as different authors will use different language and have different preconceived biases about lesbians and their relationships.

These articles are not written by and for lesbians. Although some of the articles may be written by lesbians, that is not stated within the articles. Having an out-group write the stories that the mainstream reader of newspapers sees also creates a certain discourse and can create beliefs about lesbians that may be stereotypes. An out group writing about a marginalized group can reinforce ideas of the dominant group onto that marginalized group. One example of this is in these articles, and indeed in my literature review, LGBTQ2S+ people were often lumped together into one category. This can contribute to homogenizing the experience of groups within the LGBTQ2S+ umbrella, including lesbians. This shows that a dominant discourse is that LGBTQ2S+ people have similar experiences. This was especially noticeable

within the literature review because these were peer-reviewed articles particularly looking at media representation.

I personally had expected there to be more articles focusing on the different identities within the LGBTQ2S+ umbrella. With the articles lumping these together, it creates a homogenized representation of what is happening for these individuals. This can make it seem like the experience of LGBTQ2S+ people are all the same, and the representations of them are also the same. However, this is not the case. Gay men are more often mentioned in print news than lesbians (Schwartz 2010). As well, transgender individuals are represented even less than the other groups under the LGBTQ2S+ umbrella. This is shown by the lack of discussion of transgender people in both my literature review and the newspaper articles included in this discourse analysis. No articles in the literature review mention transgender individuals. In the discourse analysis, no articles that I included discuss a transgender person, or if they do, that is not mentioned in the article, so I will assume that the individuals are not transgender because that is what the language in the articles is telling the audience.

One article that I did not include in the discourse analysis was an article about a transgender woman who is pursuing human rights complaints against an esthetician service (Brean, 2019; “Trans activist victim or villain?”). This article mentions how there may be sexual assault allegations against her from underage girls online, but mostly talked about her criminal convictions and did not mention relationships that she engaged in. As well, the article was unclear if she identified as a lesbian so I did not feel that it fit my inclusion criteria. However, it is worth noting that the only article that discusses transgender individuals in the last two years is a transgender person facing criminal charges. This does fit with the theme of sexual assault I

found in the articles included here. This shows that transgender voices are mostly excluded from the narratives available in the newspaper article discourses.

Another voice that does not seem to be included in these articles is racialized voices. None of the articles mention or describe the subjects of the articles in any way besides stating they are lesbians. As the normative expectation of our western society is whiteness, in these articles it is assumed that people are white. Not mentioning racial diversity within these articles indicates to the average reader that lesbians are not racially diverse. Since racialized lesbians face intersecting oppressions for holding both a marginalized queer identity and a marginalized racial identity, not having them represented in the news media further contributes to their erasure and marginalization.

During this discourse analysis, I was surprised to not find very many articles that had a central theme of lesbian relationships. The article by Ramsay (2019) was the only article that focused on how it was hard for the lesbian subject of the article to find a relationship. The other articles focused on a separate news story that tangentially related to the relationships, such as the criminal allegations relating to an inappropriate sexual relationship, a relationship as a means for coming out, and a relationship as the reason for being kicked out of church. To me, this showed that the discourses of lesbian relationships particularly were not important enough for the media to report on individually, but rather in relation to a negative news story relating to the relationship. Stories about relationships in particular seem to be missing from the discourse, as do stories about racialized and transgender individuals. As a white cis lesbian, myself, I have had to examine my own bias while going through these articles. Without seeing pictures, I too imagined in my mind the subjects of the articles as being white and cis. My own positionality

creates these biases. Through this MRP I hope to have illuminated what is available for lesbian representation in print news and what biases it highlights both in ourselves and in the discourse.

The biases present within the discourse illuminate the dominant discourse available in mainstream society for lesbians and relationships. Mass media represents and constructs society's dominant discourses (Mullaly, 2002). News media is included here, and dominant discourses also determine what is newsworthy. Things that are newsworthy are determined by economic and cultural values, such as what will get readers to read the newspapers as well as what culturally is considered valuable to report on (Mullaly, 2002). Shown here, what is culturally relevant to report on in relation to lesbians is sexual assault, coming out, and highlighting sexual behaviour.

In this MRP, I hoped to illuminate what types of discourse is present in print news media for lesbians. Social work can benefit from this by gaining a further understanding of what representation is available for lesbians and the general public. Given that the available representation sexualizes lesbian relationships, the understanding social work can gain is how this representation might influence lesbians and also the general public. The focus on sexual behaviour in particular creates a popular discourse that lesbians themselves are focused on sexual behaviour that is often inappropriate. For social workers, it is important to work against this discourse and work with people to understand there is a wide range of lesbian experiences that are not captured in these discourses. As an anti-oppressive social worker myself, I will use my learning gained from the MRP to center the voices of marginalized groups, including lesbians. I will also have become more aware of how discourses within mass media influence how people think and act. As social work is such an interpersonal profession, understanding and critiquing

where people form their beliefs and gain understandings about different groups of people will show areas where social work can learn to be more inclusive.

Conclusion

Through searching the mainstream news articles from the last two years, I identified three discourses present in news media about lesbians. They include the sexualization and criminalization of lesbian behaviour, a focus on coming out and identity, and the pairing of lesbian with sexualized words. These discourses show that lesbians are viewed a very specific way in mainstream media with a focus on sexual behaviour, identified by the first and third discourse. The second discourse of coming out, similar to the discourses focusing on sexual assault, shows how lesbian relationships are constrained in the media. The discourse available does not open up possibilities of diverse ways of life for lesbians but rather constrains them. Here, lesbians are either able to engage in heteronormative relationships or be hypersexualized. Lesbian relationships as shown in this discourse are also shown to exist in a private realm where they must be disclosed by the person engaging in them. This focus on privacy shows how lesbian relationships are still seen as something that is non-normative.

I came to this MRP topic through my own reflections on the media I was consuming. Most of the media I had in my mind was television shows and movies, which still had a limited representation of diverse lesbians. I chose to look more specifically at print media for this MRP because it catered to a broader population and I wanted to examine how lesbians are represented to people who may not choose to consume lesbian content. I thought that discourse present in news media particularly related to social work because it creates stereotypes that can contribute to identity formation for lesbians themselves, and stereotypes that contribute to public opinion of lesbians. In this MRP I was surprised to find the news media available in the

last two years decided that the newsworthy articles mostly included sexual assault, sexual behaviour or language, and coming out stories related to a more newsworthy theme such as being kicked out of church. This limited view of lesbians that is available in print media can constrain lesbians' views of themselves, and what others are able to see lesbians as. This was surprising to me because I was expecting to find more articles related to relationships between lesbians in particular, and more diversity in representation including transgender individuals. However, the theme around coming out and identity was especially interesting to me. Representation visible in the media helps to construct identity. The specific discourses around what coming out involves in the articles represented here really highlights coming out involves facing difficulties such as isolation. This type of discourse is prevalent in society. From anecdotal evidence in my own life, this fear of isolation makes people hesitate to come out to important people in their lives. The way that newspaper discourse constructs reality for people may contribute to people worrying about their coming out process, contributing to further marginalization and mental health concerns, as well as for the general public to expect a certain way the coming out process would go. The other discourse, related to sexual assault and sexual behaviour sexualizes lesbians and highlights "bad behaviour". This shows that any internalized discourses that lesbians may take from these articles include a hyper-sexualization of lesbians.

I found these articles good to compare against what was found in my literature review. In the literature review, there was a focus on white heteronormative values that lesbians portrayed in television shows and other forms of fictional media. In the discourse analysis, this also included heteronormative values such as finding a monogamous romantic partner such as in Ramsay (2019) and O'Meara (2018). Many of the articles focused on the sexual behaviour of lesbians, which is not a heteronormative value. Instead, these articles highlight how lesbians

deviate from the norm of heteronormativity. Internalization of these values could also lead to negative effects for lesbians.

This discourse analysis shows a snapshot of what is available for lesbian representation in the last two years of print news. The limited number of articles and the lack of diversity in the subject matter show that despite lesbians and queer people in general becoming more and more accepted in Western society, there is still limited ways that the general public who would not choose to view queer television or media is able to consume knowledge about lesbians. This gap shows that despite the greater acceptance, the spread of lesbian representation has not opened up possibilities or new viewpoints in the discourse. One way these possibilities could be opened up is by embracing some aspects of queer theory in social work practice. Queer theory along with a social constructionist approach can deconstruct the idea that there is one reality or way to act as a lesbian. By taking an approach that there are multiple truths and ways of being, lesbians can be more able to engage in relationships and express themselves in a diverse way. As a social worker and a lesbian, it is important that I work to increase the awareness and representation of diverse individuals.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Selected Articles

Hunter, Brad. (2018, May 8). Female teacher escapes jail for romps with girl, 15. *The Toronto Sun*. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/2102073068?accountid=13631>

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