

The question selected: **8. To what extent did media depictions of either ethnic minorities or sexual minorities change between 1980 and the present day**

## **The Evolution of Media Depictions of Sexual Minorities in British Culture from 1980 to Present Day**

### **1. Introduction**

In today's society, the depiction of sexual minorities within British media has been widely discussed and disputed. The term "sexual minorities" applies to anyone identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer and those with non-heterosexual or cisgender identities (O'Malley and Holzinger, 2018). Over a few decades, there have been notable alterations regarding how British media displays sexual minorities, emphasizing its evolution as an important topic nowadays. This subject holds particular relevance as the media significantly impacts how the public responds to sexual minorities. Representations of LGBTQ+ people in media can foster acceptance or discrimination and shape the self-assurance and sense of belonging that sexual minority individuals experience (McInroy and Craig, 2016). It is crucial to analyze the historical background to comprehend the evolution of media portrayal of sexual minorities in Britain over time.

The emergence of AIDS in the 1980s resulted in a substantial influence on the general public's perspective towards this community. During that period, depictions in mass media were often unconstructive and attention-grabbing, showcasing acts pertaining to the subculture (Herek, 2004). Nevertheless, as society progressed, media representation altered for British sexual minorities, highlighting their culture, customs, and values through which others gained abundant education regarding them (Fisher et al., 2007). This essay will examine the changes in media depictions of sexual minorities in Britain from the 1980s to present day and explore how these changes have impacted public perception and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. Specifically, this essay will be examining media produced or consumed in Britain, as the cultural and social context in Britain is unique and different from other countries.

### **2. Media Depictions of Sexual Minorities in the 1980s**

During the 1980s, a transformation in British society was evident through the growth of Thatcherism, the emergence of new youth culture, and conflicts such as the Miners' Strike (Khabaz, 2006). Nevertheless, despite the liberalization of some aspects of British society, the representation of sexual minorities in the media remained largely negative and stereotypical. Movies and TV shows have been guilty of often depicting sexual minorities stereotypically,

featuring flamboyant and promiscuous depictions that convey deviance and immoral (Johnson, 2016). By doing this, negative cultural stigmas regarding LGBTQ+ individuals were perpetuated, contributing to the prejudice they face within British society. This trend was particularly prevalent in comedic productions, where jokes often centered on mocking and laughing at gay and lesbian characters (Butler, 2020).

The narration and representation of sexual minorities in the media during the 1980s were profoundly affected by several distinct factors. Primarily, there was a lack of representation and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in British media, which meant that the few depictions that did exist were often one-dimensional and stereotypical (McInroy and Craig, 2016). Also, the outburst of the HIV/AIDS epidemic of that decade had a tremendous influence on the portrayal of those minorities in media, with numerous people accusing homosexual males of spreading the disease and using it as an approach to denigrate further and vilify the LGBTQ+ society (Labra, 2013).

Despite the negative media depictions, there were some attempts to challenge and subvert these stereotypes in 1980s British media. For example, "The Bill" (1984-2010), a British television series, featured a revolutionary storyline about an outed lesbian police officer undercutting her colleague (Brunsdon, 2013). This narrative was remarkable for its adept exploration of the troubles encountered by LGBTQ+ people in their professional environment and its abstruse contemplation of the difficulty of confessing one's sexuality.

The portrayal of sexual minorities in the British media during the 1980s greatly impacted the LGBTQ+ community. This negative image further reinforced prevalent cultural biases, generating more discrimination against those identifying as group members. Such stigmatizing representations could have triggered the marginalization of these marginalized individuals, certainly hindering their ability to gain access to essential resources, services, and opportunities. Recognizing that media representation uniquely shapes societal beliefs and attitudes concerning marginalized communities, it is vital for media outlets to offer correct and varied depictions of sexual minority groups that reflect the complexity and diversity characterizing these subgroups.

### **3. Media Depictions of Sexual Minorities in the 1990s and 2000s**

During the 1990s and 2000s, a remarkable transformation occurred in how sexual minorities were depicted in British media. Emerging into the mainstream culture were LGBTQ+ characters, who received something more than just stereotypical portrayals. Exceptionally complex and challenging representations of LGBTQ+ individuals frequently aired on television shows such as "Queer as Folk" (1999-2000) and "Gimme Gimme Gimme"

(1999-2001). In addition, numerous films and television shows raised awareness and portrayed LGBTQ+ figures. One such program was the classic sitcom, "Absolutely Fabulous," airing from 1992-1995 and again from 2001-2004. It bridged the gap between comedy and social acceptance by having a set of flamboyant, outlandish characters embodied most famously by Jennifer Saunders as Edina Monsoon (Azzopardi, 2016). Moreover, films such as "Beautiful Thing" (1996) provided thoughtful glimpses into the lives of queer individuals and brought attention to related issues such as racism and classism (Pullen, 2012). These movies helped to break down barriers and stereotypes surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals and introduced wider audiences to the experiences and struggles faced by members of the community.

Despite the emergence of LGBTQ+ characters in popular culture, some critics felt that these depictions were still too limited and stereotypical. Specifically, "Queer as Folk" drew criticism from activists who viewed its depictions of gay men as one-dimensional caricatures defined solely by hypersexualized behavior (Parsemain, 2019). They argued that this representation perpetuated negative stereotypes and failed to show the full range of experiences and identities within the LGBTQ+ community. Similarly, "Gimme Gimme Gimme" received condemnation for promoting bad preconceived ideas regarding non-heterosexual relationships - casting gay men as salacious and flamboyant rather than revealing the diversity of those within this community (Edwards, 2010). As a result, some audiences believed the show overused cheaply constructed representations instead of delving deeper into a broader array of unique life stories.

In spite of these criticisms, British media in the 1990s and 2000s saw a notable elevation of positive representation of sexual minorities. One example is presented by "EastEnders," a soap opera that premiered in 1985 and continues to air today. In 1999, the show introduced its initial lesbian character, Sonia Fowler. This plotline depicted her journey coming out and the difficulties that she faced due to her sexuality, at the time groundbreaking when compared to concurrent programming (Parkinson, 2018). Its display helped boost the visibility and representation of LGBTQ+ individuals within British media.

Undoubtedly, during the 1990s and 2000s, significant progress was made in representing sexual minorities in British media. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that these portrayals had limitations and pitfalls. As mentioned earlier, some depictions of LGBTQ+ characters faced criticism for promoting harmful stereotypes or neglecting to capture the broad spectrum of diversity within the community. Besides, while including LGBTQ+ personalities, like "EastEnders," was revolutionary then, their storylines often narrowly focused on their

sexuality instead of covering their entire life experiences and identities. Therefore, there is an urgent call for a more comprehensive and genuine representation of sexual minorities in media outlets that reflect the diverse nature of this group and assist in breaking down common misinterpretations about them.

#### **4. Media Depictions of Sexual Minorities in the 2010s to Present Day**

Throughout the 2010s, there was a noticeable upsurge in the representation of LGBTQ+ characters across various British TV shows and films. This trend conveyed greater visibility for sexual minorities within media outlets. In particular, "Doctor Who," among the most widely-viewed TV programs, achieved a milestone when it introduced Bill Potts as its premier openly gay character in 2017 (Jowett, 2018). Significantly, the show wisely portrayed Bill's sexuality as one integral facet of her persona rather than elevating it into the central theme of the storyline.

Similarly, movies like "Pride (2014)" and "God's Own Country (2017)" evaluated the circumstances of LGBTQ+ people with incredibly deep insight. "Pride", which was based on actual events, tracked a conglomerate of activists associated with the LGBTQ+ community who partnered with picketing miners in 1984 (Kellaway, 2014). This cinematic journey epitomized the miscellaneous trials of this group, stemming from sundry classes and viewpoints, while demonstrating how they unitedly argued for a shared objective. Meanwhile, "God's Own Country" told the story of a young gay man, Johnny Saxby, who lives and works on his family's farm in rural Yorkshire. The film explored the challenges of being gay in a conservative and isolated community, as well as the complexities of navigating romantic relationships (Williams, 2020).

In the 2010s, social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have been instrumental in enhancing the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community within British media. This has primarily been accomplished via hashtags like #LGBTQ, which have received extensive use and helped improve the profile of sexual minorities by raising awareness and promoting representation (Talbot et al., 2020). Through these virtual markers, individuals and groups have accessed spaces that allowed them to share personal narratives, news stories, and commentaries, amongst other content, with an added objective to increase the broader acceptability of the LGBTQ+ community in the UK's media. The reach offered by social media has provided opportunities for members of this community to engage one another and showcase their experiences while fostering an environment of unified supportiveness. More critical is the availability of a platform enabling action against discrimination, including protesting instances of offensive speech and forcing impartiality through the demand for fair

portrayal. Its strength lies in its ability to serve as a microphone that amplifies voices and facilitates sharing real experiences on larger scales, resulting in improved corporate responsibility towards sexual minorities within media.

While the increased representation of sexual minorities in British media during the 2010s is undoubtedly a positive development, it is important to acknowledge that there is still a long way to go in terms of ensuring accurate and diverse representation. For instance, there is still a lack of representation of LGBTQ+ people of color, disabled people, and other underrepresented groups within media outlets. Also noteworthy are social media platforms, which have enabled sharing experiences among members of the LGBTQ+ community while simultaneously serving as channels for targeted online harassment and hate speech. Conclusively, taking steps to combat these issues fall under prioritizing diversity and inclusivity when hiring practices are maintained by media outlets and when implemented by more robust measures against online harassment or hate speaking through social media platforms. Even though progress has occurred on this front in recent years, achieving accurate, equitable representation implies significantly more remains yet to be accomplished concerning sexual minorities featured in British media.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, portraying sexual minorities in media has taken considerable strides. The illustration of LGBTQ+ personalities in film, television, and other forms of media has grown increasingly distinctive and thorough, with a weightier emphasis on intricate and composite representations. These modifications have brought forth substantial beneficial outcomes concerning frames of mind and assent for those sexual minorities, as media promulgation has been documented to shape individuals' values and opinions. Nevertheless, there are still grounds for betterment in exhibiting said minorities in the media arena. This could involve invalidating prejudicial generalizations, intensifying depictions of intersectional personas, and inspiring more prominent diversification among actors and producers. By seeking more excellent representation, the media can further uphold recognition and equality for all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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