

Theoretical Lens Paper

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### Introduction

Scholars (Li & Liu, 2010; Liebler, Schwartz, & Harper, 2009; Samek, 2016; Snorton, 2013) have discussed the limitations of LGBT representation in the media and society. Hillary Clinton's gay marriage equality commercial clearly advocates for the instillation of equal marriage laws in the U.S. However, regardless of the efforts of the seemingly positive, upbeat commercial, the visibility politics and intersectionality of, and within, the LGBT community are at risk of being interpreted negatively. Clinton's proclamation that "gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights" (Clinton, 2015), despite the positive tone, has the potential to be misconstrued as creating an exclusive representation, seen in a heteronormative light, or underrepresentation of the LGBT community. I will discuss the potential misinterpretations of the Clinton campaign commercial through the lens of visibility and the lens of intersectionality in order to reveal the ways the commercial exudes exclusivity, encourages heteronormative practices, and under/misrepresents the LGBT community.

The exclusive demographic of LGBT bodies represented in the commercial highlights a lack in variation of couples and diversity with regard to religious experiences. The types of marriages portrayed are narrowed to specifically religious looking marriages and ceremonies, and the depiction of marriage is exclusive to religious LGBT members, when in actuality not all LGBT members identify with religion or partake in religious practices. Scholars (Yarhouse & Nowacki, 2007) discussed the various meanings of marriages within numerous religions and highlighted how same-sex couples marry with the intent of gaining recognition of a unity, not necessarily for religious reasons or procreation. While some LGBT couples could practice religion, or marry with the intent to have kids, the representation of all LGBT couples in the

commercial marrying in religious churches is exclusive when taking into consideration the entire LGBT population.

The LGBT bodies portrayed in the commercial perform marriage in a traditional, heteronormative manner. The commercial shows marriage practiced how society is used to seeing marriage practiced, with white dresses, suits, big receptions, in a church or outside under a trellis, with photographers, and flower bouquets. The commercial also depicts bodies which appear strongly aligned in regard to gender and gender performativity, hiding the masculine woman and the feminine man (Rand, 2013). The marriages between women in the commercial occur between two feminine looking women and marriages between men generally occur between two masculine men. The depiction of only feminine women and masculine men encourages heterosexualization of bodies and although Clinton's commercial is portrayed progressively, the commercial does a poor job of accurately representing the different ways homosexuality can, and does, look outside the world of media.

In addition to the heteronormative visibility of marriages and the heavily depicted portrayal of intersecting religion and LGBT individuals, the commercial also under represents the diverse population of the LGBT community. Most couples shown in the commercial are same race couples and the narrating couple portrays two white, masculine bodies, a picture that would appear familiar and comfortable to an audience not well acquainted with the LGBT community. Depicting such a privileged couple as the forefront of the commercial further marginalizes individuals in the LGBT community who are looking for equal rights and equal privilege. By restricting individuals to the margins, LGBT members are not gaining the recognition and inclusion the commercial appears to advocate for and the conversations the commercial encourages could vary (Hanson & Dionisopoulou, 2012; Samek, 2016).

## Visibility

The Clinton campaign commercial portrays the intersection of gay marriage and religion, but, the intersection does not entirely represent the LGBT community. Rand (2013) described visibility as the beneficial means of marginalized groups being seen and heard by the media in order to “gain greater social, political, cultural or economic legitimacy, power, authority, or access to resources” (p. 122). Gaining visibility for the LGBT community is an important aspect of the Clinton campaign commercial, however, showing couples marrying in religious settings confines the LGBT community to a place where marriage holds religious values, a familiar image to non-LGBT individuals. Religious visibility surrounding LGBT communities is not only inaccurate in representing the LGBT community, a religious form of visibility also pulls focus away from the purpose of the commercial, equal rights.

The type of attention the commercial gains for the LGBT community focuses on images that are familiar to people who do not identify as LGBT. While the goal of the commercial was to raise awareness for the community and advocate for equality, the kind of attention the commercial gains for LGBT individuals is that of heteronormative practices within the realm of marriage and union between two people. Scholars (Rand, 2013; Samek, 2016) have discussed the challenges of visibility, and in the commercial, when bodies are depicted heteronormatively, the message of equality, despite diversity, is diluted, and the message instead focuses on marriage looking the same across all kinds of people, races, and sexualities.

The hegemonic structure of the commercial, showing LGBT individuals practicing such a normalized ceremony in a heteronormative way alludes to the potential for society to understand that LGBT members accept the reinforced gender roles marriage suggests (Liebler, Schwartz, & Harper, 2009; Snorton, 2013). In addition to the potential misconstrual of LGBT values the

narrators of the commercial are masculine, white men. Portraying these men at the foreground of the commercial highlights heterosexual, white, Christians as the most visible demographic, marginalizing the intersection of other races, sexualities, and performances of gender.

Comparing the issue of equal rights to a religious-looking ceremony risks minimalizing the importance of advocating for LGBT rights and restricts conversations of diversity when assessing the importance of equality (Hanson & Dionisopoulou, 2012; Kears, 2015; Sonerton, 2013; West, 2015).

### **Intersectionality**

Scholars (Kears, 2015) described intersectionality as “a way to explain the complex relationship between systems and logics of oppression that materialize as particularly disenfranchising for those that experience multiple oppressed identities” (p. 67).

Intersectionality can clearly be seen in the Clinton campaign commercial through various races participating in LGBT marriages. While this outwardly appears progressive, there is a lack of representation of interracial marriages, which is unsettling when considering that interracial marriages are still not commonplace, and people in the population still highly disapprove of interracial relationships (Dunleavy, 2004). Highlighting whiteness and same race couples in the commercial emphasizes the limitations of media and politics when discussing controversial topics. The avoidance of multiple issues in one commercial offsets the support of advocating for equal rights and creates an avenue for shifting the conversation back to privileged individuals, who circulate regularly in the media, when people get offended (Li & Liu, 2010).

The commercial also focuses on marriages which look religious. While people of religion are not marginalized in society, often times non-Christian and non-religious people are marginalized, and for the most part, these people are not shown participating in marriage.

Authors (Campbell & Monson, 2008) also discussed the ways homosexuality marginalization could be compared to racial marginalization in regard to how the public will best perceive messages. Campbell and Monson (2008) suggested that if politicians take a stance too far extreme of either issue, they will appeal to only a specific demographic of people, and obviously minimalizing the potential audience of an issue is not beneficial when campaigning. However, the lack of representation of a specific demographic of people can be seen as exclusive to individuals in the LGBT community. For example, a latin@ individual who is gender fluid, in an interracial relationship, and has adopted a queer political standpoint in regard to marriage is not at all represented in the Clinton campaign commercial.

Excluding individuals who do not conform to the heteronormative marriage defeats the point of advocating for equal rights for all individuals. People viewing the commercial are now restricted to a lens where all LGBT members, not only appear cisgendered, but desire a heteronormative religious marriage. Scholars (Campbell & Monson, 2008; Rand, 2013; West, 2015) have highlighted the importance of recognition for intersectional, marginalized communities and the heteronormative, white visibility this commercial lends results in limited fully representational visibility of racially diverse, non-heteronormative LGBT couples.

### **Analysis**

The Clinton campaign commercial aims to celebrate and draw attention to the various bodies of America and advocate for their equal rights in society and governance. From the standpoint of the commercial, the message appears very progressive and encourages the viewers to adopt the same progressive thought: celebrating union in marriage for all people, moving toward equal, human rights. However, the commercial's way of depicting the LGBT community

lacks in equal representation of all LGBT individuals and instead focuses the attention of the commercial on white looking bodies, straight, cisgendered bodies, and religious bodies.

The bodies represented in the commercial excludes those who do not look and act in similar ways. Misrepresenting a community, while advocating for that community is detrimental. Scholars (Campbell & Monson, 2008; Kearl, 2015; Samek, 2016) have clearly discussed correct and effective ways to convey the visibility of a group of marginalized individuals. However, researchers (Samek, 2016) also discussed the importance of truly understanding and advocating for the specific needs of the LGBT community, and not just “queer visibility and inclusion” (p. 361) as a whole.

Other scholars (Yarhouse & Nowacki, 2007) discussed the different ways numerous religions practice marriage and the meanings and symbols behind the publically performed union based on different cultures’ values and beliefs. The commercial’s depiction of marriage in a heteronormative light, implies all LGBT individuals desire and want a sacred union of marriage in the disciplined fashion most people are used to seeing marriage. This assumption is disadvantageous in the way it represents the LGBT community. When discussing legal rights of equality, morality should not be a factor, and the marriage the LGBT community desire acceptance into is initially the legal, civil act of marriage (Liebler, Schwartz, & Harper, 2009). The implied religious link to marriage in the commercial lends to picturing a heterosexual bond and, in the wake of gaining visibility and leverage for the LGBT community, does little to change the thinking of conservative communities.

Researchers (Campbell & Monson, 2008; Dunleavy, 2004; Kearl, 2015; West, 2015) have also studied the intersectionality of race and the LGBT community. However, the commercial focuses on a white, straight-looking bodied, cisgendered couple. The narration from

this couple, while moving and filled with messages of acceptance, affords a sense of familiarity in the kind of body depicted and that body does not accurately represent the entirety of the LGBT community. Additionally, bodies of color, while depicted, are not shown interracial, limiting the intersection of an interracial relationship and an LGBT identity. Seeing comfortable looking bodies in the commercial and continuing to discipline the sameness of relationships strays away from the equality message the commercial intends to make. Without disrupting the norm of interracial relationships and LGBT relationships, the march toward equal rights for all bodies slows down because the media directly influences what the public learns, how much the public learns, and how the public thinks about any given controversy (Li & Liu, 2010).

The implications of misrepresenting the marginalized group of the LGBT community lie in the type of attention the group receives and the way the media presents the group to society (Hanson & Dionisopoulousm, 2012; Li & Liu, 2010; Liebler, Schwartz, & Harper, 2009; Samek, 2016). Hanson and Dionisopoulousm (2012) discussed the ways loss of rights for the LGBT community resulted in a “public devaluation of their humanity” (p. 40) and while this type of attention is obviously negative, inaccurate representation of the goals of the LGBT community can also result in negative visibility. When displaying LGBT communities in the media, the importance of accurately representing the community is reflected in the conversations that start due to the gained exposure of the community. Other scholars (Li & Liu, 2010) stated the importance of how the media covers an issue, because society will view the issue however the media frames it. The Clinton campaign commercial, while positive, lacks full representation of the LGBT community and thus the conversations that surround the commercial leave individuals out of discussion and therefore those individuals continue to remain marginalized.



In addition to the misrepresentation of the LGBT community, consequences result from negative visibility. Scholars (Rand, 2013; Yarhouse & Nowacki, 2007) have discussed how heteronormative visibility encouraged LGBT bodied people to perform their sexuality heteronormatively. Obviously, performing homosexuality heteronormatively is detrimental to the LGBT community as individuals should be able to perform their sexuality in a way that lines up with their sexual orientation. The individuals in the commercial perform marriage heteronormatively and the discipline of normative marriage draws attention away from the fact that the married persons are a part of the LGBT community. This results in visibility only geared toward the practice of marriage, and the LGBT community suffers at a lost chance for recognition (West, 2015).

Many scholars (Kearl, 2015; Snorton, 2013; West, 2015) have also discussed the practice of talking about LGBT issues using analogies. From comparing the illegality of same-sex marriage to the illegality of interracial marriage (West, 2015), to discussing the potential detriments in accurately portraying ideas within public discourse analogically (Snorton, 2013), to analogizing the civil rights movement and marriage equality (Kearl, 2015), scholars have explored the uses of speaking analogically. While this practice could potentially prove helpful, one must use analogies with caution when discussing controversial issues because doing so could potentially “[prevent] meaningful and complex conversations about power and oppression” (p. 63).

Authors (Kearl, 2015; Li & Liu, 2010; Snorton, 2013) have also researched the influence of power in regard to media, understanding certain individuals hold power over others, and how hostility between marginalized groups renders the intersection of those two groups powerless. Understanding the power that various groups have the potential to hold over others, willingly or

unwillingly, is important when understanding the aspects of issue which need to be visible. The LGBT community yields much of its power to the media, and how the media portrays LGBT individuals directly effects how society views those individuals. This power ignites an importance in moving away from heteronormative visibility of LGBT communities in regard to marriage, generally and marriage equality, specifically.

### **Conclusion**

The Clinton campaign commercial, through the lens of visibility and intersectionality, limits the accuracy of the representation the LGBT community receives when depicting the right for LGBT individuals to marry. With regard to visibility, the kinds of visibility the LGBT community gains from the media directly influences the public opinion of the community. Therefore, the LGBT community is at risk of being viewed heteronormatively when marrying, and this instilled discipline to marry according to gender roles defies the purpose of the LGBT movement and what the community and its allies stand for.

With regard to intersectionality, interracial couples were under represented in the commercial and the commercial highlighted the whiteness of the narrating couple. Focusing on the whiteness of the narrating couple draws attention away from the diversity that exists within the LGBT community and results in misrepresentation. The lack of interracial couples in the commercial pushed the intersection between race and LGBT bodies when in actuality, this intersection should not be confined to the margins.

The representation of the LGBT community in the Clinton campaign commercial subjected the LGBT community to remaining excluded, heteronormative, and underrepresented in the media and in society. The portrayal of marriage as religious excluded non-religious bodies from the civil act of marriage, and thus does not accurately include all members of the LGBT

community. The bodies in the commercial appeared cisgendered, straight-looking bodies, and the portrayal of these bodies adds to the heteronormative, gender specific roles of traditional marriage, keeping nontraditional practices of marriage marginalized and encouraging the discipline of stereotypical gender roles in marriage. The commercial under represented the LGBT community despite having a positive tone. The unaccounted individuals of the LGBT community from the commercial rendered the commercial subject to critique and discussion in order to uncover the ways the LGBT community was misrepresented.

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