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**As Seen On TV:
An exploration of how sexual assault is portrayed in young adult television**

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Dr. Kicklighter

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Abstract

Sexual assault has affected countless people, whether that be directly or indirectly. The view and narrative around sexual assault is greatly influenced by television and popular culture, including shows with subliminal messaging such as young adult television. The significance of this project is examining the degree of influence of how sexual assault is portrayed in young adult television. By examining how potentially harmful or helpful the discourse on the matter can be in respective shows, conclusions can be drawn about how these narratives affect how individuals, as well as a collective society view sexual assault. In this explorative study, the portrayal of sexual assault will be examined in relation to popular television with three young adult case studies. This paper will deconstruct *Degrassi*, *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, and *She's Gotta Have It* to observe how sexual assault portrayals have changed from 2000 to present day. It will also consider illustrations of sexual assault in highschool, college, and post-graduate settings.

This project will look at the the implications of how narrative is used to portray sexual assault in young adult television. By paying particular interest to how the three series either add or detract to the normalization of sexual assault, we are able to see a common thread of narratives including raising awareness, the exploration of the psychological impact of sexual assault, rape culture and rape myth acceptance, promotion of prevention and consent, and addressing how sexual assault can intersect with other forms of oppression, such as race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status. In examining these case studies, research and observation will be done on the role of sexual objectification of women within young adult television and how that could perpetuate rape culture in a broader setting than television. These observations will be analyzed through the lens of narrative theory.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the people who have supported me as I have pursued a higher education. Without you, I would not have been able to see my potential and achieve all that I have. Thank you for making me see this adventure through to the end.

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I would like to thank Dr. Ghislaine Lewis for being a constant resource and support system in doing this research. She kept me motivated and pushed me as an academic. I would also like to thank Dr. Michael Robinson and Dr. Laura Kicklighter for being excellent resources and providing me with insightful feedback to help better and further my research. Without them, I would not have pushed myself to explore such an important topic.

Introduction

When we think about how television has illustrated sexual assault, the most prevalent portrayal of sexual assault scenes have often been relegated to a dark alleyway with an unknown perpetrator and some poor girl stumbling home drunk. How we view rape as a society and sexual assault and how it is rationalized feeds into what are known as rape myths. According to Kimberly Lonsway in her research article, *Rape Myths: In Review*, “Rape myths are attitudes and generally false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (1994). Many rape myths are upheld due to how sexual assault is portrayed in the media, as well as the perpetual sexual objectification of women on television, using things such as ‘jiggle TV.’

Starting in 1976, rape and sexual assault started being slowly portrayed in the world of television (Cuklanz, 2000). While this was a catalyst for conversation about rape and sexual assault, portraying this sensitive of a topic using the basic plot of strangers, extreme violence, weapons and threats has likely added to greater rape myth acceptance for many. As time has progressed, television has started to portray sexual assault in different ways, adding to discourse around date rape drugs, sexual assault by an acquaintance, sexual harassment, and even intimate partner sexual violence. More recently in television, and specifically young adult television, movements such as the #MeToo movement, have been broadcasted, creating more awareness to the issue of sexual assault and harassment. The problem is, with so much media coverage around the issue and its accompanying social movements, viewers are not made aware of the vast resources available as well as they could be. Though television is slowly changing the narrative on this subject, how it is portrayed, and giving more information to help victims, there continues to be a disconnect between media portrayal and reality.

Television often utilizes narrative to make their episodes relatable and give their viewers context to make sense of the world around them. Narrative in television, especially in something as unassuming as young adult television, is a large contributor to different societal stereotypes relevant to this study such as hyper-masculinity, the sexual objectification of women, rape culture, and the heterosexual script. In the book, *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, the authors, Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, and McGeough explain and examine the use of narrative in rhetorical settings. “To be a narrative, a rhetorical action must organize people’s experiences by identifying relationships among events across time. Narratives serve as retrospectives. They make sense of events of your life by placing them in relation to one another, thus imbuing them with significance” (Palczewski et. al., 2022). Rhetoric is a communication tactic used to modify an audience's perspective on something. In this study, narrative theory is used within the context of rhetoric. Narrative explains how a story is framed and provides a rationale for how a story is told. Within this framing provided by narrative, an audience is able to observe the rhetorical argument that is put into place by narrative. Some authors argue that narrative theory and rhetoric intersect in several ways. Narratives are often used as a form of persuasive communication, and rhetoric plays a significant role in shaping narratives to achieve persuasive goals. Narratives in television often use rhetorical devices to evoke emotions, create empathy, and convey moral or ideological messages. Additionally, some authors argue that narratives can be analyzed rhetorically to understand how language is used to construct meaning and shape audience interpretations. By examining narrative theory and rhetoric used in television on a broader scale, as well as examining it within the bounds of these three case-studies, common themes of sexual objectification of women, the divide between masculinity and femininity, and the

heteronormative script are able to be observed. Furthermore, the themes aforementioned add to the subliminal messaging around societal viewpoints on sexual assault.

With this background information in mind, this thesis will address how sexual assault is portrayed in young adult television and explore the discourse that this sector of popular television has provided for viewers. By looking through the lens of narrative theory, this study will explore how the effect that the sexual objectification of women in the media has on rape myth acceptance and victim blaming. There is an apparent connection between media and rape culture, as well as rape myth acceptance. Through examining three different young adult television case studies, analyzing scenes, and looking at how sexual assault affects individual characters, as well as analyzing articles, books, and journals about sexual assault and media portrayal, this thesis will answer the following research question: How has sexual assault portrayal changed in young adult television over the last 20 years and how does this vary based on the age groups presented?

Literature Review

In the past two decades, there has been continuous research done on rape culture and its societal effects. Despite high sensitivity around the subject, mass media platforms have all taken, created, or contributed to commentary about what sexual assault is defined as and the role we see it play in our society. Contributing to discourse around sexual assault comes with controversy and stereotypes that we can contribute to what we call rape myths. Behind rape myths lie a long history of the sexual objectification of women and the heterosexual script. Media, especially television, plays a large role in both shaping and reflecting societal narratives. Television is able to add to discourse around the stigmas and stereotypes of sexual assault, how it is dealt with by both victims and perpetrators, and the impact of such trauma by following the path of either:

contributing to the normalization of sexual assault and justifying it indirectly through character actions, or detracting from this sense of normalcy by empowering survivors and raising awareness for the frequency and gravity of sexual assault. Frequent terms to be used in this research will consist of the following: rape culture, rape myths (acceptance,) sexual assault, sexual harassment, subliminal messaging, victim, perpetrator, bystander, sexualized aggression, sexual objectification, humor, and narrative.

Rape Culture and Legislation

Jackie Hogan (2022) found in accordance with rape law changes since the 1970's and through analysis of three films, *Anatomy of a Murder*, *The Accused*, and *Unbelievable*, that the attitudes around rape have shifted in some ways, however there are some glaring continuations of unchanged and unchallenged cultural values about sexual assault stereotypes. She explains,

“These normative shifts are likewise prompting concrete institutional changes, with public and private bodies now reexamining matters including non-disclosure agreements, mandatory arbitration, statutory limitations on reporting, financial caps for damages, legal definitions of sexual assault, and sexual harassment, and other institutional processes that continue to block the path to justice for survivors of sexual violence.”

In other words, legal reforms have made great progress in America and this change in legislation has translated to the change of narratives in the media. Hogan's analysis of the three films demonstrates how over the course of sixty years the degree of influence that the media has over contributing to rape culture and therefore naturalizing rape and sexual assault.

Similarly to Hogan, Tammie Jenkins (2020) analyzes three films, *The Bluest Eye*, *Blurred Lines*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, to observe the underlying narrative of rape culture through the lens of critical pedagogy in order to deconstruct the collective narrative of sexual

assault. Jenkins seeks to challenge larger social narratives by reconceptualizing rape culture as an attitude and sexual assault as a crime. Jenkins concludes that rape culture is an attitude of indifferences surrounding sexual assaults or other carnal acts held by individuals or groups normalized over time. Such views are in the narratives of the texts chosen for this exploration (113). In addition to this, Jenkins uses the analysis of how men are masculinized and women are objectified in mass media and popular culture to further conceptualize how race, sex, and class intersect. Jenkins found that in each distinct case study that there was an underlying embedded message of rape, how music influences the subliminal messaging, and how the characters in these films contribute to the attitude that is rape culture.

Nickie Phillips (2018) explores and addresses the rise in the concept of rape culture. She covers the mainstreaming of rape culture through popular culture, as well as different societal spaces. In specific she references gaming and college campuses. Rowman examines the impact of different policies, television, and virtual world on how the general public has gone on to shape rape culture. Overall, she provides a contemporary overview to the term rape culture and gives insight as to the why behind public reactions, attitudes, and responses to rape culture.

Sexual Objectification of Women

There has been substantial discourse in the field around how the hypersexualization of women in popular culture and media influences sexual violence as well as reinforces perpetrator perspectives on sexual proclivity. Silvia Galdi and Francesca Guizzo (2020) explore victim, bystander, and perpetrator perspective on the basis of the Media-Induced Sexual Harassment Framework. Galdi and Guizzo found that sexually objectifying media normalizes harassing behaviors and can be a casual risk factor in sexual harassment, the discouragement of bystander intervention, and the heightened acceptance of this kind of behavior by victims. They define the

sexual objectification of women in the media as the portrayal of women in a way that emphasizes beauty and sexual readiness. In turn, this reduces women to a kind of decorative/sexual object. Through drawing upon recent empirical evidence, the Media-Induced Sexual Harassment Framework supposes that the sexual objectification of women in the media creates a cultural environment that enables reinforces the presence of sexual harassment. Concluding their research, the authors make a suggestion that states: “to implement effective intervention strategies aimed at tackling sexual harassment, not only is it necessary to acknowledge its prevalence, but also action is required to clearly identify its causes” (662). This epidemic of sexual objectification of women in popular media often translates into personal relationships, as studied by Laura Ramsey and Tiffany Hoyt.

Laura Ramsey and Tiffany Hoyt (2014) found in a survey of 162 women that feeling objectified by a partner is related to different methods of sexual pressure and or coercion. The result of this study was that these women who experienced this sexual objectification from their partners were at increased risk for higher body shame and lowered sexual agency. Furthermore, the authors note that drawing attention to sexual objectification in the context of romantic relationships could help to improve women’s overall welfare, largely due to how big of a role relationships play in their lives and the repercussions of them. The authors also note that the objectification of women could also have a negative impact on men and in turn, may make them more likely to become perpetrators of coercion and sexual assault if they adopt this objective view of their partners. Ramsey and Hoyt suggest that there needs to be educational programs that empower women to recognize and reject the objectification that they experience to help maintain their own sexual agency. The authors suggest that by implementing a program such as this that

these women will therefore be better equipped to deal with sexual pressure and coercion from both romantic partners and others.

Leanna Papp, Monique Ward, and Riley Marshall (2021) found after conducting two different studies that there is a direct association between women watching reality television and having a greater approval/acceptance of the heterosexual script as well as sexualized aggression. The authors were also able to conclude from this study that said media consumption may directly contribute to the normalization of sexual aggression as it pertains to college settings. The authors note that college women who identify as straight and are in heterosexual relationships are coached by reality television to experience and attend to the sexual narratives presented on the shows. Additionally, through their study, the authors found a cross-over between the normalization of sexualized aggression and situational settings such as social drinking. To conclude their findings, the authors make a suggestion of how to help change the heteronormative script and its effect on the normalization of sexualized aggression by mentioning the implementation of modules that challenge college students to de and reconstruct the heterosexual script and emphasize media literacy could be helpful going forward.

Rape and Sexist Humor

After understanding the effects that the sexual objectification of women by mass media has on relationships and sexual proclivity, it is important to understand how this plays into what rape humor its effects. Monica Romero-Sanchez and Hugo Carretero-Dios (2016) conducted three different studies in order to examine the effect on sexist humor and “men’s self-reported rape proclivity.” The authors’ study, as well as other research, suggests that sexist humor can influence prejudice against women, both interpersonally and societally. Romero-Sanchez and Carretero-Dios explore how gender norms have an effect on sexist humor, and in turn influence

rape culture. The primary finding of the authors work was that when sexist jokes were delivered by women, it gave power to the situation in the sense that sexist men were able to justify, and report, their willingness to commit rape. In other words, when women delivered sexist jokes, these men were able to justify and found it permissible to commit rape, or consider committing rape. The authors conclude that their findings suggest that sexist humor has the ability and potential to influence how men who have sexist attitudes think about some different forms of rape.

In line with gender norms and sexist humor, Nathaniel Swigger (2016) poses the question in this research article, “Can pop culture influence political beliefs?” Swigger assesses this question by conducting a lab experiment on two popular sitcoms, *How I Met Your Mother* and *Parks and Recreation*. Through this experiment, Swigger found that there was strong evidence that gender norms presented in a TV show can affect the attitude around public policy as it pertains to gender issues. Additionally this study primarily dives into the attitudes around contraceptives and abortion rights depending on if gender relationships were portrayed in a positive or negative light in these two case studies. Through his study, Swigger found that sitcoms can in fact influence policy decisions around gender issues, especially those that portray the “boys will be boys” mentality and have an overlooked effect on public opinion. Swigger’s study also found a strong correlation between a respondents level of rape myth acceptance (RMA) and the predictability of their opinion after being primed with a sitcom. The author suggests that there should be further research done in order to fully understand and investigate how apolitical comedy shows influence political issues and public opinion.

Narrative Theory

Sue-Ann Harding (2013) gives an overview and exploration of the application of narrative theory within the author's own work. Harding defines narrative as a tool for academic investigation. She says, "This includes a revised typology of narratives, the combination of narratological and sociological approaches, an intratextual model of analysis, and a new emphasis on the importance of narrators and temporary narrators in the (re)configuration of narratives." In other words, Harding explores narrative in relation to her own works and other works in order to observe how scholars have engaged with narrative in order to further their work, as well as how she uses it to explore her own. After understanding how narrative theory is used by scholars, it is important to understand how narrative is used in television.

M.J. Porter, D.L. Lawson, and K.B. Nellis (2002) examine how television shapes our societal narrative and helps to define our assumptions about the nature of reality. The authors examine the structure of narrative as it relates to television on a closer level. In order to do this, they use the Scene Function Model. The authors found in application of this model, they were able to observe patterns within the narrative, how television achieves the goals of the narrative, and the functionality of scenes as they serve to elicit a certain reaction and or interpretation from viewers.

In the book, *Rhetoric and Civic Life*, Palczewski, Ice, Fritch, and McGeough, explain what the form and function of narrative is. They explain that narratives are forms of symbolic action, meaning they describe or depict events, however a narrative is not an event itself. The authors define narrative as having to organize people's experiences by identifying different relationships across a period of time. By identifying these different relationships, narratives form two different types of memory: public memory and personal memory. Forming these kinds of memories in an individual, as well as in a public sphere, narratives are able to create a sense of

culture and community by helping individuals to understand the cultural values of their societies. The authors also note that narratives are most capable of affecting people when they are developed in a certain manner. To do this, they must hold the attention of their audience utilizing plots that generally reveal information in a chronological fashion, or through character development, which should conform to behaviors the audience expects in order to further the narrative's credibility. All of these aspects that make up narrative contribute to what we hold as a social truth in order to arrive at a social reality.

In order to observe the role that sexual assault narrative plays in young adult television, it is first important to understand the role that narrative plays in television, through the lens of narrative theory. Narrative is the study of text or any work that is being analyzed. The discourse that narrative uses is encompassing of all of the elements and strategies a work uses to communicate the meaning (and often chronology) of a work. Scholars engage with narrative in order to gain a full and comprehensive understanding of a work. By engaging with narrative, one is able to gain an understanding of how not only an author, but also their larger society views dominant perspectives and stereotypes. As explained by Jason Mittell (2017), "many scholars have married feminist theory to narrative theory to explore how various narrative structures are gendered." In other words, feminist theory is largely connected to narrative theory due to the gender structure in our society. Similarly to those scholars who have observed the interwoven nature of feminist theory and narrative theory, this work analyzes the relationship between these gendered narrative structures and how young adult television portrays sexual assault. As explained by Catherine Palczewski, Richard Ice, John Fritch, and Ryan McGeough (2022), narratives serve the function of forming memory, as well as create a unified sense of cultural identity and community. The television audience is able to identify with the characters through

the use of narrative, allowing the authors, actors, and audience to create a sense of community through character development. By absorbing what is put on the screen in front of us and processing the subliminal messages portrayed in the show, television is able to influence audience viewpoints by contributing to individual and collective social reality.

Given the nature of the issue, it is important to look at each series case-study in a certain way. By analyzing the narrative behind each instance of sexual assault in the respective series, one is able to observe the societal narrative that television portrays in regard to sexual assault and the effect that contemporary young adult television has on messaging.

Methods

With the aforementioned research in mind, this study examines qualitative data on how sexual assault is portrayed in young adult television and identifies the objectives of how narrative theory is used by looking at three young adult television case-studies. In looking at these case studies, specific characters in each will be followed and evaluated based on their own sexual assault story and how that affected them as a character. By examining character story lines and the role that sexual assault plays in them is reflective of how society perceives sexual assault and how it has changed as time and laws progress. This data has been collected from three different case studies that were chosen based on 5 evaluative criteria. This research consists solely of qualitative data in order to effectively analyze sources and case studies. It should be noted that in this study, the episodes chosen to be analyzed were not chosen at random. The selected episodes were chosen in order to observe the progression of how a specific instance of sexual assault in the case study affected the character's development in the following episodes and the methods they used to cope with the trauma they experienced.

Evaluation criteria:

These case studies chosen to be evaluated were based on the following 5 criteria.

1. Representation of a diverse cast
 - a. This representation includes that of different races, sexualities, and gender.
2. Created in one of the three following decades: 2000's, 2010's, 2020's.
3. The show is demonstrative of one of the following age group settings: high school, college, and postgraduate.
4. Relevance and reflectiveness of the legal and social practices during the time period the show was first produced.
5. Includes practical examples of sexual assault.

The following objectives of narrative theory are used and analyzed in accordance with each case study. Narrative theory is also used to analyze common themes in each of the case-studies and determine how that affects viewer's perception of rape culture.

Narrative Objectives:

1. Observation of narrative fidelity and narrative probability and how they work to form a storyline.
2. The role of character development in pushing a certain narrative.
3. How does the text contribute to a commonly held social reality?

Finally, the data collected from different journals, articles, and books are used to examine how popular television impacts societal perceptions of rape culture and rape myths.

Analysis:

This work is a result of a cumulative analysis of both case-studies and research around how sexual assault is portrayed in young adult television. Analysis of this data is based on current

understandings of how narrative is used in television. By analyzing television narratives, conclusions can be drawn on what the subliminal messages are in each case-study.

Description and Background of Case Studies:

Degrassi: The Next Generation:

A series created by Linda Schuyler and Yan Moore, *Degrassi* is the longest running drama series in Canadian history (Degrassi.tv). There are six different brand installments of the show, beginning with *The Kids of Degrassi St.* in 1979 (to 1986) and followed by (in order,) *Degrassi Junior High* (1987-1989,) *Degrassi High* (1989-1991,) *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, *Degrassi* (2001-2015,) and *Degrassi Next Class* (2016-2017,) *Degrassi* offers commentary on a variety of topics and real life issues that affect disparate age groups. The series is arguably one of the most important young adult television shows ever made. With the latter series running for almost four decades, viewers are able to see the progression of societal norms from different time periods and observe the growth of the characters. The writers in *Degrassi* seek to tackle a variety of social issues that plague young people of different age groups and in different settings. *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, alone, dedicated its air time to important issues including, but not limited to: dating struggles, peer pressure, bullying, physical abuse, sexual abuse, substance abuse, school shootings, diversity, fatphobia, mental illness, racism, and homophobia (Mahoney, 2021). In this explorative study, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* will be used as the first case study, examining the character Paige Michalchuk and her sexual assault storyline to observe how the trauma from being sexually assaulted affected her character and the commentary surrounding it as an early 2000's show.

She's Gotta Have It:

Filmmaker, Spike Lee, created the Netflix original series, *She's Gotta Have It* as a reimagining of his first feature film *She's Gotta Have It* in 1986, which grossed \$7.1 million in the box office (Daniels, 2019). Spike Lee is one of the most well-known filmmakers for his work in exploring the African-American experience by challenging racial stereotypes and addressing controversial issues. Lee is also credited with expanding the minds of the American film industry to “an unprecedented degree” to the contributions of African American talent (New York State Writers Institute). First airing in 2017, the show follows the life of the main character, Nola Darling, as she explores her art, sexuality, and balancing a career, friends, family, and love. In creating the project, Lee took interest in the “Stop Telling Women to Smile” street art campaign created by Tatyana Fazlalizdeh and brought her on as the primary artist of the show as well as a consultant. Fazlalizdeh’s work is reimagined in the series as Nola’s “My Name Is” series. The artwork used in the show allows Lee’s contemporary narrative to shine through and create commentary on the struggles of sexuality, feminism and black experience in America. As the second case study in this project, the first season of the series will be examined and follow the implications of the sexual harassment Nola faces and how that affects her character development, translating into her art and other areas of her life.

Sex Lives of College Girls:

Created by Mindy Kaling, an award winning actress, writer, producer, and director and Justin Noble, writer, executive story editor, and producer, airing in 2021, *Sex Lives of College Girls* follows four roommates, Bela, Leighton, Whitney, and Kimberly, as they enter college and explore their sexuality and being on their own for the first time. The series takes a contemporary approach to female sexuality and its societal portrayal with an unlikely group of friends from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, sexual experiences, and socioeconomic statuses. The show

focuses heavily on sex positivity, as well as the nature of sorority and fraternity life in college and how it affects the students involved in those organizations, as well as on the periphery. In this final case study, the first season of the series will be examined and will follow the experiences and development of the hyper-sexual, positive Bela Malhotra after she is repeatedly sexually assaulted by a superior in her dream comedy club, the Catullan. This study will look at how she dealt with the aftermath of the trauma and the steps she took after being assaulted, noting the reactions of her peers and how she herself reacts.

Results

Narratives shape every aspect of life, from the popular culture experienced on a broad scale to an interpersonal level. Narrative theory helps us to understand the text that is being presented to us and in turn allows the audience to understand the context of the text. Narrative is the basis of television, as television gives its audience a story, or some sequence of events, and helps the viewer make sense of it. The storylines within television are shaped by the social reality of a culture. This contribution to social reality allows television as a medium to influence societal viewpoints and add to the discourse around relevant social issues. When sexual assault was first brought on to television in 1976, it created a space on television for such a sensitive topic to be talked about and portrayed in both very realistic and unrealistic manners.

After understanding the role that narrative plays in television, we are able to analyze the first case study, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. This case study is based around one of the main characters in the show, Paige Michalchuk. Paige is a 14 year old, stereotypical high school mean girl who serves as the show's primary antagonist during the first season and into the second season. During season 2 is when the audience is able to see Paige's true character arc, as well as

a main arc within the show itself. In season 2, episodes 7 and 8, “Shout (1 and 2,)” Paige is invited to a party by her long-time crush, Dean Walton at his home. After arriving at the party, Paige hits on Dean, asking him to go upstairs with her. Dean accepts and heads upstairs with Paige, then asking her if she wants to have sex. Paige, not ready to lose her virginity, declines Dean’s offer for sex to which he responds by ignoring her. Repeatedly saying no and unable to fight him off, Paige is raped. The rape scene itself is not actually showed in the episode. As viewers, we see Dean pull out a condom as the camera pans to the party occurring outside and hear Paige’s repeated pleas for Dean to stop and to get off of her. The next scene after the rape occurs features Paige, sitting alone on the bleachers with a very solemn look on her face and we are able to hear background audio of her and Dean’s conversation from the night before.

The repercussions of being raped and the trauma from it follow Paige throughout the episode, as well as in the show as a whole. After she is assaulted, Paige is pestered with questions from her friends about her night with Dean, reacting angrily when someone brings it up. Distraught and terrified, Paige confides in a friend, Hazel, who encourages her to take several courses of action including going to the doctor to check for STDs and talking to the guidance counselor. In the sister episode, “Shout (2,)” Paige focuses on her own recovery and reunites with her all-girl band in order to enter into a music competition. One of her bandmates writes a song about sexual assault. After telling her story, the character, Ashley, who wrote the song informs the band of her rationale saying, “I did some research online. Did you know one in four girls experiences sexual assault before they attend university?” In light of what happened to her, Paige refuses to perform the song, until she spots Dean in the audience, and she delivers the very powerful lyrics, ending the episode in triumph.

Now that we understand the storyline of what happened to Paige Michalchuk's character, we are able to analyze it in accordance with narrative theory. It is important to note when examining this case study that *Degrassi: The Next Generation* is rated TV-14, which can account for the fact that though rape is portrayed in this episode, the writers were likely not able to show a more graphic depiction of it due to their target demographic. With that in mind, how the scene is shot is important when examining the impact of the narrative. Because *Degrassi* could not show the actual rape scene on camera, the film makers made a decision to pan the scene to the party outside. By doing this, they are able to showcase how Paige and Dean's friends were merely feet away with no idea of what was occurring in the room upstairs. The environment that this took place made certain that there were bystanders, however, there were none that could intervene or have knowledge of what was occurring while they were partying outside. As these two episodes progress, the audience is able to observe a number of things. Paige is raped by someone she knows and trusted. Due to past portrayal of sexual assault and rape in television, people often associate the act with that of a stranger when in fact 45% of sexual assaults are committed by an acquaintance (RAINN). Furthermore, by setting up the narrative in such a way that Paige is raped by a peer, confides in a close friend, comes to terms with the act, as well as the fact that it is not her fault, and eventually press charges against Dean in season 3, the writers of *Degrassi* give commentary on the idea that as a society we should not place the blame on victims and seek justice. It is important to note that Paige and Dean's trial goes until season 4 and due to the amount of victim blaming that occurred, Dean was found not guilty. This further pushes the narrative that even when justice is sought, it is not always served, as well as the notion that victim blaming perpetuates rape culture. Other observable narratives present in this arc of episodes include the fact that when Paige told Hazel she was raped, she pointed her in the

right medical and mental health direction for support as well as Ashley quoting a statistic about sexual assault. The writers of *Degrassi*, rather than creating the persona of a helpless victim and pitying friends, pushed the narrative of education and resources. In terms of relevant legislation, *Degrassi* High was set in Toronto, Canada. Up until May of 2008, the legal age of consent in Canada was 14 (Miller, Cox, and Saewyc, 2010). During the time of her assault, Paige was 14 years old, being the legal age of consent in Canada at the time, whereas Dean was 17. The narratives present in this case study are exemplary of the ramifications of sexual assaults that happen in a highschool setting, as well as the importance of education around sexual assault to an overall high school age group.

After examining Paige's character arc and the ramifications that victim blaming and the failure of the justice system have on rape at a high school age group, we are able to better analyze and understand something that many deem as less traumatic: sexual assault. By examining the character, Bela Malhultra from the *Sex Lives of College Girls*, we are able to observe a common instance of sexual assault in a college setting. Prior to coming to Essex, the college that serves as the main setting for *Sex Lives of College Girls*, Bela was an awkward, inexperienced, and somewhat sheltered girl. A pivotal plot in the show to her character is the fact that she is a woman of color whose dream is to be a comedian. In order to pursue her dream of being a comedian, Essex is home to one of the most prestigious and renowned comedy clubs, the Catullan.

Bela endures a sexist ritual in order to join the Catullan. She is depicted giving handjobs to six members of the voting committee which is shown in the episode through a series of different cut-scenes, Bela is chosen to be a member. This instance should be noted within the context of what a streaming service is allowed to portray. Bela chooses to do this, believing it

will help ensure her spot in the Catullan. Instantly, this has ramifications for Bela, as it makes her wildly unpopular with the few female members in the Catullan and she later feels guilty and disgusted by her actions. We should take into account the shock and fear factor that this scene demands of its audience, as it gives insight into the sexual objectification of women and how many feel they need to perform in order to get a leg up from their competition in a male dominated field. After joining, as an interning support staff, Bela started to experience sexual harassment from one of her superiors, an editor at the Catuallan, Ryan. The first incident that occurred with Ryan happened in season 1, episode 5. When Bela learned that the Catullan editors were having a wine and cheese soiree, Bela decided that it would be in her best interest to go to the party, uninvited, in order to win favor with the editors and in turn, they would select her piece so that she could be a full member. During this party, Ryan invites Bela into his room and tells her how much he liked her piece. Following his flattery, he proceeds to ask Bela if he can “show her a funny video” and puts on pornography. Uncomfortable, Bela stands there and watches and leaves the room when it is over, not giving the situation much thought, other than the fact that it was unprecedented and strange.

Just two episodes later, in episode 7, Bela is accompanied by two of her other peers and Ryan after turning in their final submission to the Catullan to be considered for membership. One of her peers asks Ryan if they are able to see the autograph wall upstairs to which he agrees. After admiring the wall, the two peers leave Bela and Ryan upstairs. The unsuspecting Bela is admiring the wall when Ryan pushes himself up against her backside and assaults her. When this happens, Bela pushes him off and excuses herself. When working with another writer at the Catullan, and one of the only other women in the club, Bela learns that Ryan showed his penis to her without her consent and seemingly, very much at random. The writer, Carla, asks if he has

done anything of that nature to Bela, to which she denies that he has. Later in the episode, the editors announce that Carla has quit the Catullan. Bela is upset by this news and confides in Leighton, telling her what happened. In the two following episodes, Bela tells two other members of the Catullan, Eric and Evangeline, about the incidents that occurred with Ryan, to which she is met with doubt from Eric. He later apologized and he and some other senior members, as well as Bela and Carla confront Ryan about his actions, which he denies, and he is kicked out of the Catullan. In light of this, Bela realizes that the Catullan is not what she thought and no longer wants to be a part of it, so she quits as well, followed by two other women in the club to start their own all-women comedy club on campus.

Within this storyline and character arc, the audience is able to observe the narrative put into play by the writers, demonstrating how people in positions of power are able to take advantage of those who are lower than them. Bela's assault contributes to the idea of narrative fidelity, which is whether the events included in the story correspond to the audience's experiences and understanding of reality (Palczewski et. al, 2022). Additionally, the fact that Bela was under the impression that in order to be one of the only female members of the Catullan, she needed, or it would be to her advantage, to give handjobs to the voting committee in order to further her personal agenda, speaks volumes about the social reality she faces as a woman of color at a wealthy, predominantly white institution. Furthermore, the character development of Bela and the course of action she takes is exemplary of the narrative pushed by the show's writers. From the beginning of the show, Bela is portrayed as very sex positive and confident. By portraying her in this way, it adds to the notion that no one is exempt from experiencing this kind of trauma. After her assault, it is clear through her actions and body language that her confidence is slightly shaken. She confronts Ryan about his actions, stuttering

and saying that she “Doesn’t want to do whatever this is” and proceeds to ask him “Are we cool?” She quickly excuses herself and leaves the room. The next mention of her assault does not come until the next episode. However, when she came forward to tell her peers about the assault, she experienced disbelief from one of the male characters. This disbelief is exemplary of how many do not want to believe that their loved ones and colleagues are capable of being a perpetrator. Later in the episode, she was apologized to for his lack of willingness to believe her and asked if she wanted to take action against her perpetrator. From experiencing this support, Bela was able to take action against Ryan and have him removed from the organization. This narrative pushes the idea that victims of sexual assault should seek support and justice against their perpetrator, rather than keep quiet in fear that no one will believe them. At a college level, instances such as what was depicted happening to Bela and Carla in this case study happen frequently and are often ignored and normalized, especially in a social setting. By portraying her traumatic experience this way, victims of sexual assault, like Bela and Carla, are shown that they have courses of action available to them that should be taken, such as involving Title IV, as mentioned in the show by Bela.

Finally, the third case study in this research is derived from *She’s Gotta Have It* and follows the main character Nola Darling. Nola is introduced as a polyamorous, sexually liberated artist, struggling to define and establish herself. In the very first episode of the series, Nola is walking home from a friend’s house late at night. During her walk home, she is catcalled by a man on the street. After talking back to him, the stranger approaches her, grabs her from behind while holding her wrists. Nola manages to escape the man’s grasp and the man angrily calls her a “black bitch.” From this point on, viewers are able to observe the paranoia Nola experiences as a result of this assault. This paranoia includes Nola constantly looking over her shoulder, as the

series progresses, experiencing flashbacks to her assault, constantly on edge as she goes about her everyday life. Her psychological state translates into her relationships with her lovers, causing her to be defensive, confrontational, and irritable in the episodes following the assault. As a result, Nola makes the decision to be done with men for a time and cuts off contact with Jamie, Greer, and Mars and begins experimenting with a lesbian relationship. As she tries to heal herself from this trauma, Nola experiments with several different coping mechanisms and treatment options including going to therapy, going to see a spiritual healer, and ultimately creating a street art campaign against street harassment (which ultimately ends up being defaced.)

As Nola's storyline and character development progress through the first season, the viewers are able to relate to Nola's character and empathize with her trauma. Catcalling is an extremely common form of sexual harassment experienced by countless women daily, so much so that it has become normalized. As it is, catcalling can be terrifying and traumatic for a woman, fearing that the individual who catcalled you may approach you and the situation escalates. Many's fear became the reality for Nola as the stranger pushed himself up against her, restraining her wrists. As stated in *Rhetoric and Civic life*, "Characters in narratives should conform to the behaviors that the audience expects. If those behaviors are antithetical to audience expectations, the audience is likely to dismiss the narrative" (Palczewski et. al, 2022). Nola's character conforms to behaviors that an audience would expect from a victim of sexual assault, trying different coping mechanisms and seeking an outlet in order to gain back their power after they felt it was taken away from them. In Angelica Florio's article, "How Spike Lee Corrected 'She's Gotta Have It's Controversial Rape Scene For Netflix," she explains how the point of this sexual assault scene is that it is not nearly as violent as the movie and how a "less intense"

incident still requires processing. She says, “the Netflix series suggests that any level of violence towards women — even catcalling, which is pretty much universal — can traumatize women” (2017). Many have called this series Spike Lee’s ‘feminist awakening’ (Little, 2017). He explained his regrets with his 1986 film, *She’s Gotta Have It* in an interview with *Deadline*, “It made light of rape, and that’s the one thing I would take back. I was immature and I hate that I did not view rape as the vile act that it is” (Bowen 2017). By pushing the narrative of the trauma and powerlessness that sexual harassment, and even cat-calling can cause, Lee’s contemporary take on his original film contributes to the social reality of what it is like to be a woman in modern-day America. Additionally, this narrative contributes to the widespread prevalence of the #MeToo during this time period.

Discussion

Each year, there is greater media exposure detailing the implications and prevalence of sexual assault. Because of this, more progressive narratives are being brought into play and forcing change of societal viewpoints. The narrative of the media that viewers consume affects how they internalize what sexual assault is and the physical and emotional repercussions of it for all parties involved, whether that be the victim, loved ones, or even the perpetrator. As consumers of television and based on the current literature available, we are able to see how our societal perception of sexual assault has changed over the years and educate ourselves on the resources available for those who have been a victim. The portrayal of sexual assault in young adult television is a complex and multifaceted topic that deserves careful consideration. Sexual assault is a serious and sensitive issue that affects individuals of all ages, including young adults. Television shows aimed at young adult audiences have grappled with depicting sexual assault in various ways, sometimes accurately and responsibly, while other times falling short and

perpetuating harmful stereotypes or misconceptions. Television is a very powerful medium that can raise awareness and create conversations about the topic. It can provide a platform for survivors to share their stories and highlight the impact of sexual assault on individuals and communities. Television shows can also serve as educational tools, shedding light on the importance of consent, healthy relationships, and seeking support after experiencing sexual assault. Moreover, young adult television has the potential to depict the complexities of sexual assault, including the emotional and psychological aftermath, and the challenges survivors face in navigating the legal and social systems. This can help break down the harmful myth that sexual assault is solely a physical act, and highlight the long-term effects it can have on survivors' mental health, relationships, and overall well-being.

The three case studies that were examined exemplify the role of character development in their storylines and by using these character arcs, these contemporary television shows are able to demonstrate the push for change in societal narratives. These young adult television shows pushed a narrative advocating for believing survivors of sexual assault, as well as helped to educate their audiences on the different resources, statistics, and coping mechanisms around sexual assault, rather than normalizing the behavior. The female characters who were victims of sexual assault within each of these case studies illustrate a realistic depiction of the effects of trauma. By portraying peer support, as well as discussing the different courses of legal and social action, each of these shows help to decrease the social reality of rape myth acceptance. Furthermore, based on the data collected, the hyper-sexualization of women on television is a large contributor to rape myths and culture. One common critique in young adult television is that sexual assault is sometimes sensationalized or used as a plot device for shock value or entertainment purposes, rather than being portrayed with sensitivity and accuracy. This can

perpetuate harmful stereotypes or misconceptions about sexual assault, such as victim blaming or trivializing the severity of the issue. It can also reinforce harmful gender norms, such as portraying sexual assault as something that only happens to women, or portraying survivors in stereotypical roles, such as weak or helpless. Narrative theory helps to shed a new light on this topic by drawing parallels between reality (in legislation and statistics around sexual assault,) and the why behind why young adult television portrays sexual assault in the manner in which they do. Based on the following research, the conclusion should be drawn that young adult television shows can serve as a direct reflection as to a society's viewpoints and conceptions about sexual assault.

In these three case studies, these three different women characters, all of different races, age groups, and time periods were exemplary of the trauma of sexual assault that 1 in 6 women deal with every day (RAINN.org). The writers of these shows were able to push contemporary narratives by showcasing how their characters were able to overcome the trauma they experienced and the steps they took to seek justice in their own ways. By observing different sectors of perpetrators (acquaintance, superior, and stranger) in different age groups and time periods, we are able to see the change in reaction from character to character. Regardless of time period or age group, these women all experienced slut shaming and some forms of harassment from their previous sexual partners. However, in regards to each of their assaults, as the different age groups progressed, the course of legal action went from a criminal case in *Degrassi*, to removing the perpetrator from a position of authority and an organization in *Sex Lives of College Girls*, to finally a street art campaign in *She's Gotta Have It*. This shows the progress of women moving towards less legal action and more social action with age. Some common themes observed in all three case studies include victim blaming, the individual pursuit of justice, and

the recognition that sexual assault or harassment is not the victims' fault. Furthermore, these three case studies also include subliminal resources, such as statistics, coping mechanisms, and suggestions for those who may have experienced sexual assault, pushing the education of sexual assault awareness, rather than contributing to commonly held rape myths and stereotypes that are largely based on a woman's appearance, sexuality, and her promiscuity. By normalizing sexual assault in young adult television and seeing the effects of that normalization (in victim blaming, rape myth acceptance, and disbelief of victims,) by characters on our screens, we should not let it detract from the heinous, unjustifiable action of sexual assault. These shows were able to identify the effects of normalization and push the narrative that sexual assault and sexual harassment is inexcusable, regardless of the circumstance.

It is important to note that gaps in the literature still remain. Limited young adult television shows have touched the idea around sexual assault in men. Additionally, there has been limited research on if exposure to things like porn and other media with hyper-sexualization of women affect the likelihood of men being sexually aggressive.

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