

“Of Vampires and Men:” A content analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

SOCI 4309 – Qualitative Research Methods

Final Project: Unobtrusive Method/Content Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, it is estimated that every year 300,00 women are raped, and 97% of rapists are never incarcerated. While there has been a reported decline of cases of rape, at least 54% are left unreported every year. Cases of rape in the United States frequently blame the victim, leaving the assailant to minimal prison sentences or no sentence at all (CDC, 2016). This study aims to analyze how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* portrays rape culture and what it means to blame the victim in the instance of sexual assault.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a fictional television series which is considered to be a cult classic from prime-time television. The show targeted teenage women and promotes the role of the strong leading female figure. It follows Buffy Summers, a teenage girl bestowed with the heritage of the slayer bloodline. She was the one girl in the world who could slay the vampires and fight the demons with the powers of the slayer. Surrounded by friends and comedic relief Xander Harris and Willow Rosenberg, Buffy Summers fought mystical threats while attempting to maintain normality in her teenage years. The use of magic and fantasy throughout the series stands as a metaphor for real-life issues, delving into uncomfortable topics without addressing them head-on. While the show ran from 1997 through 2003, it continues to have a strong following through fans and the release of graphic novels, which continue into the eighth and ninth season of the story.

Regardless of the recent decline in reported rape in the United States, rape culture has clearly not disappeared, and victim blaming is regularly in the news. In 2016, a college student by the name of Brock Turner stood on trial for the sexual assault of a young woman behind a dumpster. Despite her testimony and the charges made on Brock Turner, he was given a

minimum sentence of only six months, with the possibility of early release due to good behavior. Rape culture continues to be a perpetual problem in today's society.

Prime-time popular culture television plays a large role in the understanding of social aspects such as rape culture. Youths and adults in today's society find connections and commonalities between themselves and the fictional characters which they idolize, making prime-time television a factor in the learning process of social stigma. Considering the cult-classic standing of the fictional television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as well as the amount of viewers who idolize Buffy Summers as a strong female lead, it is imperative to analyze and understand the potential influence aspects of this television show has on today's society, specifically women and their view on victim blaming, gender roles, and the portrayal of the rapist.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interest in the portrayal of rape culture on popular culture television is rapidly growing. Studies surrounding this manner also find interest in the construction of rape myths through femininity and patriarchy, as well as an underlying theme of victim blaming. Furthermore, there is a general understanding that prime-time television is reflective of and shows the construction of social aspects of life, including but not limited to today's rape culture. Examining how the media and pop-culture represent rape culture is important due to the fact that young and adult minds alike are molded into products of what they see and how they react to violence toward women. Television has the power to change perspectives in negative and positive manners, and it is important to understand the implications of sexual violence on prime-time television. The following section will describe important themes in the current research, how is rape culture portrayed in television?

Discussion on portrayal of rape myths joins the discussion the cultivation of social norms and mores through television programs. Brinson argues that television programs may be viewed as “vehicles through which cultural values and attitudes are absorbed and redistributed.” (Brinson, 1992). Through this assertion it is understood that the use of the taboo subject of rape for plot development in prime-time television exposes young viewers to rape culture in a subtle fashion. As such, it is also argued through Custers and Van den Bulck (2012) that the growing culture of fear among woman “grows among a culture of violence against women,” and assert that one does not require having direct experience with sexual violence. Indirect experience is “sufficient to feed this culture of fear.” (Custers and Van den Bulck, 2012). They continue to focus on the idea of cultivation theory, the idea that a great deal of socialization takes the form of storytelling. Stories are created to illustrate social order and what is to be accepted as normal. There is, however, argument that there is a lack of evidence to suggest that sexual material and violence on television directly influences young viewer’s sexual attitudes (Burr 2009). Burr states that censorship of notions of sexual violence and ambiguity “deprives viewers of the opportunity to reflect upon [...] sexual mores.” (Burr, 2009). In this argument, it is apparent that the problem is not within the sexual content itself, instead it in the inaccurate representation of victims and offenders. This posits the question of fault and solution; what role does the media truly have in shaping norms about rape culture? What would be the most appropriate call to action, censorship or exploration of violence against women in prime-time television?

Examining the role of rape culture in the media, specifically in prime-time television, increases the social ability to answer questions on how society views sexual violence. As expressed in a conversation of modernity and post-feminism, Susan Owen points out the representation of adolescent rites of passage in the cult television series *Buffy, the Vampire*

Slayer. In her discussion, she expresses that viewers of the teen drama were “invited to reflect upon violence committed toward teen females by teen males” (Owen, 1999). It is no secret that creator of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon, emphasizes the importance of the strength of the female character. He has been cited on numerous occasions for his attempts to turn the tables on the typical “victim/assailant” role through empowering the role of women. Buffy Summers, for instance, was designed to oppose the stereotype of the female role. As a small blonde teenager, she defied female stereotypes in having the ability to stand on her own. Owen points this out as the series playing at transgression, or going against a law, rule, or code of conduct, yet it “remains to be seen” whether transgressive television can “challenge institutional relations to power.” It is further asserted, as well, by Strain, Martens, and Saucier that the presentation of rape culture in comedy and humor can either reinforce or challenge sexual violence (2016). In this sense, it is clear that sexual violence and rape myths can be represented either positively or negatively, through normalizing and belittling the action of rape, or instead by causing discourse in the conversation and bringing light to the seriousness of the matter.

In a content analysis study of prime-time television of the 1980’s and its portrayal of rape, Brinson makes the claim that the extreme use of rape myths in prime-time television reinforces the belief of victim blaming (1992). Her expression emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of sexual violence on prime-time television as a means for preparing young minds to cope with attacks against women. Her analysis of popular television dramas represented the extensive use of the rape myths including “asking for it, wanting it, lying about it, and not being hurt” in 26 rape storylines. This finding, however, can be contested when digging deeper into the root of the issue; the portrayal of sexual violence and femininity can positively influence today’s culture. In *The Journal of Whedon Studies*, Winter draws a

connection between Buffy, the small blonde female taking the role of the vampire slayer, and gender hybridity. She asserts that “Buffy’s embodiment is not limited by fear of sexual violence [...] but undermines patriarchal restrictions on feminine movement” (2016). By empowering the role of the female, rape culture is being contested. The stigma following rape culture and sexual violence views the woman as the frail and helpless victim, and through empowering the female role and increasing their ability to avoid fear, prime-time television can re-shape cultural norms of patriarchy and femininity.

In conclusion, analysis of rape culture in the media follows a long history of social constructs of gender and sexual violence. Specifically, representation of gender roles and violence towards women in popular culture television posits the insinuation that the representation of women in television has a striking result in ideals towards rape culture. By empowering the female role, writers are contesting the notion of the woman as the victim. By censoring sexual violence, television series could potentially perpetuate myths about rape culture and the overarching notion of fear among women. Media analysis of rape culture and representation of the female body in depicting sexual violence will add to the growing body of work surrounding the culture of rape and violence society has stumbled into. Furthermore, it will enforce an understanding of the myths surrounding rape culture to today’s society.

DATA AND METHODS

This study utilizes an unobtrusive method to analyze how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* portrays rape culture. I conducted a content analysis of seven episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Content analysis is an unobtrusive method of research which collects data from an already existing source, which exists independent of the research itself (Hessey-Biber and Leavy,

2011:228). For the purpose of this study, I purposefully selected seven episodes which featured instances of sexual assault and rape culture.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a fictional television series which is considered to be a cult classic from prime-time television which follows Buffy Summers, the one girl in the entire world equipped with the power to slay the vampires and vanquish the demons roaming around Sunnydale, California. She is surrounded by friends Xander Harris and Willow Rosenberg, as well as a father-figure by the name of Rupert Giles, who offer their helping hand in her dangerous missions and attempt for normality in her life as a teenager. The television series ran from 1997 through 2003, and aired on the WB network.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer was chosen based upon its' representation of the female role, and the use of fantastical events to portray real-life issues. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* first aired in 1997 and emphasizes the role of a strong leading female. Because I was interested in how rape culture was portrayed in popular culture television, specifically how victim blaming, conflicting gender roles, and the portrayal of the assailant were represented, content analysis was the most appropriate methodology for the question "How *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* portrays rape culture".

I examined seven episodes of the six-year run of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* paying attention to specific phrases, scenes, and character expressions which I then collected and analyzed. I then began the coding process of the material, where I was able to group and analyze common themes throughout the content. This helped me connect similar concepts and combine them into larger groups, which were examined for descriptive and literal codes. These codes were then reduced into three analytical themes. There were, however, limitations to my study which furthermore need to be addressed.

One major limitation of my study is the fact that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ran in the late 1990's into the beginning of the 2000's, which marks this television series in a different generation. By exploring a television show which has been off the air for over a decade, I am missing important queues which exist in current popular culture television. Secondly, by using a television series based on fantasy I am missing an instance of realism which would provide additional insight. Lastly, there were no other methodologies used such as in-depth interviews in order to analyze the existence of rape culture in prime-time television. Regardless of these limitations, content analysis was sufficient to answer my research question.

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to examine how rape culture is portrayed in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. To do this, I examined seven episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* which were purposefully selected to answer my research question. The episodes analyzed are the following episodes: The Pack (Season 1, Episode 6), Reptile Boy (Season 2, Episode 5), Bewitched Bothered and Bewildered (Season 2, Episode 16), Go Fish (Season 2, Episode 20), Once More with Feeling (Season 6, Episode 7), Dead Things (Season 6, Episode 13), and Seeing Red (Season 6, Episode 19). These episodes were purposefully selected due to their involvement of sexual assault, and helps demonstrate how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* portrays rape culture. The findings answer my research question.

Three major themes were found upon completing data collection and analysis. (1) Punishment and blame fall onto the victim, not the assailant; (2) Social norms for gender roles are perpetuated and cause conflict; (3) The role of the assailant is always the "nice guy", often somebody well known by the victim. I will discuss these three themes and provide readers with insight into the accurate portrayal of rape culture in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Still not asking for it.

Theme 1: Punishment and blame fall onto the victim, not the assailant.

One major finding of this study is that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* portrays a realistic examination of victim-blaming in rape culture. Based upon the content, the victim of sexual assault is blamed for the attack due to the clothes they were wearing, who they were attracted to, or whether or not they were drugged or put under a spell. In nearly every instance of a sexual assault or attempted rape, the assailant was excused for their actions because the victim was “asking for it”.

Throughout the selected episodes for content analysis, Buffy Summers is often the sole victim of sexual assault. In nearly every situation, she is not only the victim of attempted rape, but the victim of blame by her peers and superiors as well as blame of herself. When faced by Xander Harris, who had been possessed by a mystical hyena in “The Pack”, she was told she “liked her men dangerous”, making it her fault that she had been attacked. Their mutual friend, Willow Rosenberg, came to his aid and reminded Buffy that he wasn’t himself: it was the hyena in him. This is a fantastical representation of the involvement of drugs and alcohol in instances of rape. Because Xander was not himself, because he had no control over his own actions, he was forgiven too quickly for attempted rape. In a later episode, “Go Fish”, a member of the swim team forced himself on Buffy and in an act of self-defense, she quickly broke his nose. When faced by the Sunnydale High School principal, the blame was quickly turned to the victim. The assailant claimed to have been lead on by the clothes she chose to wear. After being told to dress more appropriately for school, Buffy herself admitted that her lack of bruises hurt her case. The fact of the matter is that it was never the assailant’s fault: they were lead on by her choices

of clothing and her desire for the “dangerous type”, alluding to her romantic relationship with the vampire Angel.

Even Giles, who represents a father figure throughout the series, falls accustom to victim blaming and normalizing the instance of rape culture. In the same episode Xander Harris was possessed by a hyena, he brushed off the boy’s actions by claiming he was simply going through puberty. When Buffy came to him for help, he expressed that “that’s just what high school boys do- they prey on the weak”. His oblivious nature to the instance of rape culture carries into numerous episodes, including “Reptile Boy”, when Buffy was given a date rape drug at a fraternity party to be offered as tribute for a demon who would offer the fraternity eternal wealth. When she finally escapes and her friends, including Giles, come to her aid, she is remorseful. She apologizes for lying, and for drinking alcohol. In what mirrors many real-life cases of sexual assault, Giles reminds her that this was a lesson to be learned: had she told the truth and had she not drank alcohol underage, it never would have happened. In Giles’ mind, Buffy was not the victim; she lied about her whereabouts and she joined in an activity that put herself in danger, making the abduction her fault, not the fraternity’s.

Themes of victim blaming are found throughout the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* franchise in a disturbing and fantastical way: when a young girl was overpowered by the antagonists of season six, The Trio, and turned into their sex slave, she was told it was her fault, because she had broken up with the leader of the gang. Later, when the vampire Spike assaulted Buffy in her own bathroom, it was because he had no soul, and he expected a quick forgiveness when he made moves to obtain the soul he had lost when he was turned.

Ideals of victim blaming are present throughout the selected episodes for content analysis, and in nearly every situation, the assault was not reported and the assailant did not face

any form of trouble. Given the fact that the victim of assault is never offered solace or understanding, this theme is important because it reflects a very real issue in today's culture of sexual assault and rape.

Hunt like a man, slay like girl.

Theme 2: Social norms for gender roles are perpetuated and cause conflict.

The concept of gender roles is a sociological phenomenon which exists only insofar as society allows it to, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does not neglect the existence of social gender norms. Through the witty banter of Cordelia Chase, the rich and popular mean girl throughout the early parts of the series, gender roles are very clearly defined. In many occasions, she makes the accusation that male characters who are less successful and athletic are not “real men” and likewise, female characters who wear discounted clothing and don't follow the set out codes of conduct for female behavior are not “real women”. In “Reptile Boy”, for instance, when she is forced to invite Buffy to the fraternity party, she explains what Buffy has to do in order to be accepted: laugh at appropriate times, dress nicely but not too nice, and to keep her mouth shut unless spoken to. Through the eyes of Cordelia Chase, gender roles define success, though throughout the series, they also define pivotal moments of sexual assault and rape culture.

Despite the fact that Buffy Summers embodies a strong leading female role who defies the limitation of gender norms, she is very easily overpowered by the strong and aggressive male who assaults her. In “The Pack”, the normally comedic Xander Harris becomes aggressive and violent, and more confident than ever before. This embodies the role of the assailant as strong and unbeatable, or the dominant male role who takes what he wants. Normally, the funny-guy

Xander wouldn't have the ability to successfully attack the slayer. In his animal-like state, described by Rupert Giles as "normal teenage male behavior", however, he was able to overpower the usually unstoppable girl for a reasonable amount of time. This perpetuates the dominant male role and expresses the weak and frail nature of female embodiment in today's society. Another heavily provocative scene in a later episode, "Seeing Red", shows Buffy Summers being overpowered by yet another male character: Spike, the friendly vampire with a chip in his head. After a long struggle to escape the vampire, Buffy was eventually forced onto the ground and left with numerous bruises from the altercation. The representation of the female as weak and fragile represents the aspect of rape culture that pins women as easy targets, even if they are well prepared to protect and defend themselves.

Every episode I analyzed demonstrated themes of defined gender roles, from defining the dominant and successful male as strong and aggressive to defining the average female as weak and easy to target. "Dead Things", an episode in season six of the show which surrounds The Trio and a device they created to turn women into sex slaves examines the reality of how women are viewed in society. When Warren hypnotizes his ex-girlfriend Katrina with the device, she is instantly moved to follow his every command. She is forced to wear a maid's uniform and refer to the men as "master". The Trio agree to take turns "playing" with her before she eventually snaps back to reality and asserts the immoral actions the boys are pursuing. It is because she speaks her mind and regains consciousness of her own body that she is then murdered, being silenced once and for all. The metaphor used through this character represents the silencing of women in our culture: it is all too common for women to neglect reporting instances of sexual assault and rape due to fear of what will happen once they speak out. And yet again, The Trio was never caught for their crime, and incarceration never occurred.

Messages that show the male figure as dominant and the female figure as weak perpetuate gender stereotypes and represent a major problem in rape culture. With the acceptance of violent and aggressive actions as “normal teenage male behavior” and the ideal of the female role as a target who cannot defend herself cause conflict, making the existence gender norms an important subject in regards to sexual assault and rape.

Only the good die young.

Theme 3: Assailants are portrayed as the “nice guy”, often somebody well known by the victim.

Statistically, the majority of instances of rape and sexual assault occur between the victim and somebody they are close to, such as a family member or a friend. This is portrayed throughout each of the episodes I analyzed. In “The Pack”, the assailant was Xander Harris, one of Buffy’s best friends and most honest peers. In “Go Fish”, the assailant is a well-known member of the swim team whom Buffy took a romantic interest in for a short time. “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered” presents a love spell cast by Xander Harris onto Cordelia Chase to obtain her unrequited love without her extent, though the spell did backfire and caused all of the women of Sunnydale to very literally fall head over heels for the boy. “Once More with Feeling”, the musical episode of the series, shows Willow Rosenberg casting a spell on her girlfriend, Tara, to cause her to forget about their fight. Though this instance of sexual assault was not violent or aggressive, their moment of intimacy was not consensual. “Dead Things” involved the young woman, Katrina, being assaulted by her ex-boyfriend, and “Seeing Red” portrayed the common thread through Spike, who was a close ally of Buffy Summers.

Not only were the instances of rape and sexual assault shared between the victim and somebody they knew well, but the assailant was perpetually portrayed as the “nice guy”, somebody who never truly meant any harm. Through charm and wit, these men were given the ability to trick their female victims into letting their guard down, causing a lapse in judgment in regards to their own safety. “Reptile Boy” featured Tom Warner, a member of the fraternity who was the *good guy*. He deviated from the norm of the fraternity brother, making claims to be polite and protective, even standing in to prevent the drunk party-goers from flirting with the naïve and helpless Buffy. After offering her a drink which had been drugged, however, his true intentions were revealed. His motive from the first instance of meeting Buffy Summers was to drug her, and sacrifice her to a demon which would give him and his fraternity brothers eternal wealth. While the instance of sexual assault was not present, the embodiment of the demonic sacrifice played as a metaphor for rape culture.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research study was to analyze how rape culture is portrayed in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. An analysis of seven episodes aired of the series over its’ six year run exposed three significant themes, which were supported by dialogue and interaction between various characters.

One major theme is that blame in every instance of sexual assault in these seven episodes was given to the victim, and the assailant was left unpunished. This theme is repeated through each of the seven episodes I analyzed by representing an assailant or authority figure that made excuses for the assault. A consistent message within *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is: when a female

wears provocative clothing or expresses an interest in danger, she is at fault for being assaulted. Typical male behavior is aggressive, and testosterone and hormones cause men to be violent and prey on the weak.

The second theme presented in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* presents the existence of social expectations for gender norms. The embodiment of the female character is weak and fragile, whereas the dominant male is expected to be aggressive and confident. The majority of the messages within *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* portray the reality of the consequences of normalizing gender stereotypes, causing women to play the role of an easy target while men are excused for going after what they want.

The final theme was that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* promotes the statistic that a majority of instances of rape are performed by somebody close to the victim, such as a friend or family member, and the rapist is often thought to be the “good guy”. This was demonstrated through the various instances of assault between a major character and somebody they knew and loved, or somebody they trusted due to their honest and moral façade.

The portrayal of blaming the victim is provocative because it is a major contributing factor to today’s culture of rape. Young girls are sent home from elementary, middle, and high schools due to their clothes being too revealing. The general consensus is that too much skin will distract the boys, yet there is a lack of attention towards teaching young boys to be respectful towards women’s bodies. In many cases of reported sexual assault, the assailant was let off either because the victim was drunk and had no control or the assailant themselves were drunk and had no control. It is a pivotal problem in rape culture that is addressed honestly and truly through *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Expressions of societal gender norms are equally troubling as they encourage the stereotype that men are meant to be aggressive and dominant while women are meant to be fragile and weak. These stereotypes perpetuate the idea that women are easy targets and men can take whatever they want, offering tribute to the former theme of victim blaming. The idea that men would strive to be dominant, or strive to be aggressively in charge of a weak woman, promotes the idea that sexual assault is excusable. This television show provocatively demonstrates this clash of gender roles, and brings the social reality of the stereotypical defenseless woman into a fantastical and intriguing light.

Finally, the portrayal of the assailant as the “good guy”, somebody well known and trusted to the victim, demonstrates the reality of sexual assault in today’s culture. The popular consensus of rape among many members of today’s society is that it occurs between two complete strangers in a dark alley, or somewhere off the beaten path. While this does happen, it is more common for the victim to be assaulted by somebody they know very personally. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is true to the culture in demonstrating the reality of the woman letting her guard down because she trusts somebody, only to be tricked into playing the blamed and weak victim.

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