Sexually Violent Women: As Seen on TV

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ABSTRACT

Female sex offenders (FSOs) constitute a minority of the justice system and representations of sex offenders in television crime dramas. Previous research on FSOs has focused on the ways in which perpetrators are portrayed by news outlets throughout their trial. However, little research exists on fictional representations of FSOs and their implications. This study explores representational themes that surround FSOs using the concept of symbolic annihilation. A textual analysis of three episodes from television crime dramas (two episodes from *Law & Order: SVU* and one episode from *Criminal Minds*) was used to uncover patterns of representation. Thematic analysis was then used to understand the implications of the representations. This study revealed that representations of FSOs on television crime dramas interact with hegemonic femininity to delegitimize the perpetrator's actions while also demonizing the nature of the character.
Keywords: Television, representation, sexual assault, female sex offender, symbolic annihilation

INTRODUCTION

In the U.S. justice system, women make up less than ten percent of prisoners and only one percent of convicted rapists (Hassett-Walker, Lateano, & Di Benedetto, 2014). Since sexually violent women make up such a small percent of the criminal justice system, and an even smaller portion of the entire population, limited fictional representations of female sex offenders (FSOs) often remain unquestioned. Furthermore, representations of FSOs on screen are frequently sensationalized in a way that mystifies the existence of sexually violent women. This mystification occurs through the simultaneous delegitimizing of their offenses and demonizing of their character. Here, delegitimization refers to minimizing the effects of female perpetrated rape and framing the actions of sexually violent women as beyond their control, while demonizing is a form of framing the perpetrator as exceptionally evil (Hayes & Baker, 2014).

For most individuals, television is the only site in which they will encounter sexually violent women, making representations of FSOs on television significant to their understanding of who can be a perpetrator and who can be a victim (Cain & Anderson, 2016; Turnball, 2010). This analysis will focus on the ways in which representations of FSOs on the crime dramas *Law & Order: SVU* (NBC, 1999–) and *Criminal Minds* (CBS, 2005–) are framed in accordance with, and opposition to, dominant beliefs of sex and gender and how these representations make female perpetrated rape easier to consume. These representations combine to create truths of sexual violence that have profound implications on the ways in which legitimacy, or recognition of experience, is granted to survivors of sexual violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crime Dramas

The educational function of crime dramas has transformed television from entertainment into a site to condemn deviation from traditional gender roles (Hayes & Baker, 2014; Turnball, 2010). The popularity and success of crime dramas depends upon the genre's ability to sensationalize violence and transform representations into familiar, consumable images (Hayes & Baker, 2014). Therefore, profit driven and sensationalized representations of FSOs become less about the crimes women commit and more about their violation of societal norms (Hayes & Baker, 2014; Zack, Lang, & Dirks, 2018). Culturally pervasive images of crime dramas help shape people's perceptions of sexual violence and offenders. A 2012 survey of over 900 participants found that perceptions of FSOs and the reasoning for their offenses closely mirrors ideas presented in media (Cain & Anderson, 2016). Previous studies of crime dramas have focused on media effects of violent representations, including their impact on world view (e.g.,

DeBruin, 2010; Parrott & Parrott, 2015; Reith, 1999). In regards to gender, media studies of crime dramas have produced quantitative analyses of gender representation (e.g. Parrott & Parrott, 2015) as well as qualitative analyses of gendered victims and law enforcement agents (e.g., Coulthard, Horeck, Klinger, & McHugh, 2018; Jermyn, 2017).

Sex, Gender, and Rape

Sex and gender. Media studies research, growing expansively in the seventies, has focused on the differences between representations of men and women in film (Carter, 2011). Sex scripts and gender role expectations describe the socially constructed behaviors, characteristics, and values associated with specific sexes and genders (Carter, 2011; Giacardi, Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Lippman, 2016; Sink & Mastro, 2017). Sex and gender are often conflated so that all women are expected to behave in traditionally feminine ways and all men in traditionally masculine ways. Gender roles are socially created and learned from a variety of sources but media is viewed as having the strongest influence on establishing gender roles (Taylor & Setters, 2011). Previous research indicates that media representations of women support negative stereotypes (e.g., Sink & Mastro, 2017; Welsh, 2011), and "the media are thought to convey to audiences what types of roles and behaviors are most approved of and valued in society" (Carter, 2011, p. 366).

Hegemonic femininity refers to the prescribed set of characteristics and behaviors for women. Gender role expectations of hegemonic femininity dictate that women should possess qualities such as being domestic, emotional, and romantic (e.g., Carter, 2011; Taylor & Setters, 2011; Parker, 2017). Women are also often seen as being more suited for parenting and defined by their roles as wives and mothers in media representations (Ghaznavi, Grasso, & Taylor, 2017; Parker, 2017). Conversely, men are designated traditionally masculine gender roles such as assertiveness, competitiveness, aggressiveness, and sexual motivation (Giacardi et al., 2016; Gilpatric, 2011; Scharrer, 2001).

Although representations of violent women in media have been studied previously, these analyses rarely include an examination of sexual behavior. Studies of violent women have indicated that a woman's violation of hegemonic femininity was not viewed as condemning gender roles but rather served as an exception to socially prescribed behavior when the woman was physically attractive (Taylor & Setters, 2011). The physical attractiveness of violent women was found to provoke ideas of traditional roles, minimizing the impact of the woman's violence or traditionally masculine behavior (Taylor & Setters, 2011). Therefore, representations of violent women both support and contest hegemonic gender roles (McClearen, 2015).

Women have long had a place in crime and horror genres; however, this place has mostly been limited to the role of victim (Welsh, 2011). A number of studies have noted the growing presence of violent women in film and television (e.g., Ghaznavi et al., 2017; McClearen, 2015). A previous study on representations of sex and violence in film found that women are more likely to be portrayed in sexual content but men are more likely to be characterized as perpetrators of violence (Bleakley, Jamieson, & Romer, 2012). Analyses of film, television, and video games have all found that women are most frequently presented as passive, vulnerable, subordinate, and in need of rescue (e.g., Carter, 2011; Collins, 2011; Ghaznavi et al., 2017). The physical bodies of women are not only portrayed as more sexual than male bodies but also more vulnerable. An analysis of audience interpretations of female action heroines found that female characters are perceived to be less capable of handling violent action scenes and are more susceptible to injury (McClearen, 2015). Stereotypical representations of women also include hyper-sexualization (McClearen, 2015). Women are expected to be physically attractive yet not too sexual, or they may be labeled as deviant. Thus, when a woman is represented in an overly sexualized way, she is often victimized as punishment for her deviance from femininity and sexuality (Welsh, 2011). Other studies have argued that sexual representations are not about sex but about establishing women as sex objects (Collins, 2011; Ghazani et al., 2017).

Rape. Previous studies of rape and sexual violence have focused on offenses committed by men against women. Studies on rape, using feminist methods, have attempted to increase awareness of the prevalence of rape in order to dispel myths of victim responsibility and the types of *men* that offend (Projansky, 2001). Historically, sex-essential definitions of rape require specific reproductive organs (Sjoberg, 2016) or define rape as "a form of patriarchal control over women" (Projansky, 2001, p. 7). I argue that definitions that depend upon a male perpetrator and female victim must be abandoned in order to study FSOs; however, the legacy of these definitions continue to impact the portrayals and readings of FSOs on television. Sex-essential definitions of rape depend heavily upon traditional sex scripts, which impacts public perceptions of who is capable of sexual violence and evaluations of victims (Welsh, 2011).

Symbolic Annihilation

Gerbner first proposed the concepts of symbolic representation and symbolic annihilation in the seventies (Carter, 2011; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). However, Tuchman has built upon this theory and further developed it in the years since. According to Tuchman, "just as representation in the media signifies social existence, so too underrepresentations and (by extension) trivialization and condemnation indicate symbolic annihilation" (1979, p. 533). Tuchman focused on representations of women in media and how the representations did not reflect contemporary lives of women (Carter, 2011). Furthermore, Tuchman's development of symbolic annihilation was driven by the lack of visibility of working women (Tuchman, 1979).

Hilton-Morrow and Battles define symbolic annihilation as the "absence of representations, underrepresentation of a particular social group, or a markedly strong pattern of negative representations" (2015, p. 78). FSOs are not *necessarily* symbolically annihilated because of their lack of visibility, rather their annihilation occurs through patterns of stereotypical and sensationalized representation. Patterns of symbolic annihilation surrounding FSOs are significant as they create the idea that intentionally sexually violent women do not exist (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Within the theory of symbolic annihilation, representation corresponds to social value (Klein & Shiffman, 2009). The symbolic annihilation of sexually violent women may be viewed as a form of devalorizing women in general, but the absence of representation also serves to minimize the experiences of survivors of female perpetrated sexual violence.

Although past legal discourse has contributed to a suppressive legacy surrounding sexual violence, scholarly work has also provided useful analyses of the typologies used to categorize and stereotype FSOs. Stereotypical representations of sexually violent women, framed through these typologies, are a form of symbolic annihilation because they create a systematic format for negative representations. Traditional typologies of FSOs include the teacher/lover, male-coerced, and predisposed offender (Hasset-Walker et al., 2014). Several expansions upon the original three typologies have been proposed; however, many modern typologies contain inconsistencies and rely upon other forms of social identification such as sexual orientation.

METHODS

Method of Archive Selection

When representations of sexually violent women are available in media, characters are rarely labeled as FSOs. The episodes selected for this analysis come from crime dramas because of the genre's assumption of criminality. Other genres frequently frame violence perpetrated by women as a legally and morally grey area. This ambiguity can be seen through the reluctance of characters to involve law enforcement when the perpetrator is a woman. The episodes included in this analysis were selected from over 800 total episodes from both series. However, following a series of eliminations, less than a dozen episodes qualified for analysis by specifically identifying a female character as a sex offender.

The episodes in this archive were selected because they included a rape specific offense. This study takes a moderate approach to defining rape by recognizing the act as both a sexual and power violation (e.g. Projansky, 2001; Sjoberg, 2016). To find the episodes for this archive, fan created wikis ("Criminal Minds," n.d.; "Law & Order," n.d.) were used to eliminate episodes with only male perpetrators. As previous studies using online fan created databases have found, the website affordances rarely allow users to understand the types and severity of violence perpetrated in media (Gosselt, van Hoof, Gent, & Fox, 2015). This resulted in dependence on episode summaries of female offenders to eliminate non-sexual offenses. The episodes in this archive were then selected from the remaining episodes because of their discussion of sex scripts, descriptions of the violation, and diversity of victim identities.

This analysis aimed to incorporate diverse identities by accounting for both male and female victims. This consideration was necessary as victims of FSOs are divided amongst sex and gender (Hasset-Walker et al., 2014). Racial and ethnic diversity was not available in any of the qualifying episodes, resulting in only White perpetrators and victims. Historically, marginalized racial identities are over represented as perpetrators of crime; however, distorted representations focusing on White perpetrators and victims can be seen as a method of increasing the perceived relevance of the issue (Crenshaw, 2012; Sides, 2017). The elimination process resulted in an archive consisting of the episodes "Parole Violations" (Abbinanti & de Segonzac, 2015) and "Head" (Peterson, DeNoon, & Campanella, 2004) from *Law & Order: SVU* as well as "The Angel Maker" (Dworkin, Beattie, & Kershaw, 2008) from *Criminal Minds.*

Method of Analysis

The episodes in this archive were then analyzed based on visual representations of the offender, the offender's dialogue, and dialogue about the offender. Formatted like most other crime dramas, the perpetrators in this archive receive little screen time, so analyses relied upon discussion of the perpetrator by other characters (detectives, attorneys, judges, etc). Representations were then distinguished between commentary on the offender's behavior and commentary on the nature, or inherent value, of the offender. Patterns across these representations of behavior were then coded into themes. Comparisons of hegemonic femininity and sexually violent women were then used to analyze the episodes' implications.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Symbolic annihilation focuses on patterns of representation, specifically patterns of negative representations (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Stereotypes cannot exist in isolation, yet sensationalization depends upon unpredictability. Therefore, the following questions were posed to gain insight into how formulaic representations of FSOs retain elements of shock in media.

RQ1: How are the actions of FSOs portrayed in the television shows *Law & Order: SVU* and *Criminal Minds*?

RQ2: How is the nature (inherent value) of characters portrayed in the television shows *Law & Order: SVU* and *Criminal Minds*?

RQ3: What are the implications of the portrayals of sexually violent women?

RESULTS

The Impossible Woman

The plot of "Parole Violations" from *Law & Order: SVU* focuses on combating sex-essential definitions of rape. The prosecutor in this episode describes the case as having "just one problem, convincing twelve people on a jury that a woman even *can* rape a man" (Abbinanti & de Segonzac, 2015).

At the beginning of the episode, Detective Carisi enters the police station fuming that Tommy, his future brother-in-law, has cheated on his sister. As he describes what happened to his boss Olivia Beckett, who functions as the ultimate voice of authority and truth, she explains that Tommy was actually raped. Carisi, an experienced detective in the special victims unit, scoffs "Is that even possible?" (Abbinanti & de Segonzac, 2015). Carisi's question exemplifies the social understanding that men are perpetrators and women are victims but also serves as an opening to contradict this norm. In this way, the detectives serve as an educational model for what people *should* believe while also reflecting societal ignorance of FSOs.

Donna Marshall is known for being one of the toughest parole officers in the district. Throughout the episode, her power is continuously reinforced through her words, actions, and occupation. The reiteration of her power marks her in opposition to hegemonic femininity as she refuses to meet the traditional gender trope of passivity (Beasley, 2010). However, Donna is also distanced from traditionally masculine scripts such as when her boss describes her as "barely a sexual being, let alone a predator" (Abbinanti & de Segonzac, 2015). This comment reflects the normative belief that women cannot and should not initiate sexual relations (Zack et al., 2018). Donna's lack of femininity defines her throughout the episode and makes her sexually violent behavior easier to comprehend.

The trial of "Parole Violations" does not implicate Donna but rather questions women and their capacity for sexual violence. Women cannot be represented by a singular entity and any attempt to do so relies upon extreme generalizations and stereotypes (Crenshaw, 2012). However, throughout the course of the episode, Donna serves as a stand-in for all women.

"Parole Violations" expresses cultural anxieties regarding the ability of men to be victims of rape. This cultural touchpoint becomes central to the episode through the detectives' concerns about Donna's legal defense. Her defensive strategy frames the sexual encounter as consensual drawing upon myths that men should be able to overpower female offenders and that men are unable to perform sexually under duress. During an interrogation, Donna laughs at the possibility that Tommy would have been able to perform at gunpoint describing him as "ready, willing, and able" (Abbinanti & de Segonzac, 2015). These are common terms used to minimize the experiences of male victims of female perpetrated rape, as hegemonic masculinity does not fathom the existence of a man who is

not sexually motivated (Zack et al., 2018). This description perpetuates the traditional heterosexual script that men are proper aggressors and cannot be victimized.

"Parole Violations" may be viewed as progressive by establishing the possibility of FSOs; however, this episode retains regressive elements by emphasizing Donna's deviance from femininity as a precursor to her sexually violent behavior. Representations of FSOs are used to delegitimize characters by distancing them from femininity and create consumable narratives of sexually violent women.

The Incapable Woman

Following the discovery of a hidden camera, detectives analyze the footage in the *Law & Order: SVU* episode "Head." As the detectives watch the recording of a young boy being raped the screen freezes on the perpetrator's manicured nails. The detectives are stunned to realize that the offender is a woman, illustrating how the casting of a female offender is often used as a shock factor to sensationalize rape.

The first images of Meredith Rice portray a caring and nurturing, if not slightly concerned, middle school principal and step-mother. However, Meredith's representation quickly shifts when it is revealed that she raped the twelve year old boy, Shane. Meredith's role as Shane's principal situates her within the most media saturated FSO typology: the teacher/lover. The concept of forbidden love romanticizes the teacher/lover typology and provides a form of female perpetrated sexual violence that is readily consumed by mystifying the relationship. Previous research has found that mystification frames male students as "lucky" to have a sexual learning experience by ignoring the absence of consent (Zack et al., 2018, p. 61). When being interrogated, Meredith explains that Shane "only struggled the first time" and Shane's attachment to Meredith further reinforces the idea of a consensual relationship (Peterson, DeNoon, & Campanella, 2004). This typology is the most prevalent typology as it fulfills the voyeuristic desire of the public to consume an attractive White female teacher's sexual relationship with an adolescent boy (Zack et al., 2018).

During an interrogation, Meredith has an irrational outburst and gropes a detective. The detective shoves her and Meredith hits her head. Meredith's doctor then orders a CT scan which reveals a large brain tumor, located in her frontal lobe, impacting her impulse control and behavior. Ultimately, Meredith's sexual violence is attributed to her brain tumor and her deviation from femininity is framed as unintentional. Through the medicalization of the rape, Meredith transforms from a child rapist to a victim of cancerous cells. Meredith's actions are further minimized through the revelation of her past experiences as a victim of sexual violence. The idea of cyclical abuse, or previous victimization causing future offending, is largely disputed in the medical and justice communities. Statistically, the majority of sex offenders were previously victimized, yet the majority of victims do not become offenders. The notion of cyclical offending can be seen as inaccurately creating the assumption that all victims will become perpetrators, but this cycle contains even less relevance for female victim/perpetrators (Glasser et al., 2001).

Meredith's experiences as a child frame her as predisposed to sexual violence but only acting because of the tumor. At the end of the episode, Meredith is described as a "noble woman who suffered a freak brain tumor" (Peterson, DeNoon, & Campanella, 2004). Meredith's reputation is repaired when she chooses to go on the sex offender registry to protect children in the event the tumor would ever grow back. Ultimately, Meredith's deviation from hegemonic femininity and sexual violence is attributed to her brain tumor, minimizing any remaining responsibility.

The Insane Woman

In the *Criminal Minds* episode "The Angel Maker," a string of recent murders replicate the patterns of a previous offender. The original serial killer and rapist's DNA (semen) was even found in the new victim Delilah, yet the case is not as clear as the detectives originally thought since the original perpetrator had just been executed.

The crime scene of the sole male victim is one of the only deviations from the original murders and reveals information that dramatically alters the perpetrator's profile. As the music climaxes, Agent Hotchner addresses the police station in his trademark somber tone, "this person is a woman" (Dworkin, Beattie, & Kershaw, 2008). These words have little meaning outside of the context of the episode; however, in crime dramas, a perpetrator's masculine identity is often assumed. Thus, a female offender is sensationalized through the dramatic reveal of her sex. Until this point, the episode has only provided quick cuts of the perpetrator's gloved hands and hooded figure. Now that Agent Hotchner has revealed the *true identity* or sex of the perpetrator, a broader image of the offender is unveiled. Chloe Kelcher, no longer wearing a hood, clutches her rape kit as she prepares to attack another woman.

Chloe is represented as an attractive and well educated White woman who would not commit rape and murder, if not for her mental instability and emotional connection to the original killer. As the profilers describe her, they diagnose Chloe with hybristophilia, a sexual attraction to men who commit violent crimes. The detectives also speculate that she was a previous victim of sexual violence. Hayes and Baker outline how a FSO's history of being

a victim of sexual violence is used to explain an "inability to respond to the opposite sex" or "have a decent adult relationship" (2014, p. 6). According to the profilers, Chloe lacks self-esteem, a father figure, and competency compared to the original perpetrator. All of these components work to delegitimize Chloe's responsibility by psychologizing her actions, though not depending on her femininity. In fact, Chloe's emotional response and love-driven madness actually reinforce ideas of hegemonic femininity.

Double deviance is defined as the "offending against the 'fundamental norms' which govern sex-role behavior" (Beasley, 2010, p. 8). Women who commit acts of sexual violence are doubly deviant as they offend against their victims and the feminine gender roles society has prescribed for them. Notions of double deviance are further compounded when a woman, like Chloe, rapes another woman. For a woman to sexually violate another woman is considered the ultimate betrayal of femininity as women are not supposed to contribute to each other's oppression (Sjoberg, 2016). Through theories of double deviance, the nature of sexually violent women is portrayed as inherently worse compared to male perpetrators. The demonization of sexually violent women displaces them not only from femininity but also from humanity, in a way that male perpetrators are not displaced. This displacement further reinforces ideas of traditional gender roles and the dangers of deviant femininity.

DISCUSSION

Rape discourse functions to both reflect and produce society's beliefs regarding sexual violence, particularly who is capable of sexual violence and who can be a victim of sexual violence. The episodes in this archive engage with dominant beliefs regarding sex and gender in a unique way, but the union of representations create a broader truth of female perpetrated rape. The representations of FSOs establish the existence of sexually violent women; however, the removal of their responsibility undermines the trauma and impact of female perpetrated rape. This notion grants legitimacy to male perpetrated rape and devalues the experiences of survivors of female perpetrated rape. As much as these episodes comment on Donna, Meredith, and Chloe, they also assign value to the experiences of Tommy, Shane, Delilah, and other victims of female perpetrated rape. Their experiences are minimized by questioning their inability to stop their perpetrator, the romanticization of the relationship, and framing the horrors of the rape as dependent upon their sex as well as the sex of the perpetrator. These episodes establish horror and disgust through sensationalized representations of deviation from traditional gender roles, not victim experiences.

The focus of the episodes and sensationalization of their images work to minimize the effects of female perpetrated rape by romanticizing, medicalizing, and psychologizing FSOs while simultaneously framing them as exceptionally evil. The minimization of their behavior and magnification of their wickedness may seem at odds, but these two methods of representation frequently occur in congruence to reinforce traditional ideas of sex and gender. Through this framing, representations of female perpetrated sexual violence become easier for audiences to consume by separating and/or realigning the offender with hegemonic femininity. Though the episodes provide images of non-hegemonic women, these women are not provided a space to interact in non-criminal and non-feminine ways. These representations provide a warning for a woman's deviation from femininity and prescribe roles and expectations to fulfill hegemonic femininity. Ultimately, sensationalized representations of sexually violent women obscure realities of sexual violence by relying upon, and contributing to, traditional sexual scripts and gender roles.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The most prominent limitation of this research comes from the limited representation of fictional FSOs on television. This study was limited in its scope by only focusing on two television programs. Furthermore, this study was limited by the ambiguous treatment and labeling of FSOs on television. Several potential episodes for this analysis were eliminated based upon their inconsistent and confusing nature regarding the criminality of sexually violent women. Thus, the focus solely on crime dramas serves as another limitation to this study. Future research should conduct cross-genre analysis to compare the ways in which sexually violent women are represented. Medical dramas appear to represent FSOs in a very different way than crime dramas, so the willingness of a genre to label behavior as criminal is something to be studied in itself.

Another limitation of this study was the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the representations. Previous research indicates that exoticism is one method of delegitimizing female perpetrated violence (Hasset-Walker et al., 2014). However, despite racial and ethnic representation in other episodes, episodes pertaining to female perpetrated rape only had White perpetrators and victims. This analysis cannot elaborate on how diverse racial and ethnic identities may be delegitimized using other methods.

Future research should provide greater insight into the ways victim identities contribute to the methods used to delegitimize FSOs. Representations of sexual violence depend heavily upon the representation of a victim to establish the existence of a perpetrator. Age, sex, and power differentials all influence how characters addressed the responsibility of the offender but conclusions were not able to be drawn from victim identities due to the lack of comparisons available. Additionally, future research should examine the ways in which media representations impact how relationships are labeled and perceived by the public. Historically, the public has been consumed by representations of forbidden relationships, including those with significant age and power differences. Future research should also explore how consensual sexual relationships are defined for minors. Sexual experiences are often framed in a way that correlates to hegemonic gender roles and has numerous implications for how sexual experiences are understood.

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