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Supernatural Sexuality:
The Sexual Behavior of Powerful Female
Characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Jordan M. Mauger

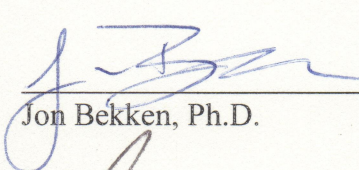
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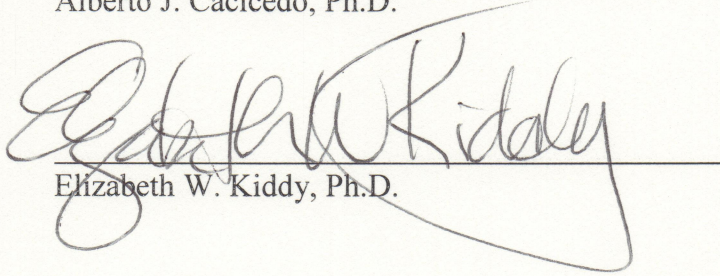
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Supernatural Sexuality:

The Sexual Behaviors of Powerful Female Characters in Buffy the Vampire Slayer

The course of research on television effects has investigated a number of aspects of this pervasive form of media, spanning over numerous social issues and television genres. With television being the omnipresent force in society that it is today, it is quite often placed under scrutiny to determine whether the depictions on television affect viewer behavior. Whether it pertains to body image perceptions derived from teen programming, the effects of violence in cartoons on youth behavior, or conceptions of reality based on reality television programs, the possibilities for studies on the effects of television are nearly limitless. As the medium has evolved over the years, the social guidelines and standards applied to television have changed as well. Even though there has been a recent increase in the monitoring of subject matter on television by the FCC, the amount of sexual content has dramatically increased since television's inception. Therefore, a topic of common focus in regards to television content is that of teen programs and their depiction of sexual situations.

This study deals directly with the issue of sexual content on television in regards to a single program: Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Using a qualitative content analysis

approach, the issues that were dealt with specifically are those pertaining to the sexual behaviors of the number of powerful female characters on the television program. The potential implications of such depictions on the teen audience demographic are subsequently discussed.

In Every Generation...

Buffy the Vampire Slayer ran for seven seasons from 1997-2003, five years on the WB network and two years on UPN. The show was targeted at the teen/young adult demographic, with the characters and situations in the show depicting high school, and eventually college, life. The protagonist of the show, Buffy Summers, is a seemingly average female with extraordinary gifts. Being the chosen slayer of her generation, she alone fights the vampires, demons, and forces of darkness, possessing supernatural strength and agility that provide her with the means to fend off the evil in Sunnydale, California. This supernatural theme extends beyond the character of Buffy and the demons she faces to the supporting characters of the show. Many of Buffy's friends possess similar gifts, and quite often these characters are also female. Unlike some other teen shows in the fantasy television genre, however, "Buffy adopts a façade of fantasy to cover a portrayal of the teen years as they really are" (Epps, 2002, p. 29).

Therefore, as Kaveny (2003) explains in her analysis of the feminist characteristics of Buffy, the show "operates as a metaphor for the problems faced by middle-class teenagers, particularly girls" (p. 18). Kaveny believes that what Joss Whedon—creator of the series—knows and illustrates with Buffy is that "high school and college are not the carefree prelude to real life as popular culture generally portrays them. Rather, they are real life's most intense and dangerous phase: negotiating them

successfully requires a strong moral character, the loyalty, honesty, and compassion of friends and family, and sometimes a bit of supernatural grace” (p. 18). The show integrates sexuality into this adolescent metaphor through the element of vampirism, a generally understood sexual metaphor. The choice of vampirism as the focus of the program therefore points to the trial of navigating the wakes of adolescent sexuality as the central concern of the show.

In a number of instances over the course of the program’s seven season run, female characters find themselves in situations of a sexual nature. Quite often, these sexual situations are either initiated by or mutually entered into by female characters, specifically those females that possess enhanced levels of power. Whether it is the supernatural slayer powers of Buffy and Faith, the witchcraft abilities of Willow, or the demon possession of Miss Calendar (with this possession increasing strength and resiliency), these empowered women frequently exhibit sexual behaviors and initiate sexual situations. Cultivation analysis suggests that these portrayals of female characters possessing power and exhibiting sexual behavior may have an impact on societal beliefs about the nature of our world. Thus, this theory directly relates to the subject of this study, as cultivation analysis can be used as a reference tool in discussing the potential effects of the depictions of females on Buffy and how these depictions might contribute to viewers’ sense of reality.

Past Research: Television’s Influence on Sexual Behavior

With these portrayals functioning in such a supposedly realistic way, the depictions of character behavior in this program have the potential to restructure Buffy’s teen demographic’s conception of reality. In regards to entertainment, media critics are

often concerned that the portrayals in television, movies, and other forms of entertainment will not be true representations of reality, thus leading audiences to misjudge certain aspects of real life (i.e. race relations, gender roles). George Gerbner's theory of cultivation analysis suggests that "television cultivates a common world view and common stereotypes through a relatively restrictive set of programs, images, and messages" (Gerbner, 1980; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001, 7). This theory serves as the reasoning behind many concerns with television media. The cultivation theory does more than say that people will give TV answers to real world questions; it suggests that television's representation of reality actually moves perception of reality to the norms and standards represented on television. A reasonable corollary, therefore, would be that viewers might implement these representations in their own behavior.

The connection between the ideas of cultivation analysis and entertainment media suggests that audiences process media in a very direct way, commonly using it as a source of determining reality. Individuals will implement the behaviors they view in this entertainment media, using these depicted behaviors as the standard to base their own actions on.

A number of studies have looked at the relationship between sexual content on television and its effects on audiences, specifically teens and young adults, utilizing both the cultivation theory as a basis as well as other related theories. Basing research on the information processing model of media theory, Taylor (2005) set out to determine the degree to which viewers perceive television content as realistic based on the sexual messages embedded in television programming. The information processing model functions similarly to cultivation analysis in its focus on perceived realism in depictions

on television, this realism helping to create the “common world view” suggested by cultivation analysis. The experiment’s participants included 182 college undergraduates who were exposed either to visual/verbal sexual content, neutral television content, or no television at all and subsequently asked to complete measures of sexual attitudes and beliefs. The programs chosen by Taylor included shows that appeal to the same audience as Buffy, such as Friends, Ally McBeal, and Dawson’s Creek. What Taylor found speaks to the significant effect of television on audiences: “participants who scored high in perceived realism and viewed sexual content on television endorsed more permissive attitudes than participants in other groups” (p. 134). Beliefs about “female sexuality were also found to be influenced by depictions of sexual talk; for those who perceive such content to be realistic, watching television content featuring talk about sex led to the belief that relatively more female peers are sexually active” (p. 135). As Taylor admits, these beliefs are not in line with traditional beliefs that men are more sexually active than women. Yet based on the sexual discussions of the female characters in the programs (i.e. on Ally McBeal, “a woman described, with obvious relish, having sex on the first date”), these perceptions were created (p. 136). With shows like Ally McBeal, Dawson’s Creek, and Friends, where all or at least half of the major characters are female, these results prove to be unsettling as this young adult audience perceives that all females are sexually active based on the depictions of behavior of the females on these shows.

Yet research has shown that even if this influence is reflected in evaluations and measures, this teen audience does not necessarily recognize the effects of television’s depictions of sex. Through the use of focus groups, Werner-Wilson, Fitzharris, and Morrissey (2004) sought to determine the extent to which adolescents identify—without

prompting—media as a source of influence on sexual behavior for adolescents. Upon discussion of the researchers' questions in the focus groups, researchers found that only one group of adolescents (a female group) mentioned media as an influence on sexual behavior, and they mentioned it in a mocking tone. This group did not believe that media actually has an effect on adolescent sexual behavior despite what others may think.

Even if such self-report research indicates that adolescents/teens do not recognize the media as an influence on their sexual behavior, this does not mean that media has no effect, as demonstrated by studies such as Taylor's experiment. While these adolescents may not believe their own ideas of sexual behavior come from their exposure to television sexual content, they are likely receiving their information on sexual behavior from media without even being aware of it. This a limitation of a research method like focus groups, where participants are asked to report their own emotions. While they have the capacity to reveal their conscious thoughts and emotions (if they choose to even reveal these), this does not necessarily represent their unconscious thoughts (or the influences they might not be aware of in this case).

Therefore, due to the difficulty of determining the effects on audiences directly, a content-based research method sometimes seems to provide more concrete results. In her content analysis of teen programming, Aubrey (2004) set out to determine if the portrayal of sexuality differs based on gender and reinforces stereotypes of dominating males and submissive females. Much like Taylor, Aubrey coded both sexual acts and sexual dialogue as forms of sexual content. Aubrey coded Buffy the Vampire Slayer in her study along with shows like Dawson's Creek, Charmed, and Buffy spin-off Angel, as these shows were representative of the teen genre. The results, as expected, showed male

characters initiated sexual behaviors significantly more than female characters. Aubrey did account for programs in which the focus was on female characters (like Buffy) and thus conducted a cross-tabulation in which the gender of characters was controlled. As predicted, results also showed that women featured in a sexual scene faced more negative consequences than men. In most of the scenes that featured both male and female characters, the female character was still more likely to receive the negative consequences. Scenes were significantly more likely to portray a negative consequence when female characters initiated a sexual reference than when male characters initiated a sexual reference.

With a content analysis, the discussion of effects on audiences is limited to conjecture as the results do not speak to any causation of or correlation with particular behaviors in reference to actual audiences. The results of Aubrey's content analysis raise a number of issues, however. The repetition of men initiating sex without negative consequences in television programs leads audiences to believe that men are meant to be more proactive in their sexuality and will not be thought less of if they are sexually active. According to these same portrayals, the reinforced idea is that women should be passive and avoid sexual activity if possible so as to not have a negative social stigma. If one is thinking in terms of Gerbner's cultivation theory, these conclusions would bear definite merit, with Aubrey's results as support for these ideas. Should the "common world view" developed by this repeated depiction be that women are meant to be passive and submissive in their sexual behaviors, an inalterable social standard for female behavior would be set in place.

Past Research: Analyzing Buffy

A number of studies similar to the current research have focused on specific shows, particularly programs with leading female characters. Sometimes this research deals with feminist issues in the workplace as depicted on television shows such as Ally McBeal (Hammers, 2005). Multiple analyses also exist that specifically focus on Buffy the Vampire Slayer in terms of feminism, violence, and, as is the case in this study, sexual content. One such analysis proposes a correlation between vampirism and sex, the act of biting/being bitten serving as a sexual experience: “The act of necrophilia, though rare in reality, has always been linked in literature with vampirism. The embrace and bite are a parody of the sexual act, particularly because they are traditionally performed by a male character on a female character who is passive and seems to welcome his touch” (Spaise, 2005, 745). This male dominating role does not necessarily exist in Buffy; rather, there is a role reversal with powerful women who are sexually aggressive. In some cases, as this analysis points out, relationships between female characters (like Buffy) and vampires (Angel, Spike) function effectively in terms of sadomasochism as distribution of power is an important aspect of this sexual behavior. Both Buffy as the slayer and Angel/Spike as vampires possess supernatural strength, therefore equalizing the relationship rather than having it functioning as a male-dominated interaction. Such an analysis speaks to the sexual nature of many of the storylines in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, these sexual situations frequently involving super-powered female characters.

Other literature on Buffy speaks to this empowered female role, evaluating how gender roles are positioned in the context of the show. Early (2005) looks at the character of Buffy as a “woman warrior and hero” who is “counterpoised...against male

characters” in such a way that elevates her to a higher level of capability (p. 19). As the slayer, Buffy’s power surpasses that of any mortal man, therefore placing her both in a heroic role as well as a role of potential dominating behavior. Early points out how Buffy questions male-dominated authority structures (such as the government-run demon fighting operation, “The Initiative”). The show illustrates both a playful and a serious consideration of the central theme of the danger of oppressive patriarchal power structures. A critical analysis such as Early’s demonstrates the prominent role female power represents in Buffy, although it does not deal directly with the way this power reflects the sexual behaviors of empowered female characters like Buffy.

What seems to be the common thread throughout this research are findings that point to Buffy the Vampire Slayer being a presentation of a powerful and empowered, aggressive female, thus helping the program to undo some of the negative stigma associated with active female aggressiveness.

Other intellectual analyses of Buffy have taken an etymological approach to the program, such as Adams’ (2004) Slayer Slang. The author explores the language of Buffy, including an essay on the nature and evolution of the show’s language as well as a detailed glossary of “slayer slang.” Adams identifies trends in the formulation of these slang terms such as the extensive employment of affixes like -y (out-of-the-loopy), -age (slayage), and über- (überevil). Academic literature such as Slayer Slang illustrates how pervasive Buffy is as a television program, infiltrating both the areas of communications studies as well as linguistics.

Goals for this Analysis

Previous studies on Buffy the Vampire Slayer focused on related topics (necrophilia, female warrior), but none focus on the sexual behavior of powerful female characters in a more general social context or on the aftermath of these behaviors. Therefore, three objectives guided this qualitative content analysis. The first was to determine which female characters could be constituted as powerful, regardless of what type of power (supernatural, intellectual, etc.) they possessed. The second objective was to analyze the sexual behaviors of these powerful female characters, gauging the sexual situations initiated by these female characters and the circumstances of this sexual behavior, as well as how dominance plays a role in their sexual encounters. The final objective was to investigate the consequences of sexual behaviors for these female characters and whether it speaks to a responsible representation of teen sexuality. Examining these aspects of Buffy therefore leads to a discussion of how these depictions of empowered females' sexual behaviors have the potential to affect teen/young adult audiences viewing the program, particularly the female audience, according to the theory of cultivation analysis.

METHOD

Sample:

A sample of one episode from the first season and two episodes per season from seasons two through seven, a total of 13 episodes, was qualitatively analyzed for depictions of sexual behavior in female characters. Episode selection was based on the original airings of the episodes: those episodes that aired during sweeps periods were the focus of this study; for seasons two through seven, one episode was from November

sweeps, the other from May sweeps. Because Buffy the Vampire Slayer was a mid-season replacement in its first season, only a May airing was analyzed in the case of the premier season.

Selecting episodes from across all seven seasons led to a more comprehensive analysis of the progression of character development and storylines involving sexual content. Also, since sweeps is the time when most television programs receive their highest ratings and have the largest audience, such a sample was chosen to give more weight to the discussion of how these depictions can potentially affect a large teen/young adult audience. Sweeps is also the time when creative forces behind television programs attempt to formulate stories that are particularly compelling, the use of titillating storylines dealing with sexual encounters between characters functioning as a common thematic draw for audiences. Methodologically, this could then lead to a skewed idea of the “sexualization” of the show. Thus, additional episodes were viewed if it was deemed necessary in order to fully evaluate the progression of behavior of a particular character and to provide a complete analysis of certain storylines.

Unit of Analysis:

In order for a female character to be evaluated as powerful, she had to possess some exceptional abilities, whether it was extraordinary physical strength, supernatural abilities, or intelligence.

Sexual behavior was qualified as behavior that leads to or intends to lead to the actual act of sex. Those behaviors that did not eventually result in an actual sexual act were still considered sexual behavior if it seemed the character intended for such a result to occur. Dialogue with sexual references was also examined when it is spoken by

empowered female characters in order to provide a more in-depth qualitative evaluation of these commanding female characters. Female characters were the main focus of analysis, although male sexual behavior was looked at in some respect as well in order to create a point of reference. Consequences and effects of the sexual behaviors of powerful female characters were based on the progression of the storyline of these characters after the pinpointed sexual behavior, analyzing whether the actions are positively rewarded or create negative consequences within that episode or arch of episodes.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Women of Power:

As Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a decidedly female-centric show, a number of female characters appeared on the program, a substantial number of them possessing some form of extraordinary power. The protagonist of the show, Buffy Summers, is imbued with the supernatural physical talents of the slayer. This power allows her to be expertly skilled in hand-to-hand combat as well as weaponry such as crossbows, swords, and wooden stakes. These powers and skills allow Buffy to slay a number of vampires and demons throughout the episodes included in this sample. While in the earlier seasons of the show Buffy is somewhat unsure about her power, her confidence grows as the seasons progress. In the first season episode "Nightmares," after initially facing off with the nightmare demon, Buffy says, "He's too strong. I can't fight him." Yet even within this episode, Buffy's confidence in her power grows; by the end of "Nightmares," Buffy engages the monster in battle, saying, "There are a lot scarier things than you, and I'm one of them." With such supernatural talents, Buffy is able to complete her duties as "the chosen one" and protect those she cares about, including her family and friends. Buffy

serves as a warrior for those who cannot defend themselves against the forces of darkness, particularly women who lack comparable super powers. Buffy's power is therefore driven by good intentions, and therefore she uses it responsibly throughout the seven seasons of the program.

Buffy thus serves as a figure of intimidation for the evil forces that would attack Sunnydale. For example, in second season episode "The Dark Age," Buffy guards over the diabolical Ethan Rayne to prevent him from escaping while at the same time protecting him from a demon he summoned. When Buffy says she's "not much into running," Ethan replies, "Aren't we manly?" Buffy responds by saying, "One of us is." Such content is found throughout many episodes of the program, the amount of power Buffy possesses placing her in complete opposition to the stereotype of the weak female in distress. As Inness (2004) suggests in her essay analyzing tough women in the media, female characters like Buffy who are depicted as particularly tough women serves as a challenge to "the patriarchal status quo," threatening the venerable belief that masculine power is the ultimate dominating form of power, one that eclipses that of submissive females (p. 11). In this instance in particular, Ethan points out Buffy's masculine qualities, therefore recognizing the power she possesses. Under the patriarchal status quo discussed by Inness, power is linked to males, so anyone exhibiting such power is therefore to be identified as manly.

This characterization of Buffy's actions as being decidedly masculine raises the question posed by Early and Kennedy (2003): "Must 'women' become, in effect, 'men' to achieve just warrior status?" (p. 2). Crosby (2004) perceives the depiction of Buffy's strength as having a definite masculine connotation, with the slayer's weapon of choice—

a wooden stake—emphasizing that “Buffy owns the phallus” (p. 162). However, what strong female characters like Buffy demonstrate is that power and fortitude are traits not limited to males; rather in the case of the females on Buffy, the females are the dominating and powerful force to be reckoned with. Buffy “draws attention to the widespread appeal of indomitable, uncompromising female heroes—often appearing in warrior roles—who challenge understandings of what it means to be a woman in contemporary times” (Early, 2003, 55). They still maintain their femininity, with Buffy herself struggling with the same issues as every other teenage girl: school difficulties, family problems, bad boyfriends, etc.

Whereas Buffy’s “masculine” strength remain constant throughout the episodes viewed in this sample, Willow’s power evolves throughout the seasons of the show. Introduced in the first season and appearing throughout this sample of the program, Willow does not boast great supernatural strength or skills like Buffy, but she does possess considerable intellectual skills in the early seasons of the show. Using her advanced computer hacking skills, Willow is able to access confidential information on numerous occasions, including the season 2 episode “The Dark Age,” in which she uses her skills to gain information about Giles’s past. While Willow’s intellectual skills do instill her with some power, the type of power she possesses expands in later seasons of the show. Beginning in the third season, Willow explores witchcraft, eventually becoming very skilled in the area. With these powers, she is able to complete a number of remarkable tasks, such as when she revives a seemingly dead Buffy twice, in the beginning and at the end of the sixth season (“Bargaining” and “Villains”). While, during the sixth season, Willow abuses her witchcraft skills in order to deal with the pain of

losing girlfriend Tara, overall she utilizes her power responsibly and for the good of her friends.

Whilst Buffy is born with her gift and Willow develops her skills through her innate intellectual power, other female characters possess power for a short period of time due to demonic possession. Such is the case with Miss Calendar, a teacher at the high school who has a romantic relationship with Buffy's watcher, Giles. In the season two episode "The Dark Age," Miss Calendar is possessed by Eyghon, a sleepwalker demon who enters into unconscious individuals and takes control of its host's body. While possessed, Miss Calendar experiences a "euphoric feeling of power" that enhances her physical abilities, making her less vulnerable to harm and giving her improved fighting skills ("The Dark Age"). When the demon is exorcised from her body, she loses these powerful abilities, thus showing that some of the female characters on the show—when endowed with power—do not always retain it, especially if it is evil power like that of a demon.

Power is shown in other female characters on Buffy that do not have noble or heroic intentions in the use of this power. One such character is the female vampire Drusilla, who possessed the heightened physical abilities of a vampire, including enhanced durability and fighting skills. Drusilla also possesses hypnotic abilities, allowing her to manipulate minds, as she demonstrates in the season 2 episode "Becoming Part II" when she tricks Giles into believing she is his deceased love Miss Calendar through her hypnotic abilities. Never reforming throughout the course of the season, Drusilla's power is used to accomplish evil objectives whenever she appears on the program.

Playing a similar villainess role is Veruca, a female werewolf who uses her extraordinary animal abilities to wreak havoc on the Sunnydale community, particularly on fellow werewolf Oz and his girlfriend, Willow. Unlike Oz, who locks himself in a cage during the full moon to prevent himself from doing harm to others in his wolf form, Veruca roams freely in the night, ravaging and killing innocent people. She justifies her actions to Oz by saying, "We're animals. We kill" ("Wild at Heart"). Veruca utilizes her power freely and selfishly, unconcerned with the innocent lives she harms in doing so.

Functioning between the bounds of good and evil empowered women is Faith, a vampire slayer who possesses the same abilities as Buffy. Initially good-intentioned, Faith comes to Sunnydale to aid Buffy in her fight against evil. She is "a more provocative object because she illustrates the still-precarious position of warrior woman balanced on these borders between good and evil" who is "socially, sexually, and morally ambiguous" (Tjardes, 2003, 67). In the case of Faith, the degree of power she possesses leads to her corruption. When trying to qualify her somewhat hedonistic use of her slayer power, Faith tells Buffy, "The life of a slayer is simple. Want. Take. Have" ("Bad Girls"). This attitude toward her powers leads Faith into a string of violent incidents, with Faith working under the guidance of the evil town mayor for the latter part of the third season. Faith's character comes full circle in the final season, however, when she returns to help Buffy and her friends face The First, the ultimate evil, at the end of the seventh season. Therefore, Faith functions as a female character bridging the gap between good and evil power, as well as serving as an illustration of the effects supernatural power can have on those who possess it.

Sexual Situations and Consequences:

Buffy the Vampire Slayer dealt with a number of themes throughout its seven seasons, each being a reflection—whether directly or indirectly—of situations the average teenager/young adult might face. Therefore, sexual references and situations appear prominently in the program, functioning as illustrations of how these experiences occur in the lives of teens and young adults. A central point of discussion is how the strong female characters previously mentioned function in these sexual situations. The overall findings of this qualitative content analysis were that female characters possessing some type of power were quite often the initiators of sexual situations. In addition, those females who tended to use their powers for noble causes tended to be less aggressive in their sexual advances, although still initiating these sexual situations.

As the main character of the show, Buffy's experiences serve as a focus for many storylines, quite often depicting her in sexual situations. Many times this sexual behavior is merely a conversation of a sexual matter, such as when Buffy and Willow discuss their dreams/fantasies in "The Dark Age." Yet when Buffy has her actual first experience of sexual intercourse with Angel, it is an act she initiates. This is not a wholly irresponsible decision as Buffy and Angel have been in a relationship for an extended period of time, and both characters seem to want to move the relationship forward; therefore, Buffy is not using her power to force the act to occur. Yet the consequences of the act suggest that the decision was not wise, signifying that Buffy's age at the time of this act did not provide her with the proper amount of maturity to make such a decision. Angel, a vampire cursed with a soul, loses this soul when he experiences a moment of happiness with Buffy during their sexual encounter. He reverts back to his evil behavior, becoming

the soulless Angelus. This soullessness empowers Angelus as it leaves him without human concern for Buffy; she is merely a pawn through which to gain pleasure. The fact that Buffy was only 17 at the time she had her first sexual experience implies that her immaturity led to this "victimization," Angel using her to gain this pleasure and then "losing his soul" and, in turn, all concern for her.

This situation seemingly serves as a metaphor for situations in which teen females agree to sexual intercourse and are subsequently spurned, the male receiving what he wanted out of the encounter. Through this act, Buffy is disempowered just as Angel is empowered; yet by the end of the second season, Buffy kills the now-evil Angelus, regaining her empowered persona. This renewed confidence/dominance is evident in the dialogue exchanged between Buffy and Angel at the end of "Becoming Part II" during their battle. When Angel stands over an unarmed and seemingly defeated Buffy, he says, "No weapons. No friends. No hope. Take all of that away and what's left?" Angel then raises his sword to finish Buffy, but she stops the blade with her bare hands and responds with a forceful, "Me." Having regained faith in her supernatural abilities, Buffy subsequently defeats Angel.

When Buffy re-encounters Angel after he is resurrected (with a renewed soul), she again initiates a sexual situation, this time much more forcefully. This encounter is not, however, like the traditional sexual encounter of her previous experience; rather, Buffy forces an ailing Angel to take blood from her, a metaphorically sexual exchange, in order to cure him of a poison in his system: "Drink. Drink me," Buffy says as she forcibly places a resisting Angel's mouth to her neck. Again Buffy, the powerful female, initiates the sexual encounter and again, it is not a selfish act for individual pleasure;

rather, it is an act of selfless sacrifice made by a more mature Buffy. Buffy thus demonstrates how power can be used for noble causes. The consequence of this act is that Buffy is hospitalized due to blood loss, an outwardly negative consequence except for the fact that Angel is cured and proceeds to help Buffy in battle after she recovers.

Buffy's sexual decisions are not completely noble, however, as there were situations in this sample when Buffy's sexual decisions were decidedly aggressive and seemingly selfish. However, these situations were fueled by disturbances in Buffy's life that caused her to commit such negative acts in desperation. One such act occurs in "Smashed" when Buffy, in the middle of a fight with vampire Spike, violently grabs him and kisses him. The two proceed to have sex, Buffy obviously serving as the empowered and controlling force in the encounter. Since Spike is a vampire (without a soul), the choice to sleep with him is not a positive or noble decision. Yet due to the recent departure of Buffy's watcher as well as difficulties readjusting to life after her resurrection at the beginning of the season, Buffy lets her sorrow take control of her supernatural power, utilizing it to forcibly enter into a sexual relationship with Spike. With this negative sexual decision comes a negative consequence as Spike becomes so infatuated with Buffy during this ill-advised sexual relationship that when she ends their association, he attempts to force himself upon her. While Buffy escapes unharmed, the experience proves to be traumatic for her. Thus, Buffy's negative sexual decisions, fueled by the combination of her sorrow and supernatural power without any mature consideration of the consequences, lead to serious negative repercussions. Again, there seems to be the suggestion that irresponsible sexual encounters made without mature

thought bring about injurious consequences, an idea illustrated through the scenarios on the program.

Whereas Buffy is decidedly sexual due to her innate empowerment from the start of the first season, Willow's sexual nature evolves over the course of the show just as her power grows. In early episodes of the program, Willow is very passive about her sexual feelings, particularly in regards to her crush on best friend Xander. She fails to attempt any type of initiation of a relationship with Xander, her lack of supernatural empowerment leaving her with little confidence. The suggestion therefore seems to be that intellectual power, while a formidable force, does not fuel sexual aggression or the initiation of sexual encounters. Yet by season 3—precisely in sync with the development of her witchcraft abilities—Willow becomes decidedly more sexual, especially in her relationship with boyfriend Oz. In “Graduation Day Part II,” she initiates a sexual encounter with Oz. During the subsequent season, Willow is forced to deal with sexual competition in the form of the much more aggressive Veruca. After Oz and Veruca have a tryst while both are in werewolf form, Veruca tells Oz, “It doesn’t take a full moon. We could do it again right now” (“Wild at Heart”). While Oz initially resists, he eventually succumbs to Veruca’s advances, a seemingly negative consequence for Willow—whether the consequence is due to Willow’s lack of intense sexual aggression or of her initially giving of herself too willingly to Oz in the previous season is not certain. What is clear in this situation is that good-intentioned power does not prove as forceful as selfish/evil power in engaging a sexual act as the latter is more likely to lead to aggressive sexual behavior that thus leads to a sexual encounter.

In the case of Veruca, this intense sexual aggression bears ties with both the animalistic nature of her werewolf persona as well as the lack of moral standards she possesses. When Veruca says, “We’re animals. We kill,” she demonstrates how the power she gains when becoming a werewolf has impeded her moral judgment (“Wild at Heart”). Proceeding from her animalistic power is an animalistic sense of morality. She feels no remorse in killing another human being. With such a destructive set of morals in place, she in turn also believes that no bounds should be placed on her sexual aggression. The consequence of this mindset is unquestionably negative as Veruca is killed by Oz in werewolf form, Oz doing so to protect Willow from Veruca’s attack.

When Oz leaves out of guilt for his animalistic indiscretions, Willow is forced to direct her growing power/sexual energy elsewhere. She finds kinship—and eventually love—in the form of Tara, a fellow witch who also possesses great power. This combination of two powerful females leads to a much more symbiotic sexual relationship than any of the heterosexual relationships on Buffy. Their powers complement each other, thus leading to a positive sexual relationship based on mutual trust and not the aggression or initiation of only one party.

The effects of instilled demonic power on the sexual aggression of a non-empowered woman are displayed with the characterization of Miss Calendar in the episode “The Dark Ages.” Unbeknownst to Giles, his love interest is possessed by the demon Eyghon, an evil force that Giles has encountered in the past. The power of Eyghon’s essence intensifies Miss Calendar’s sexual aggression, leading her to act in an initially promiscuous and eventually aggressive manner. Soon after the demon enters Miss Calendar’s body, she says to Giles, “You could take me home...or you could take

advantage of me in my weakened state" ("The Dark Age"). When Giles protests, feeling as though such a sexual encounter would be inappropriate, the possessed Miss Calendar presses him further: "There's never been a better time," she says. After being rebuked again, Miss Calendar becomes violent, the demon inside her causing her to physically attack Giles, the built-up sexual aggression manifesting itself in the form of physical violence. When the demon is eventually exorcised from Miss Calendar's body, she is left with both a lack of power as well as the correlating lack of sexual drive. When Giles approaches her and proposes they get together, she turns his offer down, having seemingly lost any sexual drive whatsoever. Therefore, negative repercussions result from such demon-induced sexual aggression as Miss Calendar is left feeling indifferent towards any further sexual contact with Giles.

Drusilla, the vampire hypnotist, uses her powers in a similarly seductive manner on the same subject—Giles—in order to gain information about an apocalyptic ritual for a then-evil Angel. She utilizes her abilities to make Giles believe she is in fact his deceased lover, Miss Calendar. While taking on this false form, Drusilla seduces Giles into revealing the information: "We'll have everything we never got to have, never got to feel," she says ("Becoming Part II"). This seduction through female supernatural power serves to be an effective tool as Giles does unknowingly reveal the information. Upon finding out the information, Drusilla kisses Giles, an act that upsets her current lover Spike. While a seemingly minor negative consequence, this sexual promiscuity on the part of Drusilla leads to the negative consequence of her lover's jealousy. These sexual actions motivate the jealous Spike to join forces with Buffy for a short while to defeat Angelus and Drusilla, Drusilla's promiscuity decreasing Spike's loyalty to her.

Negative consequences abound in the case of renegade slayer Faith. Her rash actions both sexually and non-sexually cause her to face numerous negative repercussions. Faith's sexual promiscuity is readily evident in how she talks, dresses, and behaves; she functions as the most overtly sexual female character observed in the sample of this qualitative content analysis. "Her sexual aggression is presented early on as scandalous but attractive, even when associated with violence" (Tjardes, 2003, 70).

Although Faith is not completely selfish and misguided in her behaviors when she first arrives in Sunnydale, it is evident that she lives her life in a sexually promiscuous manner: "Isn't it crazy how slaying just always makes you hungry and horny," says Faith to Buffy after a night patrolling for vampires ("Faith, Hope, and Trick"). In this scene, her "sensuality and appetite are foregrounded as she devours appetizers, licking her fingers" when she makes this remark to Buffy. "This line is one of the most quoted in viewer sites; it often is used as symbolic of Faith's attitudes" (Tjardes, 2003, 69). This hedonistic attitude is expressed in both Faith's flippant behavior towards Buffy as well as her forceful and sometimes dangerous sexual aggression.

This sexual outlook—which is ultimately revealed as an unhealthy lifestyle through the consequences of Faith's actions—is further displayed in an instance when Buffy finds herself without a date and Faith suggests that they "find a couple of studs, use them, and discard them," illustrating both her dominance over males in sexual situations as well as her lack of concern for the consequences associated with sexual encounters. This moral ambiguity is evident in all facets of her behavior, the powers of the slayer giving her a sense of entitlement for whatever she desires; her "want, take, have" philosophy.

Yet in living in such a way, Faith places others in harms way as the dangerous nature of her behavior is illustrated in her second sexual encounter with Xander in “Consequences.” Her first seduction of Xander in “The Zeppo” is “prompted by violence but played comically as she throws him out afterward, clothes bundled in his arms, with a hurried, ‘That was great. I gotta shower’” (Tjardes, 2003, 70). During this first encounter, Faith’s references to “the ‘lust’ that slaying brings and her sexualized movements when discussing slaying” work to “equate violence and sexuality” (Tjardes, 2003, 70). Yet when Xander comes to talk to Faith at her apartment in “Consequences,” her sexual aggression surfaces and leads her to force Xander onto her bed, transforming from seduction to violent behavior. When he resists, her sexual agitation builds up to a violent fervor, causing her to begin to strangle Xander while straddling him on her bed. Lacking strength comparable to that of a slayer, Xander lies helpless and is only saved when Angel stops Faith from killing him. This rape-like encounter with Xander is again a reversal of traditional roles: it is the woman who violently tries to overpower the man and force herself upon him.

This is only the beginning of a string of subsequent violent acts Faith commits, leading Buffy to drastic measures to stop Faith’s indifferent behavior. After a violent battle between the two slayers, Faith lies in a coma, the consequences of both her sexual aggressiveness as well as her violent behavior leading her to such an end result.

When Faith returns in the final season of Buffy to aid Buffy and her friends in one last battle, she has seemingly changed her callous and violent persona into a much more compassionate personality. Yet Faith’s sexual promiscuity has not faded; in “Touched,” she initiates sexual intercourse with Principal Wood, a man whom she has just met.

However, this initiatory sexual behavior is reciprocated by Principal Wood; thus, Faith's sexual aggression does not create violent repercussions for the parties involved. As a result, no negative consequences arise from this sexual encounter.

As the case of Faith's later sexual encounters display, the aftermath of aggressive sexual behavior, behavior which has a strong correlation to power/strength, is not uniformly negative. As this instance shows, when the female initiates the act and both parties are mature enough to consent to engage in the sexual act, such an act is not punished. Therefore, aggressiveness does not necessarily equal evil or negative consequences if it is accompanied by mature thought.

In many of these situations, the sexual behavior is punished, whether it is initiated by an overall good and moral character or a more villainous character. For the immoral or evil female aggressors—Veruca, Drusilla, early Faith, possessed Miss Calendar—the negative consequences are derived directly from the negative sexual aggression, an uninhibited desire for sex without consideration to moral restrictions or the well being of others. Yet in the instances that it is initiated by a moral character, like Buffy's encounter with Angel, the negative consequences seem to be derived from the fact that the seemingly moral character does not possess the maturity to experience the sexual act.

DISCUSSION

The core message of the content of this sample of Buffy the Vampire Slayer seems to be that sexual relationships are a prominent part of the lives of teenagers and young adults. By featuring such a topic so prominently on a program targeted at this teenage/young adult demographic (particularly during times of high viewership like

sweeps), concerns arise over how these depictions affect the views of this demographic audience.

While it would seem that audiences would process entertainment media with less of an inclination to accept the viewed material as reality, this media can still have a significant influence on how certain demographics of audiences perceive reality. As previous research focusing on cultivation analysis have suggested, “television cultivates, like parents, peers, the clergy, and teachers, through its stories, common world views, common values, and common perspectives on how men and women should think, behave, and act” and that “a primary concern is that television’s lessons and imagery may not reflect the real world” (Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001, p. 4). For example, one of the findings of from this qualitative analysis was that women who possess power tend to be sexually aggressive, the sexual act serving as a means of displaying dominance over their sexual partner through the initiation of the act. There are serious potential ramifications for such depictions as the creation of such stereotypes for powerful women may serve to shape the social development of Buffy’s audience, especially the teenage and young adult audience to which it intends to appeal, and create false images of the gravity of uninhibited sexuality.

In the views of cultivation analysis, these audiences—particularly young girls relating to both the characters and the situations faced by these characters as scenarios they may face in their own lives—are potentially led to believe that a strong woman must demonstrate her strength through sexual willingness and aggression. As Taylor discussed with the framework of the information processing model, this young adult audience perceives that all females are sexually active based on the depictions of behavior of the

females on shows such as Buffy. These young girls—who will wish to live up to the standards of greatness held by the heroic characters (like Buffy and Willow) and possibly the less heroic, more rebellious characters (like Faith)—therefore will believe that they must practice a similar promiscuity and sexual aggression if they fail to recognize the negative ramifications that face these characters when they enter into sexual activity irresponsibly. They may only assimilate the actual portrayals on Buffy and form their beliefs about sexuality based merely on the quantity of sexual acts on Buffy. Based on the high level of both sexually aggressive characters as well as the overall abundance of sexual content, Buffy's audience might cultivate a sense of reality that is skewed and based around interpretations of the show that are not completely accurate.

Due to the show's supernatural elements, a certain amount of suspension of disbelief must be exercised, thus suggesting that perhaps this cultivation theory may not apply since viewers already know that the situations on the show are not true to reality. Yet the metaphoric nature of many of these situations creates portrayals that are pertinent and particularly applicable to many teen/young adult lives. As Epps said, unlike some other teen shows in the fantasy television genre, "Buffy adopts a façade of fantasy to cover a portrayal of the teen years as they really are" (2002, p. 29). Therefore, the situations and behaviors on the show have the potential to cultivate a sense of reality that is not wholly accurate. Audiences process entertainment media and, while they may not take it as absolute fact, still look to it to provide a reflection of some aspect of reality.

Based on the way audiences, particularly teens, process and utilize entertainment media such as Buffy, an innate responsibility seems to exist for creators of such media to provide audiences with representations that are fairly true to reality. There are potential

negative ramifications if entertainment media strays too far from reality in its portrayals, and entertainment media becomes potentially dangerous to the mentality of impressionable audiences when it is the only source of media used by audiences to understand the possible responses to situations they may face in the real world. Yet Buffy is only one program and thus cannot be looked to hold the full responsibility for creating such audience conceptions of reality. Even so, the fact that Buffy addresses so directly issues facing teens would thus lead to a more micro-based interpretation of the cultivation analysis theory, looking at how that one small cultural subset of the teenage girl demographic is affected by the portrayals of this relatable program.

While the amount of sexual content on Buffy may be sizeable, the inclusion of portrayed consequences for irresponsible sexual actions on the program serves to redeem the quality of the sexual content of the show. The program treats teen sexuality with a moral seriousness not found in much other teen genre programming. Those females who enter into sexual situations aggressively and selfishly face negative consequences and are often punished in some way for these actions. The negative consequences of Buffy's initial encounter with Angel dramatize the rationale for waiting and saving one's self: the person you think you love may potentially change after getting what they want, so make sure you have found true love before giving yourself sexually to another person.

The situations on Buffy, in being metaphoric representations of reality, serve a potentially positive function if such programming is analyzed with the media studies approach of content analysis. While the heavy amounts of teen sexuality may seem to promote sexual promiscuity as a true necessity of teen life, the ramifications of irresponsible sexual acts work to counteract the potentially harmful high quantity of

sexual content of the program. Therefore in this case, the quality of the content counteracts the seemingly negative quantity to provide a more positive and useful portrayal of teen sexuality to be referenced by teen audiences as a means of promoting the careful consideration and maturity necessary to enter into sexual activity. The message, according to cultivation analysis, is in the content of the show. Thus, if interpreted correctly, audiences of Buffy can derive positive notions of sexuality from the portrayals of mature females making responsible decisions just as they will be dissuaded from sexual activity if not possessing that good-intentioned maturity.

Further positive potential exists in the form of the portrayals of female characters as strong and independent. As Inness states, "tough women are appearing not only in the popular media but in real life, too" (p. 3). Jones (2002) further argues this point in his discussion of the importance of strong fictional characters, stating that that program such as Buffy show "a profound shift in the relationship of women, to power, sex, and aggression." He believes that rather than being just the latest fashion trend, these images reflect the fact that "women are challenging the male monopoly on power and aggression, a shift that has broad ramifications for how gender is constructed" (p. 150). Therefore, females who view programs like Buffy see strong female characters that are capable and able to defend themselves, thus encouraging a strong image of confidence in female viewers. Whether this leads to women wanting to have stronger bodies, an example given by Inness, or simply standing up for themselves in situations where they would be belittled as women, such depictions have definite positive potential if strength and self-confidence is carried over into female viewers' own lives.

Early (2003) believes that the portrayals on Buffy serve as an overall positive model for young viewers on how to deal with the trials of life, particularly relations between genders: "Perhaps the greatest strength of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is its creator and writers' ability to portray relations of power, especially gender relations, both as representational systems and as social processes that can be exposed, analyzed, and changed" (p. 65). As mentioned, the discourse created by introducing powerful and capable female characters into the media spectrum allows for further exploration, and possible improvement, of relations between genders. This works to benefit both males and females: "the program offers a hopeful discursive space for promoting new understandings about how individuals, in particular young people, can take charge of their own lives and, if so inclined, can choose to act in purposeful ways to create a more just and less violent world" (Early, 2003, 65).

CONCLUSION

While this qualitative content analysis did accomplish its main objectives, there were limitations to this theoretical model, as there are with any form of analysis. The key question behind this study is whether the morals expressed in the content of the program, which was recovered via the content analysis, has an affect on audiences and their own perception of reality. The theory of cultivation analysis was used as a means to address this question and suggest possible answers. When addressing a media theory such as cultivation analysis, actual displayed effects of media content on viewers prove to be useful in correlating results with the actual theory concept. Yet with a content analysis, such a correlation between results and the theory cannot be made as the research method only evaluates the content of media and does not address the effects the content actually

has on audiences. Therefore, it is not possible to arrive at a definite answer to the key question of effects on audiences. This suggests a need for future research if the actual effects of the content of Buffy—or any other television program—on audiences are to be further explored and analyzed. Such methods as surveys or an experiment would serve to address such effects-related issues more fully. This is a qualitative study that could benefit from a more qualitative follow-up study using a more systematic approach such as the analysis forms mentioned above. Yet regardless of the form of analysis, it is hard to fully understand, quantify, or qualify the complete effects of television portrayals that is suggested by the theory of cultivation analysis.

Further limitations of this qualitative content analysis include the selected sampling analyzed. Since only a select number of episodes were analyzed for the quality of their content, a more comprehensive study looking at the same aspect of the program's content might be conducted in the future. This would allow for a much more complete evaluation of the sexual behaviors depicted on the program. Similar qualitative analyses might be conducted on other programs within this same teen genre to further explore the potential implications of the inclusion of sexual content on teen programs and how such content cultivates a model of reality that may not be entirely accurate.

While limitations to this study exist, relevant results surfaced from the analysis of the sexuality of these female characters, a particular aspect program content that had yet to be analyzed in such an in-depth manner. This led to the accomplishment of the research's objectives, an apparent correlation found between powerful women and aggressive sexual behavior. The findings displayed that Buffy does indeed have a high level of sexual content; however, upon evaluating this content, it is evident that the

manner in which this subject matter is dealt constructs a portrayal of sexual situations that serves a positive social function. Selfish and irresponsible sexual aggression is not rewarded; rather, it is punished. Thus, this study illustrated that Buffy, while relying heavily on sexual content for subject matter, deals with such content responsibly. If evaluating the program on the basis of the media theory of cultivation analysis, it is therefore fair to say that, if interpreted correctly by the impressionable teen demographic of the show, the sexual content will dissuade irresponsible sexual behavior in teens, thus promoting a responsible representation of reality.

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