

**Uncovering America's Horror story: A Content
and Critical Analysis of *American Horror Story*.**

The Honors Program
Senior Capstone Project
Student's Name: Jessica Maio
Faculty Sponsor: Stanley Baran
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ABSTRACT

The popular television series *American Horror Story* has captivated millions of Americans with its shocking and twisted plotlines that never fail to surprise. Perhaps one of the reasons that the show has become so popular is that it uses the horror genre as a way to explore controversial topics. The purpose of this project is to examine the controversial topics that are presented in *American Horror Society* and compare them with the current views of mainstream society to determine whether the show primarily reflects the views of the larger society or challenges them. In other words, how does American Horror Story use the “distance” provided by its genre’s fictional world to comment on our contemporary real world?

INTRODUCTION

Ever since its debut in 2011, the television series *American Horror Story* has earned millions of dollars in revenues and is still becoming increasingly popular among loyal and new viewers. The use of well-known celebrities as characters on the show as well as the show's unconventional themes have helped contribute to this popularity.

The show often presents topics that are considered controversial and that in the past, typically have not been seen before on television. It appears that *American Horror Story* is attempting to do more than just bring up these issues. The intention is to get people thinking about them and perhaps in ways that they have not thought about them before. Therefore, one question that this project will seek to answer is, what is the show *American Horror Story* saying about American society?

To elaborate, there are several key issues that the show brings up that can be analyzed. Some of these include abortion, gay rights and mental illness. This project will look at these and similar topics and determine how *American Horror Story* portrays them, based on the contexts in which they are presented.

The project will seek to achieve three main goals. The first is to conduct a content analysis of the show *American Horror Story* by selecting certain key words and phrases to look for in the episodes of the show and examining how they are used in the context of the show. The next goal will be to analyze the results in the context of season two of *American Horror Story* through a critical textual analysis. Finally, the third goal will be an attempt to compare the results of my findings from the content and critical analysis to the current political, cultural and social views of mainstream American society.

The scope of this project is mainly limited to the show *American Horror Story*. However, the show is relatively new so I had to branch out to other areas of the horror genre to obtain more information initially. Research in the field of horror has shown that horror movies tend to play with the emotions of their viewers. *American Horror Story* seems to work in a similar manner, by reflecting the issues and concerns of American society, back to them. However,

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the project will attempt to determine if the show is in fact reflecting these issues or if it is challenging them and pushing people to think differently about contemporary issues that are important in today's society.

The focus of this project will also be limited to American society. As can be determined by the name, *American Horror Story*, the show portrays the issues of American society and even uses real historical figures and places in America. Furthermore, although the show sometimes showcases controversial issues in a historical context, they do so in way that is true to modern day American society.

For example, one of the seasons takes place at a mental asylum in the 1960s. While the setting was accurate for the time period, the show portrays the topic of mental illness as something that is not taken seriously and that needs to be improved upon. This way of thinking is also accurate to the historical time period but the episodes and the characters expose the mental institution and treatments in a very negative manner. These beliefs are more closely correlated with the views of modern day society.

One of the primary reasons for conducting this project is that it is current and relevant in terms of today's society. Some of the topics that will be studied during the course of this project are ones that are controversial and highly debated in American society today. It is also important to examine these topics within the context of *American Horror Story* because the show is very popular and is gaining more and more viewers each year.

Therefore, if the show is reflecting the views of American society, then understanding what *American Horror Story* has to say about these hot topics can help us understand how society feels about them. If the show is challenging or pushing people to think about these contemporary issues in a different way, then understanding how the show portrays them can help us understand how the media is able to influence the beliefs and values of the millennial generation

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The horror genre has grown into a multi-billion dollar enterprise with income from films such as *Saw* bringing in \$55.2 million for one movie in 2004. This does not include the sequels (Fernandez, 2008). The *Saw* franchise started as a low budget film that was initially rejected but was then picked up by Lionsgate and ended up becoming a multi-billion dollar franchise.

This is not a single occurrence and the horror phenomenon has even expanded from the big screen to viewers' own televisions with television shows such as *American Horror Story*. The television series *American Horror Story* in particular has seen notable ratings and popularity, due in part to the fact that it often features famous actors on the show. The producers have even been able to get world famous superstars Adam Levine and Lady Gaga to appear on the show (Upadhyaya, 2015).

Now in its fifth season, the show has clearly gained a large following despite the horrific content that in some ways tests the limits of what is acceptable for television. Studying and analyzing the show *American Horror Story* is both current and relevant because it is within a genre that is currently a large part of mainstream American society. Studying how the show communicates information about controversial issues to viewers can help us understand how this particular genre can be used to explore important cultural questions.

Through mass media and social media, American society has the increased ability to express opinions and attitudes about current events now so more than ever before. The implications of this are both positive and negative. For one, younger people may feel more inclined to express their political, cultural and religious views through social media platforms where their posts may be validated or challenged by fellow users. Seeing friends and family post statuses of such natures may invite other users to do the same. In addition, various social media platforms have profiles devoted to political, religious and cultural figures and ideologies.

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The ease and access of being able to share one's views so freely has invited many to do so but not without repercussions. One obvious flaw with this system is that social media does not always have reliable content, especially in terms of its content regarding politics.

Furthermore, this idea of free sharing allows people to argue more and can fuel hostilities between internet users.

But, discussion about society's values is not necessarily a negative thing and hearing other opinions may help an individual widen their perspectives. There are several prominent issues being debated currently in society but some key examples include gay rights, and the Federal Government's executive order to legalize gay marriage in all fifty states; abortion, and the attempt to defund Planned Parenthood; and gun control.

These topics are most definitely creating discussions and different groups of people have strong opinions of what they think is right. Analyzing *American Horror Story* is a relevant and contemporary endeavor for several reasons. The show incorporates these topics into the storyline, but it does so in a way that encourages viewers to contemplate all opinions and viewpoints.

Lens

Because *American Horror Story* is currently popular and the themes that it brings up, such as abortion and gay marriage, are contemporary and highly debated, it is beneficial to examine these controversial topics from a mainly contemporary standpoint. It will be important to examine the issues as they are portrayed today by American society compared to how they have been portrayed in the past.

Although it will be necessary to conduct background research on the horror genre and the field of communication in general, there is much relevant literature on *American Horror Story* and the horror genre in general. The content analysis will seek to measure and define the value of popular culture as a site to investigate important issues.

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Background and History

The study of social sciences in America was largely influenced by the development of the Frankfurt School at Columbia University. The school was originally built in Germany to foster the study of Marxism but became an important site for the development of critical theory and the study of the social sciences.

The field of communication as a major discipline in America is thought to have four forefathers: Kurt Lewin, Paul Lazarsfeld, Carl Hovland and Harold Lasswell. All of these men, although from different disciplines and backgrounds, played a prominent role in the development of the communication field in America. Wilbur Schramm, another key researcher in the communication field, even mentions Levin, Lazarsfeld, Hovland and Lasswell in his memoir, *The Beginnings of Communication Study in America: A Personal Memoir* (1997). Schramm introduces the notion of these men as founders of mass communication.

The onset of mass communication in America took place during the industrial revolution where everything was produced in mass quantities. This idea of sharing more than ever with more people than ever also applied to communication. Books became accessible to those who had never before been able to read them (Fang, 1997).

It is important to think of mass media not only in the print copy but also in the digital form as well. Important milestones, often referred to as the "Golden Ages" of different technologies, including the radio, the television, the internet and social media helped shape the development of mass communication. Such events transpired during the 1920s, the 1950s, the 1990s and the 2000s respectively (Harris and Sanborn, 2014).

Key Terms

Key terms to understand in the field of communication include Mass Communication, popular culture and Mass Media. The significance of these terms to the horror genre is great. It is because of the mass media revelation and the development of mass communication that popular genres, such as horror, were able to grow significantly.

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Put in simple terms, mass communication is a way to disseminate information to a large number of people although, Oxford Dictionaries defines it as, “The imparting or exchanging of information on a large scale to a wide range of people” (2015). Likewise, mass media can be thought of as the mediums that reach a large number of people. Popular culture describes the cultural activities that are popular among a large amount of people in a society.

Background of the Horror Genre

The Horror genre is very broad and can be perceived in many different ways. For example, there are several different sub genres including crime, apocalyptic, occult, and many others. Viktória Prohászková (2012) argues that horror is sometimes confused with similar genres such as science fiction and thrillers.

Prohászková explains that modern day horror as we know it is derived from Gothic style writing that was popular in the Eighteenth Century. Gothic novels were inspired by gothic architecture and often involved supernatural elements. These novels became well known for their distinct settings and characters. They typically included common horror tropes such as vampires, monsters and haunted houses (Spratford & Clausen, 2004). The gothic style of writing would become a catalyst for the modern day style of horror.

The Enlightenment also played a role in the development of the horror genre. During this time, new developments in science and technology led to new ideas about the creation of the Earth and nature and destiny of humans. This ultimately prompted many to question the ideals of religion and the existence of God. Additionally, there was talk about how science would greatly contribute to the evolution of the human race but that it could also be used for evil. The fear of the potential evil that science could bring about was reflected in gothic novels such as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (Spratford & Clausen, 2004).

Ann Radcliffe, Charles Brockden Brown and Matthew Lewis contributed to the “new age” of horror by starting a transition from gothic novels. Similarly, authors like Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ambrose Pierce were making their marks in America in the horror genre and setting the standards with their famous written works.

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The successors to the famous written works of horror were movies such as *Nosferatu* and *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and *Der Golem*. These films were typically dark in nature and pictured eerie settings such as castles. Many years later, classic American horror films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Jaws*, *Halloween*, *Alien* and *The Exorcist* were released. With the exception of *The Exorcist* the films were typically filled with violence, blood and gore.

In contrast, the eighties were famous for what came to be known as “slasher” films. Films like *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th* and *Child's Play* featured deranged killers who often stalked and terrorized their victims. As a result of the many different aspects of horror introduced by past movies, the horror films of modern day (2000-present) take advantage of all of the different themes and of horror to create a truly terrifying experience for viewers.

The resulting implication of the significant growth of the horror genre throughout the decades is that it spurred the creation of a whole horror industry. As with any industry, horror itself became a sellable commodity from which certain business were able to profit.

The Evolution of Horror

The horror industry in America, especially horror cinema and television, has evolved over the years and has largely kept up with the changing American culture. Other developments, such as breakthroughs in technology, must also be noted as attributing to the change in American horror television and cinema. However, it is also fair to conclude that today's American culture has created new standards for what is considered appropriate to air on television.

The content that is currently shown on television and in films is far different than what would have been allowed in the past. There is more violence, nudity, blood, gore and risqué scenes than ever before. Although this applies to most television and film genres, the horror genre especially, has been affected.

New breakthroughs in technology especially, have made it possible for producers to make scenes even scarier and more realistic with the use of sophisticated graphics but it is

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interesting to investigate why viewers choose to watch these shows and movies that are filled with more blood, gore, murder and torture.

Why is Horror so Entertaining?

The relatively new television show *American Horror Story* combines elements typically seen only in horror movies within the timeframe of a typical television series (for example, one hour per week for thirteen weeks). The show essentially is testing the limits with horror on television. It features graphic horror such as murder, torture and rape that, until recently, would be shown only in the movie theater and would be deemed too inappropriate for most television channels.

There are several reasons why viewers continue to watch the show, including the suspenseful storyline which usually ends each episode with a cliffhanger. This draws viewers in and gets them emotionally invested in the show and the characters. Some of the characters are also celebrities which may contribute to the viewers' initial decision to watch the show.

Tim Goodman (2011) gives readers a taste of *American Horror Story* when discussing some of the behind the scenes information regarding the show. He notes that the producers of *American Horror Story* are also the producers of the popular series *Glee*. He describes the show (*American Horror Story*) as being cliché but also “creepy and freaky”. Essentially, Goodman is pondering how the creators of *Glee* went to go on and produce *American Horror Story* and if their intentions are valid or honorable or if they are simply doing it to change things up.

Either way, the show is nonetheless quite creepy and scary. Goodman mentions how even the title sequences are slightly terrifying with the flashes of graphic images that could be pulled straight out of a horror movie. It seems as though the producers like to use their shows to make bold statements. Goodman mentions the fact that the producers use actors with Down Syndrome in both *Glee* and *American Horror Story* and he questions if there is some kind of deep meaning for this. In addition, in *American Horror Story*, the producers use real historical events and people as well as historically controversial topics.

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While Goodman focuses more on the intentions of the show, Gary Hoppenstand (2012) discusses the television and the horror genre especially in terms of the transformation of the content that it produces. *American Horror Story* for example, is certainly not a typical haunted ghost story. It combines several elements of horror and presents them in a manner that is gruesome and suspenseful to fans. But, why is there a demand for such gruesome horror?

One theory that Hoppenstand suggests is that audiences get emotionally connected to today's horror shows. For example, each season of *American Horror Story* presents a different storyline. While the episodes are based on typical horror tropes (such as a haunted house or an insane asylum) they are written so that the viewers are emotionally involved in the lives of the characters and what is happening around them.

In each season, all of the different characters' stories are unraveled throughout the episodes. For example, in season one, readers can follow the plight of main character Vivian as she and her family move to a new house and as she tries to repair her failing marriage while preparing to give birth to twins. By the end of the season, viewers may find themselves emotionally invested in Vivian and what will become of her.

Hoppenstand also discusses the shift that has taken place throughout the years in the nature of the programs that are allowed on Television and more specifically, programs that pertain to the horror genre. He points out that traditionally, these programs that were shown on television were censored and modified so that they were more appropriate for the various audiences.

Hoppenstand does point out however, that this is different from the film industry which is typically less censored than television. *American Horror Story* is defying the traditional image of horror presented on television by incorporating material that is just barely appropriate for television but perhaps not quite horrific enough for the film industry. The content that is allowed on television has become less and less censored throughout the years but *American*

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Horror Story has taken it a step further by including elements that previously would usually not be shown on mainstream media.

Selling Horror

Virtually anyone can log tune in and watch the murder, rape, torture, and other horrific things that the show has to offer. This is different from past shows because they typically did not feature scenes that were extremely graphic and horrific and if they did, it was not as easy for children and teenagers to access to these shows. This has changed, however with new video technology.

Today, the internet allows anyone to access virtually anything from anywhere. This is especially true for children and teenagers who usually have the technical competencies to gain access to content that they would normally not be allowed access to, if they so choose. Because of this, media companies tend to try to advertise their content to younger teenagers and children. Part of what makes the content so desirable is the fact that children are told that they are not allowed to view these types of mature content.

Media companies are escalating the situation by marketing their horror movies to young teens, who make up their target audience. Not only are producers putting out movies that are popular, but they are capitalizing off of them as well. This means that they have a reason to market horror to society and to young people because it is what makes money.

With the increasing amount of technology, access to these movies is becoming common, even for young teens. They can download files of the movie from the internet and share with friends. This is contributing greatly to the horror movie industry's ability to capitalize on blood and gore and topics that are typically considered inappropriate.

Understanding the Symbolism

It can be difficult to imagine how a television show or movie that is filled with so much blood and gore can have any underlying meaning and symbolism. However, *American Horror Story* touches upon several controversial and complex issues. The show features underlying messages and symbolism and tends to present currently hot topics in a subtle way.

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Dawn Keetley's *Stillborn: The Entropic Gothic of American Horror Story* focuses on the symbolism that is prevalent in the show. For example, Keetley examines the significance of twins which is a common theme in *American Horror Story*. Keetley suggests that each character experiences a sort of reproduction or twin version of themselves.

This is especially true in death, the characters are the same in death as they were when they were living. Sometimes so much so, that they may not even know that they are dead. This is what happens with one of the main characters, Violet. It was not until it was revealed to her by one of the other ghosts in the house, that Violet knew that she was dead. In a sense, the characters cannot escape their lives, even in death.

Moira the maid especially exemplifies this parallel existence. All of the characters perceive her as an innocent old housekeeper except for main character Ben Harmon. He constantly sees Moira as a beautiful young woman who is trying to seduce him. After several episodes, viewers learn that Moira had an affair when she was a young housekeeper and was murdered as a result. Even in death she cannot escape her former self. Moira's character also demonstrates the significance of the house which is referred to as the "Murder House."

The house itself represents the cycle of life and death. The main character and family matriarch, Vivian, gives birth to her twins in the house but most of the characters end up dying in the house. From abortions, suicide and murders that occurred during the residency of the first owners, to the murders and suicide of the Harmon family, the residents of the house are trapped and are unable to leave.

The house is a vessel where all the residents eventually end up staying. When Adelaide is struck by a car and killed, her mother makes an obvious attempt to drag her onto the front lawn of the house because she knows if she can get her there, Addie's spirit will remain at the house forever.

In addition, the Harmons move to L.A. and to the new house specifically to start over. After just getting over a period of infidelity in their marriage and Vivian's miscarriage, the family uproots and picks a new house to settle in, which they hope will solve their problems.

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However, their dreams of a new life and a renewed beginning are eventually violently shattered and murdered just like all of the residents who pass through the house (2013).

Perhaps the symbolism and intricate plot is what grabs viewers' attention in the first place and then keeps them watching later on. They become emotionally and psychologically invested in the show and the suspense keeps them coming back for more. Some viewers take their roles as fans a little more seriously though, leaving one to wonder just how much of an impact the show has on some people.

Taking it Too Far?

This is important because some people worry about a show that has such graphic content and themes that are so influential and what it could possibly prompt people to do. Chris Tribbey discusses an *American Horror Story* fan appreciation night. The significance of this is the fact the show is so popular that it is able to have its own appreciation night. Tribbey describes a night at a cemetery where one hundred fans gathered to watch the season premiere in the cemetery. The night also included information sessions on Los Angeles hauntings and a psychic. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment hosted the event which is part of their efforts to market the show.

One way that the show attempts to accumulate fans is by signing celebrities as actors. Simply having celebrities on the show is enough of a reason for some viewers to start watching it. If they see a familiar face or someone who has a great amount of power and influence, viewers may be more inclined to watch. In addition, a big-name celebrity may validate the popularity of the show and convince the viewer that they are making a good choice by choosing to watch.

The addition of Lady Gaga to the show *American Horror story* was recently announced by Forbes. The announcement was made at the same time that the title and theme of the season were announced. According to Forbes author Emily Canal (2105), "The 28-year-old musician and philanthropist earned \$33 million between June 2013 and June 2014, Forbes estimated. She is No. 19 on the Forbes' Celebrity 100 List, a ranking of the most powerful stars in 2014."

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The fact that Lady Gaga is a very wealthy and powerful star is important in the context of her recent addition to the *American Horror Story* cast. This is significant in several ways. The first is that having such a powerful and influential celebrity on the show will most likely increase the popularity and the ratings of the show. Some fans will watch the show simply because Lady Gaga will be a part of it.

Additionally, Lady Gaga's addition to the cast says something about the existing popularity of the show. To hire such a popular and influential artist most likely cost the producers a large sum. This speaks to the show's growing success since 2011 when it first aired. Besides Lady Gaga, the show also features several other celebrities including Jessica Lange and Stevie Nicks, to name a few.

Most horror movies do not sign on popular celebrities. In fact, some horror movies have been known for discovering new actors and helping them start their acting careers. Without having popular actors and celebrities star in their movies, producers and film executives have to find other ways to capture and audience. One tactic is to come up with a strong marketing plan that includes getting sponsors to sign on, if possible.

One way to market horror films and programs is to understand their popularity. Horror tends to be more popular in times of high stress and uncertainty in society. For instance, if there is a devastating occurrence that affects a large part of a nation, there may be a correlation with increased sales in the horror genre which is attributed to people craving an adrenaline rush to deal with any stress that they might be facing.

In order to cater to customers' adrenaline rush cravings, companies have used the horror theme in different ways to market their products. There have been increases in haunted events and the companies that partner with them as sponsors. For example, Six Flags, McDonald's, and Dunkin Donuts have jumped on the horror bandwagon as sponsors for various horror themed events. These companies typically promote a certain horror film or event in exchange for increased advertising.

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The Changing Definition of Success in the Horror Industry

While some films fail and never make it far in the industry, other films take off and find immense success. Some so much so, that they make profits in the billions and start a franchise. This was the case with the *Saw* franchise which started out with a very minimal budget and turned into a huge success (Chudgar, 2013).

Hollywood Reporter writer Jay Fernandez (2008) focuses on the popularity and success of the *Saw* franchise specifically. The movie and its sequels has turned into a billion dollar franchise even though it started as a low budget production. In addition, there was originally some uncertainty as to how successful the film would turn out, but when it first screened it proved to be successful and showed great potential.

Success in the contemporary horror film industry requires a comprehensive knowledge of the horror industry and the culture that the film is representing. Filmmakers and producers have to keep up with the changing technology and expectations of today's American audiences. Newer production technologies also mean that viewers' expectations are also raised and they expect producers to keep raising the bar.

During his interview with *The Washington Post*, Mick Garris discusses the different aspects of horror movies and his opinions on them. Garris is a writer and horror movie director/producer. He is first asked if he believes that American horror films are lacking innovation and are being trumped by foreign horror films. Garris responds simply by offering that American audiences are captivated by the cultural differences that put a new twist or bring new ideas that they have not seen before.

The initial question however, is important because it highlights the question, "Are Americans becoming bored with the horror films that are being produced, and if so what does this say about American society?" The article is dated from 2005 when films such as *Saw II* and *The Ring Two* were released. Although cinematography has improved since then, these films and others were still innovative in the content that they offered. If audiences of that time were getting bored, as the interviewer suggests, it could mean that society's tolerance for gore, blood, torture, and other horrific things has greatly risen.

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When asked what he believes makes horror movies so captivating, Garris responds by saying that he thinks it is the suspense rather than the blood and gore that keeps people on the edge of their seats. He personally believes that a good plotline that focuses in the development of the characters makes for a better horror movie although he does acknowledge a horror movie in which there is blood and gore elicits a very favorable response.

Garris was also asked about his thoughts on remaking horror films to which he responded, "The whole remake situation has gotten a bit out of hand, in my opinion (*The Washington Post*, 2005)." As Garris notes, many horror films have been remade to update them and in hopes that they will create a new appeal with newer audiences.

The main reasoning behind this is for the profits that these movies can potentially generate. The horror film can therefore be seen as a commodity that is readily marketed and consumed. One question to ask then is why are horror films so popular that companies can make billions in profits off of them?

Garris answers by explaining that horror films confront our fears in a healthy way. As viewers of a horror film, we can face our fears without actually being in real danger. When asked about the proper length of time that a horror movie should be, he suggests that longer is better because it gives the audience more time to invest in the story and the characters and experience all of the emotions.

Therefore, producers of horror films want viewers to sympathize with the characters so that they will have more of a connection to the movie. If viewers are emotionally and psychologically connected to the characters and the overall movie, they will likely have a positive experience and will keep coming back for more.

During the interview, Garris is also questioned about the use of humor in horror movies and what it does to grab viewers' attention. Garris explains that both humor and horror keep audiences involved in the movie because they are usually portrayed in moments that are unexpected, thus recapturing the audience's attention. These elements cause the audience to react which ultimately keeps them interested and invested in the movie.

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Garris also shares his thoughts on franchises of popular movies during the interview. He notes that it is difficult to do the same movies over again successfully. He explains that he thinks that audiences will eventually become bored with the same movie being redone many times and he also explains that film companies need to keep up with their audiences in terms of the horror media that they produce. It is not enough for these companies to simply produce horror films but rather, they need to live and breathe horror and be good at producing such films.

What it ultimately comes down to is the money. Once again, the horror film industry can be seen as a large business. Movies are expensive to produce and market to large audiences but if they are successful, they can bring in huge profits.

Horror film companies can be compared to a company that sells a tangible commodity because they both go through the same steps of the business cycle. A company selling a certain product has to be good at what it makes (or do business with a reputable vendor that manufactures its products). Then, it must develop a successful marketing plan in order to make the product known to its target audiences. If the product is a well-made product that has been marketed well and priced fairly, then chances are that it will sell well and be successful.

Likewise, a production company looking to produce a horror film must be well versed in the genre. It must have the right equipment and actors if there is going to be any chance for a successful movie. The film must be marketed and if it is successful, it will hopefully sell out box offices and bring in millions or billions in profits. The difference however, between a tangible commodity, such as a watch, and a horror film is that everyone involved in the horror film is profiting off of blood, gore, torture, and people's fears. Questions of ethics also arise when it comes to marketing these films to underage children and teenagers.

Another topic brought up during the interview was women in horror films, more specifically, women in distress in horror films. Garris states that audiences are generally more sympathetic to a women in distress rather than a man in distress.

Garris describes the horror genre, "The term horror by its very definition implies transgression, something that isn't polite in the first place (2015)." He acknowledges this but

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then continues to discuss his admiration for the horror genre. He is not alone as his views are largely shared by many in American society. The nature of the horror genre has become more and more grotesque over the years. The content that is shown on television and in the theaters has become less conservative and certain things are becoming more acceptable to show on screen.

Of course, there are ratings to help control what content is viewed by different aged viewers. However, there are concerns with companies marketing horror entertainment to young teens and children. These young adults are now able to access horror films easier than ever due to the increasing availabilities of new technologies.

Some production companies may take advantage of this by sharing their horror films online where young adults can access them without a parent or legal guardian. Garris suggests that production companies purposely release PG13 movies so that young adults can view them and the commercials that are used to advertise them.

Essentially, audiences watch horror movies because they want to be scared and they enjoy the thrill and the suspense of not knowing what is going to happen next. This is good news for producers of horror films who can produce these films with relatively low budgets and possibly jumpstart their careers in the industry. Some films with lower budgets have even proven themselves worthy by bringing in millions at the box office.

The horror industry is a huge business in itself and can be examined in a similar manner as other businesses. It is focused on maximizing profits and gaining loyal viewers who will keep coming back for more. Like any business, advertising is an essential part of reaching out to customers, especially target audiences. In addition to production and film costs, film companies spend a lot of money perfecting their advertising campaigns.

Ian Conrich (2010) describes the horror genre as something that comes and goes in cycles much like consumer goods that go through the various stages of the business cycle. Arguably, film producers must find ways to compensate for the times when the horror genre has hit its troughs in the cycle.

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Some of the ways in which they do this may be questionable. For instance, filmmakers tend to try to market their horror films to underage children, knowing fully well that these children usually have the resources and know how to access these films one way or another.

Nonetheless, Conrich also discusses the horror genre in a cultural context. For example, new technology allows audiences to view horror media on various devices at virtually any time of the day. This same technology creates a community experience where people can share their thoughts, reviews, and ideas for fan fiction relating to horror movies which in turn, contributes to the horror culture. When people can share opinions and experiences so quickly and easily, certain films become more popular and widely shared due to word of mouth marketing.

Besides being able to simply view their favorite shows and movies anytime and anywhere, breakthroughs in the technologies used in the television industry have given viewers an overall much better viewing experience. Factors like lighting and the quality of the cameras have contributed to a better looking film or television program and the ability to record a show or movie was essential in giving producers and directors more creativity in what they aired on television.

The Evolution of Television and Its Contribution to the Horror Genre

Of course, one of the most important mediums through which horror is portrayed today is the television. Lorna Jowett and Stacey Abbott (2013) investigate the progression of the media that is shown on television, and more specifically, horror media. They discuss different eras in television and describes the type of content that was shown and the technology that was used during each era.

The first era of television that they describe is during the years 1950 to 1975. The majority of channels that were active during this era did not reach mainstream audiences. During this period, there were certain restrictions and limitations as to what was deemed appropriate to air on television. However, there were also producers who were trying to bring the restricted material to the television screen in hopes to increase their audiences. Science fiction and horror were popular genres that producers used to portray social issues.

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Along with dealing with the cultural issues of the period, producers also faced technological issues. For example, actors were not easily followed by the cameras while they were moving around the set. In addition, the screen size of televisions made it difficult to shoot scenes when the camera needed to zoom in and out. Producers attempted to overcome these restrictions by working with them to use them to their advantage.

Jowett and Abbott categorize the period of 1975 to the 1990s as a time of great change in terms of the technology used in television. One notable breakthrough was the ability to record shows rather than filming everything live. In addition, viewers could record their favorite shows and store them until they were ready to watch them at another time. With the introduction of the remote control, viewers found it easier to switch between channels.

While these changes brought about more convenience and a better viewing experience for television audiences, producers had to adapt the way in which they marketed and presented their programs. Instead of simply marketing shows towards everyone and anyone who would watch, producers started aiming their shows towards specific audiences. That is, they developed target audiences to which they could better market

Another trait of television during this time period is that shows started to combine more than one genre. This came with some complications though, especially for shows that contained elements of horror. Such shows could only be broadcasted during certain times and if they were to be shown during the daytime and early evening they were edited to make them appropriate for children.

Jowett and Abbott describe the present era of television (1990s to now) as being revolutionary and a big game changer in the way people watch television. The technology used in television is keeping up with, and in some cases even exceeding, expectations of viewers.

Jowett and Abbott also mention the importance of channels that require subscriptions and the effects that they have on the content that is being allowed on television. Because these channels require a payment in order for viewers to access them, they have more freedom regarding the content that they air on the networks.

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Analysis of the Literature

The majority of the literature in this work is qualitative although some sources do produce quantitative figures. These are mainly sales and profit figures as well as rating of shows. The qualitative sources are more appropriate for examining the horror genre from a cultural, psychological and emotional perspective. The literature features an interview with a popular horror film producer which is essential to gaining a “behind-the-scenes” look.

The benefits to the mainly qualitative data are that many different opinions and viewpoints are represented and the content of horror programs and films can be analyzed. Moreover, qualitative data has the advantage of allowing researchers to produce reports that are unique to the writer. Qualitative data is more appropriate in this instance but it is not without limitations as it cannot provide results or figures from research conducted in the same way that quantitative data can.

The use of mainly qualitative data can be limiting as there are not many studies that can easily be replicated. For example, if one were to study a topic in the natural sciences field, they would be able to set up an experiment, analyze the results and produce quantitative data. The study could then be easily replicated by another researcher who is interested in verifying or challenging the results. This cannot be done in the same way if a researcher were to write an analysis of a book because it is that writer's unique perspective.

Conclusions

In general, the literature focuses on how the horror genre can be perceived as a business and the different ways in which it is marketed and sold. Another noticeable trend is the implications that watching horror may potentially have on viewers. For example, there are articles detailing instances where movie producers have attempted to market mature rated horror movies to young teenagers and children. Likewise, some fans appreciation for *American Horror Story* caused them to host a fan appreciation night in a cemetery.

The literature informs the project topic because one of the goals of the project is to examine the immense popularity of the show *American Horror Story*. Research shows that the show has affected fans and its popularity has prompted the producers to feature celebrity guests.

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This information can be used to help understand how the media in general has an impact on viewers and mainstream society as a whole.

Much of the literature will be useful in conducting a content analysis of *American Horror Story* and applying the results. Some sources discuss symbolism in the show while other sources discuss the cultural and psychological aspects of the horror genre in general. In addition, background literature in the field of mass communication will be essential in providing support to the content analysis because it will help explain how television is used to manipulate the messages that are perceived by viewers.

Literature about the development of the television and its continuous improvement throughout the ages can be particularly helpful to research on how media is used to manipulate what viewers see. Moreover, further research can be conducted with the topic of mass media and how its evolution has affected the way in which messages are communicated to society and large scale audiences.

A significant discovery that was made while compiling the literature was the fact that not only is horror literature and film accessible to young teenagers and children, but that horror film producers are purposely marketing their films to this underage target group as well. This, coupled with improvements in technology, has helped contribute to the development of the horror genre because young adults are able to access this content from which they were typically restricted. Advancements in technology allow viewers to easily access these horror programs and films virtually anywhere and at any time and the marketing of this content to young adults gives them a reason to do so.

Many of the literary works examined offer different views or explanations for why horror is popular. Some suggest that viewers get emotionally involved while others discuss the marketing and promotion of the horror genre, especially to the youth or even the use of celebrities in the shows' casts. For the purposes of this project, it may be beneficial to examine *American Horror Story* in terms of the distance that it gives viewers to explore the controversial topics embedded in the episodes.

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Perhaps one of the reasons *American Horror Story* has been well received by so many is because it presents issues that are highly debated in mainstream society. More importantly, these topics are presented in such a way that makes it comfortable for viewers to reflect on them. Viewers are essentially distanced from the issues which makes it more comfortable for them. Putting abortion or homosexuality in the context of horror is typically more acceptable to viewers. It seems more appropriate to a viewer than if he or she were to discuss these topics in normal daily conversation.

American Horror Story is especially effective at covering topics within the episodes in such a way that viewers are able to examine them from a distance. Most of the seasons are set in different time periods and include actual historical events and people. This is especially true in season two, which is set in the 1960s. Many of the scenes take place within the walls of Briarcliff manor, a former tuberculosis ward turned mental asylum located in a town in Massachusetts. Although the manor itself is fictional, it is an accurate portrayal of what the reality was in that time period.

It is easy as viewers to view season two of *American Horror Story* and criticize the way in which the mentally ill were treated, for example. One might easily recognize and point out the less-than-satisfactory living conditions or the mistreatment and abuse of the patients but this is not something that this viewer may normally bring up in his or her daily conversations. Moreover, viewers may hold a certain belief about a controversial issue and may not be willing to think differently until confronted to do so by watching the show.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This project will attempt to answer the following research question: Does the popular television series *American Horror Story* reflect or challenge currently controversial issues in mainstream society?

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METHOD

Introduction

The method employed for this project combines content analysis and textual analysis. This combination is most useful in synthesizing important topics and themes so their significance can be analyzed in a specific manner. For this project, I wanted to examine how the show *American Horror Story* reflects or challenges the views of present day American society, if at all. This method was appropriate because it combines both quantitative and qualitative data to provide insight on the research question.

For the data portion of the analysis, the main source is the General Social Survey. This is a national survey conducted annually that asks Americans a series of questions regarding controversial or relevant issues and topics in American society, Questions include but are not limited to religion, politics, science, health care, the justice system and poverty. The data are unbiased and are used by a variety of investigators, journalists, scholars and demographers, for example to determine Americans' overall feelings on these important topics.

Methodology

The methodology is mainly process driven and requires following the steps of a content analysis. To conduct the analysis, I first created an outline of all the steps that would need to be taken. This included: watching episodes of the show, keeping track of themes and words that occurred across the episodes, noting how many times they appear in each episode, identifying coders to watch the same episodes, have them track themes that they think are important, compare their findings to mine to serve as a validity check (note: the work to this point constitutes my content analysis), analyze the dominant themes in the context of the episodes and then in the context of society and conduct outside research on surveys of current controversial topics in American society (my textual analysis). The surveys are used as a means of comparison to determine if the analyzed data from the content analysis agrees with or challenges the views of American society.

The first step was to watch all of the selected episodes and identify important themes. I selected episodes 1, 9,10,11,12 and 13 and kept track of the themes that I found in each

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episode. Next, I had two naïve coders watch the same episodes and keep track of the themes that they found. They were naïve in that they were unaware of the purpose of this study. Although I did not explain the purpose of the project to the coders (so as not to influence their answers) I did give them an instruction sheet that asked them to identify and track the major themes that they found in each episode (See Appendix D). I identified a relevant theme as something that reflects important social, cultural, or political issues that remain current today.

Once the coders had completed their task, I examined their results and compared them to mine to check for inter-coder reliability. In doing so, I identified the themes that were in 100 percent agreement; that is, they demonstrated perfect inter-coder reliability. These themes were then chosen for the critical textual analysis.

During the textual analysis, I examined each theme in the context of Season 2. I discussed each theme in depth and provided evidence as to how each theme is presented in the show. In other words, I examined what commentary *American Horror Story* was making about each of these important topics.

In order to compare how the themes are presented in *American Horror story* to the views of mainstream society, I collected data that modeled how Americans felt about these issues. Most of the data were collected from the General Social Survey. I then compared the data to the results of the textual analysis to answer my research question which was, "Is *American Horror Story* reflecting or challenging the views of mainstream society.

Conclusions

The methods used in this project are both qualitative and quantitative and are largely process driven. These methods were effective in helping me keep my ideas clear and concise. The quantitative methods helped to ensure that the data were organized and accurate and also acted as the base for my qualitative data. Conducting a content analysis also helped me organize the qualitative data in such a way that it was easy to synthesize and apply to the other aspects of the project.

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Once I began the project, my methodology was shaped in part by the data that I found and the conclusions that I made. My initial idea, which was to analyze the show *American Horror Story* and compare it to contemporary issues, led me to choose the content analysis combined with textual analysis as the means of examining the important themes in the show.

RESULTS: CONTENT ANALYSIS

The results of the content analysis consist of data from two coders in addition to the data that I personally collected. The analysis was conducted using six select episodes. My results were generally consistent with the results from the first coder. The results from the second coder displayed the most variation.

The results of my content analysis included a range of themes from each episode but the themes that were counted the most were mental illness, murder/death and family conflict. The most frequent themes that the first coder identified were as follows: Interracial conflict, religion, redemption and forgiveness, sanity, the power of women, nature vs nurture and the role of motherhood. The most frequent themes identified by the second coder were as follows: Insanity, desperation, domination, shame, re-birth, payback, jealousy, forgiveness and acceptance.

In order to determine which themes would be selected for the critical analysis, I set an inter-coder reliability level of one hundred percent. The themes that appeared in all three sets of results (regardless of their frequencies) were the ones that fulfilled this requirement and were chosen as the main topics for the critical analysis. The two themes that met the confidence level requirement were religion and mental illness. There were some additional themes that were consistent with my results, but they did not meet the one hundred percent confidence level requirement (that is, there did not appear in all sets of results). As a result, they were included as sub-categories and were examined within the context of the major themes (religion and mental illness). The additional themes that were included were religion vs science, abortion and homosexuality.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Religion

From the beginning, the opening theme song gives us a taste of how religion is portrayed in the show. Flashes of seductive nuns and an ominous looking statue of the Virgin Mary set the tone. The scenes in the opening sequence are very dark and the images follow suit.

The fact that the mental asylum, Briarcliff manor, is owned and run by the Catholic Church is paramount to the way in which religion is portrayed in season two. The asylum is run by head nun Sister Jude and her assistant nun Mary Eunice. Several other nuns serve as nurses and aides in the asylum. Sister Jude reports to the Monseigneur who has dreams of becoming the Pope in Rome.

These characters certainly are not saints themselves. Sister Jude is a former prostitute who hit a little girl with her car one night while she was driving drunk. She fled from the scene, leaving the little girl hurt and alone in the street in the middle of the night. Her guilty conscience and the reoccurring thought that she murdered and abandoned a little girl causes her to turn to the church and renounce her life of sin. Sister Mary Eunice is a seemingly innocent young nun until she is possessed by the devil during an exorcism. This causes her to be a cruel and merciless leader of the asylum who seduces the Monsignor and murders several of the patients and guards. Additionally, the Monsignor is a power hungry priest who dreams of becoming the Pope and living in Rome as the ruler of the Catholic world. While his intentions may seem honest and he shows genuine concern for the patients, he is too blind sighted by his vision to realize the unfavorable conditions that the patients are facing in his asylum.

In the asylum, repercussions and offenses are typically based on Catholic morals. For example, Kit and Grace are caught having sex and are punished for it by means of forced sterilization. Not everyone would agree that their misdemeanor is a punishable offense but in the Catholic Church it is a sin and therefore, they are punished. Similarly, Shelly is a patient

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who is classified as a nymphomaniac because of her strong sexual desires. She is considered to have a mental illness because her morals do not align with those of the Catholic Church.

Shelly even tells Dr. Arden how her husband cheated on her with several women and nothing became of him but as soon as Shelly cheated on her husband in retaliation she was locked away in the mental asylum. Shelly's situation exposes not only the way in which society was held to strict catholic religious standards but it also provides commentary on the double standard that is imposed upon Shelly, merely because she is a woman.

As part of their treatments, the patients are often exposed to religion, and prayer especially. The patients are often made to pray in response to their transgressions. This is more evidence of the belief that the patients were mentally ill because they did not fit traditional catholic beliefs and therefore, they can potentially be saved by religion.

Religion vs Science

There are several instances in which Sister Jude and leading physician Dr. Arden clash in their views of how the asylum should be run. Thus, there is constantly a battle between science and religion. Dr. Arden and the Monsignor do work together but both with different intentions. The Monsignor dreams of becoming the Pope and residing in the Vatican where he will be the leader of the Catholic world. Dr. Arden attempts to discover developments in science and medicine that will lead to a superior human race, no matter the cost to the patients. The Monsignor is not fully aware of the extent of Dr. Arden's medical experiments until he is called to the hospital to perform a patient's last rites. He arrives to find a deformed monster-like creature whose legs have been amputated, who he discovers is Shelly, one of the patients at the asylum.

Episode two is a catalyst for the religion vs science tension that occurs throughout the season. The asylum acquires a new patient when a couple brings in their son, about whom they are greatly concerned. They express their fears about his behavior and that he is a potential danger. As they are discussing this with Sister Jude, Dr. Thredson walks in and starts imparting his psychiatrist opinion onto the parents. He immediately assumes that the boy is simply going through a phase as a teenager although, after hearing some of the boy's

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symptoms, he explains that he cannot be sure and he cannot make a proper diagnosis until he has examined the boy.

When the Monsignor arrives, Thredson expresses his concerns regarding the treatment that the Briarcliff has decided to provide, which is an exorcism. They tell him that they have called in a specialist and a priest shows up shortly thereafter. The priest overhears Thredson's concerns and tells Thredson that he is glad to have a nonbeliever in the room.

Upon entering the room, the son, who is aptly named Jed (which means loved by God), starts resisting and yelling. This behavior may seem normal, especially for a mental institution, but Jed starts speaking in Latin and contorting his body in abnormal positions. As seen in other literature and movies, these are classic traits of someone who has been possessed, usually by a demonic entity. However, Thredson refuses to acknowledge this and assumes his duty as supervising physician. The exorcism scenes and the scenes leading up to it very closely parallel *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*.

Similar to the *Exorcism of Emily Rose*, the patient eventually dies during the exorcism, leaving viewers to contemplate if his death was a result of the exorcism and the lack of proper medical care or if the patient was truly possessed by some sort of demonic figure. Viewers are again left to ponder the dynamic between religion and science.

Abortion

Abortion is examined through many different lenses in Season Two of *American Horror Story*. The result is that viewers are offered the opportunity to consider different arguments for and against abortion. After Lana becomes pregnant with Oliver's baby, it seems obvious that the reasonable thing for her to do would be to have an abortion, especially since the child is a product of rape. However, she is told that she cannot have an abortion because it is considered a sin in the Catholic Church.

There are a number of things to consider at this point. First, Lana's situation may prompt many viewers to sympathize with her, and they would likely agree that having an abortion is an understandable reaction to such a horrible situation. After deceiving and kidnapping her,

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Oliver chains Lana to a bed and rapes her in his basement. The moral issue is not an entirely difficult one because Lana was raped. Second, the pro-life stance that is taken by Sister Mary Eunice (who represents the Catholic Church) is presented in an earlier time period. This may suggest to viewers that the pro-life argument is outdated. In addition, Mary Eunice tells Lana not only that abortion is wrong, but that she does not have a say in the matter. This could be playing on the argument that a woman should be allowed to make decisions regarding her body.

At this point in time, viewers are aware of the fact that Sister Mary Eunice has been possessed by the devil during an exorcism gone awry, in a previous episode. Perhaps this is a signal to viewers that Mary Eunice's viewpoint on abortion is dangerous or evil.

Despite being told that she cannot have the abortion, Lana uses her situation to her advantage. She even threatens Oliver several times by telling him that she will perform the abortion on herself if he does not cater to her wishes and help her escape the mental asylum. Lana eventually attempts the abortion, even after being told that it is not right to do so. However, it is a failed attempt and she is stuck in the same predicament. At this point, viewers are yet again exposed to the pro-life versus pro-choice argument. Even though Oliver is a serial killer and rapist, he appears to be a doting father who is excited to properly raise and look after the child.

The question now becomes whether or not the father should have a say when considering an abortion. Generally, those who are for abortion make the argument that the woman should decide because she is the one carrying the child. Oliver's character is multi-dimensional. In terms of physical appearances, he is attractive and well put together. Whenever he is at work in the mental asylum he always acts and dresses professionally. He comes into work wearing a suit and tie, hair that is gelled back, polished shoes and glasses. In his profession as a psychiatrist at Briarcliff, initially, one would never suspect that he is actually a dangerous

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serial killer who preys on innocent women, rapes them, and then skins them alive before murdering them.

Viewers know from previous episodes that Oliver's mother deserted him when he was young and that his desire for motherly affection has contributed to his current state of insanity. A flashback of Oliver in medical school reveals that he had acquired an obsession for skin after taking a medical class where he had to perform a dissection on a female cadaver. He explains that the dead woman's skin was the closest he has felt to a mother's touch. This led him to start kidnapping women so that he could skin them. He even earns the nickname "Bloody Face" because of the grotesque mask that he wears while murdering his victims. His killing style is notorious among the residents in the area and everyone knows who "Bloody Face" is and that he kidnaps unsuspecting women and skins them before murdering them.

The fact that Oliver grew up to be a dangerous serial killer who rapes and skins his victims could be attributed by some to the fact that he grew up without a mother figure and dealt with issues of abandonment throughout his life. Thus, the likely conclusion would be that Lana should have the abortion because she does not want the child regardless of how he or she was conceived. Furthermore, if she does give birth to the child and then gives it up for adoption, the child will face abandonment issues and may turn out to be like Oliver. Oliver's character is essentially foreshadowing what could possibly happen if Lana gives birth to the child and then gives the baby away to the state.

After cornering Oliver and shooting him dead moments before the police arrive, Lana decides in that moment not to have the abortion. This is not because she suddenly decides to keep the child, but rather it is because she has witnessed so much suffering and murder that she does not want to take part in it anymore. The fact that Lana says, "no more death" is important because she is outwardly saying that to have the abortion would mean ending the life of a human being and she cannot bring herself to do that. This is significant because one of the

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arguments surrounding abortion is if an unborn fetus can even be considered alive and if so, when is that point?

Years later, when Lana is a famous author who has exposed the sinister secrets of Briarcliff in her book, her son Johnny comes back and confronts her while she is being interviewed as a recipient of the Kennedy Center Honors Award. He explains to her that he has had a difficult life growing up without a mother and essentially blames his misfortune on the fact that she gave him up for adoption after he was born. He goes on to explain that this abandonment has caused him so much psychological trauma that he has followed in the footsteps of his father and has become a copycat bloody face killer.

Because of Lana's unique situation, viewers are encouraged to consider the different arguments surrounding abortion. Initially, it seems obvious that Lana should have the abortion because she was raped and she should have the choice to make decisions regarding her own body. However, after witnessing numerous counts of violence and after murdering Oliver in self-defense, Lana decides not to have the abortion because she has already been through a great deal of psychological trauma.

She ends up giving birth to the child but viewers are left to contemplate whether or not this was a good choice. Theoretically, having the abortion would have meant that Johnny would not have been born and he would not have been able to cause violence as a serial killer.

Homosexuality

Homosexuality is another consistent theme throughout season two because Lana is homosexual. Viewers learn fairly early into the season that she has a significant other named Wendy. Of course, considering the time period, their relationship is forbidden and kept a secret from the public. Lana and Wendy live together in a cozy suburban home. Other than their secret forbidden relationship, they appear to live a picturesque life. Wendy is an elementary school teacher and Lana is an aspiring journalist.

When Lana wakes up after being sedated in the mental asylum, Sister Jude informs her that she is now a patient at Briarcliff Manor and that Wendy even signed the paperwork. What

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Lana does not know is that sister Jude has coerced Wendy into signing the papers by blackmailing her. She shows up at Wendy and Lana's house with a professional packet of paperwork.

At this point, Sister Jude threatens to expose Wendy and Lana's secret relationship if she does not sign the papers. Jude also hints that this would likely ruin Wendy's career as an elementary school teacher, which is more evidence that homosexuality was not publicly accepted during the time period. Additionally, the fact that Sister Jude is using Wendy and Lana's relationship against Wendy is reflective of the Catholic Church's disapproval of homosexuality. Although Jude has other intentions for committing Lana to the asylum, she explains that Lana is being committed in order to treat her homosexuality and she even has a judge sign off on the paperwork.

This is not the sole instance of homosexuality represented as a mental illness and requiring treatment. Dr. Thredson offers to help Lana escape, but tells her that in order to do so, he must "cure" her homosexuality. He even tries to use a type of aversion therapy that was recognized by the Ivy League schools. Lana tells him that it is not something that can be cured, but that she will try regardless. After several failed attempts, Thredson gives up and realizes that the therapy is not having its intended effect. The show is essentially countering the argument that homosexuality is a sin or a mental illness that must be treated in some way. In addition, the story lends credence to the belief that homosexuality is not a choice.

Mental Illness

In episode one, when discussing mental illness, Sister Jude states, "mental illness is a fashionable explanation for sin (2013)." Her attitude towards mental illness sets a precedent for the way in which mental illness is perceived and dealt with at Briarcliff. While the occurrences within the walls of Briarcliff may be shocking or surprising to some viewers, they are not the exception.

The season is set in the 1960s, which is a time period when mental health was treated like an unusual illness and patients faced unfavorable conditions. Sufferers of mental illness who did not have families that could afford proper care were often sent to asylums where they were

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neglected and often mistreated. John R. Sutton of University of California, Santa Barbara (1991), suggests that poverty was a factor in shaping the mental health system along with the limited developments in psychiatry Sutton also proposes that diagnoses of the mentally ill were based on the moral code at the time. Lana for example, is admitted to the asylum under the pretense that she identifies as homosexual which, at the time, is not deemed morally acceptable.

From the beginning of the season, Lana and other journalists were trying to uncover the dark secrets that Briarcliff was hiding. In many of the scenes, the asylum is literally dark because there is a storm or the power is out. There are various instances in which the inmates are treated brutally, even tortured within the walls of the asylum. Dr. Arden regularly performs medical experiments on the patients as he considers each one "an evolutionary failure." He does not believe that they are entitled to humane treatment because he does not view them as human. In fact, he turns some of the patients into monstrous creatures by performing painful medical experiments and amputations that leave them disfigured and crippled.

In Episode Four, Dr. Arden, a tall German doctor, is accused of being an ex-Nazi doctor by a patient who claims to be Anne Frank. She says that he was one of the most notorious doctors who performed cruel medical experiments on the inmates. Arden is often found surrounding himself with German paraphernalia and talking about the "greater good" of the human race. He commonly discusses his plans to improve the "greater good" which often parallel some of the themes of eugenics.

There are some scenes which give the viewers insight to Dr. Arden's personal life. He is depicted as being an avid listener of classical music. His style and tastes in food and music are rather classy and elegant. He even invites a prostitute to his house, and is disappointed when she does not share in his love of classical German music. When she enters his room, she finds several pieces of German Nazi memorabilia.

The fact that Arden is a doctor who is supposed to be helping and treating patients is somewhat ironic and is representative of the norm that existed in treating medical illness. His

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“treatments” consist of electroconvulsive therapy and even forced sterilization and lobotomies. Arden’s treatments however, are often in accordance with the administration. Sister Jude orders many of the treatments until Sister Mary Eunice takes over the position, in which she continues to implement the same, if not worse, treatments and punishments.

The offenses that cause the patients to have to endure these harsh treatments are often minimal in comparison or they do not relate to whatever mental illness from which the patient is supposed to be suffering. Lana is subjected to electroconvulsive therapy for speaking out against Sister Jude and Kit and Grace are ordered to have forced sterilizations (although Kit is later pardoned) because they were caught having sex. The offenses are often determined based on the moral standards at the time. In the 1960s, it was frowned upon for someone to identify themselves as being homosexual so in turn, Lana is treated for her “illness.”

Sister Mary Eunice and Sister Jude’s characters effectively demonstrate the corruption that existed within Briarcliff and the mental health system. The fact that Jude ends up going insane as a result of being a patient in her own mental asylum is paramount. When Jude is in charge of running the asylum she is portrayed as a powerful, put together woman. When new patients are admitted to the asylum they are usually resentful and act out in resistance. Jude always remains calm even when the patients are violent towards her. Throughout the season, she regresses until she eventually loses her sanity.

Shortly after Jude starts regressing while in the mental asylum, she states that she is more sane as a mad woman. This is important because it highlights the unfavorable conditions and poor treatments that the patients received. After experiencing the same conditions that the patients faced, Jude is able to see the horrible reality.

RESULTS: THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY

According to Frank Newport (2016), Americans have been increasingly changing the ways in which they view popular social issues. A survey conducted in 2001 and extended to 2015 that measures Americans self-reported attitudes on social issues, suggests that Americans are becoming more liberal when it comes to moral issues.

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This is true for topics such as abortion, gay marriage and pre-marital sex, among others. To elaborate, respondents showed an overall increase in acceptance of social issues such as gay marriage, abortion, divorce and stem cell research. At the same time, they exhibited a decreasing acceptance of issues such as the death penalty and medical testing on animals.

The shift in thinking overall among Americans has to do in part with the way they view the underlying moral issues. For example, the reason that many Americans are in favor of abortion could be because they generally feel that a fetus is not considered to be alive until it is able to survive on its own. Furthermore, many have made the case that a woman should be able to make her own decision regarding her body.

Research from the university of Chicago similarly suggests that Americans have shifted their views of social and moral issues in a more liberal manner overall. The General Social Survey is a national survey that is conducted annually and asks Americans a series of questions regarding controversial or relevant issues and topics in American society, Questions include but are not limited to religion, politics, science, health care, the justice system and poverty. The data are unbiased and are used by a variety of sources to determine Americans' overall feelings on these important topics.

For example, one basic statistic from the General Social Survey measures respondents' marital status, starting in the year 1972 and ending in 2014. The statistics show that in 1972 the ratio of married individuals to divorced individuals was much higher at 17.8 than the ratio for 2014 which was 2.82. In both years, the numbers of individuals who were married were nearly the same while the number of divorced individuals in 2014 was significantly greater (2016). A likely explanation is that the views on marriage have changed over this time period and Americans do not see divorce as being morally unacceptable.

One explanation for this shift in thinking over the years could be a result of a change in the religious landscape of America. Ideas are no longer shaped by a central dominant religion, namely Christianity, but instead more Americans have moved away from organized religion or have identified themselves as atheists. Out of 2538 Americans surveyed in the 2014

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General Social Survey, 1125 identified as protestant, 606 identified as Catholic, 40 as Jewish and 522 as having no religion. Other religions included Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, although these religions all had less than 30 responses

This shift in thinking can also be seen in America's political landscape. Survey data from the 2014 General Social Survey indicates that more Americans are likely to identify as Democrat rather than Republican. However, more respondents identified themselves as being independent with the majority of these respondents leaning towards democrat.

Abortion

One variable that is measured by the GSS is respondents' acceptance of abortion in certain circumstances. In general, respondents believe that abortion is acceptable in cases of medical necessity and if the child will not be well off when he or she is born. For example, respondents generally felt that abortion was acceptable if the child has a strong chance of being born with a serious birth defect, if the mother's health is seriously endangered as a result of the pregnancy or, if the pregnancy is the result of a rape.

Additionally, respondents indicated that they favor a woman's choice to abort in the event that she cannot afford to take care of the child. Most respondents did indicate however, that they were not in favor of abortion unless there was a valid reason (such as medical necessity).

Science

In order to gauge respondents' general feelings about science, the survey included a question that asked if the respondents thought that science makes our lives better. Of a total 2358 respondents, 772 agreed and 225 strongly agreed with the idea that we have an improved standard of living thanks to science. An overwhelming majority of respondents also agreed that science and technology will provide future generations with more opportunities.

Mental Illness

One of the questions on the General Social Survey asks respondents if they believe the government should provide health care for mental illness. The answer choices consisted of seven different codes with corresponding labels. The labels are as follows: definitely should

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be, probably should be, probably should not be, definitely should not be, can’t choose, no answer and not applicable.

The majority of respondents indicated that they believe the government probably should provide health care for mental illness, with only 27 less respondents indicating that they believe that the government definitely should provide health care for mental illness. A total of 104 respondents answered “probably should not be” while sixteen respondents said that the government definitely should not provide health care for mental illness.

Homosexuality

When asked if homosexual couples should have the right to marry, 532 respondents strongly agreed and 423 agreed. The amount of respondents that were not in favor of allowing homosexual couples to marry was much less. The number of respondents that disagreed was 223 and the amount that strongly disagreed was 327.

Another question asked, “What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex--do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all (2016)?” 812 respondents answered not wrong at all while 669 answered always wrong.

Overall the results derived from the General Social Survey appear to be consistent with Newport’s theory that Americans are taking more of a liberal or “leftist” stance on moral issues. (2016).” Although the responses tend to show some mixed feeling regarding moral issues, all of the key moral issues examined in this paper have the same consistency in the answers. That is, most of the responses are in favor of the options that lean more towards the left.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Content Analysis Results

My original hypothesis regarding the content analysis was that the coders would identify moral issues that are currently highly debated in society. I suspected that some of the most popular themes to be identified would be abortion, mental illness, and gay rights. These

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themes are not only currently popular in American society but they are also prevalent throughout season two of *American Horror Story*.

While the coders noticed several themes that were similar to the themes that I saw, there were also some discrepancies. I set my inter-coder reliability level at one hundred percent and there were only two themes that fit into this confidence interval. The two themes that were consistent among the two coders and myself were religion and mental illness. There were some additional themes that I discussed in the critical analysis which fell within the scope of the two main themes as well. These themes (which include abortion, religion vs science and homosexuality) were also identified by the coders but they did not meet the one hundred percent confidence interval.

As previously mentioned, there were some differences among the results of the two coders and myself. Some of these discrepancies were merely due to the manners in which the coders phrased their themes. For example, in episode one, the first coder wrote as a theme, "oppression of women." I identified the same theme but instead labeled it, "men vs women" thus it was understood to be the same theme and was accounted for as such.

There were other themes that had little or no consistency among the two coders and myself and were therefore disregarded. In episode twelve, the second coder identified the following themes: jealousy, discovery and fame. These themes were not in accordance with the other coder or myself and they did not fit within the scope of this project and were therefore disregarded.

Overall, the results from the two coders generally agreed with my results but I had anticipated a higher level of correlation. There were more variations in the chosen themes than I had originally anticipated. I was ultimately able to work with the results despite the variations by creating sub-categories that corresponded with the two chosen themes.

Critical Analysis Results

The results of the content analysis were used to develop the critical textual analysis. The winning themes from the content analysis that were used in the critical analysis were religion

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and mental illness. Several sub-categories were also examined in the context of these themes including abortion, religion vs science and acceptance of homosexuality. Due to the scope of this project, these themes were examined in the context of *American Horror Story* season two.

The first major theme examined is religion. It was determined that religion is portrayed negatively throughout the season. From the foreboding opening credits to gradual demise of all the characters who are powerful religious figures, viewers get the idea that the pitfalls of religion are exposed and examined in this season. Nonetheless, science was also criticized. Viewers can see this through the characters of Dr. Arden and Dr. Thredson who are both supposed to be helping people in the name of science but are instead hurting others.

Viewers are not given an exact answer as to which is better or worse for society however, there are clues that lean towards a more certain answer. In the exorcism scene, the boy ends up dying and viewers are left to wonder if the exorcism is what killed him (in other words he is killed by religion) or perhaps he could have been saved with proper medical care. Additionally, the fact that the asylum fails miserably after being run by a catholic administration suggests that a separation of church and state may have been more beneficial.

Within the major theme religion, abortion was examined as a sub-theme. Season two takes care to expose viewers to different arguments regarding abortion but it ultimately takes a dominant stance on the issue. The fact that Lana's pregnancy is a result of rape would cause most to agree that she should be able to have an abortion but she decides not to after witnessing too much murder and death. At first, it may seem that the show is taking a pro-life stance. However, her son Johnny returns and confronts her, telling her that he has followed in the footsteps of his father and has become a serial killer because he has faced abandonment issues due to growing up without a mother. Therefore, the season ends by conveying the message that abortion may have been the better option and that it can be justified, especially in Lana's case.

Another theme that is brought forth through Lana's character is homosexuality. Lana is told that she has been admitted to the mental asylum because of her homosexuality. Viewers learn

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that Sister Jude had blackmailed Wendy into signing the papers that admitted Lana to the asylum by threatening to expose their relationship. This would have ruined both of them. They both would have lost their careers and become outcasts in the town.

When Dr. Thredson tries to treat Lana for her "illness" using a well know treatment, it is not successful and Lana explains that she cannot be cured and that homosexuality is not a choice but is something that is inherent. Thus, the show takes a fairly strong stance regarding the issue of the acceptance of homosexuality and homosexual relationships. That is, society should be accepting of homosexuality and homosexual relationships because it is not an illness and it is not something that is chosen.

Season two takes place in a mental asylum and therefore, there is a large emphasis on mental illness. From the beginning, Lana is trying to gain access to the mental asylum to expose its dark secrets. The asylum is typically dark, which is symbolic of its dark nature. Patients face unfavorable conditions and are often tortured or unfairly punished. The characters often use the word barbaric to describe each other's treatment of the patients. The show has a fairly strong point of view on mental illness. It aims to reveal how mental illness was disregarded and inadequately treated in the past and that society should be mindful of this moving forward.

General Social Survey Results

The results of the General Social Survey typically align with the results of the critical analysis. That is to say that most of these issues addressed in the show are reflective of the general attitude of Americans. The results showed that Americans have moved away from a central dominant religion and this is shaping the way in which they form their opinions regarding certain issues.

Furthermore, respondents indicated that science is beneficial to society and will continue to be beneficial for future generations. The results also indicated that Americans are far more sympathetic to women who choose to have abortions in necessary circumstances, couples who are engaged in homosexual relationships and those who suffer from mental illness. These themes were all ridiculed by the show for the way in which they were dealt with in the 1960s.

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My original research question was, "Does the popular television series *American Horror Story* reflect or challenge currently controversial issues in mainstream society?" *American Horror Story* presents controversial issues in accordance with the views of mainstream society but it does so in such a way that challenges viewers to think differently about these issues or themes. For example, the issue of abortion was not one-sided. Although the final episodes suggest that women should be allowed to have an abortion if necessary, the viewers are exposed to the different sides of the argument.

Obstacles

I faced certain obstacles while obtaining and analyzing the data. I had initially chosen two coders who had agreed to complete their portion of the content analysis in the agreed upon time period of three weeks. Both coders failed to meet this deadline and needed to be reminded of the importance of their involvement.

The first coder got the results back to me shortly thereafter however, the content analysis was not completed correctly. I had given both coders a guide on how to complete a content analysis and the first coder did not follow the guide and the results were unusable.

The second coder reached out to me and informed me that she would not be able to take on the work because she did not have the time in her schedule to conduct the content analysis. This set my project back by one to two weeks as I had to find two new coders who would be able to complete a content analysis in a short time period.

I eventually found two new coders who were both able to complete the content analysis. Both coders followed the instructions and completed the content analysis correctly however, there were some discrepancies in the results that had to be addressed. I had asked the coders to identify themes that they thought were controversial in mainstream society. For the most part, their themes fit well with these instructions but there were some themes that were irrelevant to the project.

CONCLUSION

The literature review encompasses the broadness of the horror genre and was an important part in the formation of the scope of the project. It provides significant information on the background of the horror genre as a whole as well as content that is specific to *American Horror Story*.

Although the scope of this project was limited to season two of *American Horror Story*, the results from the data provide sufficient insight regarding the original research question. The goal of the research was to determine if the popular television series *American Horror Story* reflects or challenges the views of mainstream society. The results ultimately revealed that the show is generally reflecting the views of mainstream society. However, it does so in a way that encourages viewers to consider important cultural issues from different viewpoints.

The methods used for this project combine qualitative and quantitative data and are appropriate because they identify and validate themes that can be analyzed in the context of the television series. The content analysis allowed me to validate the themes that I found in the show. The critical analysis uses the themes identified in the content analysis and compares them to the results of the General Social Survey.

Although the content analysis used data from select episodes, the critical analysis examines most of the episodes of season two of *American Horror Story*. This brings more depth to the project as each episode presents a variety of controversial themes from different perspectives. In addition, each episode plays an important role in the development of the different themes.

While writing the critical analysis, it was necessary to remain unbiased. The themes discussed in the critical analysis are highly debated in mainstream society. Although the critical analysis is a personal analysis, subject to my perceptions and findings, taking a neutral position is essential because any biases could alter the results.

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Another challenge emerged when conduct the content analysis with the two coders. In order for the content analysis results to be effective, the scope of the project was not revealed to the coders so as not to skew their results. It was difficult to describe the instructions to the coders without revealing the project's intentions. Both coders asked for clarification multiple times and each time I had to refer them back to the content analysis viewer guide (see Appendix D).

FURTHER RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

The scope of this project is limited to the television series *American Horror Story*. More specifically, the content and critical textual analysis focus solely on season two of the series. The content and critical analyses could be expanded to include all seasons and episodes of *American Horror Story*. Season two was chosen because it is especially content heavy and presents more controversial themes than most of the other seasons. The other seasons however, do depict highly debated and controversial themes that could be analyzed in the same manner.

The same methods that are used in this project could also be used to determine how the media (especially television) affects viewers. The research can be used to attempt to answer the question, "do media lead or follow the culture." Answering this question can help determine if the millennial generation can be influenced on important social issues by the media. This can be especially useful when analyzing important and relevant topics, such as the recent political campaign.

Furthermore, these methods can be used to determine the role of different film and television genres on issue formation. There were several television series in America that had over eight million viewers from 2014 to 2015 (EW.com," 2016). Each of these highly popular shows has the potential to influence millions of viewers. Conducting a content and critical analysis can help us to understand how they are doing so. Additionally, further research can determine if different genres have more or less of an effect on the issue formation process.

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Limitations

The scope of this project is limited to season two of *American Horror Story*. This is due mainly to limited time and resources. If the project were to be duplicated, it could be conducted for a longer span of time to allow for additional analysis of other seasons of the show. The same methodology could also be applied to other television programs or other genres.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: My Content Analysis Results

Episode 1		Episode 9		Episode 10	
Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency
Sex	2	Murder	6	Death	4
Interracial marriage	1	Mental illness	5	Science	1
Punishment/treatment	2	Family issues	1	Mental illness	3
Mental illness	3	Homosexuality	1	Religion	3
Religion	3	Abortion	5	Abortion	1
Science vs Religion	2	Men vs women	1	Punishment/treatment	1
Homosexuality	2	Religion	3	Rape	1
				Murder	2
				Science vs Religion	1
Episode 11		Episode 12		Episode 13	
Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency
Sex	1	Family issues	2	Family issues	3
Family issues	3	Sex	1	Abortion	2
Murder	3	Polygamy	1	murder	2
Death	2	Murder	2	Homosexuality	2
Mental illness	2	Death	3	Mental Illness	4
Abortion	2	Mental illness	3	Men vs Women	1
Homosexuality	2	Homosexuality	1	Death	2
Men vs women	2			Religion	1

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Appendix B: Coder 1 Content Analysis Results

Episode 1		Episode 9		Episode 10	
Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency
Interracial Conflict	4	Abortion	5	Nature VS science	2
Fear of Outsiders/Otherness	3	Justice system	2	Blind Ambition	3
Religion	4	Nature VS nurture (Johnny)	2	Power of evil	3
Science VS Nature	3	Redemption and Forgiveness	5	Sanity	4
Oppression of Women	2	Corrupt Religion	3	Medicinal Practices	2
Homosexuality	2	Science VS Nature	2	Celibacy	1
Over-Ambition	2			Hopelessness	2
Episode 11		Episode 12		Episode 13	
Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency
Nature Vs Nurture	3	Vanity/Pride	3	Nature VS Nurture	4
Resurrection	2	Obsessive Behavior	2	Mental Health (Schizophrenia)	2
Family Values and Roles	3	Racism/fear of otherness	3	Vanity and Pride	2
Malpractice	1	Polygamy	2	Reality TV/Television	2
Power of Women	4	Insecurity	2	Investigative journalism	3
Demoralization of Women	3	Family Values	3	Sanity	1
Homosexuality	2	Corrupt Religion	2	Family Values	2
Blind Ambition	1	Sanity	4	Role of mother/motherhood	4
Sanity	2	Homosexuality	3	Deceitfulness	2
Abortion	2	Medicinal Practices/Mental Health	2	Homosexuality	1

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Appendix C: Coder 2 Content Analysis Results

Episode 1		Episode 9		Episode 10	
Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency
Insanity	8	Insanity	5	Religion	1
Aggression	3	Confusion	2	Temptation	1
Lust/Passion	3	Aggression	2	Redemption	1
Religion	3	Desperation	5	Domination	3
		Religion	3		
		Forgiveness	2		
Episode 11		Episode 12		Episode 13	
Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency	Theme	Frequency
Shame	3	Jealousy	3	Forgiveness	2
Re-birth	3	Discovery	2	Acceptance	2
Payback	3	Fame	1		

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Appendix D: Content Analysis Viewer Guide

Please view the following episodes from season two of *American Horror Story*. Please identify and keep track of the major themes that you notice in each episode. For the purpose of this project, please identify themes that you think reflect important social, cultural, or political issues that you think remain current today. For example, if you were to watch season three of the show, you might choose *feminism* as one of your themes, and note how many times you see examples of feminism portrayed in the show. Or you may notice something much less broad, for example, the role of celebrity. Use the same system of notation for these topics as well.

Example:

	Theme 1,	Count	Theme 2,	Count	Theme 3... count...
Episode 1:	Feminism	3x			

Episode 9:

Episode 10:

Episode 11:

Episode 12:

Episode 13:

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