Contraception

Original research article

Facts and fictions: Characters seeking abortion on American television, 2005–2014[☆],[☆☆]

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Abstract

Objectives: We aim to describe how women who seek abortions are portrayed on television, recognizing that onscreen fictional stories can shape the public's beliefs.

Study design: Drawing on a comprehensive online search, we identified all fictional representations of abortion decision making on U.S. television from 2005 through 2014. Characters who considered abortion in these plotlines were quantitatively content coded for their demographic details and reasons for abortion, with 95% intercoder reliability.

Results: Seventy-eight plotlines were identified, including 40 plotlines (51%) wherein a character obtained an abortion. Characters who considered abortion were mostly white, young, in committed relationships and not parenting. Comparing all abortion-considering characters to the subset of abortion-obtaining characters, the higher rates of abortion were found for characters who were white, of lower socioeconomic status and not in committed relationships. Compared to statistics on real women, characters who obtained abortions were disproportionately white, young, wealthy and not parenting. Compared to reports on real women's reasons for abortion, immaturity or interference with future opportunities was overrepresented; financial hardship or pregnancy mistiming was underrepresented.

Conclusions: Taken in aggregate, televised abortion stories misrepresent the demographics of women obtaining abortion and their reasons for doing so, overrepresenting younger white women and underrepresenting women of color, poor women and mothers. Overrepresented reasons were more often self-focused rather than other-focused, contributing to a perception that abortion is a want rather than a need. Findings hint at the politics of onscreen abortions, suggesting that it is easier to portray with peripheral characters and among some demographics (e.g., teens).

Implications: Onscreen representations may influence public understandings, contributing to the production of abortion stigma and judgments about appropriate restrictions on abortion care. Understanding the particular shape of inaccuracies around abortion portrayals can enable advocates and healthcare practitioners to identify and respond to popular misperceptions.
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1. Introduction

Medical procedures and patient experiences are often portrayed in inaccurate ways in American popular culture — and abortion stories are no exception [1–5]. Such inaccuracies are to be expected in the fictional world of television, where unlikely turns of events can be used to create drama or humor and bizarre or fantastical circumstances allow for escapist entertainment. Onscreen depictions, however, impact public perceptions and beliefs about reality. Cultivation theory [6] describes how the immersive "world" of television leads people to more readily accept social realities as portrayed on television; this leads viewers to incorporate fictional stories into their understanding of an issue and even dramatically shape their perceptions of the world [6,7]. Research shows that, consistent with cultivation theory, fictional portrayals of abortion impact viewers' beliefs and political opinions [4,6,8–12], with historical evidence that representations of abortion in popular culture had a greater impact on changing opinions of abortion than did abortion's increasing legality [13]. Fictional portrayals of abortion-seeking characters, it follows, are likely to have notable

influence on how the general public thinks about women who consider abortion. Television viewing represents the majority of Americans' daily leisure time [14] and, thus, television portrayals, in specific, of women who seek abortion are likely to have a strong influence, offering a rich opportunity for analysis.

Our previous work identified over 300 plotlines in American film and television in which a character considers abortion, and it demonstrated that abortion plotlines over-represent abortion-related death [1], presenting abortion as more risky than it is in real life [15,16]. Here, we extend this analysis to examine recent fictional television representations of the women who consider abortion. Our data allow us to identify and compare subgroups within this sample (e.g., those who obtain an abortion) and to compare characters who obtain abortions to the reported demographics of real women who obtain abortions [17–19]. In aggregate, these findings provide insight into how women who consider abortion are represented in entertainment media, with potential consequences for public understandings of abortion patients. Understanding the inaccuracies in fictional abortion portrayals can enable advocates and healthcare practitioners to identify and respond to popular misperceptions.

2. Methods

We produced a comprehensive compilation of abortion-related plotlines in American television and film via three online searches: Movie Database (IMDB) keyword results, IMDB descriptor results and Google results for the string "abortion on television." All searches were initially conducted in December 2012 and were repeated in February 2013 and January 2015. Titles not found through these means but discussed in previously published academic literature were also included. See Sisson and Kimport [1] for further detail. Individual plotlines were identified from the full list of titles. All plotlines that aired on U.S. television from 2005 to 2014 and detailed a character's abortion decision making were included in our sample.

All episodes related to each plotline were viewed and quantitatively content coded by a member of the study team. Variables relevant to this analysis included the pregnant character's demographic details (age, race, socioeconomic status, education, relationship status and prior births), centrality to the show (main character, peripheral character or single-episode appearance), the outcome of the pregnancy (abortion, adoption, parenting, pregnancy loss or other) and whether or not the character died, as well as reasons for abortion. Socioeconomic status was coded broadly (high, middle or low), determined by considering specific references to money, financial status and occupation. We note that most characters were judged to fall in the "middle" category. The primary coder utilized online fan resources when the abortion-related episodes did not include the desired content (e.g., discerning a character's educational

level by reading summaries of previous episodes). The study team met weekly to discuss coding questions. Coding decisions were reached by consensus. When primary coding was complete, a second coder independently coded a 10% sample of plotlines. We achieved 95% intercoder reliability.

2.1. Analysis

We charted the frequency of demographic variables for the sample and for the subgroup of characters who obtained an abortion, calculating relative proportions. We charted the frequency of each reason for abortion, the number of reasons offered and the proportion of characters to whom that reason applied. We restrict our analyses of reasons for abortion to the subgroup of characters who obtained abortions due to the volume of missing values for characters who considered *but did not obtain* an abortion. All analyses and descriptive statistics were computed in Microsoft Excel.

3. Results

3.1. Characteristics of characters

We found 415 onscreen abortion plotlines, with 78 television plotlines in the last 10 years. As Table 1 shows, characters considering abortion were most frequently white (80%), middle class or above (85.7%), in a committed relationship (63%) and not parenting (83.3%). They were most frequently in the 30- to 39-year-old age group. Abortion plotlines were not relegated to peripheral characters; of the 78 characters who considered abortion, 47 (60%) were main characters.

Fifty-one percent of the characters ($n=40$) who considered abortion obtained one, making it the most frequent pregnancy outcome (there occurred parenting in 28.2% of plotlines, pregnancy loss or false pregnancy in 11.5% and adoption in 6.4%, with other outcomes such as death or infanticide in 2.6%).

The subgroup of abortion-obtaining characters was distributed across the age groups (Table 1). However, as with the larger group of characters considering abortion, characters obtaining abortion were most often white (87.5%), middle class or above (80.0%), in a committed relationship (55%) and not parenting (82.5%). The largest group of characters who obtained abortions were main characters, although they represented less than half (45%) of all abortion-obtaining characters.

Comparing all characters who considered abortion to the subset that obtained abortions, the racial homogeneity in the former group was exaggerated in the latter: 55% of white characters obtained an abortion, compared to 33% of characters of color. For all other variables, though, the highest rates of abortion were found in the least frequently represented categories. For example, most characters considering abortions were middle class or above (higher socioeconomic status). However, working class or below