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An Analysis of LGBTQ+ Representation in Television and Film

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In recent years, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters in television and film has been gradually increasing. As the topic of sexuality becomes more acceptable in our society, so do these characters. While this representation may be increasing, the question remains if this representation is accurate and enough to represent a whole spectrum of people within such a large community. This kind of inclusiveness in media, such as movies and television, can profoundly impact marginalized community members, such as the LGBTQ+ community. But, is this representation done accurately, and is it doing enough for the community it is speaking for? The text, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, poses the question "... whether true representations are possible, where 'true' would include 'adequate' as well as 'accurate.' If they are not, does this indicate the weakness of representation, or its power?" (Bennet, Grossberg, & Morris 2005, 307). Merriam-Webster defines queer as "differing in some way from what is usual or normal" and as "sometimes disparaging + offensive ... of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction that is not limited to people of a particular." It is essential to acknowledge that this essay will use the term 'queer' as an umbrella term to encompass all sexualities and identities that are non-heterosexual. The term 'queer' was once used as a derogatory hate-filled word that LGBTQ+ communities and individuals have now reclaimed and serves as a powerful tool to assert their identities. By looking at the issues through the critical lenses of queer theory, scripting theory, and various communication models, this paper will critically examine modern LGBTQ+ representations in both films and television. Examining these representations at the macro and micro level scales of society, in addition to looking at the long-term effects and implications of inaccurate or inadequate media representations, will illustrate the importance and value of education and understanding the complexities of LGBTQ+ representation in media.

Political and Social Impacts

Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires, and Gay Cowboys analyzes queer representation in cinema by looking at the political and social processes that influence these cinematic movements. The text points out that queer cinema ultimately can normalize queer relationships in popular culture. By engaging with the term 'queer,' Mennel (2012) asserts the taking back of the term by the queer community and expands her discussion under the queer umbrella to include sexualities and identities that go beyond gay or lesbian. Mennel (2012) states that "... Queer also signifies the deconstruction of identity, proposing that its very notion relies on bounded coherence that imposes exclusions and limitations on subjectivity," (69). By going beyond the binary definition of straight, gay, or lesbian and engaging with the concept of queerness, Mennel acknowledges the societal implications that the definition of queerness is based on. For the definition of queer

to function, it relies on the societal expectations of cisgendered heterosexuality. Mennel (2012) ultimately argues that the cinematic queer representations examined in the text enabled viewers to engage in the critical discussions that come with representation – is it accurate and adequate? – and allow for the normalization of the broad experiences of queer people of all identities.

Similarly, Daniel Marshall's (2016) article, *Reading Queer Television*, analyzes queer TV shows and characters to identify how they might be interpreted and how this media can be explained: "as a generative object of critical and political interest," (18). Marshall (2016) identifies the important strides that queer representation has taken to the point where it has become a familiar feature of a majority of mainstream television. By reflecting on the way that mass-produced queer television is framed within culture and politics, Marshall (2016) argues that queer representations foster critical thinking regarding the histories of queerness in addition to the present. This reflection also engages viewers in education regarding queer culture and issues as a way to normalize gender and sexual differences. Marshall (2016) also points out that while these representations show a clear progression in the number of representations, they often prompt viewers to accept stereotyped portrayals of gender and sexual differences as normal, which can have a regressive effect advancement of acceptance towards queer individuals. Both Mennel and Marshall's texts seek to expand the analysis and critical interpretation of queer representations in film and television.

Communication Models as a Tool for Understanding

For a complete analysis and critique to occur, one must understand how a message, or media, is received and interpreted. Stuart Hall's (1980) text explains how messages are received and interpreted through the encoding/decoding model of communication. Hall (1980) constructs four stages in this communication model: production, circulation, use, and reproduction. At the production stage, the encoding of the message takes place as the creator builds its meaning and intended meaning into the message. The second stage, circulation, is when the message is received by the receiver(s), when a movie premieres in theatres or when a TV show begins airing. The stage of use is when the decoding of the message occurs; the receiver begins interpreting the message by placing meaning upon it. In this stage, the viewer consumes the media and interprets the message, analyzing the representations of characters, relationships, etc.; this stage requires that the viewers are active participants in viewing the media rather than passive viewers. Finally, after the receivers have interpreted the message based on their cultural backgrounds and societal experiences, the reaction that takes place is called reproduction. When analyzing any form of media, Hall's communication model and the sender, message,

and receiver concept are hugely beneficial in understanding how media is distributed and how meaning is constructed in a mediated context. In the context of television and film, the message is the tv show or movie; the receiver then views the show or movie and can interpret the message and place their meaning onto it. The TV show, *The Fosters*, functions as a prime example of queer representation and its interpretation. *The Fosters* focuses on a family with lesbian parents and a mix of adopted and fostered children, one of which is queer and a number of other LGBTQ+ characters throughout the series. Using *The Fosters* as an example, the show is the message; the receiver, or viewer, consumes the media – watches an episode. During and after the viewer watches the episode, they begin analyzing and interpreting the messages. They may look at the romantic relationships, how two queer characters, Stef and Lena Adams Foster, relationships and personalities are portrayed. The viewer may use past experiences of representations of queer characters to interpret this and place their own meanings onto the message. Finally, once the viewer has processed the message and placed its own meaning onto it, the reaction occurs. The reactions that occur after the construction of meaning are produced in ways like posts on social media like Twitter or Reddit, reaction videos on YouTube, or written reviews on other platforms, such as blogs. Understanding this communication model is essential to beginning to look at how viewers interpret messages in general in order to better understand how they interpret and analyze queer representations in media.

Roland Barthes' (2012) text, *Myth Today*, looks at a different form of communication model using the semiotic model of the signifier, the signified, and the sign. Barthes (2012) describes myth as "a type of speech" and "a mode of signification," (217). Unlike Hall, Barthes' communication model goes down to the bare basics of speech and language. Barthes (2012) modifies the semiotic model of the signifier, signified, and the sign, which he renames form, concept, and signification, respectively. The form is the object's physical elements that exist, such as sounds, words, or images. The concept is the mental ideas that we place on the form. The signification is the actual object/thing. For example, the signification could be a character in the show/movie on TV or film. The form could be the image of the character and their physical appearance and what is presented based on that. The concept here could be that the character may be wearing clothing that is typically feminine/masculine, and you might assume that that character is gay. For example, again referring to *The Fosters*, the form could be dialogue or visual representations within the show, like how the queer characters talk or look. The concept could be a pre-perceived notion you hold of a character based on their race, sexuality, or gender identity, and the signification is the viewer's final interpretation as a whole representation of a character. This final stage of the model brings the form and concept together in the viewers' minds creating a final interpretation of

the character or show as a whole. Barthes' model of speech as a myth is essential to understanding how we interpret objects based on our previous knowledge or assumptions that we hold. The communication models demonstrated illustrate how meaning can be constructed and how beneficial it is in encouraging discussion and engaging discourse of media content.

The Importance of Education

As we become aware of the process of interpretation that occurs when viewing a message, we must identify how we can engage critically with the media. Gilad Padva's (2008) text, *Educating The Simpsons: Teaching Queer Representations in Contemporary Visual Media*, outlines a plan for discussion in a classroom setting regarding queer representation in media using an episode of *The Simpsons* "Homer's Phobia." Padva (2008) identifies the prevalence of negatively stereotyped queer roles in which the "other" is identified. Padva's (2008) education plan "contextualizes sexual oppression and liberation, and the rejection and acceptance of 'the other.' The goal of the education plan is greater tolerance of social, ethnic, religious or sexual minorities," (68). Critical viewing and engagement are created by analyzing eleven categories: stereotypes, identification with the other, effeminacy, homophobia, gay-straight alliance, family, masculinities, naming the other, (mis)identification, and different readings, different perspectives (Padva, 2008). These categories for critical analysis can be implemented in other TV shows featuring queer characters and will enable all viewers to engage in the discourse surrounding queer representation. If we again look at *The Fosters* as an example, the show features a diverse cast of characters of different races, sexualities, and gender identities. *The Fosters* does well what Padva is suggesting, providing a lot of clear and obvious opportunities for engaging in the critical discourse of the representations of various minority groups.

A study conducted by Rebecca Creager (2019) analyzed different shows on Netflix using scripting theory, which "... lends focus to the importance of [social] scripts in society. It explains life as a stage, and individuals as performers," (1). Creager (2019) says there are two levels to scripting theory, the front stage and backstage. The front stage is the actions shown in public spheres for others to see, while the backstage is the actions taken behind the scenes to create an identity/portrayal (Creager 2019). Social scripting theory is similar to Hall's communication model in that the backstage is where the individual puts their meaning into the message. What is shown on the front stage can then be interpreted by the audience, where they can then create meaning on that portrayal. Creager's (2019) text focuses on sexual scripting and examining how members of sexual minority groups often look toward media as a source of education and "sexual

socialization," (4). This is similar to what is presented in *Queer Cinema*. Mennel (2012) says that queer representation serves as a tool that can normalize the experiences and lives of queer individuals. However, Creager (2019) ultimately concluded that current media portrayals offer an incomplete view of queer lifestyles and the community. When queer characters are portrayed on TV these portrayals are incomplete. TV shows tend to "shy away from using any controversial or problematic depictions" so as not to offend and offer as 'normal' of a TV experience as possible (Creager 2019, 17). Without other comprehensive educational sources available to queer youth, this incomplete view of queer sexual relationships in media can result in a lack of sexual agency and knowledge and possibly lead to unsafe sexual practices among queer youth (Creager 2019).

The Damages of Stereotypes

In addition to TV portrayals of queer characters being incomplete, they are often stereotyped or overly negatively portrayed. This is what author Andre Cavalcante (2015) calls anxious displacement, which refers to "the overloading of negatively codified social differences and symbolic excess onto figures and relationships that surround LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) characters," (455). Essentially, these negatively codified images or messages get displaced off of LGBT characters are projected onto other aspects such as other individuals or relationships surrounding them (Cavalcante 2015). Cavalcante (2015) identifies three areas that motivate anxious displacement in network TV shows: popular gay rights discourse as a political force, the transformational quality of media as a textual force, and producers and showrunners as an industrial force. Anxious displacements often result in a limited range of values that are "rooted in ideologies of whiteness, class, moderation, and the American family," (Cavalcante 2015, 467). Cavalcante (2015) points out that while these stereotypes or negative codified traits are displaced, there remain to be "traces of the 'other'," (468). Cavalcant (2015) identifies anxious displacements as a kind of double-edged sword; while it does often produce the opportunity for legitimization and normalizing, it also has a tendency to be "overloaded with negatively codified social differences and symbolic excesses," (p. 454). Ultimately, anxious displacement is how TV shows try to 'normalize' the lives of LGBT characters. However, the process ends up taking away from the identity of the LGBT characters and enforces negative codified stereotypes of LGBT people and their lives.

Joel Penney (2015) discusses similar concepts in his text, *Responding to Offending Images in the Digital Age: Censorious and Satirical Discourses in LGBT Media Activism*. This text examines various campaigns of media activism groups such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation; Penney (2015) also

examines the ways in which the LGBTQ+ community responds to offending images in media. Penney (2015) states that "a frequent response to such problematic portrayals can be characterized as censorious discourse, that is, advancing the position that these offending images should not be countenanced and that every effort should be taken to effectively remove them from public circulation," (217). The text identifies that LGBTQ+ communities and activist organizations take advantage of the power of participatory media and culture. These organizations and individuals recognize the power that participatory culture holds in the meaning-making in media consumption. Penney states that rather than demanding images be removed, these organizations and communities are parodying these representations in an attempt to delegitimize the representations as real. Suppose the community is able to make other people see that the representations are unrealistic. In that case, they can change the way that the viewers see and interpret the messages, shifting the push from outcry and censorship to understanding and education. These communities take to social media and various types of online platforms to express these concerns and "reflect[s] a more judicious understanding of the contemporary media landscape and the meaning-making power of participatory and networked audiences," (Penney 2015, 231). While LGBTQ+ media portrayals continue to be inaccurate, damaging, and reinforcing stereotypes, LGBTQ+ communities continue to respond and speak out against harmful or offending images in media.

The text, *Media: A Catalyst for Resilience in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth*, importantly examines the impacts of both positive and negative media representations of queer youth. Ultimately the study found that while media representations continue to increase, they are also frequently underrepresented and are "characterized predominantly by negative or one-dimensional portrayals" and "instability, vulnerability, and victimization rather than resilience or self-efficacy," (Craig et al. 2015, 257). Craig et al. (2015) also point out the positive side of the increases in media representations of queer youth; these include increased access to diverse representations that may be "less bound to stereotypical or limited representations" as well as providing the possibility for the development of positive "identity formation and self-perception," (257). Overall, Craig et al. (2015) point out that media often serves as "a catalyst for resilience" by helping "queer youth cope with discrimination and navigated the turbulence of adolescence and young adulthood as LGBTQ individuals," (269). Media, in this sense, has the potential power to be a positive influence in the lives of queer youth. Referring back to our example of *The Fosters*, the representation of transgender character Aaron Baker was particularly groundbreaking, showing a trans person as powerful, happy, and accepted; the character is shown in a happy, healthy relationship, where his identity is not the focus of the character and storyline, but simply an aspect of Aaron as a complete person. This type of representation on a

mainstream TV show provides the opportunity to show young viewers who may identify as transgender, or another gender identity, a positive representation of themselves that is not focused on discrimination and victimization.

However, a study conducted by Sarah Corey (2017) analyzed representations specifically of bisexual characters in television media found that bisexual representations were severely lacking and often reinforced negative bisexual stereotypes. Corey (2017) analyzed *Grey's Anatomy*, *Lost Girl*, and *Orange Is the New Black*, all of which feature bisexual imagery without identifying the characters as bisexual. To begin with, Corey (2017) states that failing to have these characters identify themselves as bisexual contributes to the erasure of bisexual identities. Additionally, Corey (2017) identified three themes in which these shows contributed to bisexual stereotypes and reinforces these harmful ideologies: lack of self-identification, the overuse of love triangles, the 'greedy bisexual.' These reoccurring themes all contribute to the reinforcement of bisexual stereotypes and bisexual erasure. Corey (2017) states that identifying and naming sexuality, especially in popular media such as the TV shows analyzed, gives the sexuality credibility, and legitimizes it, which is extremely important when representing any minority. By not identifying these characters as bisexual, they are reinforcing the idea of a heterosexual or homosexual binary. This binary definition means that these characters are either heterosexual or homosexual based on their current partner, rather than identifying and maintaining a bisexual identity "regardless of the composition of their romantic or sexual relationships," (Corey 2017, 197). Both the overuse of love triangles and the idea of the 'greedy bisexual' both reinforce the negative and false stereotype that bisexual people cannot be satisfied with a single partner or single gender and that they are greedy in wanting multiple partners of multiple genders and are unable to commit to their partner (Corey 2017). These media portrayals of bisexuality are overwhelmingly negative and continue to contribute to negative stereotypes and continue the erasure of bisexuality as a valid sexual identity; "The media presents the notion that bisexuality is an invalid identity and viewers are apt to accept and adopt the notion as the truth. This leads viewers to believe the media presentation of bisexuality over reality," (Corey 2017, 201). Ultimately, the dangers are identified for bisexual viewers who may not have the knowledge or confidence to reject these representations. As a result, the stereotypes are reinforced, and the individual internalizes these representations as truth, leading to "internalized biphobia, as well as a negative image of their own sexual identity," (Corey 2017, 201). Overall, both the negative impacts and the positive impacts of various queer representations in media must be analyzed and understood to understand how to react and respond to these types of images in media.

Conclusion

Television and film can be a powerful and influential tool for all individuals. TV and movies have the power to shape people's perceptions and change how they see the world and other people and communities. This essay ultimately illustrates that media portrayals of queer people have been mostly negative, one-dimensional, and inaccurate (Cavalcante 2015; Creager 2019; Corey 2017). Additionally, the importance of accurate and adequate media representations of queer individuals has been emphasized, as well as the power that queer people have in influencing popular media and the decisions that are made in this space (Craig et al. 2015; Penney 2015). Overall, when used correctly, media can be a vital tool for representing, accepting, and discussing minority groups in society.

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