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Representation InQueeries: How are LGBTQ+ characters treated on tv?

Presentation

The topic of this project was chosen not only due to the author's devotion toward television shows but also as means to give a voice to the queer community, since she herself identifies as a member.

This research project aims to contribute to an understanding of the LGBTQ+ community's representation in television series. The analysis of several themes gives some insight as to how characters of the community are represented, partially in comparison to heterosexual or cisgender ones. The intention is to specify which traits these characters, as a group, bear and the reasons why they are treated as such. This project attempts to interpret how society's relationship with the community throughout time affects how they are shown.

Methodology

A series of themes were picked in order to gain a better understanding of how certain characteristics are shown in television shows, and how society and its evolving mind-set affects the amount and the type of visibility given to the collective. For the purpose of attaining more knowledge on the selected topics, a further investigation was realized, consisting of the reading of other studies as well as plenty of trustworthy articles.



A strategic sampling has been done for this study based on two factors. First, the specific series and episodes had to include scenes that reflected situations relevant to the research themes. Secondly, the sample had to include a variety of genres: political thrillers, workplace comedies, lighthearted family dramas and science fiction. In this way, the series have been selected because they have particular features and characteristics and this fact enabled detailed exploration and understanding of every research question.

Results

Two negative tropes regarding queer representation are *Bury Your Gays* and *Queerbaiting*. The former represents the trope which takes place when a character is killed off a television show for no particular reason, other than to perhaps enrich the main character's story line, who will most likely be white, straight, cisgender, and often enough male as well. One example which has gotten a strongly adverse reaction from the show's fans would be Lexa's death from *The 100*. The latter, *Queerbaiting*, is a phenomenon which comes about when a relationship or figure is hinted or teased to be queer but it never gets confirmed or shown on screen. Two classic cases of this trope are *Supergirl*, which had a lot of controversy around this subject, and *Sherlock*.

Kisses and *Coming Out* are two themes chosen for the sole purpose of showing just how much of an impact visibility can truly make, as they legitimately bring a lot of progress to representation and mean a lot to fans. However, there are some negative aspects in the *Kisses* matter which are definitely mention worthy. Firstly, sexualization, especially between female characters to attract male viewers. Then the previously mentioned queerbaiting, when two characters who aren't explicitly said to belong to the community share a kiss to allure queer audiences, but afterwards it's never mentioned again. And lastly, the fact that kiss scenes or intimate scenes between characters who identify as LGBTQ+ tend to have less screen time than straight and cisgender characters. As for the *Coming Out* chapter, a very significant coming out scene would be the one on *The Ellen Show*, which is undoubtedly one of the most iconic sequences regarding this matter.

The topics *LGBTQ+ Characters of Color*, *Portrayal of Queer Characters* and *Bad Representation vs. No Representation* were created in order to address misrepresentation. In most television shows you generally have one token character which belongs to one minority in particular, so to have one character pertain to two or more minority groups at once, and for that to be shown in a respectful way, is incredibly rare, which is why there's a huge lack of representation for queer characters of color. In the *Portrayal of Queer Characters* theme it was researched which

characters inside the community itself were portrayed better than others. In relation to numbers, with the contribution and help of GLAAD's annual reports, it was found out that the characters which are less represented on television are asexual, transgender and genderqueer characters. Both of these topics regard the lack of queer visibility for LGBTQ+ figures; this lack of representation, or in other words, no representation; is highly linked to bad representation. This concept is a direct consequence of fans complaining about no representation, since those statements lead some writers to believe viewers will accept any kind of representation, without taking into account how inaccurate or just plain bad. However, this also takes place the other way around. When people criticize bad representation, that leads writers to erase the representation in itself, which then results in no representation. It is a vicious cycle which, through progress, we are beginning to pop.

The Rich Gays Problem is a phenomenon that occurs when queer characters are portrayed as excessively affluent in frequent occasions. This aspect happens to contradict reality, because it is a fact that rich queer people do exist; nevertheless, several studies have proved that the average quantity of money a queer person has is generally lower than the one a heterosexual or cisgender has, as a fault of numerous circumstances. Rich gay characters also tend to be portrayed with a lot of stereotypes, such as being exaggeratedly effeminate or very into the fashion field.

Gay Parents, was selected as it gives view to the good and bad aspects of this sort of visibility and the reason why this visibility might be deemed for the better or for the worse. Anti'LGBTQ+ people have spread the belief that when two queer people raise a child, that child will follow those same tendencies. An allegation which is obviously ridiculous and disrespectful to science. For the purpose of not playing into those exact stereotypes, many creators have written the kids of queer couples to be as closest to the norm as possible, which despite the intent being sympathetic, isn't always the best kind of representation as it does not reflect reality. A show which does not play into this topic thought, would be *The Fosters*.

Last but not least we have the chapter dedicated to *Queers on Children's Shows*. Many parents don't allow their kids to watch any type of content related to the LGBTQ+ community given that they are regularly afraid that this particular action might turn their children gay. Which, once again, is quite ludicrous and blatantly absurd. For this reason, a large number of networks are scared to include anything queer on their television shows aimed at the younger people. However, what they ought to be doing is the complete opposite for kids seeing themselves reflected through the screen will likely help them and stop them from rejecting their own feeling for an extended portion of their lives. A couple of shows which have quite good representation would be *Steven Universe* and *Andi Mack*.

Conclusions

The number one problem in regard to LGBTQ+ representation is one hundred percent the lack of it. It is most definitely what causes most of the other issues with the depiction of queer characters. The mischaracterization or absence of positive visibility of these figures is part of the reason why some members of society will not let their mindsets evolve into a more open-minded one. Yet at the same time, it is the fact that those intolerant mindsets are still on some level dominantly integrated in people's belief systems what has created the shortage of queer characters in the first place. It is a vile cycle that repeats itself once and once again. However, queer people's need for visibility began to burst this awful bubble by demanding the portrayal of their own characters to the few people who as well as being in a position of control over this form of media content, also had a more respectable opinion towards the community. This allowed a big part of the visibility viewers are able to enjoy nowadays to even happen. This is the reason why the amount of positive queer representation began to increase parallelly with the rise of more considerate attitudes in relation to the community.

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