

Queer Reflections: Unveiling the Impact of Media Stereotypes on Adolescent Well-being

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Abstract

Queer women are repeatedly stereotyped and portrayed negatively, reinforcing negative societal prejudices toward Queer women, having a lasting effect on women who identify as queer or are a part of the LGBTQ+ community. This research unearths the implications of media portrayals that depict lesbian/queer characters as dehumanized and othered bodies and investigates how members of the LGTBQ+ community react to these depictions. In order to facilitate this, mainstream media clips depicting lesbian/queer characters and women-loving-women interactions were shown to adolescent girls aged 14-18 who identified with the LGBTQ+ community through a survey. The participants were asked to respond to a series of questions in order to gauge their reaction to the clips shown. The data revealed that the lasting negative effects of these representations on adolescent girls within the LGBTQ+ community, range from body-dysmorphia and low self-esteem, to feeling the need to live up to the oversexualized standards that society imposes on lesbian/queer women. Because the queer female perspective is often not taken into account by media studies scholars, this research contends that the scholarly and public focus should insist on lesbain/queer screen diversity, grounded in the concept of visibility, as a key lens for understanding the value of representation. In other words, nuanced portrayals of lesbian/queer representation matter as it provides a point of identification and reassurance to viewers within this community who might not experience visibility in other contexts.

Introduction

There are numerous examples of misrepresented queer women in the media, specifically in tv shows and movies. Queer women are constantly displayed in harmful and stereotypical

ways. They are oversexualized and romanticized. This study falls under the category of gender and media, and social construction of gender and sexualities. This topic is intriguing because queer women are constantly stereotyped and this reinforces negative societal prejudices about Queer women, having a lasting effect on women who identify as queer or are a part of the LGBTQ+ community. The main research question is as follows: How do stereotypical depictions of queer women in mainstream popular culture movie/TV clips affect the self-esteem or mental health of queer adolescents?

Literature Review

Price highlights the history of Queer women in television. Before the 1990s, Lesbian or Queer characters had not been largely portrayed. “Queer narratives such as *Queer as Folk*, *Will & Grace*, *The L Word*, and other more explicit queer stories began to appear more frequently on television in the late 1990s and 2000s” (Price 11). Price finds and exposes the implications of monolithic expressions of queerness through both queer and heteronormative presenting television narratives. Exploring the policing of lesbian cultural expression through narrative voice and the cultural implications of overarchingly monolithic narratives and how it has shaped queer culture. Price unravels the single story of queer women perpetuated by United States popular television through the 1990s and early 2000s. They are constantly depicted as “White, wealthy, living in cities” (Price 60). This idea of one overall depiction is considered a utopia. “Utopic spaces are a common theme in queer narratives— a dream of a better tomorrow where the sexually divergent individual is not excluded, punished, or criminalized for their break from the compulsory heterosexual dominant majority” (Price 40). The idea that queer people have to find refuge in a bustling city because that is the only place where there's enough people that they

blend in, the idea that “living among others who share your sexuality in a large enough community that you will not be singled out” (Price 42).

Queer women have always been poorly represented in the media whether it be from queerbaiting, stereotypical depictions, poor diversity, etc. The most common depictions of queer women is that of the ones living in big cities. They are portrayed in this way to avoid the possibility of being an outsider or being singled out. Constantly portraying queer women in this way, once again, places them and their identities into a singular viewpoint. The idea that they have to run away to find refuge in a larger city because their hometown or community would not accept them is harmful to viewers even if it's in a subtle way. “By imposing a metronormative lifestyle through mass media on the rest of the world, we are erasing the cultures and identities of all other queer expressions that are just as valid” (Price 60).

“The “glitch” is the solicitous homoromantic moment depicted in the show—capturable instances that stack up to prove queer reading of a show is valid” (Price 94). Producers use queerbaiting to attract more viewers - LGBTQ viewers - but never actually allow or include queer characters -and laugh off the possibility (Price 95). Producers do this in a way that doesn't or poses no threat to explicitly offend or harm the community. They consider queer-baiting to be productive and “an opportunity” for queer viewers to have that possibility of a queer relationship and for the viewers to use their imaginations. Essentially queerbaiting is used to prove that these fan-favorite characters are indeed straight and should not be perceived in a different way. This distorts fans perception of queer characters and overall possibility of the characters being present. Fans end up writing or creating their own types of media that include the queer characters for self satisfaction. But then because fans write or create their own queer forms of media, the creators or

other fans of the original show/movie claim this recreation to be a “feeble attempt to pervert the canon” scenes or characters.

It is precisely the notion of queer-bating expressed by Marshall, et. al. that serves as a springboard for a broader discussion on the ways in which queer viewers elect (or choose) to create their own types of media in order to depict the authentic representations that the producers initially promised. And even though they are separately creating their own media (fanfiction, art, stories, headcanons) they receive backlash from the fans/creators. Queerbaiting opens an opportunity for a queer relationship but overall shuts down the idea that it *is* possible, harming queer viewers and the community. Queerbaiting raises this idea of “don’t ask, don’t tell” because if it is only implied it is most often never addressed or discussed. When fans create their own media this societal norm of ‘silence’ allows the “heteronormative majority” to dismiss their content and further ignore the possibility of Queer relationships/characters.

The purpose of this study is to assess the portrayals of lesbian women in the media from the perspective of lesbian women. Highlighting how the effects of media portrayals of women, leave a lasting effect on women's mental health, body image, and self esteem, Arienne and Ramsey uncover how most of these research findings focus on the effects on heterosexual women. Whereas Lesbian women are never fully taken into consideration. Their responses are often grouped with other sexual minorities. “Both heterosexual and gay men identify that “beautiful blondes” are the stereotypical lesbians” Subject to stereotypes, queer women are confined to a single viewpoint. Arienne and Ramsey found that “lesbian women have higher degrees of centrality and certainty in their sexual orientation identity” which leaves them to feel more affected by representations of lesbians they see in the media. “Therefore, representations of lesbians in the media may feel more identifiable and/or relevant to lesbians rather than other

sexual minority women.” Primarily sexualized by men, queer women are often portrayed in respects of the male gaze. Because of the male gaze and through mainstream media, it is mostly seen that homosexual women are sexual objects. “Heterosexual men encourage lesbianism for their own pleasure due to a common desire to be with two women at once, while simultaneously devaluing it by associating lesbianism with an act of performance” (Arienne et. al). Thus further undermining the severity and actuality of homosexual women with the claim that their relationships are solely experimental. Due to the constant objectification lesbian women feel the constant need to monitor their appearance.

Knowing that queer women/Lesbians are constantly objectified by the male gaze throughout the media, it is that much more disheartening to understand that their perspective on the matter is not often taken into account. In any case of reliable and realistic representation of a group it is increasingly important to work with the group who is being represented. Not highlighting the responses of lesbian women undermines the importance of their representation. When their points of view are not understood, the female queer perspective is initially lost. In order to create and display proper representation in a way that supports the LGBTQ+ community and Queer women, the creators of the content must consider the way their content will affect the community.

Arienne and Ramsey’s study has shown that women are constantly sexualized in popular media and that this sexualization has left a negative impact on their self-esteem and body image. This study focuses on the Lesbian perception of this because their points of view are often not accounted for. 179 participants were asked “What stereotypes regarding lesbian relationships are most frequently observed in the media by lesbian women?” Arienne and Ramsey hoped to unearth the lesbians' perceptions of how lesbians are portrayed in the media. The participants

were assigned to view clips from *Desperate Housewives* that expose stereotypical portrayals of lesbians. The clips displayed “performative lesbian actions for men” displaying the characters in ways that were sexual experimentation (Arienne et. al 9). Over half of participants (56.8%) responded to the media claiming the clips to display oversexualized and stereotypical portrayals of lesbians. The lesbians exposed to “sexualized lesbian media portrayals” reported “higher self-objectification, lower mood, lower self-esteem, and lower body image” (Arienne et. al 18). The participants noted that the women-loving-women relationships are often temporary and created in respects of the male gaze.

This feedback given by queer women shines a light on the significant effects of lesbian representation. The constant oversexualization and stereotypical illustrations of queer women have lasting negative effects on these individuals. Rather than the representation being progressive and encouraging, it harms queer women on their perspectives of themselves while also creating unattainable and unrealistic standards that non-LGBTQ+ members assume to be accurate. It is evident that producers and media makers fail to consider the harmful implications of false representation.

Johnson analyzes how lesbians were represented on TV shows airing between 2010 and 2019. While studying the prominent tropes and themes that surround Lesbian characters on television, Johnson also analyzes the impact these themes can have on the audience. Acknowledging the abuse of stereotypical tropes in LGBTQ+ media and of characters, Johnston states “tropes such as bury your gays or the male gaze limits how lesbian characters are presented, making it difficult to move past the expendable character or one that is only there for the benefit of the male audience. The impact of these messages has a direct effect on viewers,

who struggle to see themselves represented in an accurate or positive way” (Johnson 17).

Johnson’s “goal of the study was to examine how lesbian characters and their relationships are portrayed and what messages are being shown to younger audiences” (Johnson 21). The shows used for the analysis were: *Pretty Little Liars*, *Jane the Virgin*, and *One Day At a Time*.

The lesbian characters portrayed in these shows are seen as “token lesbians” which are simply there for the purpose of having a gay character. In addition, these shows as well heavily avoid saying the word “Lesbian” and use “gay” as an umbrella term because it is more widely accepted. Although, these shows depict their queer characters in an unsexualized way that received positive responses from its audience—because in *One day at a Time* and *Pretty Little Liars* the characters are portrayed as teenagers. Although this research is thorough within these shows, it only focuses on the representation of Lesbian characters, excluding other identities or queer characters.

This research analyzes *Pretty Little Liars*, *Jane the Virgin*, and *One Day at a Time*. These shows are extremely popular with young adult and teen girls, so their representation of lesbian characters resonates and is prevalent in that society. The main positive effect of their portrayal of Lesbian/Queer characters is the refrain from oversexualization. This tends to be the most difficult and prevalent issue in mainstream media (TV/Movies). Although the main issue uncovered was that these shows do not use the word “lesbian” to describe their queer characters. Erasing the use of the word “lesbian” makes the audiences less accustomed to hearing it, which has a negative impact on the viewers and their personal relationship with the word. The erasure of the word subconsciously affects the young viewers, queer or not, to avoid using or accepting this word. Because using “gay” as an umbrella term is widely accepted, it is easier to ignore this issue but it is increasingly important to address the effects of ignoring/purposefully not using the word

“lesbian.”

Arienne examines the way Lesbians perceive themselves and their relationships after seeing depictions in the media and how(if) the oversexualization affects their body image issues. The perspectives of lesbian women are often not taken into account when studying the response of the LGBTQ+ community towards media that represents the community. Constantly being seen as an “act of performance,” lesbianism portrayed in television often fails to display their lesbian characters as more than just lesbians. Lesbianism is often disguised as “close female friendships” or for simply male pleasure. The male gaze’s impact on the portrayal of Lesbians stems from men’s desire to be with multiple women at once, so they sexualize any ‘women-loving-women’ acts. The way lesbians are perceived and portrayed in the media affects the way many lesbian/queer women view themselves. Arienne shares “masculine-presenting women experience objectification via being labeled as hypersexual aggressors, while feminine-presenting women are treated as sexual objects” (Arienne 11). Feeling the need to either reject or live up to these standards, queer women tend to focus on their appearance constantly. All women are objectified in the media, but lesbian relationships have been increasingly exploited in favor of the male gaze which is exceedingly harmful.

There are not a lot of positively and unsexualized representations of lesbians, so these representations are typically what lesbians feel the need to look up to or model after. This is harmful not only to the young lesbians who seek representation but others whose perspectives of lesbians stem only from these negative representations. The stigma and stereotypes surrounding being lesbian or a queer woman and the exploitation to please the male gaze, results in lesbian and queer women obsessing over their appearances. Negatively affecting their perspectives of themselves, lesbian and queer women fear oversexualization and being associated with harmful

stereotypes.

In Arienne's research, a group of 179 lesbians were shown clips of media that portrayed oversexualization of lesbian characters. Arienne used clips from *Desperate Housewives*. The participants were shown clips that were either stereotypical or oversexualized depictions of lesbians. The participants recorded that the clips affect their self-esteem, increased negative moods, negative body image and increased self-objectification. The more stereotypically portrayed lesbians in the media, the more participants noted an association to negative moods. They also noted the lesbian relationships to be overly performed to appease men and male viewers. The "hot" lesbian was the character type seen most often. Arienne notes the limitations of this research to be the lack of information that would give results on how the participants would be affected by long-term exposure to these types of media. This was a short-term and immediate exposure and analysis survey. The immediate responses may change over time due to constant exposure of sexualized or stereotypical media. Another limitation is the use of only one media source: *Desperate Housewives*, and not using other shows, movies, or etc.

The immediate responses from the participants indicate the negative and harmful responses to the media proposed from *Desperate Housewives*. Because the lesbian/female queer perspective on media that portrays lesbian is not often taken into account, Arienne's research finds important results and information. The participants who viewed the clips recorded having negative moods and lower self-esteem. This is not surprising because the content given to them and often seen in the media is inaccurate and mostly harmful to the community. Although the representation of lesbians/queer women has become better and less stereotypical, the past should not be ignored nor should anyone be ignorant of the effects of stereotypical and oversexualized portrayals in the media.

Lee examines the representation of lesbianism and lesbians in film. Rather than viewing it as a sexuality, Lee researches lesbianism as a gender and sexuality matter. Lee scrutinizes the “Queer theory.” The Queer Theory challenges traditional views on sexuality by rejecting simplistic hetero/homosexual binaries and emphasizing the complexity of identity, including transgender and bisexual experiences. However, some feminists object to its use of the term "queer" due to its negative associations. Although lesbians have been depicted in movies/television since the 80s, there has not been enough attention or examination to how they are portrayed. Lee analyzes the representation of lesbianism in films, focusing on three key factors: symbols used, types of representation, and changes over five historical periods. Symbols such as attire, names, occupations, locations, and gestures signify lesbianism. Representation types include stereotype (butch-femme), annihilation/invisibility (killing or converting lesbians), and lesbian sensibility (strong female relationships). Over time, representations evolved: from cross-dressing in early films (1895-1930s) to positive portrayals in the 1970s-1980s, and a focus on lesbian sensibility in the 1980s-1990s. Recent representations (1990s-present) challenge gender binaries and embrace queer politics, diversifying lesbian narratives. Lee concludes that the portrayal of homosexuality in films historically favored gay men over lesbians, with the first lesbian character appearing much later. Traditional studies like feminist film studies and gay studies often overlooked lesbian experiences. This study employs lesbian feminism and queer studies to explore gender and sexuality issues in lesbian representations more comprehensively.

Understanding that, historically, gay men and queer male characters have been favored over lesbian women or queer female characters paves the way to understand the harm that this can cause to young queer people. When lesbian characters are not given the attention or criticism as often as queer male characters, their validity is lost and therefore affects the view of those who

identify with lesbians. Moreover, the reluctance to embrace the term "queer" and the stigma attached to it is not an isolated issue; it resonates with numerous members of the LGBTQ+ community who endure pervasive stereotyping and adverse reactions. Feminist opposition to adopting the term "queer" adds another layer to this discourse, illustrating intersecting challenges faced within the broader struggle for acceptance and recognition.

Project Description

This study falls under the category of gender and media, and social construction of gender and sexualities. The main research question is as follows: How do stereotypical depictions of queer women in mainstream popular culture movie/TV clips affect the self-esteem or mental health of queer adolescents? The benefits of conducting research in this include but are not limited to: understanding how queer individuals react to viewing dehumanizing content, exploring the genealogy of mainstream media stereotypes of queer/lesbian women, and reimagining films that portray queer/lesbian women in relationships more accurately. This amplifies the voice of queer/ lesbian women and catalyzes the positive, complex, multidimensional representation of these characters in film and TV.

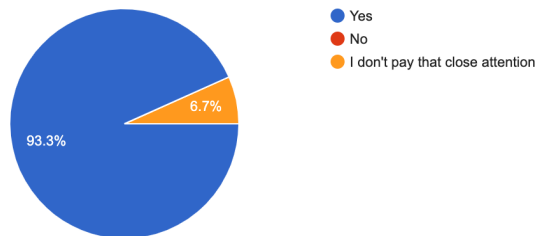
Research Methods and Results

To further conduct research about this topic, specifically targeting the young queer perspective and viewpoint on the subject matter, a survey that presents media (TV/Movie clips) of stereotypical or non stereotypical queer/lesbian portrayals was distributed to the students. Because the queer voice is so important, it is ideal that the survey should be available to the students in the QSA or those who identify as queer. Those who participated in the survey were asked relevant, multiple choice, questions to the subject matter.

Have you noticed stereotypical depictions of Lesbians/Queer women in TV/Movies?

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15 responses

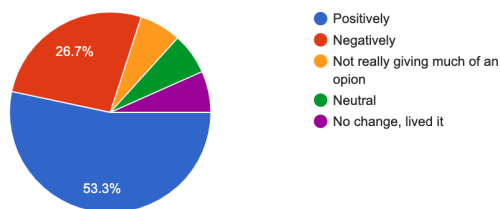


After being shown clips from three mainstream popular media, *I Am Not Okay with This*, *Cruel Intentions*, and *Pitch Perfect*, the participants were asked the following questions: After watching this scene, How would you say this affects your perspective on Lesbian/Queer Characters? Would you identify this as good or bad Lesbian/Queer representation? The clips depicted women-loving women scenes (kisses, romantic attraction, etc.). The first scene from *I am Not Okay with This*

After watching this scene, How would you say this affects your perspective on Lesbian/Queer Characters?

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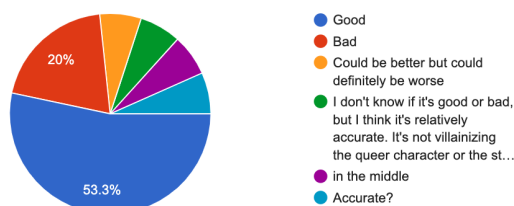
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Would you identify this as good or bad Lesbian/Queer representation?

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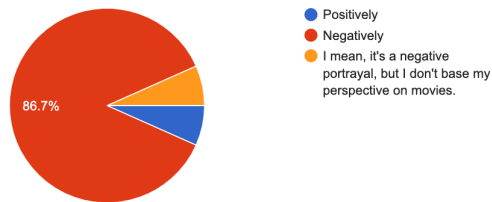


The second scene from *Cruel Intentions*.

After watching this scene, How would you say this affects your perspective on Lesbian/Queer Characters?

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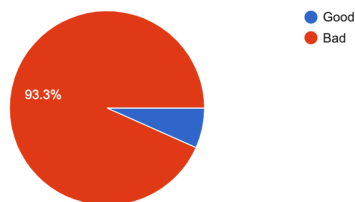
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Would you Identify this as good or bad Lesbian/Queer representation?

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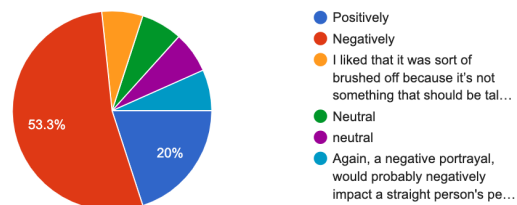


The third scene from *Pitch Perfect*, displaying a stereotypical joke towards a lesbian character.

After watching this scene, How would you say this affects your perspective on Lesbian/Queer Characters?

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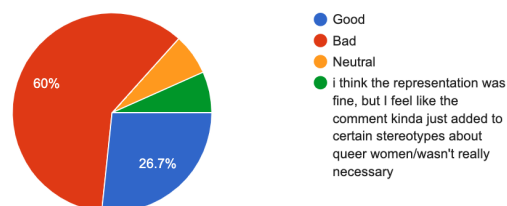
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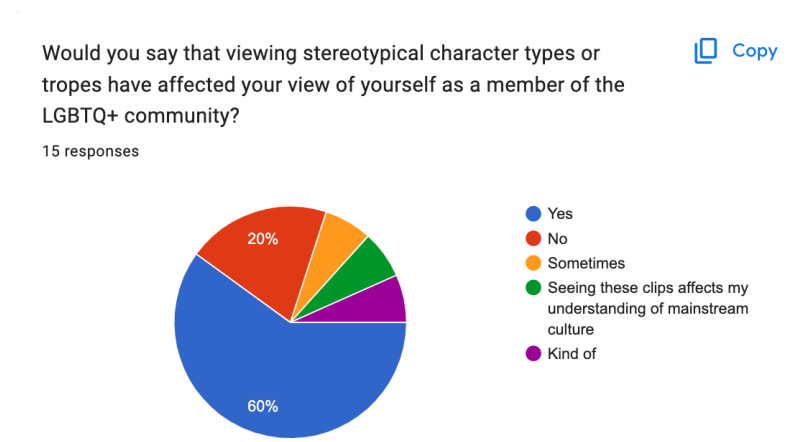
Would you Identify this as good or bad Lesbian/Queer representation?

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15 responses



The final inquiry solicited their ultimate responses to the media and featured an open-ended question so that participants could elaborate on their answer.



The explanations for the responses to the final question reflect how the participants felt about the media shown to them. For example, one participant remarked, “I think stereotypes played a big role in my perception of my sexuality as I was growing up. It seems super ingrained in our culture that to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community you have to fit certain stereotypes or identify with a specific type of queer identity. So, it's difficult to reconcile that with the fact that many people's sexuality exists in a gray area that cannot be defined by stereotypes. It's something I think queer people have to remind themselves of, too. You can be queer and just be you, you don't have to be queer and then act or look or dress "queer", if that's not something you want.”

These responses give credit to the reality behind the misrepresentation and effects of such.

Another respondent surmised, “Often after seeing queer women depicted in film, I feel a sense of shame being associated with such unappealing stereotypes. It is rare to find media that makes me proud to be gay, with only a couple notable exceptions.” In addition to these musings, another adolescent replied, “A lot of representation in the media includes the queer character being rejected. I feel like this can affect lots of queer or questioning people because they'll be scared to

put themselves out in the world. Fear of rejection is a real thing and if all you watch is someone like you being confused or rejected, you can develop a negative view of yourself.”

Conclusion

The benefits of conducting research in the discipline of gender studies include but are not limited to: understanding how queer individuals react to seeing this kind of content, where/how queer women are stereotyped, and how to reimagine ways to portray them more accurately. Moreover, it also contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to define the positive and negative impact of the representation of queer women in mainstream media. Through the use of surveys and the analysis of peer reviewed journal articles, this research hopes to amplify the voice of queer individuals/women and their understanding and perspective on the possibly harmful ways that lesbians/queer women are being portrayed in the media.

Acknowledgements

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