

QUEER REPRESENTATION IN TEEN DRAMA STREAMING
SERVICE TV SHOWS

by

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This study is designed to explore the nature of queer characters and relationships in contemporary media. Specifically, this is through the exploration of the question: How are gay and lesbian presenting relationships and characters portrayed in streaming service teen drama TV shows in the last 5 years? As the numbers of LGBTQ+ identifying people in the US have increased significantly in recent years, these types of characters have also become far more frequent within media. Therefore, this is one attempt at gaining an understanding of what these portrayals look like. Eight television shows were analyzed, four consisting of a main queer female couple and four with a main queer male couple. These shows include: *The Wilds*, *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, *Dickinson*, *Atypical*, *Heartstopper*, *Young Royals*, *Love, Victor*, and *The Bastard Son and the Devil Himself*. A variety of elements were explored, including intersectional identities, screen time and affection, relationship configuration, the coming out process, religion stereotypes, and heteronormativity. Regarding major findings, there was a relative lack of diversity across racial and class groups, along with a limited representation with the queer community itself. Furthermore, there were significant differences in screen time and depictions of intimacy between queer men and queer women. However, there was a general, not only acceptance and normalization of queerness, but also celebration of it. Along with this persisted more nuanced depictions of queer individuals in general, including pushback against

queer stereotypes, and more exploration and nuance in the relationship between the LGBT community and religion. Still, there persisted a heteronormative narrative that underlies many of these shows, a reflection of the society that queer individuals live in.

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Introduction

This study seeks to explore how gay and lesbian presenting relationships and characters portrayed in streaming service teen drama TV shows in the last 5 years. This exploration is important for three primary reasons. Firstly, media in general is incredibly impactful, and can have large effects on those who consume it. Therefore, exploring what messages are being sent about queerness is critical to understanding the experiences of queer individuals. Secondly, looking at shows from the last 5 years is significant, as much previous research on homosexuality in media has been looking at older shows when it was just becoming more normal to see queer people on television. Over the years queerness has become far more common in television, but because of this it has potentially become less compelling to explore. Lastly, focusing on teen dramas on streaming service shows was necessary for two reasons. The choice to focus on shows premiering on streaming services was simply due to the fact that queer characters appear to be prominent in these types of shows, and these shows tend to be shorter, making it far easier to analyze the entirety of eight total shows. The focus on teen dramas specifically was one of the most important elements of this due to the influence of media on consumers. The adolescent years are the primary time in which individuals tend to begin discovering their sexuality, so evaluating the messages that young queer consumers are receiving about people like them is critical.

Literature Review

Media Influences Us

Since its rise to prominence in the 1940s, television has become a staple in American families and culture. Because of this, the power of television to influence society and reflect societal values has become dominating. Media has shaped ideals about anything, from politics to religion to ideas about particular groups. It also has the power to shape people's attitudes and beliefs about themselves ("Television's Impact"). Due to this shaping force that is television, and media in general, it is important to assess the way this functions in regards to sexual orientation.

One of the biggest influences for young people in our society in regards to sexuality is what is seen from Disney films (Martin, & Kazyak, 2009). Children grow up watching Disney films that send a wide variety of messages and socialize them to believe and behave in a certain way. Particular behaviors and ways of life are normalized, and within Disney films, one of the most dominant themes is that of heteronormativity, or the idea that heterosexuality is what is normal and expected. The exceptionalist aspect of these romances, which convey heterosexuality as something magical and transformative emphasizes the importance of heterosexual relationships in society. This does two things: reveals that messages in media are extremely important and dictate many beliefs and opinions and reveals that heteronormativity is conditioned in individuals from childhood. This highlights the importance of homosexual representation in media for individuals who are not heterosexual, as the majority of queer youth grow up seeing heteronormative narratives persist as the dominant standard for relationships in media. When it comes to queer representations in media, heterosexual people have been taught what to think of queer people and queer people have been taught what to think of themselves (Epstein & Friedman, 1995)

). When it comes to representations that only show heterosexuality, queer people begin to think something is wrong with them because they are not being shown, which can make individuals feel isolated and invisible.

Effect of Queer Representation on Heterosexual Attitudes

When it comes to the importance of representation of queer people in media, there are two viewpoints to consider: the reactions of heterosexual individuals to these portrayals, and the reactions of queer individuals. For queer individuals, it is incredibly important for them to see themselves represented. However, it is just as critical to think about what reactions these portrayals are evoking from heterosexual individuals, as these attitudes greatly affect the lives and treatment of real queer people. Studies have shown that exposure to pro vs anti-gay videos effect the opinions of heterosexual individuals, with pro-gay videos being associated with more positive attitudes toward queer people, and anti-gay videos being associated with more negative attitudes (Thi, Waldo & Fitzgerald, 2000). On a very basic level, this emphasizes the role media plays in dictating heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality. Furthermore, when it comes to actual homosexual characters rather than overall messaging, unsurprisingly, the same trends appeared to occur. However, it is important to note that negative portrayals did not seem have much of an effect on already held perceptions (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007). Therefore, positive depictions in particular appear to be quite influential in creating positive attitudes toward homosexuality.

Something important to take note of is reactions to the sexualization of lesbians. This has been a common trend in queer media, and one interesting finding in this regard is that viewers tend to perceive these portrayals as a performance that is functioning for the male gaze. This can be viewed in both a positive and negative light. It can be seen as a positive because people seem

to be able to recognize that this is an exaggeration of reality. Lesbians are never doing anything for the attention of men, and that appears to be recognized. However, it is also important to note that this can be invalidating for more feminine lesbians and can lead people to believe that all lesbians look like the common lesbian stereotype: unattractive and masculine (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). It is also important to note that many women are actually uncomfortable viewing this oversexualized media due to this perception of it being intended for the male gaze. Many women work to reframe their thinking when viewing this type of media, and also find that viewing it privately or in women-only spaces is far more comfortable (Scanlon, & Lewis, 2017). This provides compelling insight into the harmful effects that inaccurate portrayals can have on consumers.

Lastly, it is also important to take into account that there appears to be a difference in heterosexual individuals' opinions when it comes to gay vs lesbian representation, and this opinion seems to vary depending on the gender of the consumer. Heterosexual audiences tend to be more much more receptive and positive regarding media showing lesbians than gay men. However, a large factor here is the gender of the viewer, as women tended to view gay and lesbian imagery at around the same level. Heterosexual men, however, tended to view imagery of gay men far more negatively than heterosexual women, and lesbian imagery far more positively than did heterosexual women (Oakenfull, & Greenlee, 2004). This provides important implications regarding differences in general acceptance of queer individuals, and hints at potential implications as to who is watching particular types of queer media.¹

¹ It is important to note that this study is from 2004, and consumers of lesbian vs gay imagery may have shifted as portrayals have shifted in nature.

Effect of Queer Representation on Queer Individuals

Along with noting the impact of queer media on heterosexual individuals, it is, of course, just as important to discuss the impact it has on queer individuals. While queer representation is much more common nowadays, and coming out has become much accepted, it is important to look at how this type of media has made an impact throughout the course of history. At the time when queer media began to rise in the early 1990s, queerness was still rarely discussed in real life. Individuals had to face “coming out” and understanding their feelings without any real role models to look up to. This made it incredibly difficult for queer individuals to even identify themselves as gay or lesbian, and this often led them to search for answers in media. Therefore, the way that homosexual characters are shown in media, whether that be as great role models who have amazing lives and are out and proud, or perverted, sick individuals, had great influence (Fejes, & Petrich, 1993). This is far less relevant today because homosexuality is far more accepted than it was 30 years ago, which can be seen through the great strides that have been made, such as the legalization of gay marriage in the US in 2015. As of 2022, support for same-sex marriage in the US also increased to an all time high at 71% (McCarthy, 2022).² A large part of these changes in attitudes are seemingly due to these media representations of queerness, but for certain people today, the representation of queerness is as influential as it was 30 years ago. This is especially relevant for individuals coming from very religious households where queerness is viewed as just as wrong and sinful as it was years ago.

² It is important to note though that at the time of this thesis being completed, there is significant conflict in the US regarding queer individuals, especially transgender individuals. While homosexuality is indeed far more accepted than it had been in the 1990s, we have yet to see what the scope of these anti-LGBT bans will have and how broad of an impact they will ultimately make.

Early Portrayals of Homosexuality in Media

During the very late 1800s and early 1900s, homosexuality was not particularly uncommon in film. However, these portrayals tended to fall into three different categories: comic relief, to induce arousal, primarily through sexual acts between women, or to paint homosexuality as deviant or perverse (Fejes, & Petrich, 1993). Media essentially framed homosexuality as something that should either be laughed at, pitied, or even something that should be feared. The first queer archetype was that of “the sissy,” or what was typically characterized as an effeminate man. This character served to make men feel more manly and for women to feel more womanly. A large part of the reason this character thrived was because he didn’t appear to have a sexuality, and his identification of gay came more from his gender performance rather than actual sexual orientation (Epstein & Friedman, 1995). As movies progressively got more explicit, there was significant pushback, especially from the Catholic church. Because of this, in 1934, the Production Code was put into action. This was a set of industry guidelines that restricted what could be shown in film; sex, crime, profanity, and so on, and any type of homosexual content became highly censored. Therefore, from the mid-1930s to the early 1960s, any appearance of homosexuality in film was almost completely absent. Still, homosexuality was not completely erased, but the new common trope was homosexual characters as villains. In the 50s and 60s, when the strength of the Production Code was wavering, homosexuality started to reemerge in film, but these portrayals were rarely even neutral, let alone positive. This was also a time where masculinity ruled, so seeming gay was just as bad as actually being gay. Most instances of homosexuality during this time were based on subtext or indirect references, which reflected the experience of homosexuality in society at the time. In the 60s specifically, homosexuality did begin being talked about on screen, but never in

a way that wasn't negative. From this was also born the idea of unhappy and suicidal gay people, a very common character trope seen in media. By the 70s, *The Boy In The Band* finally showed a positive portrayal of gay men, showing a sense of comradeship and community between gay men. However, at the time, homosexuality was still considered a mental illness and attending gay bars made you liable for arrest. There was also rapid pushback against positive representation with an increase in even more negative depictions. The slur 'fag' was also used at an incredibly prominent rate and became normalized through its use in films. When it comes to television, many of the same trends that applied to Hollywood were also paralleled here, with very stereotypical portrayals taking place. This included very effeminate gay men and masculine, unattractive lesbians. Essentially, many early representations of queerness consisted of the muddling of sexuality and gender expression, using these characters as comic relief or villainizing them, with occasional depiction of overly sexualized lesbians that would become much more prominent years later in the early 2000s.

Portrayals of Queer Men in Media

Portrayals of homosexuality in media started to accelerate in the 1990s for both gay men and lesbians. At this time, portrayals of gay men specifically tended to either be presented in a heterosexualized way, where gay men gave off the appearance and mannerisms of what would classify a heterosexual man, or in a very stereotypical sense, casting the individual as very flamboyant and "feminine". There wasn't much of an in between, and this heterosexualization of gay men can be seen especially through the lens of the gay man/straight woman relationship. This can be seen through many mainstream shows and films of the 90s, such as *Will & Grace*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Object of My Affection*, and *The Next Best Thing*. This heterosexual framework that these gay men experience is filtered through their relationships with straight

women, and their framing in comparison to other gay men. Some general trends that have been typical of 90s and early 2000s portrayals of gay men are their romantic and sometimes sexual relationships with their straight, female best friends. The two are frequently put in situations of that of a heterosexual couple such as living with each other, being referred to as a married couple, and sometimes even raising a child together. The only thing truly stopping the two from engaging in a heterosexual relationship is the lack of sexual intimacy, though at times the two share a bed, engage in kissing, and sometimes even sexual acts. Frequent in these portrayals, the gay man holds a very emotionally intimate relationship with their straight, female counterpart and often is able to understand the woman in ways that heterosexual men cannot. Along with this, the gay men often act in a way that is like a father would, frequently aiding the straight woman in fixing her issues, or reeling her in when she gets too neurotic (Shugart, 2003). These examples demonstrate some of the themes seen with gay men in popular media when queerness really started becoming more prominent on television.

Outside of this relationship with the straight woman, certain gay men are oftentimes heterosexualized based on their comparison to a stereotypical, effeminate gay man who serves as a Foil. A Foil is a character that is the total opposite of another, frequently the main character, that serves to emphasize certain aspects of said character. These gay men are portrayed a the stereotypical way, akin to ‘the sissy’: talking with a high-pitched voice, being overly flamboyant, and generally demonstrating characteristics that would normally be ascribed to women. These Foils serve to reinforce the masculinity of other gay men, because even though these heterosexualized men have instances where they exhibit some of these stereotypes, by comparison, they exhibit the typical characteristics of a heterosexual leading man (Shugart,

2003). Therefore, Foils in the case of gay men enforce certain types of masculinity that we see on screen.

Portrayals of Queer Women in Media

When it comes to the representation of queer women in media, there seems to be a fairly apparent divide over time. Initially, queer women tended to be portrayed exclusively as lesbians, and were often shown as masculine and unattractive, along with generally either being comic relief or villains. However, around the early 2000s there appears to be a shift where queer women became overly sexualized, sexually promiscuous, and essentially possessed a fluid sexuality. They no longer tended to be defined as lesbians, or if they were then the meaning of what is to be a lesbian was twisted in order to make sex with men a possibility. Essentially, many newer lesbians in media are written and centered around the male gaze, centering heterosexual men as the target audience of these portrayals. Also, like with gay men, lesbians were frequently heterosexualized (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). In a sense, the “lesbian” representation was more like representation of overly sexual bisexual women who were labeled as lesbians.

When looking at more recent lesbian representation, the typical identity of lesbians in media is: white, young, cisgender, and middle-class (Parker et al, 2020). Interestingly, many of the lesbian characters were shown having positive relationships with many people in their lives, such as their mothers, close friends, romantic partners, and children, but not with their fathers. Along with this, even if they showed positive relationships with their friends, their friendships tended to be underdeveloped. There also tended to be many homonegative tropes associated with them, including the evil, death, and cheating/promiscuity tropes. Some of these identity trends also have been observed among gay men, specifically that many of the most popular depictions consist of White, middle or high-class men (Avila-Saavedra, 2009).

This reveals that even with increased visibility, there are very specific types of queer people who are being portrayed in media.

Methodology

I investigated my research question through content analysis, or the examination of already existing data. My study serves as preliminary research to get a sense of what trends and themes tend to be emerging in recent queer media. I decided to look at 4 shows with a prominent male/male couple and 4 shows with a prominent female/female couple in order to try and get somewhat of a range, while still making the research manageable. The four shows with lesbian presenting relationships, which will be referred to throughout as WLW (women-loving women) shows are: *The Wilds*, *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, *Dickinson*, and *Atypical*. The four shows with gay presenting relationships, which will be referred to as MLM (men-loving men) shows are: *Heartstopper*, *Young Royals*, *Love, Victor*, and *The Bastard Son & The Devil Himself* (TBSATDH). These shows all appear on streaming services and provide a wide variety, including Netflix, Hulu, Apple TV+ and Amazon Prime. They were chosen for a few primary reasons. Firstly, I wanted to choose shows that were well received, so all 8 shows have over an 80 on Rotten Tomatoes in both critic and audience ratings. I also chose shows with a prominent queer couple, and specifically chose those where the characters were teenagers. This is because this is a group that will likely be affected most by media portrayals of queerness, as that is the time frame in which most people explore and discover their sexuality. It is also important to note that all of these shows are classified as dramas or comedy-dramas. Lastly, I want to look at very recent queer representation, so I chose shows from the last 5 years, with the oldest having started in 2017, but running through 2021. Most of these shows premiered in 2020 or after, meaning they are very recent.

I watched every episode for each show and took note of both quantitative and qualitative elements. Quantitatively, I looked at screen time and displays of affection, both romantic and

platonic. I also looked at more basic qualitative context, which consisted of various identities of the characters, regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, whether a character was closeted or not during the show and/or if they were aware of their sexuality at the start of the show are noted, along with romantic tropes that surface. In the case of these shows, those specific tropes are enemies to lovers and friends to lovers. Lastly, more complex trends were considered and discussed, and some speculations were made. The primary trends that persisted throughout were religion, coming out, stereotypes and heteronormativity. The codebook used can be found in the Appendix, and it provides detailed elaboration on how certain codes were defined, gives examples, and specifies frequency when appropriate.

Show Descriptions

The Wilds

The Wilds follows 8 teenage girls who are stranded on a deserted island following a plane crash, and the show moves around in time, with each girl getting a season 1 episode dedicated to their backstory. The two queer characters being focused on are Shelby, the resident optimist, pageant queen, and closeted lesbian, and Toni, the fiery, outspoken, quick-tempered lesbian. The show was canceled after two seasons, leaving many plotlines unresolved.

Teenage Bounty Hunters

Teenage Bounty Hunters focuses on twins, Blair and Sterling, who attend a Christian private school by day, and are bounty hunters by night. The eventual pairing is of Sterling and April, who attend the same school. Sterling tends to be quite opposed to the strict rules of Christianity, while April appears to be very religious, conservative, straight and overachieving teacher's pet. The show was canceled after one season, leaving many plotlines unresolved.

Dickinson

Dickinson focuses on the life of Emily Dickinson as she lives in her parents' house in Massachusetts during her late teenage/early adulthood years just before the Civil War. Loosely based on real life events, Emily's letters and poems to Sue, her best friend and eventual sister-in-law, have revealed that they were actually lovers. This is prominent in the show, as opposed to most other adaptations of Emily Dickinson's life.

Atypical

Atypical focuses primarily on Sam Gardner, a teenage boy with autism. However, his family all play prominent roles in the show, including his track athlete sister, Casey. It is not until season 2, once she has switched high schools, that Casey meets Izzie, her eventual love interest, and another track athlete. The show was canceled after 4 seasons, though it was able to wrap up with a fitting conclusion.

Heartstopper

Based on a comic book, the premise of Heartstopper is specifically that of Nick and Charlie's relationship. There are other storylines revolving around their friends, including a smaller lesbian storyline, but their relationships, from meeting, to friends, to boyfriends is the primary focus. This show was renewed for a second season, which will be released in August 2023.

Young Royals

Young Royals focuses on Wilhelm, the crowned prince of Sweden as he begins attending a prestigious boarding school. The primary storyline is the relationship between Wilhelm and

Simon, and the conflict between Wilhelm's queer identity and his royal title. The show has been renewed for a third and final season, which is projected to be released in late 2023.

Love, Victor

A spinoff of the film, *Love, Simon*, the show focuses on the life of Victor, and the first season in particular explores his discovery of his own sexuality. Victor meets Benji, his future love interest, in the first episode of the show. The show was canceled after 3 seasons, but it was able to wrap up with a fitting conclusion.

The Bastard Son and The Devil Himself

Based on the novel *Half Bad*, *The Bastard Son and The Devil Himself*, is a supernatural show focusing on conflict between two different groups: the Fairborns and the Blood Witches. Nathan, the illegitimate son of the most dangerous witch ever, is meant to be trained to kill his father. Along his journey to try and survive, he meets Gabriel, a blunt and snarky blood witch who attempts to help him. It is implied that Gabriel, Nathan, and Nathan's female love interest, Annalise, may have eventually been involved in a relationship together, but this is more speculative based on the book as the show was canceled after one season.

Findings

Inequalities

Discussion regarding the inequalities in identities that were shown is important due to the impact on intersectionality on individuals. Intersectionality is the idea that the various identities of an individual, including class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and so on, interact to create a unique experience. For example, within the queer community, a White gay man would have a very different experience interacting with the world than would a Black gay man. The following sections examine inequalities observed in these shows in regards to race and class, and provides brief commentary on the diversity of queer identities that are shown.

Race

One trend that persisted throughout these shows is that, for many queer characters, their sexuality was the only marginalized group that they were part of. Of course, for the queer women, their gender identity was another way of identifying with a minority. Apart from queer women, the variety when it came to queer characters appeared to be quite limited, and this was especially true of race and racial dynamics within couples. Not one main queer couple featured two ethnic minority characters, and only three times was a completely non-white queer couple shown. These were: Victor and Rahim and Rahim and Conner from *Love, Victor*, and Ivan and Luc from *The Wilds*. All of these couples were very minor, and either lasted together very briefly or simply had very minor storylines and screen time.

When it came to characters individually, only 4 out of the 16 main queer couples being focused on were considered to be racial minorities. These characters were: Izzie (*Atypical*),

Simon (*Young Royals*), Victor (*Love, Victor*), and Nathan (*TBSATDH*).³ This reveals the relative lack of diversity within the queer characters that are portrayed in these shows. However, it is important to note that there are more minor BIPOC queer characters in five of the shows. In total, there are 20 additional queer characters in these shows and, of those, 8 are part of a marginalized racial group.

Along these demographics, race itself was rarely a topic when it came to the five interracial couples. The only shows where it is prominently discussed in relation to queerness or queer characters are *The Wilds* and *Love, Victor*. In *The Wilds*, Toni made many comments about whiteness in general, which included a number directed at Shelby. Toni's perception of Shelby as a rich, white, straight, deeply religious girl initially sparked animosity from Toni. In *Love, Victor*, race was discussed between Victor and Benji. In fact, it was a cause of conflict between the two, as Victor felt Benji was being too hard on Victor's mother, Isabel, as she struggled to accept her son's sexuality. He claimed that Benji could never understand due to his "liberal, white parents," indicating the very different experiences of queer people of different races. Benji doesn't understand, but Victor later has a discussion with Rahim, an Iranian gay man, about this topic. They both understand the impact that race has, as they recognize how much their parents and grandparents have gone through to make a good life for them. This makes it more difficult for them to be so unforgiving when their parents make mistakes. This rare open discussion of racial differences among queer individuals, along with the relative lack of racial diversity in these shows is important to point out. This lack of representation of a diverse group of queer

³ There is some confusion on the character of Toni from *The Wilds*, as there are indications and comments within the show that imply that she is Native American. However, Toni's actress, Erana James, stated that in the original script she was, but it was changed as she is not Native American herself and did not feel comfortable playing someone who is. Due to this and the fact that Toni appears as White, that is how I coded her.

characters leaves out a group of people from being able to see themselves represented on screen.

Class

When it comes to economic standing, this functioned very similarly to race in terms of a relative lack of diversity. Of all 16 characters, only 4 were of lower economic status, with one also moving from a low economic status to high economic status shortly after the start of the show. These included: Toni (*The Wilds*), Sue (*Dickinson*), Simon (*Young Royals*), and Victor (*Love, Victor*). Of these four characters, two were previously noted as also being ethnic minorities, and Sue, the only white character, happens to be the one to change economic status during the show. This is quite interesting to note, as it appears that characters frequently tend to be either a racial minority and of a lower economic status or are white and at least of middle-class status, if not far wealthier. Out of the 16 characters, 10 characters (11 if including Sue who quickly moves from low to high economic status) are white and of a higher economic status. Furthermore, of these characters, 4 of them are quite rich, while no queer character who is an ethnic minority is portrayed as significantly wealthy. There are a few characters throughout the shows who are both racial minorities and wealthy, but those who are prominent characters are heterosexual and those who are also queer are very minor characters. Fatin from *The Wilds* may be an exception, as there are hints suggesting she is bisexual, but it is never confirmed.

These intersectional portrayals can be interpreted in a few different ways. For one, this could be seen as realistic since many ethnic minorities are placed at an economic disadvantage due to a long history of prejudice and discrimination. On the other hand, it could also be seen as damaging because of media's effect on consumers. The portrayal of a wealthy, successful member of a racial minority could be quite beneficial to any member of a racial minority who is

consuming the show. It gives them a role model to look up to, as many of the queer people in these shows are already doing for any queer viewers.

Sexuality & Gender

Briefly, it is also important to take a look at what identities within the queer community specifically are being shown in these shows. The primary focus of this research is to look at lesbian and gay presenting couples, so all 16 main queer characters must be sexually queer in some way. There were no requirements when it came to gender queerness, yet even so, not one character in any of these shows was non-binary and there was only one transgender character.⁴ Furthermore, in the US, approximately 58% of LGBT adults are bisexual (Jones, 2023). However, only 2 of the 8 main queer men are bisexual, and only 2 of the 8 main queer women are bisexual. These numbers further extend the idea of this relative lack of diversity, as well as lack of reflection of reality, within these shows.

Screen Time & Displays of Affection

There are a number of ways in which screen time and displays of affection can be measured. For the purposes of this research, the assumption is that the person viewing the show is aware of the main queer couple, but not any other minor couples. Therefore, for screen time there were three metrics used: Total screen time of the show, total screen time for the couple (platonic and romantic), and the screen time for other instances of queerness. For the raw data for each show, refer to the Appendix.

⁴ From *Atypical*, Casey's actor, Brigitte Lundy-Paine, is non-binary. However, the character is not and is, therefore, considered cisgender.

Table 1: Screen Time & Displays of Affection for Each Show

	CST/ TST	(CST+QST)/ TST	TST/RDA	CST/RDA	TST/PDA	CST/PDA
The Wilds	0.1547	0.2013	54.41	8.42	51.39	7.95
Teenage Bounty Hunters	0.1498	0.1684	51.38	7.70	462.45	69.28
Dickinson	0.1681	0.1833	73.15	12.30	35.11	5.90
Atypical	0.1181	0.1406	51.61	6.10	58.50	6.91
Heartstopper	0.4132	0.7225	18.50	7.64	11.31	4.67
Young Royals	0.2714	0.3778	18.11	4.91	23.04	6.25
Love, Victor	0.1476	0.4213	23.62	3.49	48.72	7.19
TBSATDH	0.2563	0.2669	369.03	94.6	46.13	11.83

Key: CST=Couple Screen Time; TST=Total Screen Time; QST=Queer Screen Time; RDA=Romantic Displays of Affection; PDA=Platonic Displays of Affection. Numbers highlighted in yellow are extreme outliers.

Table 2: Average Screen Time & Displays of Affection for MLM and WLW Shows

	Average CST/TST	Average (CST+QST)/TST	Average TST/RDA	Average CST/RDA	Average TST/PDA	Average CST/PDA
WOMEN	0.1477	0.1734	57.64	8.63	151.86	22.51
w/o Teenage Bounty Hunters					48.33	6.92
MEN	0.2721	0.4471	107.32	27.66	32.30	7.49
w/o TBSATDH			20.08	5.35		

Due to four extreme outliers, there are two averages calculated for anything involving PDA in the WLW shows and two averages calculated for anything involving RDA for the MLM shows. The averages that exclude the outliers are the numbers used in the discussion.

Screen Time

For the WLW shows, on average the couple took up just under 15% of screen time, and after adding any additional queer scenes this number was brought up to just over 17%. In contrast, for the MLM shows, the main couple took up just over 27% of the screen time. After adding any other queer screen time to this, that number was brought up to 47%. These numbers

have a few implications. First, when it comes to screen time for the couples, the men take up significantly more screen time than do the women. Platonic and romantic scenes were not separated, so no conclusions can be made in that regard, but this would still likely skew the numbers even more in favor of the men. This is because many of the men get together more quickly than do the women and for three of the MLM shows, there are indications of a romance from episode 1, which could suggest any of these scenes to be romantic. The second implication is regarding the content and premise of the show in general. Based on these eight shows, it is far more likely for the main plotline of the show to be about queerness when the prominent queer characters are men. Three out of the four shows featuring a main MLM couple had queerness as the focus of the show. In contrast, none of the shows featuring a main WLW couple had queerness as the central storyline.

Displays of Affection

For displays of affection, romantic and platonic displays were evaluated. When it comes to specific numbers, the average number of minutes between platonic or romantic displays was calculated. One calculation consisted of total screen time, and one was based on just couple screen time. When looking at averages across the shows, for WLW shows, romantic displays of affection occur approximately every 57.5 minutes, and in couple scenes occur every 8.5 minutes. As Nathan and Gabriel do not kiss in *TBSATDH* until the second to last episode and only kiss once, the numbers are incredibly skewed when they are included. However, when they are not, the men kiss every 20 minutes in the entire show, and every 5.5 minutes during couple scenes. Furthermore, when it comes to platonic displays, the average for WLW shows is skewed because of just the one display in *Teenage Bounty Hunters*. This makes sense due to the fact that Sterling and April went quickly from enemies to lovers and were only seen alone as an actual couple

because they were not out to anyone else. Therefore, in their alone scenes, they were usually kissing rather than hugging, holding hands, or cuddling. In excluding them, the women showed platonic displays of affection every 48.5 minutes in the show, and every 7 minutes during their couple scenes. In contrast, the men showed these displays every 32.5 minutes in total, and every 7.5 minutes during their couple scenes. This is the only time where the men's average is higher than the women's, yet they are still within one minute of one another.

Similarly to screen time, these numbers reveal that the men are shown enacting displays of affection more than the women are. The only time they are even close is regarding, specifically, their platonic displays during their screen time only. However, the men show these displays far more frequently in the show in general. This vast difference in averages makes a lot of sense when considering a variety of factors, including the fact that many of the men get together sooner than the women, affecting the number of romantic displays, and the way many of the women start off as enemies, affecting the number of platonic displays. Generally speaking, it is clear that queer men are shown doing more displays of affection than are the women, and part of this could also simply be because they are shown so much more.

Intimate Scenes

Two shows featuring prominent queer women (*The Wilds* and *Dickinson*) and two shows with prominent queer men (*Young Royals* and *Love, Victor*) include at least one sex scene between the couple. However, the sex scenes for queer women tended to follow a similar formula, whereas those for the queer men showed a bit more variability. These differences included pace, music, skin shown, and camera angles. Two prominent styles of sex scenes included artistic and realistic sex scenes. For the women, all 4 sex scenes can be considered as

artistic, with them all following the formula for this type of sex scene very closely. For men, sex scenes were a bit more variable, though they did typically fit into a more realistic style.

There were four sex scenes shown between queer women, three in *Dickinson* and one in *The Wilds*. These scenes were all very closely aligned with the typical aspects of an artistic sex scene. All four scenes contained elements of slow motion, with some being completely in slow motion. Three of the four contained romantic songs in the background, and the fourth had Emily's voice in the background reading one of her poems. When it comes to the amount of skin shown, these scenes with queer women tend to show fewer amounts of skin than do the men, and along with this the camera angles tend to be more 'artistic' shots, which often leave the viewers wondering what exactly they're looking at sometimes. These types of camera angles occur in three out of four of these sex scenes.

When it comes to the men, there is one sex scene in *Love, Victor* and one in *Young Royals*, so it is harder to draw inferences about MLM sex scenes. However, for the men, there is appears to be much more variability. Even so, there seem to be tendencies for these scenes to more closely resemble 'realistic sex scenes.' Firstly, there is never an instance where sex scenes between men are shown in slow motion, the entire scenes are shown in real time. Regarding music, there is the most flexibility, as the scene between Victor and Benji consists of fast, upbeat music, while the song for Wilhelm and Simon's sex scene is very soft and slow. Regarding the amount of skin shown, in both of these scenes there is far more skin shown than in the women's scenes, which makes sense as men are typically deemed as being allowed to show more skin in our current society. Lastly, with the men, there are rarely any obscure camera angles, and the vast majority of the time it is clear what the viewer is looking at.

Based on all four of these components of the scene, there are drastically observable differences between the sex scenes of queer men and those of queer women. In a sense, the male scenes feel more raw and “real,” whereas the female scenes are most artistic. One potential explanation for this could be based on societal expectations of the relationship between men and sex compared to women and sex. For men, it is frequently assumed that they specifically care about the physical part of sex. This would make sense considering what was focused on in these scenes, as they seemed to be more passionate and raw in the way they are presented. In contrast, women are seen as being more connected to the emotional component of sex, which explains why their sex scenes tend to be more slow, artistic and, seemingly, romantic.

Relationship Configuration & Development

Closeted or Not?

A common trend in LGBT media is that of the “closeted character,” in which many queer character’s storyline revolves around this aspect of their identity. In these 8 shows, this was a very common trend, which is unsurprising considering the ages of these characters. Frequently in these shows, the dynamic of these main couples consists of one character being out and confident about their sexuality, whereas the other is closeted and/or they are newly discovering their sexuality. This exact dynamic happens in *The Wilds*, *Heartstopper*, and *Love, Victor*. In *The Wilds*, this dynamic consists of Toni, an out and proud lesbian, and Shelby, who knows of her queerness, but is incredibly closeted because of her deeply religious background. In *Heartstopper*, it is Charlie, who is presumably the only out gay kid at his school, and Nick who is just discovering his sexuality when he meets Charlie. Lastly, in *Love, Victor*, we find out Benji is gay almost immediately after meeting him and, shortly after, find out he has a boyfriend. On

the other hand, the entire first season focuses on Victor's journey of discovering his sexuality, and eventually coming out as gay at the very end of the season.

There are also elements of this trope in *Teenage Bounty Hunters* and *Young Royals*. In *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, Sterling discovers her attraction toward women, April in particular, about halfway through the show. On the other hand, April already knew she was a lesbian. This show does subvert this exact trope though, as Sterling ends up being the one to want to come out, whereas April desires to stay in the closet. In *Young Royals*, there is a dynamic between openly gay Simon, and Wilhelm, who presumably discovers his sexuality during the show and is forced to stay in the closet for a large part of the show. However, it is important to note that Wilhelm must stay in the closet for purposes other than his own choice. Beyond this, it is also possible that this would have been a dynamic in *TBSATDH* had it not been canceled, as Gabriel is openly queer, whereas Nathan spends most of the season involved with a woman, so it is a bit unclear what his sexuality is and what is going through his mind. Interestingly, sexuality is not really discussed in this show, which is detailed further in the Heteronormality & Stereotypes section.

Due to this closeted vs not closeted dynamic, there is a very common trend of conflict between the two individuals regarding coming out, and in some cases this actually results in a breakup. In terms of creating conflict, this occurs in *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, *Young Royals*, and *Love, Victor*, with hints of it in *The Wilds*, *Dickinson*, and *Heartstopper* as well. In the cases of *Teenage Bounty Hunters* and *Young Royals*, this conflict results in a breakup. These dynamics and conflicts send a message to the audience that this is a very common relationship configuration to have when you are queer, and that it can potentially be a huge cause of issues in the relationship.

Enemies to Lovers

While the dynamics of these relationships may have had similarities due to the shared queerness, there appeared to be a stark contrast in the way these couples meet. Specifically, for queer women, in three out of four of the shows, the relationship between the two characters is introduced in the context of disdain for one another. This enemies to lovers trope is one that is common in media, regardless of sexuality. In *The Wilds*, *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, and *Atypical*, this trope characterized the relationship between the two main queer women.

In *The Wilds*, Shelby and Toni immediately have dislike for one another, especially from Toni's end. This conflict is primarily because Toni views Shelby as privileged and homophobic. Along with this, Shelby's optimistic, positive attitude irritates Toni, while Toni's short temper and abrasiveness bothers Shelby. This conflict between the two continues and escalates even farther when Shelby reveals her 'homophobic views.' In episode 7, once Shelby kisses Toni, this conflict finally ends and quickly shifts into the lovers aspect of the trope.

In *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, the early interactions between Sterling and April are characterized by faux kindness on the part of April and Sterling's disdain for April. Parts of April and Sterling's relationship are posed as a rivalry rather than real dislike for one another. However, in episode six, after it has been mentioned a few times that Sterling and April used to be good friends, the audience finds out why this friendship ended. April reveals that Sterling "gave her away" when they were younger, and viewers see that much of April's malicious behavior was due to her being hurt. Once Sterling realizes the part she played in this rivalry, she softens toward April and then ends up realizing her attraction toward her. After this, Sterling makes clear efforts to get closer to April, including partnering up with her for a school project. As the two work on the project, April compliments Sterling frequently, and admits that they

make a good team. Finally, when Sterling unexpectedly kisses April and April kisses her back, their relationship quickly shifts from enemies to lovers.

Lastly, in *Atypical*, the enemies portion of Casey and Izzie's relationship does not last for long, only about an episode and a half, but it is significant and mentioned a number of times even after they become friends. After Casey switches to a new school as a very skilled track athlete, Izzie perceives her as a threat and is incredibly rude to her. However, once the coach takes note of the bad blood between the two, she forces them to sit together in detention. This is where they bond, where Izzie shares that she takes care of her siblings because her mom is rarely home, and Casey shares that her brother has autism, meaning she has been overlooked much of her life in favor of his needs. After this, they become quick friends, and though their friendship and relationship are both quite rocky, this is essentially the end of the enemies part of their storyline. While there are brief moments of distaste in both *Young Royals* and *TBSATDH*, these are both one sided and last for less than an episode, so they do not qualify for being considered enemies to lovers.

This frequency of women beginning by disliking one another, which does not happen with the men, provides commentary on queer women, and potentially on women in general. This trend could be a product of the common stereotype that women don't get along, and this appears to transcend sexuality as well. This trope is sending a message to young queer women that this is a common way for them to meet other women and could potentially be dangerous for a group that is a high target for bullying. Fortunately, none of these relationships could really be characterized as bullying, though the homophobic but secretly queer bully is not uncommon in queer media.

Friends to Lovers

In contrast to the WLW shows, the queer men tend to follow a very similar formula as one another. These relationships can essentially all be characterized as friends to lovers. Along with this, for three of the MLM shows, there is an early indication of a romantic attraction from at least one of the men to another. In contrast, in *The Wilds* and *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, this attraction seemingly comes out of nowhere without the characters even being friends first. It is also notable that all four MLM couples met for the first time during the show, including three pairings meeting in the first episode. In contrast, two of the four WLW couples already knew one another when the show first begins. These details highlight the more significant buildup of the relationship between the men than women, and further reveals the amount of focus queer men get than queer women in these shows. In addition, in every show the men are friends first for at least one episode before anything becomes romantic, whereas with two of the female couples, the individuals suddenly jump from enemies to lovers.

Coming Out

Coming out has long been regarded as a critical moment and process in a queer person's life. In many models and research, coming out is positioned as something that is "good" and crucial to a queer person's sexual identity. In these eight shows, coming out scenes were very prominent, with nearly every show containing what could be considered a coming out scene. Along with this, all coming out scenes, and almost all reactions to the revelation of a character being queer, are positive. It is rare that a negative reaction is shown, and when characters are homophobic, they are usually meant to be one-dimensional antagonists who are serving a purpose. There are a few instances of nuance, which will be discussed more in the Religion

section but, for the most part, most characters' opinions on queerness remain quite stable, and predominantly positive.

Coming Out Scenes

When it comes to these 8 shows, coming out scenes are quite common. There were 6 coming out scenes in 4 shows, though there are coming out-like scenes in 7 of the 8 shows. All but one of these scenes consist of overwhelmingly positive reactions, and the one scene that does not, contains a positive, neutral, and negative reaction. Each of these coming scenes will now be briefly discussed.

The first coming out scene is fairly subtle, and this is in *Dickinson* when Emily comes out to her sister, Lavinia. In season 3, episode 7, the pair travels forward in time, though the audience finds out a bit later that it was all in Emily's mind. Still, viewers are inclined to believe that parts of the conversations that take place between Emily and Lavinia do happen in reality. Due to the time period, many characters in the show appear to be somewhat aware of the feelings between Emily and Sue, but it tends to just be brushed off for the most part. Any indications of queerness are rarely discussed in the show, and when they are, the contemporary terms are not used since they did not exist at the time. However, when the word "lesbian" is used to describe Emily, both she and her sister are confused. Once it is clarified, Lavinia is surprised and asks Emily if it's true and, based on Emily's uncomfortable reaction, asks who. Emily quickly changes the subject, but a few minutes later they have a conversation. Once Emily reveals that she loves Sue, Lavinia simply responds by saying "I think I knew that." She doesn't react strongly in any way, but then ends up giving Emily great advice regarding her relationship with Sue. As this all occurred 'in the future,' it is a little unclear what was actually said between the two, but it is clear that they did talk about Sue and Lavinia refers to their conversation as a "really nice talk."

The next show to discuss is *Atypical*, which showed one major coming out scene. Most ‘coming out scenes’ in this show were very casual and will be discussed in the following section. However, the one typical sit-down coming out scene is between Casey and her father, Doug. This scene occurs in the first episode of season 4, so the two have had a lot of development and a somewhat rocky relationship up until this point. The first point that Doug focuses on is that he is the last one in the family to know, to which Casey tells him that she was worried he would see her differently. He responds that he doesn’t and that she is still a “pain in the ass.” Then, after finding out that Casey’s ex-boyfriend, who Doug has been working with recently, also knows, he uses humor to diffuse the tension by joking that the mailman must know too. The scene ends with him putting his hand on her shoulder as a display of comfort as they laugh about the joke.

Moving over to the MLM shows, the main coming out scene in *Heartstopper* is Nick’s coming out to his mom as bisexual. This scene occurs in the last episode of season one, and Nick’s way of telling his mom is by finding several different ways to tell her that Charlie is his boyfriend. Nick’s mom simply sits and listens to him, and the first thing she says once he is done is “oh, baby,” hugs him, and thanks him for telling her. She then tells him she’s “sorry if I ever made you feel like you couldn’t tell me that.” She also makes sure to tell him that he doesn’t have to say he likes girls if he doesn’t, to which he begins to explain bisexuality. He asks if she has heard of it, to which she replies that she does and she laughs a bit, saying she “wasn’t born in the 18th century.” She then asks how long he’s known, and as he tells her she nods in understanding with a big smile on her face. She then simply says “oh, I love you,” and gives him another big hug.

The last three coming out scenes are both in *Love, Victor*. The first occurs in episode 9 of season 1, when Victor comes out to his best friend, Felix. Felix is the first person who Victor

actually comes out to, as anyone who has known in the past has either been Benji, who Victor kissed, or Simon and his friends, who are all queer and already knew before Victor told them. Victor first asks Felix to turn around because it is too much pressure if he's looking at Victor, and Felix is confused but complies. After Victor tells Felix that he "likes guys," Felix first asks if he can turn back around. Once Victor says yes, Felix turns around and looks at him for a few seconds, clearly unsure of what to say. The first thing Felix does is pull Victor into a hug. He then tells Victor that he doesn't "know the perfect thing to say," but tells Victor he's really happy he told him and that it "obviously" doesn't change anything between them. Victor goes on to say that that was pretty close to perfect, and Felix begins to tear up, but tries to hide it by saying that he is just overly aware of his blinking.

The next coming out scene is in the first episode of season 2, where Victor tells his parents and his sister, Pilar, that he is gay. Notably, this is the first time he uses the word gay to describe himself. Pilar almost immediately gets up to hug him and tells him that she loves him, but his parents both sit there in silence as she does this. Noticeably, Victor's mom, Isabel, reaches for the cross around her neck. Isabel stays completely silent as Victor's dad, Armando, who is visibly confused, asks about Mia, Victor's now ex-girlfriend. After Victor explains, Armando asks "when did you decide this," to which Victor tells him that it's not something he decided, but something he is. Victor then asks his mom to say something, and she replies that they should get some rest and talk about it tomorrow, before exiting the room. Armando, who seems mostly confused, approaches Victor and gives him a reassuring few pats on the arm before leaving as well. Pilar apologizes to Victor and asks if he is okay, and Victor says that they probably just need time. Armando and Isabel's reactions will be discussed more in the Religion

section. It is notable that they, especially Isabel, are basically the only people who have a storyline pertaining to transforming from religious and homophobic to accepting.

The last coming out scene in *Love, Victor* is when Victor comes out to the entire school. He had been wanting to do this on the first day for a while, but let his mom scare him out of doing it. However, on the second day, Victor finds the courage to come out to everyone. He does this by pulling a chair into the middle of the hallway, standing on it, and telling the whole school that he is gay, and that he is with Benji.

Overall, there is a trend throughout all of these scenes of acceptance, as well as variability in reactions. Different people react differently, which is realistic to life itself, but for the most part, these reactions remain positive. At times, characters even act shocked at the thought of their not being accepting of their queer family or friend. However, it is important to note that these overwhelmingly positive depictions could be misleading for certain young individuals who may be in an unaccepting situation, as they may be led to believe that their family or friends will react in this same manor and may become disappointed. Still, generally, these positive reaction appear to be a very positive aspect of many of these shows.

Other Reactions

Apart from actual coming out scenes, it is also important to look at reactions from other noteworthy people in the main characters' lives, which primarily consists of close friends and family. Again, there were close to no negative reactions. It was quite rare in these shows to see homophobia from any major characters, and the characters who do display homophobia are meant to be rooted against.

In *The Wilds*, a show that did not contain any coming out scenes, there were still a number of important scenes where a character's sexuality was revealed. Reactions from Becca,

Fatin, and Martha are all much smaller plotlines, but very important to look at. Becca, who is discussed more in the Religion section, is Shelby's best friend, whom Shelby one day kisses. However, once Shelby's parents find out about this, Shelby's fear takes over her and she lashes out at Becca, saying horrible things to her. Even after all of this, Becca, who is religious herself, shows Shelby empathy and tells her "I know you're going through stuff. I see you... and I will never judge you." Fatin's reaction is also important, especially because of how nonchalant she is. In season 1 episode 10, after Shelby and Toni have slept together, but have not defined the terms of their relationship, the audience sees Shelby gazing over at Toni. Then, Fatin approaches her and, following a short conversation, Fatin picks up on the fact that Shelby wants to talk to Toni. She tells Shelby that she should simply go talk to Toni about how she's feeling. Shelby is shocked that Fatin knows anything is going on between them, especially because not long ago they were enemies. Fatin replies to her shocked expression saying "Please. I know sexual tension when I see it. But don't worry," and then mimes zipping her mouth shut. Lastly, after Martha sees Shelby and Toni kissing, who have been together for a few weeks now, she is very surprised. Again, this surprise is likely mostly due to Shelby's previous homophobic comments, and the constant tension between Shelby and Toni. However, once she confronts Toni with it, Toni explains that she was going to tell her soon, and Martha simply tells her that it's okay and smiles and nods after Toni asks if she's cool with it. This elicits smiles from both Toni and Shelby.

Another show that did not have any actual coming out scenes but had one significant reaction was *Teenage Bounty Hunters*. This coming out consists of Sterling telling her sister, Blair, that she is with April. This revelation and then subsequent conversation between the two occur in two different scenes. Blair first finds out when Sterling blurts out that she's "hooking up

with April,” during the middle of an argument. Blair is simply shocked, but they don’t talk about the confession Sterling has just made until the next episode. In this scene, the topic of Sterling and April’s relationship naturally comes up in conversation, as Blair asks about how serious Sterling’s feelings are. Blair, shortly after, has an incredibly supportive reaction, saying that she does not care if Sterling is gay, that she can “bang a Ficus for all I care,” and that she just doesn’t want Sterling keeping any secrets from her.

In *Atypical*, apart from the coming out scene between Casey and her father, other scenes in which people find out about her sexuality are more casual. Casey’s mom, who may have sensed the potential romantic tension between Casey and Izzie before they did, is the one to bring it up. She decides to randomly say to Casey “You know... I was intimate with a woman once.” Casey is, unsurprisingly, very uncomfortable and embarrassed, and after her mom jokes around a bit to embarrass her more, she is more serious and simply tells her that “if you ever wanna talk I’m here.” Casey’s brother, Sam, also is very casual about the whole thing. He finds out after he sees Casey and Izzie kiss, as they think no one else is in the room. After Izzie leaves, Sam asks “So is she your girlfriend now?” After Casey’s initial shock that he’s sitting on the couch, she asks if it would be a problem. To this he responds “what? No, why?” and then proceeds to talk about the gay penguins at the zoo. It is also important to note Evan’s reaction, Casey’s boyfriend who she cheats on by kissing Izzie. When she tells him she has feelings for Izzie, he’s very surprised, but it seems likely that much of his surprise comes from the fact that he thought they were happy together. He appears to simply be upset about Casey’s feelings for someone else and isn’t caught up in the fact that it is a girl. A little later in the show, following their breakup, Casey and Evan talk and he is very supportive of her plans for her track career. It is clear that there are no issues from his end with her being queer.

Lastly, in *Heartstopper*, from the beginning Charlie has a very supportive group of friends who know he is gay already. This group consists of Isaac, the very quiet one, Elle the compassionate one who is also the only transgender character in any of the shows, and Tao who is loyal, but also overprotective. Their reactions to Nick and Charlie's relationship are important to take note of. Isaac, as mentioned before, is very quiet and never even really says anything about it. It is just assumed he knows and is fine with it. Elle finds out in episode 6 and is immediately so excited, especially because Charlie has been crushing on Nick for a while. Tao is the last to find out and is initially very hurt that Charlie didn't tell him sooner and he had to find out through Elle. However, this is due to his protective nature, especially because Nick's "friends" bullied Charlie the year prior, so Tao is weary of Charlie and Nick's friendship. However, once Tao finds out and moves past the hurt, he is very supportive.

There are even more examples of very supportive, positive reactions from family, friends, and even acquaintances throughout these shows that could be discussed. Overall, this trend of positive reactions is the most revealing that queerness is meant to be accepted and rooted for in these shows.

Religion

Religion is commonly one of, if not the most, prominent barriers to queerness. Therefore, it would be expected for shows that are celebrating queerness to vilify religion. There is an established religion vs. LGBT message that is sent in various types of media. There is an overabundance of anti-LGBT messaging coming from religious voices in media, and surprisingly little LGBT affirming voices (*Missing Voices*, 2017). However, in many of these shows, the relationship between queerness and religion is far more nuanced. Even though religion functions, in a lot of cases, as a barrier to openly being queer, there are many examples of characters

reframing their relationship with religion in order to cut this divide. There are three shows in particular in which religion plays a significant role in plotlines of the show: *The Wilds*, *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, and *Love, Victor*.

The Wilds

From the start, Shelby is introduced as being very religious. One of her first lines, as she is introducing herself to Martha, Toni's best friend, is "I do family. I do Jesus. I do pageants." These are three of the first things we learn about her, and these characteristics portray her in a very particular light. As the first episode progresses, Shelby makes frequent references to religion, something that immediately rubs Toni the wrong way. This perception of Shelby as a "good", Christian, straight girl is what initially ignites an antagonistic relationship between herself and Toni.

This conflict between the two lasts for the first five episodes and reaches a climax in episode six. As the group eats mussels, Toni, an out and proud lesbian, begins to make a sexually explicit lesbian joke, and the other girls all laugh and play along. Shelby, on the other hand, finally expresses her views on homosexuality, something that had only been speculated on up until this point. Shelby yells for Toni to stop her actions, and after initially writing her disgust off as being due to these being "pornographic gestures," she reveals that everything she has been taught has made her view that way of life as a sin. She also makes sure to state that she doesn't hate Toni, an example of the common cliché used by religious individuals of 'hate the sin, love the sinner.' One of the most significant aspects of this moment, though, is the reaction of the other girls. In response to Shelby's saying, "Am I not allowed to have my own beliefs?" Dot immediately responds with "Not those ones." A few minutes later, Martha privately tells Shelby that she "can't have a problem with someone over who they are and... over something that they

can't even change." This continues into the next episode, with Fatin referring to Shelby as a bigot and "problematic Jesus freak."

However, things shift majorly once Shelby kisses Toni in episode 7. This causes a major change in Toni's demeanor and feelings toward Shelby, as this suddenly helps Toni realize the internalized homophobia that Shelby is experiencing. Then, the following episode, is when the audience finds out the extent of Shelby's religious upbringing. All we really know of Shelby so far is that she had a boyfriend back home and she comes from a very religious family. Shelby is first shown in a flashback at a religious spinning class that her dad runs, immediately establishing her family's degree of religiosity. One critical aspect of Shelby's backstory is that her father seemingly runs small scale conversion therapy in their house. For someone who the audience quickly finds out is already questioning her sexuality, this must be an incredibly traumatic thing for Shelby to know about.

Later in the episode, the audience finally finds out that Shelby was questioning her sexuality at this point, as she kisses her best friend Becca. Shelby's parents quickly find out that she kissed Becca, her father uses a different strategy than may be usually expected. He doesn't yell or get angry and doesn't even try to send her to conversion therapy. Instead, he uses more subtly manipulative tactics. As Shelby tries to talk to him, he first ignores her. He then goes on to talk about the Bible group he had with Kyle, who Shelby had seen earlier in the episode receiving conversion therapy. He explains to her that Kyle struggles with "that way of life" and that he is in immense amounts of pain. He also tells Shelby that if he "chooses" that life there "won't be a place for him here." Furthermore, he alludes that this same thing would happen to Shelby if she chooses that life, and then specifically tells her that he "doesn't want her to be alone," which is what ends the conversation. We then see Shelby express this same sentiment to

Leah at the end of the episode, back on the island, stating “Isn’t that what we’re all afraid of? That we won’t be loved. That we’ll be all alone.” This shows how deeply this message from her father is ingrained in her.

Interestingly, in season two, with all of Shelby’s religious trauma, we can still see a problem not with religion in general, but with her specific church. We even see Toni soften towards religion, asking Shelby questions about her current relationship with her faith and getting worried when Shelby gives her cross necklace to Rachel. In reference to the Rachel situation, as Rachel is grappling with losing her sister, Nora, we see Shelby attempt to help her. We see her share with someone for the first time the trauma of her losing her best friend to suicide. When Rachel asks how she got through it, Shelby repeats a prayer to her that she used to say to herself over and over. This is something Rachel ends up using to deal with her own grief.

Later, after Shelby gives Rachel her cross to further aid in her religious journey, as Toni worries about Shelby we get insight into what Shelby is thinking. She tells Toni that when she realized she was dead to the word she viewed it as a good thing because “if they knew who I really was, I’d be dead to them anyway.” This illustrates an intense shift in Shelby’s relationship with religion and her family. Even so, it is incredibly important to note that religion itself has a very complicated role in the show. The damage it does to Shelby is prominent, but we also see Shelby still help Rachel because it was something that helped her for so long. Religion itself isn’t framed poorly, but rather certain ways of using religion to hurt others

Teenage Bounty Hunters

From the very start of *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, it is established that both Sterling and April go to a very religious school. There are implications early on that Sterling is not the most devoted Christian, especially because in the first scene she has sex with her boyfriend for the

first time, which is deeply frowned upon in the church. Only a few minutes into the show, the audience sees Sterling and April in fellowship at school, where April is initially portrayed as a rich, very religious, stuck up girl. Religion is a frequent topic throughout the show due to the circumstances, but is especially prominent when it comes to sex and queerness. In the first half of the season, a major storyline is Sterling being exposed, by April, for having premarital sex with her boyfriend, Luke. However, the relationship between queerness and religion doesn't become prominently discussed until episode 7. After Sterling and April pair up for the Biblical buildings class project, they have a discussion about religion, as Sterling wants to broach the topic of queerness with April. Sterling brings up the Naomi and Ruth story from the Bible, and they two bond over their mutual liking of the story and the feminist themes underlying it. Sterling hints at the idea that the two were sexually involved, to which April is surprised, but not necessarily angry. As April tries to defend the Bible and argue that there were no homosexual themes, Sterling continues pushing on. She finally gets to a point where she states "why should the Bible be a rulebook for sex anyway, it's like 2000 years old. It contradicts itself in like a bajillion different places," to which April doesn't say much, and just looks a bit confused. The next scene between the two is when their project is being graded, to which they receive immense praise and the highest grade they could get. After this, they are on much better terms, especially from April's side, as she sees how great of a team they make. As April talks about her dad and how he has lied to her, she laments that people just won't tell the truth, which causes Sterling to kiss her. After initial shock, April pulls away and appears to be leaving, but she locks the door and turns back to kiss Sterling.

The following episode is when religion becomes a major topic of discussion between the two. They decide to meet at the arcade to discuss the kiss and what it means for them. At the

beginning of the conversation, April asks if Sterling told anyone about them. Specifically, she asks if Sterling told anyone that they are gay, to which Sterling is a bit surprised, responding with “we are?” April then goes on to explain that she is gay and how she knows and finishes by saying “I do not believe that God is going to smite me for being a lesbian. He made me...” The two then decide to secretly date one another, primarily on the request of April.

Later in the same episode, Sterling decides that she wants to come out, but April is still unsure. They have a debate, which contains a lot of compelling back and forth, but in regards to religion there are a few points that merit discussion. As Sterling argues that there are people who will love them unconditionally, April counters by saying that this is “With a post condition that we follow their rules for love.” She also refers to her parents as hateful bigots, explaining much of her behavior and previous conviction that she is straight. April also points out that, even though queerness is more accepted than ever, she still here’s the word “fag” constantly throughout the day at school. By the end of the debate, April gives in and agrees to at least lay next to Sterling at the school lock-in a few days later. However, this quickly turns sour as April’s dad is released from prison. This causes her to behave coldly to Sterling and flirt with Sterling’s ex, Luke. Sterling is incredibly hurt, and the two break up because April cannot come out as long as she has her dad in her life.

Once again, religion is not shown as an inherent barrier to living openly as a queer individual. Both Sterling and April are religious but believe that their being queer is okay in God’s eyes. The issue is when religion is used in a particular way to cause harm to LGBT individuals.

Love, Victor

Lastly, religion plays a massive role in *Love, Victor*, as it is established from episode one that Victor is questioning his sexuality but comes from a very religious family. This does not become a prominent topic though, until episode 5 when Victor has his 16th birthday party. His grandparents on his father's side are coming, and we find out quickly that they are quite conservative, as his grandfather makes comments about Victor's little brother playing with "girl toys." When Benji and his boyfriend, Derek, come over for the party, Victor immediately introduces them as bandmates rather than boyfriends. For most of the party, the two try to hide their relationship, specifically because of Benji's care for Victor. However, Victor's grandfather ends up catching the two kissing, and he and Victor's father tell Victor that he needs to tell them to not do that at their apartment, especially because his little brother may see. Victor, instead, stands up to them, saying "I'm not gonna tell them not to be who they are if that bothers you. That's your problem not theirs and not mine." Arguably though, the most important part happens later that night, when Victor and his father, Armando, have a discussion about what happened at the party. Armando applauds Victor for standing up to his grandfather and tells him he agrees. He explains that it isn't his business what those two boys are doing with their lives, but then goes on to say that he hopes the grandfather is wrong and that Victor's younger brother "doesn't turn out that way."

After Victor eventually comes out to his parents at the beginning of season 2, his mother greatly struggles. Both Armando and Isabel are quite religious, yet they have very different reactions and relationships with religion after Victor has come out. Isabel is very uncomfortable with Victor's sexuality, referring to Benji (who Victor is now dating) as his "friend," being incredibly awkward around both Victor and Benji, and even throwing away a perfectly good

meal she has made for dinner after seeing Victor and Benji kiss. The audience sees her frequenting the church as well, seeking guidance on what to do about the situation. On the other hand, we see Armando, who is a bit uncomfortable at first, making an effort. One of the most poignant moments between Armando and Isabel is when Isabel asks Armando if he will ever wrap his head around it, to which he responds “of course. Isa he’s my son and that’s who he is. I have to. We both do.” Even with his strong religious beliefs, Armando is able to overcome them and love his son anyway. Armando then makes a big leap by starting to attend Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) meetings. The audience gets a lot of insight into Armando’s point of view, as a dad who wants to be accepting and supportive but isn’t sure how. Isabel, on the other hand, does not want to go to PFLAG meetings with him, and is clearly not making much of an effort with Victor.

Armando and Isabel are currently separated, which was a big plotline in season 1. However, Isabel makes it clear that she wants to have another shot at their marriage, and Armando agrees to meet and talk. He tells her that what he has really learned through Victor’s coming out is that he is capable of change, and he makes it clear to Isabel that if she is not going to change with him, then their marriage is not going to work. This is huge, as there are still strong feelings between the two, yet Armando prioritizes his son over his relationship because he won’t tolerate Isabel treating their son poorly.

One of the most poignant moments that directly ties to religion and the different ways it can be used, is during one scene which cuts back and forth between Isabel and Armando. Isabel is at church, searching for guidance from their priest on what to do about Victor. He tells her that her disapproval is correct, to which she appears a bit disappointed, as she was hoping the church would be a bit more lenient. In this scenario, Isabel is searching for a way to make her religion

accepting of her gay son. At the same time, we see Armando at a PFLAG meeting, and hear him say “I just thank God for giving me the courage to come here and to love my son for who he is.” For him, he is accepting his son fully, and using his religion to further embrace that. He is making his religion cater to his gay son, rather than the reverse.

Finally, in episode 6 of season 2, Isabel and Victor have a very important, open discussion. Isabel explains that she grew up learning that being gay is shameful and that, even though she doesn't believe that anymore, it is still something ingrained in her. After this conversation, Victor and Isabel finally come to more of an understanding, and the audience can see that progress is being made. Then, just two episodes later, as Isabel and Adrian, Victor's younger brother, are leaving church, Adrian asks her if Victor is going to hell. Isabel is shocked and once Adrian reveals that Father Lawrence, their church's priest, has told him that Isabel tells him that Father Lawrence is wrong. She proceeds to go back into church and berate the priest, before leaving the church for good. As she goes, Father Lawrence urges her to not give up on God, and she tells him that she isn't giving up on God, but rather giving up on him. This is critical as it, again, points out that religion isn't inherently the issue, it's the way that it's used. This moment marks a pivotal turning point, as this is the catalyst for Isabel finally fully accepting her son and prioritizing him over her faith.

The third season, then, goes by very smoothly in the religious department, and portrays a healthy way having both queerness and religion coexist. The family switches to a more accepting church, and Isabel even attempts to set Victor up with a young man his age who attends the same church. Armando and Isabel even decide in the last episode of the show to start their own business, as Armando quits after cussing out his homophobic boss. The two have an incredible and unique arc, going from quite religious and homophobic, to fierce allies and proud parents of

their gay son. Even then, they never give up their religion, and instead change their relationship with their faith and even use it to reaffirm their support for Victor. Instead of making queerness cater to religion, they make religion cater to queerness.

Heteronormativity & Stereotypes

Stereotypes

One issue that has plagued the queer community are the stereotypes that they are associated with, and the way these stereotypes have persisted in media. What these shows frequently did is address many of these stereotypes, but what make them different is that the characters themselves dismissed them in many scenarios. Oftentimes, any time a stereotype was presented, a queer character would dismiss it, acting as though it is a ridiculous assumption to make. It is important to note that it was rare for a stereotype to be dismissed by a straight character, but rather became a responsibility of the queer character. Still, this presentation and dismissal of stereotypes is very important and powerful.

The first stereotype to discuss is regarding appearance, for both queer men and queer women. One stereotypical clothing item for queer women, specifically lesbians, is cargo pants. This is addressed in episode one of *The Wilds* when Fatin and Dot meet on the plane. Fatin tells Dot that she has some questions about her cargo pants, to which Dot replies “Yeah, well I’m not a lesbian. Sorry to disappoint.” The conversation moves on after that, but this is brought back up later in episode 8. Dot and Fatin talk about living together once they get off the island, and Fatin says “People are gonna assume we’re lovers, because, let’s face it, those cargo shorts still scream ‘gay.’ This is clearly just a joke, but Toni notices Shelby’s discomfort by saying “It’s not our uniform, you know. We’ve all got our own different swag.” Fatin continues just joking about it, clearly not meaning any harm by it, but it is significant that a queer character spoke up about it.

This idea of queer people looking a certain way also persists in *Love, Victor*. After he comes up, Victor talks about how many people are not afraid to tell him what they think. Within this, includes advice on things like skincare routines, something that is assumed Victor would know about because he is gay. However, what's important is that Victor points out that he doesn't know any of this, and addresses the stereotypes himself as well, stating that "There's a lot of pressure on gay guys to be stylish." These are all very minor things, but the inclusion and dismissal of these stereotypes may still be regarded as an important aspect of queer media.

Another prominent trend in previous queer content is the villainization of queer people. Interestingly, this is a minor trend throughout some of these shows that merits some discussion. There were several instances where certain queer characters had moments of being painted in a negative light, such as Shelby and April. However, when it comes to villainization, this is a more significant plotline of a character being antagonistic. There are two examples that were striking, and even though these were both minor characters, it still is important to touch upon. First, there is Ben in *Heartstopper*, who from the beginning is an antagonist toward Charlie. He wants to keep their relationship a secret, which is a common theme throughout, but what makes him a dislikeable character is his lack of communication and his complete disregard for Charlie's feelings. He completely ignores Charlie in any type of situation, has a girlfriend without ever talking to Charlie about it, and worst of all he kisses Charlie against his will. The second character who is villainized, though in a more nuanced situation, is Ivan in *The Wilds*. Ivan is a Black, queer man, and the audience finds out that he and Kirin, a straight, White man have a history, as they went to the same high school together. It is revealed that during high school, Ivan exposed the lacrosse for doing blackface a number of years before. Later in the episode, Ivan finds Kirin in the locker room sobbing, as Ivan, his boyfriend, and the audience all find out that

Kirin has a poor home life and this coach took care of him. However, Ivan decides to push Kirin farther, antagonizing him to call him a “fag” and, essentially, be the homophobe that Ivan assumes him to be. Eventually, Kirin does break, yelling a ton of horrible things at Ivan, which Ivan films and posts online, getting Kirin suspended from school. Eventually, Ivan apologizes, though it is important to note that Kirin never does.

Whether it be individuals who are meant to be antagonists, like Ben, or individuals we are meant to root for, like Ivan (to an extent), Shelby, and April, it is interesting to consider the impact of these portrayals. Firstly, it is worthy of discussion whether this should be considered a bad thing or not. This could be argued either way, and is up to the audience to decide. Of course, negative representations of queer individuals, along with any marginalized group, can be considered to be a bad thing, as you are taking a group that is already looked down upon by some, and further villainizing them. However, it could be argued that these types of portrayals of queer characters doing morally wrong things is beneficial, as it establishes them as more human, rather than a one-dimensional character. It is in human nature to make mistakes and act badly sometimes. However, something that is worthy to note, is that in many of these scenarios the queer person is acting poorly in relation to a queer situation. Shelby lashes out at Becca because she is scared of being a lesbian; Ivan baits Kirin into yelling awful things at him about being gay; Ben treats Charlie horribly because he is scared of people knowing her is gay, and so on. This is not typical of straight characters, as their flaws and poor decisions are not tied to their sexual orientation, as so frequently occurs with queer characters.

The last stereotype that is interesting to consider and was, at least partially, pushed back against in these shows is the idea that bisexual women are actually straight, and bisexual men are actually gay (Morgenroth, 2022). This is a popular stereotype and due to an extreme lack of

bisexual representation, it is unsurprising that this idea tends to pop up. While it was already addressed that there is a relative lack of bisexual representation in these shows, they did tend to push back on this stereotype in some ways, especially when it came to bisexual women. As mentioned, there is an idea that bisexual women are straight, and historically when it comes to media, this is unsurprising. Women who were romantically and/or sexually involved with another woman on screen in early films tended to not be taken very seriously, and it was assumed that she would just end up with a man if the right one came along (Epstein & Freidman, 1995). However, within these shows, the opposite tended to occur frequently. In both *Teenage Bounty Hunters* and *Atypical*, Sterling and Casey, respectively, have both been coded as bisexual. The two both start off the series with a man, or at least get into a relationship with one quite quickly. These relationships are quite long term in scope, especially for teenagers. However, in the case of *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, Sterling and April end up being viewed as the ‘real love,’ whereas Sterling’s relationship with Luke is chalked up to being primarily due to circumstance according to Sterling herself. The only downside to this is that following Sterling and April’s breakup in the last episode, Sterling tells Luke that things were so much easier with him and then proceeds to kiss him. It is apparent that this is someone who is brokenhearted going back to someone who is familiar and safe. However, because of the circumstances, this idea of heterosexuality being easy, whereas homosexuality is not and causes pain is a message that could be taken from this interaction. In the case of *Atypical*, Casey breaks up with her long term boyfriend, Evan, because she has fallen in love with Izzie. She chooses a woman over a man, which is not something that tends to be assumed of bisexual women.

It is also quite interesting to look at *Dickinson*, even though for the purposes of this research they have both been classified as lesbians (see Codebook for why). However, both

women are romantically involved with men throughout the series, and because of the time period and the fact that these two women were real people, it is impossible to know for sure how they would have labeled their own sexualities. Nonetheless, the fact that these two women did have romantic relationships with men, yet still chose one another and were portrayed as the ultimate love for each other is powerful and important to take note of.

Lastly, it is also important to look at the two bisexual men: Nick from *Heartstopper* and Nathan from *TBSATDH*. Regarding Nick, his entire storyline revolves around his relationship with Charlie. He also never really seems to show interest in women, so he easily could have been gay. However, he's not and even labels himself as bisexual, which pushes back against the stereotype of bisexual men being actually gay. When it comes to Nathan, he never labels his sexuality, but he is with a woman nearly the entire season. However, once he kisses Gabriel, it becomes apparent that he is not straight, yet his feelings for Annalise are evident, making it very unlikely that he would turn out to actually be gay.

Overall, stereotypes are present in many of these shows, but the majority of the time they are used to make a point that these stereotypes sometimes are and sometimes are not true.

Heteronormativity

While throughout all of these shows there was a general acceptance and celebration of queerness, with homophobic individuals being made to be rooted against by the audience, there was still a strong underlying theme of heteronormativity throughout many of these shows. This is unsurprising considering the relationship between societal norms and what is shown on television. This is a reflection of the society we live in currently, but it is important to note that these shows have creative expression and can go against norms if they so choose.

One of the most overt indicators of these heteronormative themes is the sheer quantity of coming out scenes in these shows. This idea of coming out is in and of itself a reflection of a heteronormative society. The sheer need to come out implies that being queer is different than what is expected, and that is why coming out is a necessity. While these coming out scenes can be quite beneficial, as they provide a model for individuals who may desire to do the same, and positive reactions from characters in the show can have positive impacts on the consumers. However, they are still reinforcing this idea that coming out is a necessity, while shows where characters just are queer without ever really talking about it can be a push toward this being more acceptable in our society.

There are numerous instances of heteronormativity throughout these shows, but a couple stand out examples will be discussed. First, in *Teenage Bounty Hunters*, the scene where Sterling blurts out to Blair that she is hooking up with April is quite compelling. Sterling is prompted to say this because Blair calls her boring and predictable, so Sterling's response is to bring up April, finishing with "how's that for boring." This reflects a heteronormative idea, as Sterling emphasizes the fact that April is a girl. It is meant to be a shock because of the fact that she is hooking up with a girl, something that Blair would not have guessed as she likely would have assumed Sterling to be straight. This use of hooking up with a girl for shock value is quite compelling to consider. On the one hand, this could be taken as a positive portrayal, as it paints homosexuality as fun and exciting (i.e. not boring). However, this could also be taken in negative way, as homosexuality is being used purely as a shock value and painting it as something that is not boring or mundane paints it as something that is "different" or an 'other' when juxtaposed with heterosexuality.

Then, when it comes to *Love, Victor*, there are a number of instances in which heteronormativity can be seen, but there are two moments that will be discussed. The first happens in the very first episode. It is quickly established that Victor's new high school is very accepting of the LGBT community. However, on the first day, Victor is immediately asked by Lake, someone he hasn't even met at this point if he "has a girl back home." Even in a supposedly very accepting environment, straightness is still inherently assumed. Then, later in season 3, Lake is actually now dating another woman. When she and Felix, who have previously dated, first run into one another, he tells her that he is dating someone new. She then responds by saying that she is too, and he proceeds to ask who the luck guy is. Felix is probably the most compassionate, caring, accepting character in the show, and even he still assumes heterosexuality in this moment due to the knowledge of an attraction to the opposite sex.

Lastly, it is compelling to note that two of the shows in which heteronormativity appeared to persist the least were *TBSATDH* and *The Wilds*, specifically when the girls were trapped on the island. In regard to *TBSATDH*, labels and queer topics are literally never discussed. Instead, people just exist, date, and kiss whomever they please. This makes sense, as this is a fantasy show, so it is not as bound by the reality of what society really looks like and how it functions. Then, with *The Wilds*, specifically on the island, there is a sense that people can be whoever they are and no one questions it. Shelby never comes out to the girls, at least not on screen, and the few confused reactions toward Shelby and Toni as a couple are based on their antagonistic relationship, not the fact that they are two women. Again, this makes sense, as the girls are on an island. They are removed from society, so the rules that govern it have faded.

Whereas most of the shows exhibit an acceptance of queerness, but still an underlying sense of heteronormativity, these two provides models of taking steps toward a less heteronormative society.

Limitations & Future Research

Due to the specificity of this topic and question, this research should be taken for what it is and not attempted to generalize to a greater audience. These patterns may, and likely do, persist throughout many types of media in our society currently, but assumptions are greatly limited. For starters, most of these shows are produced in English, with *Young Royals* being the only one in a different language. Five out of the eight shows also take place in America, with just *Young Royals* taking place in Sweden and *Heartstopper* and *The Bastard Son and The Devil Himself* both taking place in the UK (along with France in the case of the latter). Therefore, for the most part, these patterns are going to likely be most consistent with American television.

It is also quite important to note again that this research focused specifically on shows involving teenagers. One of the biggest ways in which these findings may not apply to other types of stories is the section on coming out. Any show that focuses on adults is unlikely to have as many of these storylines, as many of these individuals will have already come out and be established as queer within their lives, as was the case for a few individuals in these shows. Another critical thing to note is that, while this research focused on queerness, it focused on a very specific type of queerness. This was specifically, cisgender individuals who appeared to be either bisexual or gay/lesbian. The primary focus of the research did not include any types of gender queerness, such as transgender and non-binary individuals, along with other things that could be labeled under the queer term such as asexuality or polyamorous relationships. Lastly, there is much more that I would have done with these shows if timing had allowed it. One aspect that sticks out is that I would have loved to make screen time and display of affection comparisons within shows rather than just between shows, especially when it comes to comparing heterosexual couples and queer couples from the same show.

These limitations that have been pointed out are all directions in which future researchers could head to elaborate on these findings. A similar study, but with different television shows or other types of media such as films or even the news could be very useful in building off of this research to get a clear picture of queerness in media in general. Along with this, looking into shows that exhibit different types of queerness, as mentioned before, could be very revealing, especially because these groups tend to be quite invisible within media. This would include the groups mentioned before (transgender, non-binary, etc), as well as the individuals who did not appear frequently in these shows, which is primarily those who are queer and part of a racial minority.

Contributions

Even though this research focused on a very specific type of media and group, it is still quite impactful when examining the big trends and themes. This is especially true when comparing these results to previous findings on queerness in media. Tropes, such as the gay best friend and the overly sexualized lesbian, are frequently cited as being very prevalent in media, even in recent years. However, these stereotypes were practically non-existent within the shows in this research. It is possible that at least the latter is missing due to the age of the characters, but sex scenes were still frequent in these shows, yet in a way that did not feel overly sexualized. This research also provided great insight into the big racial, class and gender inequalities that characterize many queer focused shows. Lastly, overall, this research reveals the more nuanced and accepting portrayals of these queer characters.

Appendix

1. Codebook

Code/Subcode	Definition	Example	Frequency
Race of Character: White vs BIPOC	Race is defined by the character's race. If specific information about the character's race is not available, then it is based on the actor. Fortunately, when it comes to broad categories of race, all of the characters and actors match.	Izzie in <i>Atypical</i> is never specified to be a specific race, but the actress, Fivel Stewart, is of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Scottish, and Native American descent. Therefore, she is classified as Asian & Native American.	n(White)=12 n(BIPOC)=4 n(Asian & Native American)=1 n(Latino)=2 n(Black)=1
Economic Class of Character: High SES, Low SES & Non-Specified	Characters are classified as being of high or low SES whenever it is explicitly discussed or commented on in the show. Any time economic status is not discussed, the character is considered non-specified, though most of these occurrences would typically mean the character is in a middle-class family. These considerations are based on family wealth, rather than the character themselves as these are all teenagers. If a character changes class standing, then they are considered as however they spend the majority of the show.	Sue from <i>Dickinson</i> begins the series as, essentially, completely broke. However, once she gets engaged to Austin, she is in a situation where she has access to a lot of wealth. Therefore, I classify her as high SES, but make note in my discussion of this shift.	n(high)=7 n(low)=3 n(non-specified)=6
Sexuality of Male Character: Gay or Bisexual	These are first based on what the character labels themselves as. If they don't, then a guess is based off of clues, especially who the character dates.	Gabriel from <i>The Bastard Son and the Devil Himself</i> may be bisexual based on research on the show, but since it was	n(gay)=6 n(bisexual)=2

		cancelled we don't really know. In what we see, he only has a relationship with a man, so he is considered gay.	
Sexuality of Female Character: Lesbian or Bisexual	Same as above	Sue and Emily from <i>Dickinson</i> both date men, but it is very possible this was because of the time period they lived in. One or both of them could have been considered lesbians nowadays. In season 3, Emily states "I have never, in my life, been in love with a man." Sue, on the other hand, tells Emily in the last episode of season 2 that "the only true thing I will ever feel is my love for you." Therefore, I am classifying them both as lesbians.	n(lesbian)=6 n(bisexual)=2
Couple Screen Time	Any time in which the couple is on screen together or they are clearly involved in the scene, even if not always on screen, is counted. This includes both platonic and romantic scenes. Texting, calls, and even letters between the two are counted.	In the first episode of <i>Dickinson</i> , from around the 20–24-minute mark, the Dickinson family and Sue have dinner together. Emily and Sue are rarely shown in the scene, but this time still counted as they were both part of the scene and the audience was aware of this.	See Appendix for totals for each show.
Other Queer Screen Time	Outside of the couple scenes, this consists of any scene that features queer content. This can include one member of the couple talking about the other or about their sexuality, other	The first two minutes of episode 4 of <i>TBSATDH</i> show a flashback of Gabriel and his ex-boyfriend. These are not the main queer relationship in the show, but it is an inherently	Same as above

	characters talking about the couple or a character in regards to sexuality, and scenes between minor queer couples.	queer scene so is counted here.	
Romantic Display of Affection	This consists of any kiss shared between the main couple. Flashbacks do not count, they must be new. Kisses from sex scenes count, but the sex scenes themselves do not get a number value. If the couple repeatedly kisses without any type of interruption or pause, it counts as one kiss. Kisses anywhere but the forehead and cheek are counted, as these could be considered platonic displays. Any other type of kiss is inherently romantic.	Simon and Wilhelm's kiss scene around the 41 minute mark of season 2, episode 4 of <i>Young Royals</i> was counted as 5 separate kisses due to the small breaks between each kiss.	Same as above
Platonic Display of Affection	This consists of any actions that could be considered platonic regardless of context, including hugs, cuddling, and hand holds. The same rule for kisses applies here as well.	Around 24 minutes into episode 8 in <i>Teenage Bounty Hunters</i> , Sterling and April discretely link pinkies during a meeting. It is clear that they really want to hold hands but are closeted and can't. This was the only platonic display of affection between the two.	Same as above
Realistic Sex Scene	Characterized by upbeat music, with not a lot of changes in angle and everything in regular speed.	Victor and Benji's sex scene at the beginning of season 2, episode 8 of <i>Love, Victor</i> .	
Artistic Sex Scene	Characterized by slow music, with a lot of different angles shown,	Shelby and Toni's sex scene in season 2, episode 3 of <i>The Wilds</i>	

	and frequently parts are played in slow motion.	around the 37-minute mark.	
Enemies to Lovers Trope	Indicated by the two characters beginning by not liking one another and then ending up in a relationship. The enemies portion must take place for at least one episode. Usually this would be longer, but since these are streaming service shows, seasons tend to be quite short.	Shelby and Toni in <i>The Wilds</i>	N/A
Friends to Lovers Trope	Same as above, but instead the two characters begin as friends before entering into a relationship. Even if a crush is present, the characters only cross over to lovers territory once they have kissed or at least one has expressed feelings to the other.	Nick and Charlie in <i>Heartstopper</i>	N/A
Positive Religious Portrayal	Religion is not used to shame queerness, but is either accepting or used to embrace queerness.	Armando's discussion with Shelby in season 2, episode 5 of <i>Love, Victor</i> at a PFLAG meeting, saying "I just thank God for the courage to come here, and... to love my son for who he is."	N/A
Negative Religious Portrayal	Religion is used to portray queerness as bad, and a sin.	Practically everything Shelby's father says in season 1, episode 8 of <i>The Wilds</i> .	N/A
Coming Out Scene	A scene in which a queer character goes into a conversation with at least one other character with the intention of telling the other character(s) about their queerness.	Nick's coming out scene to his mother in the last episode of <i>Heartstopper</i> .	N/A

	This intention must be followed through.		
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2. Raw Data for Screen Time & Displays of Affection

	Kisses	Sex Scenes	Hugs	Hand Holds	Cuddle	Total Series Time (Minutes)	Couple Screen Time (Minutes)	Other Queer Screen Time (Minutes)
The Wilds	17	1	2	7	9	925	143:06	43:05
Teenage Bounty Hunters	9	0	0	1	0	462:27	69:17	8:36
Dickinson	12	3	0	22	3	877:49	147:34	13:21
Atypical	17	0	6	7	2	877:27	103:40	19:41
Heartstopper	11	0	6	11	1	203:31	84:05	62:58
Young Royals	28	1	8	9	5	506:57	137:36	53:55
Love, Victor	33	1	2	10	4	779:34	115:04	213:22
TBSATDH	1	0	4	3	1	369:02	94:36	3:53

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