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The Importance of Representation of Queer Characters in Children's Media

Media is a major power center. It holds the power to control how we as humans interact with the world around us (and what to expect from it entirely). But what are the consequences associated with misrepresentation in today's media? What are the consequences associated with misrepresenting huge minority groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community? What are the consequences of children being denied access to seeing these major groups of people in their media?

Children, unlike adults, are young and impressionable. Kids are still forming relations with how they wish to interact with this world and are still processing behaviors to reflect, both for themselves and in others. This is what makes diversity in children's media all the more important. A child needs access to a wide range of people in order to get an accurate representation of what the world is really like around them, versus how people wish for it to be portrayed. This is why such shows as *Steven Universe*, *Adventure Time*, and *She-ra* are gaining large popularity within the past decade. These shows pride themselves on representing a large variety of people in their shows, and ensure to do so respectfully and as accurately as possible. This paper will strive at answering the question: how has the incorporation of LGBTQ+ characters in children's media, (such as Princess Bubblegum and Marceline from *Adventure Time*), altered the representation of the LGBTQ+ community to a mass audience?

Now what exactly is the importance of accurate queer representation in media? The LGBTQ+ community currently makes up roughly 4-6% of the American population, according to a study conducted by Gallup in 2021. This means that this is a rather large group of people to be acceptably misportrayed in the media, but this does not stop it from happening. It is good to treat everyone with respect, but when major media corporations are focused on misrepresenting these groups for profit, it can cause great damage to the community. Societal expectations of queer people turn into these harmful stereotypes that usually only apply to a very small portion of the population being represented, and this results in media representation becoming a weapon against those it is trying to represent.

Queer characters have been seen in media for many years, dating all the way to the early 1990s and earlier. Originally, most of this representation portrayed queer characters negatively and very stereotypical, such as in the popular show *How I Met Your Mother*, which aired on CBS in the early 2000s. The show became notorious for its harmful representations of bisexual and trans people, reliance on outdated queer stereotypes, and homophobic jokes. This may be due to various reasons, but it is likely that the large target audience of CBS meant there was less the company could get away with in terms of accurate representation. It hasn't been until more recent years with a push towards LGBTQ+ rights and equality that demand for accurate and healthy representation has been used. Comparing the show, *How I Met Your Mother*, to more recent shows featuring queer representation shows great differences. A groundbreaking show that is known for its intricate storytelling, powerful performances, and stunning cinematography and production design is none other than *The Haunting of Bly Manor*. The show was presented on Netflix in October of 2020, allowing for a more niche audience and less focus on traditional commercial distribution methods (which was used for *How I Met Your Mother*). When compared

to *How I Met Your Mother*, which often relied on harmful stereotypes and humor at the expense of LGBTQ+ characters and their identities, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* offers a significant improvement in terms of positive and inclusive queer representation. The lesbian couple in the show is portrayed as complex and fully realized individuals with their own unique stories and experiences, and their sexuality is treated as a natural and normal part of their identities. Overall, the show offers a respectful and authentic portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters that is a refreshing departure from the problematic representation often found in mainstream media.

What are the positive impacts of representation? When done respectfully, queer representation has the power to do a great deal of change. Access to authentic representation allows for an audience who may not be familiar with the LGBTQ+ community to gain some increased visibility and understanding. By seeing people being represented as people, they are more likely to see them and respect them as such. When minorities get represented in a negative light, it is only natural that the audience reflect these ideals, as most people inherently believe major stereotypes. This is what makes representation a weapon. People who control the media control how people get represented, which therefore changes their image in the eyes of the public. This has the potential to negatively affect the self-esteem and mental health of people.

Now why is it important for children to be exposed to authentic queer representation in their cartoons? The answer is quite simple: to show how people they will likely meet in their day-to-day lives are normal people, and that it is okay to be different. Stereotypes associated with LGBTQ+ media representation include, but are not limited to: the “gay best friend,” the “predatory lesbian,” and the “tragic queer.” Most of these representations are notoriously harmful, as they are all seeing queer characters as almost inhuman. Take for example the notorious usage of the “gay best friend,” or in other words, the sassy human accessory who loves

fashion and everything girly. The entire premise revolves around this stereotype of them being nothing more than their set of stereotypical traits; they are usually used as a comic relief or simply just a walking accessory that gives great fashion advice. But queer characters, like all other characters, are still human. They are complex and have their own story, characteristics, and set of interests. Not every single gay man will reflect these ideals, and in some cases this is used against them – for not being their stereotype.

What does this mean for queer youth? When they see their community being represented in a light they do not resonate with. The answer is quite simple: a sense of no belonging. It is good to represent queer characters, because it is good for children to have a character that they can relate to, even if they are only at a young age. Which makes one wonder...what defines “age-appropriate” media?

Age-appropriate media refers to entertainment content that is deemed suitable and safe for a particular age group based on its content and themes. The age appropriateness of media can vary depending on factors such as the level of violence, sexual content, language, and other mature themes presented in the content. Is representing marginalized children too inappropriate? To many, this is a question that would cause an uproar. Queer children, much like any other child, deserve to see themselves represented in the media they spend their time interacting with. The purpose of censorship in children’s media is to protect young people from content that may be seen as harmful for their age, and although there are countless of individuals who can argue about the dangers associated with representation of queer characters in kid’s television, it is the ultimate decision of the child and parent to deem what is appropriate. But if a child wishes to see a character that represents who they are, that should not be something that is considered a danger to themselves or to those around them.

This need to see characters that reflect real people is what has made the shows *Steven Universe*, *Adventure Time*, and *She-ra* so popular. But why?

Steven Universe is an animated TV series that follows the adventures of a young boy named Steven, who lives “in the fictional town of Beach City, Delmarva, where the Crystal Gems live in an ancient beachside temple and protect humanity from monsters and other threats,” (“*Steven Universe*”). Steven, who is half-Gem himself, is raised by three Gems named Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, who teach him about their powers and help him protect the world from evil forces that seek to destroy it. Along the way, Steven learns about friendship, love, and the importance of being true to oneself. The show is notorious for its diverse and inclusive cast of characters, as well as its positive and uplifting messages about acceptance, self-discovery, and the power of love.

Unlike many children’s TV shows, *Steven Universe* has made itself so big through the representation of gender and identity. When asked about “trans representation in the show,” the show’s creator, Rebecca Sugar “focused on the safe space that fantasy provides, calling it ‘the best use of fantasy’ to represent and tackle difficult issues” (Dunn 56). Children’s TV shows that feature queer characters are usually only gay or lesbian, and even these characters’ identities are often left unconfirmed. What makes *Steven Universe* is its “interaction with trans representation [that] relies on separating gender identity from sexual orientation, physical sex characteristics, and gender presentation in the mind of its viewers” (Dunn 45). This is something that has yet to be done before, especially in the scene of children’s television. The show’s creators have been praised for their commitment to inclusivity and for creating a safe space for children to learn and explore their own identities; “In 2018, *Steven Universe* aired one of the first cartoon same-sex wedding scenes (‘Reunited’), and in 2019, it became the first animated show to win a Gay and

Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) award, taking home the prize for Outstanding Kids and Family Programming” (Moore 1).

Steven Universe is a show that has provided great representation and a safe space for children to explore their identities. It is much more than an entertaining show, as its lessons for viewers are beyond valuable. One of the show’s most significant features being the emphasis it places on themes of empathy, acceptance, and inclusivity. The show promotes diversity and representation, challenging societal norms and breaking down social heteronormative barriers. It also provides a platform to educate children about complex topics like mental health, trauma, and relationships. Additionally, the show's animation style and music are praised for their creativity, making it an enjoyable viewing experience for all ages. Overall, *Steven Universe* offers a valuable source of entertainment and education for its viewers, making it a show worth watching and worthy of its popularity.

She-Ra is another popular animated show that has received great praise for its representation and inclusivity. Like *Steven Universe*, *She-Ra* features strong female characters, diverse relationships, and themes of acceptance and empathy. It also has a diverse cast of characters, including those who are LGBTQ+ and those who have disabilities, promoting the idea that everyone deserves to be represented and accepted. The show's positive message has resonated with viewers of all ages, and it has become a valuable resource for teaching children about inclusivity, empathy, and diversity. The show has garnered mass popularity within the past few years due to their approach to queer representation in children’s media. According to Stephanie Ramos, “*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* takes queer representation to the next level by creating a truly queernormative world, placing queerness at the front and center of the narrative, a decision that has forever changed the way in which queer representation is handled in

children's television" (31). This absolutely changes how children's media is approached and goes against the narrative that queer representation in children's television is something that could cause danger to young viewers.

The show is centered around the main character, Adora, a young orphan who was raised by the evil Horde army on the planet Etheria. Adora discovers a magical sword that transforms her into the powerful warrior, She-Ra, and she becomes determined to fight against the Horde and protect her planet. Along the way, Adora joins forces with a group of rebels, including her best friend (and now canon partner) Catra, and together they battle the Horde and work to save Etheria from destruction. As the story unfolds, Adora must confront her past and the truth about her identity while navigating complex relationships and fighting for the greater good.

She-Ra has been praised for its positive and inclusive representation of LGBTQ+ characters and relationships. The show features several LGBTQ+ characters, including Adora's best friend Catra, who is widely considered to be a queer character. Throughout the series, Catra's complex relationship with Adora is explored, and their feelings for each other are heavily implied. Other LGBTQ+ characters include Spinnerella and Netossa, a married couple who are both members of the rebellion. The show's inclusion of queer characters and relationships has been celebrated for providing much-needed representation and helping to normalize LGBTQ+ identities in children's media. Additionally, the show's themes of acceptance and inclusivity further reinforce the importance of embracing diversity in all its forms. Overall, *She-Ra* has had a significant impact on the animation industry and has helped pave the way for more diverse and inclusive storytelling.

Adventure Time is yet another popular animated show that has been praised for its positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters and themes. The animated series follows the

adventures of Finn the Human and his best friend Jake the Dog; together they explore the Land of Ooo and battle evil villains. On their adventure, they encounter a colorful cast of characters, including the Candy Kingdom's ruler, Princess Bubblegum, and Marceline the vampire queen. The show's whimsical and unique style is complemented by the exploration of greater themes, such as friendship, love, and loss. These characteristics make it a beloved show for viewers of all ages. Throughout the series, Finn and Jake grow and develop as characters, facing challenges and learning important life lessons along the way.

The show features several LGBTQ+ characters, including Princess Bubblegum and Marceline, whose relationship is heavily implied throughout the series, and later confirmed – making it one of the first confirmed lesbian couples in children's television. The show also explores themes of gender identity and expression, with characters like BMO and Cinnamon Bun challenging traditional gender roles. However, the representation in *Adventure Time* is not as obvious as it is in *She-Ra* or *Steven Universe*, and some viewers have criticized the show for not being more explicit in its depiction of LGBTQ+ characters and relationships. Regardless, *Adventure Time* has had a significant impact on the animation industry and has helped to pave the way for more diverse and inclusive storytelling in children's media. Overall, all three shows have contributed to the positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters and themes in animation, helping to normalize and celebrate diversity in all its forms.

Each of these three shows, *Steven Universe*, *She-Ra*, and *Adventure Time*, have gained popularity for their positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters and themes, their focus on diverse and complex relationships, and their exploration of complex issues such as mental health and trauma. However, there are some differences between the shows in terms of their approach to these themes.

Steven Universe is notable for its explicit and intentional exploration of gender identity and expression, separating gender identity from sexual orientation and physical characteristics. *She-Ra* similarly features explicit representation of queer characters and relationships, but also explores themes of disability and chronic illness. *Adventure Time*, on the other hand, is more subtle in its depiction of LGBTQ+ themes and characters, but still has a significant impact on the animation industry for its positive representation of gender and identity expression.

In terms of storytelling, all three shows feature engaging and imaginative plots with vibrant, likable characters. However, *Adventure Time* tends to be more surreal and absurd, while *Steven Universe* and *She-Ra* focus more on character development and interpersonal relationships. Overall, while each show has its unique approach to storytelling and representation, they all share a commitment to inclusivity, empathy, and acceptance, and have had a significant impact on the animation industry in terms of promoting diversity and representation.

Compared to many other popular kids' shows that do not feature queer representation, *Steven Universe*, *She-Ra*, and *Adventure Time* provide a refreshing change in terms of their commitment to inclusivity and diversity. Many children's shows rely on heteronormative depictions of relationships, with male and female characters typically portrayed in traditional gender roles and assumptions about sexual orientation left unchallenged. This can limit representation and reinforce harmful stereotypes.

In contrast, *Steven Universe*, *She-Ra*, and *Adventure Time* offer a variety of positive and nuanced depictions of gender and identity, exploring the complexities of relationships and the diverse experiences of characters. This can help to normalize diversity and acceptance of all identities, and to challenge negative stereotypes and prejudice. While there is certainly room for

more shows to prioritize inclusive storytelling, *Steven Universe*, *She-Ra*, and *Adventure Time* have set a high bar for representation in children's media, highlighting the importance of diverse and inclusive storytelling in promoting empathy, understanding, and acceptance.

The incorporation of queer characters in children's media has significantly altered the representation of the LGBTQ+ community to a mass audience. Princess Bubblegum and Marceline from *Adventure Time* are prime examples of how positive, nuanced portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters can not only educate children about the existence of different sexual orientations and gender identities but also promote acceptance and inclusivity. By normalizing LGBTQ+ identities in children's media, media producers are creating a more diverse and representative media landscape that reflects the reality of the world we live in. There is great importance associated with accepting one's own identity, especially at such a young age – and that is what makes these shows so special. Their sincere attention to acceptance and inclusivity has honed great acceptance from the masses, especially in more recent years. More work still needs to be done to ensure that this level queer representation in children's media is not just a “trend,” but a permanent fixture to the industry.

It is essential that we ensure to include the voices and perspectives of all members of the LGBTQ+ community, regardless of the target audience.

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