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The Gay Agenda: Being Accepted in Children's Media

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the
Department of Writing and Linguistics

By. Tiffany Wells

Under the mentorship of Dr. Lisa Costello

ABSTRACT

For many LGBTQ+ children, there is a lack of representation of their identities in the television shows they see growing up. We turn to objects, like television characters, to help “find our way,” which becomes limited for individuals who are part of the minority (Ahmed 1). When television shows reflect a variety of lived experiences, they can increase cultural competence in their viewers. While LGBTQ+ representation in children's media has increased, it is still difficult to implement such representation. This thesis we will discuss three shows, Gravity Falls, Steven Universe, and The Owl House, that have struggled with the implementation of LGBTQ+ characters, discussing why this representation matters, how media have made progress in this area, and what challenges remain to broaden LGBTQ+ in children's media.

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April 2022
Writing and Linguistics
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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
What is LGBTQ+ and How Children Learn About It	4
Literature Review	6
LGBTQ+ American History and Experience	7
LGBTQ+ representation and its importance	9
Tropes and Stereotypes	10
Bury Your Gays	10
Queerbaiting and Queercoding	11
The Impact of Tropes and Stereotypes	12
Content Creation/Implementation	13
The Hays Code	14
Adults and Cartoons	15
LGBTQ+ Representation in Shows	16
Streaming Services and Television	17
Gravity Falls	18
Background	18
Censorship	19
Fan and Creator Input	20
Steven Universe	22
Background	23
Petitions and Unhappy Parents	23
Censorship in Steven Universe	26
Cartoon Network and LGBTQ+	28
Fan Input and Relatability	30
The Owl House	31
Background	32
LGBTQ+ Lead Characters	32
Disney and LGBTQ+	33
Dana Terrace and Disney	34
Fan Outrage and Action	35
LGBTQ+ Representation Today	37
Conclusion	37
Bibliography	39

Introduction

It was Thanksgiving Day when I was first told by my own father that he would not support me if I was gay, and in a drunken rant, he told me to get out of his house if I was gay. This happened when I was twelve and still affects me now, even in my twenties. There is a unique experience one has when growing up gay and a person of color in the American South. I am one of those individuals; my mom is Japanese and, as you know, I am gay. I was always treated differently by my peers, because of the food I ate or the way I looked. I needed to come to terms with never fitting in as a gay BIPOC in a heteronormative world, especially since I live in the "Bible Belt" South.¹

As a child, when I watched television I did not see characters who were like me because of the lack of representation and the same can be said for many people. I never saw characters who were gay, and if I did see a character that looked like me, it was usually in a stereotypical fashion. Representation in the media gives us a viewpoint of the world and the people around us. If there is no representation of any kind – whether it be LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and more) or BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) – then we will not learn about the people around us.

There are many stereotypes on television, and because of these stereotyped depictions, it becomes an expectation for audiences who have little or no experience with BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals. If we see it on television, we expect it to be reflected back onto us. For example, we expect the Asian girl to be able to play musical instruments, among other stereotypical tropes, because we see it so often on television.

¹ The bible belt is a region in the southern United States that is more socially conservative and Christian than the other US states (Rosenberg). Christianity plays a key role in politics in the bible belt (Rosenberg).

Television tells us stories and allows us to see ourselves reflected in stories, but not everyone has the same opportunities when it comes to representation in media. BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals have the least amount of representation with only forty-six percent of characters being a person of color and fifty-three percent of them being LGBTQ+ (GLAAD). There have been many codes written, like the Hays code, to prevent representation of such groups.² There are also fears of losing funding if LGBTQ+ individuals are given representation.

Representation is important because it shows individuals that they are heard, seen and normal, and if we are not seen on television then we can start to think that we are not normal or bad. It can also be a teachable moment on how people should react to these individuals; this is known as cultural competence.³ We turn to objects to help find our way, much like how we watch television, which is limited for individuals who are part of the minority (Ahmed 1). This can be accomplished through television when we see characters that reflect ourselves and is especially important in children's media. Aired television⁴ shows are important because it is accessible to a wider range of audiences, and this is especially true for children's television shows which can be the first stepping stone for children to learn more about the world.

Growing up, I did not have representation which led to me not knowing my sexuality and being bullied for my ethnicity and sexuality. I believe if there was representation I would have not been bullied. Due to this, I chose to use children's television shows because there are

² In the 1920s films began to deal with more adult and racy content according to Chelsey O'Brien. Films showed glamorous gangsters, the class struggle, and sexually liberated women. The Hays Code, also known as the Motion Production Code, was enforced by William H Hays. The Hays Code is a set of guidelines put in place from 1934 to 1968, and prohibited "profanity, suggestive nudity, graphic or realistic violence, sexual persuasions and rape" (Lewis).

³ According to Tori DeAngelis cultural competence is the "ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures and/or belief systems different from one's own." Cultural competence can help eliminate disparities, but has received pushback due to it being seen as politically correct and due to this research in cultural competence has been stagnant.

⁴ Aired shows can be found on television, but some shows can be found on YouTube or streaming services. However, often they are first shown on television.

LGBTQ+ children who deserve representation. There has been more inclusivity in children's media, but it has faced difficulty when it comes to implementing representation.

Gravity Falls, *Steven Universe*, and *The Owl House* are shows that I grew up with as a teenager and as an adult. All three of these shows have struggled with the implementation of LGBTQ+ characters, and it is important to evaluate these stories to gain a better understanding of why there is not more LGBTQ+ representation in children's media. LGBTQ+ representation needs to be more prevalent in children's media.

What is LGBTQ+ and How Children Learn About It

The term LGBTQ+ is constantly changing and has multiple versions. LGBTQ+ is one of the many acronyms that have been used by the queer community. Queer is an umbrella term that can be used when referring to someone who is neither straight or cisgender. A cisgender individual is someone whose gender expression and identity match the one that they were assigned at birth. Queer was previously used as a derogatory word against the community, but many queer individuals have reclaimed the word. However, some individuals still find the term offensive which is why I would be using the term LGBTQ+.

Each letter and symbol in LGBTQ+ are important and have its own meaning. The L stands for lesbian, the G stands for gay, the B stands for bisexual, the T stands for transgender, the Q stands for queer or questioning, and the + symbol is meant to show that there are non-cisgender and non-straight identities that are not included in the acronym (Cherry).

In Dennis Baron's book titled *What's Your Pronoun?*, Baron discusses the untold story of how we got our pronouns and notes the lack of gender-neutral terms in the English language. Gender-neutral is when you refer to a person, not by their sex but instead, you are just referring to the person in general; these individuals typically use the singular they/them pronoun. The

English language, commonly, uses gendered pronouns such as *she* or *his*. In his book, Baron writes:

At a recent dinner with friends, a Turkish electrical engineer and an American biologist suddenly veered into gender-neutral pronouns. Turkish pronouns have no gender, the engineer explained, so why does English need gender?... If you want to know the stories behind these coined pronouns, or the rise and fall of generic he, or the changing states of singular they, this book will tell you those stories (Baron 2).

The English language is constantly changing, and the acceptance of the singular ‘they’ pronoun has been more accepted; however, some individuals reject that there is a singular ‘they’ pronoun. This rejection often damages LGBTQ+ individuals.

Individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ are also at a heightened risk for mental health conditions like depression or anxiety because of socioeconomic and cultural conditions (NAMI). For example, LGBTQ+ individuals often face rejection, which can mean losing one's entire support group. We see this rejection currently, Florida is attempting to pass a piece of legislation that is being known as the “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” prohibiting classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity—it tells individuals that it is not okay to be gay and prevents the education of LGBTQ+ history (Paley and Saunders). This means children will not be able to learn about LGBTQ+ identities and will only have their parents to turn to, which can be unhealthy and dangerous if the parents are homophobic. However, many content creators are attempting to show LGBTQ+ individuals that they belong and are also trying to teach children that it is okay to be gay. By showing them people who look or act like them on TV.

Many individuals argue against LGBTQ+ representation and believe that this representation will make their kids LGBTQ+ but this is not true. We constantly see heterosexual⁵

⁵ Heterosexual is used for individuals who are straight, or like the opposite sex.

relationships portrayed in media, and none of them have made me straight so, therefore, having LGBTQ+ representation cannot change one's sexuality. LGBTQ+ characters in children's media are often the first time a child will experience LGBTQ+ individuals. Shows are often the starting point for children's education and morals, for example an educational show talking about pollution ("It may be educational, but what is that TV show really teaching your preschooler?"). They can teach LGBTQ+ individuals more about themselves and let them see there is nothing wrong with being LGBTQ+.

Literature Review

Television is a source of entertainment and lessons for many children. We expect children to learn lessons from the shows they watch and oftentimes be educational⁶. Children's media often has a lack of representation, which can affect a child negatively because they may not gain a better understanding of themselves and their peers. Representation is one way of letting people feel included and learning more about other people.

While LGBTQ+ representation has increased, often it is mostly on streaming services that are not accessible for everyone. We need to focus on shows that have been on live television and are pieces of children's media because representation is more difficult to implement in children's media. Representation is important for young children because it shows them that they belong.

There are three topics of interest: why LGBTQ+ representation is important (including its history), what progress has been made, and the challenges of having LGBTQ+ representation implemented. Many resources are available that can help us gain a better understanding of these topics. It is important to understand that there are multiple different perspectives on these topics,

⁶ Many shows are used to help children learn, such as *Sesame Street*, which goes over counting, diversity, and even death.

and some people do not agree with LGBTQ+ representation because of their political or religious beliefs.

LGBTQ+ American History and Experience

Knowing LGBTQ+ American history is one of the first ways for us to gain a better understanding of why LGBTQ+ representation is important. America has a history of minorities receiving unequal treatment and this includes LGBTQ+ individuals. We know this from the recent research on enslavement⁷ and how same sex marriage was recently passed. *A Queer History of the United States* written by Michael Bronski challenges the American history that we know by drawing from primary documents, literature, and cultural histories. He goes into detail about gay rights in the late 1970s. We also get to learn of LGBTQ+ American history up to 1990 in Bronski's book. However, Bronski notes that LGBTQ+ communities still have seen a tremendous amount of growth since 1990. While there is a lot of recorded LGBTQ+ history after 1990 like same sex marriage in 2015, this book gives valuable new details like how LGBTQ+ individuals impacted our history and the growth the LGBTQ+ community has experienced. It also shows us that LGBTQ+ individuals have always been present in history, which means these individuals have been here since the start. However, we also need to know the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Bernadette Barton's *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays*, explores the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. This is pertinent to my study because she focuses on the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals in the southern United States, which she labels the "bible belt" (Barton 2). She discusses conservative Christian ideology and how anti-gay rhetoric sometimes

⁷ The New York Times conducted a project entitled the 1619 Project. It began in August 2019 and aims to reframe America's history by talking about slavery and the contributions Black Americans as the center of the narrative.

infuses society on a variety of levels. Barton talks about her own experience of being gay in the bible belt and coming out to a neighbor during the Spring of 2003.

Jim inquired, “Do you go to church?” “No,” I said, and then took my own leap of faith. “We’re gay, and the churches around here aren’t very supportive of it.” He paused, looked confused, and examined me closely. A long moment passed. He announced, “It’s an abomination in the eyes of the lord” (Barton 2).

Barton’s experience is one too common with LGBTQ+ individuals. Barton’s book helps explain the power wielded by southern Christian institutions that serve as the foundation for homophobia.

It’s Not Over: Getting Beyond Tolerance, Defeating Homophobia, and Winning True Equality Micheal Signorile looks over the “dramatic, ongoing transformation in politics, society, and culture whose effects are focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender American (Signorile ix).” *It’s Not Over* was written on the surge of marriage equality in America and evaluates homophobia⁸, a common experience for LGBTQ+ individuals. In Signorile’s book, we can discuss equal rights and the continued bias LGBTQ+ individuals experience. Signorile shares a story from the perspective of Jennifer Tipton and her wife Olivier Odom who were taking their friend’s daughters to Dollywood in July 2011 (Signorile 25).

That day, Odom happened to be wearing a T-shirt that read MARRIAGE IS SO GAY. “I wear that T-shirt like I wear any other T-shirt. It was a nice T-shirt and it was clean.” But apparently, it wasn’t clean enough for the guard at the gate, who told the women they couldn’t enter the park. “I had to look down at my shirt first to realize what was going on,” Odom told me. “I was definitely in shock. I looked at the guy with a curious look on my face. And he said, “This is a family park.”

⁸ Homophobia can be seen as the fear, hatred, or discomfort of LGBTQ+ individuals (“What is homophobia?”).

Odom's and Tipton's experience is something that LGBTQ+ individuals will always go through. LGBTQ+ individuals are denied service and seen as un-family-friendly. This still happens and LGBTQ+ being "un-family-friendly" is what drives the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream television.

In addition to books, there are other types of media that explore the history of LGBTQ+ discrimination in the US that brought both social pressures and legal policies. *Pray Away* is a Netflix documentary that discusses the conversion therapy movement which has become policy in many states like Georgia, Florida, and Alabama⁹ and the harm it has done to the LGBTQ+ community¹⁰. Conversion therapy has played into the idea that being LGBTQ+ is choice, when it is not. In this documentary, we get the unique perspectives of ex-leaders and survivors of conversion who reveal the history and the dangers of conversion therapy. This is a part of LGBTQ+ history that is ignored and is still in practice today. All the experiences detailed here are a part of our history and need to be recognized as such. Often, the LGBTQ+ representation lacks complexity of experience and tends toward stereotypes.

LGBTQ+ representation and its importance

Another reason why representation is important is shown in "A Content Analysis of LGBT Representation on Broadcast and Streaming Television," where Cook discusses how representation in the media can have a positive effect on everyone and especially for viewers who are adolescents. LGBTQ+ characters are often a source of pride or comfort for many individuals, and this is especially true when these characters are represented in a positive non-stereotypical manner. We see this time and time again when content creators and fans speak

⁹ There are only 20 states in America that have banned conversion therapy for minors.

¹⁰ *Pray Away* is a 2021 documentary entailing the stories of conversion therapy survivors and the history of conversion therapy.

out about their experience with negative stereotypes. Often, LGBTQ+ representation lacks complexity of experience and tends toward stereotypes and tropes.

Tropes and Stereotypes

One way that representation can be presented is through tropes. Tropes have always been used in media because it gives the audience a sense of familiarity and helps the audience expect what is about to happen; they let audiences know who the bad or good guy is, for example the evil genius trope¹¹ (Gala, Dhruvil, et al.). In “Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ,” Erin Waggoner discusses common tropes in LGBTQ+ representation on television. Tropes can be seen as a stereotype, a generalization of an individual (Nittle). An example of a stereotype is that an Asian character is good at math. This is a trope and a stereotype that I experienced on a daily basis growing up. I would be ridiculed when I was unable to solve a math problem because it was expected that I was good at math. Due to this, tropes can be seen as dangerous since they can leave audience members with the expectation that these tropes represent the character or person as a whole. There are many tropes that are employed when used in reference to the LGBTQ+ community, like gay men being feminine. There are multiple tropes that are familiar to the LGBTQ+ community.

Bury Your Gays

One of the many tropes that LGBTQ+ characters experience is the bury your gays trope, and it has been used since 1976 (Waggoner). The bury your gays trope is used when a character comes out as gay and is shortly killed right after. Waggoner provides an example from the show *The 100*.

¹¹ The evil genius trope is intelligent characters who are the villain of the story. They are most often the brains behind a big plan and are often lacking brawn.

Clarke (the show's female lead character) and Lexa (the recurring female character and Clarke's love interest) consummate their relationship after several episodes of the narrative buildup elements placed throughout the third season's first seven episodes. One minute and seven seconds in the episode after they are shown happy and in bed (post-sex pillow talk), Lexa walks into a stray bullet intended for Clarke (note: she is not jumping into the bullet to save her, just is in the wrong place at the wrong time as she walks into the room).

This is common and can be seen happening in multiple shows. Most recently, *Supernatural* did this with one of their characters, Castiel. When Castiel admits that he has feelings for the main character, Dean, Castiel sacrifices himself to save Dean's life and goes to super hell. The bury your gays trope is often used for shock value (Waggoner). However, this "shock value" can hurt LGBTQ+ individuals because it can depict that queer characters will never be happy, and therefore LGBTQ+ people will never be able to obtain happiness. This same message is also shared with heterosexual viewers. However, LGBTQ+ individuals can obtain happiness; I have seen this happen with many of my who are LGBTQ+ friends who are in healthy and loving relationships. But sadly, this is not the only trope that is used when it comes to LGBTQ+ characters.

Queerbaiting and Queercoding

In addition to tropes like bury your gays, one way some producers gain viewership is through queerbaiting. Queerbaiting is the media practice of hinting at or advertising queer representation to attract or gain the viewership of LGBTQ+ individuals without following through on queer representation (McDermott). LGBTQ+ fans, like myself, are drawn to shows that have representation and we feel invalidated when shows queerbait. However, queerbaiting is

harmful because often it is never confirmed if the characters are LGBTQ+ and if they are, they are often killed off quickly, like in the bury your gays trope (Murphy). The producers, in this case, are not interested in having representation, but instead in making money.

Another common occurrence is for characters to be queer coded which is when a character is given subtext that they are part of the LGBTQ+ community but it is never explicitly said. We see this with characters like Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*. While queer-coding is not inherently bad, it can be damaging when it is mainly villains that are queer-coded (Jaigirdar). It shows audiences that being LGBTQ+ is inherently bad and can also feed into the stereotype that LGBTQ+ is not family-friendly.

The Impact of Tropes and Stereotypes

Netflix explores the impact of tropes in their documentary *Disclosure* which explores transgender representation and has transgender individuals talk about their experience watching, creating, or acting in these shows or movies. *Disclosure* allows us to explore a transgender individual's point of view when it comes to representation and goes into detail about the history of these individuals, so we gain a better understanding of the importance of representation. We also get the unique perspectives of Hollywood's impact on LGBTQ+ representation and viewpoints of transgender individuals on transgender representation. Many transgender individuals saw themselves being portrayed as a joke on television, seen as the bad guy, or committing suicide¹².

In Micheal McDermott's article, a fan writes, "It's hard enough to find queer representation that doesn't involve them coming out or suicide or being the villain or going through a phase or any other of the million tropes out there." It is important for LGBTQ+

¹² We see the trope of this in *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang, however, this play also feeds into the stereotype of Asians being submissive and LGBTQ+ individuals dying in the end.

representation to be positive because these characters reflect real people. LGBTQ+ characters filled with tropes are damaging to their audience and can show the audience that being LGBTQ+ is inherently bad when we know that being gay is not bad. These negative stereotypes and tropes have led to homophobic rhetoric because the audience is expecting these stereotypes to be true.

Content Creation/Implementation

There has been progress when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation and there are many content creators who have implemented or attempted to include LGBTQ+ characters in their shows. These characters are primarily on streaming services, but streaming services are not accessible by everyone. I will be focusing on three shows that were aired on television and their content creators. The shows up for discussion are animated television shows that are featured on children's television networks. All three of these content creators have either attempted to include LGBTQ+ characters or implemented LGBTQ+ characters. Each of these creators has their own experience with broadcasting programs that have either supported or denied their choices.

It is a challenge for content creators to implement LGBTQ+ characters into their shows because often the show will get threats of losing funding or not being allowed to have these characters. Content creators, like Alex Hirsch the creator of *Gravity Falls*, have been told that they could not have a same-sex couple kiss on-screen. While others, like Rebecca Sugar the creator of *Steven Universe*, had their funding depleted, or even their show could not be renewed for a full season like Dana Terrace the creator of *The Owl House*. Representation in media is extremely important, but content creators face challenges when implementing representation, and this can be seen in our history.

The Hays Code

The representation we have today is very different compared to the representation we had in the 1930s, mainly around the production of film. Around this time the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, was introduced in an attempt to control what stories and people we could see on the screen (Lewis). The Hays Code prohibited shows from having adultery, scenes of passion, and interracial relationships to name a few. But what is most notable is sex perversion being prohibited and this often included themes of LGBTQ+ (Insider). In a sense, shows now had to follow Catholic morals and values (Robertson 100). Many content creators had to figure out a way around this, and many turned to animation. Live-action television could not show two same-sex individuals kissing, but animated films could get away with this. A popular character, like Bugs Bunny, could be seen cross-dressing and kissing a man, male characters would also act more feminine, and during this time queer characters were seen as a joke (Insider). These depictions were often using queer coding and could portray negative stereotypes of LGBTQ+ individuals. We started to see queer coding with villains, and during this time the bury your gay trope started to gain popularity. This was showing audiences that being gay was inherently bad. LGBTQ+ characters were often portrayed as serial killers¹³ or as individuals whose lives ended in tragedy, and when this was not happening LGBTQ+ characters were the comic relief (Robertson 101).

This elimination of LGBTQ+ characters and the negative portrayals contributed to the homophobic and transphobic culture that we are still facing today (Robertson 99). The Hays Code would be dismissed in 1968 when the Motion Picture Association of America film rating system¹⁴ came into effect, but the damage to viewers will already be done (Robertson 101).

¹³ We see this in *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Psycho*.

¹⁴ This was established in 1968 and provided parents with the information needed to decide if a show was appropriate for their child. We still see this system today.

Laverne Cox, a transgender individual and activist said, “I’d turn on the television and I’d see these images that don’t seem to comport with, like, the person that I knew I was. And so, everything that was trans about me, it made me just hate” (Feder). The negative stereotypes in media often showed audiences that it was wrong to be LGBTQ+ and often, like Cox, made individuals hate themselves.

Shows had to go through regulations, codes, and layers of approval but these barriers have started to go down throughout the years. This has made it easier for shows to have LGBTQ+ characters but due to past regulations being LGBTQ+ is still seen as an adult theme which is not true because there are children who are in the LGBTQ+ community. Representation must start at a young age because it shows children (and adults) that they are okay as who they are and that being LGBTQ+ is not a bad thing. Many children who grew up without representation grew up feeling as if there was something wrong with them, not truly understanding who they are, or hating themselves. I believe that if I had grown up with LGBTQ+ representation I would have realized earlier that I was LGBTQ+.

Adults and Cartoons

There are many adults who watch cartoons for fun or with their family, and what is interesting is there are benefits if you watch cartoons, like stress relief (Nazareth). There are many adults who watch cartoons, and according to Statista, “adults between the ages of 18 to 49 years contributed to more than 60% of people who watch Cartoon Network.” This would mean that over half of the audience are adults.

Elisabeth Sherman explores the concept of adults watching children’s media in her Vice article: “Therapists Explain How Cartoons Affect Your Mental Health.” It is argued that television can be a co-treatment to help with depression or stress according to Dr. David

Rosmarin. Dr. Laurel Steinberg adds, "Kids' cartoons can be a support treatment because they incorporate themes like community order, friendship, family, teamwork, that good always wins over evil, and that the sun will always come out tomorrow." These common themes can help adults through stress relief or improving their mood. Cartoons benefit anyone who is watching whether it be teaching or stress relief (Nazareth). However, even though adults can enjoy children's shows, content creators and producers have to be cognizant of their shows' themes and depictions because their target audience is children. If a show has LGBTQ+ representation they are already receiving pushback for having this representation, so they have to be extra careful when it comes to what their shows are about and if they are family-friendly. However, family-friendly can be seen as a broad topic as everyone has a different idea of what family is. We see this in Alexandra Whyte's article where broadcasters define what family-friendly is to them. One executive, Ana Carolina Lima, thinks that family-friendly content should emphasize core values like friendship and respecting differences, while Naketha Mattocks thinks family-friendly content is being connected and feeling seen (Whyte).

LGBTQ+ Representation in Shows

Media is a form of entertainment for households and has also been a way of learning new things, especially for children because of educational television shows like *Sesame Street*. There are now multiple streaming services available to us that allow us to watch anything from anywhere, which has led to the decline of cable subscribers while streaming services see a continued climb in subscribers (O'Brien). However, there are individuals who cannot afford streaming services which means their only access to media is via cable television.

Many LGBTQ+ characters are on streaming platforms, but when it comes to live television, there is a lack of these characters. Live television shows often get less support from

production companies when they include LGBTQ+ characters. GLAAD¹⁵ reports that in 2020 there were 95 LGBTQ+ characters in original scripted streaming services shows, 70 LGBTQ+ characters on broadcast networks, and 81 LGBTQ+ characters on cable programs. All of these numbers have decreased from the previous year.

Streaming Services and Television

There are many shows that have implemented LGBTQ+ representation; however, it is an unequal amount of representation when compared to streaming services and live television. Streaming services often have more LGBTQ+ content compared to live television (GLAAD). GLAAD reports, “The number of LGBTQ regular characters on scripted primetime cable programs has decreased significantly year-over-year, down to 81 from 121.” GLAAD also reported:

GLAAD counted 95 regular LGBTQ characters on original scripted series on the streaming services Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix, a decrease of 14 from last year’s tally. There are an additional 46 recurring LGBTQ characters, an increase of two from last year. This totals to 141 characters on streaming, a decrease of 12 characters overall from the previous year (pg 17).

The main reason for this is streaming services are funded by subscribers and allow for the streaming service to target specific audiences (Cook 33). According to Statista, Netflix is leading the way for LGBTQ+ content with 110 LGBTQ+ characters as of the 2020-2021 season, while Hulu only has 19. What allows Netflix to have multiple LGBTQ+ characters is the fact that the company has the financial backing to fund LGBTQ+ stories (Opie). Insider has also found that over 90% of LGBTQ+ children's characters are behind a paywall (White). We see this with

¹⁵ GLAAD, also known as the Gay Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation was founded on November 14th, 1985 in response to defamatory coverage of HIV and AIDS. GLAAD has been at the forefront of cultural change and accelerating acceptance for the LGBTQ+ community.

Netflix and their multiple shows with LGBTQ+ characters like *Voltron: Legendary Defender* and *She-ra and the Princess of Power*. But as stated before these shows are not available for all audiences and can only be watched on Netflix. Streaming services have become more affordable, but we need to keep in mind that there are extra costs to streaming services, for example, the internet, and not everyone has equal access to the internet. Access to the internet plays a key role in the amount of representation a child can receive, and even then it is not guaranteed that a child will be able to access these shows because a streaming service might not recommend those shows.

The shows that are up for discussion are on streaming platforms but are still being aired on television. In fact, I mainly watched these shows when they were aired on television. There is a lack of LGBTQ+ representation on live television and these shows need to be evaluated.

Gravity Falls

Gravity Falls will be the first show that I will discuss because it premiered first, and I am discussing the shows in chronological order based on when they were initially released. I will be discussing the show itself and its LGBTQ+ representation, the content creator's struggle with implementing LGBTQ+ representation, and the importance of fan participation.

Background

Gravity Falls was created by Alex Hirsch and is a story about twin siblings, Dipper and Mable Pines, who were sent away to the mysterious Gravity Falls to spend time with their great uncle, Grunkle Stan. During their time in Gravity Falls, the twins go on cryptid adventures and have to solve the town's mysteries. *Gravity Falls* premiered on June 15, 2012, on the Disney channel. *Gravity Falls* is rated TV-Y7, making its target audience 7 years old or older, so we can

see that the target audience is children but many adults have watched *Gravity Falls*. This goes back to content being family-friendly: it is enjoyable for both adults and children to watch.

Censorship

Gravity Falls has a diverse cast of BIPOC characters, but it is lacking in LGBTQ+ characters. Hirsch has attempted to put LGBTQ+ representation in *Gravity Falls*, but experienced pushback from Disney and ultimately was not allowed to have LGBTQ+ representation.

On August 24, 2018, Twitter user Jenney Liebowitz asked Alex Hirsch, “How come there were no gay characters in *Gravity Falls* then” and Hirsch responded, “I tried.” Disney at the time had denied Hirsch the possibility of having LGBTQ+ characters in an episode titled *The Love God*. The idea was simple: two old ladies would fall in love and kiss in the episode. Hirsch, already frustrated at Disney for their censorship of his show, decided to leave the two old ladies kissing in the scene. Disney has censored Hirsch before. Immediately he got the note from Disney, “please revise.” In his interview with *The Mary Sue* he continued:

I responded with a one-word answer: “Why?” This basically broke the censors. They couldn’t think of a single way to phrase an answer to that question so they made me talk on the phone so there would be no paper trail. They were terrified of sounding like bigots—but I honestly don’t think they were bigots, I think they were cowards. They basically admitted that there was no good reason why I should change it, but that they get complaints about this stuff from various homophobic parents and would rather avoid the headache, and couldn’t I just drop it (Hirsch).

This would be a battle that Hirsch would not win, he would be forced to cut the scene of the two old ladies kissing. Hirsch would never stop trying, and by the season finale, he would include the confirmation of an LGBTQ+ relationship in the season finale.

There are two police officers who make reappearances in the series. Deputy Durland and Sheriff Blubs are side characters in *Gravity Falls* who hate working and love to have fun. They are often used for jokes, and the two characters are seen as close friends throughout the series. However, in the season finale, season 2 episode 21, *Weridmageddon 4: Somewhere in the Woods* Deputy Durland and Sheriff Blubs say, “We’re made with power.” They pause and look at each other before grabbing each other’s face and saying “And love.” This for many fans (and Hirsch) was confirmation that the two characters were gay.

It is not uncommon for shows to confirm LGBTQ+ relationships in the season finale because these shows no longer need funding and the producers of the shows are ready to be done with the show. A notable example of this comes from the series *The Legend of Korra* where in the season finale two same-sex characters held hands and shared a kiss. This moment opened the door for more shows to include LGBTQ+ representation and can be seen as an inspiration for other content creators. It also shows the struggles that take place when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation because it could only be shown in the season finale.

Fan and Creator Input

Deputy Durland and Sheriff Blubs are the only confirmed LGBTQ+ characters in *Gravity Falls*, but this did not stop fans from theorizing the possibility of other LGBTQ+ characters. Many fans believe that multiple characters are queer-coded and have theorized that Dipper is transgender.

There are many reasons for fans to theorize that Dipper is trans. One reason is that Dipper and Mable are twins who seem to be identical. Dipper is a male-presenting character, while Mable is a female-presenting character. Dipper also struggles with his masculinity and wants to prove that he is masculine throughout the show. However, other fans disagree that Dipper is transgender because we see him shirtless throughout the episode and he has a flat chest. Tumblr user Ry disagrees and says:

Hormone blockers are a thing. There is a perfectly reasonable chance that he is on blockers and so his chest has remained as flat as a prepubescent girl. He is 12 (13 by the end of the show), and on average female puberty starts between the ages of 9 and 14 (google it). He may not have hit puberty yet, and his chest is still flat (sweet-suburban-tomb Tumblr).

Fans now have greater access to content creators through social media which is where many fans communicate with their favorite content creators and how content creators share their stories. In the era of social media, fans have the unique ability to theorize about shows, and also comment on shows with other fans. This commentary allows us to see things from different perspectives. Many fans of *Gravity Falls* were disheartened when learning about the censorship Hirsch went through, and many agree that LGBTQ+ representation should be more prevalent because they are LGBTQ+.

Hirsch has continued to be an advocate for LGBTQ+ representation. Most recently Hirsch called Disney out for their tweet stating “There’s room for everyone under the rainbow. Happy #PrideMonth.” In response to this tweet Hirsch tweeted back:

Disney privately: Cut the gay scene! We might lose precious pennies from Russia & China!

Disney publicly: Honk honk we put rainbow bumper sticker on Lightning McQueen today CONSUME OUR PRODUCTS TEENS. (@_AlexHirsch).

This was not all Hirsch did, he also encouraged other creatives at Disney to take a stand in his following tweet:

To any creative at Disney TV, Feature, Publishing, or Streaming: please mercilessly spam your execs with “there’s room for everyone under the rainbow” next time they tell you to “please revise” your LGBTQ+ character for “not being Disney appropriate.” (@_AlexHirsch).

Hirsch wants there to be LGBTQ+ representation and encourages his peers to include such representation. Content creators play a key role when it comes to having representation because they will be the primary voice for their stories. They sometimes have to fight for representation, but it is a needed battle.

Disney has improved on its LGBTQ+ representation throughout the years, but Disney still censors content creators in fear of losing audience members and money (this will be further discussed in *The Owl House* section). One of the ways we can get more LGBTQ+ representation is holding a dialogue, boycotts, and calling out companies, but despite this, there will always be some sort of confrontation when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation.

Out of all the shows discussed in this article, *Gravity Falls* has the least amount of representation primarily because of the time the show came out: 2012. However, what is surprising is that *Steven Universe*, a show popular for its LGBTQ+ characters, premiered a year after *Gravity Falls*. The only difference between the two is the creators, story, and where the show was broadcasted.

Steven Universe

Steven Universe is a popular Cartoon Network show that has had multiple seasons, a movie, and a spinoff series. It has many LGBTQ+ characters and the content creator himself is a member of the LGBTQ+ community. *Steven Universe* has received support from Cartoon Network, but the show still has received pushback from their network and audience members.

Background

Steven Universe aired on Cartoon Network on May 21, 2013, and was created by Rebecca Sugar who is non-binary. *Steven Universe* is a story about a young boy named Steven who is half-human and half-gem. Gems are aliens that take their forms from rocks. His mother is dead, but luckily he has her three friends Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl to be his motherly role. The four of them form the group known as the Crystal Gems. Steven learns new ways to help save the world with the help of his friends and the magical gem that is in his belly button.

Petitions and Unhappy Parents

Steven Universe is filled with LGBTQ+ representations whether it be having a same-sex wedding, non-binary characters, and intersex characters. Despite fans enjoying the representation, *Steven Universe* has received pushback and censorship.

Garnet, a character in *Steven Universe*, is a fusion. A fusion in *Steven Universe* is a character who is the product of two or more gems who merged to form a new stronger being. Ruby and Sapphire do this out of love and form the character Garnet. Throughout the series, we are able to see how close the two characters are and for some fans, it is obvious that it is way more than friendship. During the episode titled *Jailbreak*, Ruby and Sapphire are forcefully separated, but luckily are able to reunite. When reunited they share a kiss, and it is revealed that

the two are Garnet. The kiss, however, fueled controversy and a change petition to have the show censored. Lars.green started the petition on change.org¹⁶ and they state:

I loved watching *Steven Universe* with my kids but same-sex relationships are not a topic that should be discussed in children's programming. The kiss between Ruby and Sapphire was over the top for a children's cartoon. We are signing this petition for Cartoon Network to censor current episodes *Jailbreak* and *Rose's Scabbard* to exclude LGBT themes and to censor future episodes¹⁷ (Lars.green, n.d.).

The petition never got far and only received 150 supporters. A common trend when it comes to critiques of LGBTQ+ representation is the fear of it not being family-friendly, despite many shows showcasing heterosexual relationships. This also can mean that different types of families are not being portrayed on television.

There have always been petitions against LGBTQ+ representation. The popular right-wing watchdog group known as One Million Moms (OMM) has started multiple petitions against different companies that showcase "immorality, violence, vulgarity, and profanity." The group is a division from the American Family Association (AFA) and commonly this group is against the showcase of LGBTQ+ individuals (Hooper). This is because LGBTQ+ relationships are seen as sexual in nature due to their censorship in the past and because of religious or political beliefs. One of the most recent complaints from OMM is a Sephora commercial that featured two gay men. In this petition, the group states, "One Million Moms continues to stand up for biblical truth, and Romans 1:26-27¹⁸ is very clear about this particular type of sexual perversion." There are many groups and individuals who do not agree with same-sex attraction

¹⁶ Change.org is a website that allows individuals to start petitions.

¹⁷ This petition was made 7 years ago, and many of the signers have mixed views.

¹⁸ The new international version says, "26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error" (*New International Version*, Romans 1:26-27).

or anything LGBTQ+, and often times these groups and individuals fight against LGBTQ+ representation. We have seen cancellations before. A primary example can be seen when an Alabama theater refused to show the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* because it had a homosexual character (O'Hara).

I grew eager to learn more about the other side of representation, the ones who do not want LGBTQ+ representation, but I found it challenging to find these resources. However, I found that many individuals who oppose LGBTQ+ representation tend to be Christian or see being gay as a political issue, and these issues are commonly discussed online. Hannah Williamson, a Christian YouTuber, says that she was in tears when discovering *The Owl House* because of its LGBTQ+ representation. In her video, she goes into detail about how homosexuality is a sin and goes on to share that she does not think Dana Terrace should be allowed to create a TV show because Terrace is bisexual and shares “demonic” images. Williamson goes on to say, “They slowly, but surely, crept perversion into children’s shows. They've already got the adults now they’re going after our kids” (A Christian's Response to Disney Debuting First Bisexual Lead Character). She also mentions how she thinks that the Hays Code should be brought back because it follows Christian morals. This ideology is common and is something we see with Williamson and One Million Moms. Many individuals are Christian and believe that LGBTQ+ representation is wrong, pushing sexuality, politics, and beliefs. However, being LGBTQ+ is not political or a belief. Because if it is, then being heterosexual should as be as well, but being heterosexual is not seen as a choice or sexual. Despite this many people want shows to be discontinued or censored for its LGBTQ+ representation because many believe that being LGBTQ+ is morally wrong and is a sin. This causes the media to be controlled, in a sense, by those who believe in these ideals. However,

religious beliefs are constantly changing and some individuals do not believe that being LGBTQ+ is a sin or morally wrong. However, these voices are often silenced and shows are either canceled or censored.

Censorship in Steven Universe

Steven Universe would gain more notoriety and make history when the show had a same-sex engagement and wedding. However, like with any show, *Steven Universe* would experience censorship¹⁹. There are many times when *Steven Universe* was censored in the United States and the rest of the world. Sometimes it was to cover up violent scenes, but LGBTQ+ moments were censored around the world.

Russia has refused to show some episodes of *Steven Universe* and did not show the episode (Season 2 Episode 22) *The Answer*, which showed the origin story of Ruby and Sapphire. In this episode, Garnet (a fusion of Ruby and Sapphire) tells Steven the story of how Ruby and Sapphire first met. Ruby is a soldier assigned to protect Sapphire because she can see into the future and potentially stop the rebelling army. In this vision, Sapphire saw that she would be a casualty and accepted it, but Ruby not wanting this saved Sapphire by accidentally fusing with her. This is when they first formed Garnet, and the first time two different gems fused. The future was changed, and Sapphire's vision was incorrect. The two characters flee because they would be killed if they stayed. We get to see the two characters falling in love. The two characters blush at each other multiple times and even sing a song together. They dance and fuse once again near the end of the episode. These moments were never shown in Russia.

There are more moments like how the UK and Malaysia cut out scenes of an episode. In Malaysia, they cut out a scene of Ruby and Sapphire kissing, so instead of seeing the two

¹⁹ According to the American Civil Liberties Union, censorship is the "suppression of words, images, or ideas."

characters kiss, you see a looping image of Ruby tossing Sapphire into the air and holding her in a bridal position while Steven is covering his eyes.

While in the UK, they cut out a scene of Pearl, another gem, dancing with another female character, Rose Quartz who is also a gem. Pearl and Rose Quartz are female-presenting characters. The dance was suggestive, and a moment showed Pearl's jealousy of Greg because he was dating Rose Quartz, the gem Pearl had a crush on. The dance was replaced with Greg, Steven's human father, playing the guitar and watching in awe. Cartoon Network UK responded to this censorship, "In the UK we have to ensure everything on air is suitable for kids of any age at any time. We do feel that the slightly edited version is more comfortable for local kids and their parents" (Jusino). However, this scene was shown in the US.

Foreign censorship is concerning and worrying and can affect individuals living in America (McLaughlin). Students shared that they were worried about their international peers when returning to their home country after participating in rallies or protests (Lopez-Villafaña). Fans worry for their international peers who are not able to access representation because it makes it more difficult for international audiences to feel seen due to the lack of diversity in media. Everyone deserves to be seen and know that they are valid, but these moments are taken away from them when censorship comes into play. Many companies censor shows in fear of losing money or because a country does not support LGBTQ+ individuals.

The censorship in *Gravity Falls* hurt fans because censoring a same-sex kiss told fans that there was something inherently wrong with it, and when the same thing happened with *Steven Universe* it only concreted those feelings. Censorship tells fans that there is something wrong or mature with the content, and therefore being LGBTQ+ is something sexual and bad when that is not the case. We see heterosexual kisses in media all the time, but those moments

are not seen as sexual in nature, so what is the difference between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ relationships? There is no difference besides the identity of the individual, so we need to make these relationships more visible because censorship is damaging.

Cartoon Network and LGBTQ+

Steven Universe has a diverse range of characters, but like many content creators, Sugar still faced difficulties from their producers. Cartoon Network producers told Sugar, “you can’t have these characters (Ruby and Sapphire) be in a romantic relationship.” However, for many fans it was obvious that Ruby and Sapphire were a couple, so Cartoon Network would not allow Sugar to confirm that their relationship was a romantic one (Henderson). Cartoon Network told Sugar, “We want to support that you’re doing this but you have to understand that internationally if you speak about this publicly, the show will be pulled from a lot of countries and that may mean the end of the show.” The network was worried about losing money. Many networks are afraid of losing money and audience members when they include LGBTQ+ representation because backlash can often start a campaign to end a show. Eventually, Cartoon Network would allow for Ruby and Sapphire to get married. Cartoon Network has had multiple shows that featured LGBTQ+ characters, but it can still be a challenge for content creators to have these characters and we see this with Sugar.

Rebecca Sugar and Steven Universe’s Impact

Rebecca Sugar has been the mastermind behind multiple children’s television shows and has always pushed for LGBTQ+ characters. Sugar is also a member of the LGBTQ+ community. They are non-binary and bisexual and use she/they pronouns. Sugar has always wanted to create LGBTQ+ characters because they never saw these characters growing up and felt as if there was something wrong with them due to queer coded villains, which is a common

experience among LGBTQ+ individuals and this feeling ultimately is what encouraged Sugar to have LGBTQ+ representation. (Pitre).

Sugar is notable for their songwriting and storytelling. Sugar has worked on shows previously for Cartoon Network like *Adventure Time*²⁰ where they wrote songs such as *Everything Stays* and *Time Adventure*. Sugar went on to write multiple songs with deep meanings that fans will be able to relate to. *Adventure Time* is well known for its season finale where two same-sex characters shared a kiss. This kiss was not originally planned in the script, but the showrunner Adam Muto decided to approve the kiss for the season finale. But, Muto gives part of the credit for the kiss to Rebecca Sugar because they laid the groundwork to make it possible (Cinemablend). This shows many fans that from the start Sugar wanted to have LGBTQ+ representation, and this could be because of Sugar's sexuality. Sugar soon worked on their own show and become the first non-binary/woman cartoon creator on Cartoon Network (Segal). The show Sugar would create was *Steven Universe* which was originally about their brother and the relationship they shared but eventually evolved into what it is today (Pitre).

The representation in *Steven Universe* does not stop at LGBTQ+ but also displays interracial relationships, mirroring Rebecca Sugar's personal relationship (Brown). These depictions have served to help audiences see the normalcy of LGBTQ+ individuals and interracial relationships. Sugar took inspiration from their daily life when it came to creating *Steven Universe* and was able to come to terms with their sexuality. The show not only helped fans but also Sugar. Sugar saw the importance of representation because everyone deserves to know that they belong because being LGBTQ+ does not mean you deserve to be treated differently.

²⁰ *Adventure Time* is a Cartoon Network show that premiered on April 5, 2010. The show recently has had some spinoffs that go deeper into the same-sex relationship that was portrayed in the season finale.

Steven Universe has won multiple awards such as the Peabody²¹ and GLAAD Kids and Family Award²² due to the show's representation and inclusivity. The creator has also gone on to work on *Steven Universe Future*²³ which has a central theme of trauma, and has helped viewers learn more about trauma and healthy relationships. Sugar has always made an effort to include representation in their stories and discuss difficult themes like trauma or found family. Their stories have helped LGBTQ+ individuals feel seen and have helped individuals better understand themselves. *Steven Universe* inspired many content creators and fans due to its inclusivity. The show truly opened the doors for LGBTQ+ representation in children's media especially when we consider that it came out a year after *Gravity Falls*. LGBTQ+ fans from all over the world were finally seen.

Fan Input and Relatability

There is no doubt that *Steven Universe* has changed LGBTQ+ representation in the long run and has been an inspiration for many individuals. Jake Pitre from Teen Vogue talks to fans about their experience watching the show; one fan named Shane states, "Seeing characters you look up to be flawed individuals and love each other despite that is refreshing." Many fans also took a stand against the censorship of *Steven Universe* in the UK by starting a change.org petition titled, "End Homophobic Censorship of 'Steven Universe.'" The petition received over nine thousand supporters, and some fans commented on the reason why they signed. One fan, Maggie Derrick, wrote:

I didn't feel comfortable coming out as bisexual until I was 30-YEARS OLD, and a big reason I waited so long was because I spent my ENTIRE CHILDHOOD in a world where

²¹ According to the Peabody Awards website, the Peabody Award, "honors excellence in storytelling that reflects the social issues and the emerging voices of our day."

²² According to the GLAAD website the GLAAD Awards "recognize and honor media for their fair, accurate and inclusive representations of the LGBTQ community and the issues that affect their lives."

²³ *Steven Universe Future* is a spinoff epilogue of *Steven Universe*. It shows Steven's life after saving the world.

representation of anything other than the heteronormative didn't exist. *Steven Universe* gave me the courage to embrace who I really am and it's the type of media I wish I had access to growing up.

This is a very common occurrence with fans who are LGBTQ+ because many of us did not grow up with representation, which in turn made us hide. Shows like *Steven Universe* allow people to be seen, heard, and feel normal because we finally see ourselves accepted on television.

Steven Universe has impacted many fans whether it be its representation or the themes the show had. The show created shorts talking about anti-racism, pride, and self-esteem. These shorts are used to teach audience members, tackle tough messages, and can have meaningful messages for multiple audiences. Much like *Steven Universe* in general, these shorts allow viewers to be seen and heard. It can have the same effect as the television show because it teaches lessons in a few minutes and tackles issues that many viewers may experience.

Steven Universe tackles complex themes that anyone can relate to and has positive LGBTQ+ representation. Many fans, like myself, have found joy and inclusion with these shows. LGBTQ+ representation allows those who are in the community to feel like they belong and that they have a place. Whenever I think of *Steven Universe*, I think of the nights I sat on the couch with my sister and mother watching the show, how we all cheered on the characters, and how it felt watching Ruby and Sapphire get married: joy.

The Owl House

The Owl House is the most recent show out of the three we discussed. This show is popular and showcases a bisexual lead character and has multiple LGBTQ+ characters. It has made Disney history for its LGBTQ+ characters and many fans love the show. However, the show has only been renewed for only three episodes.

Background

The Owl House is the most recent show and is about Luz, an eccentric human girl who stumbled upon a portal that leads her to another magical world and is given the chance to pursue her dreams to become a witch. She goes on many magical misadventures and makes friends along the way. The second season of the show is Luz trying to go back to the human world. *The Owl House* aired on the Disney Channel on January 10th, 2020, and was created by Dana Terrace. Unlike Alex Hirsch, Terrace has received support from Disney when it comes to implementing LGBTQ+ characters.

LGBTQ+ Lead Characters

The Owl House has made Disney channel history because of the show's bisexual main character, Luz. Luz is Dominican-American and is not the only LGBTQ+ character in the show: she has a lesbian girlfriend named Amity. Fans would often call the two's relationship Lumity, which is a mixture of their names²⁴. There is also a non-binary character named Raine. These facts are provided through subtext and have also been confirmed by the show's creator, Dana Terrace. Luz blushes when both female and male characters call her cute, while Amity blushes and wants to ask Luz out. Raine is always referred to by non-binary pronouns like they and them. These subtexts and events are often confirmation for fans that these characters are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Fans would get confirmation of Luz and Amity's sexuality in the second season of the show.

In season 2 episode 8: *Knock, Knock, Knockin' on Hooty's Door*, Amity and Luz officially become girlfriends. They will begin to refer to each other as girlfriends and at the end of the episode Hooty, a terrifyingly cute giant worm who looks like an owl and resides in the Owl House, refers to Amity as Luz's GF. There are many moments in the show that showcases

²⁴ Many fans will combine names of characters and is often used for pairing characters together.

LGBTQ+ characters. We get to see Raine being referred to by the correct pronouns. The show also delves into the topic of a found family, something that is a common occurrence for LGBTQ+ individuals. *The Owl House* has made an impact in the LGBTQ+ community and has also made Disney history. However, this brings an interesting question when we realize that Disney had produced *Gravity Falls* as well, so what has made Disney make this leap into including blatant LGBTQ+ relationships?

Disney and LGBTQ+

It is now more common to see a diverse range of characters in Disney movies and television shows, but sometimes these moments were not good moments. In Disney's live-action *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney claimed that there was an openly gay character in the movie; however, this was only confirmed at the end of the movie when Lefou was seen dancing with another man. We also see this in the movie *Onward* when a character mentions their same-sex partner is passing. Disney has a history of claiming a character is openly gay but only makes these characters a side character or barely show the character. These are often subtle remarks that can be easily edited out of the show (Placido). This has been done time and time again, and these 'queer' characters are often forgotten so when Disney repeats this the company is praised for introducing their first gay character (Placido). Disney never commits to having an LGBTQ+ character due to the backlash the company may face.

Disney has had multiple LGBTQ+ characters in their shows, but these characters are hidden behind a paywall and are only shown on their streaming service DisneyPlus. This makes it inaccessible to viewers who cannot afford or access the streaming service. LGBTQ+ characters are hidden so Disney does not have to face unhappy parents because they can direct their content towards a particular group of people, so the company can still make money. However, not having

these LGBTQ+ characters not seen can be damaging to a child because they will not be able to see themselves on tv.

Dana Terrace and Disney

Terrace knew that she wanted to have a bisexual lead character and wanted her show to have LGBTQ+ representation because of this she was open with Disney about her plans for representation. However, similarly to Hirsch, Terrace was not allowed to have LGBTQ+ representation. Things changed and Terrace was allowed to have representation. Terrace writes on Twitter, “I’m bi! I want to write a bi character, dammit! Luckily my stubbornness paid off and now I am VERY supported by current Disney leadership.” It is interesting to see how Terrace was allowed representation while Hirsch was not, and due to this we can see how far Disney has come. We can assume that this could be because when *Gravity Falls* came out same-sex marriage was not legal at the time. However, before Terrace, there were other LGBTQ+ characters on Disney, like *Andi Mack*²⁵ or the main character from the short *Out*²⁶.

Disney still has a way to go even though the company has more representation. Most of their LGBTQ+ characters are hidden behind a paywall or are left in the background. What made *The Owl House* special was the fact that a bisexual character was the lead, and she was not the only LGBTQ+ character. Fans were able to see non-binary and lesbian characters as well. *The Owl House* was the representation many fans wanted and supported, but sadly the show would end earlier than expected because the show would not be renewed for a full season.

²⁵ *Andi Mack* is about an almost thirteen year old girl who discovers her older sister is actually her mother. You can watch this show on Disney+.

²⁶ *Out* is a Disney+ original short about a gay man coming out to his family.

Fan Outrage and Action

It has recently been announced that *The Owl House* is ending, but it will be able to run for a shorter season three. Originally season three was planned to have twenty episodes but now has been cut down to three specials (Anderton).

Many fans were disheartened when it was revealed that *The Owl House* would not be renewed for a full season, and many fans began to speculate as to why. It was believed that it was because characters were confirmed LGBTQ+ because this announcement came shortly after Amity and Luz became a couple. Fans did not want the show to end, so they began to take action.

Fans started to tweet on Twitter with the hashtag “savetheowlhouse,” and eventually ended up on the trending tag on Twitter. Some fans even started their own petitions that got over 130,000 signatures. Petition signer, Nessa Holliday, states, “We need this show. To be able to see well-made queer characters on screen is amazing. This show has so much potential, it could be the next Gravity Falls. It can't be canceled it needs a proper run and when it comes to a close it needs a satisfying ending.” Fans also sent Disney letters asking for the show to not be canceled. However, despite the attempts fans made, it was too late to save *The Owl House*.

Dana Terrace shared why she believes the show was canceled in a Reddit post. Terrace admits that there have been issues with airing *The Owl House* in a few countries, but believes that was not canceled because of the LGBTQ+ representation. She writes:

At the end of the day, there are a few business people who oversee what fits into the Disney brand and one day one of those guys decided TOH didn't fit that "brand". The story is serialized (BARELY compared to any average anime lmao), our audience skews older, and that just didn't fit this one guy's tastes. That's it! Ain't that wild? Really grinds

my guts, boils my brain, kicks my shins, all the things. It sucks but it is what it is (u/AntagonistDana).

Fans were amazed by the reason why the show was canceled and many fans agree that cartoons are also for adults. However, what upset fans the most was how Terrace was not included in the conversation about ending *The Owl House*.

When the show first premiered it was at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused Disney to tighten their budgets and also gave an opportunity for the company to cancel shows that they deemed not up to the Disney brand. Terrace writes:

Every show had to tighten their belts. Budgets were constrained and episodes were cut across the board. But we took the biggest bullet and I wasn't given the option of a "season 4 when parks open again." They just wanted to be done with TOH and this was the perfect chance to do that. Even getting the consolation s3 episodes was difficult, apparently. Hard to say, I wasn't allowed to be a part of any conversations until I was just... Told. Wasn't even allowed to present my case (u/AntagonistDana).

Terrace and fans are disappointed that *The Owl House* is coming to end. Fans loved the positive LGBTQ+ representation the show had, and Terrace loved creating these characters.

The Owl House has made Disney history because Luz is the first bisexual lead character and is not hidden behind a paywall like so many LGBTQ+ Disney characters. The show was an inspiration for many LGBTQ+ individuals who finally felt seen and understood. Fans wait eagerly for the next episode excited to see more Lumity and to see how the story will progress despite the shortened season.

The positive representation was exciting for many fans and gave fans, like me, a feeling that they belonged. I have a special connection with the show because it came out on my

birthday and has made me feel seen. I am able to see a positive LGBTQ+ relationship on the screen and has given me more hope for future relationships I may have. The show has made me feel supported, seen, and accepted.

LGBTQ+ Representation Today

LGBTQ+ representation has become more prevalent today compared to what it was like when I was growing up. We only saw representation in season finales like in *Gravity Falls*. This was when I was sixteen years old. *Steven Universe* came shortly after and aired the marriage episode when I was eighteen. Finally, *The Owl House* aired when I was twenty, and the characters were shown as LGBTQ+ right from the start. Many shows are starting to have LGBTQ+ characters, and it is amazing to see because it lets me know that I belong. However, despite the growth, there are still challenges and pushbacks against LGBTQ+ representation.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ representation has become more prevalent in today's media, but these pieces of media are often hidden behind a paywall. Shows that are aired on television have a harder time implementing representation because of backlash. While all the shows I discussed here were aired on television, I accessed most shows through streaming platforms or YouTube clips.

LGBTQ+ representation is still lacking and needs work because there are still so few shows that have it. However, representation is hard to achieve because of the constant worry about how audiences will react, censorship, and shows being canceled. Content creators go through challenges in order to implement LGBTQ+ characters because they are often censored or threatened with the cancelation of their show because being LGBTQ+ is often seen as sexual and un-family-friendly. Many people also think that children will turn gay if they see LGBTQ+

characters. It should be well known by now that seeing LGBTQ+ characters will not make you gay or affect a child's sexuality.

I think back to my time when I watched straight characters kiss and become a couple. I remember knowing that I had to find a boy I liked and pick a random boy, but in truth, I never really found any boy attractive. I was always drawn to other girls, but I hid this from myself and my friends. The point is that I never became straight from watching heterosexuals kiss on Disney Channel. Instead, I just did not know who I was. I remember getting bullied for who I was, and I remember how painful it felt when I was not accepted for who I was. I just wanted to be accepted.

Representation is important because it lets us see that we are accepted in society and it is a teaching moment for those who are not a part of the minority. A world without representation shows individuals that they are not okay as who they are or that they are bad, and it is also chilling because we only get to see one individual on the screen, and it will never reflect the group as a whole. If we only see one person on television we can start to think that there is something wrong with us. In order for us to have more representation, we need to hold discussions about it. We also need to start implementing these characters and also stop going back on stereotypes and tropes that have negatively affected the LGBTQ+ community. A world with representation will allow everyone to feel seen, heard, and valid. We would be able to see ourselves on television and see that all of us belong.

Representation is not just for the person who is LGBTQ+, but also for those who are not LGBTQ+ because representation teaches us more about ourselves and the people around us. At the end of the day, it is the acceptance of all individuals.

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