

**FROM DEAD TO FEMME: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LESBIAN
REPRESENTATION ON TELEVISION**

by

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Abstract

This study analyzed the ways in which lesbian characters are portrayed on television between 2010 and 2019. These series' intended audiences were teen to young adult. The questions for this study focused on the quality of representation, which included narrative inclusion, messaging surrounding romance, and reoccurring or emerging themes. Tropes such as the evil/dead lesbian identified by Millward et.al (2017) or the feminine lesbian, found on shows like *The L Word*, were also analyzed to highlight the reoccurrence of named themes already defined in media analysis. Using a qualitative content analysis, the three series utilized for this study were examined under cultivation and framing theory to identify what messages were being shared with audiences about lesbian identity and relationships. The results of this research indicated that lesbian characters more often than not were being sidelined from the main narratives of the show and that these representations can fall under old and new patterns.

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Introduction

Although lesbian characters have been present since the early history of television, they have often been portrayed in a negative light. Initially, these characters were limited to villain roles, where they preyed on young, straight women until they died violently (Millward et. al., 2017). Lesbian characters were expendable and easily written off, making them easy characters to hate. This sort of representation enforced the messaging that any sort of “sexual deviance” was dangerous and deadly. As time went on and representations changed, lesbian characters became more masculine and more “manly” (Kite & Deaux, 1987). Moving into the new millennium, television was slow to adopt LGBT representation as a whole, with only a handful of shows having any LGBT content (Fisher et. al., 2007). In more recent years, a growing number of shows have contained lesbian representation and by the numbers, things look to be improving. One of the earliest available Where We Are on TV report from the 2007-2008, GLAAD noted only seven LGBT identifying characters out of six hundred and fifty regular or supporting characters. Additionally, not one of the characters, regular or supporting, on network television was a lesbian (Where We Are on TV Report, 2008). GLAAD, an American organization focused on “tackl(ing) tough issues to shape the (LGBT) narrative and provoke dialogue that leads to cultural change,” more recently reported ninety LGBT characters in 2019 which is a large shift from the year before, with only seventy-five characters being reported on broadcast, cable, and streaming services (Where We Are on TV Report, 2019). While this increase in representation is no trivial feat, the messaging surrounding these characters also needs to be addressed.

Studies have shown that messaging about a marginalized group can impact how someone in that group sees themselves. Negative messaging can impact the self-esteem of an individual and shift how they view themselves (Huston et. al, 1993). Additionally, individuals seeking

representation are aware when a character is pandering or added just for the sake of representing a group. These characters tend to reflect stereotypes and preconceived notions about said group, and can negatively impact viewers (McInroy & Craig, 2017). While the quantity of lesbian characters have grown over the years, that does not mean that the ways these characters are portrayed has improved since the early days of television, and many stereotypes and tropes still exists today.

This thesis analyzes ways in which lesbians are represented on television shows airing between 2010 and 2019. The series viewed for this study span a combined decade, helping us better understand how representation has evolved and in what ways it still needs to improve. While many commonly used lesbian tropes have been researched and analyzed over the last few years, there is a lack of analysis discussing new themes and the impact they can have on an audience. Discovering changes as well as new emerging themes can further the discussion about representation and how to continue the betterment of these storylines. This qualitative content analysis will help further the conversation about representation by highlighting tropes still commonly used today as well as analyzing new themes, adding insights into what messaging is being shared about the lesbian identity. Through this analysis, audiences will become more aware of common tropes and emerging themes regarding lesbian characters on television. This will also help communications professionals in the entertainment field better identify what needs to be improved moving forward.

Literature Review

This review of literature discusses the quantity of LGBT characters on television over the years, LGBT stereotypes and tropes on television, and why representations of LGBT individuals' matter.

LGBT Representation by the Numbers

Since the 1960s LGBT characters have been included on screen and several studies have focused on the quantity of LGBT characters on television to discuss the growth in representation. A study that examined Australian, English, and American television programs discovered “...over thirty television networks that have depicted gay characters, specifically documenting one gay character in the 1960s, 58 characters in the 1970s, 89 in the 1980s and 306 in the 1990s” (Chung, 2007, p. 100). This list highlights the continually growing number of gay characters on television over this period. Other studies have also analyzed the quantitative growth of LGBT characters on television focusing on more modern examples.

While globally the numbers of LGBT characters have improved greatly decade by decade, a closer examination of American television tells a different story. In the early 2000s, LGBT representation was rare in the United States. Fisher, et. al (2007) found that between the 2001-2002 television season, only one in six shows had any “nonheterosexual” content. Fisher et al. defined “nonheterosexual” as any content that reflects LGBTQ sexual discussion or actions. The study used random sampling of popular adolescent television programs and coded sexual topics discussed by characters as same-sex or not (Fisher et. al., 2007). The study did not give an age range for adolescents; however, the World Health Organization has bracketed this range between 10 and 19 years old (World Health Organization, 2021). While the study examined 2,715 episodes that aired over the course of 2 years, it noted an increase in these topics even during this period.

In 2016, GLAAD reported that only forty-three regular characters on primetime, scripted television identified as LGBTQ (Where We Are on TV Report, 2016). GLAAD counts original scripted series, where casting is announced by the network, airing in primetime between June 1,

2016 and May 31, 2017 (Where we Are on TV Report, 2016). This yearly report continues to mark the rise in the number of LGBT characters on television. As of 2019, “of the 879 regular characters expected to appear on broadcast scripted primetime programming this season, 90 were identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer” (Where We Are on TV Report, 2019, p. 6). While the number of LGBT characters on television has improved over the decades, these studies fail to examine the depictions of the representation. It is vital to look at the quality of these characters, not quantity, to gain a better understanding of stereotypes and how they are enforced by networks.

History of Stereotypes

Stereotypes of LGBT individuals have been perpetuated and repeated throughout history. Stereotype can be defined as “a learned association between two social concepts that do not define each other” (Cox et.al., 2012, p. 427). Prejudice can be learned through teachers, parents, and peers. Whether subconsciously or intentionally, adults can convey their attitudes about a group of people to children (Hannam, 1978). These ideas have been passed down from adult to child over the course of history. With the rise of media such as television, stereotypes can be passed to children and adolescents more easily. One study found that, “Usually, what hostile prejudice there is the children bring to the school from home, or they learn from talking to their own age groups, watching television and reading their comics” (Hannam, 1978, p. 26). The popularity of television has changed the way stereotypes are spread and enforced in society; this includes LGBT stereotypes.

Hart’s (2000) essay examined the history of gay male representation on television. To note, many studies only include one or two subgroups and did not study the LGBT community as a whole. By examining previous studies analyzing gay men on television over forty years, Hart

examined how gay men were represented and how this representation has changed, or not, decade to decade. The 1967 documentary, “The Homosexuals” unintentionally established the misconception that gay men are weak and pitiful. This stereotype has persisted until the early 2000s, with gay male characters being portrayed as effeminate and a nonthreat to the straight male characters (Hart, 2000). Even when media is celebrated for its representation, stereotypical depictions prevail.

Will and Grace made history with an openly gay lead, helping reshape America’s perception of this group. However, the show still presented Will as a feminine, unthreatening character. He was presented as shallow and attention seeking, obsessed with beauty and fashion. Stereotypes like this can be dangerous, with one study finding, “the portrayal of lesbian and gay stereotypes in the media misleads the general public into thinking that being lesbian or gay is a matter of performance or lifestyle choice” (Chung, 2007, p. 101). Shows like *Will and Grace* enforced the that gay men only care about their looks, drinking, and fashion, simplifying a complex identity into bullet points.

Similar studies have focused on lesbian representation in television and film. A prominent stereotype in lesbian representation has been the “butch” lesbian where these women were presented as masculine and presented similarly to straight men (Kite & Deaux, 1987). Through the lens of inversion theory, the researchers examine how lesbian and gay stereotypes formed based on the opposite sex. The portrayal of lesbians presented these women with short hair, dressed in masculine clothes, and treated others the way heterosexual men did. It was noted, however, that with the attention of the AIDS pandemic, gay men have a “more clearly formed stereotype...than of lesbians” (Kite & Deaux, 1987, p. 92). While a more masculine presentation was common, this was not the only lesbian stereotype.

Similar to depictions of lesbians, bisexual representation, both male and female, on television has also fallen into a pattern. Through content analysis, Meyer (2010) found that bisexual characters do not fall into coming out narratives unlike gay and lesbian characters. While gay and lesbian characters found stability through their sexual discovery, bisexual character's coming out narratives were brought on by outside crises (Meyer, 2010). These representations can enforce the idea that bisexual individuals just "haven't made up their mind" and that stability can only come with a choice of gender to be attracted to. This can negatively impact the way straight and gay individuals view bisexuality. While bisexual stereotypes vary from gay and lesbian ones, there is some overlap.

A 2017 content analysis found that early transgender representation was almost always rooted in negative stereotypes that included being deceivers. Of the nine characters analyzed for this study, five of the characters were portrayed by cisgender actors (Capuzza & Spencer 2017). For trans women, the stereotypes were rooted in hyper-femininity and hyper-sexuality (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Trans men and nonbinary individuals were represented less than trans women, making them almost invisible. The use of cisgender actors as well as the imitative way trans characters are portrayed on television creates a perception that transgender people cannot assimilate or a deceiving the public.

Evil/Dead Lesbian

While the previous section highlighted the general stereotypes of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters on screen, the following subsections highlight some commonly used tropes for lesbian narratives and characters. Tropes is defined as "a common or overused theme or device" (Miriam-Webster, 2020). The evil/dead lesbian, bury your gays, the feminine lesbian,

male gaze, and tokenism are all discussed in this literature review in order for the reader to gain a better understanding of these themes as they impact later analysis.

Millward, Dodd, and Fubara-Manuel (2017) noted that while lesbians were voraciously consuming LGBT media, their representation continuously fell under “The evil/dead lesbian” trope. This stereotype was defined as,

Another technique to limit lesbian possibility is to dehumanize the lesbian character. There are two common ways to achieve this. One is to make her expendable to kill her...The other way to dehumanize her is to make her evil, a negative and unsympathetic force with which the audience (readers or viewers) cannot identify (Millward et. al., 2017, p. 13).

By being expendable or an evil character, it was easier to dehumanize lesbian characters by preventing sympathy from audiences (Millward et. al., 2017). These stereotypes continue to persist on television today.

Bury Your Gays

The “evil/dead lesbian” stereotype, as previously identified by Millward et al., has evolved more recently into the “Bury your gays” trope, widening its reach to bisexual female characters. While there is no noted origin in the transformation from evil/dead lesbian to bury your gays, Deshler (2017) notes that TVTropes.com has been using it since 2010 and the use of this title has gained popularity on social media websites like Twitter and Tumblr. Dead lesbians/bury your gays originated in the 19th century as a way for writers to include LGBT representation into their works without receiving social backlash (Hulan, 2017). This trope most commonly entails a same sex couple confessing their feelings for one another, having sex for the first time, and one of them dying shortly after (Hulan, 2017). No longer needing to evade social backlash, killing

these characters is now used for “shock value” and has become the norm for lesbian and bisexual characters. (Waggoner, 2018). Autostraddle, a popular media website for queer women, found that from 1976-2016, there have been 1,586 shows with straight characters and 193 shows with lesbian/bisexual characters on American scripted shows. Of those 193 shows, 68 of them had a lesbian or bisexual character die. For comparison, 12 of those shows had a male character of equal narrative importance die (Hogan, 2016). The prevalence of dead lesbians and now bisexual characters reinforces the idea of expendability to viewers. GLAAD found in 2016 that “more than 25 queer female characters have died on scripted television and streaming series. Most of these deaths served no other purpose than to further the narrative of a more central (and often straight, cisgender) character” (Where We Are on TV Report, 2016, p. 3). In 2019 GLAAD noted that the number of lesbian characters had increased to 8 points to 33%, and that increase put primetime television shows back to the numbers before 2016. Additionally, GLAAD found that more lesbian and bi female characters were series regulars, making them less likely to be killed off (Where We Are on TV Report, 2019). However, the more recent reports have stopped tracking the number of lesbian and bi character deaths. The overwhelming death on television has helped evolve the “evil/dead lesbian” trope.

A content analysis of *The 100*, which aired on the CW, discussed the impacts of the bury your gays trope and the fallout of the show’s lesbian death. The relationship between Clarke, the protagonist, and Lexa was nuanced and complex. The build up to their romantic entanglement kept people tuning in every week. However, this took a turn for the worst during the show’s third season when Lexa is killed not for a narrative purpose, but for shock value. The use of a lesbian death for shock is not a new concept, as Deshler (2017) highlights,

In Season 6, episode 19 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) ... Willow's girlfriend Tara is shot by a stray bullet just after they have their first on-screen love scene. In Season 3, episode 7 of *The 100* (2014) ... the same sequence of events occurs (p. 42).

The 100 killing Lexa in almost the same way as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* killed Tara almost twenty years prior shows how often and unoriginal these deaths can be. Lexa's death sparked a movement called "LGBT Fans Deserve Better," calling out shows like *The 100* and others who use LGBT characters to lure in an audience only to kill them for "shock value" (Deshler, 2017). Bury your gays has been discussed at length since 2016 due to extreme use of this trope, but other lesbian stereotypes have been left unexamined.

The Feminine Lesbian

The visual representation of lesbian characters has drastically changed as representation evolved. The butch stereotype has diminished over the years, shifting representation to reflect a more feminine, heteronormative model. This trend is demonstrated in *Coronation Street*, one of Britain's longest running soap operas, which introduced a lesbian relationship in 2009 between Sophie and Sian, in order to add diversity to its story telling. The women's story of coming out and acceptance was embraced by audiences, no doubt helped by their unassuming coding. In a content analysis of *Coronation Street*, "Sophie and Sian are coded through a youthful, white, "everyday" femininity, integrated into the visual conventions of the soap opera. Indeed, this absence of difference is a defining feature of the lesbian normal" (McNicholas Smith & Tyler, 2016, p. 323). The butch identity was not a viable option for the *Coronation Street* characters as it normally was used to subvert heterosexuality, not homogenize with it. The characters are, virtually indistinguishable from straight characters on the show and do not challenge the

heterosexual norms (McNicholas Smith & Tyler, 2016). The feminine, “straight passing” lesbian has become the norm, creating a more homogenized group.

In the United States, *The L Word*'s cast of characters embodied the unthreatening, feminine lesbian, leaving butch representation completely out of the narrative. While the show was deemed groundbreaking at the time, “the hype surrounding *The L Word*...ushers in a new era of lesbian visibility and representation to the mainstream, which presents fashionable and glamorous images of lesbianism to counter ‘the stereotype’ of lesbianism” (Beirne, 2016, p. 94). This show transformed the visible lesbian from the “butch lesbian” to the “lipstick lesbian” with the majority of the main and supporting cast fitting into a homogenized white, thin, feminine look. The couples also moved away from and challenged the “butch/femme aesthetic” and into a “femme/femme aesthetic” (Beirne, 2016). *The L Word* further homogenized lesbian visibility on television and enforced the new normal.

Modern television shows follow the “lipstick lesbian” model more often than not. Monaghan stated, “‘the lesbian normal’ is reflected in soap operas that associate lesbianism with conservative white middle-class ideals of femininity, which results in the establishment of hierarchies marginalizing lesbian identities that do not meet these patriarchal heteronormative standards” (Monaghan, 2020, p. 432). Some believe we have moved into a post-gay era of representation. This era of television can be defined as when audiences were ready for shows that didn't focus on a character's sexuality or coming out and they could just exist as another person on screen (Monaghan, 2020). While the thought is idealistic, post-gay representation can really mean reinforcing the normal, unthreatening stereotypes of the LGBT community.

Seif's content analysis examined current broadcast television show's representations of gay and lesbian characters. This analysis utilized Stuart Hall's representation theory to examine the

ways in which these characters fit into heteronormative ideals. While Seif found that gay men were represented as effeminate, the lesbian characters all were depicted as more feminine (Seif, 2017). While gay male stereotypes has stagnated and persisted over the years, the lesbian stereotype has evolved.

The Male Gaze

The male gaze effects the way that women of all sexualities are presented to an audience. One article stated, “Through the male gaze, the female body becomes territory, a valuable resource to be acquired” (Ponterotto, 2016, p. 147). Media can portray women as objects to be conquered by men, and something to be desired. This not only affects straight women, but lesbian representation. A study focused on lesbian representation and lesbian perceptions said, “previous research has found that sexual minority women are primarily sexualized by men” (Annati & Ramsey, 2021, para. 8). The study goes onto say that this representation of a sexualized lesbian can negatively impact how young lesbians learn what lesbians should look like and what their romantic relationships should be like (Annati & Ramsey, 2021). .

The L Word was criticized for feeding into the male gaze ideals of what lesbians should be, and how their characters were portrayed as the model for lesbianism as a whole. In a study focused on how *The L Word* feeds into the male gaze, Wolfe and Roripaugh note,

Perhaps even more disturbing, the accommodation of this phallogentric male gaze is handled in such a way as to encourage the concomitant implication that the lesbians represented in the show are sexually available to men – men who, in true form to male pornographic fantasy, are routinely “invited” (an “invitation” that is thereby extended, by proxy, to the male television view) to “participate” in scenes of lesbian sex either as voyeurs, disruptive witnesses, or actual participants. Over and over again throughout the

show, male figures are repeatedly insinuated into scenes of lesbian sex, creating a series of bizarre triangulations or threesomes (Wolfe & Roripaugh, 2010, para. 5).

Through voyeurism or express invitation to men on the show, *The L Word* encouraged the male gaze to gain viewership. Having conventionally attractive, heterosexual passing lesbian characters be the dominant presentation of lesbianism on the show warped the perception of what a lesbian should be and encouraged the male gaze. Annati and Ramsey's study analyzed how lesbians feel about the lesbian representation they saw on screen. Their findings concluded, "Other common themes present in responses included that lesbian portrayals are negative (36.4%), for the male gaze (30.1%), and hypersexualized (20.5%)" (Annati & Ramsey, 2021, para. 36). This assessment of lesbian representation has not changed from the airing of *The L Word* in the early 2000s.

Tokenism

One way that television shows can avoid criticism about the lack of diversity is through tokenism. Grant (2017) defines tokenism as, "the practice of appeasing or placating a demand for a particular course of action. This act of placation is generally perceived as both instrumentally unsatisfactory and morally inadequate" (p. 2). This inclusion usually involves only having one of each character "type;" one gay character, one Black character, one woman, etc. These characters tend to fit overused stereotypes, as the intention is low effort representation. Tokenism in a television show can make it feel like there is a checklist that writers are working through, only including one of each character type. By only including one of each character type, the narratives in different shows can appear identical to each other or predictable. This kind of writing can become obvious to viewers, and they start expecting certain story lines for certain types of

characters (Kessler, 2011). Every character fits a type or mold, making the story telling predictable and unreflective of the real world.

Kohnen (2015) analyzed how ABC Family's *The Foster's* diversity was an intentional way to maintain the company's brand. While on the surface, *The Foster's* can be viewed as a diversity triumph, Kohnen notes,

The phrase "programming reflecting today's families" is of particular significance to *The Fosters*—this is the type of contemporary family that ABC Family imagines its target millennial audience will find "relatable." The phrase "diversity, passion, humor, and heart" frequently appears in trade press articles about ABC Family, underlining the centrality of diversity to the channel's brand (Kohnen, 2015, p. 91).

While *The Foster's* was praised for its diverse stories by audiences and critics, Kohnen argues that their use of diversity in their mission statements and press releases highlights the intentionality of creating this show, and how the brand wants to be celebrated for it. Including diverse stories in shows is an intentional choice by a media company. However, by only including the bare minimum, it can leave audiences bitter and bored.

Why Representation Matters

The way minority groups are portrayed on television can influence public perception. Huston et al. found that even if people recognize the source material is fictional, its messages and images shape beliefs about the real world. Negative messages and images can create stereotypes that can enforce racism, bigotry as well as have negative effects on the self-esteem of members of that group (Huston et al, 1993). This holds true for LGBT representations and perceptions as well. A 2012 report by The Human Rights Campaign found that 92% of LGBT youth ages 13-17 hear negative messages about being LGBT from school, religious and elected leaders, family,

internet, and television/movies. From that 92%, 46% reported these messages came from TV and movies (Growing Up LGBT in America, 2012).

LGBT representation can have positive impacts as well, giving a voice to a marginalized group. Pop culture can bring awareness and comfort to viewers, making it easier to identify with LGBT characters. One study found that “Individuals in popular culture who personally identify with the LGBTQ community offer appropriate empathy and portrayals regarding the difficulties in coming out, fleeting family support, and labeling” (Comer, Bower, & Sparkman, 2014, p. 47). This study also discovered that pop culture can play a role in normalizing feelings and reinforces exposure to the LGBT community (Comer, Bower, & Sparkman, 2014). Media representation can have positive and negative effects on an audience. However, negative messages, including stereotypes, can have a strong effect on public perceptions of minority groups.

By analyzing LGBT representation in television and film across cultures, Gilad found that “bullying and bashing of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) persons (particularly adolescents) have become common themes in popular communications of the 1990s and 2000s” (Gilad, 2007, p. 105). Cook’s 2018 study analyzed representation on broadcasting and streaming shows. The shows in the study were chosen using a LGBT-oriented TV guide “The Lavender Tube” or GLAAD resources. Characters were selected based on “a) appeared on-screen; b) was named; and c) spoke dialogue at some point in the five analyzed episodes” (Cook, 2018, p. 18). The shows were coded by character interactions like homosexual jokes, sexual encounters, violence, self-harm, etc. (Cook, 2018). Out of the 40 characters analyzed that were victims of violence, 5 were LGBT identifying (Cook, 2018). The Human Rights Campaign reported that 17% of surveyed individuals reported being physically attacked for their sexuality

(Growing Up LGBT in America, 2012). Violence toward the LGBT community on television can affect individuals viewing these television programs.

The use of these stereotypes can have an impact on LGBT individuals and how they view themselves and their place in the world. One study interviewed 18 to 22-year-old LGBT identifying individuals who consume some form of traditional media 20 hours per week to gain a better understanding of how LGBT representation impacts them (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Questions asked by the researchers included, “How does media representation of LGBTQ young people impact you?”, and “What role do you think media plays in the lives of young people generally, and LGBTQ young people specifically?” (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 36). The study found that representation on television can be validating, with one interviewee stating, “It was probably on *The L Word* [that I first saw a LGBTQ character]. I was 15 or 14 and that’s what was so exciting... They were like right there in the real world. And it felt legitimizing” (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p.38). On the other hand, the people being interviewed highlighted the limited storylines given to LGBT characters and the expected trajectories, and that they are mostly broad, unnuanced strokes of the LGBT experience with one person noting, that LGBT characters primary conflict is the struggle with their sexuality. If the only focus of a LGBT character is their struggle, then that is all that is being perceived about being queer (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Another participant stated, “So we have the jock, we have the cheerleader, we have the nerd ... and now we’re starting to ... have the queer kid, the transgender kid, the gay kid, the lesbian kid ... But they’re not as represented as they should be” (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 40). While seeing gay characters can be validating, the overall flat representation can leave viewers disheartened and disappointed.

Cultivation Theory and Framing Theory

Cultivation and framing theories go hand in hand when understanding messaging. Framing theory is defined as "...select[ing] some aspects of perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 55). Two uses of framing that will be leveraged for this study are valence and storytelling. Valence framing represents information in either a positive or negative light: (Hallahan, 1999). Storytelling is a form of framing that, "involves (a) selecting key themes or ideas that are the focus of the message and (b) incorporating a variety of storytelling or narrative techniques that support that theme" (Hallahan, 1999, p. 207). By framing only certain aspects of the LGBT experience or one perceived look of a LGBT person, framing in media can influence the way the public relates to or understands LGBT individuals.

Cultivation theory looks deeper into how media's story telling can influence public perceptions. Gerbner (1998) explained cultivation as,

Institutional needs and objectives influence the creation and distribution of mass-produced messages which create, fit into, exploit, and sustain the needs, values, and ideologies of mass publics. These publics, in turn, acquire distinct identities as publics partly through exposure to the ongoing flow of messages (p.180).

Media messages can enforce or change social norms and ideologies, influencing the way the public views themselves or marginalized groups. Enforcing stereotypes or framing a group in a negative light on television can have impacts in the real world and how those people are perceived. Gerbner notes that cultivation is not a static process, but rather changes as society does. He states, "A radical change in society may, of course, lead to change in the system of messages and consequently to the cultivation of new and different perspectives" (Gerbner, 1998,

p.180). Using cultivation theory as a lens for this analysis will allow for a more in depth understanding of how social norms can influence and change media representation and vice versa.

Overall, the literature highlights how far representations have come, but also how many negative tropes and messages are still around today. Tropes such as bury your gays or the male gaze limits how lesbian characters are presented, making it difficult to move past the expendable character or one that is only there for the benefit of the male audience. The impact of these messages has a direct effect on viewers, who struggle to see themselves represented in an accurate or positive way. This analysis will utilize the existing work to discover any shared themes or ideas that were previously noted in the literature review. This will also be used to support any commonalities between the content analyzed in order to show how themes can persist. The research questions for this analysis not only focus on if lesbians are represented, but rather the context of this representation through narrative, themes, and romantic plot lines.

In order to better understand how lesbians were portrayed, analyzing how they were included in narratives was key. Lesbians and LGBT characters in general are rarely the protagonist of a show, and therefore could not be involved in every plot relevant arc. However, that doesn't mean they have to be excluded from key narratives. Most shows have a number of plots running in tandem per episode and noting where the lesbian characters were placed could help better understand the character's importance in each series. Additionally, these characters do not live separate from others on their show. How other characters talk about the lesbian ones adds additional insight into how the series valued them.

While there are many pre-existing tropes for lesbian characters, that doesn't mean that there aren't other common themes emerging. Omitting established tropes from this thesis would have

been difficult, however making new discoveries about emerging themes was also key for analysis. Combining the two concepts into one research question allowed for new and old themes into the analysis and strengthening any findings.

Finally, as romance is the focus of so many lesbian characters, it was vital to include this as a research question. Romance can be exciting and fun for an audience, however it can be limiting for lesbian characters, only allowing their inclusion in the narrative to be in this way. Ideas about romance can also be varied, with some stories revolving around the fight to be together while others are about just trying to find that one person. Lesbian romances are often the ways that characters explore their sexuality, as they never had feelings for another girl before. Lesbian love stories are often tragic or end up with both parties unhappy, so it was important to give space to these types of issues for this analysis. This research question was chosen to ensure that the love lives of lesbian characters were focused on in order to better understand the messaging around them.

Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways are lesbian characters included in the main narrative of a show? How are these characters discussed by others?

RQ2: What themes or tropes are explored through these characters?

RQ3: What messages about romance are told through the lesbian relationship(s) on the show?

Methodology and Research Design

A qualitative content analysis was selected in order to accurately analyze the portrayals of lesbian characters using specific examples from media in order to understand the common themes between characters written between 2010 and 2019, including new and emerging themes

as well as existing tropes. This method of research, “begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). This method allowed for an analysis of visual messaging (how characters are physically presented) and belief messaging (what the show is telling the audience about lesbian identities). Miller utilized content analysis for his study on how transgender Youtubers can be utilized as an educational resource in order to understand and examine themes, specific issues raised in videos, and the educational value for viewers (Miller, 2017). Jacobs and Meeusen leveraged content analysis in order to understand how LGBT individuals were framed in news media as acceptance progressed (Jacobs & Meeusen, 2020). Content analysis was used for Signorielli and Bacue’s study to examine the treatment of prime-time TV characters over the course of 30 years. Content analysis allows for a breadth of studies, whether it’s broad ones like Himes and Thompson’s analysis on fat stigmatization in movies and television between 1984 and 2004 or more specific studies like Sink and Mastro’s (2017) random sampling of one week’s worth of primetime television to analyze their depictions of gender. This method can be utilized for a broad scope of studies and can fit the needs of the current study. Content analysis also allowed for an in-depth view into television shows on networks that were among the top broadcast and cable networks for quantity of LGBT representation (Where We Are on TV Report, 2021). For this study, embedded analysis was leveraged to explore lesbian representations over multiple artifacts in order to find common themes amongst different genres of teen television (Creswell, 2007).

As a lesbian who avidly watched lesbian and bisexual characters on television during my youth, I am aware of commonly used tropes and messages about lesbian characters and look at this representation with scrutiny. My sexuality and experiences have provided me knowledge of

stereotypes and how they align or stray from the varied experiences of being a lesbian. Through my own viewings and previous research, I am aware of named tropes such as “bury your gays” and am familiar with the narrative patterns of LGBT media. While my knowledge of existing tropes makes it easier for me to identify them, this insight is only a surface level analysis, and will not bias it. The purpose of this thesis is to objectively observe patterns on television, and I only aim to note the existing stereotypes as part of the analysis.

Artifact Selection

Television series were initially selected based on the networks in which they aired. Networks was selected as a factor as some networks’ target audience are teenagers and young adults. By having this age range as a target audience, teens are more likely to view these series. Freeform (previously ABC Family) was identified as a network as their target audience is ages fourteen to thirty-four (Wagmeister, 2015). The CW was selected based on the target demographic being ages eighteen to thirty-four (Gough & Hibberd, 2008). Netflix was selected based on the wide variety of series, including shows for kids to adults and for its popularity, with 214 million subscribers worldwide (Chan, 2021). Drama series airing on the CW, Freeform, and Shows with TV parental rating of either PG or TV-14 were then selected after the networks were chosen. TV PG is defined as “parental guidance suggested and can contain images unsuitable for younger children” (The V-chip: Options to restrict what your children watch on TV, 2020). Popular shows that have been rated TV PG include Modern Family, Avatar: The Last Airbender, and A Series of Unfortunate Events. The TV-14 rating is defined as the content not suitable for children under the age of 14 (The V-chip: Options to restrict what your children watch on TV, 2020). Popular TV-14 shows include Arrow, Glee, and New Girl. Drama and comedy series were selected over genre series (i.e., Fantasy, Super-hero, etc.) as their settings were rooted in a

reality similar to the viewers. As the goal of the study was to examine how lesbian characters and their relationships are portrayed and what messages are being shown to younger audiences, genre television shows did not fit the needs. While fantasy and sci-fi shows can have canonically LGBT characters, messages about otherness can be muddled with metaphors. When discussing vampirism, for example, Jami McFarland states, “Monsters offer some of the most egregious representations of race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality. Far from being apolitical creatures that simply fascinate and frighten, monsters embody constitutive difference or ‘otherness’” (McFarland, 2016, p. 2). In *The Vampire Diaries*, people “come out” as vampires, with one character undergoing “conversion therapy” to try and turn her back to human. Shows with lead or reoccurring lesbian characters were selected to ensure that the research questions could be fully analyzed. Lesbian characters might not appear or come out until later seasons, but they would still be analyzed as such. Finally, shows were selected if they were completed or cancelled.

Three shows were selected for this analysis: *Pretty Little Liars*, *Jane the Virgin*, and *One Day At a Time*. *Pretty Little Liars* was a drama series that followed four friends reunited a year after the mysterious disappearance of their friend, Allison. Once the girls reconcile, they start being blackmailed by “A”, an unknown omnipresent threat. The friends dealt with the trials and tribulations of high school as well as forced to solve evolving mysteries surrounding the identity of “A” and the perceived murder of Allison. Airing on Freeform (previously ABC Family), *Pretty Little Liars* premiered in 2010 and was met with high acclaim from organizations like GLAAD for their inclusion of a lesbian character and her relatable coming out storyline. Emily Fields was one of a handful of LGBT characters on screen and helped propel representation forward. However, by the series finale in 2017, it appeared that television representation as a

whole had outpaced the show. *Pretty Little Liars* ran for seven seasons and at its peak in 2011 had on average 4.2 million viewers (Levin, 2017). The largest demographic of viewers were women ages 12-34 (Ng, 2013). *Melissa and Joey*, another show airing on Freeform, ran for four seasons starting in 2010 and “was the networks highest rated sitcom” (Goldberg, 2015). No further ratings information was discovered for *Melissa and Joey*.

One Day At a Time followed the life of a recently divorced woman, her two kids, and her own mother trying to navigate life in L.A. This sitcom, originally premiering on Netflix, dealt with real life issues like military PTSD, blossoming teen romance, and the reality of being an immigrant in the United States. Airing between 2017 and 2020, the show was celebrated for its coming out narrative and inclusion of a nonbinary character. Elena, the lesbian daughter, explored the intersectionality of being a lesbian and Cuban-American, highlighting the unique struggles that brings. This series was also highly acclaimed by GLAAD for its intersectionality and stories about a community that is not well represented in media. After being cancelled after three seasons, Pop TV picked it up for a fourth, ultimately being cancelled after that. *One Day at a Time* peaked in viewership in season three with 1.63 million viewers (White, 2019).

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, was another sitcom airing at the time and ran for four seasons. However Netflix rarely discloses their viewership data making it difficult to gauge audience numbers. In 2015, one report found 7.3% of subscribers tuned in for the first day of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*'s release (Rich, 2015). No further data was discovered for this thesis

Jane the Virgin, a dramatic comedy, followed the story of Jane, a 23-year-old student who accidentally becomes pregnant after a medical mix up. The CW's telenovela follows these characters through their daily lives like work and relationships, and heightened drama like faked

deaths and over the top betrayals. Airing between 2014 and 2019, there were several reoccurring queer female characters in the series including Luisa, Rafael's sister, and Petra, Rafael's ex-wife. Luisa was an out lesbian from the outset of her character introduction and did not have to go through a self-acceptance phase or a coming out on screen. She did have to deal with her manipulate evil ex-girlfriend, who popped in and out of the series. In later seasons, Petra realized she was attracted to women as well as men, and spent a number of episodes coming to terms with her sexuality as well as coming out. She eventually found a romantic connection with another woman, Jane Ramos. *Jane the Virgin*, while not equally celebrated by GLAAD like the other series, was deeply loved by queer viewers. Autostraddle, a queer media website, reviewed and recapped the show from the beginning, "It's only been the first episode of the show but the way they portrayed a queer Latina is a breath of fresh air compared to other portrayals of queer Latinas" (Yvonne, 2014). While the series main focus is not the queer woman, it was still an important aspect of the narrative that kept viewers coming back. *Jane the Virgin*'s season four had on average a 0.2 rating with its series finale clocking in 660,000 viewers (Ramos, 2019). *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, also airing on the CW around a similar time, ran for four seasons. When the show premiered it was averaging 1.05 million viewers, however similarly to *Jane the Virgin*, viewership for its finale and final season dropped to 582,000 viewers (Porter, 2019).

All three television shows were chosen for their inclusion of lesbian characters where their lesbianism was discussed by themselves and others. *Pretty Little Liars* and *One Day At a Time* were also selected as they included coming out storylines. *Jane the Virgin* was selected for having an out character from the start. All three series were selected for including romance plots for their lesbian characters having some variety in story lines will allow for better analysis overarching messages and themes throughout teen television.

Examining series with different genres will help gain a better understanding of messaging across a spectrum as opposed to exclusively focusing on one category like sitcom or drama. How the messaging differs or is similar will help gain insights on improvements needed or where commonalities lie, making it easier to pinpoint reoccurring tropes or emerging themes.

Procedures

Character descriptions were completed for each lesbian character presented in the episodes analyzed. Character descriptions included physical description, personality, and any tropes based on appearance (i.e., butch lesbian). Themes, messages, or key discussions surrounding the lesbian character were noted and highlighted for further review. The dynamic of romantic relationships were also highlighted. Dialogue was either notation or pinged in the script of the episode to further analyze verbal messaging. Notes in relation to narrative inclusion, themes or tropes, and romantic messaging were taken for each episode of television viewed.

Data Analysis

Once each season of television was viewed in full, the notes for each episode were compiled and analyzed. For *Pretty Little Liars* all seven seasons were initially viewed, and episodes that included storylines that focused Emily and explicitly Emily's sexuality were noted for further review. These could be episodes where she has the most screen time, episodes where coming out was discussed, or discussions about her sexuality or love life were present. In total seven forty-five-minute episodes were watched for the purposes of this analysis. These episodes were viewed on HBOMax, as they have the streaming rights to the show. All four seasons of *One Day at a Time* were viewed for the same purpose as before, making note of Elena focused episodes. Five thirty-minute episodes of *One Day at a Time* were selected for analysis as Elena had more plot centric episodes and screen time as compared to the other characters chosen for

this thesis. This show was viewed on Netflix and PopTV as Netflix does not have season four on their website. For *Jane the Virgin*, all five seasons were viewed and Luisa's episodes noted. In total, ten forty-five-minute episodes were selected for review due to Luisa's limited screen time. *Jane the Virgin* was viewed on Netflix as they have the streaming rights. Each episode was viewed and analyzed independently in order to collect findings per show. Notes were taken for screen time, when the characters were discussed and how, including quotes, appearance, and any additional interesting findings during viewing. Time stamps were also noted during viewing to refer back to during analysis. Only once the individual analyses were complete were the shows considered in relation to one another. After this consideration, common findings were grouped and assigned a topic based on the related research question. Any additional findings not included in the research questions were also noted for further analysis and discussion. Additional coders were not considered for this thesis due to the timeframe and scale of the project.

Results

The following section discusses the results discovered from the content analysis. It is first organized by research question and then by subsequent themes found during analysis. Organizing by themes, and not only by research questions, will help provide further insight into the different subject matter that falls under each question and will help maintain a structure for the different findings. The focus of this section will be on any findings that more than one show shares in order to highlight the messaging enforced by multiple networks and series, however a handful of sections will highlight findings from only one show if they have fallen under a previously discussed theme or trope.

The Lack of Narrative Inclusion

Taking the backseat: The first research question asked, “In what ways are lesbian characters included in the main narrative of a show? How are these characters discussed by others?” The analysis found that overall, lesbian characters and their storylines rarely take the main storyline of an episode, even when in a lead role. In *Pretty Little Liars*, while Emily Fields is in the main four of the cast, her narratives tend to be lesser plots, only taking up a small amount of screen time each episode. *Pretty Little Liars*’ main cast consists of a group of friends, four girls, who are reunited a year after the disappearance of their friend Allison. While all four lead characters are involved in the narrative surrounding the main mystery, Emily focused narratives tend to take the backseat to her straight counterparts. In the same episode that Emily comes out to her parents, the episode after she comes out to her friends, one of the main four girls, Aria, reveals she is dating their English teacher (Dougherty, 2011). The entire group engages in the conversation with Aria after her reveal. Hannah tells the girls that she saw Aria get into someone’s car the night before, prompting Aria to tell her friends that she is dating their English teacher, Ezra Fitz. Her friends are obviously shocked, asking,

Emily: The call you got at the party, that was from [Mr. Fitz]?

Aria: I couldn’t tell. I couldn’t tell anyone. I promised Ezra.

Spencer: Ezra, whoa hold it. This is something that’s been going on? You and a teacher?

Emily: How long have you been seeing him?

Aria: Since right before school started.

Hannah: Okay so you don’t have a boyfriend in Iceland...And you were seeing a teacher when I fixed you up with Noel?

The scene continues with the girls asking questions about Aria and Ezra and is only interrupted when there is a knock on the door (Dougherty, 2011). In comparison when Emily came out to

her friends, and when she came out to her parents, only Aria asks any questions or is there to provide comfort. In Hannah's hospital room, Aria separately asks Emily,

Aria: You told them? How was that?

Emily: Rough.

Aria: Hey it's gonna be okay, Em.

Emily: I don't know what it's going to be, but I know it's going to be different.

Aria: I guess so.

Once this conversation is completed, the scene moves forward and Emily's coming out does not get mentioned again. (Dougherty, 2011). While the Aria reveal is a different kind of relationship outing, the show allows more time for the girls to process this than Emily's coming out, with all of them being involved in the conversation and asking questions. Emily is only given one friend for support. When it is revealed that A sent pictures of Emily and Maya kissing to Pam, Emily's mother, it is dropped within the same episode and never brought up again (King, 2010). Emily, for the most part, must deal with her struggle alone.

In *Jane the Virgin*, Luisa's narrative is given less priority than the rest of the cast's, even when her storyline drives the plot forward. In the pilot episode, Luisa is the one who accidentally inseminates Jane, giving the show its title and main narrative. Luisa is introduced in the pilot episode during a conversation with Rafael. The audience learns in that conversation that Luisa is Rafael's sister, Raf wants to divorce Petra, and that Luisa has a wife, Allison (Snyder Urman, 2014). Later in the episode as Luisa returns home a text overlay that reintroduces her to the audience. *Jane the Virgin* relies on these text overlays to introduce and remind audiences who each character is throughout the run of the show. The text says, "Dr. Luisa Alver. Rafael's Sister. Married*. *In Some States" (Snyder Urman, 2014). This overlay is there to remind the audience

that Luisa is gay and to provide us the information that she is a doctor, which will be important later on in the episode. In this short scene, Luisa discovers that Allison is cheating on her. This incident is the catalyst for Luisa accidentally inseminating Jane, introducing us to the main narrative of the show. However, the reason behind this mix up, Luisa's wife cheating on her, is a subplot that doesn't make it past the first episode. Allison is never shown, and we only hear her through phone calls. Even her divorce happens entirely off screen. Once Luisa's mistake is out in the open, her plot relevance drops significantly.

Luisa's on again off again lover, Rose, is also introduced in the pilot episode. The narrator states, "Later, when asked about the so-called Immaculate Conception of Jane Gloriana Villaneuva, Luisa Alver would say that it was the biggest mistake of her life." [Enter Rose] It wasn't" (Snyder Urman, 2014). The text overlay for Rose states, "Ex-Friend, Ex-Lover" (Snyder Urman, 2014). Luisa reaches out to Rose because she needs a lawyer and we learn through their conversation that Luisa is on probation with her job and that she has issues with alcohol. Once Rose's true identity is revealed in season one as the drug lord Sin Rostro, her plot becomes the looming background threat, only popping up occasionally each season. Despite her label as the villain of the show, her narrative is separate from the main cast's. When the lesbian characters are involved in the main plot of an episode, it doesn't focus on their sexuality or rarely moves the plot along.

A separate story: In general, *Pretty Little Liars* tends to keep romantic partners separate. Partners don't interact with the main four girls often, only having scenes with whichever girl they are dating. However, the partners and romantic plans of the straight characters are discussed between the four main girls. Emily doesn't get the same treatment. While the main plot of the series, the mystery of A, involves the other character's love interests and friends, it does not

include Emily. In season one, episode fifteen, Spencer helps Aria with her date with Ezra, providing her tickets to an art show. Aria shares this information with their friend, Hannah,

Aria: Spencer got these tickets for me and Ezra!

Hannah: You're taking Mr. Fitz?

Aria: Okay I really wish you'd just call him Ezra. And yes I'm taking him, he just doesn't know it yet, it's a surprise. I don't know I- I just figured that a date out of town would give us a chance to actually have a date.

Spencer: Yeah I get it, you guys do have the social lives of shut-ins (Goldsmith, 2011).

In season one, episode twenty, Hanna finds a gift from her boyfriend Caleb that she thinks is a surprise for her. Hanna excitedly shows Aria and Emily, prompting Aria to ask, "It's so pretty Hanna, when did he give it to you?" (Dougherty, 2011). Emily asks, "Why an owl?" as the gift is an owl necklace (Dougherty, 2011). Hanna goes on to explain why the animal has such significance to them. Within the same scene Emily sees her ex-girlfriend, Paige, talking to a boy, but Emily can't express her hurt at this because their relationship was a secret (Dougherty, 2011). In season one episode twelve, Aria wishes Maya luck about dinner with Emily's parents, "I'll see you guys later. Have fun tonight but FYI, if you decide to wear jeans, iron them" (Goldstick, 2011). The group of friends don't talk about Emily's romantic life unless her girlfriend is present for the conversation, unlike the how the girls discuss boyfriends as a group.

In *Jane the Virgin*, the trope of establishing lesbian characters as inherently separate from the show's main story arch is established by presenting Luisa as completely outside of Rafael and Janes life. When Rafael discusses Luisa, it's to exclaim what a burden she is, that she's probably drinking again, or that she is a pain. When it is revealed that Luisa's girlfriend, Eileen, might have killed someone, Rafael says frustratingly, "It must be connected to Rose. I knew my sister

was still involved with her!” (Sciarrotta, 2017). Rafael does the same thing to his ex-wife, Petra. In the pilot episode, Rafael wants to divorce Petra, telling her that “I think we bring out an ugly side in each other, don’t you think?” (Snyder Urman, 2014). However, Rafael annoyance or anger with Petra is discussed with her, not to a third party. The characters are allowed to talk out their issues with each other and come to a resolution. Luisa is not allowed the same with Rafael.

When Luisa is in episodes, her narratives do not start until one third to halfway through the episodes and cliffhangers involving her aren’t resolved in a timely manner. In the season one finale, Jane and Rafael’s son is kidnapped by Rose. In the premiere episode of season two, this cliffhanger is resolved and the child is returned safely. When it comes to cliffhangers revolving Luisa, she is not given the same treatment. In season three episode one, Luisa is kidnapped and it’s revealed that Rose has taken her to a submarine at the end of the episode. It is not further explored, however, until season three episode three, where the narrator has to jump in and say, “Ah. Here’s Luisa. So yeah, I definitely need to catch you up on these two” (Rivera & Schraft, 2016). The narrator goes on to share that Luisa has been missing for two months, which doesn’t seem like a worry for Rafael. Her story is very much on the outside looking in. These lesbian characters are stuck on the outskirts of the main focus of the show.

How lesbians are discussed by non-lesbian characters: While *One Day at a Time* is a sitcom, there aren’t jokes aiming at Elena’s sexuality that are cruel or intended for the audience to laugh at Elena. Rather, any gay jokes are presented as friendly, inside jokes that allow the viewer to laugh with (rather than laugh at) Elena. When Elena’s mother struggles with accepting Elena’s sexuality, there are several conversations about Elena without her present. After Elena comes out to her grandmother, she tells Penelope she does not accept her due to her religious beliefs,

Look, I know you are cool with this, but you have to understand. I am a religious woman.

And I'm sorry, I have a problem with Elena being gay. It goes against God! Although, God did make us in his image. And God doesn't make mistakes...And when it comes to the gays the pope did say 'Who am I to judge?' And the pope represents God. So what, am I going to go against the pope and God? Who the hell do I think I am? Okay. Okay. I'm good (Jones & Roth, 2017).

Penelope also struggles with accepting Elena and talks it out with a lesbian friend. She struggles over the fact that no one else seems to be affected by this news, stating,

My daughter came out to me and I'm not totally okay with it. And I hate myself for it...I should be feeling really happy that she feels comfortable enough to come out to me. But I just keep thinking it's not the way I pictured it (Jones & Roth, 2017).

These discussions are not in front of Elena, and the adults in the show work out their acceptance separate from her. When Elena's father doesn't accept her and tells her she's confused, Penelope steps up and stands up for Elena (Calderón Kellett & Royce, 2017). After her coming out, conversations around Elena's crush or relationship are lighthearted, and no one continues to think her sexuality is a phase.

In *Pretty Little Liars*, Emily's issues are rarely brought up with her group of friends, only when she is one on one. With other characters like Aria and Hannah, their personal or relationship issues are discussed as a group. Even if these characters ultimately have to deal with something alone, the other girls are there for support as a unit. After Emily is forced to come out to her friends by revealing she was in love with Alison, only Aria comes to comfort her. After the reveal Aria seeks out Emily separately and says, "I wish I'd known. Look, hey, Allison loved you, and I don't know if it was in the way that you wanted her to, but I know that she did"

(Goldstick, 2010). Emily is subject to hearing her mother and father discuss how being gay is a phase and that something is clearly wrong. In an argument with her husband, Pam says, “this isn’t something that she came up with on her own, it’s that girl from California, Maya...How are we going to fix this...that’s not who she is, this is what someone else is making her into...Maybe she’s experimenting” (Dougherty, 2011). After a tense dinner with Maya, Pam tells Emily to her face that she’s “...not okay with it. The whole thing makes me sick, sick to my stomach” (Goldstick, 2011). As the fallout of Emily’s coming out progresses, this comment is never addressed by Pam, and Emily never shares what happened with her friends. Conversations about her coming out or her relationships don’t occur unless Emily is present.

For the majority of *Jane the Virgin*, Luisa’s story is enwrapped with Rose and her abuse, or she is trying to get away, caught in the cycle. However, only the audience knows the extent of Luisa’s attempts to leave or the emotional abuse to which she is subject. Her brother, Rafael, sees her as a burden for the majority of the show. When Rose kidnaps Luisa so they can run away together, Rafael assumes she just ran off in typical Luisa fashion (Rivera & Schraft, 2016). He also doesn’t trust Luisa or her girlfriends. When introduced to Eileen, Raf doesn’t trust her, immediately saying, “If you want to be in my sister’s life, or mine, we need to do some medical tests...(Luisa) your last girlfriend was a criminal with a fake face” (Schraft & Snyder Urman, 2017). While their relationship starts to improve over time, Rafael still sees Luisa as a burden and acts annoyed or inconvenienced when she’s in town. Once it’s revealed the Eileen is in fact Rose, and Luisa thinks she wanted to change, Rafael loses it and says,

Oh my god you are completely delusional. Totally crazy! Just like your mother and you know what? I am done pretending that you’re not. I don’t care what you do now that

Rose is behind bars, as long as you stay the hell away from me and my family! (Schraft & Snyder Urman, 2017).

This is not relation to her sexuality, but rather the woman she is dating, the crime lord who killed her and Rafael's father. Overall, how these characters are discussed varies between shows, however these characters aren't often discussed outside of themselves.

Themes Old and New

As indicated in the Literature Review section of this thesis, tropes were defined as “a common or overused theme or device” (Miriam-Webster, 2020). Tropes such as “bury your gays” and the “feminine lesbian” were identified as most commonly used per the Literature Review. Any themes that weren't common or overused were separately noted to track any new trends.

The Feminine Lesbian: The second research question asked, “What themes or tropes are explored through these characters?” All three lesbian characters analyzed in this thesis have more feminine attributes and are more feminine presenting, fitting into the conservative middle-class ideals of femininity that Monaghan (2020) identified. Emily, Luisa, and Elena all have long hair and wear some form of makeup. Emily and Elena wear a mix of skirts, dresses, and pants while Luisa wears almost exclusively sundresses. Elena does prefer suits and will lean more masculine in a formal setting fitting with Kite and Deaux's understanding of lesbian stereotypes, however this is the only instance of a more masculine appearance. Emily and Luisa wear dresses and heavy makeup for their formal looks, encapsulating the “lesbian chic” look popularized by *The L Word* (Beirne, 2016). Although Emily is labelled the “sporty one” she still presents in a feminine way (King, 2010). All three women fit the feminine lesbian definition as virtually indistinguishable from their heterosexual peers” and do not challenge the “norm” (McNicholas

Smith & Tyler, 2016). Even the romantic partners of the lesbian characters more often than not fit the “femme/femme aesthetic” that Beirne identified *The L Word* establishing in the early 2000s. These characters and their relationships perpetuate the ideal heteronormative ideology of femininity, enforcing the hierarchies of lesbian identities and perpetuating the heteronormative standard that Monaghan warned of. The feminine lesbian has taken hold of lesbian characters throughout all the shows analyzed.

The Evil/dead lesbian: Millward et. al (2017) previously defined the evil/dead lesbian trope as a way to dehumanize a lesbian character by making her expendable. This was done through killing her or by making her unidentifiable to audiences through evil or negative actions (Millward et al., 2017). *Jane the Virgin*'s main antagonist, Rose, encapsulates this definition through her actions throughout the show. Rose, also known as Sin Rostro, is a Miami drug lord who also is in the business of changing criminals faces with an underground plastic surgery ring. She is married to Luisa and Rafael's father and wants to inherit his hotel business so she can continue her illegal plastic surgery. Once she is revealed to be the villain, Rose makes Jane and Rafael's life hell, making her expendable to viewers as they cannot relate to her actions. While she is the villain due to her action against Jane and her family as well as her threat to Rafael and the hotel he inherited, her main focus is her obsession and love for Luisa. To justify pretending to be another woman and tricking Luisa, she says,

I left some stuff in Miami that I needed to pick up –and I realized you wouldn't give me a second chance, not if you knew I was me...I love you, Luisa. I've always loved you...you are the only person I have ever felt this way about. And you fell in love with me twice, let's build a life together (Rivera & Schraft, 2016).

Rose uses her love for Luisa to manipulate her into staying with her and being a part of her schemes. Eventually her actions drive Luisa away, but Rose continues to cause damage to Luisa and her family.

Jane fears for her life once Rose escapes prison, as she becomes the person who is preyed on. In a desperate act to get Luisa back, Rose takes Jane hostage, stating, “What do I want from you? I’m glad you asked. I need Luisa to meet me at your father’s premiere party. And you’re going to help me get here there” (Rivera, 2019). Even as she is holding the protagonist hostage, her focus is only on Luisa. However, by targeting the young, straight, female lead, the writers make Rose “a negative and unsympathetic force with which the audience cannot identify” (Millward et. al., 2017). By threatening Jane, Rose has gone too far. In a dramatic final confrontation with Rose Rafael, and Jane, Luisa comes out of hiding to save them, interrupting Rose to say, “Let them go! I won’t go anywhere with you if you touch them” (Rivera, 2019). Rose’s attention is then turned completely to Luisa, happily saying, “No problem. I knew you’d come. I told you, our is the greatest love story ever told” (Rivera, 2019). Luisa kills Rose during this altercation, freeing Luisa of her forever. Rose’s death is a shock to the audience, as a show like *Jane the Virgin* doesn’t kill off characters lightly. Waggoner identified using queer deaths as shock value is the new normal for these characters, and that their deaths rarely impact the overall plot. Similar to characters like Nora Hildegard and Mary Louise in *The Vampire Diaries* or Jenny Shecter in *The L Word*, Rose’s actions ostracize her from the audience, making her death an expendable and acceptable one.

The Token Lesbian: Emily and Luisa encapsulate aspects of tokensim as discussed by Grant. In *Pretty Little Liars*, once Emily has come out, there is nothing left for her character. While she does face and overcome obstacles, her storylines do not directly impact the main plot,

and her character doesn't add anything to the group. Within the main four friends, Emily is the only queer one. The other queer characters in the show are Emily's girlfriends, who come and go quickly and don't have significant impact to the story. For four and a half seasons of *Jane the Virgin*, Luisa was the only queer character in *Jane the Virgin* that had direct ties to the main narrative. While Rose was the villain, her plot was in the background of the show for most of the series run with the occasional direct impact. There were no other reoccurring queer characters for four and a half years other than the villain Rose until Petra comes out in season 4 (Snyder Urman, 2014). Both of these characters fit the "token" model identified by Grant. These inclusions are there to fit a "type" of character and the shows do very little to expand their queer characters until late, if at all (Grant, 2017). The placating of audiences in this way is not satisfactory, as one character type cannot and should not express an entire group.

The Coming Out Narrative: In *One Day at a Time*, the coming out narrative is explored heavily in the first season. Elena comes out to her mother, Penelope, halfway through season one. Elena says, "I feel more when I look at a picture of Kristin Stewart than I do when I kiss [Josh]" (Mann & Sielaff, 2017). The subsequent episodes involve other characters learning of Elena's sexuality and learning to accept it. Penelope goes to their family friend, Schneider, to talk about her coming out. Looking for an open ear and a friend, Penelope shares, "Elena just came out to me" to which Schneider exclaims, "Finally! That is a load off my mind" (Jones & Roth, 2017). This conversation reveals that Elena's brother, Alex knows as well. However, Elena coming out to Alex was not shown to the audience. The majority of this storyline revolves around Penelope learning to accept Elena and eventually defends her from Elena's father's homophobia. Victor tells Penelope, "This isn't who she is Lupe, it's not. It's a phase. It's what kids do. It's like, cool now to be gay" to which Penelope replies, "Oh yeah, that's it, she wants a

piece of that sweet bullying and persecution” (Calderón Kellett & Royce, 2017). The growth in acceptance is not Elena, but Penelope.

Emily also explores the coming out narrative in *Pretty Little Liars*. The first season is very heavy with Emily’s coming out storyline and her finding peace within herself, even helping love interest Paige with accepting her sexuality. When talking with her about coming out, Emily describes hers, saying, “I didn’t come out of the closet, I fell out on my face. But I’m out, and whatever else happens I don’t have to worry about it anymore” (Dougherty, 2011). Paige goes onto say, “If I say it out loud...If I say, I’m gay, the whole world is gonna change” (Dougherty, 2011). The weight of coming out and the fear of acceptance is explored between both Emily and Paige, highlighting how every experience is different. However, once her coming out is over, the show stops having conversations about Emily’s sexuality.

The lack of lesbian labels: *Pretty Little Liars* as well as *One Day at a Time* avoid using the word “lesbian” to describe Emily or Elena. Elena tells her mother, “I don’t think I’ll ever fall in love with a boy...when I think about love, I see myself someday loving a woman” (Mann & Sielaff, 2017). Elena later comes out to her father telling him, “I have grown up. And I’ve learned a lot about myself since you’ve been gone. And I’ve changed. Well, not changed, but um, I’m gay” (Calderón Kellett & Royce, 2017). In *Pretty Little Liars*, Emily tells her friends when being forced to come out, “I loved Ali as more than a friend” (Goldstick, 2010). Later, Emily comes out to her father, telling him, “I’m gay” (Dougherty, 2011). Even Paige calls herself gay, never a lesbian. In *Jane the Virgin*, Rose is described as a lesbian only by the narrator who says, “She was trying to close a deal all right. She was dating a man so she could use his hotel for her illegal plastic surgery ring, and her heart wasn’t in it because, well, Rose was a lesbian” (Sciarrotta, 2015). However, the characters themselves never label their sexuality

except for Petra, who tells her ex-boyfriend, “By the way, I’m bisexual, it’s you” (Snyder Urman, 2019). While being attracted to women, the characters in these shows never label themselves as a lesbian.

Mixed Love Messages

Normalizing Conversations: The final research question asked, “What messages about romance are told through the lesbian relationship(s) on the show?” While Elena identifies as gay, her partner is non-binary. This is met without questions about Elena’s label or any pushback about Syd using they/them pronouns, albeit a few jokes about pronouns. Elena and Syd’s relationship is treated like any other teen relationship. Elena has to keep her bedroom door open; they go on dates; they support each other and get into fights. It’s normalizing this relationship. McInroy and Craig’s study found that young people who identify as LGBT felt legitimized and validated by LGBT characters on screen. By treating Syd and Elena like any other teenage couple, it frames them as relatable to an audience. When Elena and Syd are caught buying a hotel room, Penelope patiently listens to what happens and provides support (Badillo & Levich, 2019). Penelope treats this discussion like any parent would with their teenager, no matter their sexuality. When discussing having sex for the first time, Penelope shares, “...it’s very emotional...Sex is not a dirty thing that you should hide. But it’s also not something that you should take lightly. And I just want to make sure that you’re okay with what did or didn’t happen” (Badillo & Levich, 2019). Comer, Bower and Sparkman (2014) found that pop culture and media play a role in contextualizing and normalizing LGBT feelings and identities and reinforce expose and qualify of these individuals. By including conversations that are usually seen between a parent and their straight child, *One Day at a Time* enforces that queer love is normal and acceptable. These discussion between Penelope and Elena highlights how queer

relationships are relatable and normal to an audience and that the conversation doesn't stop after coming out.

Reframing the Lesbian Male Fantasy: The series analyzed did not pander to the male gaze as identified by Annati and Ramsy, unlike its predecessors such as *The L Word*. Elena and her partner Syd in *One Day at a Time* wear comfortable clothing and care about video games and social justice (Jones, 2018). They get together after Elena finds out her crush has a girlfriend where they exchange “me, me gay” confirmations (Jones, 2018). It's messy and nothing can be read as fetishizing or sexualizing of their relationship. The show allows the teenagers to act as such, even if their actors are older. The show doesn't linger on the couple kissing and when they discuss sex, it's about two people who love each other, not two female presenting people doing it for the male audience. In *Pretty Little Liars*, Emily is never shown in an overly sexual way with either Maya or Paige. They are all dressed like sixteen-year-olds, wearing jeans and t-shirts or causal clothes to school. Even during formal events, the outfits are not overly sexual or revealing. When shown kissing, the girls are framed in a romantic way through the music, lighting, and editing. Male characters and audiences are not invited to participate through character dialogue or lingering camera shots of these characters, two issues that Wolfe and Roripaugh previously identified. Maya's jokes about her and Emily being gay pertain to, “Are you worried my jeans are too butch?” not anything they do in private (Goldstick, 2011). The characters are not written for men and are attempting to portray lesbians in a more accurate way.

The Abusive Behaviors/Relationships: In *Pretty Little Liars*, Paige bullies Emily and holds her head underwater threatening her for a spot as captain. She also makes comments about “knowing which team you [Emily] really plays for” (Goldsmith, 2011). Later in the episode, Paige kisses Emily, asking she “tells know one” (Goldsmith, 2011). Once Paige's sexuality is

revealed, Emily and her briefly date and the past abuse is not seen as an issue. Paige's fear of her parent's also keeps her in the closet, which makes her lash out at Emily for wanting to be more open with their relationship (Dougherty, 2011). This behavior is never addressed by Emily or other characters, letting it slide for the sake of a romance. Emily does eventually end things, but because she is out and doesn't want to feel shame anymore, not because of any abusive behavior. Paige tells Emily, "I can't risk being seen with you, I thought you understood" (Dougherty, 2011). Emily goes onto say, "I so understand, believe me I do. But hearing you say that I...ouch" (Dougherty, 2011). This is one of the only times Emily expresses how Paige's actions hurt her. While their relationship has its sweet moments, the violent start was never truly addressed.

The cycle of abuse is explored as much as it can be in *Jane the Virgin* with Luisa and Rose. What starts out to be a telenovela level passionate relationship between Luisa and her stepmother evolves into Rose's obsession with Luisa and her need to control and keep her. To Rose, theirs is "The greatest love story ever told" (Rivera, 2019). While this relationship is abusive, Rafael, Jane and Petra don't seem to identify this is happening, blaming Luisa's flightiness and her alcohol addiction for her behavior. No one tries to talk to Luisa about if she's okay or why she ran off and it met mostly with annoyance from her family. While *Jane the Virgin* is a comedy in the format of a telenovela, the fallout of Rose's arrest is offscreen, where the audience and the other characters can't see or reconcile. When Rafael tracks Luisa down to find out the identity of his birth parents, Luisa says she doesn't know but that, "Rose knows though...you can talk to her. Just please don't tell her where I am. I'm finally done with her. I feel like I broke that spell" (Shaw & Wells, 2018). In the end, Luisa kills her abuser and reconciles her relationship with Rafael and Jane. Rafael says, "Thank you for saving our lives" 'Oh psh, it was no big deal I...I couldn't let anything happen to you before your big day" Jane jumps in and adds, "We'd really

like you to be there, actually” (Rivera, 2019). Luisa escapes the cycle of abuse after years of being in it and has her own happy ending with being reunited with her family. Unlike *Pretty Little Liars*, the gravity of Luisa’s situation is addressed in the show through her discussions with Rafael and her helping the police officers find Rose.

Discussion

This study’s findings suggest that while lesbian representation continues to perpetuate over used tropes such as the feminine lesbian and tokenism, new findings such as the reframing of the male gaze have emerged. Recurring tropes and stereotypes as well as emerging patterns affected how these series framed the lesbian characters and have implications in regard to audience interpretation and influences on how the public understands lesbians.

The first finding in this study is that lesbian characters are most likely not to be included in narrative that drive the plot forward, but rather are only limited to their sexuality or their love interest. Similar issues have been noted in previous research. Netzley (2010) found that in the 1970s many shows included gay characters for sole purpose of having the straight character come into conflict with them, and ultimately accept them by the end of the episode. The study notes, “These stories often happened over the course of an episode, with a gay character who appeared once and never returned” (Netzley, 2010, p. 939). However, to have recurring characters exhibit this behavior is novel. Emily Fields in *Pretty Little Liars* is only included in narratives about her coming out, and her storyline has very little impact on the main overarching plot involving finding out who is blackmailing her and her friends. While the straight characters in the show get to talk about their significant others and plans about dates, Emily does not. *Jane the Virgin* does the same with Luisa. The majority of Luisa’s interactions with her brother are negative and tense, and any positive growth quickly gets erased when it is revealed she is still

involved with Rose. Luisa has to hide her relationship and has no one to turn to when Rose turns emotionally manipulative or obsessive. It is only when Rafael needs things from Luisa or needs to find Rose that she is allowed to be involved in the plot. Cliffhangers involving Luisa don't get resolved until episodes later, forcing the narrator and the show to remind the audience what is going on with her. This lack of inclusion could be based in tokenism, as both Emily and Luisa serve as the most stable examples of LGBT characters for their shows. Grant (2017) notes that tokens are used as symbols for the group they are representing. When these symbols are excluded from the main plot of a show, what messages are being sent to the audience? Yes these characters are visible, but as Kessler (2011) notes, by only including the bare minimum, story lines for these characters can become obvious and expected. While it was previously identified that some characters were there only to serve as a token of diversity, a character existing outside of the main narrative is a new discovery.

The second finding indicates the enforcement of older tropes but also the emergence of new ones. The feminine lesbian, first highlighted in *The L Word*, continues in all three series analyzed. All three lesbian characters don't challenge the heteronormative status quo in regard to their dress or appearance. McNicholas Smith and Tyler (2016) claim this feminization to be an effect of media companies trying to add diversity but in tandem, placate conservative audiences, stating, "...one of the key effects of mainstream television's attempts to diversify (and expand audience share), through the scripting of lesbian characters and storylines, is that it has become increasingly "straight" with regard to the prevailing gendered norms of femininity" (pp. 322-323). Additionally, all their love interests fit into the "femme/femme" aesthetic that Beirne identified in a 2016 study. The "lipstick lesbian" has become the expected representation as

noted by Monaghan (2020) and based on the findings in this study, this portrayal will not be going away.

Jane the Virgin perpetuates the evil/dead lesbian trope identified by Millward et. al (2017), with Rose being the main villain of the series, who is ultimately killed by Luisa. By season five, Rose is no longer an empathetic character, but a mad woman driven to cause harm to Luisa and her family, all in the name of love. As stated in the literature review "...to dehumanize her is to make her evil, a negative and unsympathetic force with which the audience (readers or viewers) cannot identify" (Millward et. al., 2017, p. 13). While Rose's death provides closure for Luisa, this is still another dead lesbian character.

The coming out narrative was featured heavily in *Pretty Little Liars* and *One Day at a Time*. While this narrative can be helpful to viewers to show self-acceptance and acceptance from family and peers, it also perpetuates an idea that this is the only story lesbian characters, and more generally LGBT characters, can tell. These coming out stories are also the expected ones, as an interviewee in McInroy and Craig's 2017 study noted,

The traditional coming out story ... gay white boy comes out to the parents after he thinks he likes a boy. They go 'oh, no, it's just a phase' ...He goes through some struggles and eventually some of his friends leave him, some of his friends support him, but eventually his parents go 'OK, I accept you. You're my son after all' ...But you never hear the story of the trans kid such as me who was told that it's all in my head ...You never hear the story of the kid whose parents tried to kill themselves...You never hear the story of the parents who are immigrants and who have trouble reconciling their cultural differences. We never see that because these are complicated stories. These are stories that are so hard to believe and they're stories that we don't want to accept as true, but they exist (p. 41).

While both Emily and Elena's mothers find it difficult to accept their daughters, it does not affect the characters in an impactful way. Despite saying hurtful things to Emily, her mother never reflects or apologizes and Elena is not privy to Penelope's struggles. Coming out can be complicated and it often does not end with a positive outcome. However, television does not explore the nuances in coming out, and would rather stick to a safe exploration of sexuality with a happy ending.

An emerging theme that was identified in this study was the lack of lesbian labels. No character in any of the series analyzed for this thesis referred to themselves as a lesbian, only as gay or not at all. Comer, Bower, and Sparkman (2014) found that, "Popular culture has been shown to help some LGBTQ individuals who are in the process of forming their sexual identity" (p. 43). However, if a sexuality is not explicitly labeled, how can representation help people form their own idea of their identity? The avoidance of the lesbian label perpetuates the idea that lesbian shouldn't be used, or that it is a dirty word. By not labeling characters as lesbian, the shows frame these individuals as not in a distinct group with its distinct history and culture.

A third finding was that despite the issues with the representation in these shows, there were improvements. These characters didn't feed into the male lesbian fantasy that so many others have. The analyzed characters were not sexualized for the sake of male audiences and reframe Annati and Ramsey's 2021 research regarding lesbian representation made for the male gaze. This study found that, "In the case of lesbians portrayed on American television, the message is sent to viewers that lesbianism is, in part, a performance that can be enacted for the attention of heterosexual men" (Annati & Ramsey, 2021, para. 9). Emily, Elena, and Luisa, unlike other lesbian characters, don't negatively impact or distort how young lesbians learn what they should look like, nor do they play up their sexuality or sexual desire for the benefit of the male audience.

The sitcom format allowed for *One Day at a Time* to have grounded, real conversations between Elena and Penelope about her sexuality, her relationship, and being a teenage girl. None of these discussions were implied to have happened or glossed over, there is even an entire episode surrounding Elena having sex for the first time that isn't treated as a joke or as a male fantasy.

Emily finding self-acceptance and using it to help someone else come out empowers her and the audience. By the end of the first season, Emily no longer feels shame about her sexuality and is proud of who she is. By helping Paige accept herself, we see how much Emily has grown within one season. McInroy and Craig (2017) found that participants in their studies sought LGBT media around the time of coming out in order to learn how to assimilate into that culture. To have a character like Emily go from being closeted to being out and proud can be validating to viewers.

To the extent that *Jane the Virgin* allowed, abuse in a lesbian relationship was explored. While Luisa was mostly alone in this journey, she does eventually break free of Rose's emotional abuse and manipulation. By the end of the series, she put herself in harm's way to save Rafael and Jane from Rose, and has the strength to confront and end Rose, finally finding peace. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence reported that 43.8% of lesbian women, "have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime, as opposed to 35% of heterosexual women" (2018). By including an example of what abuse can look like in a lesbian relationship, *Jane the Virgin*, helped raise awareness of this issue. While this is a dramatized version of an abusive relationship, exploring this between two women is rarely done on television, let alone television created for a younger audience.

Overall the analysis showed that while important steps have been made with how lesbian characters are portrayed, representation has stagnated in some ways. Tropes like the feminine lesbian as well as issues such as lack of narrative inclusion persisted throughout all three series analyzed. However, the findings were not all bad, with coming out narratives moving away from focusing on the struggles being a lesbian to other issues such as acceptance and love for a gay child. Additionally, characters were not created for the male gaze, making them more human and less likely to be objectified. Another positive finding was the exploration of abuse in lesbian relationships. While *Pretty Little Liars* failed to fully commit to this topic, *Jane the Virgin* explored how abuse can look in a lesbian relationship, and how difficult it can be to get out of this situation. These findings concluded that lesbian representation was a mixed bag, with some issues of representation continuing.

Through the lens of cultivation theory, the way in which these characters are portrayed can have both positive and negative effects on an audience. The ideas of how lesbians should look and act can affect public perceptions of real life lesbians who might not reflect what is seen on television. While people's understanding of the lesbian identity can be limited through these portrayals, the exposure the lesbian and LGBT characters can have an impact on public perception. Gerbner (1998), regarding cultivation theory, stated, "These publics, in turn, acquire distinct identities as publics partly through exposure to the ongoing flow of messages" (p.180). Exposure to people different from yourself is vital for acceptance. Between 2002 and 2020, acceptance of homosexuality in the United States rose from 51% to 72% (Poushter & Kent, 2020). The access to lesbian stories on television not only helps those struggling with their sexualities, but for everyone to humanize and understand others.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is that it does not have the ability to analyze these characters under multiple lenses such as intersectionality. While intersectionality plays a role in Elena's story in *One Day at a Time*, this study's research was only limited to analyzing her sexuality. Elena's story is centered on her being a Cuban lesbian young woman, all factors of herself that matter when understanding how she engages with the world. Lenses like intersectionality can add additional context and can help create a more well-rounded character and could be utilized for further research.

Another lens that was not utilized was historical analysis. Historical analysis can be defined as "research that examines past events to understand current or future events" (American Psychological Association). While this thesis analysis centered on shows that have previously ended, the study does not look to find meaning with these representations in older more historical shows, only to highlight the origins of repeated themes or stereotypes. One of the most groundbreaking television series for lesbian representation, *Ellen*, was not used as a framework for this study. Using this show as historical framework to understand a more modern, "Post-*Ellen*" representation could contextualize and provide further insights into why lesbian representation has evolved in the way that it has since her coming out.

Another limit of this research was limiting the artifacts to only drama or comedy series. There are a number of superhero, fantasy, and sci-fi shows who's target audience fit's this study that were not analyzed. Genre television shows require a lot of additional context and background information in regard to story, and many times a character's ability or superpower can be read as an allegory for queerness. While many teen genre series include lesbian characters, the additional context required around a storyline or major plot point would require additional research and literature.

Finally, a limit of this study is that it only focused on lesbian representation, excluding other queer characters from its analysis. Limiting the scope to just one representation can provide more detailed analysis, however, meant that gay (male), bisexual, transgender or asexual representation was overlooked for the purposes of this study. Petra from *Jane the Virgin* comes out as bisexual later in the series; however, this storyline was not analyzed as it didn't fit the criteria of this thesis. As mentioned previously, Elena's partner, Syd, is non-binary and uses they/them pronouns, but they were only analyzed as Elena's love interest, not their own character. Analyzing these series for LGBT representation as a whole could provide different findings and insights.

Implications for Future Research

Future researchers should look outside what has historically been deemed "good" lesbian representation. While GLAAD's mission to push media for better representation, what this study has shown is what was "good" ten years ago might not be good now, and that the number of LGBT characters does not equate to improving representation. With the endless number of streaming services and television shows at our disposal, looking to what lesbian viewers deem as good might provide a better understanding of what lesbians look for in their own representation.

Future researchers should also look to the Russo Test. This test developed by GLAAD and its criteria, "can help guide filmmakers to create more multidimensional characters, while also providing a barometer for representation on a wide scale" (GLAAD, 2017). The criteria includes,

The film contains a character that is identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender.

That character must not be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or

gender identity. I.E. they are made up of the same sort of unique character traits commonly

used to differentiate straight characters from one another. The LGBTQ character must be tied

into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect. Meaning they are not there to simply provide colorful commentary, paint urban authenticity, or (perhaps most commonly) set up a punchline. The character should ‘matter.’ (GLAAD, 2017).

This test was not included in my own research as it’s a more general baseline of representation, and in this iteration does not dig deeper into the context of these characters. At first glance, each of the shows selected pass the Russo Test, however this test is not highly utilized in media analysis and could not be utilized for this study. In the future, the Russo test should be used more when discussing LGBT characters so it can be honed and then used for additional analysis or artifact selection.

Social media and fan perception should be leveraged for further researchers. Live-tweeting and social media posts from lesbian fans could provide a better understanding about how these characters were received by the people these shows are representing. Analyzing the posts from fans and highlighting common insights could shine a light on the results discussed previously as well as provide additional findings not discovered during the initial research.

Finally, future researchers might opt out of leveraging tropes that have been exhaustively discussed over the history of television. “Bury your gays” have been discussed at length since the death of Lexa in *The 100* in 2016, and future researchers might decide that it no longer needs to be discussed. While this is an important topic to discuss there are many other issues regarding lesbian representation that should be explored and highlighted. If the bar is “stop killing lesbian characters,” writers and showrunners could continue to create stereotyped or negative representation even if they are alive. Setting the bar higher and analyzing lesbian characters on a more personal level could help elevate storytelling and push writers past these tired tropes.

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Appendix A

Code Book

Stereotypes:

Feminine Lesbian:

Definition: Synonymous with “lipstick lesbian;” indistinguishable from straight women on the show; Feminine dress/long hair/makeup

Example: Bette Porter from the L Word.

Butch Lesbian:

Definition: masculine in appearance, more in common with straight men; Short hair/male presenting dress; masculine traits

Example: Boo from Orange is the New Black

Tropes:

Bury your gays:

Definition: a narrative consisting of a same sex couple confessing their feelings for one another, having sex for the first time, and one of them dying shortly after or a realization and acceptance of oneself and then dying shortly after.

Example: Tara from BTVS, Lexa from The 100

Evil/dead lesbian:

Definition: Villain of the story, usually preying on the innocent straight woman, framing a character as expendable, and won't be missed once dead

Example: Rose from Jane The Virgin, Willow from BTVS

The Messy Bisexual:

Definition: unstable narratives, unable to make choices in and out of their romantic lives, seen as sexually promiscuous

Examples: Kat from *The Bold Type*, Bo Dennis from *Lost Girl*

Appendix B

Character Descriptions

Emily Fields (Pretty Little Liars): Tall teen girl with long dark hair. Wears light makeup and dresses “sportier” in her day to day in jeans and t-shirts, but for formal events wears heavy makeup and dresses. Is categorized as the sporty one as she is on the swim team and is driven in her pursuit of the sport.

Maya St. Germain (Pretty Little Liars): Emily’s first love interest. Has long hair and wears light makeup in her day to day. Dresses more artsy than Emily but still causal in jeans and boots. For formal wear, is similar to Emily and wears dresses and heavy makeup.

Paige McCullers (Pretty Little Liars): Emily’s other love interest in season one. Much sportier than Maya and dresses similarly to Emily. Wears light makeup and has long hair. Despite wearing suits for formal wear will still wear heels and heavy makeup.

Luisa Alver (Jane the Virgin): Feminine woman with long hair and wears light makeup. Wears dresses for everyday and formal wear. Despite being a doctor is rarely seen practicing. Struggles with alcohol addiction.

Rose (Jane the Virgin): Tall extremely feminine woman. Wears high heels and dresses as well as bold lipstick colors. Has long red hair and well-manicured nails. The only time is seen wearing less is when she is in prison.

Elena Alvarez (One Day at a Time): Teen girl with long dark hair and wears light makeup. Dresses in jeans and t-shirts and doc martins. Wears suits for formal wear but also wears heavy makeup. The “social justice warrior” character who cares deeply about injustice in the world.

Syd Pierce (One Day at a Time): Tall non-binary person with long hair and wears light makeup. Dresses in jeans, flannel, and t-shirts and wears more androgynous jumpsuit for a formal wear.