



LITERACY AND REPRESENTATION IN LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITIES

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Social Change, LGBTQ+ Literacy, and Representation

Psychologists, sociologists, proponents of critical and evolutionary theory, and advocates generally agree that social change starts with personal change. It includes conversation and understanding. It relies on collecting and hearing the voices, seeing the faces, and learning the stories of intersectional lived experience, past the single-story and stereotypes. Social change required individuals to challenge their fears of change and of the unknown to learn how to take a seat at the table and listen to the other voices in the room without contempt or confrontation. Social change for queer communities can finally happen when the normative narrative is challenged by centering the lived experience of the individuals within the community and understanding the ways that representation, and cultural literacy shape identity. Through knowledge, acceptance, and empathy the narratives that are accepted and used to guide society can become more inclusive and the policies and politics surrounding these identities can be more beneficial, and supportive.

When I was seven, I knew that “love was love” when we went to the wedding party of the two women down the street. It was just a party and not a “real” wedding because same-sex marriage wasn’t legal. When I was eleven, I learned that some men felt more comfortable as women when my acting coach and his friends attended our cast party in dresses and heels. It was the last time I saw him before he hanged himself, citing the depression he felt from not being accepted for who he was. When I was fifteen, I got a crush on a girl in my ballroom dance class. It was just a “meaningless girl-crush” because I “liked boys but... if I found a girl I liked that would be okay too... but I liked boys... really.” When I was thirty-two, I asked a friend when he knew he was gay and he said he’d “just always known”. He asked when I “knew I was straight” and I realized I didn’t know if I was. Over time, I noticed that the words we use to describe ourselves and our feelings carried weight. I realized how language shapes, creates and recreates identity in ways that can destroy and empower. Language is powerful and understanding how culture has changed the meanings, movements, and performances of specific words in the language over time is so important. Using words in the “right” way and becoming articulate with the literacies of gender and sexuality validates, affirms, and humanizes identities.

I spent much of my twenties on the internet, making friends and building online support systems, generally with people who were much younger than I was, but somehow a lot smarter and more accepting about some things than my peers were. I often felt like my peers and the generations who were older than I was were stuck on old words and concepts, unable to welcome the movement and change of the languages and literacies of social narratives. Maybe they were too reluctant to embrace change. Maybe they were too arrogant to entertain new ideas. All I

knew for sure is that these “older and wiser” critics were missing something I didn’t want to miss.

Looking around in spaces near me and online, I found that there were a lot of stories from queer-identifying people that all sort of went a similar way. They thought they were broken, they thought there was something wrong with them, they had to try to be “normal” and then they heard someone else’s story, saw themselves reflected in a character in a movie, or saw a word or concept explained and defined on social media and it changed things for them. They felt understood. They felt seen. They felt like they had found language that they could use to talk about their own identity and experiences. This story was my own. And I wanted to understand it more.

Literacy

In January of 2019, The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law examined the results of a Gallup Daily Tracking Survey and found that 4.5% of a sample of approximately 350,000 U.S. adults ages 18 and up who reside in the 50 states and the District of Columbia identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender. That’s roughly 11.3 million people. While that seems like a lot of people, the LGBTQ+ community is still a very small and still very oppressed minority in our country and around the world. LGBTQ+ people are faced with many obstacles from discrimination and the violation of human rights to bullying and “othering”. Like many groups and subcultures, the LGBTQ+ community has unique literacies and languages that are an important part of the lives of those within the community that provides safety, recognition, empowerment, and identity, and the relationship between literacies, technologies, and identities support and shape queer people and their experience in our social narrative. (Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, 2019)

Language and sexuality researchers have demonstrated how sexuality is discursively shaped by the way we use language to talk and write about sexuality-related aspects. This issue becomes even clearer when it is investigated how sexuality-related language use changes over time since differences in language use evolving from a comparison of historical periods tell us something about how our conceptualization of sexual phenomena has developed (Green 2018). Older generations of LGBTQ+ people relied on unique language and literacy in order to find one another and community while still hiding those differences from society. This was especially necessary for places where homosexuality was illegal. Queer people used “code words” and slang to allow them to speak openly about their identities and experiences. Additionally, sociolinguistics have found that “she-ing,” an academic term that refers to the linguistic practice of feminizing people and things is also a performative part of the language that queer people speak. She-ing appears almost universally and across centuries in gay language. It was initially practical, enabling gay men to talk about sex and lovers in public without fear of arrest or persecution.

The Williams Institute data also showed that the average age of the LGBT identified American’s polled was 37 years old with the largest percentage of them falling between the ages of 18-24. (Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, 2019). The millennials and gen-z still rely on a lot of the pre-stonewall language of the community but they also have forced change in the relationships between these words and the social narrative. Sometimes there is pushback from the older generations as younger LGBTQ people reclaim the word “queer”, redefine terms to be more inclusive, fight for states to put transgendered names and pronouns on driver’s licenses or speak loudly for their rights to equality. It’s a shift away from meeting in secret and using codes

but much of the word choices and performance still include older vocabulary. This younger generation acquires and shares their language differently than the older generations did and there are entire scopes of literacy that can be found online and through social media. Technology carries the language and vocabulary around the world and reaches and connects more people than ever before. Twitter, Tumblr, and other social sites provide young queers with the means to learn and understand their shared experiences. It also allows those who are questions or who are allies a window into the language that may help with better understanding and acceptance.

When the wrong language is used in regards to a person's identity it can make them feel unsafe and stigmatized. A 2014 study of transgender individuals, for example, found that 32.8% of participants felt "very stigmatized" when they were misgendered (Jagannathan, 2019.) Misgendering is one of the more subtle forms of enacted stigma that transgender spectrum individuals experience as it has the potential to shape how they feel and how they evaluate themselves and their social identity (McLemore, 2014.) The experience can result in a loss of "the sense of belonging, of being seen,"(Jagannathan, 2019.)

Representation

Representation builds the ideals and accepted conventions of the social narrative in regards to the performance, understanding, and vocabulary of gender, race, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and other traits of identity. Good representation allows groups and individuals that are deemed "outside" of the "norms" to be seen by society and allows their voices and stories to be heard. When audiences are able to see something represented they are better able to find understanding and create spaces for new social norms and shift the social consciousness to include different experiences, backgrounds, and identities. Each of these unseen groups has gone through transformation on screen as the feedback from society has further molded their screen representation and will continue to change as society's understanding, demands, and experiences push for even better characters to represent them.

Considering that Television has served as a vehicle to normalize and support the visibility and reality of women, people of color, differently-abled individuals, the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized groups on screen and in society, it's critical, in this particular moment, to ask ourselves if media representation of the LGBTQ+ community is reflecting the way the community is changing and expanding. If our society is going to move closer to social justice, then it is critical that we see representations of ourselves transform in the media. Centering the rhetoric of representation as a means of social justice is imperative to the future of the social narrative, acceptance, and understanding of all marginalized peoples. Using media representation of Bisexual and Asexual characters, this essay examines the quality of representation of the LGBTQ+ community in media because a full range of their stories are important for us to see and to hear.

Because life and art imitate one another and form our social narrative, television is always more than mere entertainment. It carries messages about social interactions and about the nature and value of groups in the society that can influence attitudes, values, and actions among its viewers. It serves as a source of information about the world, whether viewers seek entertainment or enlightenment. (Huston). Most viewers do not simply consume media images and remain unaffected, so representation is important (Eschholz, et al.). According to cultivation theory, portraying something on television helps to mainstream it and it stands to reason that television depictions of LGBTQ+ characters should evolve as LGBTQ+ communities do (Gerbner). Many queer characters have been improved to provide better representation,

intersectionality has been considered and stereotypes have been phased out, however, despite strides for accurate media representation of the LGBTQ+ community, Bisexual and Asexual characters are still plagued with stereotypes or erased altogether, perpetuating a continued social narrative that overlooks, invalidates and deletes these identities.

Since their first depictions on television, gay and lesbian characters have been cast in a wide variety of stereotypes and tropes from largely sexless to hyper-sexualized. Initially, characters were desexualized, and any contact between two people of the same gender, even kissing, was heavily censored. (Khan). Later, shows like *Queer as Folk*, which depicted two of the show’s main characters engaging in explicit sexual activity during the pilot episode, were the polar opposite of sexless. (Kessler). Both of these views of LGBTQ+ individuals result in flat characters and misrepresentation both on screen and in society. The portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters are problematic because they show how “gayness is seen through the eyes of confused heterosexuals” (Walters) and further mislead viewers with other stereotyped conventions of homosexuality like the “sassy gay man”, the “flannel-clad masculine lesbian”, the “sexy experimenting college girl”, the “innocent young bi-curious boy” and a further variety of porn-script worthy one-dimensional inaccuracies. Even shows that are acclaimed for their LGBTQ+ inclusion still, unfortunately, rely on problematic storylines and patterns. For example, *Will and Grace*, though praised for portraying the idea that not every gay man is the same, still relied on old stereotypes by presenting homosexuality using a comedic basis and “equating gayness with a lack of masculinity” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow). The teen musical drama *Glee*, was also highly praised for the ways that it opened up possibilities for representation to challenge heteronormativity (Dhaenens) but perpetuated the tropes of the homosexuals as nothing more than victims seeking sympathy and of a hierarchy of hetero-acceptance based on the ideas of “coming out” as a means of “authenticity” and labeling.

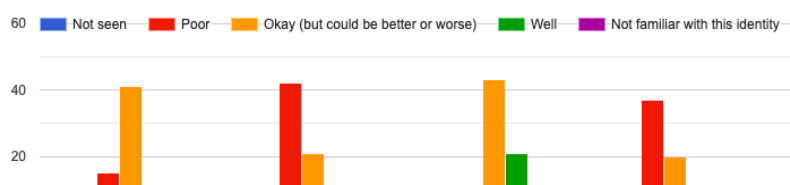
My Research

Inspired by my own journey to find the representation and the language, I began my research with faculty mentor Kim Hackford-Peer at the University of Utah. I constructed a survey that I shared with my networks and invited others to share with their own. The questions I asked in the survey focused on the spaces and modes in which the responders learned about different identities, words to describe those identities, and the communities that they initially and currently find for themselves. I also asked about representation in entertainment and news media and how that affects their own identities. The responders mostly fell into the 18-25 age range with several others fall into ages up to 45 - though I didn’t discourage older folks from participating. Identities ranged across the board.

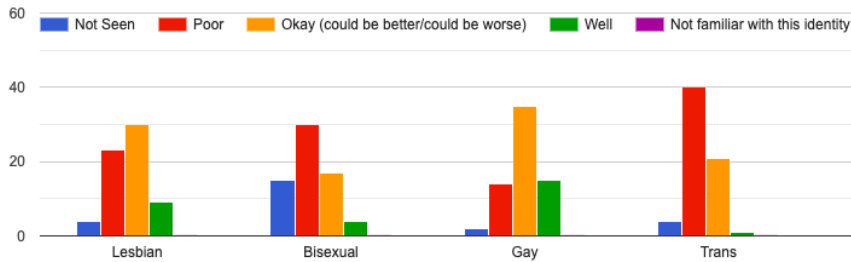
Some of the results were expected.

Many queer individuals who participated said that they see gay men represented “okay” and “well” in both news and entertainment, while transgender people were represented “poorly” in both and bisexuals “not seen” at all. I would be interested in research further to learn if allies and heterosexual identifying people would view this representation in the same way or if their answers would be different. I also wonder how the erasure of identities compares to the negative representation of them.

How well do you see identity presented in entertainment media?



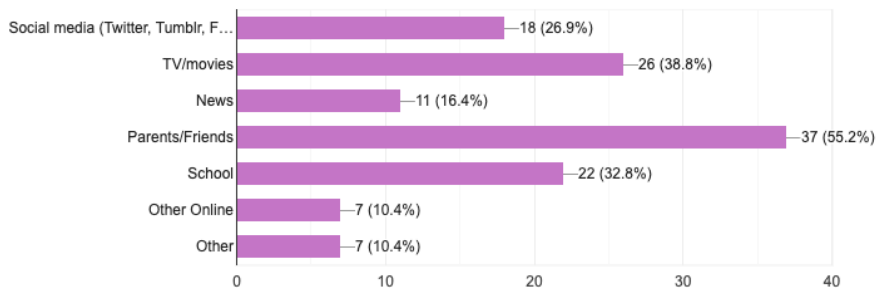
How well do you see identity presented in news media?



The results also showed that while most participants learned about the existence of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals mostly offline and from parents and friends or movies and TV, while they learned about the existence of other queer identities on social media sites. The majority of respondents also indicated that they have turned to social media most often to find language to express themselves and their understanding of these identities.

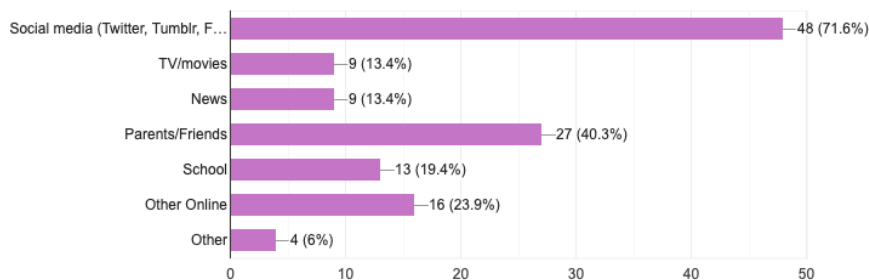
What best describes where/how you first learned about the existence of Gays, Lesbians and Bisexuals?

67 responses



What best describes where/how you first learned about the existence of other queer identities (trans, asexual, nonbinary, pansexual, intersex, aromantic, etc.)?

67 responses



One participant said I feel like *“I have to fit into what people outside the community expect to be or expect me to do. I feel like if I waiver from those expectations, I won't be viewed as valid and won't be accepted.”*

It is such an important statement. We know that lived experiences and intersectionality allow for an understanding beyond the single story. And we can see how a single story of a marginalized group can create a social narrative that stereotypes, tokenizes, and even dehumanizes the people who live these lives. This research aims to change that for queer identities. Subvert the social narrative with words and context. Show where these words are found, the communities they create, and the safety they provide. Tell the stories of what it means to find words and see self-reflected in media and the world. Remind those who make policies and rules that affect queer people that they are more than a stereotype and are real humans with real memories and experience.

By exploring and examining this literacy, these words, and how LGBTQIA+ people see themselves and their lived experiences in media, academia and the overall social narrative, a better understanding of the significance can be developed. From these results, an understanding of lived experience and diversity can be recognized and used to create more inclusive and more authentic narratives and spaces in workplaces, academia, family, politics and policy, and in general. This also fosters a stronger, more robust support of the LGBTQIA+ communities around us and in society.

Why It Matters

Identities are closely linked to self-image and self-worth and when those labels that are chosen are invalidated or discriminated against it through the wrong language, discriminating narratives, harmful politics, political rhetoric, and poor representation it can cause physical and mental distress. LGBTQ teens are twice as likely to attempt suicide as straight adolescents, according to the Centers for Disease Control (LGBT Youth).

Being seen and validated and accepted predicts greater self-esteem, social support, and general health status; it also protects against depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and behaviors (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). This is one of the many reasons that language and the acquisition of language have such a strong connection with identity and the queer experience. It is also why it is important for individuals to be able to see an authentic representation of different identities in news and media.

In order to change the social and rhetorical narratives in our world, it is important that we confront and challenge the status quo, the norms of the dominant groups, and the dogmatic performativity that dictates normativity. By understanding the ways that queer communities find, use, and curate language to express their experiences and themselves, as well as the ways that representation colors and shapes this identity we can create a more inclusive and more authentic space for all individuals. Examining the stories and intersections of lived experiences, society can create a new narrative of understanding, acceptance, and empathy that benefits those within and community and those outside of it as well. Policies and politics surrounding these identities can focus on support and improvement and move toward seeing queer individuals as real, authentic, human people.

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