

The Effect of Intersectionality on Bisexual People's Connection to Queer Characters

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, LGBTQ representation has surged in entertainment media. While this is important for many reasons, seeing other queer characters in movies and TV shows is known to cause a positive emotional response and a connection of the person to that character. While this phenomenon has been well studied, there is no information on how additional shared identities affect connection. This paper delves into how intersectionality places a role in the connection that bisexual people have towards queer characters in entertainment media. It uses the narrative method to assess the personal experiences of bisexual people of varying races, ages, and genders to the extent that one's race, age, or gender aligning with that of a queer character affects their connection to that character. Bisexual people were interviewed about their general connection to queer characters and then were asked to what extent would that character's race, age, or gender aligning with their own would affect their connection. The results revealed that more marginalized races and gender identities experienced stronger connections to the characters when their race or gender aligned with the characters. Additionally, age was found to be more of a factor for youth than it was for older people. The research concluded that intersecting marginalized identities strengthened one's emotional connection to queer characters more than common racial or gender identities.

Literature Review

Bisexual Media Representation

Entertainment media can have a massive impact on the way its audience views the type of people being portrayed, and especially with minorities, the various ways it represent them is extremely influential in determining how they are perceived by their audience (Fejes and Petrich 408). According to a study done by Jonna Cooley and Gary Burkholder, those who do not have a personal relationship with an LGBTQ person in their own life are heavily influenced by how LGBTQ characters are portrayed onscreen (Cooley and Burkholder 84). Judith Butler explains this fact with her theory of gender performativity: Repeated instances of a concept lend legibility and coherence to that concept (Felluga). This basically means that frequent and consistent inclusion of LGBTQ characters will normalize the concept of being LGBTQ to its audience.

The representation of the LGBTQ community in virtual entertainment media has long been controversial in its portrayal. Historically, the media's portrayal of the LGBTQ community has been mostly negative due to the cultural intolerance of LGBTQ people during those times (Fejes and Petrich 409). However, from the 1990s to current day, portrayals of the LGBTQ community have become more frequent and inclusive (Cook 7) to match the growing cultural acceptance of LGBTQ people. The percentage of regularly occurring LGBTQ characters in TV shows has grown from 1.7% in 2005 to nearly 7% as of 2017 (Cook 7). This growing inclusion of LGBTQ characters in entertainment media has helped establish the LGBTQ community as a norm in contemporary American society (Fejes and Petrich 409).

However, despite the overall improvements in LGBTQ media representation, certain subgroups of the LGBTQ still lack proper representation. Lesbians and gay men see themselves frequently represented in mainstream virtual entertainment media while bisexuals are underrepresented. Of all LGBTQ characters on streaming networks from 2019, 35% were gay, 33% were lesbian, and 25% were bisexual (GLAAD 2019 Report 13), yet comparatively, among those in the LGBTQ community, 19% identify as lesbians, 36% identify as gay, and 40% as bisexual (A Survey of...). In addition to being underrepresented, bisexuals are often portrayed in a more negative manner compared to their lesbian and gay counterparts. A content analysis of network television shows done by Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas revealed that, while gay men are occasionally stereotyped as flamboyant and extravagant and while the opposite holds true for lesbians, overall, gays and lesbians are portrayed in mostly positive manners. However, despite the positive portrayals of gays and lesbians, bisexual media portrayal hasn't even come that far (Raley & Lukas). Bisexuals are both underrepresented as well as fall into harmful tropes, both of which undermine non-LGBTQ people's understanding of bisexuality (GLAAD 2019 Report 26). The media habitually harms the perception of the bisexual community by utilizing bisexuality as a temporary plot device, treating bisexual characters as innately untrustworthy, compulsive, and self-destructive, and by failing to explicitly label the character as bisexual, also known as bi erasure (GLAAD 2019 Report 26). While such increased positive portrayals of gays and lesbians' people have helped normalize homosexuality, the misportrayal of a marginalized group, especially one as heavily stereotyped like the LGBTQ community, can instead vilify it (Raley and Lucas).

The effects of media representation are profound on both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ people. A study conducted by GLAAD researched the acceptance of non-LGBTQ people when exposed to LGBTQ character representation. It found that non-LGBTQ people were, on average, 12% more likely to be accepting of LGBTQ people compared to those not exposed to LGBTQ media representation (LGBTQ Inclusion in... 2). Furthermore, 80% of those exposed to LGBTQ media representation said that they were supportive of LGBTQ rights, while only 70% of those not exposed to LGBTQ media felt the same (LGBTQ Inclusion in... 2). Sarah Kate Ellis, president and CEO of GLAAD, said that "The findings of this study send a strong message to brands and media outlets that including LGBTQ people in ads, films, and TV is good for business and good for the world".

The consequences of improper bisexual media representation extend past just bigoted opinions. Despite making up nearly half of the entire LGBTQ community, bisexuals are much less likely to be out compared to lesbians and gays (GLAAD 2019 Report 26). Deerwater attributes this to the harmful stigmas that surround their identity, much of which is the result of improper media representation (Deerwater). Shows will often use bisexuality as a plot device as being attracted to multiple genders can create drama for the characters wrapped up in the relationship (GLAAD 2019 Report 26). Consequently, this has given rise to harmful stereotypes, most notably, the one that bisexuals are more likely to cheat because they are attracted to two or more genders.

Additional evidence shows that LGBTQ media representation can serve to benefit or harm perceptions LGBTQ people depending on how they are portrayed. A study focusing on the effect media portrayals of gay youth characters on gay adolescents found that these queer (a general term referring to anyone who is not heterosexual) characters influenced their self-realization of their identity (Gillig and Murphy 3843). This was because these characters acted as a source of pride and comfort for LGBTQ youth (Gillig and Murphy 3843). LGBTQ youth saw themselves in the media portrayals of the queer characters which "provided hope and improved mental energy" (Gillig and Murphy 3843). This also strengthened their supportive attitudes inward towards other members of the LGBTQ community. However, when gay characters displayed physical acts of affection as well as gender nonconforming behaviors, it evoked disgust response among non-LGBTQ youth (Gillig and Murphy 3842). Gender nonconforming behavior is when men present themselves in a way that is not traditionally seen as masculine or women in a way that is not seen as traditionally feminine. An example of this would be men wearing dresses or women in tuxedos. This disgust response proved to worsen attitudes towards LGBTQ youth by nonLGBTQ people (Gillig and Murphy 3842). The researchers believed that this was due to nonLGBTQ youth viewing these acts as offensive or immoral, however, future research into the multiple dimensions and implications of this disgust response is needed.

Race's Influence on Social Relationships

Race is extremely formative in the types of relationships that people make as well as who they make them with. According to a poll done from the Pew Research Center, people are more inclined to develop relationships with those of the same race; 81% of white people, 70% of black people, and 54% of Asian people have only close friends of the same race (Parker et. al). Although this statistic is influenced to a degree by the fact that many people grow up in neighborhoods composed exclusively of people of the same race, there are still social factors that play into this. Sixty-two percent of white people said that they had a lot in common with other white people while only 10% of white people said the same about black, Asian, or American Indian people (Parker et. al). This same trend perceiving people of other races as innately different than one's own is found among black and Asian people as to what racial groups they felt like they had a lot in common with (Parker et. al). Because of this, when many people seek out platonic and romantic relationships, they tend to prioritize people of the same race rather than others.

Literature Review Conclusion

Most of the research surrounding this topic centers around the impact of LGBTQ media representation on influencing the attitudes of non-LGBTQ people towards the LGBTQ community as well as some basic research into the emotional response that LGBTQ media representation evokes among LGBTQ people. However, there is no comprehensive research on what factors of LGBTQ media representation influence an LGBTQ person's self-realization of their identity. Additionally, I will be applying the concept outlined in the "Race's Influence on Social Relationships" to both age and gender. My research will look to dissect and categorize certain demographic features of LGBTQ characters which, when aligned with the audience's, amplify the emotional response to the extent that they promote pride and self-realization. In doing this, I am assuming that certain features of LGBTQ characters will promote pride and self-realization more than others, and variations in these types of features (masculine vs feminine, ethnicity, age) will also vary how much of an emotional response is evoked from the audience.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study all identify as bisexual, and people's place on the asexual to allosexual spectrum was not considered in this study, just one's sexual orientation. Even though there are some micro-labels that fall under the bisexual umbrella (omnisexual, polysexual, pansexual), since they all meet the definition of bisexuality, no differentiation was made among them. No gender identities, races, or ages were discriminated against in this study.

Given the fact that LGBTQ people are difficult to distinguish in public from their non-LGBTQ counterparts, the LGBTQ Community Center in Sacramento was used to search for participants. A staff member at the center sent out an email to the staff and youth at the community center regarding my study, and those who responded to the email were then messaged with a follow up confirming their participation.

To be eligible, the participant must have had some base experience with LGBTQ media in order to draw from their experiences and give viable data. To determine this, the audience was asked about their experience with LGBTQ media representation and their emotional response to these characters at the beginning of the interview. People of varying races, ages, and genders were preferred in order to see how different demographics may react to a character's race, age, or gender aligning with their own, yet no one under the age of 14 was considered as their experience with LGBTQ media is likely extremely limited. Before being interviewed, all participants were required to sign a consent form.

Methodology

This overarching goal of this study is to find how race, age, and gender influence the positive emotional response that LGBTQ characters evoke from a bisexual audience. The study intends to answer the question: to what extent does the alignment of a bisexual person’s race, age, or gender with a LGBTQ character’s race, age, or gender influence the emotional response that they experience? Therefore, a narrative method will be best for this study: a research method that uses personal experiences as data in order to reach a conclusion. The narrative in this study are the participant’s personal experiences with LGBTQ media representation in movies and TV shows.

In this study, the participants were interviewed for about 5 minutes and asked to respond to questions regarding how the race, age, and gender of a LGBTQ character would influence the emotional response they had to that character. Since the study focused on the personal experiences of the participants, the range of potential responses was too great for a survey, and a more qualitative method would have to be used. By using an interview, the participants could freely respond to the questions asked in order to give further insight into their experiences and provide a more in-depth response. In the interview, the participants were asked the following questions: Do you experience some positive emotional response or feeling to the presence LGBTQ characters compared to non-LGBTQ characters? What is your race/age/gender? Does a character’s race/age/gender aligning with your own influence the emotional response that you experience and to what extent does it influence this response? Although the first question does not directly relate to my study, it was needed to establish that an emotional response was evoked from the audience in response to a LGBTQ character. This method produced a plethora of personal data regarding the experiences of bisexual participants with LGBTQ representation in TVs and movies. This allows for the data to be broken down in order to look for correlations between the participants' race, age, and gender, the race, age, and gender of the character, and the emotional response of the participant.

Results

The table below represents the results of the study from the four people that were interviewed. For the purpose of preserving the anonymity of the participants, their names have not been included, and they are simply listed in the order that they were interviewed. Also, although there are many micro-labels that fall under the nonbinary umbrella, for the purposes of the study, no differentiation was made among people who identify with different micro-labels. Their gender identity is simply listed as non-binary. Additionally, all women who participated in this study were cisgender, meaning that their gender identity corresponds to their biological sex.

Table: Summary of the Findings of the Four Interviews

Participant #	Their Race/Age/Gender	Extent that each Mattered
1	White 22 Female	Does not matter Matters somewhat Matters somewhat
2	White 35 Female	Does not matter Does not matter Does not matter
3	Hispanic/Latino 19 Non-binary	Matters a lot Matters somewhat Matters a lot
4	White 27 Women	Matters somewhat Does not matter Matters somewhat

As stated before, all persons interviewed identified as bisexual. The second column gives the race, age, and gender identity of the participants, and the third column shows how much each characteristic mattered to each participant. The responses given to the extent that each characteristic mattered in furthering the positive emotional response that the participants experience are divided into three answers: it matters a lot, it matters somewhat, and it does not matter. This is what formed my data set. Although some participants elaborated more on how a characteristic affected their emotional response to the character by comparing it with other characteristics, it did not have any effect on the overall data set, so that information was excluded from the table.

This table condenses the information from the interviews into a more digestible form, making it easier to identify what different races, ages, and genders affect the emotional response that LGBTQ people have to LGBTQ characters when their identity is aligned with the characters.

Analysis

Although it is difficult to draw any grand conclusions given the small data set, there are some trends that are revealed among those that participated in the study. Basic analysis of the data reveals these trends for how various races, ages, and genders contribute to influencing the emotional response that one has to a character. However, additional research is needed to reveal why these trends exist.

Race

In this study, only white and Hispanic people were represented. Participants one, two, and four were white and participant three was Hispanic/Latino. Of the three that were white, two said that race does not matter at all, and one said that race matters somewhat. The overall trend of those who participated in the study revealed that, for white people, race does not play much of a role in the emotional response they have to LGBTQ characters. Additionally, one of the people who participated in the study was Hispanic. Unlike the white participants, for the Hispanic participant, race mattered a lot when it comes to connection with LGBTQ characters.

This makes sense considering that most of the American population and therefore the characters in American entertainment media are white. Given that being white is seen as the default, white people are less likely to resonate with white characters based on that one specific identity. However, given that Hispanic people are minorities in America, their racial identity is not going to be represented as much compared to more common racial identities like white so Hispanic characters are more of a rare occurrence. Therefore, when seeing other Hispanic characters in entertainment media, their emotional response will be greater as two of their marginalized identities align with the character, not just one.

Age

Although no older adults, elderly, or minors were represented in the study, there is still a trend in the data that is worth noting. Among the older participants (ages 27 and 35), they stated that age did not influence their connection to LGBTQ characters, yet among the younger participants (ages 19 and 22), they indicated that age mattered somewhat. In more general terms, age matters more for younger bisexual people compared to older bisexuals.

This trend is likely due to the fact that as queer children are developing, they look for validation through those that share their identity which they often find in characters from movies and TV shows. As stated earlier, LGBTQ characters act as a source of pride and comfort for LGBTQ youth (Gillig and Murphy), hence why they are more going to latch onto characters with shared identity and experiences. Since LGBTQ youth depicted in entertainment media often go through the same struggles that actual LGBTQ youth go through (the journey to accept their sexuality, coming out, the social struggles associated with coming out, etc) those characters will resonate with them more and foster

feelings of self-identification. This is not necessarily the case in adults as they are more secure in their identity and have fully developed and come to terms with their sexuality.

Gender

In this study, only three women and one non-binary person or enby (an unofficial umbrella term used for all non-binary people) were interviewed. No men volunteered to participate in the study. The answers varied among the women from it mattering somewhat to it not mattering at all, however, the general conclusion shows that gender often influences the emotional response that women experience to a limited degree. It should also be noted that the mean amount that gender mattered among women (the common gender identity in this study) was greater than the mean amount race mattered among white people (the common racial identity in this study), indicating that gender overall most likely plays a greater role regarding the emotional response that bisexual people experience. Additionally, the nonbinary person that was interviewed indicated that gender mattered a lot given the degree of the emotional response that they experience.

Similar to race, given that the nonbinary gender identity is much more marginalized in American society compared to cisgender men and women, the gender of the character aligning with their own matters much more than it does for men and women. Since nonbinary people are less represented in entertainment media, a bisexual nonbinary person seeing a queer nonbinary character will naturally evoke a greater emotional response than if their gender identity did not align with the character's.

Limitations

When interpreting the results, it is imperative to understand how my data and analysis may have been skewed. Although my methodology was successful in getting the information that I was looking for, it also significantly reduced the number of participants that I received. As opposed to something like a survey which is much more convenient yet does not allow for in depth analysis of the results, an interview typically yields less people because it is a lengthier process and is more of a hassle for potential participants. Given the low quantity of participants in this study, it is impossible to make any definitive conclusions as these participants alone cannot represent the entire bisexual community. Additionally, in this study, there was only one nonwhite person, one genderqueer person, no men, and only people ages 19 to 35. Given these restrictive demographics, it is important to understand that, while the results of this study could be used to infer how other minorities emotional response to queer characters whose racial/gender identity or age is aligned with their own, there are still many some grey areas that cannot be accurately predicted without further research that includes other demographics not represented in this study.

As stated earlier, the interview lasted for about five minutes. In this time, I asked participants the questions and they nearly immediately responded each time. However, the participants most likely did not think much about the question before answering it, and they therefore may not have given themselves enough to fully examine the question and develop an accurate response. This could have resulted in more shallow responses that did not accurately represent their experiences with LGBTQ representation in entertainment media.

Conclusion and Area for Future Directions

Given the missing data for certain racial groups, age groups, and genders, as outlined in the limitations section, it is important to include all racial groups in further studies. However, even from this study, speculations about the implications of the results could be made. Even though only one Hispanic/Latino person was interviewed in the study, it is likely that all people of color will respond similarly to this as, using the information presented in the literature review regarding how race plays a role in relationships, there is no reason that different racial minorities should give

any significantly different responses. The same logic can also be applied in order to hypothesize the response of the age groups not represented in this study. Given the trend of age matters more to younger people and less to older people, even though only people of ages 19-35 were interviewed, following this trend, it is likely that for those below 18, age will matter and for those over 35, it won't be as much of a factor. Assuming this trend holds up, although there was some speculation made in the analysis section, additional research to confirm why age matters for younger people and does not matter for older people would be useful in order to better understand these results.

Given the small data size in this study, it is impossible to draw any wider conclusions about how race, age, and gender influence the emotional response of bisexual people to LGBTQ media representation. In order to determine how bisexual people of different races, ages, and genders respond to an alignment of their identity with queer characters, the study should be repeated with a greater sample size. This will allow for definite conclusions to be made regarding different minority's responses to seeing themselves represented. Furthermore, this study is only representative of the opinion of those in America, so it should be repeated in other countries which can then solidify the conclusions found in previous studies. Repeating the study in other European countries (those with similar demographics compared to America) can allow for broader observations and conclusions about how bisexual people in minority populations respond to seeing themselves represented in television. Also, repeating this study in communities with different racial demographics (ex: where nonwhite people are the majority) who still consume media with predominantly white characters will allow for further analysis of the findings and also provide a deeper understanding of the sociological aspect of how race affects the emotional response of LGBTQ people. Specifically, it will determine whether the amplified response of bisexual people of color to queer people of color in entertainment media is the product of living in a society in which white people are the majority or consuming media with predominantly white characters.

Repeating the study with other queer identities can help solidify the results of this study and provide insight into how different queer identities react to seeing themselves represented in entertainment media. The emotional response of bisexuals may be different than gay men or lesbians, so repeating the study with those groups is necessary in order to be able to apply the results to all non-heterosexual people. Finally, repeating this study with transgender and nonbinary people as the base identity instead of bisexuals and then seeing the effect of race, age, and gender on how those people relate to transgender or nonbinary characters can provide insight into how the results of this study can be applied to genderqueer people.

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