Identity Spectrums, Analytic Adolescents, and "Gays in Space!"

A Qualitative Investigation of Youth Queer Narrative Reception

by

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ABSTRACT

This research study examines the interaction between youth queer narratives and young people through examining my core research question, How do young people engage, interpret, and respond to queer narratives? Applying a feminist narrative analysis to examine the qualitative data, I propose a methodological research shift where the voices of youth are valued as content experts; an artistic shift that moves content-creation away from a top down traditional media model and towards a youth-centered new media approach for art making; an aesthetic shift away from over-used stereotypes, tropes, and stale representations and instead innovate to represent intersectional, spectrum-based diversity of the LGBTQ+ experience.

This qualitative research study utilizes questionnaires, focus groups, and case study interviews, to engage adolescent perceptions of queer narratives. The youth, ranging in ages from 15 to 18 years old and living in the Phoenix, Arizona metro area, explore and examine LGBTQ+ themes, characters, plots in traditional and new media.

My dissertation examines youth interactions with queer narratives through three chapters. These address themes of: character, identity, and representation; plot and the search for accuracy; and the symbiotic exchange between narrative and community. Throughout the dissertation, young people analyze narratives, reflect on their own lives, and envision the future of youth queer narrative. The youth describe a move away from traditional media and towards new media platforms with user-created content, social network interaction, and the sharing of common experiences with peers. Finally, I

examine the implications of both the research findings and the methodology on the future of youth-engaged qualitative research, as well as the performing arts.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my work on this dissertation:

To my mom, who inspired a love of learning, reading, and helping others

To my dad, who taught me to never give up on my dreams and goals despite the challenges that get in my way

To my amazing committee, Stephani Etheridge Woodson, Kristin Hunt, Erika Hughes, and Johnny Saldaña, for patiently and bravely guiding me through this research journey and for challenging me to re-examine…everything

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CHAPTER ONE: LET'S START WITH SOME INTRODUCTIONS

> PENELOPE: I remember when I was little I would like pretend to have crushes on guys because people would be like, "Who do you have a crush on?" And I'd just be like, "Oh, Jimmy," because I had to give them an answer because if I said I don't have a crush on anyone, they'd be like, "Oh, that's a lie." But I always liked looking at the girls. I distinctly remember being like, "Oh, that girl's pretty. Oh, I like her outfit," and I'd get flustered around girls but I thought it was just because, I don't know, I just didn't realize I was gay.
>
> So around then, I remember watching Orange is the New Black and there was a character who was – I think it was Piper, actually…I remember her being like very feminine and pretty and I remember her talking about being gay or being bi or basically being attracted to women…I remember just like a moment of clarity, like the heavens opened up and I was like "I'm gay." It's not that I just think girls are pretty. I'm attracted to girls. I've never been attracted to men.
>
> Because of media, I feel like I thought of lesbians as such a stereotype being they had to be butch, they had to have short hair, they had to be into cars or whatever. But also because of media, that kind of crushed that view I had in my head and told me more about myself (Penelope 2017).

Penelope is an example of how young people learn more about themselves through queer media narratives that surround youth. My research study examines youth queer narratives through having direct conversations with adolescents, valuing their perspectives, and exploring the narrative landscapes together.

I conduct my research with young people during a particularly transformative moment in United States history. First, the queer population is growing, as seen in a Gallup report indicating that, in 2016, 10 million people (4.1% of the US population) identify as LGBTQ+, an increase of 1.75 million since 2012. It is estimated that 7.3% of all millennials identify as LGBT which is almost double Generation X (3.2%), roughly triple the baby boomers (2.4%), and five times as many traditionalists, those born before 1945 (1.4%) (Gates 2017). A Pew Research Center study indicated that 87% of surveyed

adults know someone who is gay or lesbian, while 30% know someone who is transgender (Where the Public Stands 2016). As more people identify as queer, it stands to reason that more narrative content will emerge in the media.

The teenagers of 2018 were born during the culture wars of the early 2000s and learned to walk as queer communities felt the wave of anti-same-sex marriage state-ballot initiatives passed in the 2002 election. When contemporary teenagers entered junior high, President Obama advanced equal rights through anti-discrimination executive orders, supporting pro-LGBTQ+ legislation, and the Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage legal in the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges case. Attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues shifted from 1997 to 2015 as evidenced in a 2015 Pew Research Center study which found that 63% of US Americans "say homosexuality should be accepted by society," up from 46% in 1994 (Gao 2015). Throughout this cultural shift, children have been watching television, reading books, exploring the rapidly expanding Internet and social media universe. These media sources contain more stories of queer individuals, same-sex couples, out LGBTQ+ characters, and overall LGBTQ+ representations (Chung 2007; Fisher et al. 2004; Kelso 2015). I wanted to speak with young people like Penelope, as witnesses to this journey, about queer character constructions and narratives with youth perspective front and center.

Research Question

Building from a place of cultural curiosity, I have one primary research question with several supporting questions that focus on the complex relationship between

narrative, youth and identity development as well as the established and developing forms of media.

Research Question: How do young people engage, interpret, and respond to queer narratives?

Related Research Questions:

- Where do young people find queer narratives?
- How do social relationships and social networks affect narrative interaction and interpretation?
- How are youth identities affected by narratives?
- How are queer narratives constructed in traditional media and new media?
- How do youth see themselves and their own lives in relation to queer narratives?
- How are queer narrative storylines understood to represent or not represent youth realities? What is realistic or accurate to young people?
- Where do young people learn about queerness?
- What do young people wish to see in traditional media youth queer narratives?

Entering the Discourse Community

To begin I want to lay the groundwork and place myself in the larger discourse community. As my study focuses on youth queer narratives, I examine each before shifting to looking at the media and elaborating on my research approach and methodology.

Defining Youth

For the purposes of my study, I define youth as those from birth through the

approximate age of 18 years old. As youth in the United States are partially characterized by the compulsory K-12 education system, I choose to work within that structure. While younger youth, like upper elementary or middle school students, would probably benefit from a discussion about identity construction (as they are wrestling with puberty and their own personal identities), this age group tends to be more protected by the gate-keepers (parents and school administration) than older youth. Access to older youth is generally easier as their identities are more closely aligned to the stages of adulthood—not as in need of gate-keeper protection. The research population is largely limited by researcher access. Youth structurally transition when they turn 18. They can serve in the military, vote, sign themselves out of school, and are often legally treated as adults. The government grants legal rights to 18-year-old individuals, marking the end of youth-ness and the beginning of adulthood. Rather than deal with academic distinctions or medical estimations of the human brain's full development, I choose to deal with the systems and structures that define youth and adulthood. US American youth endure these constructs, so I choose to utilize this working definition.

Youth are not passive receptacles, unwillingly assaulted by media narratives. In the United States, youth are active consumers, accepting and rejecting, consuming and producing, receiving and transmitting the ideologies, constructions, and decisions presented. Youth filter the messages through interactions with other people's narratives of their own identity journeys. I next examine the active relationship and the accepting/rejecting narrative filtering present in young people.

Working with youth, instead of on youth, is important because they have their

own unique points of view and experiences. Rather than assume the narratives they consume or their reactions to these constructs, I speak with them directly. Youth, often viewed as on the journey to adulthood, should be respected as unique human beings. Scholars have explored the tension between youth as becoming/being (Qvotrup 2011; James 2011; Sykes 2011), and I choose to treat youth as humans, not solely as products in development. In order to uncover/discover youth engagement with queer narratives and characters, my research puts youth front and center. I want to ensure young people and their unique insights are respected throughout the research process. I could conduct this research from an adult-outsider position and predict what youth might watch or think and, therefore, speaking for youth. However, I cannot honor youth as human beings and treat their voices as less important. While youth develop physically, emotionally, and socially during their teenage years, they still should be treated as independent humans with their own unique perspectives.

When I examine the current body of research about queer youth media, some researchers spoke with young people under the age of 18 (Snapp et al. 2015; Bond 2015; Harper and Bruce 2016). Other researchers focused on adult researcher interpretations and queer readings of youth-focused media (Raley and Lucas 2006). Those who did, spoke to 18 to 22-year olds in university or support group settings. These studies covered the trans youth experience (McInroy and Craig 2015), the effect of media on youth resiliency (Craig et al. 2015), and identity formation from *Glee* (Meyer and Wood 2013). A similar study used surveys and focus groups with adults to identity LGBTQ+ role models for the coming-out process, dealing with bullying, etc. (Gomillion and Giuliano

2011). Few studies interview young people under the age of 18 and when they do, they focus exclusively on queer youth perceptions of queer media in terms of identity formation, the coming out process, and bullying. Few ask non-queer youth about queer representations nor youth narrative constructions or interpretations. This hole in the research data is what my study seeks to address.

Defining Queer

As "queer" has been reclaimed by young people, as well as the larger discourse community, I use "queer" as a collective term to include the panoply of non-normative gender, sexual, and affectual identities. The term itself has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community and in particular by the scholarly field, as evidenced in the rise of queer studies (De Lauretis 1991; Jagose 1996; Halperin 2003). This reclamation returns the power of the word to the subordinated and oppressed people. As Kimberle Crenshaw states,

> Subordinated people can and do participate, sometimes even subverting the naming process in empowering ways. One need only think about the historical subversion of the category 'Black' or the current transformation of 'queer' to understand that categorization is not a one-way street. Clearly, there is unequal power, but there is nonetheless some degree of agency that people can and do exert in the politics of naming. And it is important to note that identity continues to be a site of resistance for members of different subordinated groups (Crenshaw 1991, 1297).

While the term may not be preferred by all in the LGBTQ+ community due to its checkered past, the queer theorists of the late 20th century like Teresa De Lauretis (1991) and Annamarie Jagose (1996), the young people in this study in 2017, have taken the word back. As James Sears states, "I celebrate queer because our childhoods were pervaded by those who brandished the word in the staccato repartee of classmates in

insults hurled into the radio waves, and in hellfire condemnation from pulpits" (Sears 1999, 4). Scholars, activists, artists, and youth can mobilize queerness to challenge the forces that have worked against the queer community in the past.

Having a queer identity or identifying queerly means stepping away from the heteronormative way of seeing oneself. Instead of existing in the heterosexual-only landscape, queer individuals embrace a broader affectual, sexual, and identity definition. Queer

> challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse. Given its commitment to interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity, the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality. (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 1)

Queer serves as a reclamation of power to step outside of the normalized or standardized definitions of sexuality, gender, relationships and identities. Queer identity is non-normative and, within the working definition of queer, tension exists between trying to define the term while also acknowledging it is without a fixed point.

> That queerness remains open to a continuous critique of its exclusionary operations has always been one of the field's key theoretical and political promises. What might be called the 'subjectless' critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent. (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 3)

Queer functions as a way to describe a break from the heteronormative "normal." Essentially, when people construct a societal norm, the violation or challenging of that norm can fall under the nebulous term queer. Queer also works to break fixed definitions and identity structures. "As presently constituted, queer seeks to disrupt the discrete,

fixed locations of identity by understanding sexuality and its meanings not as a priori or given but as constructed, contingent, fashioned and refashioned, and relational" (Talburt 2000, 3). As Susan Talburt indicates, identity, sexuality, gender, are all constructed and relational, therefore they can be deconstructed and explored in relation to others. However, even queerness can settle into an established definition and fixed identity. The queer label takes on the norms of being queer and has lost part of its disruptive origin.

Second, queer can functions as a verb or an action. Queer has the power to destabilize or challenge. "Queer has been said not to be a noun, for nouns stabilize in space and time, but an adjective that cuts across identities, subjectivities, and communities" (Talburt 2000, 4-5). When applying this verb to our work as scholars or as practitioners, the act of queering or applying queer theory allows us to re-examine our assumptions and to frame the field differently. Queer becomes a functional lens to reflect on one's work. The term queer shifts and can take on multiple meanings. As Judith Butler states,

> If the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings, it will have to remain that which is...never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. (Butler 1993, 228)

Butler indicates that this word constantly shifts and grows in order to stay queer. Once it falls into the normative space, it needs to be broken out again. As queer nears a codified set of identities, it can be challenged by its gerund (verb) form.

Before moving further, I must center an operational definition. I use "queer" as a collective term to include the panoply of non-heteronormative gender and sexual

identities. The term itself has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community and in particular by the scholarly field, as evidenced in the rise of queer studies. Additionally, throughout the dissertation, I use the acronym LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and a plus sign to include other identity-communities) as a connection to the larger non-normative community. I use no other collective terminology in the dissertation.

Defining Narrative

Generally defined, narratives are the stories humans tell each other and are composed of character, plot, and action. However, as Marie-Laure Ryan states in her article, "Towards a Definition of Narrative," narrative definitions should not depend too strongly on implicit elements. She posits that narrative should include the less classifiable pieces that relate to storytelling. "Narrative is about problem solving… about conflict…about interpersonal relations…about human experience…Narrative is about the temporality of existence" (Ryan 2007, 24). That being said, there are operational definitions of narrative that seek to establish frames and expectations for narrative. Rick Altman's narrowing of narrative definition components highlights two key elements; action and character. "The existence of narrative depends on the simultaneous and coordinated presence of action and character. Narratives are not made of characters here and actions there but of characters acting" (Altman, 2008 15). Additionally, narratives transcend the form in which they occur. As Altman also states, "however different the media that serve as a given story's vehicles—however distinct the oral, written, illustrated, or film versions of a particular narrative—we readily recognize a story's

ability to be translated into different forms and yet somehow remain the 'same' story" (Altman 2008, 1). While a narrative may be online or in a comic book or in a play, the story remains constant.

The person or thing doing the action is a key factor in the narratives continuity and impact. Brian Richardson posits four guiding components that make a theory of character. These are: mimetic connections to real human behaviors, formal character functions that support plot or establish patterns, embodied ideological positions, and the physical body of the actor that can shift the character itself. The first three components can be seen in both written and verbal/aural narratives. The fourth is unique to narratives that are acted out, such as theatre, television, and movies (Richardson 2007). The physical presence of the actor allows for one person to play different, roles and the ethos of the individual actor can impact the performance of the character. As the majority of the pieces I discussed with the participants were in a performed medium, this is a key factor to keep in mind; the performer and means of performance matter. For the purpose of this study, I narrow the scope of narrative I investigate to be those stories performed and acted (television, movies, theatre, online video) and not stories told through reading (comic books, graphic novels, short stories, and novels). Queer narratives should be examined because they represent a minority of the overall media narrative landscapes. They also present a minority community to the larger viewing audience. For some narrative consumers, their only exposure to a queer individual comes through television. They may not have out queer neighbors, friends, or co-workers, so the characters serve as stand-ins for the LGBTQ+ community.

Media Context

Narratives are often told through the media. Clear evidence exists of the media's power over young people, functioning as a stand-in for adult role models and knowledge unavailable in schools. Subject matter that parents, schools, or friends may have not discussed have the potential to enter youths' worldview. As Sheng Kuan Chung (2007) states, "Most likely, the media generations learn about social issues like homosexuality not from direct contact with gay people or from their parents, teachers and peers, but from characters and scenes depicted in…television programs" (Chung 2007, 99). Research also indicates that television has become a main source of information and tool for adolescents to deal with life's challenges. "Some have labeled the media a sexual 'super-peer' because of its role in establishing sexual norms and expectations for young people" (Eyal et al. 2007, 317). These norms are then repeatedly copied and passed down. For the purposes of my paper, I use television as a cluster term for broadcast, network, and streaming televised productions.

In our current digital society, these narratives can spread even more quickly through social media. A 30-second commercial or YouTube video, for example, can be posted and then shared across the globe, creating instant discussions. Additionally, with hundreds of network channels available and a variety of media providers, each targeting different viewing communities, the quantity of available narratives has exploded. My research seeks to check these assertions with actual young people. Do television, commercial advertising, and the media serve as a super-peer, as previous research suggests?

What young people see is also growing and changing. The young people I interviewed described a wide variety of narratives from a broadening array of easily accessible sources. Youth consume narratives in greater numbers and have more narratives easily accessible than in previous generations. The majority of young people have smart phones that connect to the Internet, and more specifically YouTube, at any point during the day. As a Pew Research Center study found, roughly 75% of teens have access to a smartphone with a race/ethnicity access breakdown indicating that 85% of African-American teens and 71% of white and Hispanic teens have smartphones. (Lenhart et al. 2015, 2). YouTube itself represents a shift in youth media viewing habits away from traditional media to new media; from top-down produced programming to bottom-up, interacting and reactive, user-created content. Youth media in 2017 provides creative outlets for young people to record their own videos, write their own blogs, and respond to their peers. Youth also have more channels on their televisions, have access to streaming video services, and Internet access at home. With computers, tablets, laptops, and smartphones, the narrative landscape once constrained to a television, movie screen, or book, can now be easily accessed at the touch of a few buttons (McInroy 2017). As youth are more connected through social media and technology than adults, these narratives have even greater significance.

Television and the narratives it advances are particularly potent because of the large amounts of time devoted to it by young people. The key component is that television, as well as other narrative mediums, are power communication devices that engage agentic youth. Television is a primary medium for content knowledge and

psychological development (McInroy 2017). While watching television they are not merely absorbing new information but rather filtering, analyzing, and adapting to the various narratives, characters, and messages.

Traditional media also includes a new technology: streaming content. The impact of Netflix and other streaming online programs are also significant because the majority of young people I spoke with watched their media programs on their phones, computers, or after the initial air date on television screens through Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, etc. This allows teens to watch programming on their own in a comfortable environment. Whether it is late at night in their rooms, while waiting for the bus to school, with friends or with family members, this flexibility represents a marked shift from 10 years ago when people could only watch when the show aired or to record it on a VHS tape or, later, the DVR. As a result of streaming online services, young people have more options available. Programs are accessible when they broadcast or released and on-demand after they air. Greater accessibility opens the door for a greater amount of narrative media moments.

Previous Research

Using research methods to unpack the images presented to young people is significant for several reasons. First, it is important to see the variety or lack of variety of queer representations to young people. These representations inform young people about their own social constructions of queer life as well as their interactions with peers and their self-esteem. Second, all media are essentially in the business to sell a product, so uncovering what sells informs what norms are present in society. Third, cultural attitudes

toward the LGBTQ+ community have shifted, so uncovering how the media landscape has changed could inform the reasons behind it.

My first foray into exploring this topic began with an in-depth survey of English-speaking Theatre for Youth plays with queer narratives or queer characters. Building off the work by Annie Giannini (2009; 2010), as well as Manon van de Water (2012), I found more plays than I had expected and yet the narrative kept repeating; queer victim gets bullied; queer victim finds some way to make it through; and the play concludes with a nice moral ending. Table 1 presents the list of play titles I researched. I use an asterisk notation to indicate those that include a queer victim narrative. Considering the considerable size of the Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) canon, LGBTQ+ representation is rather low (Giannini 2010; van de Water 2012). As van de Water states, "When homosexuality is represented in TYA, it is treated as a calamity, discreetly packaged in plays intended to teach lessons about tolerance…contained in a discourse of 'troubled gay youth' which limits representation to those who are victimized because of their sexuality" (van de Water 2012, 82). A quick glance showed that roughly 65% of these plays rely on a victim narrative.

Table 1: LGBTQ+ Theatre for Young Audiences Play Archive

All of Us by Laurie Brooks*	*Other Side of the Closet* by Ed Roy*
Along Came Tango by Emily Freeman	*Reflections of a Rock Lobster* by Burgess Clark*
Aunty Ben by Sian Ni Mhuiri (UK)	*A Service for Jeremy Wong* by Daniel S. Kehde*
A Beautiful Thing by Jonathan Harvey*	*Slipping* by Daniel Talbott
Blu by Gloria Bond Clunie*	*She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen*
The Children's Hour by Lillian Hellman*	*Tea and Sympathy* by Robert Anderson
Cootie Shots by Fringe Benefits	*The Trans G Kid* by Trisha Sugarek*
fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life, by Sarah Gubbins*	*The Transition of Doodle Pequeño* by Gabriel Jason Dean*
Fun Home, by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori	*The Wrestling Season* by Laurie Brooks*
Food for the Dead by Josefina Lopez	*Vin* by Stephen House (AUS)*
The Geography Club by Brett Hartinger*	*Yellow on Thursdays* by Sara Graefe
The Laramie Project by Moisés Kaufman*	

And yet, the characters presented onscreen were also problematically repetitive. Television sitcoms had moved from having queer guest characters and toward queer leading roles. But the traditional media representations on major networks leaned toward middle-aged, White, gay men in committed relationships. These characters lived comfortable middle to upper class lifestyles, longed for children, but rarely had intimate moments (Bond 2015). The subtle messaging from the artistic producers became, "we

can watch you on television and laugh, but don't make the viewing audience too uncomfortable with your overt queerness." The white-washed gendered depictions of the queer community also neglected to reflect a modern, diverse United States.

Narrative Analysis Approach

I utilize narrative analysis techniques to guide my study and to investigate the data collected. In particular, I use a feminist narratology or feminist narrative theory approach. The analysis approaches a narrative text with an understanding it is linked to material circumstances from history and culture. This approach also understands that texts do not reproduce reality but are constructed representations of the world. This broad term expresses a narrative focus which "covers the many different ways in which gender-related aspects of narratives and the models used to analyze them may be interrogated from a feminist point of view…along with the neighboring areas of inquiry such as queer theory" (Page 2007, 189). Context matters in a feminist narrative approach. Ruth Page goes on to state that feminist narratology is especially concerned with cultural constructions of gender as narrative analysis cannot "take place in a context-free vacuum" (Page 2007, 189). Robyn Warhol adds that feminist narrative theorists see that "texts are always linked to the material circumstances of the history that produces and receives them." (Warhol 2012, 9). This connects well into my study because I am interrogating the constructions of these forms as intentional actions built from individual or group motivations, expectations, stereotypes, and biases. Some of my questions ask the youth participants to directly examine why content creators make the choices they do and how social events impact representation.

Feminist narrative theory in application examines a text from positions outside of the heteronormative, male-dominated point of view. As Warhol states, "class, race, nation, gender, sexuality, ethnicity dis/ability: feminist narrative theory tries to keep as many of those balls in the air as possible, accepting responsibility for critiquing narrative manifestations of all categories of oppression based on socially constructed identities" (Warhol 2012, 12). This feminist focus on narrative that highlights intersectionality, the positionality of reader and creator, and social construction link well into my research.

After-Queer Approach

In this study, I also deploy a newer theoretical approach addressing queer theory, "After-queer." According to Talburt, after-queer seeks to bring back to life "queer's potential by alternately centering and de-centering sexuality" (Talburt 2010, 50). An after-queer approach is a different way to examine the representations and treatment of queer subjects. Susan Talburt and Mary Lou Rasmussen (2010) position an after-queer educational approach as focusing on the ways representations of sexuality, gender, identity and education intermix.

An after-queer approach has been used in several studies to date (Crowley and Rasmussen 2010; Charles 2010; Marshal 2010). Claire Charles understands an after-queer frame to be "about understanding connections that are produced between sexuality and broader cultural processes that seek to govern young people's subjectivities" (Charles 2010, 35). Her research involves discussing femininity with youth in a school environment, similar to my interview-based research method. She focuses on what can happen beyond a limited sexuality discourse. Her method and use of an after-queer

approach, and her exploration of the interactions between identity, privilege, and power informs my study.

My use of an after-queer approach is heavily informed by Daniel Marshall and his examination on how young people view popular culture representations of queer youth. He posits that an after-queer approach is possible now with a growing number of queer representations. While previous queer readings or views of media focused on a deficit-approach, where queers needed to read themselves into straight media depictions or narratives, contemporary readings involve examining representations that are wholly queer. Instead of asking where the LGBTQ+ community fits into the narrative heteronormative landscape, an after-queer approach focuses on "critically reading the limitations and the pleasures of explicit representations of gay and lesbian characters" (Marshall 2010, 76). An after-queer approach has a few hallmarks that contribute to my study.

First, an after-queer approach recognizes the viewer or consumer an active member in the receptive and analytic process. Views of queer youth, for the purposes of this study especially, are "not constrained by notions of passive receptivity…Young people are mobilizing self-aware understandings of the constructedness of representations of sexual identity" (Marshall 2010, 75). Young people are engaging with each other about the representations they see in traditional media, online, and in new media forms.

Second, an after-queer method pays particular attention to young people's capacity for actively analyzing stereotypes and representation in complex ways. "The impact for the contributors is that it demonstrates their agentic capacity to analyze and

respond to mass-produced representations of homosexuality" (Marshall 2010, 77). Key to this development is that young queer individuals need to be able to separate themselves from the representation itself and read the constructions.

> After-queer reading practices then reflect agentic capabilities of young people to critically distance themselves from stereotypes. In this respect, the work of the audience is to read itself out of, rather than into, the text. Or, to put it more accurately, reading one's self out of the text is a defining characteristic of after-queer reading practices. (Marshall 2010, 77-78).

An after-queer approach fits my study because it focuses on queer young people actively unpacking and examining queer representations.

Marshall's definition and after-queer methodology informs my data collection process. He advocates in his article that the after-queer approach occurs on a macro media level that aptly can address the historical trends in queer media. I advocate data collection can happen with youth. Marshall's focus is more on online discussion boards or other text-based mediated environments. "Conducting this work at a media level, in contrast to a direct data collection with young people themselves, is important because cultural contests over meaning commonly have a media dimension." (Marshall 2010, 80). He indicates only those media researchers who have a larger grasp of the media landscape can make this analysis, while also arguing an after-queer approach requires young people to engage in active discussion and agentic responses. I argue that young people are also capable of examining trends in media depictions and representations themselves and can use their agentic voices in verbal discussions.

Participants

The participants in my study came from three Phoenix metro-area high schools

which contain a diverse socio-economic and student cultural background. According to the most recent census data, in 2016 the Phoenix metro area had approximately 4.7 million residents and the city of Phoenix, as the 6th largest in the United States had 1.6 million residents with a median age of 33. Youth under the age of 19 account for 27% of the metro population and 21% of youth live in poverty (Census Reporter 2016). In terms of the racial and ethnic diversity in the metro area population is 56% White, 30% Hispanic, 5% Black, 3.7% Asian, and 2% Native American (Census Reporter 2016).

In order to establish partnerships for field sites, I began by emailing faculty members in charge of Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA) at various high schools in the area and reaching out through my own personal networks. I did not want to speak only with queer youth about queer issues, so I also contacted teachers at an arts-school and a local public high school to set-up sessions. Teachers and staff at three sites agreed to be involved, and I determined that each site would have two focus groups with 5 to 15 youth each. With each field site, I first visited each school to speak with the teacher or staff member about the study and then returned to visit classrooms at each site and share the research study opportunity directly with the young people. I asked interested young people to complete an assent and consent form by the focus group session date the teacher and I had determined. Three of the focus groups were school GSAs, one focus group was a study hall period, and two focus groups were completed during an arranged time that gathered interested young people together from multiple classes and groups. These focus groups also contained a cross section of different sexual orientations, gender identities, and racial/cultural backgrounds.

Based on the responses and experiences during the focus group sessions, I approached seven individual youth for one-on-one case study interviews. I selected participants from the focus groups based on their responses to the questions, their comfort with the research process, and the depth of previous discussions. I first ensured I had approval from the supervising faculty member at each site and then asked the student to participate in the longer interview.

Each participant up to age 18 in the focus group sessions and individual case study interview sessions completed a parental consent form and student assent form before I collected any data (Appendices A and B). Youth 18 years of age or older completed a consent form for themselves (Appendix C). Additionally, each person chose a pseudonym in order to protect the individual's identity. Each case study participant's chosen name, indicated age, expressed gender identity, expressed sexual orientation and written race/ethnicity are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Case Study Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender identity	Sexual orientation	Race/Ethnicity
Ozzy	17	Transgender Female	Bisexual	White
Ann-Jordan	14	Female	Pansexual	Palestinian
Alice	17	Non-binary	Asexual	White
Penelope	17	Female	Lesbian	White
Zol	16	Female	Bisexual	Latina
Tila	16	Female	Lesbian	Black
Lili	18	Transgender Female	Straight	Latina

Methodology: The Study

In order to better explore youth queer narratives, I used a qualitative research process which can be broken down into three data collection methods: questionnaires, focus groups, and case studies. This technique utilized youth in the research process and placed a strong emphasis on their voice. Four research studies strongly influenced my research design. These included: Sarah Gomillion and Traci Giuliano's (2011) use of questionnaires; Shelley Craig et al.'s (2015) case study interviews and their focus on new online media; Shannon Snapp et al.'s (2015) use of focus groups with youth under 18; and Victor Evan's (2007) use of questionnaires, focus groups, and case studies with teenagers and adults. In my study, each research method and data collection technique provided a different type of information. I received approval from the ASU Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the dissertation research on August 9, 2016 (Appendix D) and re-authorization for further data analysis on August 18, 2017 (Appendix E).

Questionnaires

The first data collection technique involved individual questionnaires. One form collected demographic information and included questions about age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identities, and a series of questions on media usage and viewing technology (the number of screens) at home (Appendix F). The second form was a brainstorming questionnaire to allow individual youth to think through different narrative mediums and where each sees queerness (Appendix G). Rather than assume what young people would watch or view, I wanted to hear directly from them. Based on my previous work as an educator, I knew that the participants would want to process and

reflect on what they have seen in order to best discuss their observations and opinions with peers. Participants completed both forms before we began the focus group sessions.

Focus Groups

A second data collection technique was the use of focus groups at each field site. I conducted six focus groups total with group size ranging from 5 to 15 participants. I determined the focus group size primarily by youth availability and the time granted by the teacher or staff member. At one field site, I divided the large GSA group into two smaller groups, as I only had a 45-minute window of time. Focus Group Session 1 was the first half of that population while Focus Group Session 2 was the other half. Each of these sessions focused on the same questions. Focus Group Session 3 was the combined groups and the discussion questions focused on what youth want to see in future narratives and their overall thoughts about queer youth depictions. We completed the other four focus groups in one session each.

I designed the focus groups to potentially examine responses from different populations. Three were composed of Gay/Straight Alliance members, two were young people at an arts-based high school and one was a collection of youth in a study hall. Each included a variety of identities in the room.

During each focus group session, I held discussions using the same set of questions (Appendix H). Through focus groups, young people described and defined factors that led to queer legibility. They also described their perceptions, desires (even if different), and a collective knowledge. Additionally, the youth focus groups produced a larger list of narrative samples through a combined effort or snowball effect. Ideas

triggered more ideas, or fragments of ideas, that the rest of the group often completed. Each focus group ranged from 45 to 75 minutes long with attention paid to naturally flowing, comfortable dialogue.

Case Studies

The third research method was individual case studies with seven individuals. I interviewed each participant for approximately 30 to 40 minutes and asked the same core questions (Appendix I). Due to schedule constraints with one of the field sites, two of the case studies happened one after another with the second participant hearing some of the questions while the first participant spoke. This allowed time for her to think about her own responses as well as reference the responses of her peer. While not ideal, scheduling difficulties at another site made me hold three case studies simultaneously. I asked each question of each participant in sequence. Often, the young people would add onto each other's ideas or supplement the point with her own experiences but at the same time respected each other enough to not interrupt a story or point. I held the other two case studies independently of each other.

Data Analysis

I tabulated the data collected from the questionnaires into a spread sheet and examined the brainstorming responses for patterns. I categorized the television narrative responses into mediums, then into genres. Each of the other narrative mediums was separated into its own table. This data can be found in various tables throughout this document and in Appendices J through M.

In order to examine the qualitative research data, I transcribed each focus group, and had each case study transcribed by an outside service, which I double checked upon completion. I coded each focus group and case study for content and patterns. I went through a series of coding cycles to extract key narrative themes (Saldaña 2011). Each code is a "shorthand label to a piece of data that takes this datum apart and defines what it means" (Charmaz 2011, 165). First, I utilized a holistic coding method to examine general ideas and concepts in the data by indicating general categories for the datum units. Next I coded the data in each category into smaller sub-codes. I primarily utilized descriptive coding (names of television shows, "identity marking", and "stereotypes") and values coding ("positive media feelings", "more likely to watch"). When a descriptive code could not adequately describe a pattern, I used In Vivo coding to highlight student perspectives through verbatim text ("Super-Gay", "Tip-toe into Gay-ness". The second round of coding refined and re-organized the codes into more manageable units. I then went through a categorization process where I clustered similar codes together and also subdivided general codes into sub-codes. For example, my first round of coding included a general code of "gay male stereotypes" and after that initial wave of coding, I broke down what was actually being said. This included sub-codes like "uses hands a lot," "effeminate gay male," or "likes fashion." These codes can be found in Appendix N. I used the qualitative coding software MAXQDA to help organize the codes and aid in finding patterns in the research pieces. From these codes and sub-codes, I developed larger themes such as what narratives do, how they impact youth, and how

youth view narratives and media (Saldaña 2011). Finally, I wrote on the themes, reflected on their interconnectedness, and significance.

My research methodology, composed of the previously described data collection techniques, has been designed to put youth voices at the center of the study. Engaging young people's experiences through a multi-modal approach via written brainstorming, group discussion, and individual interviews allow more voices to be heard in methods that address a diversity of expressive preferences. Additionally, my methodology attends to both breadth and depth of information.

Researcher Positionality

I conduct this research from a particular point of view. I taught secondary English, speech, and theatre for seven years and bring in an ease in speaking with teenagers, education pedagogy and curriculum design, and underlying expectations on teacher/student power dynamics. From my teaching experience, I also know that young people have their own perspectives on life. As an artist, I recognize the value of engaging youth as peers in the creative process. As a theatre scholar, I have read and seen theatre that contains queer characters and have seen an increase in television shows, movies, comic books, and children's literature that present a wider diversity of the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, as a gay man, my view of queer narrative contains tension between the seeing the value of queer characters embedded in media and with my dissatisfaction with those characters. I'm torn between wanting quality queer narratives and knowing that increased queer visibility, even shoddy, can be valuable. Combining these three elements, I design this study to decentralize my position as a sage-on-the-

stage educator and explore these topics with youth. In order to uncover/discover youth engagement with queer narratives and characters, my research put youth front and center. Entering into the classroom to meet with youth, I present as an outside authority figure and must recognize and negotiate power dynamics based on my appearance and my identity. Additionally, as a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, I recognize that these intersectional demographic categories add to my own positionality in relation to the queer subject matter and the diverse youth participants. I occupy multiple positions of power as an adult, an educator, a researcher, and as an outsider.

Chapter Preview

I organize this dissertation into five chapters. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the methodology, research design, and underlying guiding theories of the project. From this foundation, I focus in Chapter 2 on narrative and character through representation, identity, and stereotyping. Chapter 3 explores youth queer narratives through plot, tropes, and traditional media narrative accuracy. I also examine where young people find information about queerness. Additionally, both chapters 3 and 4 present youth solutions for transforming traditional media. Chapter 4 investigates the reflexive relationship between social networks and narrative. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the implications of my research and offers a way forward for the artistic community.

CHAPTER TWO: CHARACTER REPRESENTATION AND YOUTH IDENTITY

After examining the interview data collected from the focus groups and case studies, several youth narrative themes emerged around the way characters are represented. I connect these representation issues to youth identity, narrative effects on identity, and what young people believe could be done to fix the problems they address. Building from the previously established narrative definition, this chapter focuses particularly on character and addresses the following related research questions.

- Where do young people find queer narratives?
- How are youth identities affected by narratives?
- How do youth see themselves and their own lives in relation to queer narratives?

In order to answer these questions, I utilize the concepts described in the preceding chapter, define the additional operational terms "media" and "identity," and then examine identity formation and representation. Next I present four key themes, move into the intersections between narratives and identity, and finally present youth suggestions about how to move forward.

Defining Media

Lauren McInroy (2017) delineates narrative media into two forms: traditional and new. I utilize her definition to better isolate and examine different forms of representational mediums. She states, "Traditional media is predominantly characterized by offline technology, while new media is characterized by online (or computer-based) technology—and has been highlighted for its unique degree of interactivity and non-hierarchical structure" (2017, 41). Her study went farther into youth perceptions of these

two media forms, and those young people highlighted the focus on social control and commodification in traditional media versus the creative opportunities and interaction in new media. She also focused on media consumption versus media production.

Defining Identity

Identity is socially constructed and negotiated through narrative. We present ourselves to each other and read the appropriateness or inappropriateness of others, and other's identities. Our individual identities may vary based on the situation as we utilize code-switching to reflect the social environment and expectations. Additional members of a social circle can affirm or reject a presented identity. Even the markers of identity are co-created: socially constructed signs, symbols including clothing choices, hair styles, body art, etc. Steph Lawler states, "identity needs to be understood not as belonging 'within' the individual person, but as produced between persons and within social relations" (2008, 8). This production of identity is particularly evident in the created narratives. These narratives then inform, reify, and support youth identity construction (Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; Kelso 2015; Marshall 2010). A sociological view of identity explains that the stories themselves serve to reify societal norms. "Identity is not something foundational and essential, but something produced through the narratives people use to explain and understand their lives" (Lawler 2008). Identity is never fixed, and its development begins at birth. In other words, each individual creates an identity and actively re-creates and modifies it throughout their lives in relation to other people.

Intersectionality

Identity is also a multifaceted construction. Intersectionality highlights that humans are combinations of identities that combine in unique ways (Crenshaw 1991; Harper and Bruce 2016). Other demographic factors, beyond queerness, should be examined when looking at identity. For example, in the United States context, a narrative portrayal of a black queer man is different from the portrayal of a white queer woman. The queerness of both cannot be lumped together due to this one LGBTQ+ factor. Crenshaw emphasizes that identity structures relate to power and privilege within a society. Power and privilege, in other words, are affected by intersectional identity factors. "I should say at the outset that intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity…My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1991, 1244-1245). Crenshaw also posits three types of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational. My research, while touching on all three of Crenshaw's delineations, is relevant in particular to representational intersectionality. Crenshaw states:

> Perhaps the devaluation of women of color implicit here is linked to how women of color are represented in cultural imagery. Scholars in a wide range of fields are increasingly coming to acknowledge the centrality of issues of representation in the reproduction of racial and gender hierarchy in the United States. Yet current debates over representation continually elide the intersection of race and gender in the popular culture's construction of images of women of color. Accordingly, an analysis of what may be termed "representational intersectionality" would include both the ways in which these images are produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color. (1991, 1282-1283)

My work extends this representational intersectionality to the US American queer community and how queer images are "produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives" and "how contemporary critiques" of anti-queer, homophobic, transphobic, representations marginalize the queer community.

Disidentification

In order to better examine youth experiences of queer narratives and characters, I examine disidentification. Jose Esteban Muñoz advanced the theory that explored identity and outward expressions of that identity through power relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the dominant majority and the marginalized minority. "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (1999, 4). He stated that the minority, when faced with the normalizing influence of the majority, disidentify in order to not just survive, but to change the system from within.

> Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance. (Muñoz 1999, 11-12)

The young people in my study exist in a similar space; working to establish their own identity structures while feeling uncomfortable in the majority's representational

constructions. This is not limited to gender or sexual identity but also includes other factors. Disidentification is also intersectional as both concepts seek to explore identity from multiple combinations of identity structures which create unique matrices which affect social relationships and power dynamics (Muñoz 1999).

Collected Queer Narrative Sources

With those framing definitions established, I present some initial data findings to help inform the thematic analysis. As described earlier, the young people began the research study by filling out a questionnaire/brainstorming activity. I asked them to list where they see queerness on television (broadcast, network, and streaming), in movies, in print, onstage, online, and in other popular culture forms. Table 3 shows the television shows that received more than 4 mentions. The additional data tables, including television shows with under four mentions, can be found in Appendix J. Television shows were the most often mentioned and dominated the overall discussion. In the data set itself, I include the network which broadcasts the show, the genre, and the TV Parental Guidelines. As one can see, of all the media forms and narrative pieces listed, the young people referenced *Orange is the New Black* the most.

Table 3: Questionnaire Responses: Television with Ratings, Genre, and Network

Title	Count	Rating	Genre	Network
Orange is the New Black	32	TV-MA	Drama	Netflix
Modern Family	22	TV-PG	Comedy	ABC
Glee	19	TV-PG	Comedy	Fox
The Fosters	18	TV-14	Family	ABC Family
American Horror Story	12	TV-MA	Drama	FX
Ellen	10	TV-G	Talk	NBC
Adventure Time	7	TV-PG	Cartoon	Cartoon Network
How to Get Away with Murder	6	TV-14	Drama	ABC
Grey's Anatomy	6	TV-14	Drama	ABC
Black Mirror	6	NR	Drama	Netflix
The Real O'Neals	6	TV-PG	Comedy	ABC
Steven Universe	6	TV-PG	Comedy	Cartoon Network
How I Met Your Mother	5	TV-14	Comedy	CBS
Ru Paul's Drag Race	4	TV-14	Reality	Logo/VH-1
The Office	4	TV-PG	Drama	NBC

Regarding theatre pieces, the young people identified works they had seen onstage but also those pieces the school was producing. Young people at one site, for example, were putting on a production of *Almost, Maine* and proudly shared the story with their classmates. At another site, the young people were part of a production of *Spring Awakening*. They stated,

YOUTH 1. *Spring Awakening*, am I right?

YOUTH 2. We are doing it, this--
YOUTH 3. I put that too.
YOUTH 1. Come see it, it's going to be great. (Focus Group Session Six 2017)

This highlights that youth identify queer theatre pieces they have seen in person. While television shows, movies, and new media pieces can be easily shared and viewed by consumers, theatre productions need to be encountered during the run of the show at a specific site. The focus groups knew of theatre pieces, but certainly not to the extent of television, movies, and online content. Table 4 presents the works mentioned. Another interesting discovery is that none of the youth responses match the list of queer TYA plays referenced in Chapter 1.

Table 4: Questionnaire Responses: Theatre

Title	Count
Rent	10
Spring Awakening	6
Rocky Horror Picture Show	4
Avenue Q, Dog Sees God, Hedwig and the Angry Inch, La Cage Aux Folles, Falsettos	3
Almost, Maine, Victor Victoria, School of Rock, Cabaret, The Producers, The Book of Mormon, The Color Purple, In the Heights	2
Hazelwood Senior High, Mama Mia, Angels in America, Polaroid Stories, In Moonlight, Black Boys Look Blue, Blue Galaxy, Hamilton, Bare: A Pop Opera	1

There is a complete disconnect between the works the youth have seen and the queer Theatre for Young Audiences plays (TYA) I had previously examined. Geography, production frequency, and theatre-going behaviors certainly could be a factor, as could these teenagers' interest in works that target older audiences.

Narratives Affect Identity

Several themes emerged from the data regarding the intersections of identity and representation. These are that *narratives affect identity*, *narratives reinforce stereotypes*, *narratives reflect the viewer*, and *narratives limit possibilities*. Before heading into the data, I connect my findings to other previous research. To begin, narratives influence identity formation. Humans use stories to make sense of the world around us and then create stories to represent our journeys. Media takes these stories of self-expression and transmit them to other individuals creating their own stories. Through similarity, familiarity, and wishful identification, these media narratives inform and shift this identity formation process. The television shows themselves function as a way to share identities. "We endlessly tell stories about our lives, both to ourselves and to others; and it is through such stories that we make sense of the world, of our relationship to that world and of the relationship between ourselves and other selves" (Lawler 2008, 12). The tales we weave showcase our values, beliefs, attitudes and the conditions for narrative social acceptability.

The media narratives also can inform gender schemata, or structures of how genders should behave (Nathanson et al. 2002). Narratives also compound on each other to create these structures. The story does not work independently, as it builds on

previously held stories. "The narrative cannot stand alone but must refer to and draw on wider cultural narratives...about how class impacts living arrangements, about working-class respectability and a kind of alternative middle-class existence" (Lawler 2008, 12). In other words, the story-narratives we tell are built off of, draw from, and reinforce the cultural narratives we promulgate. The long arc of this narrative has changed during the past 50 years, but still carries with it certain norms and stereotypes.

For queer youth, these representations become particularly important as the narratives become strong role models, informing identity formation (Fisher et al. 2004). Television narratives are a "strong influence on sexual identity formation, behavioral choices made by teens, particularly as they grow into emerging adulthood" (Meyer and Wood 2013, 436). Gomillion and Giuliano point out that these messages last well into adulthood. "Media experiences contribute to individuals' development of their sense of self and…these experiences remain salient into young adulthood and possible beyond" (2011, 332). Narratives have a persistent influence on identity construction.

Narratives function by connecting with individuals and communities. First, the narrative needs to be similar to the viewer (Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; Squire 2012). Narratives that create "everyman" character serve as a fill-in for a real person the viewer may know. While the struggles of the main character might not be the exact struggles of the viewer, they are similar enough to create an effective narrative. Narratives also function by bringing disparate groups of people into the same family. This familiarization (Squire 2012) uses family tropes to link groups together under one umbrella or the ethics of common humanity. Familiarization functions by connecting

people through common human experiences like love and belonging. Finally, narratives function through wishful identification (Gomillion and Giuliano 2011). This involves the characters or role models presented to the viewer and wanting to be just like that person. Viewers focus on positive attributes and actions, then model that behavior. Through similarity, familiarization, and wishful identification, narrative functions as a strong influence in media landscapes.

Theme #1: Self-Awareness and Self Recognition

Self-awareness is an inner sense of who we are and how we feel. When we see things on television or in person, we sense if it matches to our own identities at the moment or if it does not. One element of the first theme can be seen through young people discussing their queer origins and when queer narratives entered their worlds. This can be seen in Tila's story. Tila, a 16-year-old black lesbian, knew from an early age that she was a lesbian, though not by that name. "When I was little, I knew that I liked girls, but I didn't know what it was called" (Tila 2017). She was aware of her attraction and preferences and this played into her sense of self. Lili had a similar experience. She stated, "I knew – when I was four years old, I told my mom, 'I want to be a girl.' Of course, I didn't know that meant transgender, or anything like that. I kept saying, 'Why can't I be a girl?'" (Lili 2007). These two experiences highlight how self-awareness can connect with representational forces.

Tila noticed that she saw only one type of lesbian on television, and she knew she did not fit that role. "They don't really have these kinds of lesbians on a show. They have the girly kind… You're either a femme or you're a stud. So, you're either girly, or

you're a dyke. I'm a dyke" (Tila 2017). She clicked with the term "dyke" and viewed her options in a binary split between masculine and feminine. For her, the media was one-sided and did not match her identity. She recognized the disconnect between what she saw and what she felt at that moment. She describes herself as a "dyke," and a masculine lesbian and struggles to find other masculine lesbian portrayals. However, seeing Tila Tequila on the reality dating show *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila* stood out to her. The bisexual star was one that Tila thought was really attractive. She states:

> TILA. I watched – I don't even know the name of these shows. It was a pretty gay show. What are those shows called, where you're trying to find love?
> INTERVIEWER. Like a dating show?
> TILA. Yeah. It was one girl, and she was – it was either a boy or a girl. She was bi, on the show. Tila Tequila! I was a really little kid, and I don't think I was supposed to be watching that, but yeah. That's where I learned what I was, from that show...It changed my life. (Tila 2017)

Tila is also negotiating what is allowed and not allowed in her household. Watching this show was a risk, but she watched anyway and the show helped her unpack her identity.

Self-Recognition and Identity

When young people see themselves in the narrative and identify with the characters or characteristics, they recognize themselves onscreen. This is often an "aha" moment that crystalizes a sense of self in an individual. These self-recognition moments occurred throughout the focus group and case student interviews and connect to the first theme. Penelope, a young lesbian, talks about her recognizing herself and her identity being bolstered on the Netflix show, *Orange is the New Black*. This show tells the story of Piper, a bisexual middle class white woman who is put in jail for committing several

crimes. For Penelope, seeing the "right kind" of lesbian that fit her sense of style and what she was feeling was an eye-opening experience.

> PENELOPE: I remember watching *Orange is the New Black* and there was a character who was – I think it was Piper, actually, who was very feminine, but I think she's bi, but like gay, whatever, it's kind of – but I remember her being like very feminine and pretty and I remember her talking about being gay or being bi or basically being attracted to women. And I remember being like, oh, yeah, I'm – I remember just like a moment of clarity, like the heavens opened up and I was like I'm gay. It's not that I just think girls are pretty. I'm attracted to girls. I've never been attracted to men…It was wild. (Penelope 2017)

Before this moment, she expressed the only lesbian options she saw were butch, masculine women. This show provided a new frame, a new identity possibility. I find it significant that while Penelope and Tila are both about the same age and both identify as lesbians, neither saw "their kind" of lesbian in the media. Penelope spoke about the overabundance of masculine lesbians while Tila had the exact opposite observation with her view of a field full of feminine lesbians.

Zol, a young bisexual Latina, identified her bisexual starting point from the television show *Victorious*. "I used to think Jade was bisexual because she would go around kissing other girls, and she'd still have a boyfriend. I was like, 'It's kind of cool. I dig it'" (Zol 2017). Participants noted the lack of bisexual representation in the media and even Zol had a hard time coming up with examples. For her, this show was a benchmark bisexual representation moment, and she recognized herself in the piece.

The student participants recognized the power of the media to adjust social expectations and the individual schema. Penelope states, "I feel like it's a split thing. Because of media, I feel like I thought of lesbians as such a stereotype being they had to be butch, they had to have short hair, they had to be into cars or whatever. But also

because of media, that kind of crushed that view I had in my head and told me more about myself" (Penelope 2017). The media narrative is framing and using schema to identify possibilities--reinforcing, challenging, and building their identity. This becomes problematic in that not all schema adequately contribute to understanding the world around us.

Self-Awareness, Self-Recognition, and Representation in Action

Both self-awareness and self-recognition, as well as the power of representation, can be seen in Lili's story. Her supportive family, the strong links she made between her identity and a reality star's journey, made me wonder about the underlying relationship between a young person's identity and how they engage with queer narratives.

> LILI: It's weird to start. Okay. I'm 17. I'm a senior, graduating in – not four weeks, but done with school in four weeks. I'm transgender, male to female. I started taking hormones--about a month now; it's been a month. It's going really good. I think, orientation-wise, I would identify myself with straight. It's still something I contemplate. What do I say exactly? From everyone's perspectives, they kind of say, "Just go with straight," so I say, "Okay, I'm straight." It's always going back and forth with, "Oh, so you're gay," because I still like guys, or, "You're straight because you're a girl that likes guys." It's kind of between those two, so I'm just like, "You know what? I'm just going to go with straight."
>
> Sixth grade was when it really hit me, because I ended up having a crush on a guy, and I did not know how to respond to that or anything like that, so I was always just very conservative and kept to myself around him. If he tried talking to me, I was super shy about it.
>
> Sixth grade was also the time that my family decided to get Netflix for the first time. And so, I was like, "Oh, okay, let's try to find something to watch." I had watched a whole bunch of scary movies and things like that, things that I enjoy, and I came across *RuPaul's Drag Race*. So, I talked to my mom about it because, of course, I didn't know every single term within the gay community and things like that; I was still learning about it. And, I talked to my mom, and I was like;
>
> YOUNG LILI. "*RuPaul's Drag Race*. What is this? Is it…It's a woman, and it says, 'drag race.' Is she the host or something?"

> MOTHER. “No, that’s a drag queen.”
> YOUNG LILI. “What’s a drag queen?”
> MOTHER. “That’s actually a man, and he dresses up as a woman.”
>
> LILI: I came to thinking, “Really?” So, I started watching the show, season after season, and I kept thinking to myself, “If she could do that, I could do that.” I knew – when I was four years old, I told my mom, “I want to be a girl.” Of course, I didn’t know that meant transgender, or anything like that. I kept saying, “Why can’t I be a girl?” So, it comes back to me in sixth grade. “Oh, my gosh. I can do this.” So, I would take some of my mom’s clothes, and her shoes, and try it on. I didn’t know how to do makeup, so I didn’t do any makeup. (Lili 2017)

From this piece of text, several key ideas come forward. First, her social circle was supportive of her journey; in particular, her mother was the supportive parent she needed. Lili’s mom was able and willing to answer questions about the LGBTQ+ community. Not only does her mother know about drag queens but also allows her then-son to try on her clothes and shoes. This type of supportive environment certainly contributes to a young person experimenting with and discovering identity.

Next, Lili indicates she had feelings of being different from a young age, as she was not sure how to engage in a first crush with a boy. This was complicated by her gender identity and her sexual orientation. In terms of gender identity, as a child she knew she wanted to be a girl and latched onto drag as the physical means to this inner desire. Later she learns about the differences between drag performance and transgender identity. In terms of sexual orientation, as a child she knew she liked boys. As a boy liking boys she worked through her own feelings about being gay and became shy around her crush. Lili’s experience highlights the complexity of gender and sexuality and that oversimplifying the queer experience can be dangerous.

Finally, this piece of text also illustrates that her early curiosity about gender representation, as young as four years old, lingered until it found a frame, a representation that allowed her to name her identity. Her experience demonstrates Muñoz's disidentification. Faced with either presenting a "normal" teenager or a "radical drag-queen", Lili found a middle ground that appeased both her inner identity and outer social pressures. She used the narratives and identities presented to her and found one that worked well for her. She identifies and sympathizes with RuPaul and the contestants when she says, "If she could do that, I could do that." These became role models for her behavior and identity. Jesse Fox and Rachel Ralston highlight the importance of role models for those communities, such as the transgender community, that are less frequently portrayed in media. "Online role models were most essential for individuals with identities that are rarely portrayed or invisible in regular media, such as asexuals or individuals going through gender transitions" (2016, 641). While some young people in the queer community may watch *RuPaul's Drag Race* and wish to become a drag queen, Lili goes on to say she was inspired by a particular queen and her coming out of the trans-closet.

> LILI: It was when Carmen Carrera – one of the contestants on *RuPaul's Drag Race* – she came out as transgender. She said, "I am a female" …She had a huge inspiration for me because she ended up becoming a model, and I wanted to become a model, too, and all these different things. So, that's where I learned the difference, because I had decided to look it up on my own terms, and it said, "A transition from male to female" …I looked into that more. There's hormones involved, surgeries involved. She looked like a female, and I said, "That's what I want to become." (Lili 2017)

The narrative, the character, the person Carmen Carrera, and her coming out journey framed the trans-gender option. This moment of similarity, a trans-Latina watching a

trans-Latina onscreen, and identification through shared goals, kicked off her desire to learn more. With the more-realized sense of self, and with support of her social group, Lili was able to take her "drag" identity into the public.

> LILI: My first time going out in what I considered drag at the time – it was First Friday, and I went out, and this one person complimented my hair. My mom thought he was just being an asshole, but I was like, "Oh, my God, he complimented me." I was all happy about it. That's where it all went into place. RuPaul was the biggest person to impact me in that way. (Lili 2017)

Lili's journey as a young trans-woman is informed by *RuPaul's Drag Race.* This provided new information for a young child which then grew into questions and curiosity. Her family was supportive of this identity exploration and it crystalized when a particular character shared her own journey as a trans-woman. The narrative provided a set of options for the viewer and, in this case, it supported a developing identity.

Theme #2: Narratives Reflect (or Do Not Reflect) the Viewer

One of the first questions I asked the focus groups was simple and direct; "Do you see yourself on TV?" While I was curious about more general identification in terms of demographic factors like race, gender-identity, sexual orientation, religion, and age, I also wanted to see where they saw similarity and differences. On a micro-level, some of the case study participants saw themselves in particular characters. However, on the macro-level, the focus groups provided a resounding "no." The varied answers, while circling the same rejection of queer representation in traditional media, can be divided into issues around sexuality, gender-identity, physical appearance, and performance. First, one young person pointed out that representation sticks to binary constructions. A character is cis-gendered male or female and likes men or women. "Not really, because I feel like it

sticks to the very I am cis-gendered, I am straight...well not straight, but I'm like either I only like girls or only like guys" (Focus Group Session One 2016). This participant is pointing out the small list of sexuality and gender representations options available in traditional media representations.

The young people recognize their sexual orientations are not there and, when there are queer representations, they tend to be gay men. Again, traditional media representations are built from a binary choice between male and female, gay and straight. Representations that blur the binary are not as present. The adolescents noted a lack of asexuality and pansexuality, transgender characters, and bisexual characters, too. Alice indicated;

> YOUTH: Oh, yeah, for sure. Like I was saying earlier, a lot of times the media just portrays gay people and very rarely a trans person, but there's no asexual representation. There's no pansexual representation. There's no just non-binary or gender fluid representation. There's none of that. It's just the very like "there are gay people who are homosexual" and that's it. That's kind of the portrayal that we're seeing nowadays. (Focus Group Session Five 2017)

The focus groups also commented on the rare bisexual depictions on television.

"A lot of shows refuse to even say the word bisexual. Like they'll kinda hint at it but they won't actually say it. The only show I've heard say it is on, the one about the doctors...*Grey's Anatomy*. That's the only one that I've heard say that word" (Focus Group Session One 2016). In general, they observed the representations on television do not present identities that exist on a spectrum nor in terms of ethnicity or race.

The young people observed that the queer characters presented onstage are overwhelmingly white. One young person stated, "I think another big thing is the like the white family, because there is never anything with like a cultural background. Like

there's never anybody saying, 'Look at how my Muslim family deals with me being gay.' Anything but being white and Christian" (Focus Group Session One 2016). Furthermore, they saw this lack of representation as a political issue that producers want to avoid. In the following passage, note the imaginary line they draw.

> YOUTH 1. Yeah so instead of like going into a whole different religion and ethnicity and background...
> YOUTH 2. Yeah, that would be too much...
> YOUTH 1. Yes, but that also means that white people and men and straight are all the default, and that's a big problem.
> YOUTH 2. That's a big problem in general. (Focus Group Session One 2016)

They assert that more racial and ethnic diversity cannot happen as doing so would be "too much"—presumably for the white viewing audience. The young people echoed observations made by film industry observers, critics, and the common viewer; the media only shows a small variety of races and genders onscreen. When asked about which shows present non-white and non-gay characters, the youth could only come up with a few. This list included *The Fosters* and *How to Get Away with Murder*; with a mixed-race couple, *Sense 8*; with transgender characters, ethnic diversity, and a variety of relationships, *Orange is the New Black.*

Finally, not only are the characters predominantly white, the young people go on to indicate the portrayed characters are more attractive, "they are prettier" (Focus Group Session Five 2017) and colorful, "they're just like over-exaggerated attitudes" (Focus Group Session One 2016). These representation constructions idealize physical beauty that falls along cis-gendered standards. Yet, these also break cis-gender expectations of behavior through previously described feminine male and masculine female traits.

Theme #3: Narratives Reinforce Stereotypes

Narratives also reify and advance stereotypes. Stereotypes are not inherently negative or positive but they do contain generalizable observations about a group of people. To take a step back, a stereotype is an overgeneralization about a group of people, often discounting individual differences for group characteristics. This differs from schema as schema contain collected information that humans use to make sense of the world around them. Schema can be very focused and detailed, while stereotypes overgeneralize everything. Narrative stereotypes are thought as shortcuts, and the media uses stereotypes to entertain and inform their audiences. "The media industry understands that people learn about others through internalized images as stereotypes. Without stereotypes, a sitcom or film would make little sense to the viewer" (Chung 2007, 100). They allow the viewer to understand a character or situation with less work on the part of the performer and audience. Narrative can, however, advance distorted stereotypes of a group of people. When overused stereotypes represent only a small portion of a wider population, they can negatively influence the viewer. Stereotypes are also problematic because they over-simplify complex distinctions into reductive binaries. A stereotyped character is either masculine or feminine, gay or straight, sexual or virginal, normal or abnormal. Narrative representation should stretch beyond limited stereotypes and into the gray areas between these black and white polarities. Judith Butler points out that this danger should not limit the discourse or performance itself. She states, "certainly, it remains politically important to represent women, but to do that in a way that does not distort and reify the very collectivity the theory is supposed to

emancipate" (2004, 197). While Butler refers to women and feminism, it certainly applies to the study and representation of the LGBTQ+ community as well. It is important to represent same-sex couples and to not reify heteronormative constructions.

Along with general knowledge on potentially new ways of living, young people can also be introduced to new stereotypes or have existing stereotypes reinforced. When the media presents these, they can reinforce existing beliefs, however flawed. Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas state, "People who watch TV for longer periods of time are more likely to give a stereotypical 'television answer'" than those who do not watch television as much, regardless of demographic (2006, 21). In other words, the consistently delivered narrative constructions can sway people to not consider other options. Young people, as well as the larger viewing audience, see these stereotypes as realistic. This becomes particularly problematic when queer characters and stories are portrayed in the media.

While increased queer visibility since the early 2000s in television shows, film, and other narrative sources is laudable, it has both negative and positive outcomes. The narratives are both informing the audience about a group of people but are also reinforcing stereotypes. "Although broader representation of lesbian and gay characters in the media helps to demystify homosexuality, the repeated portrayal of lesbian and gay stereotypes not only reinforces depersonalized images of gay people, but also mis-educates children and the public about homosexuality" (Chung 2007, 100). Exposure to depictions of same-sex couples, queer youth, and the LGBTQ+ community on television serves as a double-edged sword. It both exposes a wider public audience to LGBT

culture but potentially also presents a stereotyped, limited view of the queer experience. While producers and audiences are not monolithic, portrayals can be.

Stereotypical representations also reinforce negative stereotypes. These stereotypes come from a variety of media sources, both traditional and new. According to Raley and Lucas' study, youth are learning from "heterosexist and homophobic sources of misinformation on TV" (2006, 22). Gender roles, for example, are often reified by sitcoms and commercial advertising (Fisher et al. 2004). As commercials have to pack a lot of information into a short 30 or 45 seconds, they are particularly potent. Before new media gained a strong youth foothold, television programming and the corresponding commercials served as a primary content delivery method, rich with stereotypes. Eleven years later, McInroy continues to examine stereotypes and representations in new media, highlighting their staying power. Even with the rise of streaming services and new media, advertising still contains stereotypes. "LGBTQ people have consistently been stereotyped as comic relief, villains, and/or criminals, mentally and/or physically ill, and victims of violence. These stereotypes remain prevalent and may contribute to ongoing societal homophobia and heterosexism" (McInroy 2017, 34). In 2017, as well as 2006, commercials are often repeated across networks, digital platforms, and social media; they serve as an even more persuasive narrative tool.

This one-sided narrative experience can have negative impacts. Queer youth may not have queer role models at home or in their community, so they find out about the queer world through television or connect through new media environments. However,

when the narratives and characters are unlike these youth, it can challenge their own identities. The stereotyped narrative can affect the very youth these traditional media pieces might seek to support. “Many lesbian and gay youth and adults remain in the closet partly because they have failed to identify with the stereotypical characteristics of lesbian and gay people portrayed in the media” (Chung 2007, 101). The cis-gendered, white, middle class, fit, coupled mold can be a daunting role-model for queer youth who match few of those categories, if any.

The youth participants express negotiating the positive and negative components of representation, as well. Through critical thinking and reflection, they recognize that the media can affirm identity and/or wash over the complexities therein. Penelope stated,

> PENELOPE: When I see queer people in the media, I'm always like, "Hey, representation, yay!" And like I said, it's getting a lot better. There's still sometimes when there's a stereotype, but stereotypes are also kind of rooted in truth, so as long as they're not offensive stereotypes – I'm kind of flip-flopping on what I said earlier, but as long as they're not like offensive stereotypes, representation is still a very valuable thing. So, I'm always excited when I see queer people in media. I definitely will like be more tempted to watch a show if there's like a queer character in it. (Penelope 2017)

She, along with other focus group participants, appreciated the increase in quantity but had to negotiate that with the difference in representation quality. The young people came up with stereotypes which can be organized into several categories.

The images that are presented to young people often are in the form of stereotypes. While talking with the focus groups, they highlighted these patterns. We talked about the strongest stereotypes, why traditional media producers of these narratives tend to rely on them, and how young people who have little contact with others

in the LGBTQ+ community may be influenced by these representations. These stereotypes fall into four major categories. These include the feminine gay male, the masculine lesbian, the oversexualized bisexual, and the comic transgender punchline. Next, I examine each of these stereotypes.

Feminine Gay Men

The first of the stereotypes to be examined is the feminine and flamboyant gay man. Of all the stereotypes discussed, this one came up more frequently than the others. When asked how the young people know a character is gay, they quickly went to feminine features, an interest in fashion, and a sassy flamboyant attitude. Here are just a few of the comments.

> YOUTH A. I think playing into a little queer stereotypes here, people who are gay are usually seen as a little more flamboyant and now musicals are very flamboyant and colorful things. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)
>
> YOUTH B. I know someone is queer by the way they walk and talk. Like a sassy walk. (Focus Group Session Five 2017)
>
> YOUTH C. Usually the way they look. Usually when I see shows, they portray the gay stereotype as more feminine. (Focus Group Session Five 2017)
>
> YOUTH D. But he's [Kurt from *Glee*] super gay. There are two characters that are super gay. Every other episode, he breaks out into a song and dance. He sings Sia sometimes. Sia's great. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)
>
> YOUTH E. He [Kurt] dresses femininely in the Halloween episode, which not all gay people would. But stereotypically – he has hair curlers. He acts really feminine. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

With each of these examples, the femininity and physical behavior of gay male characters reinforces this dominant stereotype. One problem with stereotypes is that it impacts how others view the gay community. When asked, "How do you think that [stereotyped

portrayals] affect people that don't know queer people?", the youth highlighted that these stereotypes could actually mislead individuals into thinking feminine men must be gay and masculine men must be straight.

> YOUTH: Especially with gay men in the show, they'll see they're like normally feminine and then if they come across someone who is feminine, they'll just assume they're gay, and not even like ask them. They could very well be straight, but they just, they're just represented in that stereotypical way. (Focus Group Session Two 2016)

The youth are recognizing the differences between expectation and reality; that not all gay men are feminine and that not all feminine individuals are gay. The traditional media producers are not as discerning. This also connects to the youths' more nuanced and spectrum-based understanding of sexuality and gender.

The television show *Glee* came up several times with regards to stereotypes. Specifically, the young people discussed Kurt's character as being plugged right into a few different stereotypes. First, he is laid out as a feminine character that is obsessed with fashion, Lady Gaga, musical theatre, and other more flamboyant pop culture landmarks. One member of the focus group stated:

> YOUTH: I think, please don't be angry at me, but I think *Glee* is kinda horrible with a, what's that guy's name him always being like "Oh my god!," oh yeah Kurt. He's like I love clothes, AHHHH." They make him over flamboyant and all he cares about is make-up and he wants to only be friends with girls. (Focus Group Session Three 2016)

While Kurt certainly broke ground in popular culture for presenting a feminine young gay man, some of the young people had a negative reaction to the portrayal. The youth recognized that the queer community has a wide variety of expressions but expressed frustration that they kept seeing the same construction that culminated in Kurt Hummel.

Some of the young people expressed annoyance with Kurt because he did not present a "normal" gay teenager characterization and pushed too far into the extreme gay male figure. They wanted a safer, middle of the road representation that both appeased their inner identities and the outer social pressures.

Masculine Lesbian Women

The young people also focused in on stereotypes of masculine women. Often these representations are in direct contrast to feminine men. For example, the participants describe these manly women as

> YOUTH A. They are more manly and they make them have guys clothing. (Focus Group Session Five 2017)
>
> YOUTH B. If you're a lesbian then you have to be like working on cars and having a giant dog and wearing flannel. (Focus Group Session Six 2017)
>
> YOUTH C. Oh, *South Park*. There are lesbians that are super stereotypical. They wear flannel and talk really deep. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)
>
> YOUTH D. Short hair. They wear boots and they're just hormonally meaner, in a sense. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)
>
> YOUTH E. Very butch. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

Penelope, one of the case-study interviewees, uses this stereotype as a bouncing off point in describing her own identity. She stated, "Lesbians are often very butch and mechanics and whatever, which is the opposite for me because I'm very girly" (Penelope 2017). She also describes recognizing her own sexuality while watching *Orange is the New Black*; not because of the stereotypical masculine representations in prison, but rather due to the feminine women's representation. She sees her sexuality and identity as something that pushes against the stereotypical model.

Comic Trans-Individuals

Another common and notable stereotype that the focus group brought up involved the transgender community. Specifically, the young people brought attention to the comic relief created when a male-to-female transgender individual is seen in public. Often, as the young people observe, the interactions with the trans-character is built with stock responses to a deep voice in contrast to a feminine physique, make-up, and clothing. One participant stated,

> YOUTH: Any show where they show a trans-woman in the stereotypical drag sense, you know what I mean? Like always kinda make it a gag out of like, they are turned around with the long hair and they turn around and they have like a really deep voice. I don't like that. (Focus Group Session Three 2016)

The site gag of the back of an individual looking female and then the voice or front side of the character as more masculine raised red-flags in young people in another focus group as well.

> YOUTH: I saw this TV show, and I know this is offensive but, usually when I see a trans person on TV or when my parents are watching a TV show, they portray it as a comedy. I know this TV show my parents used to watch, it had a transgender character and it was male to female, but it looked more manly, like their original gender, to like mock them basically. (Focus Group Session Five 2017)

The comic sight-gag of a man in women's clothing is not new yet is problematic when it is layered on the transgender community. The transgender character is a threat to typical ideas of masculinity and femininity and this mockery is a means to even the expectations. It may also be possible that this type of representation is to build some understanding for the trans-community.

Oversexualization

According to one of the focus group members, oversexualization impacts the representation of committed queer relationships and, in particular, the bisexual community.

> YOUTH: Like if they are bisexual or anyone who is into more than one kind of gender, they are like promiscuous or they have them as like people who like sleep around. It's hard to have someone who is attracted to more than one gender and have them in a committed relationship the entire show. They are usually like the friend who sleeps around. (Focus Group Session Two 2016)

This stereotype extends to outside of the bisexual community. This shows up in different ways. The first is by the queer character hitting on his/her straight friends. One of the focus group participants stated,

> YOUTH: I think the traditional way for indicating that a character is bi or gay or lesbian, is by having them constantly hitting on people of that gender. Like throwing in your face, like "Hey I'm gay and hitting on every guy on the show." So, I don't think that's realistic at all. Not everybody hits on everybody. Like I don't hit on every girl that I see. It's like not a thing that happens. (Focus Group Session Six 2017)

Again, the young people brought up Kurt from *Glee* as a particularly strong example. During the course of the series, Kurt developed crushes on his straight teammate / later step-brother, Finn, and on several other members of the New Directions. For young, straight, homophobic viewers, this reinforces the anxiety that, in particular, gay men will take advantage of others. Penelope, one of the case study participants, highlighted this concern when she said, "another stereotype for gay men is just that they're obsessed with sex, so like more conservative people are like, oh, they're going to be just man-whores and molest our children or whatever because all they can think about is sex" (Penelope 2017). The promiscuity, oversexualizing, and lack of self-control portrayed on television

negatively affects perceptions of the gay community. However, I also agree with Frederick Dhaenens, who argues that the act of teens having sexual desire is actually a counter-narrative to a non-sexualized, neutered queer figure. He states, "The representation of gay teens having sexual desires and/or being sexually active becomes significant as a counter-narrative to the gay teen as innocent, vulnerable, or desexualized" (2012, 314). By the producers showing adolescent characters making sexual choices, they amplify their perceived agency for the audience, reminding the viewer they too have agentic choices in their own sexuality.

The young people in the focus groups also saw this stereotype showing up in female portrayals. In particular, the young people latched onto how two women kissing is considered attractive, while two males kissing is considered disgusting. This difference is highlighted with women seen as sex objects. Focus group participants pointed out that, "I would say they are usually portrayed as sex objects. I've seen movies like that" (Focus Group Session Five 2017). Another young person stated,

> YOUTH: They don't have girls because they don't know how to have girls and not oversexualize them…And I feel that as a whole, we are still uncomfortable with female sexuality because it's like a shtick whenever girls like other girls and it's like an experiment. They're never actually gay. (Focus Group Session One 2016)

The show *Orange is the New Black*, one participant pointed out, is breaking that stereotype. She stated, "Just the idea, 'oh two girls' but like in *Orange is the New Black*, it's not so much sexualized, it's just more part of them being a human. They just aren't straight. They also have normal human problems" (Focus Group Session Six 2017). Television shows have the power to challenge these stereotypes and, when they do so, they are recognized and appreciated.

Theme #4: Narratives Frame the Possibilities: Gays in Space

During my focus group sessions with the participants, we noticed an unusual stereotype pattern: gender-queer characters are presented as being from outer space. In each focus group session, we talked about where they see lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer characters. While the bulk of the ideas put forth were about gay and lesbian characters, we often thought long and hard about gender queer, non-binary characters. Young people definitely noted their absence. Rose and Amelie, in the seventh focus group stated:

> ROSE. I would also like to see more representation of people who aren't gay but are bi or trans or pans or polyamorous – anything that's just not gay or straight. I want some more –
> INTERVIEWER. More diversity of –
> AMÉLIE. Or more nonbinary characters, too. I feel like that's definitely an unexplored thing. The gay thing is now being done a little bit more, but there are no nonbinary characters hardly at all. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

So, young people are noticing the absence and wanting more representation of these communities. The thing is they are showing up…just in some unexpected places: outer space.

Where non-binary and gender queer characters do show up is in cartoons and science fiction shows. Ann-Jordan, a young poly-amorous person, also enjoys the voyages of the starship Enterprise. In particular, she attached more to the progressive and open tone of the show.

> ANN-JORDAN. I like sci-fi like *Star Trek* and stuff. More progressive shows.
> INTERVIEWER. Okay. So, like *Star Trek: Next Generation*?
> ANN-JORDAN. Yeah.
> INTERVIEWER. I'm a *Star Trek* fan myself. Which one's your favorite?
> ANN-JORDAN. *Next Generation*. Definitely.

INTERVIEWER. *Next Generation*? Okay. And what is it that you like about those shows? You said, "progressive." What does that mean to you?

ANN-JORDAN. Yeah. They're definitely so progressive because – can we talk about how there's men in dresses and it wasn't even a weird thing? And they had the very first interracial kiss on television ever. That show is just amazing. [*Pause*]

ANN-JORDAN. I've been watching a lot about space and stuff. Because, you know. Gays and space. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER. Expand that for me. Gays and space.

ANN-JORDAN. I don't know. Space is just so gay. I don't know. I think that the spectrum of sexuality and gender is eternal. There's no beginning or start because it's so fluid. And then space is like infinity and there's no beginning or start. (Ann-Jordan 2017)

There are intriguing moments in this interchange. First, Ann-Jordan sees *Star Trek* reflecting back the "spectrum of sexuality and gender" identities. Science fiction allows the viewers and show-creators to go on a journey together that is not limited by the cultural confines of contemporary society. Space is an endless expanse for diversity (Ann-Jordan 2017). The show itself, as Ann-Jordan mentions, is also a social experiment where interracial dating and gender norms, and later same-sex relationships and other social issues, can be explored. In an episode called "The Outcast," Commander Riker meets and falls in love with a female-identified member of androgynous race of extra-terrestrials. These J'naii view the gender binary as perverted and force those who have a binary gender to therapy. The episode creators have essentially created a flipped culture with a standardized non-binary gender identity and where the male/female identity construction is abnormal and in need of political and social remedy. Incidentally, as I describe later, this flipped world was one of the youth's suggestions about possible queer storylines shows could adopt. Recently, the science fiction/comedy television show *The Orville* explored a similar gender thread. One of the main characters is from an alien race

of only males. In the episode, “About a Girl,” he and his partner give birth to a female and want to kill the child as it is an abnormality for their culture. Both of these shows used alien cultures to set up a metaphor for contemporary audiences to reflect on how people engage with gender norms and differences.

The participants in the study noted some new examples that are doing similar things. The first is a television show called *Steven Universe*. Here, a cartoon protagonist is going around the galaxy collecting non-binary, anthropomorphized gems. The space gems can mate, merge, fall in love, and create new unique beings. One focus group participant stated, “Oh, all the *Crystal Gems* in *Steven Universe* are nonbinary. Technically speaking, they're mainly female oriented, but they don't identify as female. There are two characters who make up one giant one and they're small little lesbians” (Focus Group Session Seven 2017). Danny’s description of the show highlights the trickiness in talking about non-binary subjects. He struggles with the idea of appearance and embodiment (“female oriented”) versus how the characters identify or express identity. When these non-binary characters join together, he shifts to a female comparison: “they’re small little lesbians,” rather than try to explain it using non-binary language. While young people may understand and accept non-binary characters, they are still negotiating how to unpack and discuss this different character model. Young people from the sixth focus group session also highlighted *Steven Universe* and its focus on love.

> YOUTH 1. Rebecca Sugar is just like love is love in general. So, a lot of the gems, I don't want to spoil anything for you, but a lot of the gems it's really clear that coming together they make bigger gems and that acts as sort of a relationship.

YOUTH 2. It's so good. It's beautiful.
YOUTH 1. What gem is going to be the best or the most powerful. It doesn't matter if you identify as a man or a woman. And all of the gems, except for Steven, are all women. I think it's really cool. I just like a lot about that show. (Focus Group Session Six 2017)

Rebecca Sugar is the creator and producer of the cartoon series. She also worked on another queer-friendly television show called *Adventure Time*. These unrestricted possibilities resonated with the participants.

Another group of youth highlighted that while gender non-binary characters are a component, they are not the primary focus of *Steven Universe*. They stated,

YOUTH 1. The only show that I can think of where there are non-binary individuals is *Steven Universe* and that's because they're aliens. And even there, it's not open about it. Rebecca Sugar, the person who made the show said 'yo, they're not binary,' but they never really mention it in the show; it's just kind of a thing.
YOUTH 2. Yeah and there's gay relationships there, too.
YOUTH 1. Yeah, they're basically in. But they don't show like the mutual relationships and I also think they don't have a specific gender for them either. (Focus Group Session One 2016)

This echoes some other comments made during the focus groups. Young people wanted more representations of the LGBTQ+ community but they do not want sexuality or gender identity to be the *only* key character trait. The young people reinforced they want to see people like them but they want the characters to be round and developed instead of flat and static. Rebecca Sugar, as seen in *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time*, understands there is more to a character than one's sexuality or gender identity, reflecting youth lived experiences.

Another example of a non-binary alien came from movies. The animated film *Home* tells the story of an alien that is stranded on earth. Young people from the seventh

focus group picked up on this discovered theme and took it to the next level: how it portrays non-binary human beings.

> YOUTH 1. There's also this kid show called *Home* based off the movie. All these little – I don't know if I like the whole thing where they're aliens and then they're nonbinary, which is the same thing as the book.
> YOUTH 2. Yeah, nonbinary crystals, nonbinary aliens –
> YOUTH 3. The thing, too – for me, I'm asexual and nonbinary. And those two things are always shown as an alien or a nonhuman entity. It's like an animal spirit. I'm like, "That's not what it is."…Just make them normal. We're normal people. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

One participant emphasizes her desire for portraying real gender identities as part of the human experience. Another from the same focus group echoes this frustration. She states:

> YOUTH: Yeah. This isn't a show, but in the book with the asexual character that I was talking about earlier, she's asexual, but she's also a literal alien and the scene is very other and not human. As an asexual, it's very frustrating to see that. It's weird if you're asexual. You must be an alien or a plant or something. It's like, "Nope. I'm still a person." (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

While these shows may be doing a positive thing by introducing audiences to non-binary characters and a variety of sexual identities, by structuring them as alien, they are showing that this "behavior" is also alien. Young people just want to be seen as "normal."

Complicating the previous three examples, *Steven Universe*, *Adventure Time*, and *Home*, is that all three are animated. In *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time* both protagonists have light skin, closely aligning with a white racial identity. While animated, these two shows stick to the white, cis-gendered male, heterosexual principal character. The rest of the characters are aliens and present in a variety of primarily non-skin tone colors like green, purple, blue, and orange. *Home* has a person of color as the

human protagonist: a young girl with brown skin, curly dark hair, and hazel eyes. Her alien counter-part is a light purple alien. With all the creative potential for how an animator could draw the main character, all three productions have cis-gendered, heterosexual human lead characters. The animated aliens break from human conventions of color, shape, and size. This opens the door for these characters to also break from human heteronormative conventions of sexuality and gender identity. Diversity comes through the alien-other, not through the drawing of a familiar human being.

Why might television executives or producers of youth content feel more comfortable portraying gender queer characters in space versus on planet earth? It might come down to the more skeptical audiences, according to the participants. Some young people thought it was a way to introduce new identities to resistant audiences.

> YOUTH: Well not in a bad way, but like, people who are against gay people, they at least stand out and "You're not like us." "They are other creatures." So, they can still be watching the show. Cuz they're like "I don't relate to them because they're in the nether world, so I'll just keep watching the show." But it's like, I could be your neighbor. (Focus Group Session Two 2016)

The young people feel concerned though that the acceptance an audience member may feel for a character might not translate to the actual human in their neighborhood. This distancing might make a person feel comfortable watching and at the same time not allowing empathy to develop for a real non-binary person because they are too different and unreal.

Youth Perceptions of Adult Choices: "What's your motivation?"

After hearing the young people talk about stereotypes and repeated representations that seem to target them but do not reflect back their identities, I asked the

participants, “Why do you think the networks make the characters that way?” Their answers revealed a thoughtful complexity about the media industry and those that work to create it. The participants in the second focus group had a wonderful exchange in response to my question. It highlights conversations that happened in the other sessions, as well. In several sessions, the young people did not pick out a particular network or producer of a particular television show. Instead they discuss a nebulous, collective “they” responsible for the creative narrative choices onscreen.

> YOUTH 1. They probably aren't exposed to real people like that
> YOUTH 2. Or they're trying to put queer characters in the show to have more audience. Like they are vague enough or kill them off quick enough or they make them a bad person so the audience that they already have don't get scared away.
> YOUTH 3. So, they can be more diverse, but at the same time not put any real characteristics on it. So, there's a gay person, who can attract more people.
> INTERVIEWER. I love the use of your air quotes on diverse; what do you mean by [*uses air-quote gesture*] diverse?
> YOUTH 1. Sometimes it's like “oh, she's gay, she's white.” Things like "she's like a lesbian, but she's still white.”
> YOUTH 3. There's much more it than just that...
> YOUTH 2. It's usually like one deciding factor is they are gay and they focus on that and there is nothing else about them...
> YOUTH 4. There's like no other personal conflict. It's just they're gay and all people can see. They don't add anything to the character.
> YOUTH 1. When they just like sprinkle gay characters in there, they are doing it for a reason. Like they are putting them in as like "here is our gay character."
> YOUTH 3. There's usually not more than one unless they are in a relationship.
> YOUTH 4. Or it's like, when they have a gay character, they make it stand out so much that people are like "oh yeah, he's like gay.” Like sometimes there's a girl like in real life and she is like "Actually I'm a bisexual" and you're like, "Oh, I didn't know that" and it's because we are like so normal and we say that. (Focus Group Session Two 2016)

Young people believe queer characters are used to increase ratings and viewership. The productions drop one in to add spice to a show, perhaps a guest star or secondary character, and then quickly remove them or simply kill them off. It bumps up the profile

of the show for "bravely" talking about queer issues and they can all go back to normal. At the same time, that special episode or series gets to tap into an advertising marketplace willing to support liberal representation. As one young person said, while talking about *Modern Family*,

> YOUTH: I think one reason it the show got the green light in the first place is because of like money, and that's it. Having these kind of acceptable, normal portrayals of gay people and queer people in general is going to marketable to queer people. So, having a niche market that you can kinda count on to fill this time block to get that ad revenue, I think the drive of having a normal kind of show that you can watch, that is driving them. There is a lot of money to be made and just having a consistent show that just spits out episodes forever has consistent viewers. (Focus Group Session One 2016)

Young people recognize the commodification of the queer representation and queer/queer-friendly viewers. What is also particularly notable is the young person's emphasis on "acceptable and normal" portrayals. These blank slates, filled with predictable stereotypes and character types, are what is being produced as the money-maker.

Another pattern the young people noticed was the reliance of producers on white, cis-gendered, straight actors for the various roles. This came up when discussing larger social contexts and when the young people talked about not seeing themselves onscreen. This diverse group of participants saw the use of a white racial appearance and male gender identity as a blank canvas and easy entry point to introduce more substantive topics.

> YOUTH 1. Because like, for lack of a better term, it's a blank canvas, a blank slate so this is like our cultural norms. It's harder for the entirety of the population to be marketed to that. So that is the reason I think that happens. It just goes to show how I don't see myself in these shows because

the problems in my family and the problems I face, they're not, there is no context being given.

YOUTH 2. I think it's because it's kinda a way to tip-toe into gay culture because most Americans, they are ok with the white-straight dude mentality and changing one of them at a time is an easy way to tip-toe into the gays.

YOUTH 1. Yeah so instead of like going into a whole different religion and ethnicity and background...

YOUTH 2. Yeah, that would be too much...

YOUTH 1. Yes, but that also means that white people and men and straight are all the default, and that's a big problem.

YOUTH 2. That's a big problem in general. (Focus Group Session One 2016)

The young people see the social calculations happening behind the camera. As white and cis-gendered performers are normative and "standard," these serve as a scaffold from which to build more complex representations. The problem is people who do not identify as white, male, or gay become left out of much of the representation.

The participants also brought up the representation calculus that a movie studio or television network may need to figure out if a queer production is worth sending into a larger audience. Here the social attitudes of the viewing audience are taken into consideration and affect how the pieces are constructed. According to one participant,

> YOUTH: I think because, America isn't really a market that will encourage movies with LGBT characters, both economically and straight up culturally, I don't think it's accepted at that point. I think that ratings, that if you include LGBTQ+ characters, either get bumped up in the ratings or get more gated access because of just nature of having those characters. (Focus Group Session One 2016)

The speaker is working through how others may view the queer community. This response polarity came down to a boost in value (in the form of ratings) or a rejection of the content. In particular, the gating or protectionist impulse is worth noting. Those that disagree with queerness would have a negative reaction to this growing representation. This can shape the form of these representations.

Transforming Traditional Media

Toward the end of each focus group session, I asked the young people what they would like to see in queer narratives such as television shows. When asked this question, Lili focused on moving beyond stereotypes, particularly with younger queer youth, through watching established queer cinema and television. She does a lovely job setting up why a diversity of representations and moving beyond stereotypes are important.

> LILI: As there are more and more children that are growing up and things like that, the movies that may show or interpret gay people as one way may start not being recognized as much. I think that it all has to do with teaching them. So, for instance, if there's a movie coming out, and it has to do with gay people, but it's this over exaggerated, super gay – dicks throwing around, things like that – I feel like that would put in their head that kind of idea. But, I feel like for future generations, if they wanted something more historical, have them watch *Paris is Burning*, or *The Birdcage*, or even *RuPaul's Drag Race*, so they can see this is what it actually is like. It's not just this movie where they're stereotyping what gay communities are like. So, I think it all goes back to educating generations that are after us. (Lili 2017)

Lili focuses on educating the future while wrestling with the idea that stereotyped representations may not be the means to that end. Lili wants past narratives to inform future representations. Next, I examine other ways that young people want to change future queer representations and narratives.

Breaking the Mold

First, young people want to smash the stereotypical mold of what a gay man, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer teenager should be. One student said, "Why are we always cute? Like the most-hottest person on the show? It's just like one type, though, body-built, slim tone, that's the type. Then there's like nothing other" (Focus Group Session Three 2016). The young people called into question the stereotypical gay

body, fit and masculine, along with gay musical talents. "I would rather see more things that are not stereotypical, as in wearing a flannel or being really, really musical enhanced. It would be more real and not fake" (Focus Group Session Seven 2017). Of course, this is not limited to the gay male community. "Yeah, the whole you can be a girl without dressing like a girl. You can be whatever without dressing a certain way" (Focus Group Session Seven 2017). The young people also want round developed characters. As one young person stated:

> YOUTH: More information and detail on the person so not like, it's not just like "Oh they're gay" or "oh they're bisexual," they have likings and dislikes. Like they might not like strawberry ice cream, or like maybe they like a weird show that no one knows about. Like or maybe they're Republican or yeah. (Focus Group Session Five 2017)

Depth of character and reality, according to this young person, comes not from the stereotypes layered on or the gripping new episode with new plot twists, but rather connecting with young people through their complexity. As teenagers are complex creatures with diverse backgrounds and opinions, so should the queer characters in traditional media sources. At the core, young people want characters onstage, onscreen, and in-text that represent and highlight the great diversity they see in their communities.

Queer Inclusivity

Youth want each part of the LGBTQ+ acronym to have significance and attention. They recognized that the majority of the pieces they could think of had gay men and, to a lesser degree, lesbian women. Researchers agree in the unbalanced representation, pointing out the higher volume of gay male characters, and to a lesser amount of lesbian characters, and lack of representation of other queer communities (McInroy 2015; Kelso

2015). While this mainstreaming is laudable, the young people do not see themselves in such clear-cut ways. They view sexuality and gender-identity in more fluid terms. As a result, they want to see a greater diversity of gender identities and sexualities represented. One participant built off an established identity to begin to explore feelings outside of that norm. He stated, "I would like to see a story about a kid who feels out of place with how everyone else is growing up and he slowly comes to realize that he's gay but like a different category of gay. Like he could be queer or maybe transgender" (Focus Group Session Five 2017). The speaker uses a well-understood and established identity structure and is working to negotiate difference within it. One of the case-study participants also stated:

> ALICE: A lot of times the media just portrays gay people and very rarely a trans person, but there's no asexual representation. There's no pansexual representation. There's no just non-binary or gender fluid representation. There's none of that. It's just the very like "there are gay people who are homosexual" and that's it. That's kind of the portrayal that we're seeing nowadays. So I think moving into like – there's all kinds of different queer people. That would be cool. (Alice 2017)

Alice addresses a feeling presented by the majority of focus group members; they want a diversity of sexualities, gender-identities, and sexual/affectual orientations.

The young people also wanted more representation of people that are aromantic, or not interested in romantic relationships at all. As queer characters are often offered in terms of being a boyfriend or girlfriend, those youth that do not identify this way are left with no representation or role models of how a non-relationship existence could work.

> YOUTH: Something I miss also is seeing people who are aromantic. We just live in such a relationship-oriented world, so it is weird for people to talk about asexuality. The idea of not even wanting a romantic relationship is just so foreign to so many people that I wish it was explored more in the media, to say, "You can

> be perfectly happy and not want to have a romantic relationship or a sexual one, either." (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

Another participant in the same focus group picked up on that idea and took it further: discussing the range of intimacy options that are not presented onscreen. "Or people, like myself, who are asexual but not aromantic. So, wanting a romantic relationship but not wanting a sexual partnership, that's another thing that's unexplored" (Focus Group Session Seven 2017).

Finally, the young people wanted to see more non-binary options. As I indicated earlier, they want to see people they do not see normally. They want to use the representations to not only represent their views on gender but to show it to others. In a way, it serves an educational function as well. The participants want "People that don't fit the binary; I am female or I'm male, or trans, or if you identify somewhere between" (Focus Group Session One 2016), "or like people that are on the binary but don't act within the standards of that binary. Like…a guy who is really into make-up" (Focus Group Session One 2016). The youth also want these options to be portrayed as "normal" and acceptable. These non-binary individuals should not be seen as freakish or strange, but rather as an actual option. Also, they want more representations with poly-amorous relationships. "With the non-binary thing, not to be portrayed as sexual others but as real people. I also wanted to include like more bisexuality and pansexuality and poly-amory to like an actual thing not just one dude marrying a bunch of women. It can be an inclusive, tri-relationship" (Focus Group Session Three 2016). In fact, queer normalization came up throughout the research.

Intersectional Humans

The youth participants also expressed that queer representational works should be broadened to include characters of multiple skin tones. Identity, representations onstage, and action cannot be limited to one particular demographic, race, religion, or background. José Esteban Muñoz encourages a strategy for negotiating the public sphere that is "not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social" (Muñoz 1999, 9). The young people, along with researchers (McInroy 2017), noticed how whiteness is the standard model for queer characters and want that to change. The participants wanted characters from "various cultures. They need culture in movies…And like, culture with race. Like not only white kids are gay" (Focus Group Session Three 2016). This would also match the actual queer demographics in the United States. When only one identity characteristic is represented, people tend to grab onto sexual orientation and then default to "standard white kid" or, as Muñoz describes it, "the normativity of whiteness in North American gay culture" (Muñoz 1999, 9). The young people are ready to see a greater diversity onscreen.

Chapter Conclusions

A narrative analysis approach to the data revealed a strong focus on representation and identity development. Four themes emerged from the data. Individual youth described awareness of their sexuality and gender identity at an early age and often found single character representations in television shows to be an "a-ha" moment. From a wider-angle, focus group participants expressed not seeing themselves in traditional

media primarily through limited racial, ethnic, religious, gender-identity, and sexual orientation representations. They are aware of the media using stereotypes to create characters, a key component of narrative, based on inaccurate parameters. A final theme examined the limited narrative gender representation options to treating non cis-gendered individuals as non-human aliens. Finally, the youth expressed a longing for characters that look like them. These youth are looking for representations that break the set molds of what a queer should look like. This includes breaking gender norms and sexual orientation expectations, moving away from narratives filled with only gay men and lesbian women, and approaching identity representation through a more spectrum-based understanding of gender and sexuality. The next chapter further unpacks the youth focus group and case study data around the issues of accuracy and youth information-finding techniques.

CHAPTER THREE: PLOT ACCURACY AND FINDING INFORMATION

Young people are searching for information about how they fit into a community, about how interact with others, and how to make sense of the world around them. This relates to the next theme emerging from the youth focus groups and case studies: *learning about queer communities and embodying gender identity and sexual orientation through narratives*. While previous research highlights the significance traditional media plays in youth learning (McInroy 2017; Bond 2015), my study indicates a greater attention to online information and user-created new media. In contrast to television and other traditional media, the Internet and new media forms provide more complex information and highlight youth-created content for other young people facing similar issues. Yet, normative traditional media persists as the dominant provider of LGBTQ+ narratives. Im my study, more young people listed and described queer characters and storylines from television shows than online sources indicates. I explore youth queer narratives through the following related research questions:

- How are queer narratives constructed in traditional media and new media?
- How are queer narrative storylines understood to represent or not represent youth realities? What is realistic or accurate to young people?
- Where do young people learn about queerness?

To answer these questions, I examine social construction through narrative and normativity, explore the youth-identified tropes and plot structures, and highlight youth solutions to changing traditional media. Finally, I discuss a shift to online information and new media use to learn about queer communities. While Chapter 2 focused on

narrative through character, this chapter focuses on narrative through plot. Also uniting this chapter is the young people's search for accuracy in youth queer narratives and the process of learning about their own queer existence.

Narrative as Social Construction

Narratives are significant because they can construct the social reality and schema young people face. As traditional mass media and its contained narratives, are transmitted from the satellite to the digital screen, social, political, ethical, and emotional messages about what is normal spread with it. These beliefs slowly become normalized. This normalization occurs in part due to schema. Schema are structures for understanding the constructed world around us. Piaget's Schema theory involves the meaning surrounding a word. Words do not only have a socially agreed upon dictionary-based definition, but also the various surrounding meanings, connotations, loaded signals, social evaluations, etc. I agree these schemes play a significant role in understanding the world around us because we are limited by our frames of reference and the ideas presented to us. Narrative has the potential to expose young people to new ways of life. For example, the word "gay" has a standard definitions that one might expect involving happiness or a sexual/affectual attraction of one male to another. The schema around that word involves the socially constructed meanings from the media, influences from social relationships on that concept, and our inner feelings about the content. The schema help us understand new concepts and to interact with existing ones. However, we are also guided by our inner feelings and desires. While a young man may not know the term

"gay," he recognizes an inner affectual/sexual desire for other men. The impulse is there and the schema help make sense of that impulse.

Gender schema are formed from personal experience, including exposure to the media. Television can activate and then reinforce gender schemata that are already stereotyped (Nathanson et al. 2002). These gender roles can be expanded to how young people perceive their sexual orientation and gender. "Stereotyped television can shape children's beliefs about gender roles…gender appropriateness of occupations and their own career goals, attitudes toward the gender appropriateness of certain traits and behaviors" (Nathanson et al. 2002, 923). I agree with Amy Nathanson et al. that television can reinforce gender expectations, particularly when built from stereotypical representations, as discussed in the previous chapter. The narratives affect the schemas connected to gender identity, and in turn affect how young people view queerness and being "normal."

Normativity

"Normal" was a concept that came up during several focus groups and case study interviews. In order to unpack what the young people may mean when they discuss normal behavior, I need to unpack heteronormativity and homonormativity. Heteronormativity reifies the heterosexual lifestyle and often includes pressures for marriage, raising children, purchasing a house, and sticking to traditional gender roles. Homonormativity reifies the homosexual lifestyle toward producing a "good" version of a queer individual, often rooted in neoliberal heteronormative desires for couples raising children and owning a home (Duggan 2002; Herman 2003; Yep and Elia 2012;

Papacharissi and Fernback 2008). As Didi Herman (2003) indicates, homonormativity is establishing expectations for a normal gay lifestyle, often white, that privileges a narrow subset of the queer population. "Homonormativity presents 'out' ways of looking that are rooted in lesbian and gay subcultures" (144). Homonormativity can also be seen in a normalized gay talent for making over people as in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Papacharissi and Fernback 2008), and with monogamous queer couples holding heteronormative gender roles while maintaining pristine middle-class homes (Yep and Elia 2012). It can include the interest in the arts, penchant for working out, and going to gay bars. Both heteronormativity and homonormativity ascribe behaviors, lifestyles, representations, and language to be preferred over others. These privilege one type of human over another, if one does not fit the normativity mold. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner were the first to describe the reification of certain heterosexual behaviors and expectations amongst a society. These norms are everywhere and impact a variety of social expectations, institutions, and family structures. They go on to state that heteronormativity is:

> more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and effects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. (Berlant and Warner 1998, 554-555)

Heteronormativity is a pervasive and ingrained element that must be recognized, analyzed, and explored in order to open up new possibilities of identity construction. Herman extends the definition further by emphasizing how heteronormativity encourages

active heterosexuality (2003). The “ought-to” dynamic is even more present in traditional media.

Heteronormativity enters traditional media through the representations of LGBT characters onscreen. Turning our attention to representations of LGBT youth in particular, the heteronormative expectations show an ostracized non-heterosexual individual being bullied, harassed, or marginalized for not conforming to the rigid sexual norm. When these depictions contain obvious differences between how non-heterosexual individuals and heterosexual individuals are treated, then the message to young people is that breaking the heteronormative structures is inherently dangerous. “There is a comparison between themselves and straight peers who are seen to face fewer social problems, less capacity for shame, less likelihood of discrimination, and lower risk of being bullied” (Cover 2013, 342). Social problems, shame, discrimination, and bullying are the outcomes presented for exploring non-heterosexual identities, which is reinforced onscreen as well.

Normativity also limits the possible acceptable portrayals of queer individuals in real-life. One of the focus groups, in particular, observed there are certain parts of queer life that are less acceptable to mainstream U.S. Americans. These normative violations are outside of the “normal” range and focused on physical traits. “Like if you take these people down to gay pride, then like they're gonna have a problem with all the people with like different hair and colored hair and piercings and walking around in bondage gear” (Focus Group Session One 2016). These embodiments and representations violate the heteronormative and even homonormative structures because body modification and

clothing choices do not fit the heteronormative/homonormative schema of what normal people should look like. Traditional media representations have reinforced such bland queer characters that small deviations from the white, middle-class, cis-gendered mold are challenged by real-life violations. As Giannini states, limited representations do little to actually challenge heteronormativity. (2009). Diverse representations may lead to more progress and acceptance from mainstream U.S. American culture.

When examining normativity, it is important to recognize that young people get their information from three external locations; traditional media, online information, and new media. In this chapter, I examine the traditional media's use of plot and action to reinforce normativity through tropes. I then assert that the rise of the Internet and new media forms have created stronger information resources that disrupt normativity and provide a richer, diverse set of voices for youth.

Traditional Media

Traditional media is characterized by a higher level of hierarchical control and larger networks for creation and distribution of narratives. Adults create the traditional media narratives intended for youth. These adult constructions try to sell a product or advocate for their particular world view. They also carry the limitations of what is deemed appropriate and acceptable to large viewing audiences. In fact, media created by adults for teenagers actually has a larger audience that includes pre-teens, teenagers, and adults (Meyer and Wood 2013). Aware of this broad audience, media creators construct narratives that appeal to a wide base. Adults tune into stories about young people because they are longing for a look back into the past. As Michaela Meyer and Megan

Wood state, “Many of these narratives capitalize strongly on a sense of nostalgia, emphasizing both the past and future…Adult viewers can identify with the series as part of a nostalgic revisionist history of their own past identity structures” (2013, 438). Narratives can therefore become a dramatized do-over, where adults can create more positive versions of the past. While this may work for adults, young people are looking for something different from traditional media representations: accuracy. They want to see themselves onscreen.

Seeking Accuracy

The young people and I also discussed the accuracy of the plot and actions that are presented onscreen. While truth certainly is a fluid and subjective concept, I wanted to see if and where they saw what they deemed as more accurate, real, or truthful. Specifically, I asked; “In these stories, what do you think are the big stories or narratives being told? Are they believable? Unbelievable? Realistic? Unrealistic? Why do you think the media uses these stories or narratives?” (Appendix H: Focus Group Questions). Where they saw reality portrayed most accurately in traditional media was in the depiction of the coming out narrative. They identified and could see a real experience of coming out to friends and family members.

> YOUTH 1. The accurate part is like not telling your parents first but telling your best friend when you are younger.
> YOUTH 2. Or like it shows the troubles they go through to get accepted, but there are ones where they automatically start doing all this gay stuff.
> YOUTH 3. The one being afraid to tell your parents [is more realistic], unless it's like obvious like. Unless you are dressing like [youth name] then obviously you wouldn't be with a guy so if it's like that then duh, the parents know before you say something. (Focus Group Session Four 2017)

So the young people are identifying with the characters' choices, the plot, in speaking with peers and finding support before going to their parents. As the coming out process is particularly important in a young person's life, traditional media productions are often using this as a common plot device. However, adolescents found the reactions of the fictional community to be significantly different than "real life." Where the young participants may find acceptance or rejection, the television teenagers often only found acceptance.

> YOUTH: Usually they are more realistic by showing the character coming out and usually I've seen it like they accept them right away. But in reality, some kids just face rejection. Like when I did it, I see it as a struggle like I wish I was like them in a fake world where it's easier and they like they don't face rejection right away. They just face acception [sic] easily. (Focus Group Session Five 2017)

In reality, young people do not face such an easy journey. This exclusion of the real struggles can also be difficult for young people to see. This presents their real-life challenging experience as outside of the norm through the traditional media's portrayal. The young people I spoke with do not see themselves in traditional media storylines. Another participant observed that the decisions made by young people in the show *Glee* seem to come more easily than in real life. One participant stated:

> YOUTH: The main difference, I think, they know who they are right away and there's not really any development on how they figure it out. "Oh, I'm this." What if they think they are gay when they are actually transgender or bisexual and there's no knowing right away? Like everyone else the box is exaggerated. (Focus Group Session Five 2017)

This young person wants complexity in representations, so that queer youth's experiences have value and voice. When their feelings and struggles are glossed over, they recognize that it is not their story anymore and it is less relatable.

Accurate Exemplar: *The Fosters*

The Fosters frequently came up during the discussions as a positive example of a "real" set of characters that is showing "truth." This show on the ABC Family network centers around a family composed of various biologic and foster children headed by a lesbian couple. One of the children comes out as a gay youth and starts to tip-toe into dating. The lesbian couple are mixed race and some of the children come from other racial backgrounds as well. The young people saw this show as legitimate due to its representation, as well as its dramatic (rather than comedic) form.

> YOUTH 1. I feel like *Fosters* is one of the best sort of gay shows, cuz it's actually legit and they're not used for comedy. It's like a snapshot. It gave more pictures of like, they gave like the family base.
> YOUTH 2. It gave a family type of picture instead of oversexualizing gay youth and stuff. (Focus Group Session One 2016)

This focus on the family resonated with young people that see their family lives as dramatic and a mix of different types of people.

Another focus group addressed the dating relationship of the young teenager in *The Fosters*. They found it remarkable because not only was his sexuality not specifically defined, or at least they could not remember it, and that the characters did not fall into a typical gay stereotype. They stated:

> YOUTH 1. *The Fosters* was pretty accurate.
> YOUTH 2. The one little boy who is gay or bi – I don't know if they ever –
> YOUTH 1. Yeah, I'm not sure.
> YOUTH 2. And his boyfriend for a period of time, neither of them were very stereotypically gay. They were very "normal" people. One of them was pretty sporty and stuff. I think it represented that anyone can be gay. It's not just one type of person.
> YOUTH 3. Not everyone fits inside a little box.
> YOUTH 2. I think that's the exception, though. I feel like a lot of times the queer people are portrayed by their stereotypes. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

So here, the three speakers highlight that the couple did not represent any of the stereotypes associated with gay men and that their sportiness moved them into the realm of "normal." And yet, the young people also recognize that *The Fosters* is an exception to the traditional media's stereotypical constructions. Also, it is significant that their construct of normal is a homonormative lifestyle. The two lesbian parents raising a variety of children in a home they own, in a safe suburban community, where they both have nice middle-class jobs and when they are ready to date, they date someone attractive and it does not get too sexual. They describe the standard model for other sitcoms, and yet because it has a gay character, they resonate with the piece. Instead of leaving the little boxes behind, they just enjoy the replicated larger box. The semantic frame is replicated from heteronormative sources into a queer piece of television.

Traditional Media Tropes

The young people were quick to identify the numerous queer stereotypes and adeptly isolated stereotypes for each piece of the LGBTQ+ spectrum. I examine the narrative through the tropes that are used. Tropes are essentially overused thematic plot devices used in a piece. Four noteworthy tropes emerged. These are areas that the young people brought up and that deserve more focus. These include *dying lesbians, gay best friends*, *bullying*, and *AIDS victims*. Each involves a series of stereotypes woven together in established plot devices and larger character arcs. I examine each trope and include how young people would like to see the particular trope addressed.

Lesbian Death

The first trope to be examined is lesbian death. Young people, particular female participants, were acutely aware that their television role models kept dying. Focus group participants made statements noting the "lesbian that always dies first" (Focus Group Session One 2016). Another young person said about queer women, "they die. The way they have queer characters in shows and movies tend to be the same in they have women or people of color, they tend to be the first to die" (Focus Group Session Two 2016). Sometimes young people don't even remember the names of the characters but simply notice that the lesbians die first. When speaking about a fantasy show on television one participant noted, "There's these two girls in *Vampire Diaries*, and they killed themselves in some fiery explosion but I can't remember their names" (Focus Group Session Four 2017). It is remarkable that this happens so often that the young people don't even remember the character details. They simply recognize the presence of a lesbian couple and the instant destruction of these role models.

This trope was a large topic of conversation among the focus groups. The participants expertly recognized the deaths were primarily occurring with lesbians and persons of color. They stepped away from general assertions about LGBTQ+ death and instead focused on a particular subset of the queer community. To them, the solution is quite simple; stop killing them off. When talking about ideas for what young people would like to see on television, one group enthusiastically stated they wanted a "love story between two women that doesn't involve someone dying" (Focus Group Session Three 2016). Clearly, young people are ready for this trope to go away. They want their

beloved queer characters, and even those they just meet, to stay alive. "It's like have a cutsie love story between two women that doesn't involve someone dying" (Focus Group Session Three 2016). They want these people to live and thrive onscreen.

Gay Best Friend

Another strong trope in media is the gay best friend. It is so prevalent that there is even a movie called *GBF*. Typically, this is even more exaggerated because the character in question needs help from a feminine gay male. The character needs a make-over, or fashion advice, or some other magical help. One of the young people indicated, "well it has been for a long time, to have a token gay best friend where like 'where you just need some line honey', and then like it's really obnoxious" (Focus Group Session Three 2016). Other participants connected this trope to race and gender.

> YOUTH 1. The white feminist wants the one gay best friend and they want that best friend.
> YOUTH 2. I think what was said really sums it up, like the idea of the gay best friend just like, it's a little token character to make all the other white straight characters to feel good about themselves. (Focus Group Session One 2016)

As the student indicated, perhaps this character allows the straight viewing audience to see the value of the gay male community. These are the hair dressers, fashion stylists, and confidantes that every straight girl must collect. Additionally, these characters rarely are sexual. The gay best friend does not need his own boyfriend or engage in his own romantic interests, because he is there to serve the female friend. This commodification of gay people can be seen in television shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and followed into movies like *My Best Friend's Wedding*. The gay best friend trope

highlights the abstract value and comfort that a neutered gay male can have for a female character.

Regarding plot arcs, the youth long for gay people to be more than supporting friends. For example, "the gay person would totally – or the gay or like anyone on the LGBTQ+ spectrum would obviously not be the token best friend. Because that's really important not to do" (Ann-Jordan 2017). The gay best friend trope, according to Ann-Jordan, makes gay people seem like they are always friendly and always ready to drop everything to have fun. She, along with others, want to see characters that do not fit in this trope.

Bullying

Another dominant trope is queer bullying. Queer individuals are victimized by their bullies through physical violence, verbal assaults, discrimination, and harassment. My previous research, as well as the works of Giannini (2009), van de Water (2012), and Marshall (2010), highlight this trope in television in shows like *Dawson's Creek*, *Queer as Folk*, and *Glee*, as well as Theatre for Young Audience pieces like *The Wrestling Season*, *fml: How Carson McCullers Saved My Life*, and *The Children's Hour*. In addition to those works, the young people also identified the show *Shameless* as a site of queer youth bullying in television (Focus Group Session Two 2016), and in non-English speaking pieces, as well.

> YOUTH: So like I'm Mexican and my mom likes watching in Spanish, and there was this one where there was a gay couple. And you couldn't even tell they were gay, so it was like when they announced it, you were like "Oh whoa!," and then in the episode this guy was just walking and then this gay started to say slurs to him and stuff like that and they got in a big fight and then the guy is starting to get,

> like accuse him of stuff, so he couldn't adopt children, so it was kinda like bullying. (Focus Group Session Two 2016)

Bullying came up in a list of struggles that are common trends in narrative plot devices. (Focus Group Session Three 2017; Focus Group Session Four 2017). Gilad Padva, confirms the prevalence of this trope in her research, stating that

> The bullying and bashing of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer persons (particularly adolescents) have become common themes in popular communications of the 1990s and 2000s, including film, television, magazines, fiction, children's books, comics, popular music, gay press, advertisements, Internet websites and pornography. (2007, 105-106)

Clearly, this trope can be found throughout youth queer narratives, and its impact is strikingly significant.

The bullying trope and queer victimization works to minimize queer rights and encourage further acts of violence; normalizing the experience for both the oppressor and the oppressed.

> These media representations reflect diverse attitudes towards sexual, homophobic, and heterocentric abuse, harassment, and physical attack of GLBTQ subjectivities: from condemning sexual intolerance to eroticization of bullying acts; from sophisticated deconstruction of degrading hegemonic cultural practices to over encouragement of violence towards sexual minorities. (Padva 2007, 105-106)

Additionally, by presenting queer relationships and queer identities as victims, the trope re-affirms the power of heteronormativity in media representations. A reliance on tropes that present "troubled, gay youth, coming out/outing, and homophobia work to reinscribe heteronormativity by stigmatizing same-sex-attracted young people in relation to their heterosexual peers" (Giannini 2009, 51). In other words, traditional media present

bullying as a normal queer experience and non-normative sexuality or gender identity as lesser than the heteronormative standard.

AIDS Victim

Another trope is the gay AIDS victim. Several television shows since the late 1980s have explored this issue through a token gay male that has picked up HIV. One of the focus group participants stated, "well usually I've seen a gay stereotype that gay characters have AIDS and all that and that kinda disturbs me cuz they're assuming that all gay people have AIDS. And I just don't like it cuz it's rude and offensive" (Focus Group Session Five 2017). This also came up in the second focus group, this time focusing on the reactions of others. Here the stereotyped character is excluded due to his disease. "There are a couple of AIDS storylines where everyone like shuns them cuz they are like diseased or whatever" (Focus Group Session Two 2016). When it is set forth as a pattern and stereotype it not only minimizes the disease but also treats it as an eventuality. In particular, recent shows like *Brothers and Sisters*, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and *How to Get Away with Murder* use an HIV diagnosis as a surprise character trait that just comes with being gay.

Tropes Effects on Youth

With each of these tropes, the young people recognized their existence and prevalence in traditional media. This highlights that they are more than passive narrative consumers and can actively uncover traditional media practices. However, they also explored the impact these tropes can have on an audience. I asked the participants how someone who may not have queer friends, a supportive community or peer network, or

'easy' exposure may view these representations. One of the insightful moments from the second focus group tackled this subject.

> YOUTH 1. False representation, it changes their mindset, values, they assume a lot.
> YOUTH 2. Especially with gay men in the show, they'll see they're like normally feminine and then if they come across someone who is feminine, they'll just assume they're gay, and not even like ask them. They could very well be straight, but they just, they're just represented in that stereotypical way.
> YOUTH 1. How we see in media that we are just so cheery and fun, some people are just like "gay people are so happy" they're like so cheery. I want to have one as my best friend, but it's like sometimes I like don't even want to talk to you. Like get-away. (Focus Group Session Two 2016)

The young people point out that if the representations on television do not match the limited experience of the viewer, the viewer may take what they see as truth. For example, "gay men must be feminine because that's who they were portrayed, and no one is showing me any different, so it's true." The problem is this truth has been constructed by traditional media producers and relies on stereotypes and tropes. Real queer young people are then left dealing with media viewers that take stereotype for fact and believe the queer youth is just waiting to be his/her best friend. The focus group participants are pointing out that narratives built off stereotypes and tropes are providing misleading, inaccurate information to the viewing audience.

Transforming Traditional Media

In asking young people about what they wished to see in future queer narratives, they also discussed what they would fix about current traditional media forms. Some of the suggestions they offer align with Giannini's suggestions from her research into queer youth theatre. She offers that to break away can include showcasing and representing queer desires, creating characters within and outside sexual and gender categories, and

showing “fun in homosexuality; communities that embrace homosexuality; and the extension of queerness beyond able-bodied, white, middle class males” (2010, 6). The young people echo some of these ideas and also come up with some wonderful new ones of their own. These include: encouraging queer artists to take on queer character roles, decentralizing token queer experiences from queer character storylines, presenting strong queer relationships, and highlighting realistic consequences to abuse.

Queer Artists Wanted

The young people had some strong things to say about the performers presenting these characters. Young people want to see queer individuals in queer roles and appreciate when it is done well. “It's really cool when they put actual actors and actors, that match their selves” (Focus Group Session Five 2017). The young people believed that actors can put on a stronger performance if they have actually dealt with the issues the characters are struggling through. One participant felt strongly about this issue, as evident when she stated:

> YOUTH: Stop having straight people play queer people! Like let's have actual gay people and trans people or anything like that, play like those roles…Like if someone who has never been in a queer situation, so they don't know what actually happens and they don't know how it feels so whatever, the producers tell them to do they're like, so this is how it's actually, so I'm gonna just do that. But like a queer person, they're like, “I've been in this situation, it's not like this, so let me how it actually was.” (Focus Group Session Three 2016)

Additionally, these queer actors are strong role models for young people. This also extends to queer celebrities. According to Craig et al., young people look up to “admired celebrity role models because they provide a certain sense of comfort and strength…providing participants with positive representations that they could emulate”

(2015, 264). They see a sense of truth and genuineness in representations when it comes from experience. One participant stated:

> YOUTH: People talk about *Sense 8*…I think it should be queer people involved in writing queer characters as well, because the directors of *The Matrix*, the Wachowskis, one of them is a trans-woman. So she is helping, like directly in charge of *Sense 8*, and that's why the characters are really believable and realistic. They are actually part of people's lives and are being appropriated and having actually first-hand experience both in acting and like in creation of it is leading to a lot of crazy things happening. (Focus Group Session Three 2016)

Seeing real queer individuals exploring queer issues opens the door for youth to do the same. Additionally, the participants see value in character representation by someone who has first-hand experience with queer issues.

The Normal Queer

These young people want queerness to be accepted and to feel like they are part of the larger society. In this case, when the youth refer to queer being normal, they did not express changing their lives to fit a more heteronormative or homonormative standard. Instead, they want society to shift to recognize that being queer is okay and that it should be accepted. The young people want to be treated just like everyone else in that their queerness is not the sole factor of their existence.

> YOUTH: I don't really know. I think a lot of times the media tries to portray queer people and their struggles, but they don't just want a queer person to be normal…They don't just have a queer person just being a queer person as just like a normal thing. They have to turn it into the focus of a problem and a conflict and like a resolution to that. But they never just have a queer person just there. It's like there are so many straight characters, but it's not like the plot is focused on them being straight and their struggles, not really, as a straight person. It's just like they're straight, cool, here's all these adventures that they go on. (Focus Group Session Three 2016)

Zol, and other focus group participants expressed they want people, through narratives, "To actually open up my eyes and see the perspective that gay people are just like us, and they deserve the same rights that straight people do" (Focus Group Session Six 2017). There is some gray space to be explored between the way the queer community should act and how it should be treated. The young people seem to be focusing on the treatment by others where queer activists and theorists focus on queer behaviors and ways of identifying. Either way, it is interesting to see how the young people try to thread this tricky needle. To begin, young people want to be treated the same. One participant indicated she wanted "maybe like a storyline where their relationships and where you can see that their relationships are like everybody else's, they're not different in any way. They're just like a regular, straight relationships" (Focus Group Session Three 2016). The young people want to belong and to be treated the same.

The young people also wanted this normal-ness to extend to the daily life of the protagonist or queer character. "Just make them normal. We're normal people" (Focus Group Session Seven 2017). This would show up, in particular, in sitcom environments. "It'd be like, 'that show contains a gay person just like any normal thing.' And I think it'd just be normal…like any day life. For example, like *Parks and Rec*. Just continue with whatever their life is" (Ann-Jordan 2017). The young people often fell back on sitcom analogies to express the types of shows they wish had more queer characters.

> ALICE: I feel like you could really make it just like any TV show, like *The Office* or *Parks and Rec* or just like any sort of show that just has characters in it just going about their normal lives, just like they're queer, I guess. I don't think that it necessarily has to be something that is like a huge deal. (Alice 2017)

Again, this was built on being seen as people doing customary daily activities, decentralized from the queer experience or expectations that queers live differently.

Next, the young people want artists to improve the plot and action of the narratives. At the core, youth wanted storylines that challenge the dominated heteronormative, trope-based narratives. First, the participants see gender identity and sexual identity as an inborn part of their existence. On the nature/nurture debate, they are clearly on the nature or biological root side of how people become queer. That said, young people still want more depth and more to the characters' lives than this one facet.

> YOUTH: Yeah, and I think less of a focus on it being such a struggle for that character to be queer and more of like, 'That's just who they are.' Straight characters, there's never this struggle of them being straight. 'It's so hard…Oh no! What am I going to do?' It's very different how queer characters are portrayed. Their whole shebang is that they're queer and it's a struggle. It would be really nice to just see a character who is queer and also likes to read and is in the chess club and does all this other stuff. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

Tila highlighted how sexuality really should be a secondary character trait and not the main focus. She does not want to watch shows just because there is a queer character. Instead it should just be a fact of life in the larger mosaic of a character's development. "I'd rather be like 'yeah okay' like if I'm excited about it [the show] it's because it's two characters that I really like. It should have nothing to do with the fact they are gay" (Focus Group Session Six 2017). Young people want their ways of life to be treated with respect, just like the heterosexual, cis-gendered majority.

Meaningful Companionship

The young people also see how queer individuals are often put in a relationship context with other queer people. In other words, if there is going to be more than one

queer person, he/she should be in a relationship with the other queer individual. The youth participants want relationships that are more than just sex. The youth wanted to show more queer friendship onscreen.

> YOUTH: In a lot of shows I've watched, if there is one gay character and they are just by themselves, and they introduce another gay character, they end up being in a relationship. And I'd like to see gay characters be in platonic relationships, platonic love, supportive instead of being their only option in life. They're able to be friends, even though they're the only characters that are gay. (Focus Group Session Three 2016)

These participants want traditional media that shows characters finding supportive peers that are not trying to get laid. Queer youth need to see other queer youth as supportive peers and not just relationship opportunities.

That being said, the young people did want to feel like there is someone out there for them to care about and to have those feelings returned. Some participants expressed unease with romantic narratives because they do not connect with these heterosexual stories. As one focus group member stated, "I personally don't like watching romantic comedies, because it's like the same thing over and over again with the same people, but I think I would watch it was with queer characters, the same kind of like cheesy love" (Focus Group Session Three 2016). The queer youth in my study want to be swept away by narratives they can see themselves in, with romantic relationships on screen that look like themselves. This interchange between case study participants Zol and Tila really highlight this point.

> ZOL. Well, love stories in general make me believe that there's somebody out there waiting. If it would have to be a gay story, it shows me that…
> TILA. There's someone gay waiting for me.
> INTERVIEWER. I see a big smile on your face, so is that a hope?
> TILA. Pretty much, yeah.

> ZOL. But, it also makes me not feel alone because I know that there's people out there with the same sexuality as me, and so, I feel accepted – especially if a big moving picture did a movie. It's like, "Wow, they accept people like that, therefore I feel accepted." (Tila 2017)

Sexual orientation or gender identity can be secondary or tertiary points of conflict, not always the core message presented. When youth audiences (both queer and straight) see LGBTQ+ characters obsessing over LGBTQ+ issues, they learn that the only people who really care about these issues are the ones going through them and that little common ground lies between queer and straight people. How can we expect youth to see diverse experiences, when all they see are gay kids obsessing about gay issues?

<u>We've Got 99 Problems and Being Queer Ain't One</u>

It is also significant that the young people expressed that queerness need not be the centerpiece of the show or the characters' lives. Echoing other participants, Alice went on to state:

> ALICE: I think it's good to make it clear to the audience when a character is queer, but I don't think that the character's queerness should be the center of the storyline…We're not weird or other like alien because we're queer. We all have the same problems. We can't find our matching sock. Our coffee got cold and now it's gross. Like we have the same problems as everybody else and being queer might add to some of our problems, but it shouldn't make us less of a person or less normal. (Alice 2017)

A different group of youth had another great interchange about this subject. They stated:

> YOUTH 1. It being a part of a storyline. Having a movie where you have a gay character but it's not the main focus. Or like it's not necessarily a plot point. It just happens to be something brought up and then whatever. And whatever the storyline happens to be it just continues and it's not like a main "Oh my god, this changes everything."
> YOUTH 2. Cuz it really shouldn't.
> YOUTH 1. I think it's taken way to seriously sometimes. Yes, it's a part of your identity.

YOUTH 2. It's like having hair color or eye color, it's just what they are. (Focus Group Session Six 2017)

While the previous points came up a few times during the discussions, the ideas that come after were primary topics of conversation in the majority of the focus groups.

The young people want to see the journey of a character, the struggles and the success. They do not want their representations onscreen to be sanitized or scrubbed clean of the dirty parts of life. This could include "homeless kids that don't have their family anymore because they are gay" (Focus Group Session Three 2016), starting a show with the character coming out and then "it would keep going and going to see how his parents react to that" (Focus Group Session Five 2017), and "finding the label that fits you perfectly and…accepting that is subject to change" (Focus Group Session Six 2017).

Young people also want narratives to address issues from people's everyday lives. High on this list is the conflict between one's religion and one's sexuality. When discussing what youth wished they could see, one participant said, "Some of us have families and religion to deal with that isn't like Christian and Catholic. We have Muslim families and Arab parents and Indian parents" (Focus Group Session Three 2016). The young people want more variety and religious diversity. Another group of young people had an insightful interchange about religion. They stated:

YOUTH 1. They could give him really religious parents, cuz in my case my parents are really religious, and it would be like how he can admit to himself how he is the way he is and there is nothing wrong with it.
YOUTH 2. Like I've had a really religious friend find out that she wasn't straight, that she was bisexual and it was hard for her to come out because she was really religious and she had to like face a struggle like do I tell my family or church that I'm this. Or hide it for all these years and keep it inside.
YOUTH 3. And if we do have religious parents, I don't want them to just condemn their child, they love their kid, they LOVE their kid. And that's why

> I really want to see it. I want to see the struggles between everyone and everything in taking everything in perspective. Like oh we're gay, oh we are religious parents and we don't like that. They just don't know how to cope with that. I would like to see a lot more depth. (Focus Group Session Five 2017)

Consequences

Young people are faced with challenges at home, in their communities, and at school. With the growing global network of information and news, they are also witness to these stories happening across the country. Lili shared a story of one of her friends who experienced harassment in the middle of a suburb. "I had another friend – he was Native American – and we were in Scottsdale when this happened, and there was this guy that just kept circling the area that he was in, and then, he ended up calling him a faggot, and then turned the sprinklers on him" (Lili 2017). Ozzy wanted media and narratives to highlight the injustice and suffering happening to and within the trans-community. He began by sharing his perspective on recent trans-violence.

> OZZY: I see very little condemnation of the people that really harass and attack and oppress trans or queer people. Like you'd see in the news pieces – I'll go back to what happened with Leelah Alcorn. Because this is probably the most famous and usable for your purposes especially. But the news articles, there was very little serious condemnation of what she experienced with her parents. These are these total abusive assholes are doing this. And this is not an uncommon thing. And there are people on social media saying these horrible, horrible things about it. And there's no backlash. There's no one who's actually saying – There's no condemnation. There might be, "Oh, this is horrible."
>
> So, in the article, there's point A, which is missing, which is Leelah Alcorn's parents are abusive lunatic assholes. Then there's point B which is Leelah Alcorn is transgender and extremely negatively impacted by point A. And then there's C, that point B [her gender identity] leads to Leelah Alcorn committing suicide. And there's point B and there's point C. Well, there's no point A [her parents' behavior] mentioned. There's no – like they mention it. But they're not saying – you never see condemnation of people that are oppressing and violently attacking transgender people. (Ozzy 2017)

When it came to offering ideas about what type of narrative he would like to see, Ozzy focused on social change pieces. He wanted the violence and disregard for queer individuals to be an agent of change.

> OZZY: I want to be able to use the trans or the queer character as kind of like an incendiary. Kind of a tool to show what people actually go through. I don't want to make it the entire focus of the show. I would rather have it as the side scenes that you see and have extremely volatile, extremely aggressive experiences typical to what trans people experience. (Ozzy 2017)

In a notable addition, Ozzy connects his ideas about what queer narratives could be to a real experience that happened at his high school. He offers a specific plot and situation with an emphasis on the point of view of the character and the reactions of the group.

> OZZY: Like it could be – I won't name names. But there's a teacher at the school who went on a 20-minute tirade that was incredibly – just totally unacceptable about how mentally ill and diseased and unacceptable transgender people are. I want the transgender student to be in that classroom. And I want everybody to have to sit there and agonize with them as they see this person that is kind of the endearing second – like the endearing wingman or wing person, more appropriately, to the main character that they really like and appreciate just totally having their identity invalidated and being attacked in several ways. Because I'm extremely angry that it doesn't get shown and that it doesn't get condemned. (Ozzy 2017)

Ozzy's unique perspective echoes frustrations from young people in the queer community. They are frustrated with the way they are treated, they want others to see their experiences, and they want to see the behavior and the broader society change.

Social Change

Young people see the advantage in narratives presenting violence, bullying, and other shocking situations to spark dialogue and increase empathy. The young people want narratives that shocks the viewer into action. They hope this leads to effective

social change. “I feel like, and one of the best ways to enact change is to shock and to get people to sympathize with you” (Penelope 2017). The focus group participants and case studies wanted future narratives to cause change in the world. Padva also saw the potential for queer narratives to help young people. She stated,

> Although supportive fiction, cinema, popular music, printed and Internet articles and posters cannot replace a professional’s help for harassed and bullied GLBT adults and youth, anti-homophobic media can benefit social workers, therapists, teachers, guides, educational counselors, tutors and parents in their attempt to empower LGBTQ clients and to lessen homophobia among heterosexuals. (Padva 2007, 117)

Toward that end, the young people proposed a plot idea to reverse the expectations of our world in a piece of work. In other words, if the dominant type is heterosexual, flip it to queer.

> YOUTH: I think it'd be cool to reverse the dynamic and to portray either a high school or whatever where straight people can experience what queer people do, and have the dynamic entirely reversed and be questioned for how fucking weird they are for being straight. More stuff like that where changing it and letting people as a whole like, where queer people can laugh and be petty like ‘Ha-ha, now you know’ and straight people or cis-gendered people, can say like ‘oh, this is how I understand it and this is good art’. (Focus Group Session Three 2016)

This came up several times in different groups. At its core is a desire for the mainstream monoculture to see how the “other” lives.

<u>Learning about Queerness Online</u>

Media narratives are clearly presenting options to young people and the young people then use these to help construct, explore, and adjust their identities while recognizing themselves and becoming more aware of their inner selves. However, youth also seek out information from non-fictional history pieces, autobiographies, and the Internet. Many youth use the Internet more than other information sources and access to

a wider variety of online non-fiction information sources has made learning about the LGBTQ+ community and identity structures easy for young people (Bond, Hefner, and Drogos 2009; DeHaan et al. 2013). A 2015 Pew Research Center report indicated that "92% of teens reported going online daily—including 24% who say they go online almost constantly" (Lenhart et al. 2015, 2) with more than half (56%) going online several times a day. Despite this data, internet is not accessible by all young people due to socioeconomic factors, affordability, geographic limitations, and other access difficulties. Gary Harper and his colleagues posit six thematic functions of the Internet in developing sexual orientation identity. These include increasing self-awareness of one's sexual orientation, learning about the queer community life, communicating with other queer young people, meeting others, accepting one's sexual orientation, and facilitating the coming out process (Harper and Bruce 2016). The young people I interviewed are definitely aware of this transformation. Ozzy, for example, detailed this change.

> OZZY: I feel like my generation is the last to kind of have the Internet as a new developing thing. So, I'm 17 and eventually, I kind of came across the concept. And then basically, for the last six, maybe seven years, I've lived on just learning from the Internet about things like resources. (Ozzy 2017)

Ozzy recognizes the value of the Internet for finding out information and for connecting with communities. For this and future generations, young people may not feel comfortable asking peers, parents, or other figures for information about sexuality and gender identity but will have access to the Internet. Lili's experience echoes several of the study participants' journey to learning more about their own identities.

> LILI: In sixth grade, it was around the time where people would just say "gay" as a term for anything. "Oh, I like to watch this show." "That's gay." "I play this game." "Oh, that's gay." So, I never understood what it meant, and then people

> would come back at them and say, "Well, 'gay' means 'happy.'" So, I thought "gay" means "happy." Obviously, that is probably the first term. So, I looked it up myself because – I don't know where it came down to me just wanting to think, "Let's look up 'gay.' So, I looked up "gay," and there was the term for happy, and then there was another term for liking the same sex. It showed "homosexual," "queer," all these different things, and they all kind of meant the same thing. So, I learned that way. (Lili 2017)

In this case, the use of the pejorative version of "gay" spurred Lili to explore more about the word, which started a search for a new identity structure. Penelope went on a similar journey but went the route through non-fiction documentaries about queer history, sparked from an auto-biographical graphic novel.

> PENELOPE: Like Alison Bechdel, she's a – yeah, she recently had a musical written about her called *Fun Home*. She is an illustrator, she wrote comics, and she had a comic…But she talks about like queer culture and just being a queer woman and I thought that was – I really like that other than my kind of type of personality is one, when I realized I was a lesbian, I dove into research. So like, I watched a bunch of documentaries about queer culture, not just being a lesbian but a lot about like the Stonewall Riots and that whole movement. (Penelope 2017)

Penelope uses her strength as a curious researcher to learn more about the queer movement and, through that, her own identity. She attaches to narrative forms emphasizing biography and documentary techniques as a way to expand her understanding of the broader queer community. It is significant that Penelope does not describe wanting to watch primetime television shows or to watch a fictional movie, instead relying on what she sees as reliable information.

<u>Learning About Queerness Through New Media</u>

The third information source I examine is new media. New media is accessed through technical devices and includes going on social media, watching videos or reading blogs, playing games, emailing friends, etc. Each has an interactive component and

allows for the viewer to also be a content creator. Young people have this resource available all day and easily access a variety of narratives.

Reddit and Tumblr

Participants shared they found more about their identities through reading posts on Reddit and Tumblr. These interactive, blog-like website systems allow users to write about their own experiences, tag key concepts (similar to Twitter), and follow sites they enjoy reading. Ozzy, a teenage transgender participant, spoke in detail about using the Internet and Reddit/sub-Reddits to learn more about the trans community. He had a hard time finding information from traditional sources (peers, parents, and television), so he turned to the Internet for guidance.

> OZZY: I was never introduced to the concept. It was more like once – actually, I feel like my generation is the last to kind of have the Internet as a new developing thing. So, I'm 17 and eventually, I kind of came across the concept. And then basically, for the last six, maybe seven years, I've lived on just learning from the Internet about things like resources. Like learning from other trans people on the ask transgender sub-Reddit. So, there's a lot of trans people that kind of hang out and talk about a variety of things. (Ozzy 2017)

These transgender sub-Reddits create a community for trans youth. Ozzy also spoke about sharing experiences, learning about other people's struggles and successes, and even finding out about sub-Reddit user's suicides through the digital space. Reddit became a close-knit community where youth suicide was discussed and handled.

Due to the limited media representation and less easily-accessible information available on pan-sexuality, Ann-Jordan felt more comfortable sharing her thoughts online. She found the open discussions on Tumblr appealing.

> ANN-JORDAN: I know that being pan isn't an open – like when I say I'm pan, people are like, "What does that mean?" And usually, I have to be like, "I'm just

> bi" so that they don't have to make all the jokes about gender fluid folks and stuff like that. But I don't know. I feel like I learn most of it from Tumblr and stuff. Because they're an open group that you can have discussions about things. (Ann-Jordan 2017)

It is also interesting that Ann-Jordan shares that her peers have a hard time understanding pan-sexuality, especially as she describes her friend-group as queer. This highlights that having a queer identity does not subsume a complex understanding of each identity structure. All youth, queer and non-queer, have to work through their own understandings of gender and sexuality. In order to communicate her feelings for her peers, she builds it off of bisexuality instead of addressing the fine details between bisexuality and pansexuality.

Alice, a young non-binary, asexual teenager, also found Tumblr to be a welcoming space for finding out more information. She does suggest, however a critical eye when taking in the information. She states:

> ALICE: Tumblr is a good place for that [learning about queerness]. You have to be careful on Tumblr because there are a lot of people who just spew whatever without really facts, but I kind of like, I heard about things on Tumblr and then I did my own research outside of that…There was a time when I was first kind of figuring out my identity in the LGBT community, I was watching so many videos on just about that. And like not even just the asexual part of it, but just like everything. (Alice 2017)

<u>YouTube</u>

Alice also used YouTube to learn more about the LGBTQ+ community. "On YouTube, I watch a bunch of different stuff. There was a time when I was first kind of figuring out my identity in the LGBT community, I was watching so many videos on just about that. And like not even just the asexual part of it, but just like everything (Alice 2017).

This site allows users to upload their own videos on a variety of topics. YouTube videos and the corresponding YouTube celebrities came up often during my discussions with the focus groups. This becomes especially clear when examining the questionnaire responses in the online category.

Table 5: Questionnaire Responses: Online Content

Title / Name	Count
Tyler Oakley	10
Bretman Rock	6
Shane Dawson, Joey Graceffa	5
Jeffree Star	4
Manny Mua, Dodie Clark, Troye Sivan	3
Connor Franta, Hannah Hark, Stef Sanjati, Patrick Starrr, Gigi Gorgeous, Gaby Dunn	2
Kasper Tait, Matthew Lush, Domo and Crissy, Larray XO, Lohanthony, Brutalmoose, The Gabbi Show, Evan Edinger, Doodleodle, Ricky Dillon, Steven Joseph, Itsbambi, Sean Paul, Angela Vanity, Pinkstylist, Amanda Chronicles, Pubertina, Rose and Rosie, Ashley Mardell	1

Later, in one of the case study interviews, I asked Alice to explain more about her experience with YouTube. The search capability of YouTube allows users to target particular identity structures and interests (Fox and Ralston 2016). For her, she used the site to get more information about identity options. These videos provided options and insight into something that she could not get from her family or friends.

> ALICE: On YouTube, I watch a bunch of different stuff. There was a time when I was first kind of figuring out my identity in the LGBT community, I was watching so many videos on just about that. And like not even just the asexual part of it, but just like everything. I used to run a blog on Tumblr that was like support for LGBT youth and it got pretty high numbers with it, so I really wanted to like educate myself on all aspects of it so that I could help other people who were struggling to find their identity as well. So, I think that's pretty cool. (Alice 2017)

Michael, a poly-amorous, asexual focus group member found the Internet and YouTube as a way to learn about the differences between various sexual and gender-identity options.

> MICHAEL: For a while I thought, I did think I was asexual but I was like that's not entirely true, like maybe I'm half and half or a weird mixture. But finally, I sat down and looked up every sexuality and I think. But I didn't have any example to see that. But then I came across a random YouTube video and yeah, just like a lot of things. It's LGBT and not everything in between. (Focus Group Session Five 2007)

While traditional media often presents few narrative and identity options to viewers, the Internet and new media provide a fuller spectrum of the queer rainbow. Michael's experience shows how the Internet allows more information to be accessible and therefore give more identity frames to young people (De Haan et al. 2013).

New Media Effects on Youth

New Media serves as an interactive and user-guided space to ask questions, and hear from others in the LGBTQ+ community with greater anonymity to explore a variety of perspectives and issues. Perhaps the greatest effect new media has on young people is it provides an active space for youth-mediated and youth-created content. Young people, through new media, can express themselves freely, hear from other young people over great physical distance, and can search for content specifically related to their questions

or experiences. This leads to young people taking the initiative to explore a variety of identity structures (DeHaan et al. 2013). Additionally, “Media use may buffer some of the effects of marginalization, such as isolation or victimization” (Craig et al. 2015, 269). Even though the content-creator may be far away, the face to digital-face interaction, albeit in recorded video, functions as friends sitting down to share experiences and get difficult questions answered (Harper and Bruce 2016; Fox and Ralston 2016). In an environment that may not be as conducive to free expression of ideas and diversity of sexual and gender identities, these digital platforms share the world and provide identity-development opportunities through a screen.

> YOUTH: I feel like YouTube is also a good place for that [exploring your identity] because you can get educated about stuff and you can find people who are experiencing the same things and have someone to relate to. Even though it's not in person or someone that you know, it's someone that is similar to you in some way. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

These help the viewer make sense of themselves and their surroundings, even if the mixed messages from the physical community and the digital community may be different.

> YOUTH: I also think there's going to be a little bit more of a difficulty understanding what's going on, I guess. I'm assuming that being in a smaller town, especially Arizona, there is going to be more hatred and misunderstandings about being queer. Having this in your real life surrounding you at school and then being online and hearing positive things and the opposite. I think it would be more confusing. I do think it would be very helpful that we have this access to media places, because otherwise I'd be really lost. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

Shared experiences over social media sites and online environments also build resilience in young people (Ceglarek and Ward 2016). “Media, especially online media, may be a catalyst for resilience among LGBTQ youth. Media help youth cope with discrimination

and navigate the turbulence of adolescence and young adulthood as LGBTQ individuals" (Craig et al. 2015, 269). YouTube and other digital peer-to-peer systems allow youth users to share their experiences and offer encouragement. When in a cultural environment where this frame-sharing is limited due to political, social, or religious limitations, then the online environment is even more of a significant factor.

Chapter Conclusions

A narrative analysis approached to the data analysis revealed a strong focus on themes of accuracy and information-seeking. After examining the traditional media and normativity and exploring youth responses, these youth are hyper-aware of the narrative tropes. These included lesbian death, gay best friends, bullying, and queer AIDS victims. I highlighted the effects tropes have on young people and offered solutions from the youth themselves. The participants long for queer artists to be partners in telling queer stories, for acceptance, for queerness to be decentralized from the narrative, and presenting consequences to queer violence onscreen. Additionally, their search for truth is taking them away from traditional media forms and into digital spaces, online information sources, and toward new interactive, content-creation-rich new media spaces. The next chapter explores the ways narrative are impacted through communities and how communities are impacted by narratives.

CHAPTER FOUR: SOCIAL INFLUENCES AND NARRATIVE

Heading into the data analysis process, I had a few expectations about what I may find. During the focus groups and case studies, I could already see themes emerging. When I began to examine the data an unexpected theme emerged; the impact of the community on youth interaction with narrative and narrative interactions on youth community. I did not expect so many youth in the focus groups and case studies to attend to their families, friends, schools, and online communities. Chapter 4 presents the unexpected findings on the intersections between a youth's social influences and youth queer narratives. Guiding my analysis in this chapter, I use the following related research questions:

- Where do young people learn about queerness?
- How do social relationships and social networks affect narrative interpretation and interaction?

I examine how social relationships influence narrative interpretations and interactions, as well as how narratives affect social relationships. A youth's family, peer group, school, and online community may lead to a youth's ability to freely explore narrative and experiment with identity structures (DeHaan et al. 2013). I also explore the impact narrative has on communities by creating common ground for group cohesion.

The Family's Influence on Narratives

As the family unit is often the primary social group for young people growing up, it plays a large role in identity development. The values, attitudes, and beliefs of family members resonate with a child well into adult life. My discussions with the focus group

and case study participants highlight the influence family has on youth engagement with queer narratives. Three case study participants highlight the impact family has, shaping the way the young people engage with queer youth narratives and queerness itself.

First, Zol explains that her home life was full of different types of people that impacted her view of the LGBTQ+ community. "When I was younger, there were always gay people around my house because my mom was really good friends with them, and she had this really good personal connection, and I got to talk to them, and I was like, 'Wow, the gay life seems cool'" (Zol 2017). This childhood experience provided diverse role models and by seeing her own parents interact positively, it set up positive expectations for her own identity exploration experience. For her, this identity exploration began in elementary school.

> ZOL: The thing is that I would go around school at such a young age and be like, "Am I interested in boys or am I interested in girls?" I would somewhat feel so attracted towards girls and I would feel so much more attracted to guys at the same time. So, it made me question it, and one day, I sat my mom down and asked her about these feelings, and she's like, "Are you a lesbian, or are you straight?" I'm like, "Mom, I feel like I'm a little bit of both." She told me a little story about it, and she's like, "Maybe you just need to experiment to know what you actually like." (Zol 2017)

Zol's mother encourages her to examine her own feelings and opens the door to experimentation, perhaps through watching television shows about queerness and looking around online. This experience shows that the family's social environment (her mother's queer friends) and a family's attitude towards queerness (as seen in her mother's reaction to Zol's questions) can support a young person's exploratory journey into new narratives and experimentation.

Another case study member, Ozzy, had a family member influence his queer identity journey. His older brother induldged his younger sibling's questions about gender. He began to explore more about his identity after a trip to New York City and an encounter with a loud public speaker.

> OZZY: I knew that I was trans since very, very, very early on in my life but the first time I learned that it was an actual thing or anything similar to that was – I must have been like nine, I think. And for whatever reason, my family was in New York. I think visiting family. Something like that. I don't remember. And so, we were in the park by the Dakota and at the John Lennon memorial. So, there was a guy. I guess he did that a lot because he had a microphone and he was set-up. And he was just telling weird stories. And he said something about smoking with a transvestite or whatever is the word he said.
>
> And then me being the horribly naïve child I was, I asked my brother what that meant. And he was very uncomfortable with that. But I guess the first thing I was told was a transvestite is a guy who wears dresses is the first thing I heard. And my brother was like 12 and trying to explain what this whole concept of breaking gender norms. And he was kind of saddled with a huge task and he didn't really meet the challenge. But I can't blame him. He was like 12 and trying to tell a 9-year-old, just very awkwardly in public. But I guess that kind of influenced how I thought it was viewed. Because it came across as very taboo. And of course, it is to kind of – it's very dangerous and there's a lack of acceptance. (Ozzy 2017)

Ozzy's twelve-year-old brother helped him on his identity journey through an honest answer to a potentially tricky question, even though he indicated his brother did not know what he was talking about. This experience shows that interactions with trusted family members close to the same age can impact a young person's journey. His brother gave him the terminology to begin exploring narratives, also highlighting that family can help focus a young person's narrative search.

Finally, Lili highlights how a family's previous experience with queerness can shape a young person's queer journey and youth narrative engage. Lili also had a

supportive home environment around queerness, amplified due to a tragic death in the family.

> LILI: So, where I learned about it – it does come from television, but it also – in my family, we're a very open family. I think that actually happened…2000, around that time, I had an uncle who was gay, and I didn't know that he was gay. I was 4 or something in 2000. He ended up committing suicide because he was deaf, and people would make fun of him at school and things like that, so he ended up killing himself. Ever since then, they were able – his family – his mom and them didn't know that he was gay. They never questioned it, or anything like that. So, when it happened, literally, all the siblings – to the parents – were like, "He was gay, and he was deaf, and he was bullied because of it." So then, I think that made them realize, "Okay, that's not good. I think we need to make it so that whoever is gay should be more comfortable around us." In their lifetime, they'd just – they weren't very open about that kind of thing. They're very old, traditional Mexicans. They came from Nogales, Mexico. So, as time went by, I have another uncle who ended up saying he was gay, and then, I have an aunt who is a lesbian, and I have another aunt who is bisexual. My mom has experimented, and she's told me about it. So, my family's very open with that kind of thing. At first, I didn't really understand all of it. Sixth grade was when it really hit me. (Lili 2017)

According to Lili, this sudden death in the family began a conversation about being queer and the need for family to support each other. She expresses that both television programming and this family experience educated her about queerness. Additionally, it opened up the possibilities for other family members to explore their own feelings. Similar to Zol, Lili was able to reach out to her mother with questions and, based on her mother's family experience, she was able to answer her child's questions. Her mother also contributed to Lili's experimentation with gender performance.

> LILI: It was around that time where my mom gave me this small, cheap palette of makeup, and of course, my first makeup that I ever did was a whole bunch of foundation, blue eye shadow, and red lipstick. She was like, "You look like a grandma." I was like, "No, I don't." My uncle went as Bettie Page for Halloween. So, he had this Bettie Page wig, and he had some makeup, and he gave that all to me. And so, I wore it and things like that. (Lili 2017)

From that point on, Lili was able to experiment more with her gender identity. She began to wear dresses and make-up outside of the home, to local arts events, and finally to school. Her family relationships, particularly through her mother's early support helped Lili engage with queer narratives and experiment with her own gender identity representation. Based on these three stories, a family's values, attitudes, and beliefs about queerness, as well as their own collective experiences, informs youth engagement with queer narratives and identity development.

The School Community's Influence on Narratives

Outside of the home life, the school community is where young people spend the majority of their time. According to the Pew Research Center, "83% of teens spend time with their closest friends at school" (Lenhart et al. 2015, 9). This community shapes youth identity construction and is an environment for encountering queer narratives. Penelope engages with the pejorative version of "gay" at school. She used that experience to become a stronger woman, stating, "it helped me to be very outgoing and speak my mind" (Penelope 2017). She decided to not accept the negative comments and negative narrative associations coming from her peers in school. These school experiences help shape her interpretation of queerness.

The school environment can also be a supportive, safe space for young people. Both Penelope and Alice attend the same arts charter school. Each noticed the feeling of community and security in their educational environment. Penelope shared "we're very – there's a very large queer population, which is amazing because it feels like such a safe space" (Penelope 2017). The school's queer youth density impacted their comfort level.

Alice highlighted the campus community and student make-up add to a feeling of safety and security while also broadening her awareness of queerness.

> ALICE: Yeah, so I really had no idea about the LGBT community at all until I started coming to this school…I think before that I didn't think I was queer because I didn't know that it even existed, so I didn't think I was anything else than like "normal" because I didn't know that anything else existed. But when I came here and started learning more about it, I was like, "Hey, I actually think that might be a thing that I'm like." So yeah, coming to the school definitely helps with that. And this school being like a liberal arts school there are a lot of LGBTQ people here. So, once I started coming here, I started learning about it and I kind of started figuring it on my own. Because my family is very conservative, so I knew they wouldn't tell me about it, so I kind of had to figure it out on my own… So, yeah, a lot of my friends are queer. There are a lot of us here at this school. Yeah, I would say I probably have more queer friends than I have straight friends. (Alice 2017)

The school environment and her peer group provided an information source for her identity journey and helped explore queerness. While her family was more conservative, she could more freely learn about sexuality from her peers at school. Additionally, Alice took advantage of the school environment to gather with other adolescents, get involved, and help others by leading a Gay/Straight Alliance.

> ALICE: But once I got into high school, I joined the Gay-Straight Alliance at my school and I'm kind of one of the like head members of it now and we just try to like do a lot of education and we talk about problems that we're facing or problems just like that are going on in the world generally, like recently with trans bathroom rights, that whole situation happening. (Alice 2017)

The school community not only became a safe space for her to explore her own identity, it provided an opportunity to explore social and political issues. According to Alice the school environment fostered her confidence, her willingness and freedom to take risks, and to engage others about issues that matter to her. Both Alice and Penelope expressed that the school culture and climate around queer issues allowed them to more openly

explore queerness. Alice's experience highlights that the school community introduced queerness directly through her peer groups, fostered in a safe, supportive environment. Queer narratives were allowed to thrive in the school community and impacted Alice and Penelope's experiences.

Online Community's Influence on Narratives

Young people today have access to a growing community online. A queer community that began as chat rooms, instant messengers, and dating websites, is continually evolving into blogs, social networks, peer-content creation sites, and a whole new generation of interactivity. The expanding online community has also introduced new queer narratives to young people. The Internet has become a valuable and effective means for young people to develop their identities (Harper and Bruce 2016).

Online communities impact youth through facilitating opportunities to develop friendships. The Pew Research Center's 2015 study indicates that "57% of teens ages 13 to 17 have made a new friend online, with 29% of teens indicating they have made more than five new friends in online venues" (Lenhart et al. 2015, 2). Of that 57%, 64% met a friend on social media with the other 36% through online games (2015). Regarding social media sites, Facebook is used the most, with "71% of all teens using the site, even as half of teens use Instagram and four-in-ten use Snapchat" (2015, 2). Additionally, 71% indicate they use more than one social media site. Finally, social media sites can be a place where young people feel supported. The Pew Research Center found that 68% of teens surveyed experienced "people supporting you through challenges/tough times"

(2015, 6). Previous research indicates that young people are using social media and online resources to build a community. The youth researchers back-up this information.

The youth are also using this online environment and social community to explore queerness. Recent research has examined the role of social media sites in identity development (Harper and Bruce 2016), mental health and support (Ceglarek and Ward 2016), and learning about sexuality and gender (Fox and Ralston 2016). These studies emphasize the ability for social media to connect young people, to learn about the queer community, and to learn about the variety of options ahead of them. Ozzy, Alice, and several of the focus group participants discussed the interactions between online communities and youth queer narratives.

Ozzy's online community of choice is Reddit. This website allows users to create their own pages, post blogs, create discussion groups, comment on threads and, as a result, create an intricate community. As Ozzy explored his transgender identity, he found the website to be particularly valuable.

> OZZY: Like learning from other trans people on the "Ask Transgender" subreddit. So, there's a lot of trans people that kind of hang out and talk about a variety of things…So, people asking kind of showing their narratives. Like asking for advice because they got kicked out or because they got yelled at. Or this is what I want to do and I'm nervous about being harassed or killed. On one hand, there is a really healthy supportive community. (Ozzy 2017)

Blog websites like Reddit and Tumblr provide you the opportunity to self-publish, share their thoughts and feelings with others, some of which are going through similar experiences. The sites give young people a place to ask questions, share experiences, learn about gender identities and sexual orientations, and find other youth going through

similar experiences. While youth may be separated by geographic distance, they can find support close by through the Internet (DeHaan et al. 2013).

Research also demonstrates that social media can foster negative feelings about oneself and contribute to mental health problems. Pew also found that 68% experienced "people stirring up drama" and 42% experienced "people posting things about you that you can't change or control" (Lenhart et al. 2015). Ozzy indicates Reddit is a source of information and community building, but also can become "dark" and "heavy" through discussions of suicide. In particular, he describes how he sees trans-youth suicide in a new way based on story making national news.

> OZZY: But on the other hand, I was learning about very dark, heavy things that were really intimidating from a very young age…Having people that I've gotten to know and relate to just disappearing. And suicide has been a thing that has been on the peripheral of my life for a long time. People that I've known and through that community I've been exposed to it more…I guess the most famous example is I'd come across a user who their Reddit handle was Nostalgia Princess. And that turned out to be Leelah Alcorn who committed suicide in December 2014, I believe. So that was kind of the turning point for me…And it went on about her feelings about the world and her feelings about her parents. And how it was extremely difficult with a lot of concepts that I really related to. And that was the first time that it really hit me pretty hard. Because I'd known her for a little while and we'd talked. (Ozzy 2017)

For Ozzy and other LGBTQ+ youth, the ability to share their own experiences are a key element for their online community. As indicated, Ozzy learned more about suicide, trans-violence, and other important issues from Reddit. Additionally, throughout the focus group process and into his case study interview, he was acutely aware of narratives around trans-identities and those that involved violence.

Alice used Tumblr to create online content as an extension of her work with her school's Gay/Straight Alliance. She demonstrates youth's ability to use an online

community to spread narratives to other online community members and share her own story. Alice states, “I had like an open inbox for people to ask questions and stuff and I would answer with advice and personal stories and research that I had. I just tried to help in any way that I could, and if I didn’t know, I would refer them to somebody else” (2017). She wants to guide other young people who are still figuring out their own identities, as others help her. Research into youth use of social media sites and YouTube-like content creation sites, which echoes Alice’s experience, highlight that youth do so to educate others and allow for greater self-expression (Fox and Ralston 2016). Even though she may never meet these individuals face-to-face, the online mediated environment allows her to become part of a peer-community to share her experiences and narratives.

Participants in the sixth focus group discussed YouTube in greater detail and how it can shape individual feelings and expectations about being queer, as well as create and present new narratives to young people. I asked the participants to explain the YouTube phenomenon in more detail. This selection highlights the variety of narratives that come through this online community.

> YOUTH 1. For me, I really like the YouTubers who have a lot of artsy stuff. Like Dodie has a lot of music. She also just is really open about her feelings and experiences. A lot of them really match up with things I'm going through. It's interesting to see how other people handle it. Their community is very inviting and accepting and relatable, I guess.
> YOUTH 2. Hannah Hart does something called My Drunk Kitchen, where she makes food when she's drunk. It's just funny.
> INTERVIEWER. And is she queer?
> YOUTH 2. Mm-hmm. Yeah.
> INTERVIEWER. Does she talk about it on the show?
> YOUTH 3. Not much. It's just kind of known that she's queer.
> YOUTH 4. She talks about it in other things.

YOUTH 3. Every once in a while, she'll make videos about it, but it's not her main thing.
YOUTH 1. Mostly it's side comments and jokes, but really –
YOUTH 3. Honestly, I kind of like that because I feel like a lot of queer media is about them being queer. It's not that they're a person who happens to be queer. It's that their whole thing is that they're queer. I don't like that. I'm queer. I'm a normal person, though. It's great for people who are queer who makes videos about being queer. I think that's great, too. It definitely helps people who are trying to figure things out and are going through stuff. It's great to get educated about it. But I also feel like a lot of books or TV shows that have queer characters are centered entirely around that person coming to terms with being queer.
YOUTH 1. Yeah, some YouTubers are very much just like, "Let's sit down and talk about me and you." But a lot of people on YouTube do comedy or things to be funny or educational videos. It's not all just one thing. There are a lot of different types. Tyler Oakley is certainly more comedy centered and entertainment –
ALL. Yeah.
YOUTH 1. – than, "Let me just sit down and tell you about my day."
YOUTH 2. Same with Shane Dawson.
YOUTH 3. I feel like YouTube is also a good place for that because you can get educated about stuff and you can find people who are experiencing the same things and have someone to relate to. Even though it's not in person or someone that you know, it's someone that is similar to you in some way. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

These young people describe the variety of narratives that the YouTube community presents. Some of those narratives decentralize queerness to be a less significant factor while others focus on education and teaching the viewer. Other pieces present a day-in-the-life snapshot. Rather than reinforce existing narratives, like those in traditional media, the youth express new media adapts these narrative aesthetic choices. The YouTube celebrities, their constructed identities, and video content the youth describe highlight this aesthetic shift. Each of these narratives are transmitted through YouTube and then shared among the youth communities; strengthening and connecting the communities

Narratives' Influence on Communities

While family, school, and online communities spread narratives, narratives also shape youth values, attitudes, and beliefs of the LGBTQ+ community as well as impact the communities themselves. Youth queer narratives create community among young viewers. This becomes evident through conversations with the focus group and case study participants. Narratives helped Tila, for example, create a closer bond with her family. She shared her own experiences watching queer television with her mother.

> TILA. Me and my mom watch TV together.
> INTERVIEWER. Do you find that you're – because you watch TV with your mom, do you feel like there's some shows that you probably shouldn't watch around her, or some that you don't feel like –
> TILA. My mom does not care about nothing. She's worse than me.
> INTERVIEWER. Any awkward moments sitting on the couch next to your mom when something happens?
> TILA. Yeah. She makes it awkward. I don't. She's not the "cover your eyes" kind of mom. She's like, "Open your eyes, because you're going to see it when you get older, so you might as well look at it now."
> INTERVIEWER. Okay. What were some of those things that you were like, "Oh, my God, I'm watching this next to my mom"?
> TILA. Like *13 Reasons*. We watched the whole show together, and then, when Courtney and Hannah were in the room, I was like, "Something gay is going to happen." My mom said, "Nothing gay's going to happen." But then, they kissed. I was like, "I told you, Mom."
> INTERVIEWER. What was her reaction?
> TILA. She was like, "Oh." She didn't care. It was just funny. (Tila 2017)

Tila and her mom's experience highlights the shared moment between the two by engaging in queer narratives. This experience also showcases the positive role parents can play by watching media with their children. "Parents play an important role in mediating children's television viewing to counter negative effects of violent and sexual television" (Hust, Wong, and Chen 2011, 381). The researchers go on to state that "although violent and sexual television content concern parents, certain television content

can provide social and behavioral modeling" (Hust, Wong, and Chen 2011, 382). In Tila's case, the shared narrative experience allowed her space to connect with her mother and showed Tila that her mother could be supportive and be able to discuss big issues.

The community building aspect of these narratives can be seen in how the young people talk about the pieces and build each other's ideas. They have a common experience and a common variety of sources and they use narratives to engage in friendship-building conversations. The young people watch many of the same shows, share their favorite videos, and while they may not remember all the names, their collective experience (and with it, their community building dynamic) can be tracked in their discussions. For example, when speaking of a popular Netflix series, the youth said "Ohhh, *Orange is the New Black*" / "Oh Yes! Oh my god!" (Focus Group Session Four 2017). When the same group was brainstorming other titles, they even highlighted a hierarchy of queer representation. "Oh, you know what else? *Ellen*! The show" / "Oh yeah!" / "Ahh" / "We forgot about the main gay person!" (Focus Group Session Four 2017). This group of friends build off each other's ideas and highlight the shared youth community through queer narrative viewership.

Youth also connect specific television shows with their friendships. This became apparent when the participants in the second focus group talked about anoter Netflix series.

YOUTH 1. *Jessica Jones*
YOUTH 2. Yes! Ugh yes!
YOUTH 3. What was it?
YOUTH 4. *Jessica Jones*? Never seen it
YOUTH 3. I seen it but I never watched it
YOUTH 2. How can you--

YOUTH 3. Am I like a bad person? You told me to watch it, like over the summer, but I never did. But like, her shows are my shows! (Focus Group Session Two 2016)

Narratives serve as a strong common experience that connects these two friends together. Viewing this series is emblematic of their friendship as "her shows are my shows!" They have created a small community of television viewership and use that to signify and support their friendship.

Another example of community built through shared narrative encounters came from the seventh focus group session. These youth showcased their shared narratives and experiences when they were brainstorming YouTube contributors.

YOUTH 1. Dodie Clark.
YOUTH 2. Yeah, I put her, too.
ALICE. Oh, yeah. That's who I was thinking of.
YOUTH 2. I have Dodie as well.
YOUTH 1. Ashley Mardell – actually, now goes by Ash Hardell.
INTERVIEWER. Okay.
YOUTH 1. Yeah, they basically make a bunch of YouTube videos about being queer and stuff.
YOUTH 3. Troye Sivan.
YOUTH 1. Oh, Troye.
YOUTH 4. Oh, yeah. Right. Tyler Oakley, obviously.
YOUTH 1. Conner Franta.
YOUTH 3. Oh, yeah. How did I not think of that? Gaby Dunn or Douglas or –
YOUTH 2. Dunn. It's got to be Dunn. It's Dunn.
YOUTH 3. Gaby Dunn. I also have Rose and Rosie. They're married and have a really cute channel.
YOUTH 4. I have Hannah Hart.
YOUTH 1. Joey Graceffa. (Focus Group Session Seven 2017)

They are building off each other's ideas, improving the collective knowledge, and adding to the community collection of queer narratives. They are also providing new content for their peers to watch. In another focus group, this happened with make-up tutorials. "Make-Up tutorials, like guys that do their make-up." "Oh yeah, Bretman Snapchat"

"Who's that one dude? Manny Mora, he looks like Mr. [name removed]" (Focus Group Session Four 2017). These YouTube and online narratives are shared among young people and become a common experience from which they build friendships.

Chapter Conclusions

A narrative analysis approach to the focus group and case study data revealed an unexpected angle in the interaction between narratives and young people: social relationships. After examining the youth responses, it becomes clear that a young person's family relationships, school, and online community influence how narratives are absorbed or rejected by young people and whether they feel comfortable exploring queerness. The analysis also revealed narratives are a community-building element for young people with YouTube videos and television shows becoming a shared experience. Narratives are, in part, regulated and spread by social networks and at the same time provide connective tissue to the social networks themselves. The analysis also points addresses new media practices of supporting different aesthetic and artistic choices through user-created content.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCOVERIES AND IMPLICATIONS

Now that I have examined, explored, and unpacked the research, I discuss the implications this research has on the broader discourse communities. I believe that educators, theatre makers, scholars, and even the queer community each have something to take away from this research. In this final chapter, I offer my conclusions which include: trusting youth as co-researchers, young people expressing stereotype and trope fatigue, honoring youth as content creators, recognizing the growing complexity of sexual orientations and gender identities.

Before moving forward, I am not trying to speak for all young people through the creation of an archetypal youth. I base these conclusions on my conversations with these specific young people in my focus groups and case studies. I encourage readers and future scholars, artists, and educators to speak directly to the youth in their own communities about what they hope to see from the world, whether onscreen, onstage, or online.

Returning to the Question

I begin by returning to my core research question; "How do young people engage, interpret, and respond to queer narratives?" Through the narrative analysis of my collected case studies, focus groups, and my own scholarly research, I find young people *actively* engage, interpret, and respond to youth queer narratives. My findings all point away from a passive youth viewer and toward an intelligent and critical youth narrative consumer.

The youth I spoke with demonstrated that they engaged with narrative pieces with curiosity. Several participants noted that queer content would likely bring them to a television show or other narrative medium, but the story and characters would keep them there. My focus group and case study members interpreted narratives by reading themselves out of a story, rather than into one, demonstrating an after-queer approach presented in Chapter 1. With the increased quantity of youth queer narratives, these youth did not try to interpret a story by adding queerness to it, but rather stepped back from existing queer narratives, reflected on their personal experiences, identity structures, and feelings, and examined the use of stereotypes, tropes, characters, and plot devices used. The youth were honest, even others in the room felt differently about a given topic. Youth also respond to narratives by creating their own. Several participants shared their own content-creation experience while others discussed other youth responses seen in new media websites like YouTube, Tumblr, and Reddit. My research process also revealed several other key findings including the value of youth as co-researchers, narrative-hawks, and identity mold-breakers. I examine each of these findings and connect a related research implication.

Youth as Co-Researchers

First and foremost, my research has demonstrated the value in treating youth as co-researchers and insightful information resources. The young people in my study were thoughtful, critical, and graciously shared their ideas with me. Many of the conclusions in this chapter were only possible because the young people challenged my thinking about youth, queerness, and the narratives we all encounter. Additionally, with each

group the questions remained the same but the conversation focused on different areas. By talking with six different groups, I received a deeper understanding of youth queer narratives. In other words, I found that engaging more than one group of young people yields more complex results. Trusting youth as co-researchers meant recognizing that different groups of youth have different opinions, ideas, and feelings about the world around them. This finding directly relates to seeing youth co-research as supporting an epistemological shift in research.

Implication #1: Shifting Epistemologies

How do researchers learn about youth? What youth knowledge do researchers trust? What youth knowledge is valid and valued? Each of these questions highlight epistemological considerations about trusting youth as co-researchers. My research represents and supports an epistemological shift through valuing youth voices as knowledge-makers. It represents a shift from youth as students to trusted scholars, and from adults as all-knowing researcher/teacher/scholars to listeners and learners. Epistemologically, this shifts knowledge making from a retrospective adult gaze backwards to a contemporaneous analysis by young people about their views in the moment. How do researchers gain trusted, valid and valued knowledge about youth? By asking youth themselves.

Youth as Narrative-Hawks

As smart and analytic humans, the young people I spoke with have keen eyes for tracking and examining narratives. As Congressional deficit-hawks keep a close, critical eye on budgets, so do youth engage critically and closely with narratives. My young

research colleagues spotted the presence of stereotypes and tropes in the media, the over-reliance on one character type going through heteronormative plot structures, holes in representational diversity, trends and limitations in youth queer narratives. Contrary to a prevailing opinion (and previous research), young people are not passive consumers of narrative content, mindlessly plugged into traditional media or wandering aimlessly in new media click-bait. Young people, as demonstrated in my focus groups and case studies, are critical thinkers intentionally choosing the content they consume, investigating the representations, and challenging the messages put forward.

Not only do they see these constructions, but they have ideas about how to change the narratives themselves. They want characters onscreen and onstage that are as complex and opinionated as they are. They have become predictable and do not match the experiences of youth audiences. As described in the previous chapters, they also have insightful ideas about the motivations behind stereotypes, trope use, and construction. These include content creators playing it safe with mainstream audiences, using the white, gay, male character as an entry point into queer subject matter, and treating queerness as a problem to be addressed instead of a character trait to be explored and/or ignored. Similar to the youth's perceptions of their own lives, they want the characters' sexualities to be secondary to their stories and not the only relevant detail for an audience. With that said, they also want to see an increase in queer narratives and characters beyond a white, gay, male representation. They want intersectional characters of various religions, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and of diverse sexual orientations and

gender identities. They are narrative-hawks; active, discerning, and opinionated about the world around them. I connect these findings to implications in research methodology.

Implication #2: Shifting Methodologies

My study demonstrates that directly engaging with young people through qualitative research yields valuable and significant results that may not have been possible through an adult-only survey of youth programming or online content. While some researchers have interviewed youth after high school and asked adults to reflect on their childhood, speaking with youth while still young provides timely, direct knowledge. Talking with young people about youth issues, opinions, and content is served through a methodology that directly engages with them.

Researchers must also methodologically engage queerly by rejecting binary demographic data. Instead of listing gender or "sex" as an option of either male or female, gender identity demographic collection should include more options and a space for the young person to list whatever term desired. Also, instead of attempting to read gender from physical appearance, researchers hosting focus groups and case study interviews need to ask each participant about preferred gender pronouns and respectfully use the pronouns during the interviews, in writing, and when sharing the results. This shift in methodology also extends to participants expressing intersectional demographic categories like race, ethnicity, and religious beliefs.

Building off the first finding, youth as co-researchers, another methodological shift extends into school, through turning learning ownership over to young people. Instead of trying to provide content that may connect with young people, teachers can

have youth select works that are relevant to them with examples that fit the desired theme, genre, issue, etc. Instead of teachers saying "Go home and watch this television show," they could ask youth to find examples of a narrative device, social trend, or character component. This also involves building queer content into the curriculum. Rather than having a one-off lesson, which can lead to student feelings of isolation and alienation by LGBTQ+ adolescents (Snapp et al. 2015), teachers can include queer subjects and content into the curriculum.

Youth as Identity Mold-Breakers

Youth are also engaging with identity in new, complex ways. Ten to 15 years ago, the identity options for young people were primarily focused on the LGBT acronym. A person was lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. While talking to young people, I was amazed at their use of gender-identity and sexual orientation prefixes including "pan," "a-," and "demi." They recognized and valued each person's individual feelings within the group and never balked at another's expressed sexual orientation or gender identity. The focus group and case study participants' descriptions shifted identity structures away from a few rigid, binary categories into nuanced, flexible identity possibilities. For example, in one of the focus group sessions, the young people were negotiating the differences between pansexuality, bisexuality, and asexuality with ease. The young people also reflected on intersectionality through discussing the ways gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and religion interacted, were represented (or not represented), produced, and also perceived by the viewing public. Youth expressed identity structures as a spectrum, with many different shades of gray between traditional

black and white binaries. This finding has implications for artistic communities engaged in representing queerness.

Implication #3: Shifting Artistic Representations and Aesthetics

Artists and narrative producers must shift their representation strategies in order to keep engaging youth viewers. My research shows that young people are tired of stereotypes, tropes, and other traditional narrative constructions. As previously indicated, young people see gender identity and sexual orientation as a more complex spectrum than the limited options narratives present. Rather than present a limited range of characters and plots, failing to trust young people, artists need to create intersectional and diverse representations onscreen, onstage, and online. These youth, when asked about what they would like to see from youth queer narratives, desire traditional media to break the binary mold which constrains queer characters by including more gender identities, sexual orientations, skin tones, backgrounds, and faiths. The youth want shows that both highlight the queer experience and pieces that treat queerness as just another character trait undeserving of an after-school-special. These do not contradict each other but rather represent the range of youth needs and the complexity of their narrative interactions. In particular, representations that portray anti-queer violence and pieces that quickly kill off queer characters are at the top of these youths' list of artistic choices to go. Overall, youth queer narratives need to be diversified onscreen, online, and onstage.

Implication #4: Theatre for Young Audiences

As a theatre scholar, I turn my attention to my field. Based on this research and on my previous research into Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) plays, the theatre

artistic community has changes to make as well. TYA is not presenting diverse queer protagonists or supporting characters. I add my voice to other scholars like Annie Gianinni and Manon van de Water, who have made clear before that queer TYA is full of bullied and abused gay, cis-gendered males. The TYA community needs to do better. It can be a role-model for other art forms through a brave commitment to present intersectional, diverse, queer characters on amazing adventures, dramatic journeys, and comic escapades that do not involve tired tropes and stale stereotypes. When these pieces have been written, they must be performed across the United States so that young people engage in person, in the theatre, with these new and improved queer narratives. The youth in my study, all from a major urban area, did not list a single queer TYA play. The TYA community can do better, and we must do better if we seek to spread theatre across the country and value the unique voices queer youth offer.

Theatre can be adapted in new and vibrant ways to reflect change youth modalities. Traditional narrative forms rely on a top-down approach where a playwright writes a piece which is picked up by a theatre company and distributed to venues in a variety of larger markets. While a piece of theatre may be written in response to a current event or specific incident, it can take years for that piece to reach young people's eyes. New media can transmit a piece of art or expression as soon as it is performed. Young people are shifting to new media forms because they value the immediacy, their voices being presented, and trust "authentic" narratives through content-creation websites like YouTube, Reddit, and Tumblr. Live theatre can tap into this shift by artists devising new works with youth and performing them for their own communities. Having youth as both

playwright and performer can allow for more immediate responses to issues in their community and educates youth about the entire creation process. Aesthetically, creative choices like direct-audience address, the use of live video, framing the performer through light or set, can all enhance the message and connection with youth interests.

A Researcher's Reflection

As reflection is a key component of any research project, I examine where I could do better next time and offer it as advice for future researchers. First, there are several items I wish I had asked of each participant. As I was writing this dissertation, I regretted not asking their preferred gender pronouns. As a cis-gendered male, I do not think gender entered my mind in this regard. Perhaps, as a gay male and member of the LGBTQ+ community, I assumed that I would be able to read their preferred gender pronouns based off their physical appearance. This was not the case. In retrospect, adding this to the forms would allow me as a researcher to be more respectful during the focus group/interview process and it would make the writing process more detailed. It might also open the door for more discussions about the significance of pronouns.

In terms of the focus groups and case studies themselves, I regret not going in as much depth as I could. As I was listening back on the transcripts I found I missed the opportunity for follow-up questions. A simply "why" or "why not" could have revealed more. Additionally, I found that I asked for quantity of responses and not quality. The young people gave me long lists of television shows that contained queer characters but did not adequately ask about which they believed to be "best" and "worst", and then

unpacked what that means. I think this would have been a gateway into deeper discussions.

Also, I wish I had spoken with more gay males and more heterosexual, cis-gender youth during the case-study process. I feel like I had a diverse mix of young people in terms of race, religion, and gender identity, but actually had very few gay males and few heterosexual young people. On one hand, it is valuable to give voice to those identities that are less present in mainstream media and less present in previous research. However, it also serves as a hole in my research and a perspective that would have been valuable to add.

The most difficult part of the process was getting field sites to engage young people. I connected with schools through convenient and chain sampling and on friends' contacts with other schools to line up potential field sites. Future researchers might find it advantageous to use an action research or youth participatory action research (YPAR) at a site with an existing relationship to the community and the student population. This by no means reduces the need for permission from parents and the school's administration, but I have found that young people are more willing to talk when they know and trust the researcher. Additionally, engaging youth through a long-term study in a YPAR model would be a next logical step. Coming in from the outside, I did not necessarily have that trust. I felt that they trusted the cooperating teacher/staff member and through virtue of their relationship, I was deemed safe to speak with. This really goes down to the positionality of the researcher. When dealing with young people, it may be easier and reveal more about young people if the researcher is coming from

within the organization or community. On the other hand, it may be that young people censor themselves around authority figures or those they see as having power over them. Regardless, future studies need to reach out early and often to build the partnerships for this type of research. Schools with active after-school programs or study halls or clubs that meet regularly will be particularly resourceful.

Final Thoughts

Through an ever-developing psyche, built from self-awareness, self-recognition, and self-exploration, young people adjust the mirror on which they view their reflection. Young people utilize their extensive and diverse social networks such as family, friends, religious and school communities, and online environments as resources to better understand the narrative messages. Finally, young people shift, grow, and adapt their schema to re-see narratives and adjust accordingly. Perhaps due to the increasingly complex narrative landscapes, young people today are highly skilled evaluators of media and narrative messages. As teachers, artists, queers/non-queers/allies, and scholars, we must trust these young navigators and build complex futures with our young people instead of merely for them.

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APPENDIX A

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM

Dear Parent:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Stephani Etheridge Woodson in the School of Film, Dance, and Theatre at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study for my doctoral dissertation in Theatre for Youth to examine how youth perceive and interact with queer narratives in the media.

I am inviting your child's participation, which will involve a 45-75 minute focus group session with 5-7 other youth, a questionnaire, and, potentially, a one-hour follow-up individual interview. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate or to withdraw your child from the study at any time, there will be no penalty and will not affect your child's grade. Likewise, if your child chooses not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your child's name will not be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to your child, the possible benefit of your child's participation includes a greater understanding of the media's role in our lives, a chance to express his/her feelings about the narratives around us, and to safely discuss his/her ideas with peers. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your child's participation.

The focus group sessions and individual interviews will be audio-recorded. These will be stored on a password protected computer and all written references to your child will only include pseudonyms. All responses will be confidential. However, due to the nature of focus groups, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your child's name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your child's participation in this study, please call me at [removed], or Dr. Stephani Etheridge Woodson at [removed].

Sincerely,

Andrew Waldron

By signing below, you are giving consent for your child _____ (Child's name) to participate in the above study. You also give consent for your child to be audio-recorded during the focus group and individual interview sessions.

_____	_____	_____
Signature	Printed Name	Date

APPENDIX B

YOUTH ASSENT FORM

Greetings:

My name is Andrew Waldron. I am a graduate student at Arizona State University.

I am asking you to take part in a research study because I am trying to learn more about how young people see the narratives and stories on television, in movies, and in other media forms. I want to learn about how young people your age experience the media, and what they think about the LGBTQ stories they see. Your parent(s) have given you permission to participate in this study.

If you agree, you will be asked to fill out a short questionnaire, and share your ideas during a focus group discussion session with five to seven other young people. You will be asked how the stories about queer people and how those stories are constructed. The focus group will take between 45 and 75 minutes, depending on how our conversation is going. Additionally, you may be asked if you want to participate in an individual interview. This will be between you and I, will give you a chance to talk more about the queer narratives you've encountered, and may last up to an hour. In both the focus group sessions and interviews, I will be audio-recording our conversations, so that I can listen to it again later. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. When I write about these focus groups and interviews, I will not use your name anywhere.

You do not have to be in this study. No one will be mad at you if you decide not to do this study. Even if you start the study, you can stop later if you want. You may ask questions about the study at any time.

If you decide to be in the study, I will not tell anyone else how you respond or act as part of the study. Even if your parents or teachers ask, I will not tell them about what you say or do in the study. However, due to the nature of focus groups, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Signing here means that you have read this form or have had it read to you and that you are willing to be in this study.

Signature of subject _____

Subject's printed name _____

Signature of investigator _____

Date _____

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT PERMISSION FORM (AGES 18+)

Greetings:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Stephani Etheridge Woodson in the School of Film, Dance, and Theatre at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study for my doctoral dissertation in Theatre for Youth to examine how youth perceive and interact with queer narratives in the media.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve a 45 to 75-minute focus group session with 5-7 other youth, a questionnaire, and, potentially, a one-hour follow-up individual interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty and will not affect your grade. Likewise, if you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation includes a greater understanding of the media's role in our lives, a chance to express your feelings about the narratives around us, and to safely discuss your ideas with peers. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

The focus group sessions and individual interviews will be audio-recorded. These will be stored on a password protected computer and all written references to you will only include pseudonyms. All responses will be confidential. However, due to the nature of focus groups, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your participation in this study, please call me at [removed], or Dr. Stephani Etheridge Woodson at [removed].

Sincerely,

Andrew Waldron

By signing below, you are giving consent to participate in the above study. You also give consent to be audio-recorded during the focus group and individual interview sessions.

_____	_____	_____
Signature	Printed Name	Date

APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

APPROVAL: EXPEDITED REVIEW

Stephani Etheridge Woodson
Film, Dance and Theatre, School of
-
swoodson@asu.edu

Dear Stephani Etheridge Woodson:

On 8/9/2016 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	An Investigation of Queer Narrative Reception by Adolescents
Investigator:	Stephani Etheridge Woodson
IRB ID:	STUDY00004732
Category of review:	(6) Voice, video, digital, or image recordings, (7)(b) Social science methods, (7)(a) Behavioral research
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Consent and Assent Forms (HRP-502c), Category: Consent Form; • Supplemental Study Materials, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Recruitment Materials, Category: Recruitment Materials; • IRB Protocol Form, Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB approved the protocol from 8/9/2016 to 8/8/2017 inclusive. Three weeks before 8/8/2017 you are to submit a completed Continuing Review application and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 8/8/2017 approval of this protocol expires on that date. When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the "Documents" tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Andrew Waldron
Andrew Waldron

APPENDIX E

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CONTINUATION APPROVAL

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

APPROVAL:CONTINUATION

Stephani Etheridge Woodson
Film, Dance and Theatre, School of
-
swoodson@asu.edu

Dear Stephani Etheridge Woodson:

On 8/15/2017 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Continuing Review
Title:	An Investigation of Queer Narrative Reception by Adolescents
Investigator:	Stephani Etheridge Woodson
IRB ID:	STUDY00004732
Category of review:	(7)(b) Social science methods, (7)(a) Behavioral research
Funding:	None

The IRB approved the protocol from 8/15/2017 to 8/7/2018 inclusive. Three weeks before 8/7/2018 you are to submit a completed Continuing Review application and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 8/7/2018 approval of this protocol expires on that date. When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the "Documents" tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Andrew Waldron
Andrew Waldron

APPENDIX F

DEMOGRAPHICS FORM

Youth Queer Narratives Study: Demographics

Demographic Data Collection Instructions: Please answer each of the following questions to the best of your ability. If a question makes you uncomfortable or you would prefer not to answer, you may skip it.

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender or gender-identity? (Male, Female, Queer, Trans, etc.)
3. What is your sexual orientation? (Straight, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, etc.).
4. In what city and state do you live?
5. How many total hours of screen time (television, movies, personal electronic devices, computers) do you typically have:
    a. On school day?
    b. On a non-school day?
6. How many of the following devices are in your home?
    a. Televisions
    b. Computers (laptops and personal computers)
    c. Personal data devices (tablets, cell phones)

APPENDIX G

BRAINSTORMING QUESTIONNAIRE

Youth Queer Narratives Study: Brainstorming Activity

Brainstorming Activity Instructions: Please think about the media you've seen and the characters or stories you've encountered. These could be on televisions shows, the internet, movies, comic books, songs, and even in pieces of media I haven't mentioned. Don't worry if you only remember part of a character's name or a little bit of a title. We will be sharing these as a group and perhaps your peers' responses will help jog your memory. If there are some pieces you write down that you'd rather not share with the group, that is okay. Use the back of the page, as needed.

1. Please list as many television shows that you can that contain queer characters or stories.

2. Please list as many fictional print materials (books, comic books, graphic novels) you can that contain queer characters or stories.

3. Please list as many movies that you can that contain queer characters or stories.

4. Please list as many theatre pieces that you can that contain queer characters or stories.

5. Please list as much online media sources (specific YouTube channels or video blogs) that contain queer characters or stories.

6. Please list any other popular culture examples that contain queer characters or stories that you haven't included above.

APPENDIX H

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Questions

Instructions: Now that we have brainstormed a list of media, narratives, and characters, let's talk more about LGBTQ narratives and identities. Let's make sure that we all listen to each other, act respectfully towards each other, and remain open minded to our unique experiences. There may be pieces that you know and there may be some you don't know. There may be some answers or ideas that you agree with and some with which you disagree. All that is okay. I will be recording our conversation so that I can pay more attention to you and not worry about taking a lot of notes. Do you have any questions before we start?

1. When you hear the phrase LGBTQ, what do you think of? What images, people, stories, or concepts come to mind?
2. Some of these are television shows. Let's label which networks these come from. Some of these are movies, let's add on the rating. Some of these are books, comic books, do you notice any patterns?
3. How would you describe the characters on these shows?
4. When you are watching a show, are there signs or things that give away that a character is LGBTQ? What are these?
5. Are they believable? Unbelievable? Realistic? Unrealistic? Why do you think the media uses these traits?
6. In these stories, what do you think are the big stories or narratives being told?
7. How many deal with love relationships? Growing up? Bullying?
8. Are they believable? Unbelievable? Realistic? Unrealistic? Why do you think the media uses these stories or narratives?
9. Which do you think are the *best* pieces on the board? What makes up a quality queer narrative or character? How many of the pieces has a narrative or quality like that?
10. Which do you think is the worst? What factors make it the *worst* piece?

APPENDIX I

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Case Study Interview Questions

Instructions: Thank you for agreeing to sit down one-on-one and talk more about your experiences. There are no right or wrong answers, is these are about you and your opinions. Please answer the questions honestly and if a question makes you too uncomfortable, then tell me you wouldn't like to answer it and we can move onto another. I will be recording our conversation so that I can pay more attention to you and not worry about taking a lot of notes. Do you have any questions before we start?

1. Tell me a bit about yourself. How old are you? How do you identify? What do you do for fun?
2. Tell me about your family. Do you have siblings? Younger? Older?
3. Tell me about your media life. What do you like to watch on TV? Look at on your computer or cell phone? What kinds of books, magazines, or print materials do you like to look at?
4. What do you enjoy about the media? What frustrates you?
5. Tell me about where you see queerness showing up in your world? Do you have any friends that are part of the LGBTQ community? Do you see it on television or in the media? Where do you see it?
6. So what do you think about what you've seen on television or in the media on queer people? What feelings do you get when you see queer people in media? Do you think it is accurate? Inaccurate?
7. How do you think other young people might perceive queer people based on these portrayals?
8. If you could create your own show/media piece about being queer, what do you think it would look like? What would it need?

APPENDIX J

TELEVISION RESPONSE TABLE

Table 6: Questionnaire Responses: Television List of Under Four Mentions

Three Mentions
Empire, Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, Jessica Jones, American Dad, Walking Dad, Super Girl, Broad City
Two Mentions
Shameless, Sense 8, Degrassi, Doctor Who, Vampire Diaries, Pretty Little Liars, Dead of Summer, Gossip Girl, Law & Order, Wentworth, Clone High, Skins, Brooklyn 99, Community, The Flash, 30 Rock
One Mention
Transparent, Sherlock, The 100, Chopped, Supernatural, Master Chef, The Man in Apartment B, Scandal, 90210, Teen Wolf, Star, America's Got Talent, Faking It, Shadow Hunters, Host Club, Junior Romantica, Queer as Folk, Other People, House of Cards, It's Always Sunday in Philadelphia, Atlanta, Take My Wife, Young Justice, Gotham, Parks and Rec, The New Normal, The L-Word, Grace & Frankie, South Park, The Magicians, Power Puff Girls

APPENDIX K

MOVIES RESPONSE TABLE

Table 7: Questionnaire Responses: Movies

Title	Count
Blue is the Warmest Color	8
GBF, Perks of Being a Wallflower	7
Scott Pilgrim vs the World	5
I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry, Woodstock, The Danish Girl, Mean Girls	3
The Kids are Alright, Deadpool, Rent, Finding Dory, Wet Hot American, Summer, Milk, Hedwig and the Angry Inch, Amelie, Harry Potter	2
Seashore, Wolf on Wall Street, North Sea Texas, Philadelphia, Bees, Heathers, Suicide Room, Swiss Army Man, Brokeback Mountain, Una Noche, Insidious, The Way He Looks, American Beauty, Pitch Perfect, Mama Mia, The Birdcage, Fight Club, Moon Light, To Wong Food…Julie Newmar, Star Wars, Rocky Horror Picture Show	1

APPENDIX L

PRINT RESPONSE TABLE

Table 8: Questionnaire Responses: Print Materials

Title	Count
Harley Quinn Comics, Yuri on Ice!!!	5
Will Grayson, Will Grayson	4
Black Butler	3
Homestruck, Boy Meets Boy, Jojo's Bizarre Adventure, The Mortal Instruments, Batman Comic, Alpha's Mate: Northern Pines Den series, No Wings to Fly, Young Justice Comics, Harry Potter, Deadpool Comics, Justice League Comic, Carry-On Comics	2
Scott Pilgrim Comic, Great Lakes Avengers Comic, Binge, Percy Jackson, Ultraviolet, Quicksilver, Fangirl, Openly Straight, X-men Comics, Avengers Academy Comics, John Green, Winter Soldier Comic, Poison Ivy Comic, 19 Days, Question Authority, Teen Titans Comic, Flash Comic, Fun Home, Watchmen Comic, World Race Comic, Middlesex, Giant Days, The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Two Boys Kissing, Everyday, Bat Girl Comic, BatWoman Comic, Cat Woman Comic, Suicide Squad Comic, Gotham Girls Comic	1

APPENDIX M

POPULAR CULTURE RESPONSE TABLE

Table 9: Questionnaire Responses: Popular Culture / Other Content

Title	Count
Make-Up Tutorials	5
Welcome to Night Vale	3
Lady Gaga	2
The Last of Us video game, *Sims* video game, *Grand Theft Auto* video game, *Skyrim* video game, *Saints Row* video game, *Life is Strange*, Jean Paul Gaultier, R. Kelly's *Trapped in the Closet*, *Overwatch* video game, Neil Patrick Harris, Jonathon Groff, Nathan Lane, Ke$ha, Emma Stone	1

APPENDIX N

CODE AND SUB-CODE CATEGORIES

Table 10: Code and Sub-Code Categories

Growing Up
Self-Perceptions
Queer Friends
Family
Learning About Gender/Sexuality
School Environment
Identity Marking
Seeing Yourself
A-Ha Moment
Queer Representation
Why Producers Add Queers
Left Out of Media
Queer as Non-Human
Growing Representation
Effect on the Unknowing
More Likely to Watch
“Gays and Space”
Queer Media Examples
Media Viewing Habits
Online
Print Materials

Netflix

Media Feelings

Youth Content Creation

Create-a-Show/Wishing

Queerness as Not a Big Deal

Not-Stereotypical

Educate Audience

Figuring Out Identity

Show Acceptance

Reverse World

Other Cultures & Races

Character/Actor: Same Identities

Show All Kinds

Show Queer Pain

General Stereotyping

Feminine Gay Men

"Super-Gay"

AIDS Victim

“Girly Lesbian”

“Cheery and Fun”

“Funny Best Friend”

Inexperienced Youth

“Man in a Dress”
Masculine Lesbians
Promiscuity
Queer Death
Stick to the Binary
Bi-sexual Stereotype
The Punchline
“Tip-Toe Into the Gays”
Tokenism
Race Representation
All Races are Represented
“Missing POCs”
White
Mixed-Race Couples
Black
Asian
Trans Violence
Narrative Structures
Content
Context
Syntax