

Schitt's Creek and the Myth of Empowerment in LGBTQ+ Representation

by

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals experience a variety of types of representation, particularly in media outlets. While the quantity of such representations is steadily increasing, research must continue to examine the content of representations as they become available. This examination is important as much of society is determined by discourses presented in media outlets. Further, media often produces and reproduces dominant narratives about minority groups. Television is one arena where individuals come to learn about themselves and others. Particularly, the sitcom genre can be useful for figuring out how to deal with real-world issues in a humorous and entertaining way. However, the humor of sitcom does not exclude it from the meaning-making and identity-formation systems present in television and media, more broadly. Thus, this study investigates the discourses surrounding LGBTQ+ representation in the Canadian sitcom *Schitt's Creek* through critical and rhetorical discursive analyses while also applying principles of queer theory throughout. Results indicate while *Schitt's Creek* does many things well in terms of its representation of LGBTQ+ individuals, problematic stereotypes still often remain. In other words, *Schitt's Creek* breaks from typical LGBTQ+ representation found in sitcoms, but often still embodies dominant cultural narratives used to degrade, restrict, and punish LGBTQ+ individuals. This is particularly evident as one examines the ways *Schitt's Creek* often falls into heteronormative standards and continually polices the sexual nature of LGBTQ+ individuals to display a safe and comfortable version of homosexuality. Therefore, *Schitt's Creek* may often and unknowingly reinforce the heteronormative hegemonies it seeks to break from.

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INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals have historically been marginalized in American society. One way marginalization of minority groups occurs is through differences in representation between majority and minority groups. Issues in representation can span across all aspects of society – in policy, sports, education, popular culture, and more. In popular culture, representation may be addressed through the popular mediums of a society, such as social media apps, television, news sources, music, advertisements, and more. The present study will focus on issues of representation for LGBTQ+ people in television, as it relates in quantity and quality. For television, depictions of LGBTQ+ people are increasing in quantity (McInroy & Craig, 2017). However, while the quantity of LGBTQ+ characters may be increasing, issues of quality remain, such as the type of inclusion, what kinds of people are cast to play LGBTQ+ characters, the content of LGBTQ+ depictions, and more (Colwell, 2020; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006). The quality of such representations is a relatively new topic in academic study. Further, the topic of LGBTQ+ representation in comedy television is an even more rare topic for study. Regardless, studies demonstrate that representation in television has a real impact on the lived experiences of people in minority groups (Hall, 1997). This is because representations can impact how we view ourselves and others, how we treat people, and whether we perpetuate harmful power dynamics and assumptions (Colwell, 2020; Raley & Lucas, 2006).

The present analysis examines the topic of LGBTQ+ representation in television through the study of the Canadian comedy *Schitt's Creek* (Kannen, 2019). The show originally caught hold in Canada before its popularity transitioned to the United States

(Birch, 2021). Netflix, and later, Hulu, adopting the show allowed it to soar (Jung, 2019). *Schitt's Creek* explores a riches to rags storyline, something writers Eugene and Dan Levy created after wondering how rich people would react to losing all their money (Adalian, 2020). The main character, Johnny Rose is a former “business guru” and owner of Rose Video – a company that is lost through embezzlement from a business partner (Birch, 2021). Moira Rose is wed to Johnny and is an actress. She is known for extravagant outfits and witty humor. Their daughter, Alexis, is at first depicted as brainless and entitled; however, she learns to be selfless and motivated throughout the development of the program. Finally, their son David shares many of the same entitled characteristics as Alexis, but turns into a business owner and romantic as he is wed to his business partner, Patrick. In later seasons, Patrick serves as an additional main character as he is often featured accompanying David. Additionally, Stevie Budd is the motel manager and David’s best friend who is significantly involved throughout the series.

The LGBTQ+ representation in *Schitt's Creek* is apparent in the form of David and then his same-sex relationship with Patrick. Throughout the show, the audience experiences instances of David’s LGBTQ+ identity or Patrick’s LGBTQ+ identity. Additionally, much of the queer representation occurs in the development of their romantic relationship, and eventual marriage. Therefore, while analysis of David and Patrick’s individual characterizations is included, the analytical emphasis was on the representation of their relationship and as a couple.

Many are familiar with claims that *Schitt's Creek* contains “good” LGBTQ+ representation (Colwell, 2020). The representation in *Schitt's Creek* is often considered “good” because it is better than many previous representations in television. However,

some analyses of the LGBTQ+ representation in the show may be too simplistic and may not grasp the nuances and complexities of LGBTQ+ representation. Further, bad representation can be just as damaging as no representation, or invisibility, especially if the representations are stereotypical (Dow, 2001). Therefore, studies are necessary that are more demanding of LGBTQ+ representation, especially as representation continues to increase for the group. That is, representation for minorities should not be “good enough,” but should be counterhegemonic, dignity-enforcing, diverse, and varied.

The critical paradigm allows for a backdrop that will facilitate such an evaluation. A critical paradigm “is particularly concerned with the issue of power relations within the society and interaction of race, class, gender, education, economy, religion and other social institutions that contribute to a social system” (Asghar, 2013, p. 3123). In other words, “critical theory analyzes competing power interests between groups and individuals within a society – identifying who gains and who loses in specific situations. Privileged groups...often have an interest in supporting the status quo to protect their advantages; the dynamics of such efforts often become a central focus of critical research” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011, p. 288). A critical lens is concerned with identifying how power is constructed, reinforced, and challenged throughout society and is also concerned with creating a better world.

To provide the underlying framework for the study, it is necessary to explore and identify the ways society has historically privileged heterosexuality, particularly through representational issues in television. This includes an acknowledgement of the values that have become commonplace in a heteronormative culture, namely the values imposed through media, its contexts, texts, and products. Media involves considerations of

production, representation, and consumption. It centers on topics such as who produces media and what is produced, what and who is represented through certain media depictions, how an audience interprets such representations, how knowledge about a community is gained, and how identities are formed (Hall, 1997; Potter, 1996). Each of these considerations assisted in shaping this analysis of *Schitt's Creek's* LGBTQ+ representation.

To lay the foundation for the examination of the LGBTQ+ representation found in *Schitt's Creek*, it is necessary to examine and explore heterosexual privilege and the formation of a gay, oppressed identity. As groups are formed within society, power imbalances are created. These groups range in social power depending on factors such as gender identity, sexual orientation, perceived gender or sexuality, expression, and more. The nuances within social power inform queer theory, which is an attempt to diversify heteronormative spaces. One way queer theory can be enacted is through analyses of media representations of cisgender/heterosexual people and LGBTQ+ people. Queer theory sheds light on these topics which demonstrate how media often imitates the same type of oppression seen in broader society for LGBTQ+ individuals. This can often be seen through the previous types of media representations for LGBTQ+ people in television, which largely contain popular stereotypes and tropes. Such depictions assist in shaping cultural narratives. Thus, this study seeks to fill a gap in research by providing a critical evaluation of LGBTQ+ representation in television, while demonstrating the impact these representations have for broader society.

CISGENDER/HETEROSEXUAL PRIVILEGE

Many argue “times have changed,” meaning that there is a shift away from heteronormativity and related hegemonies because LGBTQ+ people are part of widely accepted “norms” of society (marriage equality, adoption, healthcare, etc.) although this acceptance is not without expressed continued resistance from some social groups. A close examination reveals LGBTQ+ people may not be accepted in broader society or cases of media representations. In broader society, d’Emilio (2007) argues “lesbians and gay men were always the victims of systematic, undifferentiated, terrible oppression” (p. 250).

According to Foucault (1981), a homosexual (and heterosexual) identity was not identifiable until the 19th century. While homosexuality has always existed, the creation of the homosexual identity has not. In this sense, an “identity” could constitute the homosexual as a social, scientific, medicalized, and legal or illegal category. Until the 19th century, such a category did not exist. Jagose (1997) states most queer theorists “make crucial the distinction between homosexual behavior, which is ubiquitous, and homosexual identity, which evolves under specific historical conditions” (p. 15).

According to Foucault (1981), the creation of a homosexual identity as an identifiable individual began around 1870. Before this time, same-sex acts were viewed as a temptation anyone might fall into, not a person who was homosexual. In other words, the idea of homosexuality was identified by homosexual acts. There was no category for “the homosexual” because it was not an identity marker. After 1870, “same-sex sex acts began to be read as evidence of a particular type of person about whom explanatory narratives began to be formed,” many of which were negative and derogatory (Jagose, 1997, p. 11).

In other words, “the homosexual begins to be defined fundamentally in terms of those very acts” (Jagose, 1997, p. 11).

Further, D’Emilio (2007) cites that the emergence of capitalism created a redefining of the family unit. Urbanization and industrial capitalism were responsible for the restructuring of ideas about what a family was and how sexual relations were to be understood. Marriage or sexual relations were no longer about religious notions of procreation but began to center around pleasure. Narratives and standards about sex being only for procreation, versus for pleasure, began to adapt during the 19th century amid beliefs about purity in Christian circles. D’emilio (2007) describes that “evidence from colonial New England court records and church sermons indicates that male and female homosexual behaviour existed in the seventeenth century. Homosexual behaviour, however, is different from homosexual identity. There was, quite simply, no ‘social space’ in the colonial system of production that allowed men and women to be gay” (p. 252-253). In other words, “sex was harnessed to procreation” because families needed the labor of children (d’Emilio, 2007, p. 252). Additionally, families needed men to provide stability in the workforce as the head of the family because many viewed marriage and a family as markers of stability. These ideals about a stable workforce continue today as many wrestle with mythologies of employment that dictate different career paths and salary trajectories for men and women. Issues of distinction between men and women still exist in workplaces today. D’Emilio (2007) states:

As wage labour spread and production became socialized, then, it became possible to release sexuality from the ‘imperative’ to procreate. Ideologically, heterosexual expression came to be a means of establishing intimacy, promoting

happiness, and experiencing pleasure. In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on sexual identity. (p. 252)

Therefore, it is argued that procreation and a stable heterosexual family were necessary for industrialization as regulatory practices. However, an increasingly capitalistic society redefined what was necessary for survival. In other words, the privatized, nuclear, heterosexual, child-bearing family became unnecessary in a high-functioning capitalist society. Thus, capitalism allowed people to survive beyond the nuclear family unit as individuals (d'Emilio, 2007). Therefore, sex for pleasure became a comprehensible notion as a homosexual identity was formed.

D'Emilio (2007) states “only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity – an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex” (p. 253). Regardless, with increased urbanization and the restructuring of the family unit, it is clear to see homosexuality began to be viewed as an individualized identity by at least the 19th century. Thus, as ideals about how a family ought to look and function begin to adapt, it is clear to see a greater emergence of the homosexual identity. However, with such an emergence comes a new group of people to oppress.

The oppression of homosexuals is, was, and remains prominent as they do not fit the “standard” model provided by the heterosexual, stable, child-bearing, religious family which was believed to be necessary to manage the need for working-class laborers. Additionally, homosexuality became connected to ethical, religious, criminal, and moral expectations and practices. These myths served to problematize and regulate homosexual behaviors and identities, while producing and reproducing homosexuality as an identity category. With the creation of the homosexual identity, sexuality became defined in relation to people versus a behavior. In the same way, notions of sexuality, sex, and gender all began to be questioned. These notions are still be questioned, reconstructed, and pushed back against today. This is evident in the conflation of feminist movements and the undermining of hyper-masculinity, for example. In response to these more free-thinking movements, some expressed opposition (e.g., “muscular Christianity (see Watson, Weir, & Friend, 2005)). Therefore, as ideas about sexuality and gender began to fluctuate, some felt the need to gain control.

With the creation of the categories heterosexual and homosexual comes an inherent power imbalance between the two. According to Cohen (2013), when a homosexual identity emerged, it became inseparable from its “normal” counterpart, the heterosexual. Heterosexuality was deemed to be “somehow the more self-evident, natural or stable construction” and homosexuality was “a derivative or less evolved” form of the person (Jagose, 1997, p. 16). This is because “heterosexuality, after all, has long maintained its claim to be a natural, pure, and unproblematic state which requires no explanation” (Jagose, 1997, p. 17). Heterosexuality was deemed normal while homosexuality was considered deviant, and still remains by many. According to d’Emilio

(2007), the oppression of gay people forced gay liberation into existence. As the group became more visible, some began to oppress gay people overtly and systematically.

D'Emilio (2007) discusses some instances of LGBTQ+ oppression in the United States:

The Right scapegoated 'sexual perverts' during the McCarthy era. Eisenhower imposed a total ban on the employment of gay women and men by the federal government and government contractors. Purges of lesbians and homosexuals from the military rose sharply. The FBI instituted widespread surveillance of gay meeting places and of lesbians and gay organizations, such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. The Post Office placed tracers on the correspondence of gay men and passed evidence of homosexual activity on to employers. Urban vice squads invaded private homes, made sweeps of lesbians and gay male bars, entrapped gay men in public places, and fomented local witchhunts. (p. 255)

As these oppositional forces became enacted, gay liberation responded.

Heterosexism and homophobia were fought against in small but impactful ways in the 1970s. However, d'Emilio (2007) argues oppression through state legislation shifted to oppression through violence and physical attacks against LGBTQ+ people. Further, d'Emilio (2007) points out whenever LGBTQ+ individuals gain rights, a group seeking to oppress rises up again.

Therefore, even though much liberation has occurred for LGBTQ+ people, they continue to remain oppressed. This can be seen even in 2023 when one considers the number of anti-LGBTQ+ and particularly anti-trans bills introduced in the United States. Through a Foucauldian analysis, one can see how increased liberation for LGBTQ+

individuals would lead to an increased opposition from those who oppose LGBTQ+ rights. Power becomes visible in the resistance to change. In other words, an emerging LGBTQ+ liberation and a more significant political voice also leads to an increased reaction from those who challenge these movements. Such instances create severe power imbalances that privilege heterosexual identities and ideals. In these moments, one can “see” the privilege of heterosexual identities as it is typically unmarked and invisible before. The continued domination and pushback from anti-LGBTQ+ individuals are one place where people can see the power and privilege of cisgender/heterosexual identities. This is evident in cisgender/heterosexual dominance in legal fields, political processes, the regulation of institutions, and, often, in the media given its dominance over processes, production, and the assumed audience.

POWER IMBALANCES

Power imbalances are inherently created between groups as people desire to conform to whatever is considered the “norm.” According to Foucault (1981), one of the most effective ways to control people’s actions is through disciplinary power. In other words, the best way to control people is to make them want to conform to the normative discourses of society. For example, “discourses of personhood... produce ideas about what ‘normal’ people should be like” (Burr, 2015, para 5). In other words, Foucault (1981) views power as the power to define what counts as normal in each society. In this instance, the majority (cisgender/heterosexual individuals) can define what is acceptable. Therefore, there is great power in being able to decide others are abnormal and unacceptable. Majorities hold a significant ability to define and enforce regulatory power

that disciplines people into self-regulation to the norms and dominant discourses of society.

Discourses govern people regarding the rules of society because individuals seek to conform to the standard. Individuals seek to conform because they are raised in a society which accepts cisgender and heterosexual privilege as the dominant discourse and approved ideology. Cisgender and heterosexual identities are deemed the acceptable standard by a majority that possess the power to define normal and abnormal. Van Dijk (1993), citing Gramsci (1971) and Hall et al. (1977) argues “the minds of the dominated can be influenced in such a way that they accept dominance, and act in the interest of the dominant out of their own free will” (p. 255). In other words, people may be complicit in their own domination by seeking to conform to the dominant discourse, even if it harms them to try to fit into this mold. Therefore, hegemony can have severe consequences on the self, as people attempt to fit into dominant narratives.

Burr (2015) continues to point out “while power relations are never fixed or invariable, those occupying more authoritative positions are able to set the standards and the norms to which the rest of us are expected to conform” (para 6). Therefore, those with power oversee deciding what is normal or abnormal. This decision is not necessarily intentional, but because of one’s own identities, those who are privileged often need to produce and reproduce valued formations they are invested in through systems and regulatory processes. They possess regulatory and disciplinary power that society is subject to and subjects itself to in terms of understanding identities and how to classify oneself. However, when people push back against these norms, the norms can be changed. Schneider & Sidney (2009) conclude “humans’ interpretations of the world

produce social reality; shared understandings among people give rise to rules, norms, identities, concepts, and institutions. When people stop accepting, believing in, or taking for granted these constructions, the constructions begin to change” (p. 106). That is, hegemonies are not fixed because the status quo is often not “natural” in actuality, but is merely one discourse produced and reproduced. This is evident through the development of the homosexual identity. Such a development illustrates heterosexual dominance and the understanding of it as “normal” is not natural, but a discourse produced alongside the emergence of the homosexual identity. The production and reproduction of such discourses allow power to perpetuate, maintain itself, and resist change.

A social constructionist approach is critical of the shared cultural hegemonies that support the dominant majority, even those meanings which may be seen as commonplace, because they often oppress those who are not viewed as valuable or normal. In this study the discourses that create power imbalances between cisgender/heterosexual people and LGBTQ+ people are examined. Discourses undermining LGBTQ+ people serve to benefit heteronormativity and cisgenderism by painting a picture of LGBTQ+ people as abnormal. Such beliefs have long been the dominant ideology surrounding LGBTQ+ people. Thus, the cultural hegemony is that cisgender and heterosexual people are more normal and valuable than LGBTQ+ individuals. In some way, cisgender/heterosexual people often have a role in perpetuating these differences. Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) argue privileged groups “often have an interest in supporting the status quo to protect their advantages” (p. 288). In other words, cisgender/heterosexual people have an interest in maintaining their superiority and enforcing their privileged hegemony because they receive societal power from these

constructed differences. This interest may not be explicit but is often embedded in identities, connected to ideologies, and may be invisible, especially to those who enforce it. Therefore, a critical examination of social narratives is necessary to unpack how certain hegemonies are enforced.

Additionally, with the recent shift toward inclusion and the normalization of LGBTQ+ people in society, the dominant challenging of such inclusion has become more mainstream. However, the continued evaluation and consideration of newer inclusions and representational practices are necessary to examine the emerging discourses and understandings being produced and reproduced about LGBTQ+ individuals. Thus, while inclusion is increasing for LGBTQ+ identities, the content of the inclusion must be evaluated given the larger framework of common cultural narratives surrounding the group. This is relevant given the impactful nature of media, which often reinforces oppressive discourses.

QUEER THEORY

Queer theory is one such method used for unpacking social hegemonies as they relate to LGBTQ+ people. Queer theory seeks to identify and separate itself from the “heteronormative matrix” that is socially constructed by those in power (Serrano & Rios Gonzalez, 2019, p. 371). Such a matrix creates the idea that heterosexuality is normal and all else is deviant. In short, queer theory is the “debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities” (Jagose, 1997, p. 3). Queer theory “is concerned with identifying power and oppression in areas where oppression may seem normal” (Colwell, 2020, p. 7). It critiques the way heterosexuality is considered the norm in society (Grzanka, 2020) as

well as criticizes the way both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ identities are formed (Colwell, 2020).

Chandler and Munday (2011) state queer theorists generally see sexuality as a socially constructed concept that is fluid or malleable rather than fixed. Thus, queer theory destabilizes the perceived stable relations between “chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” (Jagose, 1997, p. 3). According to Jagose (1997), queer theory “focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” (p. 3). While queer theory includes studies on lesbian and gay subjects, it also evaluates “such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery” (Jagose, 1997, p. 3). In summary, queer theory “locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any ‘natural’ sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Jagose, 1997, p. 3). Thus, queer theory adds a more fluid lens to sexuality studies. As a critical viewpoint, queer theory is appropriate for evaluating how power imbalances are perpetuated in society, particularly as they relate to LGBTQ+ identity formation and representation.

MEANING MAKING AND IDENTITY FORMATION

According to a social constructionist lens, meaning is created and reinforced socially. The formation of identities, in-groups and out-groups, those privileged and those oppressed, are all created socially through meaning-making. According to Hall (1997), “meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part” (p. 3). Further, “meaning is thought to be produced –

constructed – rather than simply ‘found’” (Hall, 1997, p. 5). Reality is built, rather than fixed.

Gergen (1991) points out that social constructionism focuses on the interaction between people rather than an individual themselves because, in an interaction, meaning is created, upheld, or adapted. In this way, language creates identity because it either creates the status quo, enforces the status quo, or changes the status quo. While language is the primary medium for constructing identity, all practices and texts assist in the shaping of identities (Potter, 1996). Therefore, other forms of representations are also gaining more traction, particularly in newer forms of media. For example, the rise of social media has created a higher demand for visual production, such as photos and videos. Therefore, other forms of representation, such as visual, have increased in significance for meaning making. Essentially, according to social constructionism, “our beliefs about the world are social inventions” (Galbin, 2014, p. 84). Galbin (2014), Gergen and Davis (2012), and Gergen and McNamee (1992) agree the most prominent beliefs of social constructionism are that realities are socially constructed, realities are constituted through communication and representations, knowledge is sustained by social processes, and a reflexivity in human beings is emphasized (Galbin, 2014, p. 84). Therefore, social constructions are significant because they provide power over social definition and discourses, or ideologies, that get to be the dominant forms and understandings in society.

Hoffman (1991) argues meaning exists in the space between people, in the “common world” or the “common dance” (p. 5). Therefore, meaning and knowledge are created through the interactions people have with others. Galbin (2014) further states it is

through this conversation that people begin to develop “a sense of identity or an inner voice” (p. 85). Anderson and Goolishian (1988), concur “we live with each other in a world of conversational narrative, and we understand ourselves and each other through changing stories and self-descriptions” (p. 6). In other words, how people understand themselves is dependent on the socially constructed meanings in the time and culture one exists, and on the existing power relations, hegemonies, and ideologies present in that culture. Narratives are important because they assist in shaping self-narratives. However, these approaches do not suggest a singular identity, but identities that are fluid, fragmented, and often inconsistent (Edley & Wetherell, 1997).

In summary, identities are created through socially constructed discourses (Hall, 1996). Discourses and identities are also ideological as they emerge from and are embedded in ideology (Hall, 1996). According to Cohler and Hammock (2007), social narratives serve as powerful devices for identity construction through lived experiences. One such way discourses or narratives surrounding identities are constructed is through television. Waggoner (2018) states that “the narratives that television shows present are the historical and institutional site for these conversations and identities to be addressed. Representation on television has the potential to help people with their own identities. Therefore, a lack of representation on television becomes a problem if not handled with care” (p. 1878-1879). Additionally, bad representation can be just as harmful as no representation. Therefore, television and the representation exhibited on it have the potential to impact how meaning is made and how identities are formed.

However, one must note television does not produce one unified discourse surrounding identities, but rather media sources produce and reproduce multiple

discourses that are often interconnected and intertextual (Jansson, 2002). That is, mainstream television tends to use dominant narratives for meaning-making that produce and reproduce dominant discourses and cultural hegemonies. This is perhaps because media is often produced by specific people, through reduced media ownership, and for certain audiences or interpretive communities who benefit from the use of dominant narratives. For example, while social media (and more broadly, the internet) is designed to give the impression its users have freedom of choice, its users do not have decision-making freedom. This is a myth because of the forms and versions of narratives present on the internet which represent a limited, dominant, overarching cultural narrative. Further, users do not necessarily have freedom over their consumption of such discourses, despite their sense of choice and the appearance of decision-making abilities, because their consumption is guided in terms of content navigation and content meaning-making (Meân, 2014).

This process of using and enforcing dominant discourses is a cyclical, rather than linear, process of representation. According to the Circuit of Culture, meaning is created in five moments: regulation, production, consumption, representation, and identity (Du Gay, et. al., 2013). These moments work together to “create a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified, and recreated” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 38). In other words, the construction of meaning is fluid and cyclical, constantly being shaped, adapted, and reproduced. Cultural power is both created and reinforced by dominant narratives of representation. Thus, while television produces many narratives, these narratives often work together to convey dominant cultural themes.

Representation is part of what creates cultural meanings, and those meanings have a real impact on society. Hall (1997) states “it is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we *give them a meaning...* things ‘in themselves’ rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning.” (Hall, 1997, p. 3). Thus, language creates reality. Hall (1997) states this about representation:

In part, we give things meaning by how we *represent* them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them. Culture, we may say, is involved in all those practices which are not simply genetically programmed into us... but which carry meaning and value for us, which need to be *meaningfully interpreted* by others, or which *depend on meaning* for their effective operation. Culture, in this sense, permeates all of society. It is what distinguishes the ‘human’ element in social life from what is simply biologically driven. Its study underlines the crucial role of the *symbolic domain* at the very heart of social life. (p. 3)

Thus, meaning is created socially and through representation. We give things meaning by how we represent them and talk about them. Thus, identity formation is impacted by the meanings society associates with certain things, specifically with being LGBTQ+. Meaning-making and identity formation have a large impact on how youth come to understand who they are, particularly as it relates to minority groups. Further, the creation of meaning around a certain topic is enhanced through a culture’s common modes of

understanding. One significant way to gain understanding is through mainstream media sources.

SIGNIFICANCE OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA

In an ever-increasingly digital world, people spend more time than ever consuming media. Studies accounting for the rise in social media usage state American consumers spend around eight hours a day ingesting digital media (Guttmann, 2023). On any given day, United States adults will spend around three hours watching television, a trend that is predicted to decline with the increased use of social media apps (Stoll, 2022). The growth of social media as a form of new media has increased people's ability to engage in others. According to Pew Research (2021), 72% of U.S. adults say they use at least one social media site. With the continued development of cell phones, individuals have more consistent access to media.

Nevertheless, forms of traditional media remain relevant, especially as television is still a large part of American media consumption. Television is prominent because it is "widely accessible, and can contribute to opportunities for meaningful understanding" (McInroy and Craig, 2017, p. 38). According to Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1980) and Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, and Shanahan (2002), television is the most universal mass medium in American culture and has tremendous power to affect the ways people think and behave. Therefore, as television is still relevant and influences people's lives, it remains a topic available for studying the impact of representations.

The way people consume television has adapted greatly in recent years. This is largely due to "cord-cutting," a term used to describe the ending of the relationship between consumers and their cable subscriptions (Tefertiller, 2018). Consumers are

discontinuing this relationship largely due to web-streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and others (Tefertiller, 2018). Streaming services allow consumers to access television shows, movies, sports, and more at their disposal. Tefertiller (2018) suggests with the creation of these services in recent years, cable subscribers have decreased exponentially. Further, online streaming services provide the opportunity to “binge watch” content (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Binge-watching is when a consumer watches multiple episodes in one sitting (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Binge-watching was impactful for *Schitt’s Creek* as it grew to fame in the United States in 2020. Thus, as streaming services become an increased substitution to traditional cable, their effects ought to be examined in the same way one would analyze traditional cable, as well as new forms of media. This is necessary because streaming services provide the same opportunity to shape reality other sources of media have.

Additionally, the increased use of streaming services narrows the ability for consumption, as there are only a select number of options to choose from. Thus, as consumption narrows, more of the same dominant cultural narratives emerge because content is produced by a narrow group of people and for a narrow audience. However, this issue is complex as some stream sites do offer content that is not subject to mainstream restrictions. Streaming services also allow a consumer to choose, or self-select, content. Therefore, one could choose to watch more or less LGBTQ+ content, based on their beliefs and preferences. Additionally, the type of LGBTQ+ content can be self-selected. The opportunity to self-select also impacts the types of narratives, or lack thereof, being formed about LGBTQ+ individuals. The limited capacity for

representation on these services effects the production and reproduction of cultural discourses.

Young people have often looked to fictional characters when they are a part of a marginalized community and cannot find real-life role models that identify the same way as them (Berry & Asamen, 1993). The primary source of information about the real life of LGBTQ+ minority groups comes from the fictional portrayals of these people as characters on TV programs (Gross, 1994; Hart, 2000). This is because many LGBTQ+ youth do not have an LGBTQ+ person in real life to look up to and gather information from (Savin-Williams, 1995). Additionally, many teens still do not have families, schools, or communities that express their support for LGBTQ+ identities (Bond, 2011). Because of this lack of real-life role models, mediated representations of LGBTQ+ characters become even more important, especially for youth (Bond, 2014; Steiner, Fejes & Petrich, 1993). McInroy and Craig (2017) recall seeing an LGBTQ+ representation on television gave LGBTQ+ emerging adults “a sense of possibility simply because they were seeing LGBTQ identities depicted. These representations validated their emerging sense of selves, and legitimized their feelings” (p. 38). In the same realm, social media has served to expand the opportunities for youth to see and connect with real (or apparently real) people and characters. Not only does social media allow LGBTQ+ people to be more visible to youth, but it also allows youth to interact with LGBTQ+ individuals. These experiences can assist in the development and shaping of a queer identity. Thus, media representations can impact a queer person’s sense of identity, their coming out experience, and more.

Additionally, people rely on media sources to receive information about groups they are not a part of. The receiving of this information is not always active, and is often passive, as people gain knowledge about different types of people, experiences, and different ways to work through social problems and issues. For instance, the media often informs people's knowledge of LGBTQ+ people and is often the first place individuals – including young people who identify as LGBTQ – encounter LGBTQ+ people (Gray, 2009). Therefore, the media is often the first place for many people to experience LGBTQ+ identities, especially for prominent regions of the United States such as rural and/or politically conservative and isolated communities. Thus, the media assist both cisgender/heterosexual people and LGBTQ+ people in their understanding of LGBTQ+ people (McInroy & Craig, 2017). As consumption increases, access to depictions of particular representations of minority groups (such as LGBTQ+ people) also intensifies (Shrum, 2009). In other words, as media usage increases, so does people's access to various representations (McInroy & Craig, 2017).

One way media impacts LGBTQ+ individuals is by demonstrating to them what it means to be LGBTQ+. Media representations can impact how a person learns about themselves and if or when they decide to reveal their sexuality to others. Heatherington and Lavner (2008) identify three stages to coming out. First, sensitization, or the feeling of being different, is often when an LGBTQ+ youth is confused about their queer experiences and denies their identity. Second, as a young person experiences puberty, they begin to understand and become aware that their experiences may not fit into the mold of a heterosexual person. Third, the LGBTQ+ person forms a new identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. In this final stage, the person moves from

awareness of their same-sex attraction towards an acceptance of and pride in their new queer identity. However, the realization and formation of a queer identity may be more or less complicated for an individual depending on various circumstances such as family upbringing, location, religion, gender, and previous exposure to LGBTQ+ representations.

Many people first experience LGBTQ+ identities through media representations. Raley and Lucas (2006) highlight “because mass media is a primary source of information, without recognition and respect on TV and other forms of mass media, social groups are more likely to be devalued by society” (p. 21). Bond (2014) demonstrates that “exposure to depictions of LGB sexualities in the media could create or influence beliefs and values media audiences assign to LGB identities. The sexual scripts developed from media exposure could inform sexually questioning adolescents about the value that society places on different sexual behaviors” (p. 99). In other words, media representations guide members of society to assign value to certain groups. Therefore, types of representations matter, and poor representation may be just as harmful as no representation.

It is evident heterosexual relationships and depictions are privileged when compared to homosexual or queer relationships. This is clear by considering the amount of heterosexual and cisgender characters, celebrities, or sports figures one can name when compared to the amount of LGBTQ+ people one can name in the same categories. According to Bond (2014), nearly every television program, song, or magazine centers around heterosexual relationships, discusses heterosexual sex, or depicts heterosexual sex. However, homosexuality is only present in certain types of media and on certain

platforms. Bond (2014) observes heterosexuality is present in every type of media, but same-gender sexual representations are present in only 25% of the media being consumed by LGBTQ+ people. This is in part because homosexual representation is contested in many arenas. Thus, heterosexuality becomes the privileged norm of society imposed by those who have control over the creation and production of certain types of media and discourses. When heterosexuality is deemed as the norm, all other existences are forced to become “odd,” abnormal, or out of the ordinary. This creates an “othering”. Othering serves to position heterosexuality, and its related heteronormative hegemonies, as the societal standard.

In studies that examine LGBTQ+ sexualities in television, the results are consistent. LGBTQ+ characters are rare (see Bond, 2014; Evans, 2007; Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007; Fouts & Inch, 2005; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Representation, even when present, is still full of heteronormativity (Fisher et al., 2007). That is, heterosexuality is assumed and normalized through many media representations. According to Burr (2015), these dominant assumptions of heterosexuality are problematic because “certain properties of the world and individuals assume importance and are then used as the basis for social or scientific evaluation” (para 6). People are treated differently in reality based on the socially constructed beliefs of those in power. This power could exist “both at the level of society (as between the medical profession and the rest of the population) and between individuals” (Burr, 2015, para 6). Thus, there is potential for these power dynamics to have severe consequences.

An additional way minority groups can be devalued by society is through harmful stereotypes. Stereotypes in and of themselves are not bad, but they reduce an unknown

and complex group of people into a few simple, identifiable, characteristics. Further, these characteristics often are used pejoratively, denoting a lack of respect for such individuals (Hall, 1997). Stereotypical depictions often emphasize negative characteristics of individuals in a minority group over positive characteristics or complex depictions. Such depictions could assist in creating negative feelings surrounding a minority group because using stereotypes may be easier than seeking to understand the complexities of individuals. Further, stereotypical depictions can be dangerous as the complexities of the familiar and dominant groups members are often considered and represented, when necessary, yet complexities for minority groups are often nonexistent. Therefore, stereotypes may not be as harmful to members of a dominant majority than they are to minority individuals.

Studies abound demonstrating LGBTQ+ people often model their self-concept and behavior after stereotypical representations of LGBTQ+ people on television (Gross, 1991; Gross & Woods, 1999; Steiner, Fejes & Petrich, 1993) which further perpetuates negative LGBTQ+ stereotypes (Raley & Lucas, 2006). These stereotypes can be negative because they are often from “heterosexist and homophobic sources of misinformation on TV” (Raley and Lucas, 2006, p. 22). Some studies suggest the turn towards social media may be combatting the spread of these harmful stereotypes (Dym et al., 2019). This may be because social media allows people to create their own support structures, often challenging stereotypes and reconstructing harmful narratives. Therefore, while many people still gain their understandings from media (traditional or new media), perhaps the types of knowledge they are gaining is vastly different and more accepting with the adoption of social media and user-created content.

In summary, media representations are powerful because they possess the ability to dictate cultural narratives. Therefore, media representations matter. Not only is representation necessary for minority groups, but positive and proper representation demonstrating the complexities of people is necessary. There is little formal governance privileging cisgender and heterosexual narratives; however, the workings of society make these stories and people dominant, causing oppression for those who are seen as “abnormal.” Even within representations of the LGBTQ+ community, there may be a privileging of narratives that fit into the dominant heteronormative understandings of society. This is because while LGBTQ+ individuals largely seek to break from heteronormative values, they may still enforce beliefs that are often subconsciously conveyed. As previously mentioned, Van Dijk (1993), Gramsci (1971) and Hall et al. (1977) argue sometimes minority groups can accept their own domination by acting in the interest of the group in power. One can take on understandings, including understandings about oneself, that are not in one’s best interest. In this way, they may become complicit in their own domination. Dhaenens (2013) argues while much of American society has “accepted” gay identities, it still attempts “to control and mold gayness” by limiting the ways it is represented (p. 4). Thus, while LGBTQ+ identities may have become more common in United States media outlets, their representation is often still dictated by heteronormative hegemonies.

STEREOTYPES AND TROPES

Stereotyping “reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (Hall, 1997, p. 257). In other words, it reduces people down to easily digestible depictions. According to Hall (1997) “*stereotypes* get hold of

the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity... *stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’*” (p. 258). Thus, stereotyping is an easy solution to depict a complex group in simple terms. Stereotyping is typically about a group but is applied to individuals. In other words, stereotypes pull from common understandings about social groups, but they hold significant meanings and impact for the individual person. Further, “stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power. Power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group” (Hall, 1997, p. 258). The group in power, therefore, can control the stereotypes created to describe the excluded group.

Media, and consequently individuals, use stereotypes and other types of simplified cognitive processes to communicate and make meaning. For storytelling and meaning-making purposes, stereotypes are often useful and functional for sense-making in short, economic ways. When consumers consider stereotypes, many know they serve a function to communicate something to the audience in an efficient manner. However, the use of simplified cognitive models and processes becomes problematic when the depiction centers on a group audiences know little about. This is relevant as audiences typically do not actively acknowledge the simplistic elements of stereotypes. Therefore, consumers may risk applying problematic and simplified understandings to real people and in real contexts when they know little of the represented group in reality.

LGBTQ+ STEREOTYPES

Simple representations are problematic because they reduce complex groups to a minimal set of characteristics and subject them to a narrow range of actions and events. Problematic stereotypes convey to LGBTQ+ people, and to the wider population about the group, that they must be, look, or act a certain way. Common LGBTQ+ stereotypes include a portrayal of queer people as promiscuous, queer people as lacking religious beliefs, gay men as feminine, lesbians as masculine, transgender women as drag queens, queer people as sexual predators, queer people as victims of violence, or queer people as mentally ill (Capsuto, 2000; Colwell, 2020; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Raley & Lucas, 2006, and Waggoner, 2018). Stereotypical depictions for LGBTQ+ people also include an exaggeration of gender expectations of behaviors. For example, “gay males were either hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine. Those characters representing a masculine extreme were frequently described as jocks and closeted (i.e., not out about their sexuality). Masculine lesbians in traditional media were described as butch, boyish and unfeminine, even militant; while feminine lesbian characters were frequently portrayed as shy or passive” (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 39). These representations reduce the complexity and diversity of LGBTQ+ people and guide how society expects LGBTQ+ people to look and act. If an LGBTQ+ person falls outside of these norms, they may be questioned or not believed about their sexuality, or viewed as the exception proving the rule.

An additional LGBTQ+ stereotype or trope is the depiction of queer characters only centering on narratives surrounding the societal pressures of being LGBTQ+. McInroy and Craig (2017) state LGBTQ+ people are often depicted as weak or struggling

with their identity, notably “weak, insecure, or bullied” (p. 39). Waggoner (2018) also identifies LGBTQ+ character plots often center around the difficulty of being queer. Rasmussen (2006) suggests LGBTQ+ youth are routinely discussed as having psychological problems. This is supported by statistics on LGBTQ+ teen suicide, homelessness, HIV infection, drug and alcohol abuse, and the increased risk of being verbally or physically threatened. While these observations are not technically incorrect, they do convey these narratives are the only way life can be as an LGBTQ+ individual. Such outcomes are also a product of problematic representation, of which media plays a part. In other words, while the media perpetuates narratives surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals having psychological problems, it continually enforces the problems it describes. However, these risks are not the *only* way life can be. Instead, Rasmussen (2006) criticizes the victim trope depicting LGBTQ+ youth as vulnerable and in need of mental assistance from adults because such narratives convey LGBTQ+ youth are individuals who are confused and need assistance in understanding their “abnormal” desires. Colwell (2020) highlights that many LGBTQ+ characters in television are depicted frequently in negative situations such as being a disappointment to their parents, being killed after being intimate with a partner, and closeted LGBTQ+ characters receiving more audience acceptance than characters who have come out. Thus, acceptance from heterosexual people is more important than the self-acceptance that comes from coming out (Bindig, 2015). This further suggests LGBTQ+ individuals need to fit into a heteronormative mold to be accepted by members of society, otherwise they will continue to be ostracized without heterosexual approval.

Bond (2014) demonstrates when queer people are represented in television, they are joked about, insulted, or mocked because of their sexuality 40% of the time. According to Bond (2014), queer people are often added to television or film for comedic value or to add an interesting plot twist. Additionally, Waggoner (2018) identified the “bury your gays” trope which continues to be used on television for “shock value” (p. 1877). The “bury your gays” trope is the killing of a queer character, often after a same-sex sex act. This trope is a common narrative arc in television that assists in the continued marginalization of LGBTQ+ people (Waggoner, 2018). It is a punitive narrative progression serving as a disciplinary function to control LGBTQ+ individuals and perhaps scare them into self-monitored compliance to heterosexual values.

The “bury your gays” trope in particular discourages on-screen affection. Raley and Lucas (2006) suggest displays of affection between queer couples are discouraged, especially when compared to displays of affection between heterosexual couples. While heterosexual partners experience hypersexuality in television scenes, homosexuals are desexualized to avoid controversy (Bindig, 2015). Though heterosexual couples are often depicted kissing or having sex, LGBTQ+ couples are prohibited from such displays on the screen. Some researchers suggest LGBTQ+ characters are not depicted sexually on screen because these images are threatening to heterosexual audiences that dislike the “flaunting” of sexual orientation (Bruni, 1999; Gross, 1994; Hantzis & Lehr, 1994; Raley & Lucas, 2006). These representations further the stigmatization of gay sex. Gay sex is often believed to be dirty. This is exacerbated by the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS. Additionally, LGBTQ+ people are frequently depicted as pedophiles, making sexual acts seem devious and wrong, even when experienced in appropriate and natural relationships.

Further, the depiction of LGBTQ+ couples in a domestic or family context appears to be accepted and “normalized” in representation; however, even in such a context, the sexual side of the couple is often neglected. That is, while some depictions in LGBTQ+ representation may be more accepted, sexual acts are often prohibited.

Such representations convey to cisgender and heterosexual people that being LGBTQ+ is something to be picked on. It gives people, particularly youth, the idea that being LGBTQ+ is abnormal. This is problematic as it conveys parts of one’s identity must be hidden to gain acceptance. It also may scare LGBTQ+ youth into keeping their sexuality a secret because they may fear being bullied, not being accepted by their friends and families, or like they cannot have intimate connections with love interests. This is ironic for representation because to gain normalcy for LGBTQ+ people, normal relations (such as sex) must not be shown; however, these aspects are often prohibited in representation. Further, television representations surrounding sex contain important information teenagers often use to manage and understand their sexual and personal relations. These can be both positive and negative given the existing representations of teens on television.

When queer people are not depicted as a stereotype, they are often invisible (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Invisibility means the queerness of a character is not seen, or the LGBTQ+ person plays a supporting role that adds no dimension to the show or film. This is a complex issue because there is a tension between making the queerness of a character seem to be normal, or not the main focus, and addressing what it means to be LGBTQ+, which often appears to have negative implications. Therefore, there is tension between the queerness needing to be represented, but not the main focus, and the

queerness being necessary to focus on as LGBTQ+ individuals still have not achieved equality with cisgender/heterosexual people. Regardless, Gross (2012) highlights that “plain gay folks” are considered a rarity in television (p. 16). This means LGBTQ+ people are not often “used in roles that do not center on their difference as an anomaly that must be explained, a disappointment that might be tolerated, or a threat to the moral order that must be countered through ridicule or physical violence” (Gross, 2012, p. 16). In other words, cisgender/heterosexual people are often represented in complex storylines having little to do with societal pressures, yet LGBTQ+ individuals largely represent repetitive storylines. Complex storylines become invisible in place of a stereotype that may harm LGBTQ+ people. Dow (2001) notes that an increased number of visibly LGBTQ+ characters does not equate to increased social tolerance or recognition. As noted earlier, bad representation can be just as damaging as invisibility, especially if the representation is stereotypical and simple (Dow, 2001).

Colwell (2020), Edwards (2020), and Waggoner (2018) each demonstrate LGBTQ+ narratives in the media are often negative and more infrequent compared to heterosexual storylines (see also Evans, 2007; Farrell, 2006). According to Colwell (2020) and Raley and Lucas (2006), such a problem “can be extremely harmful because representations of characters in TV can impact how we view ourselves/society, how we act/treat others, and even perpetuate power dynamics, stereotypes, and assumptions commonly held by audiences” (Colwell, 2020, p. 3). Bonds-Raacke et al. (2007) uncover that a person’s opinion on a queer figure or character in television has a great influence on how they feel about queer people in real life. Thus, LGBTQ+ television characters hold a large responsibility for shaping how the public interacts with queer people and

how LGBTQ+ people come to understand themselves. Therefore, problematic representations have the potential to cause harm to those who turn to television to gain understanding.

This is relevant as media representations serve to create and reinforce social norms. Berry (2000) cites that media messages create and reinforce behaviors and meanings of cultural appropriateness. In other words, messages received in the media have a prevailing effect on the real lives and treatment of LGBTQ+ people. However, representations can be improved to better the treatment of minorities and to inform people more accurately about the complex identities present within minority groups. Hall (1997) argues harmful stereotypes can be changed by either reversing the evaluation of popular stereotypes or by substituting negative images with positive images of the people who are stereotyped. According to McInroy and Craig (2017), LGBTQ+ storylines and outcomes often follow extremes – extremely positive or extremely negative – but lack the complexities heterosexual depictions are often given. That is, stark contrasting dichotomies are not helpful for representation either. For example, feminist scholars argue the virgin/whore dichotomy serves to enable dominant patriarchal beliefs by depicting women as either “good” and chaste or “bad” and promiscuous (Bareket, et.al., 2018). Therefore, perhaps one way to combat harmful stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people, is to give their representation proper complexity in their narratives. Complexity and variation can be done through diversifying storylines, types of people in race, gender, size, ability, economic status, and more, without using a “good” or “bad” character dichotomy.

In line with harmful stereotypes comes the harmful observation that the LGBTQ+ community and its representations often lack diversity, making an inclusive community appear to be quite exclusive. In other words, representations of the LGBTQ+ community, in actuality, represent a quite narrow portion of the community. Some have critiqued the LGBTQ+ community for being predominantly white. Jagose (1997) cites that “lesbians and gays of colour, frustrated by the assumption that they would have more in common with white lesbians and gay men than with their own ethnic or racial communities, began to critique both overt and covert racism in the mainstream gay community” (p. 63). Further, some critique the term “homosexuality” in and of itself as being hegemonic to minorities within the LGBTQ+ community. The term excludes bisexual, queer, or other more fluid identities within the community. In other words, the term creates hegemonic binaries that form in and out groups. The term “homosexuality” generally refers to gay men or lesbian women, creating a strict binary. This leads to the invisibility of certain people within the community, predominantly transgender and bisexual people, and others. The exclusion of transgender and bisexual individuals is well documented (see McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 40). However, issues of inclusion can become clouded when considering multiple facets of identities. For example, being transgender is not primarily about sexuality, but about gender and biological sex, even though sexuality is a significant aspect of the transgender identity. Therefore, the alliance between sexuality and gender may be helpful to some, but not fully aligned to others. Additionally, one must consider how representation is created for minority groups. For example, transgender characters who are not cast and played by transgender people may be providing false representation for that part of the community. The same could be said of

LGBTQ+ characters who are not played by LGBTQ+ people in general. For example, *Modern Family* features two actors who portray a gay couple. However, of the actors, one of them is gay and one of them is heterosexual. The same is true of the characters who play David and Patrick in *Schitt's Creek*. This is problematic as actors may be chosen who do not understand or represent the LGBTQ+ experience. Therefore, even when representation occurs, it can still be problematic.

Some have also critiqued the community for lacking representation in terms of physical and mental ability, differing economic status, and more. McInroy and Craig (2017) cite there are “few representations of LGBTQ people of color, or with disabilities, or of different social classes” (p. 40). Therefore, there is a need for more diversity within the community’s media representation. Such diversity is one way complex narratives can be created as the presence of multiple identity factors creates a more complex representation.

PREVIOUS LGBTQ+ REPRESENTATION IN TELEVISION

Because representation is so important for shaping people’s realities, it is also important to demonstrate an accurate and diverse depiction of the community one is representing. Representation allows a person to discover themselves within the social world (Silverstone, 2013). However, as previously mentioned, some LGBTQ+ representations have been critiqued as being one-dimensional and lacking the diversity needed to represent different intersectional characteristics within the LGBTQ+ community. Reed (2018) cites that “representational visibility has increased unevenly for the different identities under the LGBTQ banner” (Reed 2018, p. 4206; see also Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy, & Brewer, 2008; Dyer, 2005; Gross, 1994; and

Halberstam, 2005). McInroy and Craig (2017) describe how LGBTQ+ representation centers around the “young, affluent, well-educated, urban gay male” who is most often white (p. 43). The privileging of this identity is accounted for in white, male privilege. Such a privilege also leads to a high number of white, gay men working in high levels of media industry who oversee the creation and production of LGBTQ+ content. This type of depiction causes invisibility for other aspects of the LGBTQ+ community, namely bisexual and transgender people, people of color, those with disabilities, those of an older generation, those of a different economic class, and more (see Drushel, 2017; Chan, 2017). Thus, representations of LGBTQ+ people in television may be one-dimensional and lack true representation of the LGBTQ+ community as a whole and of specific subgroups of the community.

However, some argue television is not the place for one to construct reality. Some dismiss fictional stories as having no meaning, being harmless, or existing purely for entertainment (Gledhill, 1997). Television may be viewed merely as an escape from “real life.” This is even more relevant when one considers the genre of situational comedy, which will be addressed in the following section. However, the frequency with which people consume these fictional stories demonstrates the stories are an intertwining of fiction and everyday life (Gledhill, 1997). That is, even fictional stories displayed on television often mirror the realities of reality. There is evidence to support “popular fictions participate in the production and circulation of cultural meanings, especially in relation to gender” (Gledhill, 1997, p. 339). If cultural meanings can be gathered from television regarding gender, it is plausible cultural meanings can be gathered regarding sexuality as well (Gross, 1994; Hart, 2000). Even things intended for “entertainment”

mirror the conditions of the real world and contribute back to or have an influence on them. There is a “circulation between the events” experienced in television and the real world (Gledhill, 1997, p. 341). For instance, one simple understanding of normalcy could be the presence of LGBTQ+ characters in television or advertisements. For example, including LGBTQ+ couples as part of a range of families or couples displayed in an advertisement serves to normalize queer couples. Some companies that have done this include IKEA, Coca-Cola, and Target (Cheah et al., 2021). These companies are famous for including many different types of families that represent their customers and the “real” world. Inclusion serves to normalize outsiders. Thus, one could consider what a television show, in this case, *Schitt’s Creek*, conveys about LGBTQ+ people and their identity through its use of the sitcom genre, the narrative, the modes of expression, and more. Each of these factors serves to uphold or deconstruct realities about LGBTQ+ people in society.

WILL AND GRACE

One of the earliest television shows to feature LGBTQ+ characters is *Will and Grace*. First aired in 1998, the show features two gay characters, Will (of the title) and Jack, and one bisexual, Karen. Also of note is Grace (of the title) and her several interactions with LGBTQ+ individuals. Will and Grace originally were romantic partners in college until the day Grace planned to lose her virginity to Will. On this day, Will came out to her as gay and the couple split, resulting in them not speaking to each other for some time before rekindling their friendship later. Such an outcome may represent a disciplinary action as a result of coming out. Further, Grace is commonly known for

gaining the attraction of other lesbians in the show, even though she is perceived to be heterosexual.

Although viewers largely perceive “the portrayal of the gay characters on *Will and Grace* as positive” (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006, p. 10), some found the depictions problematic. For example, Edwards (2020) conducted a study on 20 episodes of the show and discovered “there is humor that perpetuates often criticized stereotypes, self-denigrating sexual humor, and humor that targets members of the LGBTQ community in a manner that prods, mocks, or satirizes those individuals” (p. 32). Humor is often more acceptable if it is self-mocking, opposed to other-mocking. Further, denigrating humor is a central aspect of the sitcom genre. Such humor is not unique to LGBTQ+ individuals; however, this type of representation can become problematic as it communicates to audience members that marginalized aspects of a person’s identity are acceptable to make fun of. Therefore, the sitcom genre faces unique complexities as it addresses social issues through humor.

Additionally, Edwards (2020) highlights that “many of the lead characters are scripted in such a way that they tend to actualize prevailing beliefs about gays or lesbians: including mannerisms/flamboyance and sexual prowess” (p. 32). Despite their abundant personalities, there is little representation of sexual behavior or action, especially for Will. That is, his character appears to lack sexual experiences, and his sexuality is not explored in many ways. Thus, *Will and Grace* depicts many of the stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people that have come to be criticized as being inaccurate and one-dimensional. However, Edwards (2020) argues what made *Will and Grace* acceptable and ground-breaking to LGBTQ+ viewers was the fact that degrading humor

was coming from gay characters and not heterosexual characters. According to Edwards (2020), “it is the gay character that delivers this brand of humor in a way as not to assimilate, but as a means of taking ownership of their attitudes and behaviors in front of a mass audience. The result is a media effect on audiences in which the character’s intersectionality is acknowledged and unpacked using humor” (p. 32). Thus, through Edward’s analysis, it seems LGBTQ+ people in *Will and Grace* are reclaiming their power through self-degrading humor. However, such a distinction is risky as it invites and may give permission for heterosexual people to continue to be discriminatory. Further, LGBTQ+ humor may be positive or negative depending on who wrote the humor and how it is understood by the audience. Meaning making and collaboration in production are complex issues as they always run the risk of the audience misunderstanding the message, given the role of irony and satire. In other words, humor is open to misinterpretation and may produce and reproduce stereotypes that are intended to challenge and undermine (Meân, 2009).

GLEE

Further, two additional television shows were piloted in 2009 featuring LGBTQ+ characters: *Glee* and *Modern Family*. *Glee* was once considered to be one of the most inclusive shows on the air as it features six recurring LGBTQ+ characters and features several other temporary queer characters. *Glee* is often praised as setting positive examples for youth representation. However, the characters present on *Glee* often receive significant family support (which is not often the case for actual LGBTQ+ people) and fall into LGBTQ+ stereotypes (being victims of bullying, having an interest in theater and fashion, etc.) (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 35). Such depictions have been criticized as

being an inaccurate representation of an LGBTQ+ person's family life while also falling into mainstream stereotyping and not being inclusive to non-stereotypical LGBTQ+ people (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 39). Addressing familial relations is a complex topic in LGBTQ+ representation as the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ members vary greatly. Perhaps what demonstrates positive representation is addressing the complexities of family interactions. The complexity comes in addressing the inequalities LGBTQ+ people often experience, especially concerning their family, while not making the interaction seem entirely negative. The "coming out" experience to one's family is often depicted as entirely negative or entirely positive. Such depictions do not account for the variety of relational elements that may impact the situation, of which sexuality is a part. Therefore, mainstream depictions often lack complexities in addressing familial relations. Multiple depictions are necessary to represent LGBTQ+ people's experiences with their families.

Additionally, others have criticized *Glee* for following heteronormative relationship models saying that the show advocates for LGBTQ+ people to assimilate into heteronormative institutions (Cales, 2015, p. 69). Such a depiction reinforces LGBTQ+ people's social inferiority by conveying a desire to assimilate into a heteronormative culture (Cales, 2015, p. 69). Thus, *Glee* "undermined its message of diversity... [and] embrace[s] normalization" for LGBTQ+ people (Cales, 2015, p. 70). While normalcy can aid in the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, it can also undermine their unique experiences.

MODERN FAMILY

Similarly, *Modern Family* demonstrates LGBTQ+ inclusion through a gay couple—Mitchell and Cameron—who parent their adopted daughter Lily. On the surface, this may seem like a progressive step forward as *Modern Family* depicts a gay couple raising a family; however, the show has been criticized for its depictions of a homosexual family falling into heterosexual norms. These norms limit the way LGBTQ+ families can be understood (Reed, 2018, p. 4216). According to Reed (2018), *Modern Family* displays a “...limited range of representations of LGBTQ parents and concretized knowledge about the shape of families” (p. 4204). Through *Modern Family*’s heteronormative depiction of a family, they “fail to acknowledge the diversity of non-heterosexual family forms and that this representational gap results in sociocultural invisibility” (Reed, 2018, p. 4204). Thus, any LGBTQ+ family that does not fit into this heteronormative structure becomes unrepresented. Such an observation can be discouraging for a community known for diversifying the family unit. For example, the creation of the homosexual identity allowed LGBTQ+ people to break from the heteronormative family structure that privileged a heterosexual, male dominated household. This break allowed family units to become diversified through different combinations of genders of parents, different types of child/parent relations, and more. Therefore, the depiction of a homosexual couple striving to fit into a heterosexual relational model limits the types of representation available for LGBTQ+ couples.

Furthermore, *Modern Family* has also been criticized for its portrayal of lesbians as being “incapable of maintaining a welcoming home” (Reed, 2018, p. 4211). Additionally, it portrays an “antagonistic and oppositional relationship between lesbians

and gay men” by positioning “gay men...as allies of patriarchy, champions of heteronormativity, while lesbians’ capacity to parent well is dismissed off-hand.” (Reed, 2018, p. 4211). Such a depiction emphasizes conflict within the LGBTQ+ community that is perhaps based on heteronormative grouping. Additionally, *Modern Family* can be critiqued for its lack of depiction of sexual encounters for LGBTQ+ people. *Modern Family* never demonstrates the sexual, erotic side of Mitchell and Cameron as they do for the remaining two heterosexual couples. Thus, while the show demonstrates gay love, a relationship, and a family for gay men that is acceptable for public consumption as media entertainment, it also suggests sexual relations, eroticism, and desire for gay men are not suitable for public consumption. Such representation creates a disparity between heterosexual and homosexual couples and conveys LGBTQ+ sex is unacceptable.

Finally, *Modern Family* has been critiqued for its invisibility of gender non-conforming women. (Reed, 2018, p. 4212). For Reed (2018), “available representations of both trans and cis women in mainstream media are defined by narratives and images that affirm traditional femininity as ideal and restrict the possibility of increasing cultural visibility of and knowledge about women who do not fit this model” (Reed, 2018, p. 4213). Thus, the show does not feature a variety of types of women and therefore displays its preference for women who fit a heteronormative standard. While *Modern Family* takes strides in the right direction, it is often viewed as lacking diversity in important areas, such as LGBTQ+ representation and the intersections of race and gender.

THE FOSTERS

More recently, *The Fosters* is often praised for “breaking barriers in representation” as the show features “seven lesbian, gay, and transgender characters, including rare portrayals of gay and transgender teenagers” (Gillig & Murphy, 2016, p. 3829). In 2015, *The Fosters* broke barriers by featuring the “youngest televised same-sex kiss, which happened between two 13-year-old male characters, Jude and Connor” (Gillig & Murphy, 2016, p. 3829). In a study regarding this scene done by Gillig and Murphy (2016), they demonstrate viewers had a boomerang response to the kiss. While LGBTQ+ participants of their study experienced an increase in positive feelings toward LGBTQ+ people and issues, and experienced higher identification with the characters, cisgender/heterosexual participants were negatively triggered into a disgust response, which evoked more negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people and issues. Gillig and Murphy (2016) conclude gender identity and sexual orientation had a significant impact on the viewers’ perception of the kiss. Such findings demonstrate the significance of the audience’s identity and the importance of the interpretive community in the meaning-making process of television, especially as it relates to on-screen affection for LGBTQ+ couples. Further, the broader background of LGBTQ+ representation in television impacts the extent to which the audience is prepared to engage with the intended meaning of the representation. Therefore, while attitudes toward LGBTQ+ characters on television are becoming more progressive and accepted, homophobia is still relevant and television shows continue to be impactful for reality, especially among youth. Further, a general lack of on-screen affection may not prepare audience members to be accepting of LGBTQ+ love when they see it.

SCHITT'S CREEK

Finally, *Schitt's Creek*, the topic of the present study, aired in 2015 and ran six seasons before ending in 2020. *Schitt's Creek* is often seen as a better example of LGBTQ+ people and their lives than some of the shows previously cited. This is because *Schitt's Creek* is known for ditching the labels of sexuality. Further, *Schitt's Creek* often does not portray the hardships evident in being queer as the center of its LGBTQ+ characters' plotlines. Instead, the show steers away from common stereotypes and family norms. *Schitt's Creek* features nine LGBTQ+ characters in total, three of whom are part of the core cast, and two who become married. Further, it is important to note the types of identities who contributed to *Schitt's Creek* through writing and acting. For example, audiences are shifting towards being critical of storylines not created by people who represent those identities. Audiences expect to see actors playing characters that represent who the actor identifies as. This is important as LGBTQ+ storylines need to be constructed and played by LGBTQ+ individuals, which will be featured as part of the overall analysis of the show. While *Schitt's Creek* is often seen as progressive, one could criticize it for lacking diversity, especially in terms of race as only one LGBTQ+ character is a person of color. Further, the show in general lacks racial diversity. The present study will serve to evaluate further the merits and downfalls of such a show for society.

Given these points, Colwell (2020) argues increasing the number of gay characters in a television show does not increase the quality of representation of LGBTQ+ people. Instead, most LGBTQ+ characters are stuck in a ridicule stage, which “means that although LGBTQ2S+ storylines are present, their experiences are used for

comedic effect rather than meaningful representation, the humour is more derisive, and stereotypes — like the effeminate male and butch female — are still very obvious” (Colwell, 2020, p. 5). Thus, while representation may be increasing for LGBTQ+ people, the type of content still demands scrutiny. This is a difficult issue as inclusion can look like many different things. However, one way to increase inclusion for LGBTQ+ people is to increase the complexity of narratives, diversity of characters, and normalcy of the community. This requires a balancing of acknowledging the issues facing LGBTQ+ individuals while also not making every representation about these concerns, thus creating a normalcy of presence, where one’s identity is purely incidental. Further, it requires avoiding imposing heteronormativity on LGBTQ+ characters and storylines while also not “othering” the characters by excluding them from marriage and parenting. Finally, it requires an increased diversity of characters selected to represent various ages, abilities, races, and genders. Such considerations will allow LGBTQ+ representation to become more complex and representative of more individuals.

GENRE OF SITCOM

The genre of situational comedy is an area ripe for study regarding stereotypes, especially those relating to gender and sexuality. Television sitcoms use hostile exchanges to elicit humor (Zillmann & Bryant, 1991). This is because the enjoyment of sitcom humor is contingent on the audience member experiencing enhanced feelings about themselves (Zillman, 1983). Therefore, sitcoms provide “interactions between individuals or groups that often place one person (or group) at a disadvantage, thereby benefiting the other” (Mastro, 2004, p. 121). Thus, one group becomes dominant over the

other as well-liked characters become more and more superior to disliked characters (Mastro, 2004).

As one group is privileged over another, gender, sex, and sexuality become easy targets for sitcom humor. Kannen (2019) cites that “some of the most popular sitcoms of all time, such as *Will & Grace*, *Friends*, and *Seinfeld*, all use tropes of sex and gender to make people laugh” (p. 60). Additionally, comedy often makes fun of LGBTQ+ characters through gay-themed jokes and stereotypes (Steiner, Fejes & Petrich, 1993). Raley and Lucas (2006) cite that “gay males and lesbians on situational comedies are seen as jokesters and jesters whose funny antics make them an ideal target for ridicule” (p. 24). Additionally, the sitcom genre makes heavy use of character stereotypes because there is not a lot of time for character development (Marc, 2016). Under the conditions of the sitcom genre, character development is unimportant (Mastro, 2004, p. 121). Further, sitcoms provide characters lacking diversity (Mastro & Tropp, 2004). While LGBTQ+ characters are often used as comedic relief in general media, it presents a potential problem for their representation in the genre of comedy (Raley & Lucas, 2006). The excessive use of stereotypes makes it difficult to ignore the implications of such a show, despite its genre (Marc, 2016). Although the excessive use of stereotypes is part of the quick establishment of characters needed in sitcom, the issue lies in how these characters are developed over time, how their narrative arcs progress through the show, and how others treat them. Hart (2000) demonstrates gay-themed jokes can be hurtful and homophobic while also perpetuating negative stereotypes. For example, for those with high prejudices against minorities, viewing stereotypical content may confirm their prejudicial beliefs (Mastro, 2004). Additionally, the use of stereotypes serves to create a

social norm suggesting discriminatory responses to outgroup members are generally acceptable (Ford et al., 2001). Thus, “understanding the impact of this type of content on television becomes critical as it may serve to reinforce its social acceptability in deriding marginalized groups (Bill & Naus, 1992; Ford, 2000; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001).

Schitt's Creek is a satirical comedy which is “a form of comedy that is rarely associated with nice and gentle forms of humor” (Patrick, 2018, p. 309). That is, *Schitt's Creek* uses many of the same tactics as general situational comedies to garner laughs from the audience. However, some argue “the notion of gentle and anti-pretentious comedy is overturned in *Schitt's Creek*, which relied on satirical humour that often includes intertextual cultural references, requiring audiences to be somewhat informed to get the joke” (Patrick, 2018, p. 308). However, *Schitt's Creek* still relies on many stereotypes to create humor, especially as they relate to gender, sexuality, and even socio-economic class. Therefore, *Schitt's Creek* runs the risk of misrepresentation through satire and irony in its humor if the audience does not understand the jokes it is making. In other words, the show may risk misrepresenting, or being overtly offensive to some groups, if the audience does not understand the tagline is a joke created through satire or irony. These gender, sexuality, and socio-economic stereotypes will be evaluated in the present study to explore the ways *Schitt's Creek* represents the LGBTQ+ minority.

METHODS

Schitt's Creek is a sitcom television show displaying the financial downfall of a wealthy family – the Roses. The Rose family came to power through the establishment of a video store titled Rose Video. However, in a business exchange, the Roses lose all of their belongings except for a town, Schitt's Creek, purchased as a joke years prior.

Schitt's Creek is the only asset the Roses have. Parents Johnny and Moira move with their adult children, David and Alexis, to the town of Schitt's Creek where they must learn a new way of life. The seasons of *Schitt's Creek* reveal the Rose family purchasing and operating a local run-down motel, Moira endeavoring to continue her meager moviestar career, David opening a small business, and Alexis finding herself in marketing. Further, the family experiences a host of relationships as David meets, dates, and ultimately marries his love Patrick, and Alexis experiences several romantic relationships with various town members. Thus, *Schitt's Creek* is the depiction of how the formerly wealthy Roses learn to interact with the town's less than glamorous inhabitants.

Schitt's Creek was chosen as the subject of this analysis because of its popularity in the sitcom genre and television in general. *Schitt's Creek* originally gained traction because of its spotlighting of Eugene Levy and Catherine Ohara, who are icons of Canadian comedy (Patrick, 2018). According to one analysis, *Schitt's Creek* presented a higher demand than 98.4% of all comedy shows in the United States during its peak viewing in 2020 (Parrot Analytics, n.d.). In 2020, *Schitt's Creek* frequented the Top 10 most streamed shows in the United States on Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, and Disney Plus (Variety, 2020). Thus, *Schitt's Creek* allows for a large audience base within the comedy genre.

Further, *Schitt's Creek* also demonstrates its relevance through several awards. At the 2020 Emmy Awards, *Schitt's Creek* swept all seven comedy categories (Television Academy, n.d.). *Schitt's Creek* also won the Critics' Choice Television Award, and the GLAAD Media Award (Bilefsky, 2020; Gardner, 2019). *Schitt's Creek* also won several

other awards for best comedy, best television show, best actors and actresses, as well as awards for editing, costumes, makeup, direction, and more (IMDb, n.d.). Additionally, *Schitt's Creek* provides a strong example of LGBTQ+ representation as one of the main characters, David, is pansexual. Regarding LGBTQ+ representation, *Schitt's Creek* won Best LGBTQ TV Show at Dorians TV Toast awards (The Hollywood Reporter, 2020). Therefore, the show is often considered to be barrier breaking in viewership as well as for LGBTQ+ representation because it assisted in the normalization of queer relationships (Birch, 2021). In addition to its social prominence, *Schitt's Creek* was also chosen because it is typically seen as “good” representation for LGBTQ+ people; however, many of the existing analyses on *Schitt's Creek* may not contain a critical enough evaluation of the show.

When analyzing LGBTQ+ representation in television, it is important to observe the types of identities that are writing narratives and playing LGBTQ+ characters. *Schitt's Creek* features a father/son writing team between Dan and Eugene Levy. The son, Dan Levy, who also plays the character of David, has been “out” as LGBTQ+ since he was 18 (Schaffstall, 2020). Dan Levy’s influence perhaps aids in providing an LGBTQ+ perspective in the writing process. Further, Levy’s portrayal of David adds to LGBTQ+ representation in general by having a gay character be played by a gay actor. In contrast, Patrick, who is played by actor Noah Reid, is not gay. While Dan Levy aids in the validity of the LGBTQ+ representation found in *Schitt's Creek*, the show is still not entirely devoted to having LGBTQ+ characters be played by LGBTQ+ individuals.

For the purposes of this analysis, the relationship between David and Patrick is the focus. These two characters are the primary focus of this study because they are

recurring main characters who feature an LGBTQ+ identity. Therefore, part of the analysis will center on who they are portrayed as individuals, while also examining their interactions together. Further, their relationship provides an opportunity to contrast the LGBTQ+ representation of couples in *Schitt's Creek* with previous LGBTQ+ couple representations in television. This is important given the history of LGBTQ+ portrayal previously stated, particularly as it relates to gay couples and their lack of sexual intimacy or the general purification of sexual desire for gay couples in television criticized in other shows. David and Patrick's relationship, interactions with each other, and interactions with other characters aid in conceptualizing the merit or pitfalls in LGBTQ+ representation in *Schitt's Creek*, especially compared to previous representations. The analysis of their relationship also allows for an evaluation of how the couple is treated by outside observers in the show. This is beneficial as how the couple is treated in the show can have an influence over how LGBTQ+ people are treated in reality. Further, the relations between David and Patrick assist in the public formation of expectations about what LGBTQ+ people should look like, and how they should act or behave.

Because David and Patrick's relationship is the central focus of this study, episodes were considered beginning at Season 3, Episode 8 titled "Motel Review" through the analysis of one single researcher. Episodes were analyzed through the end of the show (Season 6); therefore, 47 episodes were considered. Season 3, Episode 8 was chosen as the starting point because this is the first time Patrick enters the show. Therefore, as Patrick and David's relationship is the focus of this study, episodes before Patrick's appearance were not necessary to consider, except for to provide context for the rest of the show and for context clues about David's previous relationships.

The analytical approach features critical and rhetorical discursive analyses, with a backdrop of queer theory throughout. A rhetorical discursive analysis observes more than just the structure of language. Richardson (2017) provides three elements to consider during a rhetorical analysis: the argument, the audience, and the arguer. That is, the researcher considered elements such as the content created by *Schitt's Creek* (the argument), its intended audience, and the creation process of the content (the arguer, producers, etc.) to draw conclusions about the rhetorical message being conveyed about LGBTQ+ people. In other words, a rhetorical discursive analysis intends to observe what meanings are being created and conveyed through a message, in this case *Schitt's Creek*, which is a deeper analysis than simply observing what words are used. Further, a critical discourse analysis includes being sensitive to context and non-literal meanings, as well as examining explicitly stated dialogue (Antaki, 2008). A critical discourse approach looks at relationships existing between power and language regarding gender, politics, racialized groups, and other areas of controversy (Wodak & Meyer, 2010). In other words, a critical discursive analysis is hyper-sensitive to rhetoric used to oppress minority groups. This approach is necessary as *Schitt's Creek* deals with the representation of LGBTQ+ people. A critical lens allows for an examination of the subject considering existing cultural hegemonies.

Underlying these analytical approaches is a constant focus on queer theory. Queer theory, as previously highlighted, is concerned with identifying power and oppression in areas where oppression may seem normal (such as in sitcoms) (Colwell, 2020). Further, queer theory also examines the ways heterosexuality permeates society (Grzanka, 2020).

Therefore, queer theory is useful because it allows one to examine how LGBTQ+ characters are depicted, especially in contrast to heterosexual characters.

As part of the process of the analysis, S3E8 through S6E14 (47 episodes) were watched two times while taking observational notes, then evaluations were recorded. The episodes were watched a third time to ensure a valid interpretation was made.

Observational notes were taken until the material reached saturation. The researcher confirmed conclusions multiple times to ensure the findings were valid and logical. With this type of analysis, transparency in the reporting plays a large role and is important to enable detailed insight into the analysis (Potter, 1996). As such, the researcher took clear steps to indicate what data were being observed and to provide explicit detail to account for the analysis and interpretation.

As this analysis is based in queer theory and a critical approach, special attention has been given to create and uphold dignity for minority groups, especially those in the LGBTQ+ community. Consequently, it is important to state before reporting the analysis that, while it is important to critique inclusion and strive for better representation, it is better to have representation than no inclusion. Representation that is not good enough is still preferable to sticking with the status quo. Therefore, even though some conclusions reported later support the notion that better representation is still needed for marginalized groups, this should not be taken to suggest *Schitt's Creek* has not made a valuable and positive contribution to LGBTQ+ representation.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Much of the representation surrounding the LGBTQ+ couple of David and Patrick in *Schitt's Creek* can be categorized into emergent themes. The themes include a lack of

serious or intimate moments for the couple, a lack of diversity in representation, the masculinization of Patrick and the hyper-femininity of David, the heteronormativity of the relationship, the lack of sexual encounters for the couple when compared to heterosexual couples, and experiences of familial acceptance of their sexualities. While these themes are not exhaustive of the entirety of the representations of David and Patrick, they serve as large summaries to categorize the general depictions of the characters and their relationships. It is important to note these categories and many of the examples cited within them coincide, flow together, and overlap with one another. For example, the lack of serious and meaningful moments scripted for David and Patrick is particular to the genre of comedy, but it also indicates the couple is often not cast in a sexual light. However, sexuality is scripted for heterosexual couples in this program, but often not included for LGBTQ+ couples. These instances often lead to more platonic moments between the LGBTQ+ couple. Because sexuality is not often scripted for LGBTQ+ couples, the hyper-sexualization of straight couples becomes obvious, allowing for a stark contrast in representation. Additionally, the masculinization of Patrick and the hyper-femininity of David fuel the heteronormative depictions often present in their relationship. These depictions are based on easily digestible stereotypes, which are a hallmark of the genre. Because of heteronormativity, people in the show often assume David or Patrick are in other heterosexual relationships, reinforcing the privileging of heterosexual people. Therefore, each category noted often fuels analyses in other categories, allowing them to operate together cohesively. The following analysis will unpack these observations and the previously identified themes.

LACK OF SERIOUS OR INTIMATE MOMENTS FOR DAVID AND PATRICK

One general observation throughout the episodes analyzed is David and Patrick often do not engage in serious, romantic, or intimate moments. When they do, the seriousness of the moment is often cut off by a comedic remark by one member of the couple or an outside force. One example of this phenomenon is after the launch of David and Patrick's business (S3E12, 20:25). After a successful launch, the two share an intimate and meaningful hug, in dark lighting, displaying the seriousness of the moment. However, the meaningful moment is cut off by a light flickering, creating a comedic instance causing the intimacy to not last too long or become too deep. The added comedic moment defuses sexual tension in what would otherwise be a trope moment for a kiss. While it is the sitcom genre, the cutting off from the moment is particularly punitive for the progression of David and Patrick's budding relationship. Further, it serves as a disciplinary measure to keep the relationship somewhat platonic.

Another example is after David and Patrick's first kiss (S3E13, 18:45). The couple is sitting in Patrick's car after their first date when David leans in to kiss Patrick. Patrick thanks David for making the first move and comes out to David stating he has never kissed a man before. The two exchange a serious moment regarding the continuation of their relationship, but the moment is cut off by humor about how David does not like to talk before 10 a.m. While the kiss acknowledges their romantic feelings, it becomes restricted. Additionally, David's comment positions him as the more high-maintenance member of the two. High maintenance is a stereotypically feminine role in a heterosexual couple. Therefore, the instance both cuts off a romantic and meaningful moment and makes David into a feminine figure in a same-sex relationship. The

following scene immediately opens with the boisterous singing of the Rose family in front of a cake featuring the misspelling of David and Alexis's names. The Rose parents have gotten a cake for both kids as it is Alexis' high school graduation and David's birthday, but they have forgotten both. Thus, the cake is an attempt to make up for their neglectful parenting. Such a transition changed the mood from the previous scene. This moment would normally be a serious encounter as it involves several firsts: Patrick's first kiss with a man, Patrick's coming out, and the couple's first kiss. Instead of allowing the moment to be serious, humor is needed to lighten the mood for the audience. The birthday and graduation cake scene also returns the audience to a normal, sitcom state where nothing is taken too seriously. This is perhaps an attempt to pull the audience away from any negative feelings they could be having about the overt homosexual display of physical affection.

An additional example includes the first time Patrick tells David he loves him (S4E12, 5:30). In this episode, Patrick tells David he loves him at their store, which is a continual setting for many important moments in their relationship. The setting of this moment perhaps demonstrates their relationship is casual or not romantic. Additionally, the continual placement at the store avoids putting David and Patrick in a domestic setting. A domestic setting could be controversial to some audience members who resist seeing LGBTQ+ individuals in family settings and living with heterosexual normalcy. Therefore, displaying the couple continually at the store could serve as a safe space for them to exist through a heterosexual lens. However, David and Patrick are cast in domestic light later in their relationship.

Further, when Patrick says his three important words, there is no physical affection, no embrace or kiss, simply Patrick's hands on David's shoulders. David does not say the words back until much later in the episode (17:24). In this second moment, David and Patrick share a kiss and David cries; however, the moment is again cut off by humor from Patrick about how he will never be able to compete with David's love of Mariah Carey and that David forgot to bring him his tea. Again, the comedic humor that cuts off serious moments for David and Patrick is stereotyping. The stereotype depicted here is David is hyper-feminine through his love of Mariah Carey and his servanthood to Patrick. The latter is a gendered stereotype which believes women should exist in domestic settings for the purpose of serving men. This scene also produces and reproduces Patrick as the dominant "male" between the couple. The interaction heteronormalizes the gay couple. The following scene immediately transitions to a loud party being thrown for single's week, further signifying the end of the serious and meaningful moment. The transition to a heterosexual-exclusive single's week supports the cultural narrative that heterosexual people are more important and prominent than LGBTQ+ couples, and the focus should be on them.

A final example includes David's announcement about his engagement to Patrick (S5E14). David's announcement is ruined by Moira screaming about the cancellation of her movie. This instance perhaps signifies LGBTQ+ people are not often brought into serious moments or are cut off abruptly. Therefore, a case can be made LGBTQ+ are not given the same opportunities to be happy and successful as straight couples. This notion is not unique. Waggoner (2018) highlights the "bury your gays" trope is common in television for added "shock value" (p. 1877). The "bury your gays" trope is the killing of

a queer character, often after a same-sex act. This trope is a common narrative arc in television assisting in the continued marginalization of LGBTQ+ people (Waggoner, 2018). *Schitt's Creek* is unique because the gay couple is not punished or killed because of their being gay. However, it can be argued a less severe and graphic form of the burying your gays trope still affects LGBTQ+ people. While the LGBTQ+ characters in *Schitt's Creek* are not killed for their being gay, there are several instances of the sabotage of their relationship after big moments for the couple. Therefore, one can “bury the gays” without killing them through the sabotage of serious, romantic, or sexual moments and by not giving them the same types of representation of heterosexual people.

These four examples serve to demonstrate times when the couple is given a serious moment and then immediately cut off. The couple is often set up for serious moments that never occur. This lack of serious moments is perhaps stereotypical of the sitcom genre; however, it often leads to a lack of sexual moments for LGBTQ+ couples, leaving a large gap in representation.

The genre of situational comedy is unique because episodes and encounters are often short, character development is limited, and humor is often created through hostile exchanges (Zillmann & Bryant, 1991). *Schitt's Creek* is a form of satiric comedy (Patrick, 2018, p. 309). Additionally, storylines in sitcoms are generally based on the exploitation of character stereotypes (Marc, 2016) as character development is not important to the genre (Mastro, 2004). These observations perhaps help explain the lack of serious moments for David and Patrick, due to the comedic genre, lack of character development, and lack of complex narratives.

However, some research suggests even in the genre of comedy, implications for reality can be drawn. Weaver (2011) conducted a study regarding humor and racist jokes on the internet. They found evidence to support humor aids in rhetorically enforcing the status quo oppression of minorities. This argument is in opposition to arguments (e.g., Davies, 2004) suggesting jokes are “‘just jokes’ and jokes minority (or majority) ethnic groups find offensive are fundamentally harmless and have no serious import or ideological impact” (Weaver, 2011, p. 414). In other words, many believe offensive humor is harmless, yet some researchers conclude humor can have detrimental effects on society.

Raley and Lucas (2006) highlight marginalized groups are often used as comedic relief. This is a potential problem for minorities, especially within the genre of sitcom which is known for its harsh humor. Comedy, although used for humor, can have real implications on how marginalized groups are treated. Colwell (2020) concluded in *Schitt's Creek*, LGBTQ+ people are often not the subject of the joke and jokes do not paint being LGBTQ+ as an insult. However, the strategic use of comedy to cut off serious moments for David and Patrick may keep the couple easily digestible for an audience that may not be used to seeing two gay men in a serious romantic and physical relationship.

SERIOUS MOMENTS FOR HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES

Serious moments cut off by comedy for David and Patrick stand in stark contrast to how serious moments are treated for heterosexual couples in *Schitt's Creek*. This contrast also counters the argument a lack of serious representation for LGBTQ+ individuals is a result of the sitcom genre. For example, in S3E12, Moira and Johnny receive a remnant of their wealthy past: a large portrait of their family that used to hang

in the great hall of their house. As the two are reminiscing on their family, Johnny states the painting is a reminder of “the enormous strength of this family” (2:30). After this deep and meaningful moment, the scene simply ends and transitions to another scene with a calm and peaceful beginning. There is no need to fill the serious moment with humor to lighten the mood. A moment intended to be serious is taken seriously, rather than being disrupted or disciplined.

A second example includes S6E3 in which Ted plans a romantic video date with Alexis for their anniversary during their long-distance stint while Ted is abroad for work. The scene features Alexis being picked up by a driver and taken to the café where there is slow music, flowers, candles burning, and Ted waiting on a video call dressed in nice clothes (18:00). The couple also has a serious conversation about how they miss each other and are so happy to be seeing one another. There is no comedic moment here, but only two people having a meaningful moment together. This scene again demonstrates heterosexual couples are given seriousness in moments that deserve them, even while they remain long-distance.

Additionally, other couples outside of the Rose family also experience serious and meaningful moments. For example, the town mayor, Roland Schitt, and his wife Jocelyn become pregnant and have a baby, which becomes a key plot point throughout much of the show (see S4E2 and on). The upcoming birth impacts the Schitt family, causing Roland to sell some of their belongings and get a second job at the motel. Therefore, the intentionality and normalcy of their relationship becomes a new narrative in the series.

Such plot points and complex depictions are not scripted for LGBTQ+ couples. This contrast demonstrates the disparities between LGBTQ+ couples and heterosexual

couples, even within a genre known for keeping things light. Additionally, the significance of the sitcom genre is that it demonstrates real-life issues and how to work through them. However, there is a contrast between the portrayal of real-life issues for heterosexual versus LGBTQ+ couples. This is most evident because many of the heterosexual couples experience real-world issues and moments (losing their job, having a baby, being long-distance, etc.) but the LGBTQ+ couple is most often depicted in a store setting to keep their relationship “safe” and hetero-friendly.

As Raley and Lucas (2006) suggest, these depictions have implications for marginalized groups. Additionally, because stereotypes and lack of character development are common in sitcoms (Mastro & Tropp, 2004), audience members may be influenced by stereotypical depictions. For example, for those with high prejudices against minorities, viewing stereotypical content may confirm one’s prejudicial beliefs about the group (Mastro, 2004). Additionally, the use of one-dimensional and simple stereotypes creates a social norm suggesting discriminatory responses to marginalized characters are acceptable (Ford et al., 2001). That is, the quantity and quality of representation for marginalized groups in television may impact how audience members interact with members of these groups in reality. Numerous scholars (Bill & Naus, 1992; Ford, 2000; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001) suggest understanding the impact of sitcom television is important because comedy can reinforce how marginalized groups are oppressed in society. That is, comedy is not “just for fun” and the depictions in it should be taken seriously as influencing society.

LACK OF DIVERSITY IN REPRESENTATIONS

Furthermore, several researchers highlight the general lack of diversity in *Schitt's Creek*, which is also common for the sitcom genre. For example, all the main characters in *Schitt's Creek* are white. Kannen (2019) observes “this lack of representation is one that adds a layer of familiarity for mainstream audiences who are predominantly exposed to ‘whiteness as norm’ on television sitcoms” (p. 59). This is prominent as Kannen (2019) notes *Schitt's Creek's* character depictions fall in line with stereotypes of a wealthy, upper class, rural, Canadian life, which is the show's setting. In *Schitt's Creek*, there is one recurring black character, Ronnie, and her role within the show adds little to the central plot (Kannen, 2019). Kannen (2019) argues “the silence around how white everyone is, is appropriate to the privilege of the main characters, but it's possible to assume that the humour on the show would not be as compelling if the audience didn't loathe the Roses' privilege *and/or* find commonality within that privilege and whiteness” (p. 59). Therefore, the general lack of diversity may be part of the humorous point of the show and what makes it appealing to its target audience. Thus, it is unsurprising LGBTQ+ representation from the show may fall into the same stereotypical lack of diversity. This is dangerous if the lack of diversity is not representative of the population/audience or if the audience does not realize the lack of diversity. Further, including racial diversity when it is not representative of the population/audience in real life may contain value for drawing attention to the issue of a lack of diversity.

In addition to a general lack of diversity in race, *Schitt's Creek* also presents a limited pool of LGBTQ+ representation. As previously mentioned, *Schitt's Creek* features nine LGBTQ+ characters in total. While this may seem like a large number for a

situational comedy with limited characters in general, many of the LGBTQ+ individuals serve no real purpose for the show and only appear for limited episodes. Aside from David and Patrick, the only recurring LGBTQ+ characters are David's previous polyamorous lover Jake, and Ronnie, who is in a friend group with Moira and Johnny Rose. All other characters appear in singular episodes and do not have an impact on the plot of the show. Additionally, many of these characters' sexualities are never explicitly acknowledged, but only inferred through stereotypes, such as being bullied in school or a lesbian woman having short hair. Such context clues are intended to guide the audience to the assumption the character is LGBTQ+ while never stating their sexuality. These depictions perpetuate common stereotypes of LGBTQ+ individuals. Therefore, while the show does display a relatively large number of LGBTQ+ characters, their roles are trivial.

The general lack of diversity in *Schitt's Creek* is an issue common to the sitcom genre, which preys on easy stereotypes and simple representations to construct narrative arcs and make jokes. However, this type of design runs the risk of discriminating against certain minorities. One manifestation of this discrimination is a lack of serious moments for LGBTQ+ couples in *Schitt's Creek*, especially when compared to moments crafted for heterosexual couples. This distinction leads to an even greater disparity between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual couples, which is a lack of sexual moments for David and Patrick.

LACK OF SEXUAL ENCOUNTERS FOR LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS

Multiple studies indicate LGBTQ+ narratives in the media are infrequent and negative compared to heterosexual narratives (Edwards, 2020; Waggoner, 2018). This is

noticeable when it comes to depictions of sexual acts. Raley and Lucas (2006) suggest while there is not a large discrepancy between the number of displays of affection between straight and LGBTQ+ couples, the intention of the displays of affection is vastly different. That is, LGBTQ+ couples are more likely to be seen performing non-sexual acts of affection. According to Sender (2002), holding hands or hugging might be acceptable for LGBTQ+ people, but kissing and the implications of sexual activity are unlikely to be shown.

Raley and Lucas (2006) also suggest displays of affection between queer couples are discouraged when compared to displays of affection between heterosexual couples. While heterosexual partners may experience hypersexuality in television scenes, homosexuals are desexualized, perhaps to avoid controversy (Bindig, 2015). Some researchers suggest LGBTQ+ characters are not depicted sexually on screen because these images are threatening to heterosexual audiences that dislike the “flaunting” of sexual orientation (Bruni, 1999; Gross, 1994; Hantzis & Lehr, 1994; Raley & Lucas, 2006). However, heterosexual couples are not treated the same, even if they are unmarried. Steiner, Fejes, and Petrich (1993) suggest unmarried heterosexual characters often demonstrate displays of affection such as kissing or other sexual behavior. In contrast, LGBTQ+ characters are often not associated with the queer community, much less depicted showing any demonstration with an intimate partner (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Moritz (1994) suggests LGBTQ+ couples are limited to a passionless embrace, a hug, or a consoling touch.

These descriptions represent the types of affectionate interactions seen between David and Patrick, which at times may feel exclusively platonic. The focus is on

companionship over romantic or sexual elements. Broadly speaking, many of David and Patrick's interactions occur at their store, the Rose Apothecary. This setting is used often to develop their relationship. Because this setting is a business, the couple is limited in displays of affection. Therefore, the store provides an environment safe for brief and small moments of LGBTQ+ affection without risking being "over the top" for audience members who may not appreciate outright homosexual behavior. Such a setting may excuse the writers from criticisms of the couple's lack of sexual affection because one would not expect the couple to be sexual in a public place. Therefore, by placing David and Patrick continually at the store, the writers may be let off the hook for lacking sexual affection.

Additionally, throughout their interactions, whenever David and Patrick hug, their embrace demonstrates friendship, not romantic attraction. Friendship is often demonstrated through a platonic pat on the back, like one exchanged between longtime acquaintances (S4E9, 7:00; S5E5, 5:16). David and Patrick's embraces are often short and abrasive, opposed to long, lingering, and romantic. These depictions call into question the romantic connection between David and Patrick. Further, they portray the couple in an easily digestible fashion that does not risk making audience members uncomfortable. By keeping David and Patrick platonic, the show reinforces beliefs that LGBTQ+ individuals cannot and perhaps should not be romantic and/or sexual.

Such an occurrence can be observed in S5E5 throughout David and Patrick's interactions at a house party. House parties can be a site for expected romantic or sexual encounters, such as flirting or other displays of intimacy between those in romantic relationships. Before the party starts, Patrick feeds David a jello shot, which is a romantic

moment, but then gives David the platonic pat on the back. The jello shot instance should be read romantically because feeding someone something directly into their mouth would typically be considered an intimate moment. The interaction repeats itself after the party following a romantic moment about David and Patrick's paths crossing at the right time, again cut off by the platonic pat and humor about taking out the garbage and Patrick's childish jealousy (20:10). Such instances demonstrate the creators' resistance to depict David and Patrick in too sexual of light, often portraying their relationship platonically in moments that could be romantic or sexual. In other words, opportunities would likely be taken to sexualize heterosexual couples in these moments; however, writers of *Schitt's Creek* do not take these opportunities to sexual David and Patrick. Instead, the couple is portrayed in a casual, platonic way.

Further, David and Patrick are intermittently depicted in bed, but the depictions are exclusively platonic, have a lot of room between the couple, and are never serious or sexual moments. For example, in S5E3, David and Patrick are lying in bed when Patrick's roommate, Ray, walks into the room unannounced. The scene demonstrates no sexual tension and is depicted as if walking in on an LGBTQ+ couple in bed means nothing sexual is going on. This instance leads to Patrick looking for a new apartment, and David coming along as if serving as a helpful friend. This is evidenced because Patrick makes it clear the couple is not shopping for an apartment to move into together, but for a place for Patrick to reside by himself. Therefore, David's opinion is only relevant as it assists Patrick in finding a place to live since the couple is not looking for a space for both of them. The shopping for an apartment is ironic because the situation was created by Ray's continual walking in on David and Patrick. However, nothing sexual

ever occurred between David and Patrick for Ray to walk in on. Therefore, the sexual desires of David and Patrick are implied, but never stated or physically depicted. This is because the couple are only seen sitting in bed, on opposite sides, with plenty of room between them. Thus, the audience is perhaps led to believe David and Patrick are indeed sexual without displaying anything close to a sexual encounter. Sexual desire is only hinted at and may not be grasped unless the audience is looking for it. In other words, homosexual sexual desire is not explicit so the audience is not forced to consume it or be offended by it.

In S6E2, the opening scene features the couple in bed, but again platonically. The scene surrounds David, who has just wet the bed, perhaps portraying the couple in an even more desexualized way. This is because urinating in the bed is often seen as unattractive or childish. Further, someone would not want to have sex with or be in bed with a person who has just peed in a space that could be perceived as sexual. The instance therefore removes all potential sexualization of the couple, serving as a punitive or disciplinary marker for keeping homosexual people in safe representations. As the episode progresses, Patrick purchases a mattress cover in case David has an additional accident, which David is upset about. The closing scene features Patrick and David in bed, with Patrick putting in his retainer and nose breathing device, making the couple and the moment desexualized. However, this scene portrays the couple as highly domestic, which represents a normalized marker of stability. Therefore, the scene can be evaluated in positive light, but the representation of the show in general lacks many other elements of a couple in the bedroom. This is relevant when compared to heterosexual portrayals of couples within the show.

Finally, in S6E7, David, Patrick, and Alexis must share a room at the motel. In this episode, Alexis states she feels like she is sharing a room with her twin brothers who kiss (20:40). This comment perhaps solidifies the notion David and Patrick are often not depicted in a sexual way, except for brief moments of affection. Instead, their interactions are often brotherly or platonic. Thus, an intentional de-sexualization of the gay couple in bed perhaps is an attempt to make the sexuality of the couple more easily digestible for an audience that may be unaccepting of ideas about homosexual sex.

Several other unrelated instances of the de-sexualization of David and Patrick lead to the continual platonic nature of their relationship. For example, in S4E9, David dances to a song Patrick had previously sung for him at an open mic night (19:00). In this scene, David appears to be setting up for a lap dance, but instead performs a lip sync. This scene is a clear dodge from acknowledging the sexuality of LGBTQ+ couples. Additionally, in S4E8, Stevie and David pretend to be on their honeymoon to receive discounts at a spa. Stevie is David's female best friend, who he slept with in the beginning of the show (S1E10). After their brief sexual encounter, Stevie and David remain strictly friends and there is no sexual tension between them. While at the spa, the waitress makes sexual references about the two being on their honeymoon, including how the wine will increase their desire and passion later. Throughout this portion of the episode, the two are continually sexualized as people assume they are a couple and their honeymoon will be filled with them having sex. This overt sexualization of Stevie and David is perhaps over the top because they are seen as a heterosexual couple. Sexual references are only made about heterosexual couples, but never about LGBTQ+ couples. It is unlikely that in *Schitt's Creek*, overt sexual references like this would be made about

an LGBTQ+ couple. This is because such bold sexual references may make audience members uncomfortable with outward affection between same-sex partners. This perhaps demonstrates LGBTQ+ people are not viewed as sexual, or their sexuality is scandalous.

Despite their lack of sexual prowess and overt sexual depictions, David and Patrick are sometimes portrayed in sexual ways that may break the boundaries of their platonic feeling relationship. For example, at the beginning of their relationship, David and Patrick are seen kissing at the store, trying to get rid of customers so they can keep their interaction going (S4E2). David wants more privacy with Patrick and says he won't make it, meaning he will not survive if he does not get some sexual, alone time with Patrick. Later in the episode, it is revealed David has given Patrick a hickey at work (9:00). This is a nod to their sexuality, but Patrick is upset by the hickey, perhaps suggesting the audience should be uncomfortable with it as well. However, in S4E4, after David calls Patrick his boyfriend, David sits on Patrick's lap and starts to kiss him. This encounter demonstrates a jump in sexual affection for the couple. Therefore, the couple is sometimes depicted in ways that breaks barriers for LGBTQ+ sexual representation, but is often portrayed in a platonic way, especially in scenes where David and Patrick are in bed.

This type of representation can be perceived as both positive and negative. On the one hand, David and Patrick being portrayed in bed, but without sexual desire, helps to establish the longevity of their relationship as it domesticates them. Their domestication helps establish their normalcy, which heterosexual couples experience often in representation. On the other hand, a continual portrayal of David and Patrick without sexual desire serves as a restrictive measure to hold back the sexual side of LGBTQ+

individuals. In many ways, this is evident in the context and setting David and Patrick are often in, which restricts the development of a sexual encounter, as well as sexual expectations and intentions for the moment. They are set up to feel platonic, but also perhaps stable and committed. Therefore, both positive and negative implications can be happening at the same time.

While David and Patrick's relationship may seem almost entirely platonic, the couple does experience brief moments of displays of affection. However, their lack of sexuality becomes apparent when they are compared to heterosexual couples in the show, namely Alexis and Ted. Alexis and Ted, and other heterosexual couples in the show, experience highly sexual and erotic elements consistently, creating a great disparity between the sexual encounters scripted for LGBTQ+ couples and for heterosexual couples. This lack of sexual depictions for LGBTQ+ couples may lead to further stigmatization of gay sex. Gay sex is often believed to be dirty and is thus discouraged from being depicted on screen, especially to audiences that may reject gay affection. However, Bruni (1999) suggests giving LGBTQ+ characters the opportunity to be romantic and sexual in television is an important step to a more complete acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in general. Therefore, acknowledging the sexuality of LGBTQ+ people in the same way as heterosexual people is necessary for increased representation and equality.

COPIOUS SEXUAL ENCOUNTERS FOR HETEROSEXUAL CHARACTERS

In contrast to the sexual representation of LGBTQ+ couples, *Schitt's Creek* demonstrates numerous sexual references for heterosexual couples simply not present for David and Patrick. The starkest contrast to David and Patrick's de-sexualization is the

hyper-sexualization of Alexis and Ted's relationship. One example comes from a double date the two couples are on (S5E1, 12:45). In this episode, Ted and Alexis are much more romantic and sexual than David and Patrick. Ted and Alexis are seen kissing numerous times and Ted gives Alexis a smack on the rear end. Additionally, Ted makes sexual jokes about his "generator" running smoothly (19:00). However, in this scene, David and Patrick do not experience any sexual references and their relationship is kept easily digestible for an audience that may not be accepting of sexual references about LGBTQ+ people. In other words, sexual references may not be made about David and Patrick in this moment in the same way they are about Ted and Alexis because any reference towards gay sex or the idea of gay individuals having sex could be perceived as being too sexual and inappropriate. This is because references to gay sex are often more noticeable to a heteronormative society that views heterosexual sex as natural and gay sex as perverted. Therefore, sexual references about David and Patrick are excluded, despite good opportunities to display both.

In a separate moment from the same episode, Alexis challenges David to keep the spark alive in his relationship. The encouragement from Alexis to be sexual is a positive acknowledgement of David as a sexual being. This results in David attempting to talk dirty to Patrick, which fails miserably (S5E1, 8:10). Such an instance serves as another example of when the couple lacks sexual prowess in opportunities taken for heterosexual couples. Therefore, the encouragement is positive, but the outcome is negative, punitive, and disciplinary, albeit comedic, because David ultimately fails in his attempt to be sexual. Perhaps David's failure to flirt effectively could be due to the general lack of LGBTQ+ role models and materials in media for LGBTQ+ individuals seeking to

understand their identity. In contrast, Alexis, who is cisgender and heterosexual, would experience readily available role models for understanding her sexuality and how to execute it in romantic situations. While David and Alexis are merely scripted characters and not real individuals trying to understand their sexuality, the same principles could apply. While Alexis finds flirting easy, David struggles because there is rarely a public framework for how to flirt as an LGBTQ+ individual.

Additionally, Ted and Alexis's relationship is hyper-sexualized compared to the de-sexualization of LGBTQ+ couples in S5E10 where the couple has sex at Rose Apothecary. The encounter begins when Alexis and Ted are role-playing sexually and making out in the empty store while Alexis is supposed to be waiting for a package (6:40). Eventually, it is revealed the two had sex in the store as they attempt to continue their sex in the bathroom, but break the bathroom sink (14:20). Therefore, even in spaces dedicated to the advancement of David and Patrick's relationship, there is a bend toward heteronormativity. Such explicit sexual encounters are not scripted in the same way for David and Patrick's relationship, or even hinted at. This sexual encounter for Ted and Alexis also complicates the "safe space" created at the store. For David and Patrick, the store represents a place where sex is not expected. In other words, their placement at the store lets the writers off the hook for the lack of sexual encounters for David and Patrick. However, Ted and Alexis' sexual experiences at the store complicate the narrative that the store is a place where people do not have sex. Therefore, continually placing David and Patrick at the store may not be a valid excuse for why the couple lacks sexual desire. This is evident because public spaces are not off limits for heterosexual couples,

suggesting public sex can be had, but just not by homosexual couples. Such an instance provides an obvious contrast between the types of couples.

Further, Alexis and Ted experience a series of cyber-sex opportunities while Ted is away on a work trip. Originally, before Ted leaves, Alexis intended to travel with him. While the two are planning for the trip, they engage in conversation about what their bed will be like and what they will be doing in it (S5E13, 2:40). When it ends up only being Ted on his work trip, the couple has numerous sexual conversations. For example, on a video call, Ted reveals he has been thinking about Alexis a lot at nighttime (S6E3, 0:43). This spurs Alexis to start taking off her clothes with the intention of having video sex, but the couple is interrupted by the Rose family coming into the room. This type of defusing of sexual tension is also used for David and Patrick, but the continual, overt sexual references towards Ted and Alexis are unique to the couple. At a later point, Alexis suggests, “More about your bottom half, Ted” signaling the continuation of the sexual moment that was previously cut off (S6E3, 18:15). The continuation of the sexual moment sets Ted and Alexis apart from David and Patrick, as sexual moments for David and Patrick are sparse, and never continue when they are cut off.

Again in S6E6, Ted and Alexis attempt to have cyber-sex during their virtual anniversary dinner. Although Ted and Alexis’s situation is unique because of their brief distance, the couple experiences perhaps more sexual references than David and Patrick experience in their relationship in total. When Ted returns from work, he surprises Alexis at the motel (S6E8). The couple immediately wants to have sex. Later in the encounter, Alexis states she wants to do it a few more times (8:45). Such encounters demonstrate how Ted and Alexis stand in stark contrast to the de-sexualization of David and Patrick.

In addition to Ted and Alexis, *Schitt's Creek* also experiences a general sexualization unique to heterosexual couples but missing from its LGBTQ+ representation. For example, in S4E10, Moira and Johnny attend a consultation for a single's event they intend to observe. Instead, the consultant is mistaken and assumes the couple is looking to expand their sexual relations. The host who serves as their consultant wants to know the sexual sounds Moira and Johnny make, forcing the couple into participating (7:40). At the single's event later in the same episode, multiple sexual jokes are made about finding the perfect key for each person's lock. Finding the perfect key for a lock is a disguised sexual reference about finding a sexual partner that fits with each person, where the males represent the keys, and the females represent the locks. While at the event, several participants refer to the sexual nature of this activity. At another time, Alexis takes on the task of organizing her own single's week. This event is partially hosted at the motel and the singles participating have requested "do not disturb" signs for their doors (S4E12, 6:35). This instance creates a nod to their sexuality, which adds to the continued disparity in sexual representation of LGBTQ+ couples as no LGBTQ+ couples are featured in single's week. The lack of diversity in single's week and its overt exclusion of LGBTQ+ couples will be addressed in a further section dedicated to the continued heteronormativity in *Schitt's Creek*.

Furthermore, heterosexual couples are sexualized in several other one-off instances throughout the show. One example includes the sexualization of Moira and Johnny through the reading of love letters (S5E2). Some of the letters include sexual depictions, leading to them being referred to as "50 shades of Johnny Rose" (9:40). Additionally, several references to Johnny and Moira in bed occur in this episode (2:30,

9:30, 13:35, 19:55, 20:15). Therefore, this episode demonstrates heterosexual couples are often sexualized, even those who may be an unlikely target, such as parents or older people. Another example comes from Stevie and her boyfriend Emir. While Stevie and Emir's relationship is trivial to the plot of the show, they still experience sexualization, even within their brief relationship. In S5E4, Stevie makes it plain they are going to be having a lot of sex (3:40). Later in the episode, Emir asks Stevie to stay the night with him and refers to their "little sleepover" (19:05).

Stevie: So... Emir asked me if I wanted to stay the night.

David: Ohhh [Drunken laughter] That sounds promising.

Stevie: Yeah. Um, I thought you were gonna go to bed?

David: Oh no, I was, but then Tammy kept buying shots, and the whole room got behind me in like, a really big way. Anyway, I have seven more songs to finish, and some new fans who would be very disappointed if I didn't close the show.

Emir: Oh Dana, or is it David? Listen I just wanted you to know that Stevie told me what you did for her tonight. You know, giving up your evening so that we could have some time together. Anyway, it was really cool of you to do it, is what I'm saying, and not just because, um, we get to have a little sleepover because of it.

While David and Patrick's relationship is a centerpiece of the plot of *Schitt's Creek*, they do not experience the same number of sexual encounters straight couples receive. This creates a vast gap in representation.

These differences in representation create inequalities between heterosexual depictions and LGBTQ+ depictions. According to Cossman (2002), lesbian and gay relationships are privatized and desexualized, while heterosexual relationships are often public and sexual. Cossman (2002) further highlights that "sexually charged bodies should not have to desexualize themselves, nor marginalize their sexuality to the private

sphere” for the sake of keeping other people comfortable (p. 500). That is, sexualizing relationships is generally seen as acceptable until the couple is LGBTQ+, then they become desexualized. Steinberg, (2000) identifies that “homosexuality has become Hollywood’s newest commodity, wrapped in an acceptable fashion: desexualized, warm and fuzzy” (p. 154). In other words, “homosexuality is okay if it is funny, identifiable, and, above all, desexualized” (Steinberg, 2000, p. 157). Therefore, David and Patrick do not experience the same types of sexual representation as some heterosexual couples in *Schitt’s Creek*. As discussed, this distinction in representation may make LGBTQ+ couples feel as if their sexuality is not allowed or acceptable. There is a general lack of normalcy of the sexual and erotic aspects of individuals and relationships for LGBTQ+ people. Additionally, in terms of the audience’s learning through media sources, there is a lack of content teaching and showing LGBTQ+ individuals how to be sexual as a person or as someone in a relationship, as well as teaching audience members LGBTQ+ individuals are allowed to be sexual and desirous. Therefore, as media often teaches people how to behave, LGBTQ+ people are taught to rid themselves of their sexual aspects.

MASCULINIZATION OF PATRICK

Perhaps most apparent in the representation of LGBTQ+ people in *Schitt’s Creek* are the types of characters David and Patrick embody – Patrick as a masculine, sports-focused, gay man and David as a feminine, flamboyant, gay man. These two depictions fit into some of the most common stereotypes of LGBTQ+ people (McInroy & Craig, 2017), yet each of them possesses traits that make their character a bit more complex than the usual stereotypes. Therefore, while *Schitt’s Creek* plays on common stereotypes, it

also breaks boundaries in certain aspects. However, the depictions of David and Patrick may not be distinct enough to separate them from the heteronormative-feeling box these stereotypes put them in.

Patrick's representation features a masculine, gay man, who is stereotypically in the closet (McInroy & Craig, 2017), yet Patrick is often comfortable in his relationship with David and with the town of Schitt's Creek knowing he is gay. Patrick's masculinity is often depicted in contrast to David's femininity. For example, S5E13 features David and Patrick on a hike where Patrick intends to propose at the end. The hike includes the noted common stereotypes because the outdoor adventure is something Patrick has planned, and David is having a terrible time at. Throughout the hike, David appears feminine in his resistance to participate, which causes Patrick frustration. While on the hike, Patrick steps on a stick that digs into his foot. David is unable to help during the incident, demonstrating his lack of first-aid training or outdoor experience. During the eventual proposal, Patrick is the one down on one knee, asking David to marry him. This instance fits into common stereotypes insisting on gay couples still having one person appear more masculine and one more feminine. In the end, it is often the masculine partner who is participating in traditionally masculine activities, such as being the one who is proposing marriage. Therefore, this episode contains many gendered, heteronormative depictions. These depictions reproduce traditional gendered formations such as men and masculine figures being capable, and action-oriented, both physically and relationally, and women or the feminine figure being incompetent, ineffective, and useless.

A second example of these dynamics comes from S6E7 in which Patrick and David are watching baseball. In this episode, Patrick is portrayed as the masculine jock who cares about watching sports. In contrast, David continually displays his disinterest in athletic activities as he demonstrates his lack of understanding of the game. David eventually leaves to go wine tasting with Moira, which is traditionally a much more feminine activity. This interaction demonstrates heteronormative relationship standards. In many ways, this scene also reproduces notions of Patrick as the standard masculine figure and David as the “other.” Further, it enforces the idea that in a gay couple, one man must be hyper-masculine and one must be hyper-feminine. This creates a heteroromantic appearing relationship that falls into common LGBTQ+ stereotypes.

Despite these depictions making David and Patrick’s relationship appear a bit heteronormative, Patrick’s representation toes the line between invisibility and a productive, complex narrative. The masculine, gay, closeted jock is a common LGBTQ+ stereotype, but Patrick breaks the stereotype because he is not ashamed to be gay and is generally not in the closet, except to his parents. This can be observed in S4E1 in which Patrick does not attempt to stop David from telling people about their relationship, which signifies Patrick is comfortable with people in the town knowing he is gay (17:20). Therefore, Patrick is not attempting to stay in the closet, as it is revealed this is his first relationship with a man. Patrick demonstrates it is okay to be public about sexuality. However, because this is Patrick’s first relationship, the narrative alludes to the possibility of Patrick not knowing he was gay or never considering the possibility he was gay before meeting David. These things are questioned because David is Patrick’s first male partner. Throughout the show, Patrick’s previous female partners are revealed,

perhaps aiding in the invisibility of his LGBTQ+ identity. Further, because Patrick fits the stereotype of a cisgender/heterosexual man, his LGBTQ+ identity can sometimes be swept under the rug, or at least can be far more subtle than David's homosexuality. One implication of Patrick's portrayal is that it may describe sexuality as a choice if one only finds the right person. This is perhaps so because there is no reference to Patrick being even a hint LGBTQ+ before meeting David. Thus, Patrick does not necessarily fit the stereotype of a closeted jock, except in his relationship with his parents. Patrick being in the closet to his parents reproduces the narrative that talking about sexuality with one's parents can be a taboo topic or should remain hidden for fear of the consequences. This element will be discussed further in an upcoming theme. Additionally, other aspects of Patrick's sexuality seem to fit stereotypical representations of coming out.

According to McInroy and Craig (2017), when queer people are not depicted as a stereotype they are often invisible. Invisibility means the queerness of a character is not seen, or the LGBTQ+ person plays a supporting role that adds no dimension to the show or film. This is not the case for Patrick as he is a main character, and his gayness is perhaps the centerfold of his role in *Schitt's Creek*. The balance between stereotypes and invisibility is complex because there is a tension between making the gayness of a character seem to be normal (or not the main focus) and addressing what it means to be LGBTQ+, which often has negative implications as the LGBTQ+ person interacts with other aspects of society. Patrick hangs in this balance because he is comfortable being a gay man and it seems to change his life relatively little to be in a relationship with David. In other words, Patrick appears comfortable in his relationship with David. This aids in the normalization of homosexual relationships. For Patrick, it is not a big deal to be gay

or to be in his first relationship with a man. The normalization of their relationship defuses some of the “otherness” often used to describe LGBTQ+ couples. Instead, Patrick assists in the viewing of LGBTQ+ people as ordinary and not abstract.

Ordinary LGBTQ+ people are considered a rarity in television. Gross (2012) elaborates that “hardly ever shown in the media are just plain gay folks, used in roles that do not center on their difference as an anomaly that must be explained, a disappointment that might be tolerated, or a threat to the moral order that must be countered through ridicule or physical violence” (Gross, 2012, p. 16). Patrick appears to fit into the category of “plain gay folks” as he exhibits traditionally masculine traits yet is confident and comfortable being gay. This representation of Patrick breaks stereotypical LGBTQ+ representation. Patrick breaks the stereotype because he is out and proud of his homosexuality. However, Patrick’s representation falls back into a stereotype when it is revealed his parents do not know he is in a relationship with a man.

S5E11 reveals Patrick has not told his parents about his relationship with David (10:30). This information comes out because David is planning a surprise party for Patrick’s birthday, and he invited Patrick’s parents to visit. Patrick expresses his worries about them knowing he is gay by stating, “I know my parents are good people I just can’t shake this fear that there is a small chance that this could change everything. That they might see me differently or treat me differently” (S5E11, 11:20). This is perhaps the only moment in *Schitt’s Creek* where Patrick appears insecure in his sexuality. McInroy and Craig (2017) cite LGBTQ+ people are often depicted as weak or struggling with their identity. Patrick does not often embody these traits, which is what sets him aside from other common television stereotypes. However, at this moment, Patrick experiences the

pressures of being LGBTQ+. Waggoner (2018) identifies LGBTQ+ character plots often center around the difficulty of being queer. Further, Colwell (2020) highlights many LGBTQ+ characters in television are often depicted in negative situations such as being a disappointment to their parents. The fact Patrick is nervous about coming out to his parents perhaps demonstrates the reality of coming out for many LGBTQ+ people, but it breaks from the confidence in his sexuality which is often displayed through his character.

Patrick's coming out provides an important narrative given the learning elements media can provide. In other words, the demonstration of Patrick, who appears to be a comfortable, confident, gay man, as being nervous about coming out to his parents could be a useful lesson to others considering coming out to their family or friends. As will be further analyzed in a coming theme, Patrick's parents are ultimately accepting of his sexuality. Therefore, the overall narrative arc and the outcomes depicted are important to consider when evaluating how Patrick is portrayed in relation to societal pressures. Patrick can be seen overcoming societal pressures and choosing to be himself, despite the risk he may face of being unaccepted by his parents. This exhibits a positive coming out experience.

Patrick does not fit the mold of a gay man. Although this is encouraging for representation, it borders on the creation of a hetero-romantic appearing relationship with the dynamics between him and David. Patrick is not afraid to be gay, but just afraid to tell his family. In the same vein, David also presents a representation is that both positive and negative for LGBTQ+ people.

HYPER-FEMININITY OF DAVID

As discussed, common LGBTQ+ stereotypes include a portrayal of queer people as promiscuous, gay men as feminine, queer people as sexual predators, queer people as victims of violence, or queer people as mentally ill (Colwell, 2020; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Waggoner 2018; Raley & Lucas, 2006, and Capsuto, 2000). Further, McInroy and Craig (2017) cite the exaggeration of gender expectations and behaviors as a common trope in LGBTQ+ representation. They state “gay males were either hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine” (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 39). Such representations govern how society expects LGBTQ+ people to look and act. LGBTQ+ people may be expected to act in certain ways based on these common portrayals of queer people in the media.

Because stereotypes are often used in the sitcom genre due to the genre’s general lack of character development or complex narratives, it is unsurprising *Schitt’s Creek* perhaps relies on the stereotypes of gay men to construct David’s character. Based on stereotypical assumptions about LGBTQ+ people, David perhaps fits into the most stereotypical depiction of a feminine gay man. However, David’s character also displays nuances that add to the complexity of his role, yet these nuances may not be enough to overcome the stereotypical nature of his character.

Similar to the previously cited instance of David not being interested in watching baseball with Patrick but instead choosing wine tasting with his mother, S5E9 holds an additional instance of David being portrayed as feminine and unathletic, a definite trope and gay stereotype. In this episode, David is talked into joining a pickup baseball game with many people in the town. The episode features Patrick calling David “cute” (a term typically used for women and children) in his baseball uniform (6:50), David being

perceived as high-maintenance and hyper-feminine (10:00), and David being unathletic and uninterested in sports (15:30). Such depictions further the idea gay men cannot be athletic, interested in sports, or masculine in general. Other depictions throughout the show further the understanding of David as a feminine gay man. These elements aid in shaping David and Patrick's relationship to appear heterosexual, with Patrick as the male figure and David conforming to stereotypical dominant standards of what it means to be a woman or to be feminine. In S3E12, David cannot or will not help his dad carry a massive painting inside (1:10). Additionally, when his wedding is approaching, David is continually referred to as the "bride" of the day (S6E4, 13:20). The term "bride" is typically used to refer to the female partner in a heterosexual wedding. Through the continual use of this term, David is further depicted as the female partner in what would then be a heterosexual relationship. The term serves to enforce the heteronormativity of the relationship. Thus, the term is used to over-emphasize that David is far more feminine than his gay, male partner, enough to assign them gendered terms for their wedding. These representations are stereotypical as the feminine gay man is the most common way of depicting a gay man in television (McInroy & Craig, 2017).

However, David's sexuality becomes a touch more complex when it is revealed he is pansexual. Pansexuality is "a sexual, romantic, or emotional attraction toward people regardless of their sex, sexual, or gender identity" (Kannen, 2019, p. 61). Belous and Bauman (2017) observe pansexual characters in television are limited. Therefore, David is one example in a limited pool. According to Kannen (2019), "David's masculinity and pansexuality are in *no way* presented as a problem" which "is a testament to how important the show is to normalizing representations of gender and sexuality that

are often positioned as ‘Other’” (p. 62). In other words, Kannen (2019) praises David’s character as he represents a fluid depiction of sexuality. While David’s pansexual identity is rare in television, his portrayal as an LGBTQ+ individual is narrow and stereotypical. Through stereotypes, David is defined and confined in a limited space that describes gay men as feminine, flamboyant, and high-maintenance, instead of free-flowing like his pansexuality might prefer. Further, as pansexuality is seen as rare, it may be easier to assign this identity to someone who is stereotypically gay, as opposed to someone who breaks more stereotypical depictions, such as Patrick or any of the other characters. This could be an attempt to keep heterosexual-passing characters, such as Patrick, pure from labels that may cast them as the “other.” Thus, while Kannen (2019) argues the acceptance of David’s sexuality makes him exempt from an “other” identity, perhaps this is only because he is already an outlier to a show primarily focusing on heterosexuality.

The addition of David’s pansexual identity may be a good example of an LGBTQ+ narrative with complexity. This is especially true as one considers David’s friendship and brief sexual relationship with Stevie, and their relationships with a third party: Jake. These relationships outside of Patrick demonstrate fluidity in labels, which is not common in television. Therefore, aspects of David’s character may serve to break societal norms about gay men. However, many aspects of David’s character may still fall into common tropes.

One facet important to note is David’s pansexuality is primarily visible before he starts dating Patrick. This is evident through the previously mentioned relationships David has with Stevie, Jake, and other past partners. However, once David meets Patrick, he is locked into a strictly two-person, homosexual relationship with another cisgender

man. This aspect of Patrick's identity puts a border around David's pansexuality. In other words, David's pansexuality is not exhibited after he begins to date Patrick. This is perhaps a disciplinary or punitive function which serves to reign in "othered" identities, such as pansexuality. As the show progresses, the narrative arc suggests David's sexuality becomes more and more restricted, when his pansexuality offered an opportunity for a broad representation of an LGBTQ+ relationship. However, this tradeoff is made for the sake of displaying monogamy and exclusivity, which are markers of stability for homosexual couples.

Additionally, Kannen (2019) argues David's position to masculinity is "complex and fraught" (p. 60). This is because he displays varying levels of masculinity. In one instance "David is so concerned with his hair that he can't help his father hang a door" (Kannen, 2019, p. 60). However, "he is also repulsed when his sister uses similar tactics to get out of any manual labour" (Kannen, 2019, p. 60). Therefore, David is not comfortable with hegemonic ideas of masculinity, yet also reinforces these values at different times. Such observations support the notion power can be both reinforced and countered at the same time. Perhaps David represents a complex relationship with what it means to be a pansexual man. However, his overt femininity for most of the show may outweigh the brief moments where he challenges societal norms. Regardless, the overwhelming femininity of David and the masculinity of Patrick creates a dynamic that mirrors heterosexual relationships.

HETERONORMATIVITY IN DAVID AND PATRICK'S RELATIONSHIP

One effect of the depictions of David and Patrick is the two operate in a way that mirrors how one would anticipate a traditional heterosexual couple to behave. This

occurs both in how David and Patrick operate like a heterosexual couple and in how the couple desires to fit into the heterosexual norms of society. This creates heteronormative instances throughout *Schitt's Creek*. For example, prior to their relationship, David assumes multiple times that Patrick is heterosexual (S3E9, S3E11, S3E13). This demonstrates it is common to believe someone is straight until proven gay. However, it is never assumed someone is gay until proven straight. This understanding privileges heterosexuality, and homosexuality is considered an adaptation or afterthought.

Additionally, during their relationship, Patrick and David often interact as if Patrick is the man and David is the woman in a heterosexual relationship. This can be observed through previous examples cited, but also several other instances. For example, Patrick is the one who is continually pursuing David for their first date (S3E13). In this episode, Patrick is displaying the patriarchal norm of the man always being the one to ask out the woman, especially because the date requires multiple requests. This is ironic as Patrick is assumed to be the straight character, yet the audience is never led to question David's homosexuality. Therefore, even after Patrick has made several advances on David, Patrick's homosexuality is still in question. On their first date, when David is sure Patrick likes him, David is the one to make the move to kiss Patrick. There are multiple interpretations of this event. First, David could be breaking gendered norms that perceive the more masculine figure as being action-oriented and making the first moves. Therefore, David takes on a more progressive stance as he kisses Patrick first. In contrast, the move could also be perceived as Patrick himself being unsure about his sexuality, in such a way that he cannot make the physical move on David. Perhaps this is because David would be his first same-sex relationship. Therefore, Patrick may exhibit

hesitancies in taking the first big step in making their relationship physical. Thus, the interaction can have both positive and negative interpretations at the same time as David making the first move deviates from the action-orientation and leadership of Patrick and perhaps provides a situation where normative roles can be disrupted.

Much later in the relationship, after Patrick has proposed, David, Patrick, Stevie, and Alexis are touring David's dream wedding venue (S6E1). The host of the wedding venue originally assumes the group contains a heterosexual couple (4:30). When David corrects him, the man turns to assume the group consists of two homosexual couples.

Host: Ah, welcome to Elmbridge Manor and you must be the happy couple.
[Points to Patrick and Stevie].

Patrick: Oh no, not quite.

Stevie: God, no.

Host: Ladies, I'm so sorry. Congratulations. Champagne? [Speaking to Stevie and Alexis]

David: Mhmm, hi! David Rose, I'm the one getting married, and this is my partner Patrick.

While this element is likely added for comedic relief, it assists in portraying homosexuality as abnormal, a subcategory of heterosexuality, or an identity that is often overlooked in real life. This moment is potentially also about Patrick's perceived heterosexuality, which brings up once again the notion that the queerness of a character is often not seen in television. Therefore, as Patrick is more masculine, he is assumed to be heterosexual and experiences the privilege of being straight-passing. This assumption can be detrimental as it invalidates Patrick's sexuality.

Further, during the tour, Patrick refers to David doing most of the wedding planning (5:15). This idea also falls into a heteronormative understanding of wedding planning which typically consists of the bride doing most of the wedding planning while the groom is uninvolved. Further, during the wedding, Patrick is wearing a suit and David is wearing a skirt/suit combination with a suit jacket on top and a skirt on the bottom (S6E14). This further displays heterosexual norms, especially as David is continually referred to as the bride of the wedding. Therefore, the couple's wedding day attire continues to reinforce their hetero-appearing relationship. However, David's wedding attire is boundary-breaking because it displays a man in a skirt, so the representation is complex. The representation would be even more complex and boundary-breaking if Patrick, the more masculine figure of the two, were wearing a skirt as opposed to the traditional suit. Additionally, the wedding is filled with comedic moments from Moira's officiant outfit to Patrick's off-tune singing to David's reference of a "happy ending" at a massage. In what would normally be a touching moment of exchanging vows, the couple is further cut off from romantic moments by comedy. The addition of comedy in what would typically be a romantic and pivotal life moment was covered in the first theme. As discussed, cutting off a romantic moment using comedy is part of the genre, but it also serves a disciplinary function for the couple.

Finally, David and Patrick exhibit heteronormativity when it is revealed Patrick wants to start a family with David (S6E5, 6:30). This information is shared after Patrick has had surgery and is mentally incompetent due to the painkillers. Patrick states he wants to have a baby, not make a baby. This instance is deliberately avoiding a sexual scene, which is originally what David assumes is happening. A sexual moment is avoided

as Patrick makes it clear he does not want to have sex, but wants to start a family, which cannot be done by the couple having sex. Therefore, the scene is written in such a way that alludes to what could have been a sexual moment, but instead is turned into a way to fit into heteronormative standards by avoiding sex. However, the avoidance of sex would not be something present with a heterosexual couple discussing having a family, but instead would almost certainly be part of the conversation.

The starting of a family is perhaps an attempt to fit into stereotypical molds of heterosexual relationships and marriages, which typically include reproduction. Some may argue the desire for children is a sign of respect for LGBTQ+ couples. For example, Clark (1969) outlines four stages of representation: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. The final stage of representation typically involves the LGBTQ+ person having a romantic relationship and interacting with children. Therefore, Patrick's desire for children could be a sign the couple is established, serious, and interested in having a family. However, it could also be a sign the couple wants to be what is perceived as "normal," which is mirrored after heterosexual marriages. Regardless, the couple does not end up having children in *Schitt's Creek*. Further, one way to make David and Patrick more digestible for an audience that may be opposed to LGBTQ+ people or rights is to make the queer couple want heterosexual things – namely marriage and a family. Therefore, this plot point is perhaps an attempt to make the couple more acceptable but could be a small attempt at normalcy.

Research suggests making LGBTQ+ couples more acceptable for a heteronormative culture is common. According to Cales (2015), LGBTQ+ couples in television often "develop sexual identities with end goals of acceptance within dominant

culture” (p. 77). Therefore, couples are forced to conform to the stereotypical things desired by straight couples, namely marriage, settling down, and creating a family. Another tactic used in television is to include LGBTQ+ stories, but change them for the sake of the audience. For example, bisexual erasure is when a character engages in a same-sex relationship, yet still ends up in a relationship with a member of the opposite sex in the end (Waggoner, 2018). In this sense, the character might briefly engage in a relationship with a member of their same sex, but they will still end up in a heterosexual relationship. Such narratives diminish and refuse to acknowledge homosexuality or bisexuality and may even depict homosexuality as a “phase” one grows out of or moves on from. It also communicates bisexual people are often heterosexual people who are confused or experimenting with their sexuality before ultimately “figuring it out.” Therefore, television companies technically include LGBTQ+ representation, “but at the cost of remaining with heteronormative hegemony for the sake of not offending advertisers” (Waggoner, 2018, p. 1878). Thus, LGBTQ+ representation that is poor and insufficient is perhaps more damaging to LGBTQ+ audiences than invisibility (Dow, 2001).

Further, the desire to conform to heteronormative ideals reinforces the superiority of heterosexuality. Duggan (2002) describes the need for LGBTQ+ people to experience recognition and assimilate into heteronormative institutions. Dhaenens (2013) also identifies the need to assimilate into heteronormative structure may reinforce social inferiority. Some LGBTQ+ television assists in the reinforcement of rigid binaries and hierarchical structures surrounding gender, sex, and sexuality in society (Avila-Saavedra 2009; Westerfelhaus & Lacroix 2006). Such research demonstrates LGBTQ+ people who

do not conform to heteronormative demands are often depicted as abnormal, deviant, and inferior. Dhaenens (2013) further argues even those LGBTQ+ characters considered “good” representation “represent subjects that participate in or desire to participate in institutions and practices that privilege the heterosexual matrix” (p. 2). Therefore, “scholars need to be wary of television’s discursive practices that reinforce heteronormativity and thereby represent gay teens as assuming a hierarchically inferior position to heterosexuals and seeking inclusion and recognition by heteronormative institutions” despite the increasing inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters in television (Dhaenens, 2013, p. 2). Thus, the desire to be married and to create a family in *Schitt’s Creek* could be an attempt at gaining respect for the gay couple, or it could express a desire to assimilate into heterosexual systems.

Schitt’s Creek displays general heteronormativity even outside of David and Patrick’s relationship. For instance, straightness is considered normal, until proven otherwise. This is demonstrated through previous examples where straightness is assumed for gay characters and for couples. This can also be exhibited through the several episodes focusing on single’s week or single’s events. When Moira and Johnny inquire about a single’s event, their heterosexuality is assumed (S4E10). Additionally, the sexuality of everyone at the event is assumed to be straight. At the event, only heterosexual people and couples are featured, and sexual jokes are made throughout. These types of representations are not present for LGBTQ+ people and queer people are prohibited from being viewed sexually in the show. Furthermore, when Alexis hosts a singles week in town, the event is only for matching heterosexual individuals into heterosexual couples (S4E12). This event presents an easy opportunity to include

LGBTQ+ people, yet the opportunity is denied. Additionally, the week-long event features several nods to hyper-sexual experiences for the couples, furthering disparities in sexual representation between LGBTQ+ and straight couples. Therefore, as heterosexuality is continually assumed in *Schitt's Creek*, it can be difficult for LGBTQ+ characters to exist in heteronormative spaces.

FAMILIAL ACCEPTANCE

The final theme identified related to LGBTQ+ representation is the general acceptance of David and Patrick from their families, both as individual people and as a couple. This is exhibited through several interactions Patrick and David each have with members of their family. First, in S4E5, Patrick serenades David at an open mic night at Rose Apothecary. Patrick dedicates the song to David, which makes David visibly uncomfortable. Eventually, David begins to warm up to Patrick's display of affection, which is spurred on by Moira's support of Patrick's visible outward demonstration of love for David (17:40).

Second, the Rose family expresses their desire to be a part of David's relationship when they find out this is the longest relationship he has ever been a part of (S4E7). This information comes out when Patrick sends David a cookie to celebrate their four months together. The family demonstrates their desire to be a part of the relationship by insisting they throw a barbeque to celebrate; however, David expresses reservations about the family's intervention. Later in the episode, Moira and Patrick are seen chatting at Moira's workplace, the town hall (7:45). The two are engaging in casual conversation that demonstrates how comfortable they are with one another. At this moment, Moira invites Patrick to the family barbeque. Moira appears to be visibly happy about Patrick and being

involved in David's relationship. Therefore, Moira enjoys their relationship and is quite supportive, at least much more supportive than the previous people David has dated.

While at the Rose family barbeque, Patrick is again seen bonding with David's family, this time with Johnny over some grilling (14:00). Patrick's interactions with Johnny are of note because Johnny is a heterosexual male. The interaction can possess multiple interpretations. In one view, Patrick and Johnny engaging in a masculine activity can further enforce the perceived masculinization and heterosexuality of Patrick. This is because grilling is often perceived as a gendered activity only cisgender/heterosexual men participate in. In another interpretation, the interactions between Patrick and Johnny can serve as Patrick receiving approval from cisgender/heterosexual people. LGBTQ+ individuals seeking approval from heterosexual people is a common narrative trope. Perhaps through the depiction of Johnny approving of Patrick, it is enforcing the idea cisgender/heterosexual people need to approve of homosexual identities. An additional interpretation could be Patrick is bonding with a heterosexual male, demonstrating the normalcy of Patrick's sexuality. Regardless, Patrick experiences comfortable and normal interactions with members of David's family. This leads to Johnny making a toast to relationships (17:00). Each of these interactions show the familial support found in *Schitt's Creek*, particularly from the Rose family.

However, David and Patrick experience a varied form of the "bury your gays" trope as previously cited in the couple's lack of serious moments. This time, the trope comes in the form of sabotaging the relationship the moment it seems to be progressing smoothly. While at the family barbeque, Patrick's ex-fiancé makes a guest appearance, ruining the romantic and happy moment for David and Patrick (17:10). The knowledge

Patrick was previously engaged is quite upsetting to David, who storms out and does not rejoin the barbeque. Therefore, the homosexuality in the scene is killed by Patrick's heterosexual past. This further demonstrates the principle that heterosexuality is perhaps more prominent than homosexuality. Additionally, the instance ruins the significance of familial acceptance David and Patrick were experiencing.

Additionally, David's father displays discomfort with the idea of David and Patrick being sexualized in any way. S4E11 features David having an extreme rash on his face. Johnny tells David that David and Patrick are going to have to tone down their affectionate time with one another; however, Johnny does not mention the word kissing because he is visibly uncomfortable with the notion of David and Patrick doing anything sexual (10:00). A negative effect of this moment is Johnny directly discourages David's physical affection for Patrick. This could be understood by the audience as a general disapproval for gay affection. However, in a satirical show, it is possible the comment by Johnny was intended to be of comedic value to demonstrate the ridiculousness of this position and orientation. In other words, the satire is intended to call out the hypocrisy of such a belief. The risk, then, is the audience may not pick up on the satire and may allow it to enforce their homophobic leanings. Despite this instance, Johnny appears supportive of the relationship. Therefore, Johnny provides a positive example for parents about how to support their children's same-sex partners.

A final example of the support of David and Patrick from David's family occurs when David asks Alexis to give him away at his wedding (S6E4). This scene happens while David, Alexis, and Patrick are shopping for Patrick's wedding suit (20:45). The interaction occurs as such:

David: Speaking of the day, I have a better job for you.

Alexis: Okay, I think it would be a weird look for me to be a flower girl at my age, David.

David: I've thought about it, and I want you to give me away.

Alexis: Oh my god, David that's like arguably the most important role of the wedding.

David: A simple yes or no would be fine. No need to pull focus, okay?

Alexis: I do.

This instance is perhaps a break from the heteronormative matrix which typically calls for parents to give away their children in marriage, specifically instances where a father gives away his daughter to be the bride. Alexis giving David away is a break from misogyny and heteronormativity because females do not typically give away males to be married. By placing Alexis in a position of authority typically held by the father, the show is taking away power from patriarchal ideals and rewriting the script. This is creating a more complex and diverse narrative about what marriage and weddings can look like. Further, it displays Alexis's support of the union. Support from Alexis is important because she demonstrates a non-judgmental accepting of the couple. In fact, Alexis is often the one who encourages David to pursue Patrick in the beginning of their relationship. Therefore, Alexis provides a strong example of what familial support can look like.

In addition to these examples of support from David's family, Patrick also experiences familial support, although not before instances of turmoil in the relationship with his parents. As previously mentioned, Patrick's parents are unaware of David and

Patrick's relationship when they come to town for Patrick's surprise birthday party (S5E11). Patrick's parents originally find out about the relationship from Johnny (3:30). At first, Patrick's parents appear to be unsupportive of their son being gay. Even Johnny gathered Patrick's parents seemed upset when finding out David and Patrick are together (7:07). Later, as David and Patrick are talking, it is revealed Patrick's parents do not know about the relationship. Patrick sees coming out as a big deal and thinks it may be an issue for his parents (10:30). However, David is supportive about when and how Patrick decides to come out to them. Still later in the episode, Patrick's father again seems visibly upset about Patrick being gay, yet he states they are hurt Patrick would not tell them, not that he is gay (13:50). Finally, at the surprise party, Patrick appears to be nervous about coming out to his parents. When he does come out to them, he emphasizes how happy he is with David. In turn, his parents assure him they are only concerned with his happiness (18:30). Therefore, where the episode originally leads the audience to believe Patrick's parents are unsupportive of their gay son, they end up being supportive of Patrick and his relationship. Finally, the end of the episode features websites to visit when considering coming out as an LGBTQ+ person. This resource is important as people, particularly youth, gain much of their understanding about being LGBTQ+ from media sources.

The interactions surrounding Patrick's coming out represent the complex mental gymnastics that are often involved in coming out to family members. However, the depiction of such turmoil is stereotypical in LGBTQ+ representation. Waggoner (2018) depicts how LGBTQ+ characters often contain narratives surrounding the difficulties of being queer. McInroy and Craig (2017) also cite LGBTQ+ characters often struggle with their identity. Additionally, Colwell (2020) cites LGBTQ+ characters often fear being a

disappointment to their parents. Patrick embodies each of these aspects as he fears coming out to his parents. Thus, Patrick's coming out is stereotypical as it surrounds the societal pressures of being gay. However, it also represents a complex narrative as his family ultimately accepts his being gay.

In the representation of LGBTQ+ people in television, the presence of family troubles may discourage young people from coming out due to a fear of the consequences that may occur from an unsupportive family. However, instances of overwhelming support may not prepare LGBTQ+ people for the backlash that may happen when they come out if they are surrounded by unsupportive people. Therefore, it is perhaps a more accurate representation Patrick experiences both turmoil and acceptance.

Overall, *Schitt's Creek* may be inaccurate as it only presents families overwhelmingly supportive of LGBTQ+ people. In this, the show is likely attempting to provide an example that counters many of the negative narratives surrounding being LGBTQ+ that often contain negative depictions of gay people and their family interactions. In other words, perhaps the point of *Schitt's Creek* is to depict it is normal to be gay. However, this may not be reflective of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people. This representation glosses over the general inequalities LGBTQ+ people experience in everyday life. Therefore, too simple of a narrative, whether depicting acceptance or rejection, may not do justice to the complexities of coming out and being LGBTQ+. In contrast, one positive is such a depiction demonstrates the embracing and support that should be commonplace among LGBTQ+ individuals and their families. This serves as a good guiding example and an opportunity for growth for the wider community, especially as it relates to how parents can be a safe space for their children to come out to. Thus,

while *Schitt's Creek* may not push the boundaries enough in its diversity of representing the coming out experience in family settings, it may provide a utopian example of what being LGBTQ+ should be like.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the analysis of the LGBTQ+ representation in *Schitt's Creek* reveals that the representation, while taking many steps in the right direction, may not take all the necessary steps toward equality for this minority group the opportunity presented. As demonstrated, stereotypes can be harmful because they reduce a group of people to simple characteristics that are easily digestible for people unfamiliar with a group (Hall, 1997). Common LGBTQ+ stereotypes (see McInroy & Craig, 2017) may often take the place of more complex narratives. *Schitt's Creek* is one example where common stereotypes may be chosen instead of complex narratives. This can be seen most prominently through David's hyper-femininity and Patrick's masculinity. Though Patrick's masculinity is a break from traditional LGBTQ+ stereotypes, he becomes stereotypical by being closeted to his parents. Further, the relationship dynamics between David and Patrick often take the form of a heterosexual-appearing relationship. This is prominent as the couple attempts to fit into heterosexual norms. Such observations lead to the continued privilege of heterosexual couples. The privilege of heterosexual couples is additionally observed through the lack of serious moments and sexual encounters for LGBTQ+ couples, especially when compared to the number of serious moments and sexual encounters for heterosexual people.

Clark (1969) presents four stages of representation. First is non-representation, then ridicule, regulation, and respect. These stages are perhaps a progression, containing

some transitional and overlapping elements. *Schitt's Creek* has advanced beyond the non-representation stage as the show features several LGBTQ+ characters. It has also progressed past the ridicule stage as the show does not utilize LGBTQ+ jokes and LGBTQ+ characters are not used for comedic relief. However, Clark's third stage of regulation is defined as "when the minority group is represented but in limited, socially acceptable roles" (Raley & Lucas, 2006, p. 23). Finally, the fourth stage of respect is defined as when "members of the minority group are presented in both positive and negative roles of everyday life including interacting with children and having romantic relationships" (Raley and Lucas, 2006, p. 23). Through the present analysis, it can be concluded *Schitt's Creek* likely falls somewhere between and within the third and fourth stages. This is because David and Patrick are often depicted in heteronormative roles, seemingly desiring to fit into the heteronormative culture present all around them. Additionally, the couple is highly regulated in terms of their sexual encounters and relationship roles, which serve a disciplinary function to monitor LGBTQ+ individuals and couples.

To combat this, non-heteronormalcy can look like many things. For example, having two masculine partners can cause depictions to break from stereotypical binaries that assume the most natural LGBTQ+ pairing is one feminine man and one masculine man, or two feminine men. Further, having a character who is not cisgender be in a relationship can add complexity to the representation. Additionally, having an LGBTQ+ couple that does not want hetero-expected institutions (marriage, having children, etc.) can provide a break from heteronormative expectations. However, the flip side of these boundary-breaking suggestions is often stereotypical depictions provide stability for the

couple. This can be observed, for example, in how the domesticity of David and Patrick, their desire for marriage and a family, and the hetero-normalcy of their roles aids in the perceived stability of their relationship. Stability is a marker LGBTQ+ couples have reached some level of normalcy and respect in a society that privileges heterosexual couples. Therefore, by excluding LGBTQ+ couples from traditionally heteronormative narratives, they risk being further “othered.”

These findings align with previous research which suggesting LGBTQ+ people are underrepresented (Bond, 2014) and common LGBTQ+ representations are often heteronormative and/or homophobic (Burr, 2015; Colwell, 2020; Edwards, 2020; Fisher, Hill, Grube, and Gruber, 2007; Waggoner, 2018). Such depictions of LGBTQ+ identities can be problematic as LGBTQ+ youth often look to fictional media characters to discover their sense of identity (Berry and Asamen, 1993; McInroy & Craig, 2017). Additionally, other people also look to media characters and figures to gather their sense of groups they do not often encounter (Gray, 2009; Gross, 1994; Hart, 2000). Thus, media representations can have a large impact on how people understand and treat those with LGBTQ+ identities. Because media representations dictate many cultural hegemonies, media representations of minority groups have an impact on the lived experiences of minority groups (Berry, 2000; Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007).

These findings have great implications for LGBTQ+ people. If LGBTQ+ people are continually represented in ways that are stereotypical, one-dimensional, and lacking diversity, they will continue to feel as though they must fit into these categories. This can be harmful for youth seeking to develop an intersectional identity. Further, seeing homosexual identities continue to be regulated and forced into heteronormative ideals

reinforces cultural hegemonies that privilege cisgender/heterosexual people. Such regulation and reinforcement are how hegemonies function across social issues to reproduce dominant cultural narratives. While *Schitt's Creek* does take steps to provide representation for queer people, and in many ways does it well, it ultimately fails to live up to the potential equality of representation that could have been created for LGBTQ+ people in the sitcom genre.

As other studies have shown, *Schitt's Creek* provides many positive and valuable additions to LGBTQ+ representation, but it is still limited in some key respects. It can be difficult and complicated to identify, understand, and combat harmful stereotypes. However, perhaps the best way to increase positive representation is to increase the diversity of characters/roles and the complexity of narratives for LGBTQ+ identities. Even when this is done, it still may be difficult to quantify when representation is done “well” or is “good”. Therefore, issues of representation for minority groups may be an ongoing topic until further equality in society is achieved.

There is much opportunity for future research in LGBTQ+ representation. For example, it is necessary to examine how traditional forms of media, such as television, can be changed and adapted into newer forms of media, such as streaming services. One must consider the effects streaming services may have on the realities of minority groups as compared to traditional cable consumption of media. One could examine the effects of binge-watching on consumers to see if binge-watching has any effect on how characters and storylines are perceived, especially as it relates to minority groups. Mass consumption may have an effect on the meaning-making process experienced by consumers.

Further, opportunities continually present themselves for comparative analyses across different television shows. As LGBTQ+ representation continues to increase in television, the content of representation must be continually evaluated. Therefore, continuing research should examine the types of representation present in new shows as they are released and compare them to other shows demonstrating positive representation. Other research questions and different frames of analysis could lend itself well to the further exploration of this topic. For example, a thematic and coded analysis could be useful to further compare instances of homosexual versus heterosexual depictions.

Additionally, more LGBTQ+ analyses are necessary concerning newer forms of media, such as social media apps like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. Television is produced by someone and for someone. However, newer forms of media often allow individuals to create their own representation through the creation of their own content. McInroy and Craig (2017) cite that “new media was perceived as more flexible and open, and less constraining. Using new media, participants and other LGBTQ young people they knew both in-person and/or online were able to be ongoing contributors and active participants in messaging and were able to respond and react to and address LGBTQ issues and media messages” (McInroy and Craig, 2017, p. 42). Social media allows individuals to have a say in their own representation. Further, social media also allows LGBTQ+ individuals to comment on LGBTQ+ representation in other forms of media. According to Waggoner (2018), “social media platforms allow for better and more globally effective communication practices in attempting to challenge producers and creators and to warrant a need for change” (p. 1877-1878). In other words, social media allows for communities to voice their need for change, particularly against dominant

cultural narratives. Perhaps poor representation in traditional media messages has created a need for LGBTQ+ individuals to create their own representation. The effects of these spaces should be considered.

CONCLUSION

In summary, *Schitt's Creek* both resists and reinforces heteronormative values and hegemonies. It resists these values by presenting a picture of LGBTQ+ sexuality that is not questioned, resisted, or denied. This is primarily evident through how David and Patrick interact with their families and members of the town. Nobody ever questions their existence or worth. Hegemonic values are additionally disassembled through the portrayal of Patrick as a predominantly masculine, gay man who is comfortable in his sexuality. This combats a stereotypical narrative suggesting gay men must be hyper-feminine and flamboyant, or in the closet. Additionally, the LGBTQ+ characters in *Schitt's Creek* do not fall prey to becoming the point of every joke, which is typical in a comedy setting featuring minorities. Therefore, as it appears, *Schitt's Creek* presents a positive representation of LGBTQ+ identities.

However, *Schitt's Creek* often reinforces cultural hegemonies privileging cisgender/heterosexual people. This is done through the depiction of David as a hyper-feminine gay man. David is continually portrayed as unathletic and emotional. Additionally, the representation for David and Patrick differs from representation for heterosexual couples. The primary way this occurs is through the lack of sexual encounters for LGBTQ+ people, while cisgender/heterosexual people experience a wealth of sexual experiences. This creates a gap in representation for LGBTQ+ identities and perhaps furthers the stigmatization of gay sex. Finally, *Schitt's Creek* may include

depictions that are too simplistic to grasp the historic oppression existing for LGBTQ+ individuals. In other words, *Schitt's Creek* represents characters and storylines that fall into common stereotypes and tropes, while lacking the complexity of reality. This is perhaps due to the genre of comedy lacking, in general, narrative development.

Therefore, empowering elements of the show are often undercut by comedy.

The conclusions drawn in this study represent a post-modern interpretation which finds things do not fit easily together because this is not representative of reality.

Representation is a complex endeavor because many representations both reinforce and resist common narratives at the same time, especially about minority groups. Thus, *Schitt's Creek* pushes boundaries in the category of LGBTQ+ representation but may not push them far enough. This is such because the audience sees LGBTQ+ sexuality, but in an extremely safe form. Safe representation creates a myth of empowerment for LGBTQ+ individuals. In other words, on the surface, LGBTQ+ identities seem to be empowered through the representation found in *Schitt's Creek*. However, a closer look may reveal there are still discrepancies between how cisgender/heterosexual people are portrayed and how LGBTQ+ identities are portrayed. Ultimately, these portrayals matter because they aid in shaping the reality of LGBTQ+ people and society. They aid in the formation of wider understandings and cultural knowledge about how to challenge dominant discourses and hegemonies. Without boundary-breaking representation, dominant discourses which oppress others may continue to be unknowingly enforced.

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