LGBT Representation
In Animated Media for Adolescents

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So What?
Statistics

TGNC: Transgender/Gender Non-Conforming

**TGNC**

- 53% of TGNC individuals believe society regards them as “freaks/abominations/undesirable”

- 33% of TGNC individuals believe that society’s negative perceptions of trans people come from media portrayals

**TRANS**

- 84% of trans adults report experiencing depression for at least one year

Crisis within queer community as researched and reported by Steele et al., McCallum et al., and Rood et al.
36% of trans people experience regular suicidal ideation

10% of trans respondents reported attempting suicide at least once within the last year

Queer youth are 2 times as likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual adolescents, 3.5 times more likely to self harm, and 5 times as likely to experience suicidal ideation
Thesis Map

1. How Do We Define "Affirming"?
2. Affirming Representation
3. Unaffirming Representation
4. Denotation vs Connotation
5. Steven Universe
6. Voltron: Legendary Defender
7. Audience Reappropriation
8. Conclusion
9. Additional Information/Next Steps
D.A. Miller

Denotation vs. Connotation

Unintentional

Implied

Conspicuous
Andi Mack s. 3 ep. 11 (Feb 8, 2019)

Cyrus comes out on Disney channel exclusive

and I’m gay.
But why isn’t denotative representation enough?
"Affirming"

- Accurate
- Considerate
- Demarginalizing
- Validating
Steven Universe

- Imaginative, coming-of-age tale
- Steven
- Homeworld/Crystal Gems
- Themes of goodness, imperialism, family, and identity

2013- present on Cartoon Network
“We need to let children know they belong in this world... You have to tell them while they’re still children that they deserve love and that they deserve support and that people will be excited to hear their story”

(Romano)
Categories of Representation in *Steven Universe*

- **Gems**
- **Pearl; Ruby & Sapphire**
- **Amethyst**
Agender Representation
Gemstones & “Poofing”

“Our bodies are actually projections generated by our gemstone. Think of it like a hologram but with mass”

(“What Are Gems?” 00:00:23-29)
Agender Representation

The Body as a Projection
Gender
Unlimited
by Binary
Lesbian Representation

Pearl; Ruby & Sapphire
Sugar’s Roadblocks to Representation

“It was a little bit like staring into the sun” (Romano)
Denotative Representation
Trans Representation

Amethyst
Stuck in the Wrong Body

Amethyst and Gender Dysphoria

- All gems are grown in the earth
- Amethyst was “overcooked” (in the earth too long)
- This leads to stunted appearance, ridicule from peers, and a feeling of being born in the wrong body
Bodily Projection and Gender Performativity

- Dissatisfaction
- Self-creation
- Comparison to a gem that “came out right”
- Dysphoria
- Community and solidarity
- Comfortably performs her identity
Amethyst Design Progression
Steven Universe as a Model for Affirming Representation

• Accurate- takes into account the real struggles of queer people
• Considerate- characterizations rely on creators’ experiences, not tropes
• Demarginalizing- identities are never Othered
• Validating- characters are heroes
Voltron: Legendary Defender
Unaffirming Representation

Easier to pinpoint in media

- “Queerbaiting”
- Reliance on degrading tropes/stereotypes
- Isolating/villainizing queer identities
Voltron: Legendary Defender

- 2016-2018 on Netflix
- Science fiction mech show
- Led by creators who made *The Legend of Korra*
Comments on LGBT Representation

Show Creators Dodging Questions or Baiting Fans?

Story editor Tim Hendrick:
“I think I’ll just let that play out as we go”
(Kelley)

Executive producer Lauren Montgomery:
“We have those first 13 episodes, and if we ever went beyond that, we would like to push the envelope”
(“Voltron Special”)

Executive producer Joaquin Dos Santos:
“We’re fighting to create as open and as broad a spectrum of characters as we can”
(“Voltron NYCC 2017 Recap”)

Queerbaiting

Netflix ANZ @NetflixANZ · 1d
Queer Eye but it stars 5 fierce, proud, colourful robot lions oh wait that’s Voltron

Thank you all for asking. Yes, we ship klance.

09/08/2018, 01:43

1,688 Retweets 3,560 Likes
“Psycho Lesbian” trope
“SLAUGHTERING YOUR GAYS”
Even if it isn’t the “original” Shiro dying, the audience still sees the physical representation/persona of the one canonically gay hero die an unreasonable number of times.
Audience Reappropriation

A Solution to Fallible Media

• Even if a text misrepresents or insufficiently represents a community, it isn’t necessarily irredeemable

• Fan works can recreate texts and forge community
  • Zines, fanfiction, fanart, cosplay, conventions, etc.
“Fan critics work to resolve gaps, to explore excess details and undeveloped potentials. This mode of interpretation draws them far beyond the information explicitly present and toward the construction of a meta-text that is larger, richer, more complex and interesting than the original series” (Jenkins 278).
“Once television characters enter into a broader circulation... they belong to their audience and not simply to the artists who originated them. Media texts, thus, can and must be remade by their viewers so that potentially significant materials can better speak to the audience’s cultural interests and more fully address their desires” (Jenkins 279).
Conclusion

• Affirming the identities and value of queer adolescents by including them in our narratives
• No text is ever going to be perfect, but texts can be redeemed
• With the ability to distinguish between affirming and unaffirming representation, allies of the queer community can make an active effort to support positive instances of representation
More Information for Allies

- Renewal on online streaming websites: social media, “thumbs up,” viewership (Prudom)
- Human Rights Campaign 2018 LGBTQ Youth Report available at the front
Works Cited


