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## Part of This World: A Personal Exploration of Media and Queer Identity

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PART OF THIS WORLD: A PERSONAL EXPLORATION OF MEDIA AND QUEER  
IDENTITY

A culminating project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Humanities

By

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San Rafael, California  
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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's Program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Humanities. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
In the Beginning.....	4
Queering Childhood.....	9
Middle School Melodrama.....	16
High School Politics.....	21
Small Screen Outing.....	28
Moving On(line).....	39
Conclusion.....	50
References.....	55

## **Abstract**

This paper is a mix of research and personal narrative exploring the impact of television, film, and online media on identity formation. I look specifically at my own identity as a queer person and how it has been shaped by what I have seen and experienced as a young queer and as an educator. Topics discussed include homophobia in the classroom and workplace, the impact of social media on youth development and identity formation, and our changing culture as queer visibility increases. This piece is primarily a personal reflection that runs from early childhood to adulthood. It addresses social interactions that I have had with coworkers, family, peers, and students around queer identity both explicitly and implicitly. Ultimately, it concludes that while significant social progress has been made in terms of the treatment and perception of queer persons within western society, there is still a need for change.

*Keywords:* Queer, Media, Youth, Identity, Reflection

## Introduction

My choice to focus on the impact of media and popular culture on identity formation was influenced by spending the majority of my adolescence in the rural South in a mostly homogeneous community comprised of conservative Southern Baptists. As an outsider--a California transplant who never quite fit in--I had to look elsewhere for connections. When I was younger, I turned to books, but later I moved on to movies and online communities in search of others like me. I wasn't just different because I was from out of state, I was also different because I was gay. As an adult I know that I was not the only person in that community who was different. There were a handful of others who would grow up, come out, and leave town.

Much like the ones that came before it, this current generation is heralded as the most liberal yet, and specifically as the most accepting of queer people. I realize from working with youth that there is still room for improvement--even in an urban and notoriously liberal environment like the San Francisco Bay Area. The Human Rights Campaign's *Growing Up LGBTQ in America* survey polled more than 10,000 LGBTQ identified youth between the ages of 13 to 17 and gathered information about their community experiences. Almost half of the LGBTQ youth surveyed reported that they did not feel that they fit in with their community, in contrast only 16 percent of heterosexual youth reported similar feelings. An alarming 63% of LGBTQ youth also stated that they thought they would need to move to another part of the country in order to feel accepted (Shelton & Winkelstein, 2014). Even now, research has shown that while LGBTQ youth make up only 5-7% of the general youth population, they account for nearly 40% of the youth who experience homelessness. Research has also made it clear

that youth who experience homophobia are more likely than average to engage in self-destructive behavior (McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008).

As an educator, there is not a week that goes by where I am not mediating bullying around identity or speaking to students about their usage of homophobic slurs against their classmates. From speaking with my students, I have learned that not only are they subjected to homophobia in the classroom, but at home as well. Many students, including those who do not identify as queer, report that they experience the use of homophobic language by their families. However, this language usage is often of a more casual nature and not necessarily indicative of explicit homophobic views.

Given the prominent role that popular media plays in our society and the overexposure that youth have to it between television, internet, and social media, I think it is important to look at how contemporary media portrays queer individuals and to assess the impact that these portrayals have on the identity formation of queer persons and on the perceptions, that non-queer persons have of those who identify as queer. Media is a cultural touchstone and is increasingly becoming the way in which Americans learn about the world around them and the people in it. I run a school based community program for youth between the ages of 12 and 15 and separating them from their phones is nearly impossible. Even when they are in a room full of other people their access to media is what connects them to the world around them and what shapes their engagement with others.

Because of these experiences I am focusing on how media and popular culture representations of queer persons shape identity formation of queer individuals, and additionally on how these representations influence the beliefs that non-queer identifying



individuals hold about queer persons. I use the term “queer” instead of the acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) because it is a more inclusive umbrella term that can be broadly applied to individuals who do not identify as cisgender or heterosexual. I am specifically looking at how media has influenced my identity over time and will be examining not just the impact of media on my thoughts and perceptions of the world, but also the impact that day to day social experiences have had on me.

## **In the Beginning**

Identity is often thought of as the communal ontology which shapes self-concept from birth onward. To put this more simply, individuals are given a name, assigned a gender, and begin the identity-shaping process before they are even capable of cognizant thought. Identity is the conception, qualities, and beliefs that make up an individual. It is the distinctive characteristics belonging to any given individual or a group of people with shared cultural or social experiences. Identity is what enables people to position themselves within society, and is the primary means through which individuals build connections with others, both through shared identities and differences.

Identity is not just about individual self-concept and understanding however, it is also a means of gaining power, both socially and politically. For example, if one looks at the majority of the leaders within the western world, not just historically but also presently, one will find that most of them are cisgender, heterosexual, white males, and that they are frequently from middle to upper-class families and in possession of a high-quality education. Identity can be examined through several different frameworks, from developmental psychology with Erik Erikson's psychosocial model and the development of self-concept over the course of a person's lifetime, to Judith Butler's discussions of performance studies and the theory that a person's identity is a form of performance which is shaped by both their subconsciously led actions and their intentional actions and how this performativity can be both consciously and subconsciously influenced by social experiences including those from media and popular culture.

Some of my earliest childhood memories are of feeling different, particularly alone. I am the sixth of seven kids, so I was never actually alone, but I was always just a

little bit different. Of her seven children, my early childhood is the most memorable for my mother--and possibly also the hardest. Part of this may be because there is an eight-year gap between me and my closest in age older sibling, but I think much of it has to do with the fact that I was just different. I was *difficult*. I threw epic tantrums and destroyed things.

When she talks about my oldest brother as a baby and toddler she talks about how sweet and loving he was. She talks about how when he was two or three they lived in an apartment with a living room in the center and he would line all of his matchbox cars up in the hallway that circled it and pretend it was a big track. She talks about how when my second older brother was born, and the ambulance and the fire truck came, (because he was accidentally born at home) my oldest brother was so excited because he got to meet firemen and whenever he would talk about his baby brother he would talk about how he thought the firemen brought him. When he got two little sisters in quick succession, barely a year apart, he used to tell her how pretty they were in their little dresses and how much he loved them. My mother describes him as protective--as the oldest surviving child and a boy growing up in the 70s and 80s he sounds fairly typical. All of her memories of him are good or cute. He loved his little siblings and he loved his Inchworm ride on toy and he had trouble pronouncing the words "bird" and "magazine."

It's not surprising that my mother has clear memories of my oldest brother and then the next three kids sort of blur together. My second brother followed around my first like a shadow. And my two older sisters were so close in age they were basically a matched set complete with red hair and freckles.

When she talks about me it's different.

I didn't want to be held as an infant. I screamed all of the time--in the house, outside, during the day, at night, and the entire drive to and from Grandma's every Sunday. When I got a little bit older I threw epic tantrums. I would shriek and throw myself on the ground and slam around. I don't know if it was because I didn't get my way, or just because I could. The memories from my early childhood aren't clear enough for me to verify whether or not the tantrums started before or after my little sister was born when I was almost three, but I know they had stopped by the time I was in school full days--so six or seven. But their legacy has followed me. Which is funny, because now, as an adult, I am probably the most even tempered and patient of my siblings. But, still, they are what colors my family's perception of me and what fills their memories of me as a child.

Admittedly, I do remember some of the awful things that I did as a little kid. I remember going into my older sisters' bedroom and cutting all of the hair off of their Barbies, I remember pouring nail polish remover on their carpet (I have no idea why I did this, but I know it happened more than once), and I have a lot of memories of being in their closet. When I was about four I got my hands on a pair of scissors and went to town on some of my mom's clothes, paying special attention to the collars and hems. I didn't lash out at my dad or my brothers like this. Instead, I admired them and aspired to be like them, especially my brother Donald who is twelve years older than me. I wanted to skateboard like him, dress like him, play videogames like him, and have the freedom to roam around and explore like he did--without consequences.

I can trace my otherness to earlier than I can trace my concept of queerness, but there are still markers of it even in some of my earliest memories.

I remember a conversation with my mom when I was four or five. I was pouring myself a giant bowl of cereal at the kitchen table and she asked me why I thought I needed so much. I told her that it was so that I could grow up and be a big strong man. I was upset when she told me that I was not, in fact, going to grow up and be a man. And I was also frightened because there was a harshness to her tone. I never said anything like that again. If I asked her about it now, more than twenty years later, I doubt that she would remember the incident, but like a lot of things that are off about childhood in retrospect it has stuck with me.



*Figure 1 Roller skating in the house*

I was a weird little kid. I was mean, anxious, and kind of lonely. From the ages of about three to five I had an imaginary friend named DeDe. As mentioned previously, I had a lot of siblings, but most of them were too old to be interested in me, and the younger one was too young for me to pay any attention to. So, I created DeDe. DeDe was exactly like me, a counterpart to what I called myself at the time (MeMe), except Canadian and, well, evil. DeDe was responsible for my destruction of my family's belongings. DeDe was why I poured baby powder all over the living room carpet. DeDe was why I jumped off of the top bunk in my sisters' bedroom and then lay on the floor like a broken turtle. I could only aspire to be as awesome as DeDe. DeDe, much like all of the characters that I admired in media during my childhood, was a villain.

She was not a Disney princess or any of the things that are associated with the typical little girl. Instead she was powerful and evil like Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, Cruella De Vil from *101 Dalmatians*, and Scar from *The Lion King*. All of those characters did okay on their own, they didn't need other people who were like them. Or maybe I just wasn't watching all the way to the end of the movies—what little kid has that kind of attention span?

## Queering Childhood

I have very clear memories of being four years old and watching Disney's *The Little Mermaid* on a loop. I was obsessed with the film—I watched it before I went to Head Start, I watched it after I came home, I watched it on weekends, and I battled my older siblings over control of the VCR so that I could watch it. (The endless shrieking made me a natural winner.) I had the sheets, towels, and toothbrush. I loved that Ariel, the mermaid princess, had red hair like my mom and my sisters, but mostly I loved Ursula the sea-witch.

When I was thinking about my own childhood media obsessions this was the first one that came to mind, it is also the first thing that any of my family members would mention if you asked them. As an adult who works in education and runs day camps during the summer, I make a point of avoiding any and all media marketed toward children. So, it has understandably been a very long time since I have rewatched *The Little Mermaid*. So long, in fact, that I managed to block out the part where Ursula dies at the end. Prince Eric spears her with his giant ship and is clearly the true monster in the story. While this film is not overtly queer, one of the strongest themes in it is that of otherness. As a child I could relate to that, I could connect with Ursula who was power hungry and had some serious temper issues and I could connect with Ariel who wanted legs so that she could be like everyone else (those on land, anyway).

Children's exposure to media starts at a very early age, long before they are able to exercise critical thinking skills. They are wrapped in a cocoon of Disney sponsored princesses and stereotyped gender identity and this becomes normal. While the realm of children's media has been an area that most adults steer clear of when it comes to actually

watching it, they are still guilty of consuming it through their purchases and reinforcing it. Determining what is and is not appropriate in terms of censorship, however, is another matter entirely.

Currently, in the United States, children's media is dominated by two major networks: Disney and Nickelodeon. Both of these networks cater primarily to viewers under the age of twelve; however, they do offer some additional programming for young teens. Of American homes with at least one television 82.7% have access to Disney and 81.4% have access to Nickelodeon, making them the two most popular networks designed for youth (Seidman, 2015).

While children's television has been found to universally uphold mainstream heterosexuality without openly alluding to the concept of homosexuality, there have been instances of resistance to heteronormativity. Within the genre of children's television, it has been found that queer visibility does not match up with images that are made available on mainstream television for adults (Dennis, 2009). This is increasingly problematic as it aligns with the thinking that queer identity is something that children should be sheltered from or, worse, that it is actually exposure to other queers that creates that identity and not a standard life process. However, being queer is not something that is transmittable like the chicken pox, and a lack of reference images about this identity does not actually act as a vaccine. Research indicates that the reinforcement of sex roles and gender stereotypes begins in very early children's programming with shows like *Teletubbies*, which is geared toward infants and toddlers and *Barney and Friends*, which is marketed to toddlers and preschoolers. Even within programming aimed at very young children gender stereotypes are frequently reinforced with girls often being portrayed as



followers and boys given more opportunity to take on leadership roles (Powell & Abels, 2002).

One of the primary reasons behind why representation in children's television does not match with representation for adults is the potential for public disapproval. Backlash has occurred when queer characters are represented in other types of children's media; for example, many of the most frequently challenged children's books include explicit queer themes like *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Daddy's Roommate*, and *And Tango Makes Three*. This invisibility in children's media is harmful and is indicative of a silencing of the normalization of queer potential in shows and films targeted at youth.

Yet this is not to say that there is no evidence of queer identity or non-heteronormativity within children's media. While programs targeted at teens tend to show a normal and stereotypical life, and those designed for children show them living in standard nuclear families, there is queer subtext. Most queer subtext takes place between secondary characters while primary characters are portrayed as staunchly heterosexual. This parallels with the idea that the social majority is heterosexual with only outliers, or tertiary characters, falling outside of that framework. For example, it is not uncommon when accused of homophobia for people to claim that they have gay friends, while within their own personal universe, where they are the star of the show, they are not gay. The majority of viewers of mainstream media are also likely to fall into the category of not gay. The problem with this is that it continues to reinforce the othering of queer identities. When looking to media for personal representation queer people, particularly queer youth, are given the image that they are only minor players with less value and less interesting storylines.

Even within children's television there is a link between gender expression and sexual identity. For the most part gender in children's media aligns with the cisgendered binary that associates those who are assigned female at birth with being girls and women and those who are assigned male at birth as being boys and men. From the prescribed gender identities, particular behaviors around sexual identity are extrapolated. Romance is a surprisingly popular storyline even within children's media. Hints of same-sex desire are more likely to occur in live action media designed for pre-teens and teens, but the dominant view is always heterosexual. It is also unusual to see any hints of female homosexuality; while the tomboy trope exists it is not generally connected with a young female character being gay.

Disney's *Mulan* (1998) is an example of crossing heteronormative boundaries in animated film. The titular character Fa Mulan dresses as a boy in order to take her ailing father's place in the military. Throughout the film Mulan must work to keep her true identity a secret from the young men that she is serving with in order to not bring shame upon her family (Bancroft & Cook, 1998). During the film Mulan falls in love with the military leader she is serving under and in the end, after Mulan returns home to her family and the crushing embrace of femininity, they become a couple. At the end of the film Mulan is more feminine than she was at the beginning, and is now prepared to embrace the female role in marriage. The part where she fell in love with a man while dressed as one and the potential conflicts that could arise in that situation are completely glossed over. The object of her affection is only shown loving her when she has reverted to the female role, which works to eliminate potential queer subtext. Their love is acceptable because she is presenting as a woman again, and there is no indication that the

male lead would have been capable of loving her if she were a man, even though it was her actions while she was disguised as one that he admired. This film also reinforces the idea that youthful gender crossing, or tomboyism, is something that young people will eventually outgrow. At the beginning Mulan was being prepared to visit the village matchmaker and had to undergo a makeover and etiquette training so that she could acquire a good husband. In the end of the film she has reconciled with her social position (for the most part) as all young women are eventually expected to do.

But, Mulan is never presented as queer. She is not attracted to women while in the role of a man, and she is not set up as actually identifying as one. This lack of queer female visibility relates to the historical context of female friendships which has allowed for more intimacy within western cultural standards than in male friendships. Young girls are able to engage in more intimate behavior, such as handholding and emotional communication than boys without accusations of homosexuality. This may be a result of the historical ignorance that surrounds issues of female sexuality which has resulted in women being perceived as sexual objects, but not as sexual beings. Hints are also common in animated series, particularly those with fantasy elements, but heterosexuality is still dominant and at the forefront. Live action and animated programs will sometimes have queer stereotypes as drama or gym teachers, however non-child or adolescent characters are consistently portrayed with stereotyped mannerisms while never being openly acknowledged as queer (Dennis, 2009).

*Mulan* is somewhat different than how transvestism is typically portrayed in children's media because the character is not set up to be an object of ridicule, nor is she seeking any form of social gain. More frequently when this appears it is because the

character doing the crossing wants to be involved with a member of the opposite sex and thinks that by infiltrating their same-sex social group they will be able to learn more about them and use this knowledge to their advantage. This structure is usually seen when young males participate in cross dressing, likely because unlike when females do it there is no cultural gain in being female only personal. Viewers tend to deny that these elements of subversion exist on the queer spectrum and instead laugh them off (Dennis, 2009).

Overall, while heteronormativity is disrupted somewhat frequently in children's programming, primarily in animated more than live action, it tends to go unnoticed by adult viewers because animation is generally seen as less threatening than live action. Whether or not these are deliberate introductions of transgressive themes by writers as a political strategy or just harmless jokes designed for adult viewers, who are able to read more into them than children, is unclear.

But regardless of what the adults are thinking when they design this media, the young people exposed to it are forging their own connections just like I was. They are figuring out what it means to be different and determining who they will support based on how they see themselves reflected. I didn't grow up to be a majestic sea-witch like Ursula with the power to steal people's voices, but I was a lonely and strange kid so I related to her. I never had to disguise myself as someone else in order to join the military and protect my family, but I could empathize with not fitting in to the typical feminine mold and with feeling like I was putting on a disguise and a performance. I think that even if there are no overtly queer images in media, children will find their own ways to

relate to characters that represent differences even if they don't know that's what they're doing at the time.

## Middle School Melodrama

Two shows that ran from the 1990s to the early 2000s which gathered fairly large lesbian followings were *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). Even though neither of them are airing any longer, they still maintain a strong cult following. Both series featured prominent female characters with either the open acknowledgement of lesbianism or queer identity written into their subtext (Collier et. al., 2009). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* hosted the secondary character Willow who was a close friend of the titular lead from the first episode until the last (Whedon, 1997). While Willow was not openly gay throughout the entire run of the series, having a steady boyfriend throughout high school, she did come out in season four. Willow's coming out experience mirrors that of many--testing the water with members of the opposite sex and then coming out later in high school or college. Because of this, viewers questioning their sexuality have been able to use the character of Willow as a mirror for questioning and exploring their own identities and experiences. In *Xena: Warrior Princess* the lead character, Xena, is not identified as lesbian, however she had a very strong relationship with a female friend that could be read as romantic given their care and devotion to one another (Tapert & Raimi, 1995). While it was never explicitly stated that Xena was in a relationship with her companion Gabrielle, it was strongly implied during the sixth and final season of the show. It has also been stated by the producer that Xena will be openly gay in the reboot (Brathwaite, 2016). Viewers have used these shows to better determine the relationship that they have with the world around them, allowing their identities to be shaped by them directly, or they have fashioned their own identities by the texts of media representation (Collier, 2009). Both

Xena and Willow represent strong and independent female characters who are making it in the world on their own without relying on the support of a male character.

As established earlier in this paper identity, or the perception of identity, is shaped in a variety of different ways. Cultural knowledge is frequently gained through exposure to media such as film and television, but also online experiences, which is a shift from earlier times when there was less mainstream media and identity was developed more from direct community engagement experiences. According to the social constructionist viewpoint there is a relationship between the text and the meaning interpreted by the individual viewer, and as such individuals are actively fashioning a self by means of the messages and meaningful content supplied by media products (Collier et. al., 2009). The audience is less a passive viewer and more an active, thoughtful, engaged, searching, and critical spectator who is taking in the images and information gained from the media that they are viewing, or reading in the form of online discourse, and reiterating that out in the world through their own performance and behavior.

Participants in a study on the impact of media on identity conducted by Collier et. al. reported searching television and other mediums when going through the sexual identity formation process, further proof that this can be an active process (2009). They expressed a need to clarify the confusion that they were feeling about their about sexual identity, decrease feelings of social isolation, and a desire to develop a sense of community with others. They found that Xena's and Willow's representations of strong women existed as a means of feeling more normal and relating to others with shared identities when those people may not be readily available within their home communities. Xena and Willow provided positive affirmation for lesbian experiences, especially with

Willow as an out character and the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. However, some interpreted the unconditional love and relationships as negative due to internalized feelings of self-disgust, but continued exposure to the positive did help many to overcome their negative self-concept. The study concluded that lesbian audiences create their own interpretive communities and actively participate in constructing meaning from mediated images. Queer visibility in media has an overwhelming positive impact on queer-identified viewers seeking to relate their identity to the world around them and they need positive representations.

I watched a lot of Buffy the Vampire Slayer in junior high and high school. I started watching it in eighth grade and I think a lot of what drew me to it was that the characters were dealing with so much change in their lives and huge secrets. I was not slaying vampires and trying to keep it a secret, or hanging out at the school librarian's house, but there was a lot of instability in my life. I lived in Arkansas and Texas in seventh grade, and then moved back to California in eighth grade after being gone for three years. My living situation was not the most stable. I stayed with a friend for the first few months of eighth grade while my mom was trying to find a job and a place for us to live, and then I moved in with my cousin and her family. I had to switch schools, and at some point, my mom went back to Arkansas to live with an old boyfriend. I'm not entirely sure how the decision making process around that worked. There was a lot of loss that year, my mom leaving me and my younger sister in California (but not together, my sister was in the Bay Area and I was in Humboldt County) and my dad dying. It's also when I can identify my first serious crush on a girl. I was lonely, which is a pretty common theme in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and I was also living without direct adult



supervision which is something that is experienced by the characters on the show as well. While this was a little before the rise of helicopter parenting, there is a fairly extreme level of disconnect between the teens on Buffy and their parents which made my own seem less bizarre.

The character that I identified most with in the series, unsurprisingly, was Willow. When looked at over the entire course of the series she is one of the characters that is the most like a typical adolescent. She experiences the awkwardness and shyness that many youth do in the early years of high school, has conflicts with close friends complete with crushes on people who do not reciprocate her feelings, and discovers important things about herself—first that she is a witch, and then that she is gay. And, even later into the series, once she is fairly established in her identity she still goes through the awkward experience of having to come out to new people, like in this exchange between herself, her girlfriend Tara, and Nigel a visiting character on the show:

**Willow:** Questions. Great.

**Tara:** W-we can answer questions.

**Nigel:** Good. I need to know a little bit more about the Slayer, and about the both of you. Your relationship, whatever you can tell me.

**Tara:** O-o-our relationship?

**Willow:** We're friends.

**Tara:** Good friends.

**Willow:** Girlfriends, actually.

**Tara:** Yes, we're girlfriends.

**Willow:** We're in love. W-we're lovers. We're lesbian, gay-type lovers.

**Nigel:** I meant your relationship with the Slayer.

Even as an adult this random exchange is still relatable. Coming out is not a one-time event, it is something that has to be repeated under a variety of different circumstances. As a queer person it can be difficult to decide exactly how much to reveal about one's self and when it is necessary to share versus when it might be better to just keep your mouth shut.

For heterosexuals revealing that one has a spouse or partner is not typically met with a room full of awkward silence or judgmental coworkers. It also does not typically elicit a series of invasive questions about when you knew that was the gender that you were attracted to or, worse, outright rejection. For most I think that it gets easier over time, either because the older you are the easier it is to ensure that you are surrounded by people that you can trust with personal information, or because the more you practice something the less daunting it tends to be.

## **High School Politics**

When I entered high school I found myself increasingly aware of issues regarding human rights and politics, which I think is a fairly common experience for young people. I was in eighth grade when 9/11 took place and for many of the people in my peer group the reality of that event launched us into thinking more critically about politics and paying better attention to what was happening in the news than we had previously. All of the youth in my friend group at the time were vocally anti-war and pro equal rights, at least the friends that I had when I was living in California.

The first time that I participated in political action I was living in rural Arkansas. It was April, about a week before I turned sixteen, and I was a sophomore. I had been in California for part of the year previously and had learned about GLSEN's annual Day of Silence campaign. The goal of the campaign is to raise awareness about LGBTQ bullying in schools and the silencing of queer youth, in order to do this students pledge to remain silent during the school day. I drafted up a card to share with my friends about why I was choosing not to speak that day, and I encountered no issues on the actual day. The following day a few of my teachers were made aware of what I had done by some other students and I was subjected to a public lecture by my biology teacher, at the urging of a classmate with differing political views. She told me that if she had known what I was doing she would have had me suspended. She told me that she thought that I was smart enough not to support homosexuality. I wrote about this experience in an editorial for my journalism class two weeks later and was told that it was too controversial for my teacher to accept for credit, even though these editorials were not for publication, and I was instructed to do the assignment again. I wrote a second editorial about my experience

writing the first editorial and my journalism teacher gave up on making me redo the assignment. As an adult looking back on this experience I know that the appropriate thing to have done would have been to communicate with the administration about my decision to participate in GLSEN's campaign. But, I also recognize that had I done so I likely would not have been given permission to participate and that repercussions for doing so would have included suspension.

This event took place in the early days of social media, when *MySpace* was still a new form of networking and before most teenagers had access to their own cell phones, let alone smartphones. At the time, I was part of an LGBTQ blogging group online and I shared about my experience there, but that was the extent of it.

About a year later, after *MySpace* became more prominent, I learned about the issue of reparative therapy, a process developed to change a person's sexual orientation under the understanding that homosexuality is a mental disorder. A teen from Tennessee became very prominent in the realm of social media after he came out to his parents and wrote a blog post about how they had told him that they would be sending him to a Christian program that would help him to overcome his homosexuality. I was about the same age as the teen in question and just coming to terms with my own sexuality and was pretty horrified. This incident was later documented in the film *This is What Love in Action Looks Like* which criticized the group that was offering this therapy, at the time called Love in Action (but known as Restoration Path since 2012).

Most of what I remember about that time is a general sense of helplessness mixed with outrage. More than ten years later, when I think about these issues I feel pretty much the same, except now, working with youth, I understand that even a little bit of

encouragement and the smallest bit of safety that I can offer is able to go a long way. I am also an educator myself now and work to make sure that my personal biases do not interfere with how I respond to my students.

I was a junior from 2004-2005 and one of my required classes at my high school in California was a semester long composition course. Our big project for that class was a research paper, and as part of that project my classmates and I had to go out into the community and interview people about their opinions or experiences as they related to our topic. I chose to research California's Assembly Bill 849 which was proposed by Congressman Mark Leno and which, if passed would redefine marriage as gender neutral in the state of California. This statewide proposal followed the controversial issuance of same-sex marriage licenses in the city-county of San Francisco in 2004.

I ended up conducting two interviews, one from each side of the debate. I spoke with a representative from the RAVEN Project, my local branch of the Youth Services Bureau which provided outreach for youth and young adults related to homelessness, sexuality, and other issues. I also spoke with the pastor from the Baptist church across the street from my apartment building. I only vaguely remember my interview with the worker from the RAVEN Project, mostly that I ended up speaking to someone other than who I had set up a meeting with and that they were located in this old house with super steep stairs and no handrail. But the pastor I spoke to was memorable, at least in terms of the advice that he gave me. He had come up with an elaborate metaphor about the evils of homosexuality which incorporated fire (very biblical) and houses. He said that fire in the home to heat it or for pleasure was good, and that fire used to bake bread in the oven was very, very, good, but that fire in the roof and walls of a house was very dangerous. My

take away from this was that it was totally okay for heterosexual married couples to have sex, and even better if they were doing it for the purpose of procreation, but that homosexuals led to incidences of spontaneous combustion. In September of 2005 Governor Schwarzenegger vetoed the bill, but I still submitted my paper as my writing sample with my college applications.

In 2008 same sex marriage was legalized in the state of California after it was determined that not allowing it violated the state constitution. I was twenty and in college and I remember that for the handful of months that it was legal everyone was pretty excited—well, everyone that I spent time with (re: people at my liberal women's college). As a direct response to this, California's Proposition 8 was launched and made it onto the November ballot. Proposition 8 was designed to overthrow the ruling that legalized same-sex marriage in the state, and ultimately it passed. We got rid same-sex marriage the same year that we elected our first Black president.

One of the things that I remember most about Proposition 8, aside from the fact that a lot of the push to get it passed was coming from outside of the state and that there was a significant amount of misinformation being shared, was the random scare campaigns that began to pop up as commercials, and as I saw them, internet videos. One of my favorite Proposition 8 ads was one that used scare tactics about how if it was not passed then gay marriage would be taught in public schools. The commercial was called *Princes* and featured a little girl who had just gotten home from school meeting her mom in the kitchen and holding out her new library book.

**Little Girl:** Mom, guess what I learned in school today.

**Mom:** What, sweetie?

**Little Girl:** I learned how a prince married a prince, and I can marry a princess!

(VoteYesOnProp8, 2008)

The book, of course, was the children's book *King and King*. Research indicates that this commercial was the most successful of all of the Yes on Proposition ads that aired during the measure's campaign. I imagine that this is related to how the exchanged was framed between the mother and daughter and how easily, it appeared, that the child had accepted the story that she had been read in school (Fleischer, 2010).

Even though Proposition 8 was primarily focused on marriage rights, the information that was shared through advertisements glossed over this issue by stating that LGBTQ people would not be impacted or lose any of the rights that they previously had. Instead it focused on the issue of children's education and how they are both too young to understand queer identity and how it will in some way, negatively impact them. When looking into this topic I happened upon a less successful commercial which focused entirely on educators without including the use of children and families. Instead it included what can be construed as professional opinions from educational authorities discussing the fact that children are simply too young to be exposed to such things and that same-sex relationships are not scientifically sound as they do not result in reproduction, and therefore do not need to be covered in health classes. I have transcribed the script of one of the commercials below:

**Teacher Terry:** I can't teach this.

**Administrator Joan:** Don't be irrational Terry, that new health curriculum represents millions and millions of dollars of tax payer money.

**Teacher Terry:** No matter how you spin it, Joan, children don't come from same-sex relationships.

**Administrator Joan:** I don't like this anymore than you do, but we're going to have to teach that marriage is not just about having children.

**Teacher Terry:** Fine. Love whatever, whoever you want, just don't call it marriage and confuse a kid with a social dynamic that they can't possibly understand.

**Administrator Joan:** Our hands are tied here, Terry.

**Teacher Terry:** I became a teacher to mold the child not mess them up.

**Administrator Joan:** You're preaching to the choir.

**Teacher Terry:** Joan, kids don't get divorce, let alone gay attraction.

**Administrator Joan:** I hear you.

**Teacher Terry:** The definition of marriage doesn't need to be changed. Marriage has never denied gay couples to live as they choose.

**Administrator Joan:** You've been here for nineteen years, Terry, are you sure you want to take a stand on this hill?

[Phone rings ominously while they stare at each other.]

**Teacher Terry:** Do I have a choice? (yesonprop81025, 2008)

The conversation ends with the phone continuing to ring and the principal making extended eye contact with the teacher instead of answering it. That was possibly the most unrealistic aspect of the exchange for me because in my experience in education principals always answer the phone. But accuracy isn't necessarily the point of these commercials. The real emphasis is that gay couples lose none of their rights and



privileges and that voting in favor of it causes no harm. Except Proposition 8 did limit privileges that had already been granted. It was a wonderful and effective attempt at making things seem not so bad.

In 2015 the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in the United States requiring that marriages be honored across state lines as opposed to that decision being made by individual states. This was nine years after I graduated from high school, and five after I finished undergrad.

### Small Screen Outing

In 1969 Cedrick Clark identified four stages of media representation for minority groups: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Clark's original research did not focus on the queer community, but his findings are still applicable and can be seen in the evolution of queer identity as represented by mainstream media--particularly television. Over the last few decades, with an influx of demographic variety in mainstream programming, gays and lesbians have been able to move from the stage of non-representation into the ridicule stage, with some even moving forward into regulation and respect depending on the type of programming. While it is still somewhat unusual to find a queer character in a leading role on network television, there has been some advancement on this front with shows like *Modern Family* which features a gay couple who adopts a child and the show *Glee*, which while no longer airing, featured a gay high school student. When it comes to queer representation in media, much like with any other minority group visibility is slow going and representations are often very unsatisfying.

In the rural town where I attended high school there was no queer presence within the community, and while that does not mean that there were no queer people in that community, it does mean that the majority of the perceptions about queer people held by residents of the town were shaped by the images of them that they received via the media. Because local media is designed to cater to the specific demographic that it is serving that means that most of the messages about queer people that were being shared in the community erred on the side of conservative and were overwhelmingly negative. These images shaped not just the views that many of my classmates held about queer people, as

evidenced by my experience in the classroom, but also the views of the people who were working in our education system.

Research into the impact of queer representation in mainstream media indicates that increasing the availability of queer role models in media may positively influence queer identity and self-concept due to the fact that cultural factors often influence important psychological domains including that of self-perception (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Studies have shown that exposing children, who do not yet have a strong identification with a heterosexual or queer identity, to same-sex story characters who are strong and positive role models may enhance their positive self-concept as well. It has been made clear from the research that positive portrayals of media characters can produce changes in individual self-concept for the better. In addition to this, higher self-esteem can be accurately predicted for those who have positive role models that share their characteristics compared to queer individuals who lack the positive example of shared identity. Queer adolescents who are able to model after successful queer figures in media, or who personally know queer adults, have a greater sense of self-efficacy in terms of coming out and achieving a fully developed identity (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011).

Gomillion & Giuliano (2011) also conducted a study which was designed to confirm the relationship between the media and its role in shaping queer identity by surveying participants about how the media relates to queer life including individual identity and the coming out process. They examined how participants described the influence of these media figures and sources on their identity formation and their decision to come out to family and friends. The study looked at opinions on aspects of the media

which related to queer life and culture. Ellen DeGeneres was found to be a key influential figure to both male and female respondents as her coming out on her television shows, and later her transition to hosting a popular daytime talk show, lent her an air of authenticity which appealed to viewers. DeGeneres was not just playing a lesbian, she actually identifies as one.

In terms of fictional media, the popular Showtime drama *Queer as Folk* and the NBC sitcom *Will & Grace* were also influential factors in the lives of queer men and women. As with DeGeneres, *Queer as Folk* was listed equally by men and women as an influential factor, however men were more likely to list that they were influenced by *Will & Grace* than women. The discrepancy between the listing of *Queer as Folk* and *Will & Grace* is likely due to the fact that *Queer as Folk* offered both male and female depictions of queer life, whereas *Will & Grace* primarily focused on the male aspects with limited and stereotyped depictions of potential lesbian lifestyles. Interestingly, both *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk* were listed by respondents as providing both positive and negative depictions of queer persons--this is somewhat unsurprising as *Queer as Folk* is considered to be a somewhat edgy drama and *Will & Grace* is a sitcom with both mainstream queer characters and ones who are more mocking in their depiction as stereotypes. Overall, this study confirmed that participants would like to see more realistic portrayals of queer individuals--normal people with normal jobs who just happen to be gay (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011).

Their second study looked at the two common forms of underrepresentation experienced by queer people in the media: absolute invisibility or relative invisibility. They found that through most of the 20th century homosexuality was primarily depicted

implicitly, if at all, and that industry standards for both forms of media explicitly forbade depictions of homosexual behavior. When implicitly gay characters appeared in the media they were often depicted according to several different archetypes--gay men were usually sissies while lesbians were typically lonely and predatory or dykes with sinister masculine qualities.

Adults have always been the prime target of media consumption because they are the ones who generate an income and are able to decide where that money goes. They are the decision makers when it comes to the type of media produced for children and adolescents, and most importantly for themselves. It was adults who decided that violence was permissible across the board, but representations of sexuality were not. Television has always fallen into a gray area when it comes to what is and is not acceptable to show to viewers which has shifted over the years in order to align with social norms. Because of this it was not until the 1990s that real visibility of queer persons began to emerge within mainstream media. Research suggests that mainstream media sanitizes depictions of queer individuals, preventing queer characters from engaging in realistic sexual talk or sexual behaviors. Beyond mainstream media, however, a niche media industry designed, produced, and marketed specifically for gay and lesbian audiences has become increasingly accessible. Despite the growing visibility of queer media, no empirical research has quantified the depiction of sex and sexuality in this media genre (Bond, 2015).

Over the last twenty years several network shows have been noted for their portrayal of queer characters. One of the most prominent of these characters is Ellen from

*Ellen* (1994-1998) and *The Ellen Show* (2001-2002) portrayed by comedian Ellen DeGeneres (Bociurkiw, 2005). Yes, that is a lot of Ellens.

DeGeneres' coming out on *The Ellen Show*, which while a move toward queer visibility on network television, can best be placed in the ridicule stage according to Clark's stages of media representation (Raley & Lukas, 2006). While DeGeneres is a comedian, and was very well known for this at the time, and her show was marketed as a sitcom, this does not fully excuse what transpired during her coming out process, nor its unfortunate framework on the show. DeGeneres's character, throughout the show's trajectory, was set up as somewhat of a failure and was known for being clumsy, bumbling around, and not being able to stick with many of the things that she attempted. She was particularly well known for her failures at maintaining relationships with men. For DeGeneres's coming out on the show, writing maintained the concept of queer identity as being dependent on signifiers of otherness--race, class, the grotesque--in order for it to gain visibility.

The character Ellen's queerness was relational to other elements of her life. Oprah as the therapist in *Ellen* signified the historically sexualized black female body with Ellen acting as the desexualized white lesbian body serving as a contrasting balance (Bociurkiw, 2005). In the show Ellen spoke of love as not being about sex, and while this may be a true statement it ties into the erasure of queer sexuality within mainstream media--gay men as interior decorators, and lesbians and single women who live alone with their cats in their spinstery apartments. While this has changed somewhat since Ellen's coming out, it is still uncommon to find any sexualization of queer characters in mainstream media as they still exist in a predominantly token role. In reality, they are the

star characters of their own lives and don't exist to act as the sidekicks of straight women on the prowl or as makeover magicians. It's not all softball teams.

On *The Ellen Show*, her second sitcom, DeGeneres played a queer comedian, and while this is a fact of her authentic life, it also plays into the trope of her queerness being a humorous act of failure--the punchline to the sitcom that came before it. DeGeneres is notoriously seen as quirky and fun loving, but is also very much desexualized. In a sense this makes her appear non-threatening, which is ideal for mainstream television viewers. Currently DeGeneres hosts a daytime talk show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and while she has been somewhat open about her life on that show, in particular about her marriage to her partner Portia de Rossi, that reality of her being a queer person is not particularly prominent.

But, in spite of the fact that DeGeneres's sexuality is laughed off in her sitcoms and in her daytime talk show, she has helped bring normality to the idea of queer people to mainstream viewers due to her visibility. Young people are able to see her as indicative of success and can interpret that as meaning that queer people are in fact capable of making something of themselves and exerting a positive influence on others. And for the non-queer people who watch DeGeneres's talk show, she makes it clear that queer is not synonymous with deviant.

This may seem like a lot about Ellen, especially as her coming out happened long before mine, but her visibility via *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* which has aired since 2003 helped to bridge some of the gap between myself and my family both in high school and when I officially came out to them during my first year of college in 2006. When I discussed being gay with my family, Ellen was one of the first things that came to mind

for them. She was a funny and positive representation of queer identity and they would bring up her show when they were trying to relate to me or to solidify that they weren't homophobic. Her visibility is also interesting because it mirrors what many of us experience in real life--the transition from being in the closet to being out and the impact that has on our relationships with people. In a lot of other media the queer characters are established as queer very early on; and if they are not then they are generally young at the beginning of the series and come out later as part of a coming of age arc. It is much less common to see adult characters come out.

Research has found that overall the media has a negative impact on male identity. In particular, through the reinforcement of stereotypes, and this is not exclusive to heterosexual identity. Television creates and maintains perceptions of gender rather than reality, which is problematic given its wide influence over society at large (Robertson, 2011). In popular media portrayals of men are centered on masculinity as emotionally naïve, with men being portrayed as alternately juvenile or stoic. It can also be argued that sitcoms are not representational of normative masculinity in terms of characteristics, roles, or relationships. The dismantling of notions around masculinity can offer a new awareness of their own maleness and of other male groups. The escalation of masculine parody in contemporary sitcoms such as *Two and a Half Men* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* appears as opportunities to both create, then ridicule emergent stereotypes. There is a willingness in the parody to mock conventional masculinity and the notions around men as soft, while encouraging the emergent stereotypes of men as buffoons, idiots, and liars. These damaging perceptions they suggest result in men being emotionally restrictive. The researchers argue that the media's representations around



notions of male performance normalize this type of masculine behavior, especially that of emotional and physical stoicism (Robertson, 2011). These stereotypes of men and masculinity do very little to break down the social barrier that many men face when they behave in a transgressive way outside of what is considered to be normalized masculinity. In terms of binary crossover it is much more acceptable for women to engage in transgressive behavior than it is for men. While women went through a feminist revolution in the 1970s which enabled them to engage in more gender role crossover in socially acceptable ways, such as the flexibility for young women to make the choice to wear pants in school, to cut their hair, and to branch into more traditionally male-dominated careers, men have not gone through a similar revolution and are still very much bound within the confines of collective masculinity and social machismo (Connell, 2005).

*Will & Grace* was a popular NBC sitcom which ran from 1998 to 2006; it was one of the first must-see shows to feature gay characters in leading roles (Kohan & Mutchnick, 1998). The show starred Grace Adler, an interior decorator, and her best friend Will Truman, an attorney, who shared an apartment in New York City. Secondary characters included Grace's assistant Karen Walker and Will's friend the flamboyant Jack McFarland.

The show was notable for being one of the first successful network prime-time series to feature gay characters in gay milieu (Cooper, 2003). The show made use of gay humor, particularly with the character Jack who embodied many of the stereotypical elements that are associated with gay men, including a high-pitched voice and an effeminate persona. A study of college students who watched the show found that they,

as viewers, did not identify with the Jack character, but instead regarded him as the most frequent butt of the joke on the show. In spite of this he was also identified as one of the funniest characters to heterosexual audiences and also their favorite. While those surveyed enjoyed Jack for his funny personality and over the top behavior, they tended to ignore the sexual aspect of his characterization (Cooper, 2003).

Overall the camp element portrayed by Jack was met with mixed responses by focus group participants, some of whom thought that the feminization of the character and the stereotypical nature of his behavior may be harmful to public perceptions of queer persons, while others defended it as in group joking that happens within the queer community in real life (Linneman, 2007). Some respondents thought that not including a camp edge to the show would have actually been more problematic, as it would not have allowed for a well-rounded portrayal of behavior. But, many study respondents were ignorant of the fact that stereotypes are perpetuated through a feedback loop between media and real life and that what is seen on television can shape the identities of queer viewers. The show reflects real behavior, and real people (especially youth) learn from the show that such behavior is acceptable and even expected. Camp feminization is primarily a learned cultural practice, and this may be one of the ways this cultural transmission occurs (Linneman, 2007).

While *Will & Grace* has been recognized overwhelmingly for its positive representations of gay men, it situates the potentially controversial issue of homosexuality within safe and familiar popular culture conventions, particularly those of the situation comedy genre, and the program equates gayness with a lack of masculinity in regard to the character of Jack, relies on sexual tension and delayed consummation,

infantilizes the program's most potentially subversive characters, and emphasizes characters' interpersonal relationships rather than the characters' connection to the larger social world. *Will & Grace* can be read as reinforcing heterosexism and, thus, can be seen as heteronormative (Battles, 2002). The use of humor offers the necessary perspective by incongruity to comically correct the tragic frame of heterosexual and Christian perfection (Silverman, 2012).

*Will & Grace* reinforces heterosexism by *appearing* to push the envelope. By only using gay subjects who are the least likely to offend audiences, it advocates for acceptance but only in a very safe way, which reinforces heterosexual values (Mitchell, 2005). While queer visibility on mainstream television and within mainstream media as a whole is incredibly important for breaking down social barriers and creating equity for persons who run outside of the norm, it is questionable whether or not *Will & Grace* is an effective example of that sort of disruption.

The show *Brooklyn 99* (2013-present) provides a contrast to some of the other popular sitcoms that feature gay characters (Goor, Schur & Samberg, 2013). The show centers around the detectives who work at a police precinct and their interactions with each other and the criminals whom they apprehend. In many ways it can be compared to the show *The Office* (2005-2013) since it features an ensemble cast in the workplace; however, unlike in *The Office* where one of the tertiary characters is outed by his boss in the third season, it is established from the very first episode of *Brooklyn 99* that one of the characters is gay (Daniels & Gervais, 2005). In fact, it is the precinct captain Raymond Holt who is gay which leads the character to have a certain level of respect from the others. The main characters Detectives Peralta and Santiago in particular greatly

want Holt's attention and approval and much of the show revolves around their vying for it. Holt is generally seen as a humorous character because of his very serious demeanor and difficult to read mood, but the fact that he is gay is never a point of ridicule. In fact, when the members of the precinct are invited to his home for a party to celebrate his birthday they all become obsessed, to the point of hysteria, with impressing his husband Kevin. For a sitcom, *Brooklyn 99* does a remarkably good job of normalizing a gay character instead of utilizing his sexuality for additional laughs. I think that contrasting earlier depictions of queer men in comedy with newer depictions is valuable as it can work to show that it does not have to be their queerness that makes them funny, and for straight viewers it helps to shift stereotypes about the queer community away from just camp images. It is slightly unsettling which is something that I think we need.

### **Moving On(line)**

The internet has been a game changer for many people who identify as queer; it has taken media from a spectator experience to something that can be fully engaged with, and it has helped with the forging of connections for those who find themselves isolated from a local community. Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and all of the other social media sites have been revolutionary in this respect, and they have also been revelatory for many as well. Instead of not being sure what distant relatives, and even close friends, think of gay rights and queer media (having to wait until awkward Thanksgiving dinners), we can find out right away. Thanks to the internet I know that my mother likes to watch Upworthy videos and is afraid of vaccines, my little sister supports the Democratic Party, and my cousin is a bigoted homophobe who wants to castrate transgender people.

The internet has significantly changed the ways in which individuals both access and engage with queer media and with each other. With the rise of a digital culture, media can be accessed through the internet and people can be constantly connected, regardless of location, through social networking. Social scientists have even gone so far as to coin the term “ambient awareness” to refer to the type of social awareness that has developed due to the influx of social media and the ability for people to be continuously connected in the digital age (Thompson, 2008). With the advent of the internet television watching has transitioned from a passive experience taken in by the viewer and transformed into something highly interactive as viewers are able to participate in ongoing engagement with the visual text. The creation of fan sites and forums where media can be discussed and analyzed by people around the world has enabled a carryover from the visual into the web and even into in-person interaction--fan activities are a mode

of reception and work to create interpretive communities of activism and alternative social groupings (Collier 2009).

Queer individuals with supportive families report higher self-esteem and better overall mental health as observed through studies conducted in the U.S. and abroad. When support is unavailable, many members of the queer community create their own connections or kinship ties by reaching out to like-minded individuals and communities, often through social media. Social media has become an increasingly important component of community building for the queer population, as it allows members to develop a sense of group membership through community surveillance, identity expression, and emotional support. Social media has the capacity to help in the building of camaraderie and resilience among individuals who may find themselves in rural or conservative areas with little opportunity for in-person interaction.

Queer youth in rural areas have reported that having the ability to forge online connections with others can be crucial to coming to terms with their own identity and to feeling less separated from the world around them; the online worlds has helped them to understand how to create those same connections in the real world (Gray, 2009). This is doubly important because the creating of connections within the queer community has been found to compensate for parental rejection and to stand in for traditional family support networks. Virtual communities have been found to be very important for fostering these social ties when immediate family roles make it difficult to integrate sexuality and identity within traditional social expectations (Mehney, 2015). In a sense the ambient awareness that comes with the ability to connect via social media is beneficial to queer youth as it can make up for some of the real world social interactions

that they are unable to have with other young people who are going through similar identity exploration. Because media serves as such a vital source of sexual information for adolescents exploring their sexual identities, it is no surprise that youth have readily adopted new technology and media and put it to use in their intimate relationships by using the privacy of online forums and other social networking avenues in order to gain information about relationships and sexuality that they may not otherwise have access to outside of the realm of adult monitoring (Pascoe, 2011).

In issues related to gay marriage rights there tends to be more leeway when it comes to the issue of bullying because, regardless of their feelings on homosexuality, most people understand and respect that aggression, intimidation, and bullying are wrong (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014). On the other hand, young Facebook users may feel inundated with anti-bullying messages from a variety of public awareness campaigns that rely heavily on social media. This may even explain why perceived issue importance is found to be related with choosing to ignore the comments in both hostile and friendly conditions (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014)

Over the last decade with the influx of internet access into the home there has been a shift away from cable subscriptions to video-sharing sites online and television access through websites like Hulu, Netflix, and Amazon Prime. In addition to this, the website YouTube, founded in 2005, which allows users to upload their own videos, has had a huge impact on how individuals access media and on the type of images of themselves that communities are able to present online. Internet-based new media are increasingly utilized by queer youth and has a profound impact on their identity development. Research indicates that new media enables youth to access resources,

explore identity, find likeness, and digitally engage in the coming out process prior to experiencing these events in their day-to-day lives (Craig & McInroy, 2013). YouTube especially has provided a sociotechnical platform to support a participatory culture among young YouTubers. The ever-growing youth subscription to YouTube is evidence of the pertinence and relevance of this kind of medium in their lives. Youth are attracted to YouTube because the barriers for them to participate are low, their creation is easily circulated and shared, informal mentorship and instructions facilitate their developing identity, their levels of contribution matter, and they feel socially connected to peers within the community (Chau, 2010).

One of the most popular type of video posted on YouTube is the vlogs. A vlog is essentially a video diary where viewers are able to gain an insider's perspective to the life and experiences of someone else. There is still a certain separation between videographer and viewer as many videos are heavily edited for content; however, since the majority of them are unscripted, the images that viewers are able to take away of minority communities is much more within the control of the communities putting out the videos than in the control of scriptwriters or network agents as with mainstream television. These vlogs also enable people to access members of their own minority communities in a way that they could not prior to the internet. The internet has given people a sense of safety through the ways in which identity can be hidden online. Through viewership people are engaged in an iterative and exploratory process of self-discovery and identity construction--often through an articulation of what they are not in relationship to how they do not conform to the social expectations of normative identity by existing as not heterosexual or not cisgender (Ross, 2010).



Earlier studies about relationships and connections built via the internet indicate that the social interaction in online relationships was wanting in contrast to in person interactions; however, even early on in the internet's influx into American homes surveys indicated that most people who used the internet did value the social interaction that they were enabled, thanks to email and other online interaction formats like chatrooms and forums (Cummings, 2002). The birth of YouTube and social media websites like FaceBook enable users to constantly be in contact with one another. Now that the public has access to smartphones and tablets which enables them to explore and connect via the internet without access to a desktop computer, it has become increasingly evident that the internet does significantly contribute to how people engage in relationships and with one another. Surveys of the general public continually reveal that most people using the internet value email and other forms of online social interaction.

Over the last decade, online communication has become a popular platform for identity construction and experimentation as well as social interaction for those who identify as queer. YouTube's availability to host user-generated videos has allowed content creators to share experiences on topics related to queer identity, ranging from issues around bullying experienced by youth to dating, relationships, and the experience of coming out to friends and family. YouTube has the unique ability to invite viewers into the homes of content creators due to how footage is shot outside of a traditional studio, relying primarily on reality instead of the scripted world encountered on television (Strangelove, 2010). The willingness of content creators to openly disclose personal information about themselves and their experiences in a non-anonymous environment

with an unknown public works as a way of forging connection within the community at large (Green, Bobrowicz, & Ang, 2015).

YouTube enables, and even encourages, youth to make the private performance public (Gregg, 2008). Many adolescents find that the sharing, response, and linking nature of YouTube builds a supportive community for their art and behavior. After sharing a video with the YouTube community, the content creators are able to receive feedback from their audience or viewers in the form of comments and messages discussing the content of the video or as a means of reaching out and creating connections based on shared experiences. From here content creators and viewers or subscribers are able to build smaller communities of like-minded people with shared interests within the larger YouTube community. The homepages for the channels indicate how many subscribers a content creator has, the frequency of their updates, links to other channels that they host or that are of interest to them, and an opportunity to check out their playlists, which may be composed of their own videos put together in a series or other videos that they want their virtual friends to check out (Gregg, 2008).

Much of the content that is created and posted on YouTube is funny—humor is an excellent tension breaker in real life and this holds true in the digital realm. However, humor is not the only focus on YouTube; content creators and some of them are determined to give viewers an inside look at their own lives—to bridge the digital divide and create as authentic of a connection as distance will allow. This may be one of the most profound elements of YouTube because it enables for the forging of connections and the creation of community that viewers might otherwise not have access to, making it a potential game changer for isolated queer youth.

Not all content aimed at queer youth on YouTube is designed for the purpose of entertainment or to elicit a laugh. The It Gets Better Project was started in 2010 by Dan Savage when he posted a video to YouTube with the goal of inspiring youth to look to the future. The project can be accessed online through its website, or via YouTube, and features testimonies from celebrity figures, both gay and straight, encouraging youth to stick it out regardless of how difficult what they may be going through may be. The project is a new take on the idea of community sharing, which for queer people has always involved the sharing of coming out stories as a way of developing solidarity and community. Now these stories are being shared digitally, which means that for many they are more accessible and also more positive (Stelter, 2010). However, while the queer community, particularly its youth, needs hope and positive images in order to build a better future, there has been some criticism of the project as it enables politicians to win sympathy points without actually taking any sort of direct action to support youth through policymaking. Individuals can speak on behalf of the project without having to take any sort of action (Majkowski, 2011). Additionally, these videos and this type of work can also be read as more rhetoric in the same theme of “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” which implies that there is some inherent weakness within the queer community, especially in regard to the members who do not eventually make it forward to a better and brighter future. Suicide is the leading cause of death for youth between the ages of 10 and 24, with queer youth being four times more likely to attempt suicide (Center for Disease Control, 2011).

By the time that I was in high school Google and Wikipedia were already household names, if I wanted to learn about something--anything, all I had to do was run

a simple keyword search and hundreds of pages of information would be there waiting for me. The internet was how I learned about my own identity and sexuality. First it was by engaging with media through fanfiction, and then it was through finding online forums and journal sites where I was able to connect with other youth who were going through the same things that I was.

For me, the ability to connect with others through the Internet was crucial to my identity formation and for coming to accept myself. From 10-16 I lived in rural Arkansas and had zero exposure to queer people. If they were around they were invisible to me. I felt different and I struggled with the most common and valuable social experience that young people in my area had access to—church.

Up until my move to the South my experience with religion was fairly spotty. My mom had taken the family to church when I was little, but we had moved and stopped attending by the time I was about four. During elementary school, in the small town I grew up in in Northern California, I made friends at school, had weekend sleepovers, and played little league. The fact that I did not attend church was never an issue—I had some friends that did, and others who did not. But right before I began fifth grade, just after my last sibling in high school graduated, my mom moved my younger sister and I across the country to Arkansas.

We made the move in July, driving cross country in a minivan along with two of her friends, their son, and a giant dog. None of the adults had family there and they had all left their jobs without anything else lined up. The six of us lived in an RV for a couple of months at a KOA. There was no privacy and we had to trek across the campground to

use the bathroom and showers. It was not an ideal place to live as a ten-year-old and I found myself struggling not just socially, but also academically.

Eventually, things stabilized somewhat. My mom got a job at a local factory and we moved in to a small duplex apartment in a decent area of town. My little sister and I rode the bus to and from school, something that had not been an option when we lived in California, and our mom began to drift away. She worked a lot, which is not unusual for a single parent, but she spent most of her free time on the internet (she had made friends online which was how we ended up in Arkansas in the first place) and then with the people she met in chat rooms. My younger sister and I were left to our own devices. At ten I was deemed responsible enough to look after my younger sister every day after school and then for entire weekends and sometimes weeks at a time when our mom would go out of town to be with her boyfriend.

And then we started going to church, not my mom who was never around on weekends, but my younger sister and I. I have no memory of how this happened, but we went from never attending church to being picked up by the church van every Wednesday night and twice on Sundays. While church was the main social event for kids in our area, attending without a parent made you pitiable, not popular. My sister was able to go to the children's section, but I was in that awkward age range where most of the kids in the youth group were older and cooler than me. In the three years that we attended I did not make a single friend.

I was never comfortable there, but I didn't quite understand why. I tried to avoid attending the weekly sermons by helping out in the nursery. There were a lot of things that I did not understand, like how it was possible that anyone who did not believe the

same doctrine as our church was going to Hell or why the coffee on Sunday mornings was only for adults. I tried to be a good Christian. I tried to fit in. But after a while I also tried to avoid going to church. I would hide in the bathroom when the church van pulled up, so they couldn't see that I was home, and have my little sister tell everyone that I was sick. Eventually my mom found out that I was skipping church and I had to start going again. She never asked me why I didn't want to go and I doubt that even if she had I would have been able to explain the anxiety and confusion that it caused me.

While I am a little too old to have really benefited from YouTube vlogs, I did benefit from access to the internet in other ways. When I was thirteen or fourteen I found a journaling site that was designed for queer youth. For me this was pretty revolutionary. I had started journaling in third or fourth grade and did so regularly until I was in seventh grade and I discovered that my mom had read one of my journals and commented in it when I was unpacking boxes after a move. I was a kid, so of course my journal was full of embarrassing secrets and pages of me venting my frustrations about life—things that I really did not want my mom to be reading.

The online community that I found enabled me to have a journal that was password protected and that would not get lost in the transient life that I was living at the time. It let me connect with other people who were experiencing similar things—namely coming to terms with their sexuality and navigating adolescence. I was able to read and comment on other people's entries and they were able to do the same for me. It also helped me deal with some of the issues that I was having around reconciling my experiences with religion with my identity. I remember a particular evening sermon where the pastor had a projector screen out and talked about the importance of

monitoring one's thoughts and keeping them pure before God. Then he advised everyone to pretend that their mind was the projector screen and that he could see our thoughts on it. Evidently, this was supposed to help us filter out inappropriate thoughts, since if we were embarrassed by the idea of him being able to read the thought then God would not approve and we should not be having it. This stuck with me for a very long time. While, logically, I knew that the man in the bad tie could not actually read my thoughts (and what person actually wants to be reading the thoughts of a twelve-year-old anyway?) I still managed to internalize it as something that was necessary in order for me to be a good person. It took me a long time to get past shutting myself down when I was having a thought that might be considered inappropriate by others, and even now I don't know that I am always entirely successful. But the website that I found helped. It enabled me to connect with other young teens who were sharing some of the same thoughts and experiences that I was. Rather than being told that they were going to Hell or that they shouldn't think about that girl that sat in front of them in math class, they received support and encouragement. And so did I when I eventually started writing there.

The site had discussion forums, private messaging, a compilation of LGBTQ youth resources, and book reviews making the whole experience much more immersive. I wrote there from my sophomore year of high school until my freshman year of college and the people that I connected with followed each other from social media site to social media site as we got older. Over time the website's following faded out as new forms of social media and ways of connecting with queer youth became available and it was shut down after nineteen years. But, it still exists through the online Internet Archive and unfortunately so do my juvenile journal entries.

## **Conclusion**

Even though homophobia consistently remains a problem in U.S. schools, both public and private, limited research has gone into the factors that predict this behavior aside from gender and sexual identity prejudice. Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull looked at multiple domains including, empathy, perspective-taking, and classroom norms, in addition to elements of sexual orientation such as the importance of sexual orientation to identity, the number of minority sexual identity friends survey participants had, parental ideas around sexuality, and media messages (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). After surveying 581 students in 9th-12th grade it was determined that independent factors of perception and familial influence in regard to sexual orientation did predict homophobic behavior as measured through bullying and other prejudicial actions. The study's findings indicate that it is important to address multiple factors in efforts to reduce bullying, prejudice, and discrimination among youth (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015).

Although being out can be correlated with higher levels of victimization for queer youth, it also indicates a level of resilience in youth because it is associated with improved well being and higher levels of self confidence in the spite of the additional risks (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). Research has shown that childhood memories and experiences play a significant role in the production of queer identities, particularly through the narrative of the coming out story which often relates to the ways in which childhood events, thoughts, and feelings operate as a proof of sexual identity (Cover, 2011). This means that the early experiences that youth have which involve sexual identity and images of relationships in the media impact how they begin to think about themselves. If they are consistently exposed to negative attitudes about queer identity



through media or social experiences they can come to hold those same attitudes, and in the case of queer youth this can negatively impact how they think about themselves and their own identity. We have not yet reached a point in our culture where being queer does not impact how one navigates the world and one's relationships with others. While boundaries regarding sexual identities have shifted over the years, they have yet to be fully eliminated (Cover, 2011).

The other day I had to remind a staff member that we don't use the word retarded at work—even if we're being self-deprecating, and especially not in hearing range of our students. It wasn't as bad as it sounds, and it wasn't the worst thing that I'd heard that day. Socially, we live in a world where casual ableism swims alongside everyday sexism without being noticed. Kids see it or hear it and go on to repeat it, just like how they learn everything else.

My students, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders, come to school and shout things like, “shut up you fucking faggot!” at each other loud enough that it's not a secret. I had a kid argue with me the other day about the word gay. Another student had been making a noise that bothered him, so he called him out in front of the rest of the class, accused him of being stupid and obnoxious. I took him aside to remind him that we don't talk to people like that and next time, instead of calling him out in front of everyone he should go over to him and speak respectfully. He told me that what the kid was doing was gay. Insisted. And all I could do was let him know that just because someone is doing something that bothers us we don't get to call them names, and that gay isn't synonymous with annoying. But he didn't listen to me. He didn't care. Or maybe he just didn't believe me when I told him that it was hurtful to talk to people like that.

I'm out at work for the most part. My supervisor knows, the principal knows, and my team knows. But I'm not out to my students. That kind of thing gets too messy too fast. It's too personal. Sometimes it's too dangerous. In my first job out of college I worked at an after school program providing programming for a group of third graders in San Francisco. I got to know one of the school day teachers fairly well because he often stayed late, his classroom was right across from mine, and he was always willing to check in with me about students that we shared. One day a student told me that he was going to Hell because he was gay--that's what her parents had told her. It was not a situation that I knew how to navigate.

Even in the decidedly blue San Francisco Bay Area, there's still workplace homophobia, and not just from students who are still figuring things out, like how to talk to other humans. I've gotten it from peers too. When I worked in an elementary school there were a handful of primary grade teachers that made it clear that they disagreed with the requirement to teach about diversity in California public schools when it came to non-traditional households. They ignored the fact that there were children in our school that came from those households and focused on the fact that kids don't need to know about those kinds of things and that they are too young to understand them. They essentially parroted the Proposition 8 commercial with the administrator and the teacher. Queer identity still gets perceived as just sex and not human beings. Gay rights, for a lot of people, just means marriage equality and does not extend to workplace protections. And kids are just kids, who even educators can't seem to realize are eventually going to grow up and be their own people—and some of those people are going to be queer, and

wouldn't that whole process be a hell of a lot easier if they were exposed to the idea and educated about it in advance?

Last year I had to expel an eighth grader from my after school program because he had been making sexually explicit comments to some of the seventh grade girls and touching them without their consent. One of the girls confided in one of my staff members and I spent an afternoon with her in my office in tears. I later found out that it was believed that the boy was acting out because his classmates had been teasing him about being gay during the school day. Later, in March, halfway through a basketball game that I was hosting, two of my students got into it, calling each other dyke and faggot because those were the most hurtful things that they could accuse one another of being. After speaking with the principal I learned that this was an ongoing issue for both of these students and something that the counselors were already trying to mediate.

These events took me back to the end of August, before the school year began, when I was in a meeting with the other after school program coordinators with the district and the topic of bullying came up. I have always thought it my job to mediate conflict and to make sure that the youth I work with feel safe expressing themselves in my program, but what I learned is that not everyone feels the same way. One of my coworkers stated that she did not think that it was necessary to report instances of homophobic name calling because she did not think that it was a big deal since the youth she works with are elementary aged. What she failed to take into consideration is that there is a very good chance that at least some of the young people that she works with will eventually identify as queer, and that a lack of intervention by the adults in their lives when homophobia is being used as a bullying tactic will impact their sense of identity.

Her actions, or rather her lack of action, around this issue have an impact on how the youth in her program believe that it is acceptable to engage with one another and the value that they place on diversity.

Similarly, exposure and lack of exposure to queer characters in media, both fictional and real, also have an impact on the process of identity formation. Exposure to positive images of queer individuals, and positive or even neutral discussion of them, increases positive attitudes toward gay rights and the queer community at large (Garretson, 2015). By increasing visibility within media and advocating for more incorporation of queer characters in media for youth, there is the potential to shift how young people view themselves and the entire coming out process in a more positive way. Instead of having the process of coming to terms with being queer a shameful burden, or an issue that needs public service announcements to remind youth that it gets better and they should just hold on a little bit longer, it can become more normalized, more accepted, and ultimately less stressful.

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