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# *LGBT+ Media: What Went Wrong*

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RYAN JOHNSON

*Produced in Nathan Holic's Fall 2017 ENC 1102*

FADE IN:

PRELUDE

The scene starts as CHARACTER #1 runs into frame chased by CHARACTER #2 wielding a knife. They stop as CHARACTER #1 is cornered and she faces her attacker.

CHARACTER #1

Please, don't!

CHARACTER #2

I've got you cornered now, Token LGBT Character.

CHARACTER #1

[stares at her attacker in fear as they continue to stand menacingly with back to the camera. She is clearly afraid. Slowly, a "To Be Continued..." fades onto screen as they freeze frame. Hold and then unfreeze and address camera]

To be continued?

O.S. NARRATOR

Well, yeah. People love the drama of the LGBT+ character dying. It's been done so many times that we figured we'd drag the LGBT+ viewers on hoping you live, and for the rest of the audience, well, they might be excited for your death.

CHARACTER #1

That can't be true... Can it?

[Cut to a montage of various LGBT+ Characters' deaths. Eventually, it fades back to Character #1 now standing alone]

CHARACTER #1

So, that means I'm next? God, what a shitty way to go. Part of some trope.

NARRATOR

Well, it was either that or you became a character facing tragedy weekly or facing some other trope. You know, like...

CHARACTER #1

Like what?

NARRATOR

You know Kurt Hummel?

CHARACTER #1

NO! Well, okay, why is this happening to me then?

NARRATOR

I am glad you asked!

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

INTRODUCTION

[Narrator, now revealed to be Ryan, sits in a chair, drinking a cup of coffee and with research notes scattered around him.]

RYAN

Why is it that LGBT+ representation isn't up to par with the representation of our straight counterparts? Hi, I'm Ryan Johnson, a certified transgender male—Okay, not certified, but it would be cool to have a certificate for that. However, who I am isn't what's important; it's how the media represents me. In fact, it's how the media, in this case television, treats my entire community. Because I know that LGBT+ representation on television is *far* from perfect, I wanted to learn how to improve this representation and increase positivity within the community.

You might be wondering, "What is LGBT+?" Well, that is the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and plus community. "Okay?" You ask, "What is the plus?" The plus is anyone whose sexuality or gender does not fit into the umbrella of the first four letters.

So, after months of research and several all-nighters, I have begun to construct a solution to our problem. From searching through past and current television to conducting studies of my own, the solution lies within the community itself.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

REPRESENTATION OF LGBT+ PAST

[The screen fades to a title screen of the scene and then to clips of shows as Ryan talks]

RYAN

LGBT+ representation isn't new. In fact, the first big impact of representation happened in Nixon's era with the show, *All in the Family*. This show, according to Judy Kutulas, made people begin to question America's beliefs, and thus, they began to pound in the idea of Family-Values. The next milestone, well, it only got worse.

[Cut back to Ryan]

We've all heard about AIDS. If you haven't, AIDS is acquired immune deficiency syndrome. It's the final stage of HIV. In the eighties, gay and bisexual men were blamed, and television reflected this. Many of the scholarly articles I studied touched on this time in history, but none stuck in my mind more than the words from Emile Netzhammer and Scott Champ.

[Cut to black screen. Quote comes up as it is said.]

The big idea they presented was that "the treatment of AIDS in prime-time series also shapes public thought."

[Cut to Ryan once again]

The media continuously perpetuated the idea that only gay and bisexual men could contract AIDS. It was treated as a joke, and occasionally treated as a horror as the gay or bisexual man preys on someone who didn't yet have the disease. As Netzhammer and Shamp put it,

[Fade to black, quote comes up]

"Associating homosexuality with AIDS creates and reinforces a specific way of knowing AIDS: as a gay disease." [Back to Ryan] Thankfully, we seem to have strayed a bit from this idea and no one seems to view this time for the LGBT+ Community positively. But, can media still affect our perceptions of the LGBT+ community in real life?

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

REPRESENTATION OF LGBT+ PRESENT (SCHOLAR'S EDITION)

[The screen fades to a title screen of the scene and then to clips of shows as Ryan talks]

RYAN

Let's take a quick look at current representation before I talk about how the community feels about it. Kelly Kessler had the perfect article for where we stood with our representation. Hell, she said we were going in the right steps towards

[Fade to black screen and quote appears]

"Mutual Mediocrity."

[Fade to Ryan]

What is mutual mediocrity? Well, the characters represented were still just as white and

seemingly just as poorly written as their straight counterparts. However, there are still some gaps to fill, and well, you do tend to want to strive for more than just mediocrity, don't you? I mean, I know I don't just wake up in the morning and go, "Today! I will be mediocre at best!" No, as a human species, we want more than that. But anyway, that's off track.

The fact is, representation is nowhere near perfect. Another thing, it's very "GLB" oriented, and typically in that order. Kessler wrote her article in 2011, and while I love to imagine that we have moved so far since then, we haven't really. However, there's no time to be pessimistic! When the world seems to want to kill you off in all forms of media or wants to make you into yet another trope, you have to be optimistic for the future.

Writing about current representation, there's a quote from one of my favorite bisexuals Oscar Wilde that comes to mind,

[Fade to picture of Mr. Wilde]

"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

[cut to pride flags]

Which is something the LGBT+ community is pretty good at, hoping. Therefore, the logical step would be finding out what they want.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

REPRESENTATION OF LGBT+ PRESENT (SURVEY OF THE COMMUNITY)

[The screen fades to a title screen of the scene and then to scrolling through a survey as Ryan speaks]

RYAN

Sometimes, to find out how a group feels about their current representation, you should go to the group.

[cut to Ryan]

And by sometimes, I mean most of the time. Using the idea of a survey from scholars Sarah C. Gamillion and Traci A. Giuliano, I conducted an online survey of my own. I had 56 responses from the community which was an unexpected amount, and everyone had something different to say about what they thought of representation. I asked about their orientation, gender identity, age, and where they live. Then, we got into the real questions. For the sake of their privacy, I will be changing names if I decide to quote them.

The most noticed trend was that the characters tended to be white, and this was mentioned by Kessler as a step to mediocrity. However, the next most noticed thing from my list that I provided those surveyed was that characters tended to be reduced to a stereotype. Though, most would agree that representation has come a long way.

Another thing to note are similarities in characters that influenced responders. Several noted *Glee* as their first experience with LGBT+ characters, such as Kurt or Santana. Others noted webcomics such as *Homestuck*. *Sense 8*, *Penny Dreadful*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *Steven Universe* were also titles that came up often. One responder even noted Damien from *Mean Girls*, who predates Kurt Hummel of *Glee* fame.

Also, with nearly fifty percent noting that an LGBT+ character they were attached to died, I hope my opening scene makes a little more sense. One responder even joked, "When does an LGBT+ character not die in a TV show/movie?" Which, if we're at the point where this has become enough of a joke to us, it's become quite a problem. Reading through comments about harmful tropes and stereotypes that the community has noticed, all of it is pretty sad. We are, after all, more than just a trope. We're people. And as Larry Gross says,

[Fade to black as quote comes up]

"The contributions of the mass media are likely to be especially powerful in cultivating images of groups and phenomena about which there is little firsthand opportunity for learning."

[Fade back to Ryan]

So, moral of the story, if we're being represented like this in mass media, what the hickety hay does the general public think of us? Do they view us as predators? Carriers of disease? Dead because we have to pay for our sins? Sometimes, all we want is to be treated as normal. With that said, I'll come back to the survey soon, for now, we're going to look at specific examples.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

REPRESENTATION OF LGBT+ PRESENT (ANALYSIS OF CONTENT)

[The screen fades to a title screen of the scene and then to Ryan back at his table and surrounded by notes.]

RYAN

"So, Ryan, you're transgender. What are your thoughts?" You might wonder. Or, you might want me to shut up and let someone else talk, but you did choose to watch my documentary. Recently, I did a content analysis of four shows, *Glee*, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, *Will & Grace*, and *Modern Family*. From this, I noticed, adult representation is seemingly much better than the representation created for teens. That is pretty bittersweet. Because, well, you want good representation, but... You want the new generation of LGBT+ youth to have good representation as well. You don't want them to think gay men are only like this:

[Cut to Kurt dancing to "Single Ladies"]

That if they go into their preferred bathroom in high school they'll get treated like this:

[Cut to Adam getting thrown through glass doors]

That they'll be the only out gay person in school like this:

[Cut to Kurt saying he's the only out gay kid at the school]

That their parents will react to them coming out in only one of two ways:

[Cut to Kurt's dad saying he knew then cut to Adam's mom saying "We miss you"]

Or that they need to bind like this if they are a trans man:

[Cut to Adam's unsafe binding technique]

Being a teenager is hard enough. Being told you'll be alone in school or that you'll get beat up or that your family will struggle to accept you, it sucks. Sometimes, it's true. Sometimes, yeah, your parents will kick you out and cut you off. Sometimes, it is safer to stay in the closet. However, life isn't always out to get you. Typically, we stick together. Some joke that we gravitate towards each other and sometimes we don't know why until we've all graduated high school and only one of us was straight.

[cut to clips from *W & G* and *MF*]

*Will & Grace* and *Modern Family* just feels more realistic because they aren't alone in the straight world. Will has Jack and they make jokes towards each other about each other's gayness. Of course, Cam has Mitch and Mitch has Cam, but they also have a supporting family and constantly mention their other LGBT+ friends. Yes, both have their tropes and stereotypes, but they also seemed to be on the right path.

[cut back to Ryan]

Though, there is one thing I will give *Glee* and *Degrassi*. Adam and Kurt both had their own safe spaces. Adam was safe with his friends Eli and Clare, and he had a brother willing to do so much to protect him. Then, Kurt had his safe space within the Glee Club (though there were still some bullying problems within the club). Personally, when I was in high school, my safe space was theatre—I know, throw me into the "All gays love theatre" trope. But, it is



good to teach teens that there are spaces they can fully be themselves with no fear.

But, hey, enough life lessons with Ryan, let's get to how we can fix the problems.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

REPRESENTATION OF LGBT+ FUTURE

[The screen fades to a title screen of the scene and then fades to a subtitle of "What We Want"]

RYAN

So, I said I would get back to the survey, and here we are going back to the survey! The last (serious) question I asked in the survey was "What is something you would like to see as television moves forward with LGBT+ representation?" and the response was loud and clear. We're going to look at five of the top responses of... What we want.

[fade to black screen that says "Diversity" then back to Ryan]

First off, diversity. We're stepping back to Kessler with this one and to the most noticed characteristic of LGBT+ characters. Most of the characters are white. Think about it. What's one thing the characters I studied all had in common? They were white! Of course, there is representation of LGBT+ people of color, but there is no doubt that white people are represented more. This is even the case with straight characters, so while we fight for more LGBT+ representation, there's another fight going on for more representation of people of color. Because, shouldn't our media be just as diverse as we are? On a similar note, most of the characters are able-bodied. That was also a highly selected part of the survey that was noticed. All this to say, we should be striving towards diversity in our characters.

[fade to black screen that says "Normalization" then BTR]

Hello, we're normal too. Sure, a straight person never has to come out to anyone as straight, but we also typically assume straight is the default which isn't

too bright of us. However, I'm here just to say, treat us like real people. Give LGBT+ characters stories that aren't just about their identity. Our entire existence isn't based around the fact that we're LGBT+. If you looked around my room, would you be able to tell? I mean, you may see my trans pride flag scarf, but it's also clear that I have other interests. I'm a huge Spider-Man fan, I love Disney, and I hang up Polaroids of my friends and family. I'm more than just transgender and your characters should be too. One person surveyed even said that they "want to see more LGBT people I myself can relate to."

[FTB says "The T" then BTR]

Now, I'm not just talking about this because I am trans. I'm talking about it because, oh my goodness, it came up a lot in this section of the survey. One person said they would like to see "more trans people just existing." Transgender characters are few and far between. My roommate and I joked that the order the writers care about us is GLBT, and even then, the care between L and B is a huge space and then transgender characters just don't seem to be a thought. That's all I'll really say about it because the conclusion that many reached was just that they wanted more transgender representation.

[FTB then says "LGBT+ Jobs" then BTR]

Another frequently mentioned idea was LGBT+ actors playing LGBT+ roles. The same with LGBT+ writers writing the script or directing it or just having more of a say. Speaking as an actor, when seeking out roles, there aren't many specifically asking for us. Out of sheer curiosity, I once clicked the transgender box on an audition website and nationwide... Two auditions came up. The same can be said for other types of characters, and even then, they'll cast whoever they can get for it. In recent years, we've seen straight actors applauded for kissing someone of the same sex on screen because it was "so brave of them." We've also seen cisgender men nominated for Oscars as they portrayed transgender women. While yes, it is representation, it can take away jobs for people who rarely get the chance. This may be a distant future goal, but it is a goal many called for.

[FTB then says "Hope" then BTR]

One response stuck out to me. So much so, I had to give it its own subsection. She is a sixteen-year-old bisexual female who had this to say, "Growing up without seeing a single queer character hurt me and kept me from realizing that I'm attracted to girls and really made me push that feeling away. It was unfair, and all I want is for kids today to grow up without feeling ashamed of who they are." I think, that is the biggest lesson of why we are pushing for change. Not seeing yourself represented can make you feel so alone, especially if you're growing up in a homophobic environment or if you're still trying to find out who you are. If all you see is an overly stereotyped character or a character that only faces pain, it sucks. This is why change in representation is so important. Yes, we see there is improvement, only one person responded that they didn't, so before we're accused of nitpicking or only seeing what we want to, remember that most of the changes we're pushing for aren't for us, they're for the next generation. If you've ever heard an LGBT+ person speak that was alive during the AIDS epidemic and the Reagan presidency, it's touching. They talk about how they didn't want us facing stuff like that. Now it's our turn, though on a much different scale, to fight for our next generation.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

CONCLUSION

[The screen fades to a title screen of the scene and then to Ryan]

RYAN

Television is an ever changing medium. Heck, just from all of this research I've learned that. We've come such a long way since the 80s, and I'm sure we're going to continue going far in the future. I've already given some suggestions for changes the community wants to see, but it's just a question if Hollywood will act on these changes. Of course, we don't expect changes overnight, but can we still

improve? Hell yes!

I was only able to study four shows, but from what I've heard, children's media is making leaps and bounds with representation. Movies, as well, have attempted to break the mold. Like, how cool is it that Wonder Woman is bisexual? And one of the actors from Spider-Man said he liked the idea of a transgender Peter Parker.

We're in an ever-changing world, and I was only able to study a small glimpse of it. So, keep your eyes open, this is only the beginning and I am positive it's only going to get better.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

EPILOGUE

[The screen fades to CHARACTER #1 still in her corner.]

CHARACTER #1

Great! So, you've saved me from certain death?  
(pause) Hello? Ryan, you better come save me from this! Ryan! ... Wait, if the bully just left then... Oh, I guess that means... I live! Man, I'm going to go tell my girlfriend about this.

[She then exits as the screen fades to black.]

FADE OUT:

THE END

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## Ryan Johnson

Ryan Johnson is a sophomore at UCF studying Creative Writing and Entertainment Management with a minor in French. His goal upon graduation is to continue writing and continue to work at the theme parks within the central Florida area. A big goal of his is to introduce transgender characters and narratives into the mainstream of the writing world, and he plans to continue to explore these

topics throughout his remaining years at UCF. He hopes this work and his future work will inspire others to bring more of their own narratives into their writing, whether it be academic or for fun.