**Representing Minorities**

Stereotypes, Diversity and Visibility in Portrayals of Lesbian and Bisexual Women in American TV Shows

Naam student: Robin Vrolijk   
Studentnummer: 3702952  
Begeleidend docent: Milica Trakilović  
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**Table of Contents**

**1** Introduction 3

**2** Methodological Frame 6

**3**  Theoretical Frame 9

3.1 Representation 9

3.2 Stereotypes 11

**4** Case Studies 15

**5** Conclusion 21

**6** Literature 23

**Abstract**

Media representations of lesbian and bisexual women are often problematic and based on stereotypes. This thesis will discuss the importance and consequences of the representation of minority groups using theories by Stuart Hall and Kimberlé W. Crenshaw. Focusing on lesbian and bisexual women, the research question “How are lesbian and bisexual women represented in American television shows *Orange is the New Black* and *Once Upon a Time* and how can this representation be understood as an active factor in audiences’ perception of sexual minorities?” discusses these theories with regard to sexual minorities and provides a comparative analysis of two representative case studies. It is concluded that even though lesbian and bisexual characters are becoming increasingly visible on television, the majority of these characters is white and conventionally attractive, lacking diversity. In addition, there are many recurring stereotypes and tropes that can cause damage in the lives of lesbian and bisexual women by reinforcing misconceptions. TV shows that lack complex queer characters, such as *Once Upon a Time*, should strive towards incorporating them, as for example *Orange is the New Black* has done very successfully.

**1 Introduction**

The impact that mass media have on the public is immense, as they have the power to change the way their audiences view the world around them (Mahtani 2). With Americans watching television for an average of twenty-eight hours a week, this medium in particular plays an important role in “defining our cultural tastes, helping us locate ourselves in history, establishing our national identity, and ascertaining the range of national and social possibilities” (Mantsios 451). However, portrayals in American mass media, including television, tend to be biased and suffer from a very one-sided perspective on society, namely the dominant perspective of the white, upper class, heterosexual citizen (Mantsios 451, Guittar 169). For minority groups, such as people of color and LGBT people, this means they are constantly confronted with texts and images that do not reflect their lives. Even though, for example, LGBT identities are becoming “increasingly normalized” in American society (Seidman, Meeks and Traschen in Guittar 174), there are still relatively few minority characters on television shows, and those that are present tend to be depicted in a stereotypical manner (Mahtani 3).

In my thesis, I will examine the representation of lesbian and bisexual women in American television shows. I have chosen this subject because when watching TV shows myself and reading about them, I noticed that even when non-heterosexual sexuality is addressed on TV, these portrayals often lack depth or are treated unequal to their straight counterparts. This can mean less screen time, but also a double standard with regards to the amount of physical affection LGBT characters can show each other (Hogan, “2013: The Year in Lesbian/Bi TV” 3). This is especially true for lesbian and bisexual characters, who often tend to be invisible and in cases where they are present, there is an overrepresentation of young, white and very feminine characters (Plunkett). This means there is very little diversity with regard to gender identity, as well as a lack of diversity in ethnic background, class and body image. In addition, even though the number of lesbian and bisexual characters has grown exponentially over the last few years, they are still underrepresented (Hogan, “2013: The Year in Lesbian/Bi TV” 3).

In my thesis, I will look at the way lesbian and bisexual women are represented in American television shows and analyze how this can impact ideas about sexuality in society. I will do so by making a comparative analysis of two case studies: Netflix original series *Orange is the New Black* and ABC’s fantasy drama *Once Upon a Time*. My research question will be “How are lesbian and bisexual women represented in American television shows *Orange is the New Black* and *Once Upon a Time* and how can this representation be understood as an active factor in audiences’ perception of sexual minorities?” My first sub question, “How can the representation of minority groups such as women and LGBT people in TV shows be understood to play a role in influencing audiences’ perception and understanding of these groups?”, will be devoted to the theoretical background of representation in general and the importance of the representation of minority groups in particular. My focus will be on the work of Stuart Hall, pioneer in the area of cultural studies who has written much about the way media influence their audiences – and vice versa. My second sub question will be “How can the writers and producers of American TV shows represent lesbian and bisexual characters in a manner that provides audiences with a more nuanced and complex understanding of lesbian and bisexual women?” Here, I will give an overview of the different stereotypes and tropes that are often used in storylines with lesbian and bisexual characters and why this can be harmful to viewers. The third and final sub question, “In which ways can the representation of lesbian and bisexual characters depicted in *Orange is the New Black* and *Once Upon a Time* be considered innovative, or stereotypical, in terms of physical appearance, treatment compared to straight characters and storylines?”, will be a comparative analysis of two case studies, in which I will examine the way lesbian and bisexual characters are represented and how this reflects on the representation of lesbian and bisexual women in general.

I have chosen to limit the scope of my research with several demarcations. First of all, my research will focus on the period between 2004 and 2014. This is, of course, quite an elaborate timespan and it is by no means my intention to provide an all-encompassing overview of the representation of lesbian and bisexual women in this time. However, I have chosen to focus my research on this period because the last ten years have seen an exponential growth in the amount of LGBT characters onscreen, providing many different perspectives, breakthroughs and setbacks in terms of representation – such as an increase in positive portrayals of bisexual women and a higher number of queer women of color on TV (Kregloe). Often seen as a starting point for this ‘new era’ is the first ever TV show centered on lesbian women, Showtime’s groundbreaking *The L Word*, which first airedin 2004.

I decided to narrow my research down to lesbian and bisexual women in particular because of the double invisibility that lesbian and bisexual women face, both within the gay community and in society at large. To examine this double invisibility further, I will use the concept of intersectionality, which explains why discrimination based on for example gender, ethnicity or sexuality is never solely that but is always connected to a person’s other axes of identity (Crenshaw 1991). The discrimination that lesbian and bisexual women face both as women and as non-heterosexual will be a central theme throughout my thesis. The focus of my research is on television shows because, as mentioned earlier, television is the most influential form of popular media there is. When looking at the influence that positive representations of LGBT characters can have, television shows are some of the most important platforms to portray them on. In addition, I decided to focus on American TV shows because they are predominantly and widespread visible around the world. Although lesbian and bisexual characters appear in other, non-US television shows, the majority of shows broadcasted globally are created in the United States and therefore, most shows featuring lesbian and bisexual characters are American. This is reflected in a 2009 research from New Zealand by Jackson and Gilbertson, “’Hot Lesbians': Young People's Talk About Representations of Lesbianism”, where they note that “all current or recent programmes with gay or lesbian representation originated either in the USA (…) or the UK” (205).[[1]](#footnote-1) This also appears from AfterEllen’s “2013: The Year in Lesbian/Bi TV”, where they note that over 70 of that year’s lesbian and bisexual characters originated in the US (1). Therefore, my focus will be on representation in American television shows, though many of the subjects that will be discussed (such as tropes and stereotypes) will be true for other, non-American shows as well.

**2 Methodological frame**

To explain why lesbian and bisexual women face double invisibility as a minority within a minority, namely as women in the LGBT community, I will use Kimberlé W. Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality. By explaining intersectionality and applying the concept to my case studies by means of an intersectional analysis, I will attempt to make clear why the representation of lesbian and bisexual women should take into consideration not only gender and sexual orientation, but also other axes of identity such as ethnicity, class and body type.

The term intersectionality was first coined by Crenshaw in 1991 in her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”, and has its roots in critical feminist race theory (Staunæs & Søndergaard 46). The concept states the importance of taking into consideration how the different aspects of a person’s identity, such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class and nationality, are intertwined with each other. This means that, for example, the axis ‘gender’ cannot truly be considered a category on its own, but is constructed in relation with other axes of identity and should therefore always be studied as such. Crenshaw points out that this connectedness is often overlooked within feminist research: “Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices” (1241). This implies that writing about gender and sexuality, which are the most prominent axes of identity featured in this thesis, cannot and should not be done without considering other axes such as ethnicity and class. For example, women of color are subject to multiple oppressions, because they are a minority both in terms of gender and ethnicity: “The narratives of gender are based on the experience of white, middle-class women, and the narratives of race are based on the experience of Black men”(1271). The same can be said for, for example, non-heterosexual women, but again ethnicity and other factors come into play here: the position of a lesbian or bisexual woman will unequivocally be influenced by ethnicity, class, etcetera.

In terms of representation, this means that diversity is essential. Incorporating lesbian and bisexual characters into storylines is a start, but if the vast majority of these characters are white, thin and feminine, the lives of many women are still not being reflected at all on television. In order to be inclusive of lesbian and bisexual women, intersectionality is a necessary tool to critically analyze the characters portrayed and to be able to understand the diverse experiences of different lesbian and bisexual women. Critical reflection is needed, however, on the categorization of identities as given rather than fluid (Cerwonka 67). After all, there is no such thing as ‘all black women’ or ‘the experiences of black women’ and it should not be attempted to speak for such a group. Also, it should be understood that, as Staunæs & Søndergaard state, not every category of identity is as important as another at any given time, as is sometimes assumed in traditional intersectional theory (50-51). This does not mean that certain categories should be ignored, but that others can be more crucial in a certain situation. This will be kept in mind when analyzing and comparing the case studies.

In addition to an intersectional analysis, I will also do a comparative analysis of two television shows, *Orange is the New Black* and *Once Upon a Time*, in order to look at different trends in representing lesbian and bisexual women. This method of research is often used quantitatively, but when used qualitatively it focuses on a selection of cases that are chosen and then interpreted and compared based on a number of criteria (Olsen). The criteria for these two case studies, for example, were that they contained at least one lesbian or bisexual character that was portrayed in either a considerably enlightened or problematic manner. In addition, they should be well-known enough to have had considerable media attention and a large audience, rather than being a small niche show with a low number of viewers. Facets that will be analyzed and compared include characters’ appearances and scenes that discuss sexual identity. A comparative analysis will allow me to demonstrate theory on representation, especially that of lesbian and bisexual women, by providing an in-depth analysis of two representative shows. By comparing the two shows I can distinguish recurring patterns that can provide insight into the (problematic) ways lesbian and bisexual women are often represented on television.

The first case study is *Orange is the New Black*, a Netflix original prison drama which focuses on a young female bisexual protagonist. This show is relevant for multiple reasons. First of all, *Orange is the New Black* features no less than eight female LBT characters, who have many different ethnic backgrounds, body types, sexual identities and social classes, forming the most diverse group of people currently on television (Hogan, “2013: The Year in Lesbian/Bi TV” 3). This provides an interesting possibility for an intersectional analysis, since a lot of other shows feature few to none characters that diverge from the white, thin, heterosexual norm. Second, since the show was originally broadcasted online it is not influenced by censorship rules that prevail on network television, therefore having the opportunity to treat its queer characters as realistically as possible. Finally, since the show premiered in 2013 (and became hugely popular around the world, making it a representative case study), it is relatively new, meaning hardly any in-depth academic research has been done on it yet. This also means that this thesis will be relevant by attempting to fill that void by providing an analysis of the show in terms of the representation of gender and sexuality.

The second case study is ABC’s fantasy drama *Once Upon a Time*. I have specifically chosen *Once Upon a Time* because of the way the writers handled the storyline of the one lesbian or bisexual character, namely by having her come out in the most ambiguous way possible, only to inexplicably disappear never to be mentioned again. I also chose the show because of its huge popularity and subject matter of presenting fairy tales with a twist, which theoretically makes it an ideal platform to present viewers with an interesting LGBT storyline. Viewers have been clamoring for more inclusivity, such as persons of color and LGBT characters on *Once Upon a Time* since the show started, which makes the lack of a well-developed queer character - whose desire is not just a hidden, unrequited love for exactly one episode – all the more remarkable (Hogan, “10 TV Shows That Need to Add Lesbian Characters” 2). Both case studies lend itself for intersectional analyses, since Orange is the New Black shines through its diverse characters and Once Upon a Time does the complete opposite.

**3 Theoretical frame**

**3.1 Representation**

In my first sub question I will explain the concept of representation and its influence on audiences. I will do so mainly by discussing Stuart Hall, specifically his encoding/decoding model of communication. This allows me to explain how viewers construct meaning and how representation influences the way viewers see the world, therefore being a powerful tool in shaping thoughts about (often stereotyped) minority groups such the LGBT community. This theoretical framework will be structured by posing the question “How can the representation of minority groups such as women and LGBT people in TV shows be understood to play a role in influencing audiences’ perception and understanding of these groups?” In addition, I will clarify some key concepts and texts that have helped shape my ideas posed in my thesis. I will discuss previous research on lesbian and bisexual representation, such as “`Hot Lesbians': Young People's Talk About Representations of Lesbianism” by Jackson and Gilbertson. I will also look at data collected by GLAAD in their annual “Where we are on TV” reports and by AfterEllen.com. This will mainly be to illustrate the number of lesbian and bisexual characters on television, their ethnic backgrounds and the recurrence of certain stereotypes and tropes.

In his 1973 essay “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse”, Hall developed the encoding/decoding model of communication, which explains the idea that audiences cannot be seen as passive recipients of texts and images, but are active participants that interpret messages based on their personal background and experiences (Procter 59). This means that a text (‘text’ is used as an umbrella term for any sort of cultural or creative production here) does not have an inherent meaning which is encoded by the creator, but that the audience *decodes* the message through different readings (69). Hall proposes three of these readings, namely the dominant reading, the negotiated reading and the oppositional reading. The dominant or hegemonic reading is when the reader understands the message that the creator of the text intended, and thus decodes/interprets it accordingly. In this case, the reader usually shares the creator’s own (hegemonic) social position. The negotiated reading happens when a reader understands the intended message of the author, but realizes its hegemonic origin and modifies it to fit the interpretation that matches their own social position. The oppositional reading is a critical reading: here the reader understands the author’s message, but decodes it in a way that is critical of its origins in hegemonic structures and thus rejects it based on their personal experiences.

In mainstream media, minority groups such as LGBT people and people of color are continuously confronted with texts that do not reflect their lives. For example, in most American mainstream TV shows the majority of characters are white, heterosexual and upper or middle class. This leads to oppositional readings from many people that do not fit into that image for one or more reasons. Through representation, social and cultural practices are always “saturated with meanings and values which contribute to our sense of who we are – our culturally constructed identities” (Gledhill 339). This is especially true for people who are perhaps not self-aware enough for an oppositional reading and who cannot explain the feelings of discomfort caused by the stream of confrontations with hegemonically encoded messages. This can, for example, be an LGBT teenager who has not come to terms with his or her sexuality yet. This is problematic for multiple reasons. First of all, for (young) people belonging to one or more minority groups, the lack of recognition and opportunity for identification can cause feelings of anxiety, distress and low self-esteem due to feeling different (Floyd & Stein 168). By means of positive representation, television is a medium that can provide these opportunities and can therefore be beneficial for the self-acceptance of minorities. On the other hand, this also means that negative portrayals can have an unfavorable impact not only on minorities themselves, but also on the majority of viewers, many of whom get most, if not all of their ideas about minority groups from the media. This means that media such as television have the power to “reproduc[e] damaging and limiting stereotypes”, thereby influencing a large part of the population (Jackson & Gilbertson 203). An example of this in terms of LGBT representation is given by Larry Gross, who argues that “if young people consume only heterosexual versions of sexuality and have no access to alternative sources of information (e.g. in their social environment) they may ‘have little choice but to accept the media stereotypes they imagine must be typical of all lesbians and gay men’” (Gross in Jackson & Gilbertson 203). These stereotypes can in turn be harmful in real-life: lack of understanding can lead to a lack of respect, since “people internalize these messages and sometimes they output them in really offensive ways” (Fabello). Therefore, nuanced representations of minority groups is something that is important far beyond the screen itself.

LGBT representation is an especially hot topic at the moment, especially in the United States. At the start of the 2012-2013 TV season, the number of LGBT characters was over twice as high as it was in 2005 (“Where We Are on TV”). In addition, many real-life struggles over LGBT rights are going on right now, with an increasing amount of success stories[[2]](#footnote-2). These successes cannot be viewed independently from the impact that widespread LGBT visibility in the media has: according to lesbian pop culture website AfterEllen.com, the most comprehensive source on lesbian and bisexual visibility in popular culture, “social change and television are locked in a perpetual symbiosis” (Hogan, “2012: The Year in Lesbian/Bi TV” 1). Therefore, looking at the representation of LGBT characters on television is crucial in understanding the relationship between real-life struggles for the LGBT community and the influence representation and visibility can have.

**3.2 Stereotypes**

As explained, the media - especially TV - play a big role in the way audiences perceive the world around them. Portrayals of complex, three-dimensional LGBT characters on TV can lead to increased understanding of the LGBT community by people who, until that point, had based their ideas on the subject on stereotypes and misapprehensions. However, the contradictory side of this media influence is that these stereotypes and misapprehensions often originate in the very same media that have the power to overturn them. In the same way that LGBT teenagers may identify with positive examples of LGBT sexuality, negative examples can perpetuate stereotypes that have a damaging impact on society. I examine this through the question “How can the writers and producers of American TV shows represent lesbian and bisexual characters in a manner that provides audiences with a more nuanced and complex understanding of lesbian and bisexual women?”. Here, I discuss at the ways that lesbian and bisexual women are represented stereotypically on TV and how this can be related to struggles or inequality they face in their daily lives. I also suggest that writers avoid these stereotypes in order to create better and more representative stories.

TV storylines with lesbian and/or bisexual characters often suffer from the same tired clichés and plot devices, called tropes. Website *TVTropes.com* is an encyclopedia-style wiki that gathers and analyses these tropes. When using the search term ‘lesbian’, the results that come up echo many of the same stereotypes that are often discussed and criticized on websites such as *AfterEllen.com*. I will not be able to analyze them all, but I will discuss some of the most prevalent ones. Others, such as the ‘lesbians trying to get pregnant’ trope or the ‘lesbian dies at the end’ trope are less relevant for this thesis and will therefore not be discussed.

One of the most common tropes is the oversexualized lesbian that exists mainly for male titillation. *TV Tropes* calls this the ‘Girl-on-Girl is Hot’ trope and explains that the idea of two women together is alluring to most straight men. Therefore, in order to appeal to their audience, writers quite often opt to represent lesbian and bisexual characters as conventionally attractive and highly feminine, with a focus on their appearance and sexuality but not on their actual, potentially meaningful relationships with other women. This also means there is a lack in diversity in terms of characters who diverge from the norm, which is white, thin and feminine. According to Malinda Lo, this means that “you rarely see any genderqueer or butch lesbians on-screen, and you pretty much never see any women who are larger than a size 2, anyway”. Looking through an intersectional lens, this suggests a considerable one-sided image of lesbian and bisexual women that erases any diversity that could be portrayed. It has also been suggested that the feminine, oversexualized lesbian is used both as a reaction against the stereotypical image of the ‘butch lesbian’ and as a way not to confront audiences with less conventional gender appearances, meaning that “feminized representations of lesbianism reflect an attempt to ‘de-lesbianize’ lesbians, packaging them in such a way as to be unthreatening to a heterosexual audience” (Jackson & Gilbertson 208). Therefore, lesbian sexuality becomes heterosexualized by being used mainly for male audiences’ arousal (213). As a result, many people (especially men) risk internalizing the message that lesbian and bisexual women somehow exist for the sexual pleasure of men or are otherwise not to be taken seriously as having a legitimate sexual identity, leading to situations ranging from inappropriate comments (such as “you’re too pretty to be a lesbian”) and proposals for threesomes, to the possibility of actual sexual violence[[3]](#footnote-3) (Fabello).

In addition to this trope, there is a vast overrepresentation of lesbian identified (note: not bisexual, see next section) characters that sleep with men. When looking at mainstream representations of lesbian women, this trope occurs so often that frustrations have reached new levels among lesbian critics and reviewers worldwide. The problem here is that it is not just the occasional questioning LGBT teenager who is experimenting and trying to find out who she is and how she identifies, such as Amy in MTV’s new show *Faking It*, which is a reasonably realistic scenario[[4]](#footnote-4). Instead, there is an extremely unrealistic amount of characters that are lesbian identified, either by themselves on-screen or by the writers of the show off-screen, yet who still desire men sexually (Bennett, Fabello). That is not to say that there are no lesbians who occasionally want to have sex with men, but the damaging stereotype that this recurring trope creates is that lesbian sexuality is something that can eventually be ‘overcome’, leading to real-life consequences of men considering lesbianism something that should not be taken seriously. This ‘heteroflexibility’ is highly gendered. As Jackson and Gilbertson note: “We did not find this to be the case in any discussions related to gay sexuality suggesting heteroflexibility to be a distinctly gendered phenomenon, at least amongst our participants. Foremost in discussions that related to heteroflexibility was the notion of representing lesbianism or ‘girl–girl sex’ as a way of attracting and ‘titillating’ a male audience.” (207) This is confirmed by Bennett, who recognizes that the cliché of lesbians wanting to sleep with men is never found in reverse. Reviewer Elaine Atwell calls for more diverse portrayals of sexual flexibility among men on TV, “so the burden of fluidity doesn’t just fall on women, because that has some really damaging real-world consequences for girls who are told they are just confused” (4).

The third and final trope that will be discussed is that of the invisible or confused bisexual. Whereas there is an overrepresentation of lesbian identified characters who still desire men, diverse portrayals of genuine (as in ‘not played for ratings’) bisexual characters are dramatically underrepresented. Very often, female bisexual characters are presented in one of two ways. The first stereotype is that bisexuality is a phase, wherein a woman experiments or has an affair with another women, only to return to heterosexuality afterwards. This happens, for example, on *The O.C.*, where main character Marissa dates bisexual character Alex for about three episodes, only to return to her ex-boyfriend afterwards and never mentioning anything about Alex or her sexual orientation again.

Conversely, the second stereotype is that bisexuality is a “stepping stone” to lesbianism (Fabello; “But Not Too Bi”). An example of this is the character of Alice in Showtime’s groundbreaking TV show *The L* Word. Alice, who confidently self-identifies as bisexual at the beginning of the series, dates exactly two men during the first season, then never again mentions her bisexuality throughout the remaining five seasons, in which she only dates women. Other characters, such as Jenny who discovers she is attracted to women after she moves to LA with her boyfriend, or Molly who identifies as straight yet falls in love with Shane, show a much more realistic progression in their self-discovery and prove that sexual orientation covers a much broader spectrum than either gay or straight. What makes these two stereotypes damaging is that they perpetuate the stereotype that bisexual people will eventually ‘choose a side’, so to speak, erasing the existence of bisexuality as an actual and legitimate sexual orientation (“Bisexuality is not a Fiction”).

Looking at the damage that stereotypical media representations can do, it becomes clear that we need an improvement in the way characters are written in order to create more diverse and complex lesbian and bisexual characters. The key word here is diversity. If there are enough realistic, well-rounded, diverse lesbian and bisexual characters, the damage that one less well-thought-out storyline can do decreases significantly. Audiences may be impacted by a single story, but that cannot be compared by the overall effect that a diverse, nuanced spectrum of lesbian and bisexual characters can have. This is again where intersectionality comes into play. Diversity should not only be reflected in a character’s sexual orientation and subsequent relationships, but throughout their entire personality and appearance, since these aspects of identity are always intertwined with each other. If the image of the white, thin, ‘sexy lesbian’ can coexist with representations of women that are less conventionally attractive, less feminine or less white, it can cease to be a stereotype. Of course, this has to be combined with improved story writing in order to not reduce the character to a ploy without any backstory or a mere fantasy for men. However, if the focus can be on writing a three-dimensional character that is interesting and well-rounded as a whole rather than just focus on her sexual orientation, representation will eventually improve and thereby have a positive impact on the stereotypes and misconceptions that often prevail in society.

**4 Case Studies**

To look deeper into the way that lesbian and bisexual characters are (and could be) represented, I will now discuss two case studies: *Orange is the New Black* and *Once Upon a Time*. My focus is on the following question: “In which ways can the representation of lesbian and bisexual characters depicted in *Orange is the New Black* and *Once Upon a Time* be considered innovative, or stereotypical, in terms of physical appearance, treatment compared to straight characters and storylines?” I start off by providing a brief summary of both shows. Then I discuss the most important storylines and characters, focusing on the way sexual identity and physical appearance are represented. I compare the two shows and explain which aspects can be considered stereotypical and problematic and which aspects can be considered progressive and positive.

ABC’s *Once Upon a Time* is a TV show that depicts the lives of traditional fairy tale characters in a modern environment. Characters include Disney princesses such as Snow White and Cinderella, folklore figures such as Rumplestiltskin and other characters ranging from Pinocchio’s Jiminy Cricket to Little Red Riding Hood and Chinese warrior Mulan. The premise of the show is to depict these familiar stories with a twist: Little Red Riding Hood turns out to be a werewolf and Peter Pan is the epitome of evil. From the very start of the show, the extremely vocal lesbian and bisexual fanbase has been clamoring for a queer character on the show. After all, that seems so very in line with the premise of the show (Hogan, “10 TV Shows That Need to Add Lesbian Characters” 2). The show has received much criticism, however, for failing to include more diversity into its cast of characters, both in terms of ethnicity and sexuality.

Compared to *Once Upon a Time*, Netflix original series *Orange is the New Black* is the epitome of diversity and inclusivity, both in terms of lesbian and bisexual representation and representation of other aspects of identity (such as ethnicity, class, age and body type). Set in an all-female prison, the show centers around inmate Piper Chapman, who has just been imprisoned for a one-time drug deal she did ten years earlier. At the start of the first episode it is revealed that Piper is bisexual, even though she refrains from calling herself that: although now engaged to a man named Larry, she went to jail because ex-girlfriend Alex Vause named her during trial. After the initial shock of finding out that Alex is in the same prison as her, Piper soon finds that her attraction to Alex is as strong as ever, leading to a drama-filled affair behind bars.

*Sexual Identity*

Representations of non-heterosexuality are virtually non-existent in *Once Upon a* Time. The first and only exception came when the character of Mulan was introduced. At first, it was implied that Mulan might have feelings for her friend, *Sleeping Beauty*’s Prince Phillip, which she denied. After spending time with both Phillip and Aurora, her initial annoyance with Aurora’s lack of any real use faded and the two characters become more close. When, at the beginning of the third season, Mulan finally came out as having feelings for Aurora[[5]](#footnote-5), lesbian and bisexual viewers were ecstatic. Not only had the Mulan/Aurora pairing gained an avid fanbase over the previous months, but this also meant welcoming a queer character of color into the show. However, when at the end of the very same episode Mulan left to join Robin Hood’s band of Merry Men after learning Aurora was pregnant, viewers could not have predicted they would never see her again. Apparently, this was the writers’ way to conclude Mulan’s storyline, which had in part to do with actress Jamie Chung’s involvement with another show, but the general sentiment among lesbian and bisexual fans was that the storyline deserved to be worked out much more elaborately. Lesbian news and entertainment website *Autostraddle.com* accused the show of ‘queerbaiting’, meaning that LGBT viewers get drawn to a show looking for representation, which is often implied but never overt, only to never see actual queer characters emerge (Kate). It has never been resolved if Mulan did indeed have romantic feelings for Phillip as well when she was first introduced, meaning that the show missed a chance to explore bisexuality – which, looking at the invisibility of bisexuals in the media, is a missed opportunity for both a ‘fairytale twist’ and being inclusive. Even though Robin Hood and his men were present during the third season of *Once Upon a Time*, Mulan was never even mentioned. Leaving a storyline unresolved like this has not happened once with any storyline involving heterosexual romance in the show, furthering the sense of inequality in how queer characters are treated. This storyline, which started out so promising, turned out to be an enormous disappointment to fans and is the embodiment of lesbian/bisexual invisibility in mainstream media.

The contrast could not be bigger when comparing *Once Upon a Time* with *Orange is the New Black.* In its first season, *Orange is the New Black* featured eight female characters that can be considered non-heterosexual. Some of the most interesting depictions of sexual identity include African American transgender character Sophia Burset, whose past and relationship with her (presumed straight) wife are revealed through flashbacks, sweet yet incredibly racist Lorna Morello, who is engaged to a man[[6]](#footnote-6) but has a sexual relationship with lesbian junkie Nicky Nichols while in prison, and Piper herself. This immediately shows that *Orange is the New Black* is far from a conventional show: the characters form by far the most diverse group of people that are currently on television, maybe even in the history of TV. Sexual orientation is almost never a serious topic of conversation – when mentioned, it is usually in a lighthearted, joking manner common within a group of friends – yet it is always visible, whether it’s non-lesbian identified women seeking comfort in times of loneliness, sex for the sake of the physical act itself, or actual relationships that build and develop behind prison walls. The people that discuss sexuality in the most serious manner, namely Piper’s fiancée and family, are also the people that are presented as being filled with misconceptions and also as not the smartest people around in general (the term ‘ex-lesbian’ can be heard more than once).

As the protagonist, Piper’s relationships with both Larry and Alex are central to the plot. Important to note here is that both relationships get equal screen time and attention: this becomes clear in the very first seconds of the pilot, in which Piper talks about her love for ‘getting clean’ intercut with flashbacks of her in the shower with Alex and in the bathtub with Larry. Throughout the first season, the audience gets to see the history and development of both her relationships through flashbacks and current scenes. Both relationships are shown to have their upsides and downsides – Larry is sweet but boring, whereas Alex is exciting but manipulative – and audiences are not pushed into one direction or the other in terms of which love interest is the most important one.[[7]](#footnote-7) Even when Alex’ screen time is reduced drastically in season 2 (she appears in only four episodes) due to the actress’ conflicting schedule, she is still present in Piper’s life through letters and Piper’s conversations with other people, rather than disappearing from the show as though nothing happened.

Of course, the show has its imperfections. Although the fact that many characters go label-free with regard to their sexuality is refreshing and it shows that there many possibilities on the spectrum between straight and gay, it can also be understood to reinforce the bi invisibility that has been discussed earlier. This particularly applies to Piper, who is shown to have had fulfilling romantic and sexual relationships with both men and women. As she describes herself to her best friend: “I like hot girls. I like hot boys. I like hot people. What can I say? I’m shallow.” When she is called a lesbian, she denies it with: “I’m not even fully that way”. She is not lying, yet why a show that strives so hard to be inclusive chooses to have its main character refuse to use the term ‘bisexual’ is confusing and seems to erase the possibility of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation (Rafus; “Bisexuality is not a Fiction”). Having Piper matter-of-factly identify herself as bisexual would be a great example in the face of those stereotypical representations that treat bisexuality as ‘just a phase’.

*Physical Appearance*

The lack of diversity in *Once Upon a Time* is not only visible with regard to sexuality, but also when looking at physical appearance and ethnicity. In addition to being exclusively tall, thin and conventionally attractive, the main cast consists entirely of white actors, with the exception of Lana Parrilla (Regina/The Evil Queen), who is Latin American but ‘passes’ for white - meaning that her ancestry is not apparent from her looks and her heritage is never mentioned. There have been a few recurring characters and guest characters played by African American or Asian American actors, however, they have without exception either turned out evil and died, or disappeared without any mention[[8]](#footnote-8). Examples include the character of Tamara, who is introduced as Neal/Baelfire’s fiancée but turns out to be a villain and dies, and Rapunzel, who is African American but only appears in one episode. In the same way that it seems unthinkable that a show which has ‘fairytales with a twist’ as its central premise would hesitate to present familiar fictional characters as anything other than straight, the lack of diversity with regard to ethnicity is baffling and implies that *Once Upon a Time* is actually unwilling to diverge from traditional stories and characters.

The only recurring character of color whose backstory and amount of screen time are equal to recurring white characters is Mulan. As a queer character of color, she has the potential to play an important role in representing diversity on the show. As discussed earlier, however, Mulan’s sexual orientation never gets worked out further than one heartbreaking scene, which, looking through an intersectional lens is disappointing even more *because* she is a queer character of colour. In addition, online criticism on message boards and comment sections about having the most ‘butch’[[9]](#footnote-9) female character be the only non-heterosexual one also immediately emerged, as some found this to be stereotypical and had preferred to see an actual Disney princess that was a lesbian or bisexual (Anne). Since Disney princesses are traditionally the epitome of white, feminine, thin and heterosexual, it would indeed have been more revolutionary if, for example, Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella had turned out to be lesbian or bisexual, or even lesbian or bisexual *and* non-white.

In *Orange is the New Black*, main character Piper is white, slim and conventionally attractive, as are her two love interests. It is the cast of supporting characters that makes the show extremely diverse in terms of physical appearance and ethnic background. Many of the supporting characters are African American or Latin American and ethnicity plays an immense role in Litchfield Prison. Most characters of a certain ethnic background are shown to form their own community, or ‘family’, which determines where they eat, sleep and which jobs they are assigned. With even the bathrooms being divided based on racial grounds, Piper is understandably shocked when she first arrives in prison. Yet she soon learns that the inmates themselves are mostly responsible for this arrangement, and perfectly happy with it. The show manages to incorporate an incredible amount of detail with regard to culture and ethnic experience, such as street language, into every group of characters, sometimes indulging in stereotypes only to turn them back around. Street smart, full-figured, cheerful Taystee, for example, loves the Harry Potter books as much as she loves dancing to R&B music and turns out to be both a mathematical genius and an ambitious businesswoman at heart, all the while never uttering a sentence that does not include some form of African American slang. The complexity of characters like this allows for an in-depth exploration of ethnic experience much more authentically than the average TV show with perhaps one token black character.

In addition to having characters anywhere between ages 19 and late 80s, which allows the show to deal with topics ranging from the consequences of immature and irresponsible behavior to Alzheimer’s disease and dementia, the characters’ body types range from skinny to overweight and everything in between. Whether it concerns African American characters or white characters, young or old, audiences are not shielded from naked bodies or conversations about sex, even if it concerns characters that would not be considered conventionally attractive. An example is the character of Big Boo, played by Lea DeLaria, who is undeniably obese and can be considered masculine in every sense: short hair, tattoos, no makeup and often displaying loud, macho behavior. There are simply no characters like Boo on American television and she is truly a groundbreaking character simply by existing and not being reduced to a caricature. She is given a backstory, the audience sees her heartbreak when her ex-girlfriend acts hurtful towards her before being released from prison, and, most importantly: she is treated as a human being with needs, including sexual needs. Comparing a character like this to the extremely conventional, good-looking cast of for example *Once Upon a Time* shows a huge discrepancy between what constitutes a realistic group of people and what is the norm on basically any TV show.

The sensitivity and attention for representing such a diverse group of people on *Orange is the New Black* is something that can only be applauded, not only compared to *Once Upon a Time*, but to TV shows in general.

It could be considered problematic that even though the supporting cast is more diverse than any other on TV, the protagonist and her love interests are still conventional main characters in terms of ethnic background and physical appearance. However, *Orange is the New Black* manages to avoid this pitfall for two reasons. First of all, Piper is, especially in the first season, far from the most likeable character of the group. She is flawed: she takes herself way too serious, can at times be snooty and condescending and is shown to be extremely selfish, for example in the flashback scene where she leaves Alex after Alex’ mom has just passed away. Other characters notice this as well and call her out on it. Secondly, in the prison where Piper resides, white privilege has implications that are absent in the outside world. Counselor Healy takes an immediate liking to Piper because she is “not like the other girls in here”, complimenting her on her education, calling her a “nice girl” and granting her special privileges, even ones that are never extended such as a furlough to visit her dying grandmother. However, she is immediately confronted by the other inmates, especially the African American and Latin American groups, and instantly becomes the target of hostility and harassment over this special treatment. Even though the audience is supposed to be rooting for Piper to get her furlough, the outrage of the other inmates is completely understandable, especially when other characters mention not being allowed to go to their own parent’s funeral, making it clear that Healy’s preferential treatment of Piper is in fact highly unfair and based on misguided assumptions rooted in race and class issues. Because of these complexities in the writing, *Orange is the New Black* manages to remain genuine in representing diversity without avoiding a complex, realistically flawed and sometimes unlikeable protagonist.

**5 Conclusion**

Reflecting upon my research question “How are lesbian and bisexual women represented in American television shows *Orange is the New Black* and *Once Upon a Time* and how can this representation be understood as an active factor in audiences’ perception of sexual minorities?”, I can conclude that there is a huge disparity in the way that lesbian and bisexual characters are represented. Overall, there is an increasing amount of diverse characters on television in terms of sexual orientation, with *Orange is the New Black* as an absolute highlight. However, too many mainstream TV shows still lack diversity and tend to perpetuate stereotypes when they do include minority characters, such as in *Once Upon a Time*. *Once Upon a Time* could learn something from *Orange is the New Black* in terms of inclusivity, diversity and writing complex, nuanced characters and storylines. *Orange is the New Black* is revolutionary in every way when it comes to representation of women with different sexual identities, ethnic backgrounds and body types, and its massive success seems to promise good things for the future. However, as long as hugely popular shows like *Once Upon a Time* still fail to include at least *one* main character that is not straight, not white and not size zero, despite fans asking for more diverse representation, there is still a long way to go. Diverse and complex characters are needed in order to provide audiences with a better comprehension of a minority group they often are not familiar with and do not understand, as well as providing a means of identification and hope for people who belong to that minority group themselves. When showing diversity and debunking stereotypes, representation of lesbian and bisexual women of all colors, shapes and sizes can take steps towards are more informed and enlightened society in which lesbian and bisexual women will no longer be treated as inferior based on misinformation and stereotypes.

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1. The United States are a global hegemonic power, which systematically influences aspects of life such as the media worldwide. This is an issue that deserves elaborate critical reflection, however, due to the limited space of this paper it is not within my scope to do so. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, the growing number of states with marriage equality and non-discrimination laws, as well as current president of the United States Barack Obama being the first president to openly support same-sex marriage. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Further research will be needed to examine the potential correlation between media representation and actual violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yet *Faking it* faced an enormous backlash from its lesbian fans, who are tired of the cliché that lesbian or questioning characters always have to sleep with a male character at some point. It is very likely that this particular development would not have caused the same amount of outrage if there had been less occurrences of lesbian-identified characters sleeping with men - the idea of a questioning teenage girl drunkenly sleeping with somebody she is not attracted to after being rejected by her straight best friend is not unimaginable. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Albeit only to the audience, and in such an ambiguous way that many straight viewers thought she was talking about Aurora’s male love interest Prince Phillip. Viewers even went as far to express outrage at the idea that Mulan could possibly have referred to Aurora when she told Robin Hood she needed to tell someone she loved them before it was too late. The show’s creators, however, have since confirmed that the love confession was indeed meant for Aurora. The fact that this idea was unthinkable to some viewers only confirms the need for normalization of non-heterosexual sexuality in the media. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Even though it is revealed in season two that this relationship was entirely made up after an accidental meeting, her obsession with and love for her fake fiancée is very real. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The show has a huge lesbian and bisexual fanbase and the Piper/Alex pairing is extremely popular, however, it is not overtly written as being intended as the ‘true pairing’ of the show. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Problematic representations of ethnic minorities play a crucial role here, but due to the limited space of this research I am unable to discuss them in-depth here. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘Butch’ is relative here; although Mulan is always seen in armor rather than gowns and is shown to be a strong, silent fighter, her long hair and soft face can still be considered very feminine. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)