"The world has always been like a comic book world to me":

Examining representations of queer stories in comics and other media

by

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**Author's Declaration**


I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including

any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

# Abstract

Engagement with media has become the most popular form of leisure in our lives with approximately 40% of leisure time being dedicated to television viewing alone (Mullen, 2020). The consumption of books, graphic novels/comics, videogames, movies, and TV have only increased since the start COVID-19 pandemic (Doherty, Millar & Misener, 2020; Reid, 2021). Due to media's significant impact on our cultural beliefs, it is becoming increasingly important to be conscious of the messages being relayed particularly those around queer identities as they have historically been reduced to unjust portrayals or erased from media entirely (Gerber et al., 2002; Meyer, 2020; Key, 2015; Corey, 2017). This thesis seeks to examine the ways media, and specifically comic books/graphic novels, represent queer identities. In this thesis, I use a *text, context, paratext* analysis to explore a graphic novel, *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*; secondary data that examines the lived experiences of bisexual women living in Waterloo Region; and social media posts discussing the queer representation in my chosen graphic novel. I highlight the importance of continuing to include just and meaningful queer representations in mainstream media.

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**Preface**

This thesis is presented in a way to educate the reader on my learning process. My supervisor

believes a thesis is meant to show significant growth in learning that is inclusive of failures,

critiques, and problematics. Chapter One is my proposal which has remained as originally

written, Chapter Two is my draft manuscript, and Chapter Three is a personal reflection on my

growth as a researcher and scholar throughout this process.  I have not adjusted my initial

proposal in order to reflect my original thought process for this work in hopes the reader can see

that what I proposed was not always congruent with what I ended up doing, but still a vital part

of the learning process.

**Chapter One**

To quote Abed Nadir from NBC's Community, "I was kinda raised on TV" (Harmon, 2009). Abed, a pop culture loving character with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a character whom I related to throughout the show. Television, movies, and comics played a significant role in his life growing up. Whether it be through using them to understand and learn the behaviors of others or using movie marathons as a means to spend time with his friends, it is clear that television was far more than a hobby or something to do in his free time; it was a way of life. For someone who has used television to make meaningful connections across long-distance friendships and more recently, a global pandemic, Abed's use of pop culture is a familiar story to me.

However, Abed's use of television to connect with friends was not all that I related to. As an attendee of several schools in the Waterloo Catholic District School Board from Kindergarten to Grade 12, there was not much discussion around queer identities or exposure to the increasingly popular 2SLGBTQ+ movement. During my time in the catholic school system, though there were never explicitly stated that there was anything wrong with being queer, there were strong implications that queerness should be kept to oneself and is a topic that is best avoided. We were discouraged from using it as topics for essays or discussions in class and there were rarely punishments for homophobic rhetoric. The absence of meaningful of consequences and access to accurate education about the queer community lead to classmates using slurs and acting out caricatures featuring negative stereotypes outside the classroom. With few resources for information, I turned to books, television, movies, comics, and videogames for an education on queer identities.

*I had a growing curiosity of queer identities when they would arise in movies, television, and books to which media acted as a tool for education on the matter. Representations of queer characters exposed me to different identities that I did not know existed and taught me what queerness looks, acts, and talks like even if they were not situated in reality. On the one hand, it was a pivotal step in my introduction to queerness and queer identities with some representations introducing me to queer politics and discrimination, on the other hand I internalized negative representations that reduced queerness down to a few stereotypical traits; for example, that gay men are flamboyant and inherently feminine, lesbian women are inherently butch, and worst of all, that queerness was something to be mocked. As I started to question my own identity, these negative representations led to confusion and frustration as I battled internalized homophobia and biphobia.*

*Despite these negative portrayals, my experience with media had some positive influences on my life and my identity. In addition to bringing awareness to the existence of queer and Two-Spirit identities and experiences, media functioned as space for personal acceptance and belonging when I started feeling like the label of 'straight' or 'lesbian' did not quite fit. Seeing representations that better reflected my own life experiences that were not polarized or riddled with stereotypes made me feel like I was not alone. They showed me that there was more to sexuality than gay or straight, and that their identity can be a meaningful part of their character rather than the butt of the joke. It helped me gain a better understanding of what it means to be queer and showed me that being queer was not something to be silenced or for which to be ashamed.*

For many bisexual and pansexual people, biphobia has created a lack of positive space where an individual is free to live as their genuine self in the gay/lesbian and straight

communities. Liminal spaces, such as media, can offer a space for education, acceptance and belonging (Ciamparella, 2016). Situated outside the realm of reality, media offers a place that bisexual individuals can turn to for support and validation of their identity without fear of social consequences (Key, 2015). However, the opposite can also be true, where media can further perpetuate harm and exclusion for bisexual people by reinforcing inherent beliefs and biases about bisexuality (Corey, 2017). In contemporary western culture, television, books, social media, comics, and video games are among the most popular forms of leisure, and our primary ways to engage with culture (Corey, 2017) with approximately 40% of leisure time being dedicated to television viewing alone (Mullen, 2020). Engaging with various forms of media helps people, particularly children and young adults, navigate their world and negotiate a sense of self (Key, 2015). Due to its constant presence in our lives from a young age, media is often the first place children come across people who look and act differently than themselves and can be used as a tool for socialization (Kim, 2017). It has become the dominant way in which we engage with our culture, become socialized, and are influenced on how we live our lives even when disguised as a form of entertainment (Gerbner, et al., 2002). It exposes audiences to complex and uncomfortable topics and allows them to interact with them without fear of consequences or judgement (Corey, 2017). In the late 20th century, we saw this in action with the normalization of gay and lesbian identities by exposing audiences to lesbian and gay characters and plot lines. As such, media has a unique opportunity to act as a catalyst for revolutionizing our understanding of bisexuality (Corey, 2017).

Before we can look at the importance of bisexual representation in media, we must first understand what it means to be bisexual. Modern definitions of bisexuality illustrate a complex identity that is dynamic in nature and subject to change across individuals and social contexts

(Flanders et al., 2017). Over time, bisexuality has been defined in many ways, often employing inflexible definitions that do not align with how we as bisexual see ourselves. In the past, bisexuality has been rooted within gender and sexuality binaries that situate bisexuality as "a midpoint between heterosexuality and homosexuality" (Flanders et al., 2017, p. 40). Rather than establishing it as its own autonomous identity, this definition limits bisexuality as an identity deviant from *monosexuality*- an identity that refers to the attraction of just one gender (Flanders et al., 2017). Defining bisexuality based on a heterosexual/homosexual binary enforces an understanding that sexuality can only be regarded as attraction to the same or opposite gender **(**Berbary & Guzman, 2018). Rigid definitions of bisexuality fail to challenge our understandings of sexuality and gender and falsely conclude that they are static entities that strictly operate within binaries (Flanders et al., 2017).

Recent definitions have rejected this dichotomous way of thinking, instead adopting a more flexible definition that is inclusive of those who identify as trans, gender fluid, and non-binary (Flanders et al., 2017). As the lines begin to blur between bisexuality, pansexuality, and other non-monosexual identities as well as our ever-changing grasp of gender we come to understand bisexuality as an umbrella (Flanders et al., 2017; Berbary & Guzman, 2018). The bisexual umbrella can be conceptualized as a subset of non-monosexual identities housed within a single concept (Flanders et al., 2017). While the use of an umbrella term can disregard the unique oppressions different non-monosexualities may face, it can be helpful in addressing the shared issues of erasure and discrimination perpetuated by monosexual communities (Flanders et al., 2017). For the purposes of this proposal, this research will draw on the use of the bisexual umbrella when referencing bisexuality to include pansexual identities and other non-monosexual identities.

With one in six adult Gen Z's identifying as bisexual, and that number expected to increase as more cohorts from Gen Z enter adulthood (Schmidt, 2021), drawing on a less structured definition of bisexuality helps people navigate their identity (Schmidt, 2021). It allows bisexuality to be applied across a broad range of self-understandings that can vary among individuals and social contexts (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Flanders et al., 2017). Not only can definitions vary among individuals, but it can also change across social contexts and time. How an individual defines themselves personally, may differ to how they define themselves to other people or how they come to understand themselves across time (Flanders et al., 2017). Due to this fluidity, bisexuality is difficult to characterize as a stable identity, although this does not negate its relevance as an identity in its own right. Bisexuality *can* be classified based on attraction and behavior; however, should not be restricted to these features because it can also include self-identification and desire (Flanders et al., 2017). Therefore, when bisexuality is restricted to behaviours alone, we alienate young people who have not experienced their first sexual encounter, and those who have only been in a relationship with one gender from the label of bisexuality (Flanders et al., 2017). On the other hand, when we limit our perception of bisexuality to attraction, it ignores the notion that bisexual people do not always have an equal attraction to other genders. Our understanding of the Kinsey scale demonstrates that bisexual people can have a greater attraction to one gender over others (Galupo et al., 2014).

When looking at how bisexual people construct their identities, it is important not to ignore the role media plays. Similar to my own story, television, movies, books, videogames, and comics are some of the first places children are exposed to queer identities, and bisexuality in particular (Kim, 2017). How bisexuality is represented can impact how young bisexuals come to

construct a sense of self and how they choose to identify themselves, and therefore media must be considered when defining bisexuality. (Corey, 2017).

**Significance of Media Representation**

Media representations do not just play a role in how outsiders think of a certain group, but of how members of a group may think of themselves (Kim, 2007). Johnson (2016) defines representation as images, characters, actors, and storylines used by media to "convey specific ideas and values related to culture and identity in society" (p. 378). Television, film, comics, books, porn, and video games are all mediums that use representation to establish cultural meanings that reinforce behaviours, expectations, and societal norms (Craig et al., 2015).

While there have been some advancements in the representation of bisexuality, historically, representation of the identity in media have reinforced harmful stereotypes and misconceptions of bisexuality (Johnson, 2016). While one may argue that all representation is a good representation as it symbolizes the existence of bisexuality, another could argue that negative depictions create more harm than good (Gerbner et al., 2002). In an episode of *Midnight Caller* aired in 1988 called *After it Happened*, a bisexual man is portrayed as intentionally sleeping with heterosexual women in order to infect them with the AIDS virus, further pushing the stereotype that bisexual people are vectors of disease (Miller, 2014). Negative portrayals such as this can lead to bisexual individuals internalizing the messages they see resulting in a negative concept of self (Johnson, 2016). This creates an environment where bisexual individuals are less likely to come out and/or seek support due to the assumption that they will be met with rejection; *monosexism*- the belief that sexuality is fixed, dependent on attraction to one gender, and superior (Corey, 2017); *biphobia*- prejudice against bisexuality (Berbary & Guzman, 2018), and *bisexual erasure*- the coordination of heterosexual and gay/lesbian communities to limit and

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erase bisexual identities from dominant culture (MacDowall, 2009). For a marginalized identity such as bisexuality, media can be a powerful tool to uproot deep-seated beliefs about the identity; however, rather than challenge the status quo, it often serves to uphold it (Corey, 2017; Johnson, 2016).

In contrast, positive representations can dismantle internalized biphobia and improve the wellbeing of bisexual individuals. Take Rosa Diaz, a character in NBC's *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* who came out as bisexual midway through the shows fifth season. With it came nuanced storylines about the intersection between being bisexual and her Latina ethnicity, coming out to parents and friends, combating bisexual erasure, and even portrayed a touching moment of queer solidarity featuring Rosa and her publicly gay captain, Raymond Holt. It can lead to greater personal understanding and acceptance of identity, as well as foster a more supportive environment for coming out (Craig et al., 2015). Positive media representation allows for the deconstruction of stereotypes and the de-stigmatization of certain social groups. It can act as an educational tool for people who have limited knowledge or experiences with members of these groups (Key, 2015).

Representation of characters and storylines in media are useful for taking feared or taboo subject matter and helping them to become more ordinary and digestible for mainstream audiences (Hart, 2016). In a discussion about how the personification of death in media led viewers to come to terms with their own mortality, Hart (2016) argued "that sensitive subjects become easier to deal with, and ultimately less foreign and threatening, the more media consumers are confronted with them" (p. 14). He went on to mirror this argument with queer identities, believing that through repeated exposure of queer identities, audiences are able to address any anxieties, apprehensions, and uncertainties they have in risk and judgment free

space. Greater visibility of queer identities and politics in media representations can result in the normalization of queerness and viewers eventually becoming more comfortable with its existence (Ciamparella, 2016).

Historically, media representations have had success with desensitizing mainstream audiences to certain queer identities. As representations of gay and lesbian identities increased, so did the acceptance and the tolerance of these identities (Hart, 2016). During the 90's and early 2000's, queer politics were steadily becoming a part of mainstream discussion and politics (Corey, 2017). Several popular television shows with established viewership on dominant networks, such as ABC and NBC, tackled queer politics. *Will and Grace* starred two gay leading men in its' ensemble cast of characters, *Friends* and *Roseanne* featured same-sex marriages between recurring characters, and Ellen DeGeneres publicly came out as lesbian on *Ellen* (Snider, 2016). However, even these representations of gay and lesbian identities were far from perfect. They often reinforced binaries and instilled heteronormative tropes and gender roles onto these queer couples. For example, one member of the couple adhering to feminine gender roles, and the other to masculine (Sweeney, 2016). The identities, behaviours, and relationship status were also considered comedic by the other heterosexual characters on the show, with jokes often being made at the expense of the queer character (Tresca, 2016). Moreover, these representations lacked intersectionality and echoed the idea that people in same-sex relationships were either gay or lesbian, white, wealthy, able-bodied, and cisgender (Logie & Rwigema, 2014).

The current landscape of bisexual representation is reflective of the 1990's and early 2000's representation of gay and lesbian characters. It can be described as a messy entanglement of characters and storylines that cannot be neatly categorized as negative or positive (Meyer, 2010). We are seeing empowering characters that resist heteronormative tropes and stereotypes,

while at the same time engaging in storylines that contribute to harmful narratives about bisexual people. In NBC's *Glee*, Blaine was a fan-favourite character that was celebrated for his same-sex relationship with Kurt, however Blaine's character was used as a means to erase bisexuality, whether intentional or not, when he dismisses his bisexual behavior as experimental and being under the influence of alcohol (Miller, 2014). While this example embraces several negative stereotypes, it cannot be written off as exclusively negative as it still exposes bisexuality as a possibility. With regular exposure to bisexual themes and characters that challenge heteronormative and monosexual representations, media has the capacity to legitimize bisexuality as a valid identity in dominant culture (Hart, 2016).

### *Cultivation Theory*

With any marginalized identity, including bisexuality, media representations are of significant importance as "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner, et al., 1976, p. 192). Representation is an inherently neutral concept that has the potential to become negative or positive depending on how it is practiced. Negative representations promote philosophies that convince audiences certain behaviours are innate for different groups of people (Pozner, 2010). It depicts culturally constructed norms of gender, race, class, and sexuality as reality rather than performances (Pozner, 2010). We can come to understand that media representations can create and enforce harmful stereotypes that are then taken as truth. Alternatively, positive representations of bisexuality work to deconstruct harmful stereotypes and achieve existence in our culture as a valid and independent identity that is not constrained by monosexuality, race, ability, (Key, 2015).

While it may be simple to dismiss the reproduction of these beliefs in media as entertainment or as works of fiction, we must recognize that our primary vehicle for understanding the world is done through media representations and it is vital that we critique the messages being relayed (Key, 2015). *Cultivation theory*- the belief that repetitive patterns in media are likely to be internalized by the public- was developed by George Gerbner to study the inescapable consequences of prolonged exposure to imagery, stereotypes, principals, beliefs, and stories represented through media (Corey, 2017; Gerbner et al., 2002). Whether directly, or under the guise of entertainment, these media representations serve to create, confirm, and cultivate viewpoints and values in its audience (Key, 2015). Gerbner et al. (2002) argues that the primary function of media is to promote certain ideologies by presenting certain behaviours, attitudes, and characteristics as reality. Using cultivation theory, Gerbner's work found that people were more likely to see the 'real world' in terms of the images, values, portrayals, and ideologies produced through representations of characters and stories in media (Gerbner et al., 2002). He found that children who watched more television were more likely to gender certain traits and activities. For example, after being exposed to various television programming, children internalized that women[1] clean and cook while men play sports and go to work and that women are kind and nurturing where as men are ambitious (Gerbner et al., 2002). This is not saying that you become queer when you watch queer television, rather, it relays messages of what queer people look, act, and talk like which is then internalized by the audience as reality.

In accordance with cultivation theory, media is understood as both a reflection and enforcer of social norms and stereotypes where repeated exposure can alter an individual's

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[1] This manuscript is inclusive of trans, non-binary, and two spirit identities and recognizes anyone who travels under the sign of woman or man as such (Ahmed, 2016).

perceptions of the world and themselves (Corey, 2017; Gerbner et al., 2002). It influences our understanding of the importance and status of certain groups, the characteristics and culture of these groups, their histories, and their normalization as they exist within society (Corey, 2017). Furthermore, Gerbner et al (2002) notes that failure to portray certain identities altogether is a form of negative representation, with the omission of groups symbolizing their nonexistence in society. When identities are portrayed in a negative fashion or overlooked in media representations, they are being denied recognition and respect in the cultural sphere (Meyer, 2010). With our understanding that media is our primary tool for socializing and understanding the world, negative representations of bisexuality, or the absence of, invalidate the identity in the eyes of dominant culture (Key, 2015).

### *Bisexual Erasure and Biphobia*

The concept of *Symbolic Annihilation*- the forced invisibility of particular groups through their lack of representation in the public sphere- is a particularly important concept for bisexuality, where their existence is not only being erased symbolically, but also in reality through bisexual erasure (Key, 2015). Monosexual identities have shared interest in erasing bisexuality across social, political, and cultural contexts in order to maintain the status quo and stabilize sexual identities (Miller, 2014). This leads to the marginalization of bisexual people from the both the lesbian and gay communities and the straight community (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Corey, 2017).

Rather than perceiving bisexuality as legitimate, monosexism and biphobia cultivate stereotypes and misconceptions using representations in media that contribute to the erasure of bisexual identities (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Corey, 2017). Common misconceptions that manifest as biphobia include denying the existence of bisexuality; attributing bisexual behaviour

to other factors such as being closeted, confused, or promiscuous (Corey, 2017; Miller, 2014); holding the belief that bisexuality is a temporary stage experienced by gay and lesbian people prior to actualizing their true identity (Corey, 2017; Miller, 2014); believing people who identify as gay or lesbian are using the label of bisexuality to maintain a degree of heterosexual privilege; (Berbary & Guzman, 2018); and labelling sexual and romantic behaviours engaged with same-sex partners as homosexuality (Berbary & Guzman, 2018). When not rejecting the identity all together, bisexuality is dismissed as a series of negative stereotypes and misconceptions that label bisexual people as deceitful, slutty, hypersexual, unfaithful, and carriers of STD's (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Corey, 2017; Miller, 2014).

These misconceptions and stereotypes are pervasive in our everyday lives and are produced through media representations, cultivated into innate beliefs, and further reproduced back into media (Johnson, 2016). Messages of biphobia and bisexual erasure create negative social spaces for bisexual individuals where they already are more likely to experience prejudice, and less likely to receive support from family and community programs, realize their identity and/or come out (Johnson, 2016; Corey, 2017). Biphobia and bisexual erasure also have damaging effects on mental and physical health where people who identify as bisexual are more likely to experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicide, domestic violence, sexual assault, and isolation than their straight and gay/lesbian counterparts (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Corey, 2017; Miller, 2014; Bradford, 2004). In addition to experiencing biphobia from external sources, bisexual individuals are also more likely to internalize these beliefs and have a negative perception of self (Berbary & Guzman, 2018). With few opportunities for belonging and social acceptance, many bisexual individuals turn to media as an escape where they can engage with stories that reflect and relate to their own (Craig et al., 2015; Kim, 2007).

**History of Queer Representation in Media**

Prior to looking at the impact of media representations and their impacts on bisexual individuals, it is necessary to discuss the history of queer representation and how it affected modern representations of bisexuality. In the 1930's ruling boards over various media platforms, with comics and film being the most noteworthy, created a series of restrictions to regulate the images and messages being presented in these mediums called the Comics Code Authority (CCA) and the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code (Kim, 2007; Johnson, 2016). These rules established what was appropriate and not appropriate to represent on screen or in comics. If films and comics did not meet these standards, they would be censored and/or blacklisted (Johnson, 2016). At the time there was very little advancement for women, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), and queer people which meant that these creative restrictions were being made by cisgender, straight, white men. It allowed straight white men to teach people what to think about queerness and what queer people should think about themselves (Johnson, 2016). Both codes classified homosexuality as a sexual perversion and were subsequently banned from represented or even inferred to, with the notable exception that homosexuality could be depicted in a negative light (Kim, 2007; Johnson, 2016). From these restrictions emerged a series of tropes that have made a lasting impression on queer representation in film and comics and resulted in the origin of *queer coding*- when a character displays stereotypes and traits that are attributed with the queer community but is not outright confirmed to be queer (Kim, 2007).

*Queer Coding and Queer Essentialism*

Similar to representation, queer coding is neither inherently negative or positive, rather it is a neutral phenomenon that has the potential to become negative, positive, or neutral depending

on the context in which it is applied (Key, 2015). It is the process of covertly including queer

characters and used by writers and filmmakers to bypass the censorship of the restrictive codes

(Key, 2015). However, in early representations, queer coding often reduced characters down to a

few stereotypical traits (Kim, 2017). These traits were typically rooted in gender roles and

expectations (Snider, 2016). This included featuring characters exemplifying traits of the

opposite gender in the ways they would talk, walk, behave, and dress (Kim, 2017). For example,

queer-coded male characters embraced femininity through clothing, makeup, spoke in a high-

pitched voice, and engaging in activities such as cooking and cleaning (Snider, 2016). We can

see this in action with Him from Cartoon Network's *The Powerpuff Girls*. Him is one of the most

formidable villains in the show and is ripe with queer-coded feminine traits. In addition to

wearing make-up, high-heels, and pink tutus, Him has long eyelashes, a sharp jawline, and

speaks in a high-pitched, soft-spoken voice, all traits commonly associated with femininity (Kim,

2017).

  With stereotypes providing the foundation for queer coding, queer characters were

comprised of dangerously oversimplified representations that cultivated beliefs about queer

people in mainstream audiences and signaled to queers developing their identity what is

acceptable within queer communities (Kim, 2017). Media, acting as a reflection of society,

further reproduced these beliefs in subsequent representations, creating a continuous negative

cycle of until these stereotypes and images of queer people were subconsciously ingrained in

culture (Scott & Fawaz, 2018). This cycle of queer coding resulted in *queer essentialism*; a term

derived from *gender essentialism*. Gender essentialism, with respect to representation, states that

representations of women in media seek to make tropes and characteristics appear common to all

women (McKowen & Parry, 2017). Therefore, we can understand queer essentialism to be that

stereotypes and characteristics of the queer community appear in media representations can be applied to all queer identities. It is a violent practice that ignores the complexities of queer identities and experiences.

With the Hays code and the CCA limiting depictions of openly queer characters as negative representations, queer coding had more sinister applications with queer characters being reduced to villainous roles (Kim, 2017). These characters often lacked intersectionality and portrayed queer villains as gay white men with effeminate qualities. Queer villains became victims of the negative cycle of queer coding and queer essentialism until eventually queerness was equated with being morally corrupt and outcasts from society. It created a culture where if you deviate from gender and sexuality norms you will be viewed as evil and dangerous (Kim, 2017). As previously discussed, Him exemplifies a queer coded villain, however, he is joined by other famous animated Disney villains such as Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, Scar from *The Lion King*, and Hades from *Hercules* (Kim, 2017).

The restrictions on the codes also allowed the portrayal of queerness on screen or on the page if the characters in question perished (Johnson, 2016). This inspired a lasting trope called *Bury Your Gays*, where queer characters are unlikely to experience redemption, happy endings, and often experienced violent deaths (Tresca, 2016). In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Willow's girlfriend, Tara, meets a violent end after the couple shares a kiss (Tresca, 2016), and more recently in *Orange is the New Black* where Poussey Washington is murdered by a prison guard on screen during a peaceful protest. These harmful images and messages about queerness were frequent and continuous in media for 20 years, resulting in the problematic cultivation of negative perceptions about queer identities in dominant culture (Johnson, 2016).

In the 1960's, the CCA and the Hays Code relaxed their restrictions and censorship for depictions of violence, nudity, and queerness (Johnson, 2016; Kim, 2017). The 80's and 90's ushered in new representation of gay and lesbian characters as queer politics became a dominant for of discourse (Corey, 2017). Reflections of this discourse appeared in Marvel Comics where the *X-Men* served as an allegory for the gay rights movement and even contained storylines that were symbolic of the AIDS crisis during the height of the virus (Scott & Fawaz, 2018). As previously discussed, 90's sitcoms represented several queer characters and storylines. While these depictions lead to backlash/outrage from the public, cancellations, decreased ratings they were vital in ushering in a new decade of hopeful queer representation (Snider, 2016; Corey, 2017; Meyer, 2010).

### *History of Bisexual Representation in Media*

With the awareness that culture and media representation both influence and are influenced by each other, we can assume that bisexual erasure and biphobia has not only existed in the history of western culture, but in the history of media representation as well (Johnson, 2016). The lack of representation of bisexuality on screen and on page is not a not an indictment of the number of bisexual people, but rather of the effectiveness of erasure and biphobia (MacDowall, 2009). In particular, bisexuals face an uphill battle with erasure as they have been very rarely represented in media (Miller, 2014). Even with articulations that may have implied a character as bisexual or had them engage in bisexual behavior, their identities have been retroactively co-opted by the gay and lesbian communities (Miller, 2014). For both male and female characters, bisexual erasure is reinforced through common tropes that situate bisexuality as a transitional identity (Meyer, 2010; Miller, 2014). Rarely was bisexuality portrayed as being its own stable identity (Meyer, 2010).

When not being actively erased from cultural existence, bisexual characters have also been negatively impacted by the restrictions of the CCA and the Hays Code and have historically been portrayed in an unfavourable manner. During the height of the AIDS crisis, bisexual men were portrayed as intentionally infecting straight women with the virus and were consequentially blamed as being the vector of the AIDS virus between the straight and the queer communities (Miller, 2014). Coding for bisexual characters included depictions of mental instability, self-destruction, and self-hatred (Key, 2015). While the 90's television brought on positive portrayals of gay and lesbian identities as well as empowering narratives like same-sex marriages, bisexuality was depicted as a plot device, a problem to be solved, or as a minor antagonist (Miller, 2014).

The sexuality of bisexual men was typically erased altogether when not being depicted as a minor antagonist. This left the most significant portrayals of bisexuality taking the form of cisgender woman (Meyer, 2010). Where male bisexual characters threatened masculinity, bisexual women posed no threat and instead were sexualized by male writers and audiences (Miller, 2014). As a result, the identities of bisexual women were exploited and commodified by and for straight men with the image of bisexual women never having the intention to appease bisexual audiences (Johnson, 2016; Delong, 2016). As Johnson (2016) notes, "unsurprisingly, the sexuality of bisexual women is used as an enticement for male consumers, often at the expense of authenticity and [with] no respect given to the identity itself" (p. 380). With the deeply rooted repercussions of the CCA and the Hays Code, female bisexual characters were queer coded in a negative light often portrayed as a femme fetal (Kim, 2017). The femme fetal is presented as an attractive and morally ambiguous seductive female character that weaponizes her sexuality against the protagonist. Her personality is meant to reflect that of a bisexual woman;

promiscuous, hypersexual, untrustworthy (Johnson, 2016). In Fox's *Firefly,* we see recurring antagonist, Saffron, weaponize her sexuality against both the male and female crewmembers to take advantage of them on several occasions.

**Modern representations of Bisexuality**

Though both the CCA and the Hays Code are no longer relevant in modern forms of media, they still have had a lasting impact on representations of queer and bisexual identities. These restrictions have transformed how we understand and reproduce queer identities, whether we are conscious of it or not (Tresca, 2016). Even if writers, filmmakers, and showrunners have the best intentions with representing queer characters, queer coding and queerphobic themes are virtually inescapable; a testament to how profoundly ingrained in our culture they have become (Tresca, 2016). Modern representations of bisexuality are still littered with harmful stereotypes and tropes. The *Bury Your Gays* trope continues to appear in media, queer coding is used to reinforce negative stereotypes, villains continue to be coded as queer, and male bisexuality is still vastly underrepresented (Tresca, 2016; Miller, 2014).

In addition to the enduring consequences of the CCA and Hays Code, queer and bisexual identities have had to compete with new forms of negative representation. Recent trends have revealed that the *pink dollar* (or *pink capitalism*)- the exploitation of queer identities into the economy and profiting off queer audiences- is driving representation of queer identities on screen (Hanson, 2014). Pink capitalism illustrates how media conglomerates are co-opting queer identities and narratives in order to achieve monetary gains (Hanson, 2014). *Queerbaiting,* a phenomenon that emerged from pink capitalism, occurs when a film, series, or comic seek to profit off the queer community while still retaining their conservative audiences (Brennan,

2018). It can appear in many forms, including hinting at a character being queer, yet never confirming it officially in the story (Ng, 2017; Brennan, 2018).

Despite modern representations being exploited for capitalistic gains and victimized by historical representations, they cannot be neatly categorized as negative representations. With representations of bisexuality on the rise, Gerbner et al (2002), argued that representation, positive or negative, implies existence in the social world (Key, 2015). While representations of bisexual characters often reproduce stereotypes and common tropes, these same characters also produce empowering and nuanced storylines involving their identity and their romantic relationships (Meyer, 2010). The reality is that modern representations of bisexuality are neither negative nor positive. Rather, these representations operate in liminal spaces. They draw on plot lines that resist decades of queer coding and censorship, yet they still contain imagery and traits that reproduce biphobia (Meyer, 2010).

An emerging issue is that bisexual representations on screen are predominantly depictions of BIPOC women. Intersectional representations of bisexuality, though sometimes paint a more realistic and diverse picture, often reinforces patriarchal and heteronormative ideals of femininity with characters being portrayed as straight-passing, sexy, thin, cisgender, and able bodied (Meyer, 2010; Logie & Rwigema, 2014). When we see bisexuality as only being portrayed through BIPOC women, we must be critical of who these representations are being created by, who are they being created for, and the history of fetishization of both bisexual women and BIPOC women in media (Logie & Rwigema, 2014). However, BIPOC representations of bisexuality should not be ignored simply because it has the potential to be problematic. Where representations of gay and lesbian characters were once the forefront of revolutionizing the status quo on they now serve to uphold by equating queerness as wealthy,

white, cisgender, and monosexual. Bisexual representations that embrace intersectionality can act as a catalyst that challenges whiteness as central to queer identities and monosexism (Logie & Rwigema, 2014).

**Moving Forward**: **Methodology**

In this section, I will discuss the step-by-step process I have taken in this research process, its influences, and where I plan to go beyond this proposal. These steps provide the foundation for my analysis that will be fleshed out in more depth throughout this section. My research is guided by understandings of feminist, queer, and critical theories as well as my lived experiences as a cisgender queer woman, my developing politic, my areas of interest, and the courses I have taken from my undergraduate and graduate programs. I used secondary data from a previous study as well as a piece of media to inform my research. In a preliminary analysis, the data reflected that media representations play a role in how people perceive bisexuality and how bisexual people perceive themselves. I began thinking about how I could integrate a case study of media with the data to understand the ways they reflect, contest, amplify, and illuminate the lived experiences of the participants.

*Accessing Secondary Data*

My research began with a growing interest in pink capitalism and media representation. My supervisor, Lisbeth Berbary, helped me tailor these areas of interest to form a research project. Due to transferring to the program late and the ongoing pandemic, I chose to use work with secondary data to eliminate safety concerns and issues with inaccessibility. This secondary data was collected as part of a research project with Lisbeth and a research assistant in 2015. The data has since been published in an article "We Exist: Combating Erasure Through Creative Analytic Comix about Bisexuality" (2018) by Lisbeth Berbary and Coco Guzman. After

discussion with Lisbeth, I decided to take this data up with an original analysis that relates to my own interests, experiences, and identity. The secondary data consisted of 8 narrative interviews examining the lived experiences of bisexual and pansexual women living in Waterloo Region.

***Preliminary Secondary Data Analysis***

I first read through the data to become familiar with the background, education, religion, cultural identity, and experiences the participants had as bisexual and pansexual women living in Waterloo Region. On a second read through, I began to flag themes that were emergent and recurrent in the data. In Berbary and Guzman's (2018) analysis, themes related to class, culture, race, religion, education, community, and positive and negative experiences of self emerged from the data. I expanded on their analysis to specifically connect to my areas of interest. It became apparent that media had an influence on the identities and relationships of the participants. Some participants expressed their interest in shows with queer representations like *The L Word* and *Orange is the New Black* and noted that they "find [them] more hopeful" (K. Wetlauffer, transcribed interview, 2015). While others shared that they found modern representations to be lackluster, irresponsible, and leaving much to be desired:

> I think there's really no representation in general. I think… Which is just kind of so sad because we always look to the media for representation.- SK

> I think when you're showing a marginalized community on a TV platform like this, you have an opportunity to do something great. And if you don't, you're being irresponsible with the way you're having your show. And it's irresponsible to show a person of a marginalized community in such a one-dimensional way because that's what always happens to people in marginalized communities. Like they're not shown as fully human beings, like their range of personalities and behaviours and- like that's not accepted so they're not appreciated, I suppose.- Steph

A desire to see more unique, realistic, and diverse representations of bisexuality in media was also highlighted:

"I want people to learn the identification of different bodies, like queer bodies, like queer bodies, black bodies, you know disabled bodies, what not… I think people should see more representation of different kinds of queer people."- Abena

I started to look at the pieces of media highlighted by the participants from the data as well as revisited significant pieces of queer representation from my own experiences. I watched television shows, films, YouTube channels, listened to podcasts, read books and comics, and even played video games that featured representation of queer identities. From television, I familiarized myself with the bisexual characters in *Brooklyn 99, Orange is the New Black, Glee, Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and *Greys Anatomy*; from comic books I read about Deadpool and his history of pansexuality; from videogames I played *The Last of Us: Part II* and *Borderlands*; and I watched (in)famous portrayals of queer coded villains in children's media such as Scar from Disney's *The Lion King*, Hades from Disney's *Hercules*, and Him from Cartoon Network's *Powerpuff Girls*.

Much like the participants noted and what has been discussed in the proposal already, I found there was a broad range of both negative and positive representations, many within the same pieces of media. *Orange is the New Black* is a show with that has received praised for its ability to capture the messiness of intersectional representations of BIPOC trans and lesbian characters (McKeown, 2107); however, when it comes to bisexuality, it falls flat with stereotypical representations that reinforce biphobia and erasure with Piper Chapman and Lorna Morello (Kohan, 2013).

Eventually, I came across a graphic novel that features an Indigenous female lead who identifies as bisexual called *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*. I was initially drawn to this graphic novel due to my familiarity with the creators who created one of my favourite childhood shows *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and the fact that it portrays Nickelodeon's first confirmed

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queer characters and first queer relationship (Millman, 2020). *The Legend of Korra*, a sequel

series to *The Last Airbender*, originated as an animated television series created by Michael

DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko that aired on children's programming network *Nickelodeon*.

Following the end of the series, came an official continuation of the story in three-part graphic

novel series *Turf Wars*. Both the show and the comic present a unique reflection of the lasting

impact of the history of bisexual representation and a hopeful illustration of its future. During the

four-season run of the show, it fell victim to censorship from Nickelodeon. DiMartino and

Konietzko were restricted from overtly depicting a relationship between the lead, Korra, and her

also confirmed bisexual, girlfriend, Asami throughout the course of the show (Millman, 2020).

Regardless, DiMartino and Konietzko felt very strongly about representing a queer relationship

and queer coded both Korra and Asami as bisexual without confirming their relationship until

after the series finale (Millman, 2020). However, with the creation of the graphic novel,

DiMartino and Konietzko were given the freedom to confirm and explore the relationship of

Korra and Asami as well as queer themes in full display. Where the show ends with an

ambiguous image of the couple holding hands, the graphic novel begins with a kiss between the

two women (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2019; DiMartino & Konietzko, 2014).

     In an initial read through of the graphic novel, I found that the comic presented as a

unique comparative case to explore alongside the data. In addition to featuring a bisexual

character as the lead, it embodies the messy, intersectional, and hopeful bisexual representation

the participants expressed interest in seeing more in media. I decided to do a preliminary and

simple analysis of the graphic novel in tandem with the data to help guide this proposal and give

me direction for where I wanted to go with my research. I coded themes and narratives in the

graphic novel that appeared in or challenged the data and contrasted them with one another.

Emergent themes from the comic and the experiences of the participants were *coming out*,

*stereotypes and stigma's*, *allyship and advocacy*, *race and culture*, *belonging and acceptance*,

and *queer solidarity*. In Table 1, I have included an excerpt from my preliminary analysis

featuring a frame from the comic and a quote from the participant data that reflects it. This

excerpt features the theme *Coming Out* where Korra is shown telling her parents about her new

relationship with Asami, and the participant, Catherine, is sharing her first coming out

experience with a friend.

**Table 1**

*Preliminary Analysis*

| Theme | Subtheme | The Legend of Korra | Bisexual Data |
|---|---|---|---|
| Coming Out | Friends and Family | Bolin: "Are you and Asami a couple?"<br>Asami: "We are."<br>Bolin: "Woo-hoo! I knew you guys had some good gossip! Opal and I get the first double date, Okay? We're free next Tuesday."<br>(p. 73-74) | "I started by talking to this friend about the word queer, the identity of queer, and what it all means. And then I was kind of talking to her about this woman in my class too and how I couldn't really articulate what it was about her. Um, but I just felt drawn to her and – so I ended up, I guess, kind of coming out to her, kind of messily because I didn't know how. But she was awesome. She – I think it was probably the best coming out, first coming out experience I could've hoped for. She didn't challenge me. Her questions were all very open-ended and not *'prove anything to me.'* It was very *'tell me more about that.'* So that was a great first coming out"- Catherine |

### *Shifting into Capitalist Consumerisms*

Though not the sole purpose of this research, my growing interest in pink capitalism

guided my decision to analyze queer representations in media. Last spring, I began to consider

the overt influence capitalism has on queer identities and queer events such as Pride, which

originated as a riot for queer rights and is now a month-long commodification of queer identities

by selling rainbow clothing, accessories, decorations, food, candles, and as of this year, Lego.

This led me to think critically about the ways we engage with and consume queer identities and how our leisure is an inherently consumerist practice (Ravenscroft, 1996). We are sold culture, lifestyles, personas, activities, and products in the name of leisure (Juniu, 2000). It is sold to us as pieces of our personality and identities (Ravenscroft, 1996). With the most popular leisure activities being watching television and spending time on social media both in the amount of people who engage with it and for how long, media has become the forefront of leisure commodification of our identities (Corey, 2017).

Whether it be through advertisements or through storylines and characters, capitalism influences what we see and how we see it. The goal of most television and film studios, particularly the larger ones, is to make the most profit possible. Knowing the role capitalism plays in media, I started making connections between censorship, promotion, and capitalism. I questioned how my own identity has been structured through years of engaging with censorship, promotion, and capitalism and prompted me to recognize the important role representation plays in how queer identities are structured. Although capitalism is what has inspired and frames this work, I want to move beyond this and show the possibilities of the graphic novel, ways the data and comic interact with each other, and the future of representation of queer identities.

***The Case***

As I move beyond this proposal, I will show the entanglements between the data and the graphic novel. I will revise my preliminary analysis table and adopt a more robust thematic analysis of the ways in which the lived experiences of the participants interact with the characters and storylines of the graphic novel. In addition, I will unpack the interconnected relationship that comics/graphic novels and the queer communities have shared. Furthermore, I only briefly touched on certain topics, issues, influences, and theories in this proposal that I have

the potential to expand on in more depth moving forward. This includes a deeper analysis into how queer identities and gender expression is represented through media, the capitalist motivations behind representation (or lack-there-of), and an examination into the articulation of Blackness, Indigeneity, colourism's, and whiteness in media. However, I still have much learning to do in these areas and will continue to grow and expand my knowledge through further reading. Below each section, I list the books, journals, and articles that I have not included in this proposal but cannot continue my research without further reading. These are complex topics where I need to carefully consider and reflect on the role my privilege plays in my manuscript and analysis. I will reject surface level discussions and instead illuminate a specificity of how these topics appear and are reproduced in the data and the comic. Lastly, this manuscript is limited as it is merely looking at representations on screen or on page through queer characters and storylines. There is still room to go beyond this by critiquing representations of queer identities in the writing room, as actors, directors, and producers.

**Queer and Identities and Gender Expression.** This proposal only briefly touched upon how bisexual representations are limited by both homormativity and heteronormativity. It is my intention to expand on my understandings of gender roles and expressions and critique the part they play in queer-coding, queerbaiting, and queer essentialism. Furthermore, I will analyze themes specific to queer identities and the queer experience, such as the notion of found family, queer solidarity, and gender-bending found in the participant data, the graphic novel, and beyond.

**Articles:**
A "post-gay" era? Media gaystreaming, homonormativity, and the politics of LGBT integration (E. Ng)
Bury your gays and social media fan response: Television, LGBTQ representation, and communication ethics (E.B. Waggoner)
"Did You Just Smell Me?": Queer Embodiment in NBC's Hannibal (M. Messimer)

Intimate investments: Homonormativity, global lockdown, and the seductions of empire (A. Agathangelou, D. Bassichs & T. Spira)

**Books:**
A dark uncertain fate: Homophobia, graphic novels, and queer identity (M. Buso)
Queer in the Choir Room: Essays on Gender and Sexuality in Glee (M. Parke)
Sexuality and Gender Now: Moving Beyond Heteronormativity (L. Hertzmann & J. Newbigin)

**Articulation of Blackness, Indigeneity, Colorism's, and Whiteness.** With race and culture proving to be a significant influence in both the participant data and the comic, it is an area that cannot be excluded from my analysis. I aim to provide a thoughtful examination of the intersections of race, culture, and bisexual identities in media. I will further develop a critique of the whiteness, heteronormative, and patriarchal representations of queer identities not only in on screen/page, but also in the writer's room, as well as the directors and production chairs. Specifically, I want to ask who the representations are being created for and by whom? I was only able to scratch the surface of the complexities of intersectional representation with bisexual women and the othering of BIPOC identities in this manuscript and I will dig deeper into this phenomenon moving forward.

*Books:*
Amazons, Abolitionists, and Activists (M. Kendall & A. D'Amico)
Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identitiy and Social Acceptance in Indian Country (B. Gilley)
Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements (C. Carruthers)

**Articles:**
Desiring Blackness: A Queer Orientation to Marvel's Black Panther (A. Carrington)
Between women TV: Toward mainstreaming of black lesbian masculinity and black queer women in community (M. Moore)
Black Panther, queer erasure, and intersectional representation in popular culture (M. Meyer)

**The Commodification of Queer Stories and Identities.** In my research, I will continue to question why capitalism is at the forefront of queer rights and identities by examining the interactions between consumerism, representation, and censorship. Moreover, I will critique the underlying influences capitalism has had on Nickelodeon's representation of Korra's bisexuality over time. This will include the evolution from their initial hesitancy and active discouragement of portraying Korra and Asami's relationship on screen, to allowing an indie publisher, Dark Horse, to represent the queer characters, relationships, and themes in full force, to finally fully embracing Korra as one of the faces of their Pride month advertisements.

> **Articles:**
> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer media: key narratives, future directions (J. Rodriguez)

## Final Thoughts

*The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars* is a piece of media that I have grown to be very passionate about. With many representations choosing to focus on negative queer experiences (ie. not being accepted and supported when coming out to parents) or causing terrible things to happen to queer characters (ie. the death of a queer character or partner), this graphic novel instead depicts a wholesome story about support and acceptance between friends and family. Though not perfect, it encapsulates the desire expressed by the participants for more intersectional representations by featuring Korra, and Indigenous bisexual woman, who has experienced mental illness and physical disability throughout her character arc. It pushes against gender and sexuality stereotypes as well as tropes common in media. As I continue to flesh out the entanglements between the participant data and this comic, it is my desire to highlight *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars* as a hopeful illustration of the future of bisexual representation.

**Chapter Two**

Prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, North American culture recognized that the consumption of media has become the most popular forms of leisure with approximately 40% of leisure time being dedicated to television viewing alone (Mullen, 2020). Since the beginning of the pandemic, Canada has seen multiple lockdowns throughout the provinces and territories. Lockdowns and social distancing have increased the number of Canadians working from home, attending school online, and spending less time in recreational activities outside the home and with others (Doherty, Millar & Misener, 2020). As a result, we have seen people spend less of their day performing basic daily tasks like getting ready for and travelling to work/school and meal prepping (Huls et al., 2022). Other common leisure activities have also become less popular as we see a decline in social activities like going out to bars and restaurants with friends as a result of pandemic restrictions (Varella, Luoto, & Valentova, 2021).

With more free time available yet limited possibilities of leisure available, we have seen more people turn to seemingly individual leisure's such as books, graphic novels/comics, videogames, movies, and TV in even more significant numbers that before (Doherty, Millar & Misener, 2020; Coyne, Staffell, & Woodruff, 2021; Reid, 2021). Despite this pandemic causing people to remain physically isolated from one another, we are still seeing people engaging with one another by connecting through these shows, movies, and books through online means. It has allowed us to experience the world and provide connections to others through mutual media consumption while maintaining social distance and respecting pandemic restrictions (Hamilton, Nesi, & Choukas-Bradley, 2020).

We saw this at work with the viral success of Netflix's *Tiger King* [2] early in the pandemic and more recently with the global obsession with *Wordle* [3]. Streaming services like Disney+ and Netflix, subscription services like Marvel Unlimited, and delivery services that drop books off right at the front door have made such leisure activities more available and accessible than ever before. Acknowledging this intense shift towards media experiences as the now optimal choice for leisure is important if we are to make sense of how people value and prioritise leisure (Hamilton et al., 2020). If we as a field of Recreation and Leisure Studies wish to stay relevant, it is important to recognize and pay attention to this shift in leisure habits during the pandemic.

Understanding this shift towards increased media consumption is critical as the underlying messages being relayed via media are having an impact on our cultural beliefs. As evidence of this, *cultivation theory* suggests that repetitive exposure to imagery, stereotypes, values, and messages are likely to be internalized as core beliefs in its audience (Corey, 2017; Gerbner et al., 2002). Therefore, with media on the rise as being one of the primary ways we engage with culture and with one another, it is becoming increasingly important to be conscious of the messages being relayed through these forms of media and acknowledging the role media plays in the construction of cultural beliefs (Key, 2015).

Many of the messages that we have seen in recent years that have made its way to the forefront of popular culture as seen in movies, television, comics, books, and videogames are those that engage queer identities. From television to videogames like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *The Last of Us*, to comic books and movies like *Deadpool*, we are seeing more and more queer

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[2] Tiger King is a Netflix Original Series about the lucrative business of owning tigers in the United States. It premiered during the first week of the initial global shutdown of the pandemic and as such became the first viral sensation of the pandemic.

[3] Wordle is an online puzzle game where players must guess the five-letter word of the day in six guesses or less. It is the most recent viral sensation of the pandemic at the time that this was written.

characters appear in media every year (GLAAD, 2021). Recognizing an increase in both media consumption and the representation of 2SLGBTQ+ identities, there is a unique nexus to explore the media messaging around these queer identities. This manuscript will address those messages coming out of the media around queer identities with a specific focus on bisexuality due to its increase in popularity in the last ten years as will be discussed later in detail (Berbary & Guzman, 2018).

As we move towards paying more attention to media consumption as leisure, it is important to pay close attention to these narratives and messages being relayed about queer identities as they have historically been reduced to unjust portrayals or left out entirely. Dominant identities such as white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, and male are overrepresented in mainstream media compared to their racialized, disabled, trans, queer, and female counterparts in virtually every aspect of the industry (Meyer, 2020). These non-dominant identities are underrepresented as actors, writers, producers, directors, and characters (Murphy, 2015). Such identities and experiences embodying these identities are also excluded from the overarching narratives, plot lines, and core stories seen in media (Meyer, 2020).

2SLGBTQ+ identities are one of such non-dominant identities that have been historically excluded and/or tokenized. These exclusions have resulted in queer identities being written out or ignored in mainstream narratives, as well as, being left out in the writer's room and the director's chair (Meyer, 2020). When these identities *are* represented, they tend to be misrepresented or reduced to a one-dimensional portrayal for the entertainment of dominant identities (Councilor, 2021). As cultivation theory mentions, lack of representation of certain identities leads to *symbolic annihilation* and unjust portrayals are particularly dangerous as uncontested misrepresentations of identities can be internalized by broader culture (Gerber et al.,

2002). Therefore, we can understand that uncontested misrepresentations of 2SLGBTQ+

identities can be accepted as truth (Gerbner et al., 2002) which can result in discrimination,

harassment, invalidation, and feelings of isolation for people in the queer community (Berbary &

Guzman, 2018). For many of us who want to see ourselves represented with more accuracy and

complexity, we turn to subcultural, underground types of media. One such media that has always

supported queer identities are graphic novels and comic books[4].

Recognizing the need to specifically address the ways queerness and bisexuality are then

portrayed in graphic novels, I will begin my discussing the history of graphic novels and their

intersections with queer culture. This will provide key context as to why I have chosen to use a

graphic novel as a part of my analysis. I will then detail methodology and my

*text/context/paratext* analysis where I draw on a graphic novel, secondary data of bisexual

women, and fan posts/reactions from social media. Finally, I will highlight the key connections I

made during this process and what it means for the future of media representations, graphic

novels, leisure, and queer culture.

**History of Queer Comix**

Queer comics recognize the deliberate political and resistant history of comics to those

dominant cultural narratives that permeate media. Since their creation, graphic novels have been

a medium that has critiqued social climates, political structures and educated its readers on

inequality and social justice including 2SLGBTQ+ rights (Berbary & Guzman, 2018; Fawaz,

2019). It has acted as a safe space for queer readers and queer creators that exists outside the

realm of reality where they can feel comfortable exploring their identity, addressing their trauma,

and healing. However, before we can explore this uniquely queer space in comic book history,

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[4] I use comics and graphic novels interchangeably throughout. Comics that have been longer or whatever. Their histories are intertwined and equally as important to queer history and queer culture.

we must first understand the long history of white, patriarchal, and heteronormative history of mainstream comic culture.

Within mainstream publishers, there has been a significant lack of representational equality among writers, readers, characters, and narratives (Scott & Fawaz, 2018). With only one in four characters in mainstream comics featuring a woman, and racialized and queer characters appearing even less, mainstream comics have long been written by straight, white, men through a lens that centers dominant identities as the heroes and protagonists in narratives (Meyer, 2020). When non-dominant identities do make an appearance, they are often relegated as sidekicks, minor characters, and as villains (Councillor, 2021). Due to their presence at the prominence of comic culture, the state of mainstream comics has furthered the idea that comic book culture is homophobic, sexist, racist, and at times nationalistic. When taken as a whole, however, the more complex reality of comic books is that they are actually "far queerer than they appear" (Scott & Fawaz, 2018, p. 211).

If we look at the history of graphic novels and the history of the queer community, we see that they have been intertwined with one another since the early 1930's and have even been transformative of the other's culture (Scott and Fawaz, 2018). Comics have often been the dominant medium for the representation of queer identities and as such, they can be considered a cultural record for the queer community and queer politics over the last century (Scott and Fawaz, 2018). Yet, academia has often "misrecognized the complexity and importance of graphic novels in queer history" (p. 589) due to the stigma that comic books are childish, sexist, and homophobic (Fawaz, 2019). Therefore, there is a deep necessity to recognize queer comics, not only for their contribution to queer culture but also for their complex political movements that are both meaningful and useful within queer research and academia as a whole.

### *Queer Comix*

*Queer comix* are comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, Zines, memoirs, and web comics created *by* queer artists *for* queer readers that have deep use (Hall, 2013). Like the superhero genre, queer comix can be considered a genre of its own that features complex narratives that centre queerness and reject the mediums mostly heteronormative and patriarchal representations that erase or disenfranchise queer identities (Scott and Fawaz, 2018; Berbary & Guzman, 2018). In resisting these negative representations, queer comix can hold space for these queer identities that have been silenced in mainstream comics.

Many genres of comics have been significant to queer readers; however, queer comix were produced by queer artists out of the desire to recognize themselves within the media they were consuming. Queer people were not recognizing themselves and anything they were seeing, leaving them to construct who they were based on television and movie representations (Councilor, 2021). Queer comix create a "cultural construction of queerness, it creates social and literal visibility, and political advocacy of queer identities" (Abate, Grice & Stamper, 2018, p. 331). In a world that was not ready to accept open displays and depictions of queerness in the mainstream, queer comix provided a space for this to happen (Councilor, 2021). Within queer comix, queer characters were no longer being created to appeal to straight male audiences where they are fetishized, reductive, and comedic (Meyer, 2010). Queer characters and stories were being created by their own communities which leads to just, believable, and reflective representations of queerness (Councilor, 2021).

Queer characters first appeared in a comic strip called *Terry and the Pirates*. The main characters were never explicitly stated as gay, yet they were recognized as such due to *queer coding*- when a character is written to display stereotypes and behaviours that are recognized as

traits consistent with the 2SLGBTQ+ community (Greyson, 2007; Kim, 2007). Queer coding was used to bypass the restrictive rules surrounding the portrayal of queer characters in graphic novels imposed by the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in the 1930's (Kim, 2007; Johnson, 2016). The CCA was a conservative ruling board that influenced comics through the 1980's, overseeing a strict set of regulations in order to manage the images and messages being relayed (Greyson, 2007; Kim, 2007). Under this code, queer identities were classified as a sexual perversion and prohibited the portrayals of queer characters unless done so in a negative light or fear the wrath of the censors and be blacklisted (Greyson, 2007; Johnson, 2016).

However, as seen with *Terry and the Pirates*, these regulations set by the CCA did not stop the inclusion of queer characters in comics (Greyson, 2007). Artists could either covertly representing queerness by using queer coding to bypass the censors or write their narratives for underground and independent comic book publishers who were more flexible with what they allowed to be published (Greyson, 2007; Austin, 2020). Queer coding is an inherently neutral tool that has had a complex history in graphic novels. It has been used positively to include queer characters and narratives into comics and establish graphic novels as an important battleground for queer culture; however, it has also been used to enforce *queer essentialism*- the act of reducing queerness down to a few simplistic traits rooted in gender roles that produce and reinforce stereotypes (Kim, 2007; McKeown & Parry, 2017).

As a result of the rising popularity of independent publishers, the Stonewall riot, the rise of second wave feminism, and the gay and women's liberation movements the CCA relaxed their restrictions on representing queer identities in the 1970's allowing for more holistic and equitable portrayals of queer characters that allowed them to be represented openly, bluntly, and proudly (Greyson, 2007; Abate, Grice & Stamper, 2018). Rather than reducing queer characters

down to vague innuendos or as jokes, they were now allowed to be represented openly, bluntly, and proudly (Councilor, 2021).  In 1972, the first queer comic book called *Come Out* and the first issue of *Wimmin's Comix*, an all-female underground comic anthology featuring a lesbian character were published (Abate, Grice & Stamper, 2018). From the 1960's-1980's, "Marvel Comics revitalized the superhero comic book by infusing its art with the visual politics of gay and women's liberation" and the civil rights movement (Scott and Fawaz, 2018 p. 198). This was a significant moment for mainstream representations, as Marvel was already a staple in comic book culture. Although it was not an overt representation of queerness, many queer readers interpreted the discrimination of mutants as a metaphor for their own experiences (Scott and Fawaz, 2018). By the 1990's, queer comix had solidified themselves as a staple in queer culture, with some mainstream comics even starting to embrace 2SLGBTQ+ characters in their comics (Greyson, 2007; Berbary & Guzman, 2018, Councilor, 2021). However, queer and intersectional bodies still struggled with explicit visibility in mainstream comics because straight, white, males were still the dominant identity on the page, in the writing room, and as consumers (Greyson, 2007).

Even when we saw queer representations in comics, they often lacked intersectionality, much like what we saw with queer representation in early 90's sitcoms (Snider, 2016). As queer comics gained more explicit visibility, quite often whiteness was held as central to the queer experience and sexuality and gender were often problematically positioned on a binary. While it was a positive step forward to see queer characters being included and queer narratives being told, they were often white, monosexual, and limited to hegemonic gender expectations (Sweeny, 2016; DeLong, 2016). Basic representations such as these overlooked intersections of identity and inadequately reflected the complex experiences of those who face multiple oppressions

(Berbary & Guzman, 2018). They failed to recognize that queer people can inhabit bodies of different races, disabilities, classes, genders, ethnicities, cultures, and a broad range of mono-sexual and pluri-sexual identities alike. They also continued to perpetuate the belief that queerness is a binary and ignored more complex notions that sexuality is a spectrum (Flanders, 2017). Of particular relevance to this study is that fact that bisexuality, which is often positioned as deceitful, slutty, hypersexual, dirty, untrustworthy, and as vectors of disease (Berbary & Guzman, 2018).

Overall, since the 2000's, have seen a representation of characters that have become more complex, more intersectional, more integrated with non-dominant identities. We have seen the representation of queer identifying characters not only in quantity, but in quality as well. Queer characters are given complex personalities and narratives with intersectional identities where multiple non-dominant identities are at the forefront (Abate, Grice & Stamper, 2018). While these advancements of queer representation have been a significant step for queer representation as a whole, the burden of writing queer characters and narratives still falls on queer artists (Councilor, 2021). Even among these representations, there is still room to push the boundaries of how we understand and represent queerness.

The comic book medium continues to be a crucial part of queer culture and continues to grow and evolve. Comic books have been among the most produced forms of print media in the last century and with the COVID-19 pandemic have seen a 40% increase in comic book sales over the last few years (Scott & Fawaz, 2018; Reid, 2021). Movies and TV series based on Comic Books have also dominated pop culture and being among the most mass-consumed pieces of media. Furthermore, comic books and graphic novels have become considerably more

accessible to mainstream readers with the popularization of web comics and online subscription services (Councilor, 2021).

### *Significance of Comics for Queer Readers*

Even as they become more popular, comics and graphic novels still maintain some level of fringe culture that makes them attractive to people whose lives are often put on the margins of society (Scott & Fawaz, 2018). Before this push to include explicit representations of queerness, queer people read themselves into comics. When mainstream comics failed to claim queer narratives, the queer community would take them up as if they did, seeing metaphors for the queer experience and identifying queer coding, whether it was intentional or accidental (Scott & Fawaz, 2018). By understanding comics through a queer lens, otherwise heteronormative representations were queered so that the queer community could see themselves in what they were reading (Meyer, 2020). This is because readers construct relationships with comics based on their own life experiences (Scott & Fawaz, 2018). Comics "can offer resources for social movements they can be appropriated and transformed so freely because they constitute a realm where we might imagine alternatives to current social conditions because they foster shared desires that may help sustain struggles for social justice because they speak about feelings that might not be expressed in any other way and because they might bridge cultural divides" (Meyer, 2020, p. 238).

As previously mentioned, we see this in action with the *X-Men* franchise where queer comic book readers have long been drawn to its plot that parallels the struggles of mutants with the civil and gay rights movements. Ramzi Fawaz retells his first comic experience as a queer youth being drawn in by the cover of an *X-Men* comic with the slogan "A team reunited… A dream reborn." The cover portrayed a team of misfits with seemingly nothing in common with

the exception of their mutant identity and a shared goal to save the world. This "spoke to him of the promise and possibility of queer kinship and solidarity in the face of overwhelming odds" (Scott and Fawaz, 2019, p. 208). While the *X-Men* do not always feature explicitly queer characters, their stories and character arc serve as a metaphor for those in the queer community struggling with their own identity and searching for acceptance and family (Scott & Fawaz, 2018).

While narratives like *X-Men* can be interpreted as a metaphor, comics in and of themselves are "uniquely queer form of art" that serve as a metaphor for the queer experience (Councilor, 2021, p. 1). Similar to how queer people find themselves on the margins of society, graphic novels are considered on the margins of art making it a unique metaphor for the queer experience (Scott & Fawaz, 2018). Scott and Fawaz (2018) recognized this connection between graphic novels and the queer experience stating that "there's something queer about comics. Whether one looks to the mutant kinships of superhero stories (the epitome of queer world making), the ironic and socially negative narratives of independent comics (the epitome of queer anti normativity), or the social stigma that makes the medium marginal juvenile, an outcast from 'proper' art (the epitome of queer identity), comics are rife with the social and aesthetic cues commonly attached to queer life" (p. 197). Both comics and queerness undermine our understanding of the status quo, where they constantly fighting to be made visible and valued in cultural spaces (Councilor, 2021). bell hooks (2014) described "queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and thrive to live". This can be applied to graphic novels where comics are prided for being radical and transformative (Councilor, 2021).

While the metaphors highlighted by these authors are certainly interesting connections and comparisons as academics and researchers, they are not likely what draws in queer readers. What draws in queer readers is the content and its potential for the representation of self (Councilor, 2021). Comic books often powerfully explore themes that deal with trauma, the loss of identity, and discrimination through text, images, colour, and paneling which "capture the way queer people experience the world… that are often not expressed in written or spoken language" (Councilor, 2021, p. 11). Hatfield once described comics as the art of tensions "the kinds queer people encounter in daily life, the complexities and ambivalence that will take place in an instant, are powerfully represented through comics" (Hatfield, 2009; Councilor, 2009, p. 8).

When queer artists finally started writing themselves into comics, we started to see comics as a new frontier for rebuilding a newer, queerer world. Queer worldbuilding allows for artists to construct a world that is free from the rigid structures of gendered institutions and heteronormative expectations (Councilor, 2021).  Due to its long history situated in the fantasy genre, "comics [are] a medium in which anything can be drawn and be believed" (Fawaz, 2019, p. 589). Without the burden of the rigid structures of homophobia and heteronormativity and the flexibility of the genre, queer comics have represented a multitude of queer identity's both literally and for metaphors that push the boundaries of normativity, gender, and sexuality (Scott & Fawaz, 2018) it has allowed for the co-construction of countless stories that imagine a different and queerer world then what they experience in their own reality (Fawaz, 2019). Queer worldbuilding furthers the existence of a queer reality, where queerness is not positioned or othered in relation to heterosexuality, it is simply in and of itself. It allows for queer readers to shape their own identities and embody their experiences as a queer person that promotes self-

healing, self-acceptance, and hope (Councilor, 2021). One such example of a worldbuilding

graphic novel is *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*.

**The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars**

This graphic novel is something I stumbled upon in my leisure time during the pandemic,

however, after realizing its potential as a bright spot for representation of bisexuality in media, I

included as a part of my methodology. *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars* is a continuation of the

animated show *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* that aired on Nickelodeon creators by Michael

DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko. It features Korra, an Indigenous woman who is reincarnated as

the newest Avatar- the only person alive who has the ability to control all four elements (water,

fire, earth, air) that has been tasked with maintaining peace in the world of *Avatar*. Both the

show and the comic of *The Legend of Korra* presented non-dominant identities including those

of race, gender, and sexuality at the forefront of the *Avatar* universe. It paints a full and complex

picture of queer women and their lived experiences. Throughout the comic, queerness was never

centered around whiteness or tropes that show being bisexual as a hypersexual, sexualized, STD

ridden, or self-destructive. Rather, it shows Korra as a proudly Indigenous and bisexual,

muscular, tomboyish woman who deals with complex yet relatable struggles of disability, mental

illness, spirituality, and sexuality.

The comic takes place immediately after the events of the final episode of the show

where Korra and her new girlfriend, Asami, decide to take a well-deserved vacation after saving

the world. In addition to facing new threats in their home of Republic City, Korra and Asami try

to navigate the struggles that have come with their new relationship. They confront their own

feelings of doubt, negotiate coming out to friends and family, as well as trying to exist in a world

with varying opinions about queer identities. While they initially face some resistance, they

eventually are unconditionally accepted by friends and family and even find queer solidarity with Kya, another queer woman in the story.

While the graphic novel of *The Legend of Korra* is a wonderful piece of queer representation and worldbuilding, it is a novel example of queer representation as it has had a complicated legacy both as a TV show and as a comic. It is further complicated by the authors who have experienced little of the intimacy of -isms, such as colonialism, sexism, racism, and homophobia that are apparent in the identities of the characters. In particular, the depictions of Indigeneity and the perpetuation of heteronormativity and stereotypes can be easily critiqued. This a recognition that while including representation is an important course of action for queer politics, it can sometimes reinstate some of the many problematic beliefs that create and uphold the structures that divide us. However, both creators themselves have admitted in a personal essay that this work is not "a slam dunk for representation." As allies and content creators they acknowledge that they still have a lot of learning and work to do for future projects (Dimartino, 2014).

Furthermore, being a show that was targeted towards younger audiences, Nickelodeon originally shot down Dimartino and Konietzko's idea to have Korra and Asami be in a relationship (Dimartino, 2014). As such, Korra and Asami were never confirmed to be a couple while the show was still airing. However, Dimartino and Konietzko used queer coding to lay the foundation for future where they could represent the relationship openly. In the final shot of the series finale, Korra and Asami are seen holding hands walking towards their future together. Shortly after, Dimartino and Konietzko confirmed off screen that they were both bisexual and in a relationship with one another, retroactively making Korra the first openly queer character in children's media (Dimartino, 2014). After the show had finished its run, they sought to continue

the story in a graphic novel format targeted towards and older audience where Nickelodeon gave them permission to represent the relationship openly and proudly (Dimartino, 2014).

**Methodology**

Acknowledging that this text was an example of complex queer representation, I found myself in the unique space to think through this graphic novel in relation to my research. I had been looking at secondary data collected from bisexual women about their experiences of bisexual erasure and asked them what transformations they would like to see in the world. Recognizing that much of what was said was reflected in the graphic novel, I chose to read them in tandem with one another. In order to further flesh out the reactions to such a graphic novel and under advisement from Shana MacDonald, I then also decided to look at posts from social media that discussed the graphic novel. Therefore, this graphic novel is situated within both the data collected from bisexual women's hopes for transformation and responses from its own representation from social media users.

Using these three different data sets, I chose to use a *text, paratext,* and *context* analysis where I conducted a comparative analysis of a *text* (the graphic novel), *context* (bisexual data), and *paratext* (social media posts). I will explore this in more depth in the next section. I used this analysis to show a more complex picture of the messages being relayed through media, how they are interpreted and engaged with by audiences, and the possibilities of queer graphic novels. As mentioned above, more people have been turning to graphic novels since the beginning of the pandemic and there is an ever-present push to include queer identities in media. As such, it becomes an important practice to explore what kinds of messages are being put forth, and how they are being received. The intention was to specifically look at the ways that queer people *desired* to be represented, how they *were* represented, and the *reactions* to being represented.

*Context: Bisexual Data*

I restructured the *text/context/paratext* analysis where the bisexual data could serve as context to the graphic novel, where the hopes and experiences of the participants were reflected in the *text.* The original data from this study was collected by Berbary and Guzman (2018) and included eight narrative interviews were conducted examining the lived experiences of bisexual and pansexual women living in Waterloo Region. This data was collected as part of a research project with Lisbeth and a research assistant in 2015. The data has since been published in an article "We Exist: Combating Erasure Through Creative Analytic Comix about Bisexuality" (2018) by Lisbeth Berbary and Coco Guzman. The purpose of this study was to promote the visibility of bisexuality by publishing the findings of the data as a comic and to show the ways that bisexual people "navigate relationship, identity, and community" (Berbary & Guzman, 2018, p. 2). It showed how bisexual women navigated biphobia, bisexual erasure and how they "navigate the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, education, religion, migration, and community in their day-to-day lives" (Berbary & Guzman, 2018, p. 6). After discussion with Lisbeth, I decided to take this data up with a different analytical frame than the original analysis, which better related to my own interests, experiences, and identity. In a preliminary analysis, I recognized that the participants had a desire to see more queer, and specifically bisexual, representations that reflected their own lived experiences.

> I think there's really no representation in general. I think… Which is just kind of so sad because we always look to the media for representation.- SK

Furthermore, they also critiqued the messages that were coming out of current media representations about queerness and bisexuality.

> I think when you're showing a marginalized community on a TV platform like this, you have an opportunity to do something great. And if you don't, you're being irresponsible with the way you're having your show. And it's irresponsible to show a person of a

marginalized community in such a one-dimensional way because that's what always happens to people in marginalized communities. Like they're not shown as fully human beings, like their range of personalities and behaviours and- like that's not accepted so they're not appreciated, I suppose.- Steph

In addition to guiding the focus of my study, the experiences pulled from the narrative interviews provided me with the material for the *context* of my graphic novel and the study as a whole.

### *Text: Graphic Novel*

As already discussed, I selected *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars* as the *text* for my analysis. Television, books, and videogames has always been a favorite pastime of mine; and I am particularly nostalgic of comics and graphic novels as my dad passed on his passion and comic book collection to me when I was young. With video games being financially inaccessible, TV occasionally being disengaging, and spending much of my time reading academic journals and articles, graphic novels have always been something I can turn to when I feel disengaged from these other forms of media. As a fan of the original shows, *The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*, I was inspired to read the graphic novel that came out of it. This comic was a refreshing read due to its nuanced and complex representation of a queer relationship. Reading it in tandem with the participant data, I realized that it not only fulfilled the desire of the participants for holistic and intersectional representations of queer identities, but it also reflected the experiences participants through in its own narratives with Korra and Asami. Throughout my analysis, I occasionally pull examples from the show as it proved to be the catalyst for the exciting representation of queerness in the comics. However, as the majority of the queer representation in the show is otherwise minimal or incredibly subtle, I primarily use examples from the comic.

***Paratext: Social Media***

The *paratext* was comprised of various posts and essays from *Tumblr* and *Avatar* subreddits on *Reddit*. These sites were chosen due to their ability to connect fans with one another and their associations with fandom. I searched for posts using filters such as *LGBTQ, queer, bixexual, gay,* and *coming out.* The *paratext* was used to demonstrate how this graphic novel, and in particular, how the representation of queer characters was taken up by fans. Therefore, as seen in *Figure 1,* we can see that my analysis began with the bisexual data that provides *context* to the *text* (the graphic novel), which was then taken up by fans in the *paratext.* This manuscript will present these three objects of inquiry in tandem in order to showcase this graphic novel as a potential bright spot of queer representation for what many of the participants were hoping to see in representations.

**Figure 1**

*Context/Text/Paratext Analysis Chart*
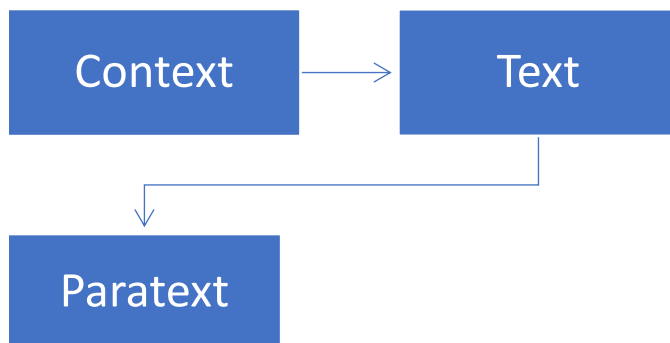


**Analysis**

After learning about this desire for representation from the participants, I conducted a preliminary analysis of the data which included an initial read through of the bisexual data transcripts (the *context*) that allowed me to become familiar with their stories and experiences as bisexual women. Participants called attention to the unrealistic and one-dimensional

representations of queer bodies in media and shared a desire to see different queer bodies and queer stories that reflected their own experiences as queer women. After discovering the graphic novel and reading it in my leisure time, I decided to include it as part of the analysis. In a secondary read through of both the participant data and the transcripts, I began identifying queer stories that were experienced by the participants and reflected in this graphic novel. I went through line by line of the participant data and each panel of the comic and identified four themes: *Coming Out, Allyship* and *Advocacy, Race* and *Culture,* and *Stereotypes*. After being advised to use posts from social media to add further depth to my analysis, I sought out posts, replies, and essays on *Tumblr* and *Reddit* to use as my *paratext. Table 2* shows an example of how I read the different in tandem with one where I compared how the *context*, *text,* and *paratext* reflected, differed, and transcended one another.

**Table 2**

*Context/Text/Paratext Comparative Analysis Example*

| Personal Acceptance | Context | Text | Paratext |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stereotypes and Erasure | "-because I hear people saying that, say, if I say bisexual and I'm really a man people will be like, "Oh, then you're straight." And if I'm dating a woman, they'll be like, "Oh, you're a lesbian." And it's like it's never – it's not – orientation is more about yourself than the people you're seeing at a particular moment. But people do think that – people want you to fit into category… They don't see bisexual lady as legitimate thing."- Abena | Mako: "And I want you to know… if you've noticed me acting a little weird, it' only because I've never had one of my exes date another one of my exes before. It's taking a little getting used to. But I think you and Asami are both perfect for each other. And I'm the most qualified person to say that." (p. 21)<br><br>Notes: Korra's relationship with Mako is never erased. It is considered a meaningful and valid part of her identity/life. | "Bisexual women are every straight guys fetish. I just love when my identity is fetishized and dismissed as experimentation. It's amazing… The majority of representation of bisexual women paints it as a 'phase' or something girls do to impress guys. Bisexuality is not shown as a legitimate identity, and same sex relationships are just craaaazzzy experiments instead of being portrayed as just as valid, loving, and serious as opposite sex ones. Good representation of bisexual women is still important and lacking overall. That's why people are celebrating these characters, whose identities and relationships are treated as normal, valid, and loving." |

As I used my themes to make connections across the *text, context,* and *paratext*, I realized that they were blurring together. After a discussion with my supervisor, we decided to change course and move forward with a mind map format which freed me from the rigid structure of a

chart, mind maps. This allowed me to explore not only the connections between the *text, context*, and *paratext*, but the connections between the themes and subthemes I already identified as well. I broke down my old themes and found that many of the stories I pulled from the *text, the context*, and *paratext* centered around acceptance; the desire to be accepted by family/society and the struggle with acceptance of the self. *Acceptance* is a significant queer theme in the 2SLGBTQ+ community as it is an essential part of the queer experience and queer politics (Ngo & Kwon, 2015). I deconstructed these old themes and created three new ones: *Cultural Acceptance, Relational Acceptance, and Personal Acceptance.* Each form of acceptance was explored on a separate mind map with the assumption being that they would be interconnected with one another.

### *Mind Maps*

My analysis, the structure of the mind maps, and the findings were all informed by concepts from my proposal such as queer essentialism, queer coding, heteronormativity, cultivation theory, and intersectionality as well as the history of queer identities in media and graphic novels. It was also informed by the desires of the participants to see more hopeful/realistic representations of different queer bodies and queer stories. I created three separate mind maps each featuring a different form of acceptance. *Cultural Acceptance* was coded as blue, *Relational Acceptance* as yellow, and *Personal Acceptance* as pink. Similar to what was seen in *Figure 1,* I structured the maps in a way where *context* appeared in left-hand corner, then *text* in the right, the *paratext* in the bottom left corner, and a summary of my findings in the bottom right. The *context* revealed how this type of acceptance had been played out in real life using the lived experiences of the participants, the *text* revealed what this form of acceptance looks like when it is played out in media, and the *paratext* reflected the impact of

representing this form of acceptance and its influence on the lives of the self-identified queer

fans. Each map was made up of a collection of direct quotes and a summarized version of the

narratives pulled from the *text, context*, and *paratext*. Below are photos of my completed mind

maps.
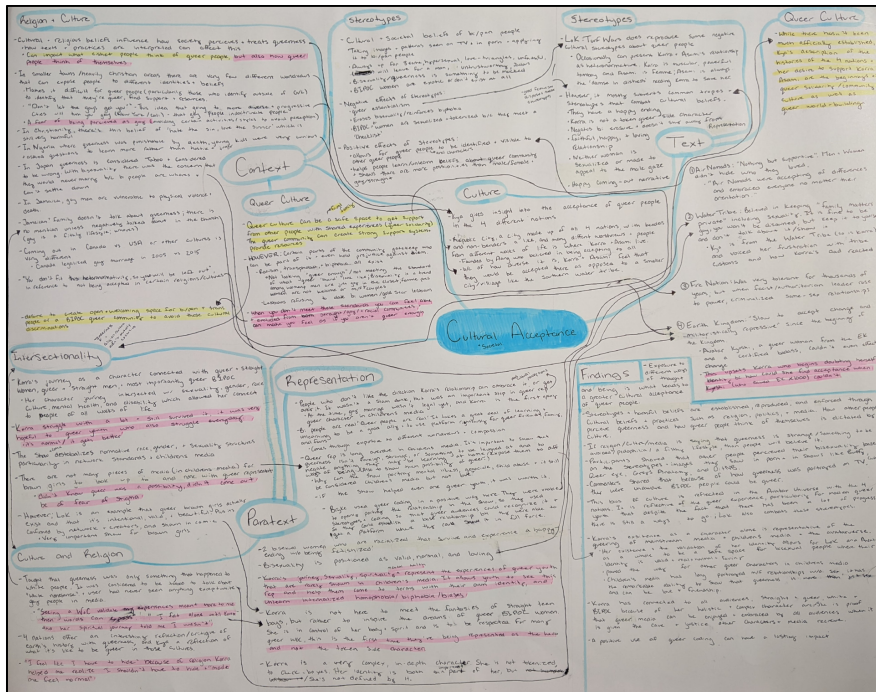
**Figure 2**

*Cultural Acceptance Map*

**Figure 3**

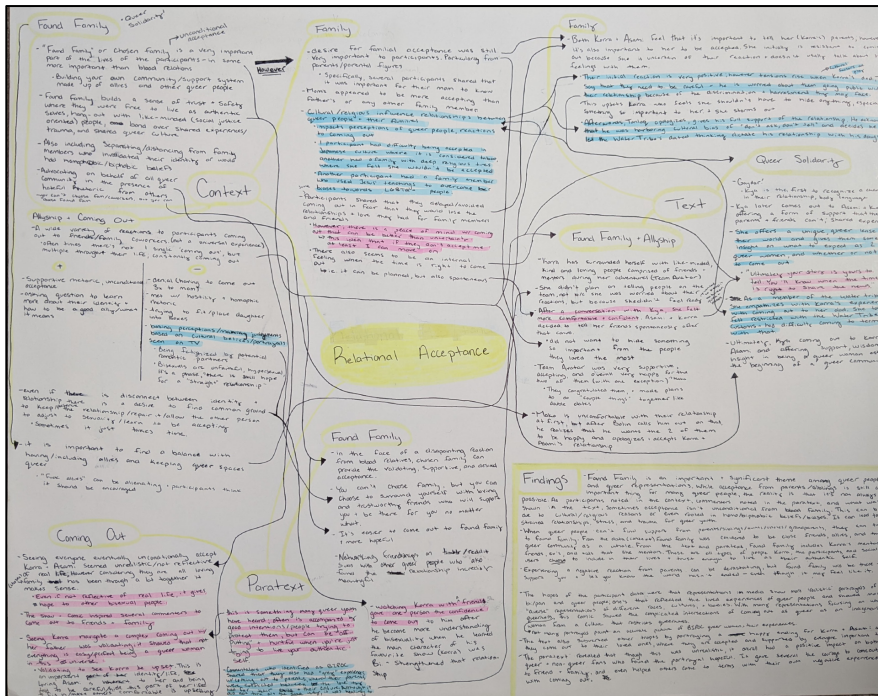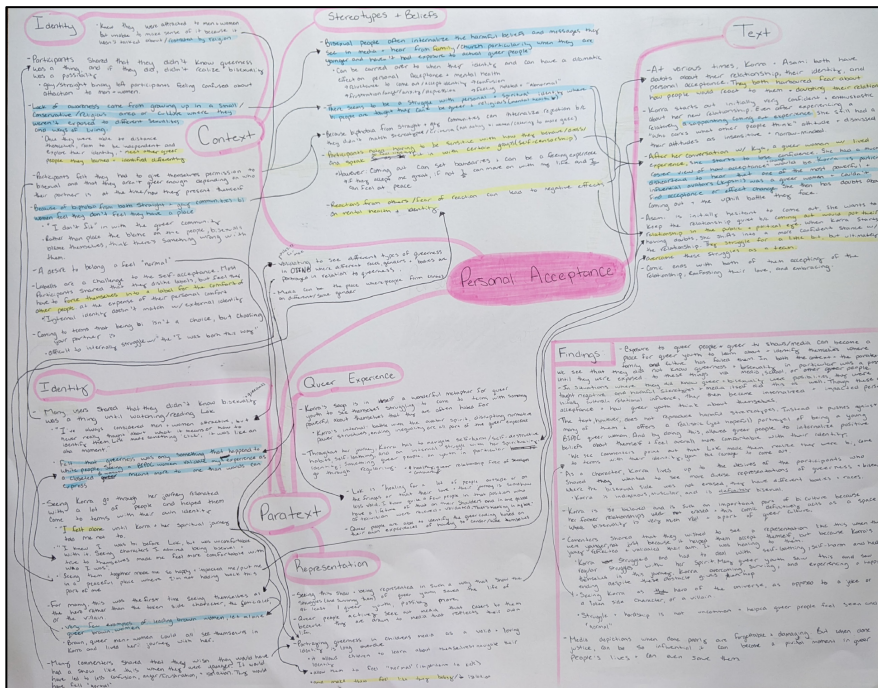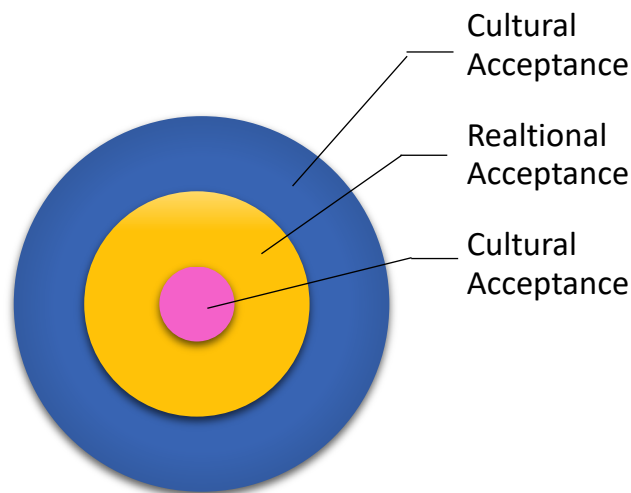*Relational Acceptance Map*



**Figure 4**

*Personal Acceptance Map*

**Acceptance.** It is important to understand that each mind map is interconnected with one another. In *Figure 5* we see a visual interpretation of how each form of acceptance is related with one another. Similar to a trickle-down effect, *Cultural Acceptance* has the greatest influence on the other forms of acceptance, followed by *Relational* and *Personal Acceptance*. Therefore, it can be understood that acceptance at the relational and personal level are dependent on and influenced by the cultural acceptance of queer identities. Although the mind maps are separated from one another, these interconnections can be seen through the various highlights that appear on the maps in their respective colours.

**Figure 5**

*Influence of Acceptance Hierarchy*



Cultural Acceptance

Realtional Acceptance

Cultural Acceptance

**Connections**

In this section, I will be summarising the key connections I made between the *context, text,* and *paratext.* With each of the major themes that emerged *(Cultural Acceptance, Personal Acceptance,* and *Relational Acceptance),* sub-themes also emerged. In *Table 3*, I show each major theme and the subtheme that emerged alongside it. Under each form of acceptance, I

discuss the subthemes and then break them down into a summary of the *text, context,* and

*paratext* of each subtheme.

**Table 3**

*Major Themes and Sub-Themes*

| Acceptance | Sub Theme |
|------------|-----------|
| Cultural | *Religion and Culture* |
| | *The Media* |
| *Relational* | *Found Family* |
| | *Coming Out* |
| *Personal* | *Representation of Queer Identities* |

***Cultural Acceptance***

Cultural Acceptance was concerned with the embrace of queer identities at a

cultural/societal level. It examined how queerness is perceived by different religions,

nationalities, ethnic cultures, within the queer community, and how it appears in media. The

*context* came from the bisexual data and was separated into *Religion and Culture*, *Queer Culture*,

and *Stereotypes*. It included discussions on the intersection of the participants' religions and

identities, their different ethnicities and nationalities, and queer culture. It also looked at how

stereotypes are both created and reproduced by religion and dominant culture and how they

influence the ways in which people think about queer people and what queer people think of

themselves. The *text,* drawn from *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*, revealed that *Stereotypes*,

*Religion and Culture*, and *Queer Culture* were the significant sub-themes. It included the

discussion of the history of queer acceptance across the four nations in the *Avatar* universe, the

existence of a broader queer culture, and the stereotypes of queer women that Korra and Asami both reproduce and reject through the novel. Sub-themes in the *paratext,* emerging from *Tumblr* and *Reddit* posts, included *Intersectionality*, *Representation*, and *Race and Religion*. They discussed the intersectionality of the queer characters, the importance of seeing a racialized queer woman, and the impacts of being the first piece of children's media to include a queer character.

### *Often times, religions and culture were at odds with queer identity*

The *context, text,* and *paratext* all revealed that queerness is a taboo topic among certain religions and cultures. Quite often, in all forms, religion and culture seem to negate some aspects of queerness and create necessity of resistance (Dunnavant, Berbary, & Flanagan, 2017). For many, it led to a struggle between their spirituality and their sexual identity where they felt that they had to choose between the two. Experiences with cultures and religions that do not accept queer people show that both participants from the *context* and fans from the *paratext* had difficulties coming to terms with their identity because of those beliefs. With queerness rarely being discussed at all, and bisexuality in particular, it was also common experience that people did not know bisexuality and queerness were a possibility. When it *was* discussed, it was done so in a negative light where harmful beliefs about bisexuality and queerness were internalised. Participants expressed not wanting to align themselves with these stereotypes and not recognizing themselves in these stereotypical discussions. *Cultural Acceptance* proved to be such a powerful influence, that it then had a trickle-down effect that shaped acceptance at the relational and personal level.

**Context: Bisexual Data.** Participants from the transcript data voiced their own experiences with some of the exclusionary practices and beliefs of Christianity.

But in the church they… bash homosexuality- just a lot of homophobia in the church … I go to church, and once my pastor was preaching homosexuality as a filthy lifestyle.- Abena

Regions that leaned towards political conservativism were also revealed to be restrictive and judgemental of queer identities. One participant shared that she lived in a small town in The United States with deep republican roots where homophobic comments and anti-queer sentiment were quite common. When she finally decided to move to California, she was excited to move somewhere where queerness was normalized and celebrated but was met with homophobic comments from her family.

… and when I first… was moving, it was like the week of my first orientation and I'm flying out and my Aunt gives me a big hug and she's like "Don't let the gays get you! - Amanda

Furthermore, participants who experienced living in different regions around the world shared the differences in the cultural beliefs of different countries. There was a significant difference in coming out in the United States particularly in the early 2000's versus coming out in Canada where gay marriage was legal and queer rights were protected and mostly accepted by the general public.

But coming out in, say, 1999 in America versus coming out in 2006 is, like, massively different… [Canada has] a longer history here of gay marriage and gay rights.- Abena

Several other participants detailed the differences between Jamaican, Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Japanese perceptions towards queerness. In Nigeria and Jamaica, queerness was criminalized and queer people were noted as being particularly vulnerable to violence and hate crimes.

In Jamaica, it's terrible because, like, they actually kill people who are gay… Messages like gay men are terrible… They're gonna burn in hell and it's really bad.- SK

And I was recently doing speaking for a group at an independent college, where they're all mostly newcomers from Nigeria. And it's a very different climate there, with 14 years imprisonment or death by stoning. - Abena

The participant, Abena, shared that her Ghanaian parents chose not to speak about queerness, and her experiences in Japan revealed that queerness was considered as something to be ashamed of and to hide.

> … my parents never talked about homosexuality at all… I started looking more into queer culture in Japan, and what I noticed is that it's something kind of taboo- Abena

**Text: Graphic Novel.** Reading the novel reflected these cultural differences that we see from the participants through the four nations in the *Avatar* universe. Each nation had its own unique history and perception of queerness as told by one of the other queer characters in the comic, Kya. In the comic, it is explained that the Air Nomads had a history of being open and accepting of all identities and relationships. The Water Tribe, who share similarities with some of the experiences explored in the *context*, believed that being queer was not an issue as long as it was kept to oneself. The Fire Nation also shared similarities with the *context* where they were formerly open and accepting of queer identities, yet after a history of colonization and imperialism, chose to criminalize queer identities. Lastly, the Earth Kingdom had always been repressive and unaccepting of queer identities.

> That's Water Tribe for you. People like to keep family matters private. No one's going to disown you for coming out, but our culture would prefer you to keep it to yourself…. My father grew up in the air temples, where men and women didn't hide who they loved. The Air Nomads were accepting of differenced and embraced everyone, no matter their orientation. For most of its history, the Fire Nation was tolerant too, but then Fire Lord Sozin took power. He decreed that same-sex relationships were criminal… Even Avatar Kyoshi- who by all account loved men and women- was unable to affect any kind of real progress. After all the Earth Kingdom has been slowest to accept change, and the most militaristically repressive (Dimartino & Konietzko, 2018, p. 55-56).

In a superficial comparison, it is clear that there are some similarities between what was mentioned about Ghanaian, Jamaican, and Nigerian culture and the Water Tribe, Fire Nation, and Earth Kingdom.

**Paratext: Social Media.** Engaging with social media posts revealed similar experiences of identity clashing with their spirituality or their culture. One *Reddit* user cited that they felt their sexual orientation and their spirituality were at odds with one another which led to feelings of isolation.

> I used to be religious… I didn't even think God was on my side since men cannot like men (or so the bible says). So as you can see, I felt completely alone with no one to talk to, not even the 'Lord' (*Reddit*).

Other users also found that Korra's own struggle with her culture and spirituality reflected that of their own, and the queer experience as a whole.

> "Over the course of four seasons she struggles with suicide, spirituality, self-loathing, and self-harm.  Trigger words for a number of teenagers, but especially ones who are LGBTQ." (*Tumblr*)

Fans of the show also resonated with the discussion of the different cultural perceptions of queerness in the *Avatar* Universe who felt that "it mirror[ed] our history pretty well" (*Reddit*).

### Media influenced cultural perceptions of queerness

As it has been thoroughly discussed, the messages being relayed through media representations and pop culture influences have significant impact on the cultural acceptance of queer identities. Problematic stereotypes reproduced in media are so prevalent that it has implications on our broader cultural beliefs about bisexuality and queerness (Gerbner et al., 2002). In the *context,* we see that many participants came into contact with people who based their own personal perceptions of bisexuality on what stereotypes were seen in media representations and in porn (ie. hypersexuality, unfaithfulness, STD-ridden). However, rather than reflect this, the *text* pushed against these stereotypes instead portrayed an overall positive, holistic, and intersectional representation of bisexuality. The fans in the *paratext* recognized this as act of resistance to typical representations of queerness and racialized women, and as such,

embraced this portrayal. With an intersectional and holistic portrayal of a queer women and their experiences, fans were able to recognize themselves and feel a sense of validation and belonging from it.

**Context: Bisexual Data.** Participants recognized the role media portrayals play in its impact on culture and shared that a lack of realistic portrayals of bisexuality was disappointing.

> I think that there's no representation in general… Which is kind of so sad because we always look to the media for representation but even within that there is hardly any like representation of bisexuality and even when there is, it's always kind of like white, beautiful women. - SK

Participants also shared that they had experiences with people perceiving bisexuality based on what they had seen in porn and in TV shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Greys Anatomy*, and the *L Word*. They felt that they were surface level representations that were more concerned with appealing to straight audiences, reproducing stereotypes, erasing bisexuality, and valuing drama rather than producing just representations of queer identities. In a discussion with Steph about Willow's character arc in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as characters in *Greys Anatomy* and *The L Word*, representations of bisexuality were found to be disappointing as they reproduced harmful messages and furthered the erasure of bisexuality. Furthermore, this participant felt that as creators with a significant following and fanbase, they had a responsibility to be more mindful of the messages they were reproducing about bisexuality.

> [Willow]'s very behaviorally bisexual… It's interesting because a lot of these characters on TV are behaviourally bisexually, like in their practices and relationships. But then a lot of the time they still lack the term. The term is not used. Or it's erased. I mean, they have a platform… Like, you'd think they have that responsibility. - Steph

Steph went on to explain that as creators with a significant cultural influence on their fanbase, they had a responsibility to be more mindful of the messages they were reproducing about bisexuality.

> I think when you're showing a marginalized community on a TV platform like this, you have an opportunity to do something great. And if you don't, you're being irresponsible with the way you're having your show. And it's irresponsible to show a person of a marginalized community in such a one-dimensional way because that's what always happens to people in marginalized communities. Like they're not shown as fully human beings, like their range of personalities and behaviours and- like that's not accepted so they're not appreciated, I suppose. - Steph

The context additionally revealed that often other people would use media representations to make assumptions about bisexuality and queerness. For example, two participants reported having male partners that would often fetishize her identity based on what they saw in porn.

> But that's only because they're attraction to it is largely… porn-y. - Catherine

> Now I'm thinking like a lot of the things I was told, like, around him applying the stuff he leaner in porn- to me. Say… through women having sex or expecting me to be hypersexual. - Abena

**Text: Graphic Novel.** Korra and her relationship with Asami were not written to appeal to straight audiences, and more often than not resisted stereotypes about bisexuality and queer identities. Though this comic draws on queer coding, it is used to elevate its queer characters and provide visibility rather than essentializing queerness. Queer coding was used to allow queer viewers to see themselves in Korra and Asami's relationship all while avoiding censorship from Nickelodeon. Rather than essentialize certain behaviours and traits as bisexual or queer, it merely codes Korra and Asami's relationship as having underlying romance and romantic characteristics (ie. mutual affection, handholding). Therefore, we recognize Korra and Asami as being bisexual based on their feelings towards one another as opposed to stereotypes such as hypersexuality, unfaithfulness, and confusion. It differs from the examples of poor bisexual and queer

representation that we see in the *context* as it does not reflect these common stereotypes reproduced in these works and instead serves as an example of the desire to see more intersectional and holistic representations of bisexuality noted by the participants. Korra's mere existence as a character alone is representative of the queering of mainstream media, children's media, and the *Avatar* universe as a whole. With the various cultures in the comic as well as the existence of Kya we see that there is both queer world building and queer community building. From Kya's stories, we know that queer politics have long been a contested topic in the *Avatar* universe, but also that there is some semblance of a queer community.

> I suspected something was up when Tenzin told me you two went on vacation together. I remember the first getaway I had with my first girlfriend. I'd never been so happy (Dimartino & Konietzko, 2018, p. 52).

**Paratext: Social Media.** Fans of the show were aware of the cultural beliefs about bisexuality that are reproduced in media about bisexuality. One user recognized the harmful impact it has on the identity and shared their own personal disgust with these beliefs. However, they went on to discuss how *The Legend of Korra* subverts these stereotypes and instead embraces a more holistic and wholesome representation of bisexuality.

> Bisexual women are every straight guys fetish. I just love when my identity is fetishized and dismissed as experimentation. It's amazing… The majority of representation of bisexual women paints it as a 'phase' or something girls do to impress guys. Bisexuality is not shown as a legitimate identity, and same sex relationships are just craaaazzzy experiments instead of being portrayed as just as valid, loving, and serious as opposite sex ones. Good representation of bisexual women is still important and lacking overall. That's why people are celebrating these characters, whose identities and relationships are treated as normal, valid, and loving (*Reddit*).

As seen in the above quote, it was noted that *The Legend of Korra* is a rare example where bisexuality is portrayed as valid, normal, and loving. Another user praised this representation for subverting some of the more sinister tropes like the aforementioned *Bury Your Gays* trope.

> And at the end of the show, the bisexuals are still alive, AND HAPPY! (*Tumblr*).

*The Legend of Korra* further subverted the erasure of queer racialized women as highlighted by a self-identified Black woman on *Tumblr* who expressed that she was taught that being gay was something that only happened to white people. She had never seen a racialized queer person before and therefore assumed it did not exist until seeing it on *The Legend of Korra*. She claimed seeing another racialized queer woman in an important role was both healing and validating to her experiences.

> Seeing a woman of colour validate my experiences meant more to me than words can express. Before Korra came along, I was unconsciously taught by the media that these things only happen to white people. I felt so alone until Korra and her spiritual journey told me I wasn't (*Tumblr*).

Another user stressed the importance of seeing an intersectional queer representation that was not othered or made to appeal to heterosexual white men.

> Korra is a fascinating case study in terms of fandom for its **intersectionality** and its exploration of **disidentification**. Who Korra is NOT is just as important as who she is. She is NOT male, she is NOT white, she is NOT straight, and she is NOT here to fulfill the fantasies of white, teenager boys but rather to fulfill the dreams of queer, women of color. She stands to be acknowledged, to be respected, to be in control of her own body, and her own journey. The reason you see so many tears and screaming and disbelief in response to the finale is that for some of these kids, this is the FIRST time they have ever seen themselves as the hero, kid show or otherwise (*Tumblr*).

**Relational Acceptance**

*Relational acceptance* was concerned with acceptance of queer identities at the intrapersonal level. It examined how relationships are affected and impacted by queer identities- including family members, romantic partners, friendships, or coworkers- and how these relationships can influence a queer person's wellbeing. The *context* was separated into sub-themes such as *Found Family, Family (Blood Relations)*, and *Allyship/Coming Out*. The *text* included *Family (Blood Relations), Found Family/Allyship*, and *Queer Solidarity* as subthemes. *Found Family* explored the relationships Korra has chosen to foster and maintain with her

friends and mentors, *Family (Blood Relations)* revealed how Korra navigated coming out to her parents and the influence culture plays on the relationships between parent/family and child; and *Queer Solidarity* showed the interdependence of queer people, relying on other more experienced queer people to help navigate the world and find acceptance, being someone to turn to as they know the struggle. The *paratext* included the categories of *Found Family* and *Coming Out*. Here fans were influenced by the hopeful portrayals of a positive coming out narrative with total acceptance being achieved in *The Legend of Korra* to come out to their friends and family and discussed how chosen relationships embrace unconditional acceptance and are founded on mutual love and respect.

### Found family was a positive space for queer people to exist

Found family is an important theme among queer people and as such, is meaningful when it is reflected in media. This proved to be one of the most significant themes in my analysis. While acceptance from parents/siblings is still important for many queer people, the reality is that it is not always a possibility. As participants noted in the *context*, social media users noted in the *paratext*, and what was shown in the *text*, sometimes acceptance is conditional and at times non-existent from blood relations. Cultural and religious beliefs rooted in homophobia and biphobia were cited as being barriers to achieving acceptance among relationships with friends and family. It can lead to strained relationships, stress, and trauma for queer youth. In the absence of acceptance from blood relations, found family can provide a safe, accepting, validating, and loving space where queer people can achieve unconditional acceptance. Being a member of a found family included bonding over shared experiences, interests, and specifically shared trauma with other queer people. In situations where you cannot feel comfortable in your own identity at home, found family was cited as being a home away from home.

**Context: Bisexual Data.** From the participant data, found family was considered to be close friends, allies, and other members of the queer community. In Amanda's interview, she shared that you cannot choose your family which made it difficult in times where she did not feel comfortable existing as a queer woman around judgmental family members.

> Because you can't change your family members. You… got to be part of your family. - Amanda

However, she went on to discuss the importance of finding a group of people outside blood relatives that were accepting and supportive.

> I build community and that's what I do and it's really hilarious in my community and that's what I do and it's really hilarious that in my community, in my dance community, I have kinky people, I have poly people, I have gay people, I have everything in my space. So I build my own communities and then the people that fit with me show up in my space because inevitably we become people's home away from home… Yeah and I build that for myself and I built that for a bunch of other people to the point that people feel safe in my space… I think that I feel safe because I know that I have a lot of chosen family that will support me. So for me it would be more things around how do you create a community where people can talk about things they're getting practice talking things that are scary for them, having conversations about this is what I need, this is what I want, setting boundaries… I guess the kinda funny part is like I build because I know that people need communities because we become chosen family. - Amanda

As we see in the above quote, Amanda built her own community comprised of found family that allowed for a safe space and a supportive environment to exist as a queer woman and became home away from home. Many other participants expressed similar stories of building their own communities or indicated a desire to build a community that acted as a safe space for racialized queer people and bisexual people. They also shared that their found family often included other queer people and friends who were social justice oriented. In this incredibly close group of friends, they felt that they were free to express themselves.

**Text: Graphic Novel.** In Korra's life, found family included her closest friends, the kids she mentored, and her own mentors. While Korra still had a strong bond with her parents, these

are the people she chose to include in her life as she valued their presence, love, and opinions. The acceptance she received from her found family was enough to make up for the disappointing reaction she received from her parents. After coming out to her found family, her and Asami proceeded to receive immediate and total acceptance that took place in the form of countless invites to participate in couples' activities and messages of congratulations/support that made them feel welcome and normal.

> Bolin: You and Asami are a couple?... Opal and I get the first double date, okay? We're free next Tuesday.
> Opal: I'm so happy for you two. And no pressure about that date (Dimartino & Konietzko, 2018, p. 74).

Korra also found a unique support in the form of queer solidarity from Kya. Prior to speaking with her, Korra and Asami felt as if they were alone in their identity; however, as we saw in the *Cultural Acceptance* theme, Kya assured them that there were many other queer people in the world and provided key insights and personal experiences with being an openly queer woman.

**Paratext: Social Media.** Found family was described as friends and other fans of *The Legend of Korra* in the *paratext.* One *Reddit* commenter shared that they had similarities between the graphic novel and their own coming out experience, where they received a disappointing reaction from their parents. In the face of this rejection, they turned to their friends for support and were given a far warmer reception where their sexuality was embraced and encouraged. In response to a *Reddit* user who found the total acceptance Korra received to be unrealistic, another user discussed the importance of found family and surrounding yourself with supportive friends and family. He believed it is not surprising to receive unconditional acceptance from a strong found family, so Korra's experience was true to real life.

> All of Korra and Asami's friends are very accepting and even seemed overjoyed. Korra and Asami have surrounded themselves with friends that are kind-hearted and accepting, so I don't think its unrealistic (*Reddit*).

Another user shared that coming out to found family was easier than coming out to his parents as he already knew they would be supportive.

> A few days ago, I came out to some of my friends as bisexual (something I never thought I would do) and it's been a big milestone in my life… That's what made me tell some of my most trustworthy friends. It was a great decision and they have truly brought me happiness. I will never tell my family though (half is really religious and half is really judgemental) (*Reddit*).

### *Narratives of coming out*

One of the first times a queer person will experience acceptance-or lack thereof- at the relational level is when they come out. Participants and social media users alike discussed the importance of coming out to friends and family. This map revealed that *Cultural Acceptance* has a significant impact on how a queer person is embraced by friends and family. Experiences with coming were shared as being an ongoing and messy process that could not be characterized as inherently negative or positive. Many experiences were stated as situating somewhere in between where they were neither accepted nor rejected for their queer identity. When coming out to parents, families with deeply rooted cultural beliefs that positioned queerness as something to be frowned upon were more likely to have a negative reception to their child coming out as queer. These beliefs were then more likely to impact their relationship either by creating a hostile environment or by invalidating their identity.

**Context: Bisexual Data.** Despite the fear of not finding acceptance and being met with hostility, participants shared that it was key part of their journey to come out to the important people in their lives.

> But yeah, coming out to my mom felt important to do. She and I have always been, like, super close. She was my only parent for a long time… And I think-I don't know- it just felt right that she should know… It just feels right to tell my mom stuff. - Catherine

Many participants also conveyed that coming out was not straightforward, rather, it was often an

ongoing process that involved constantly come out across various contexts, and that some of

these coming out experiences could neither be classified as a negative or positive experience.

One participant shared that she had a difficult coming out experience that did not result in

acceptance or rejection as we so often see in media representations of coming out narratives.

Instead, it was an experience that existed somewhere in between where acceptance and growth

took time and often came with difficult emotions.

> I tried to plan it but I had to come out to my mom twice. She conveniently forgot the first time. I planned it and I was like, 'Oh, it's going to be super casual and I'm going to be able to answer all her questions.'… But we were in the car… and I said, 'Mom, I don't just like guys.' Which was how I explained it then. She was like, 'Oh are you gay?' and I kind of wanted her to ask more questions. And I thought-and then I just- I don't know- I lost my nerve. And I don't know. Nothing happened. So I think- it was at Christmas. I came home from university one year and she and I had some time in the house alone. And I had decided I wanted to talk to her about it again. And this time it was much more emotional because I hadn't really planned it. I thought I'm just going to talk about what I'm feeling and then we'll go from there. So I said, 'I feel hurt that, you know, I came out to you back then and we haven't talked about it since. I feel like you're trying to deny this part of me. I feel like you don't want that part of me or you don't want me to be open bout it.'… And, you know, I think she understood me more… I said, 'well do you have any questions?' And so we just kind of went back and forth. She asked questions; I answered them. And you know, every now and again we'll be in the kitchen when I come to visit and she'll be washing dishes and she'll be like, 'I thought of something! I saw something on TV'. And She'll ask me a question. Yeah. And since she's making a point of, like, using inclusive language. - Catherine

Furthermore, they noted that as bisexual women, they are in a space where they have to

constantly come out depending on if they are in a relationship with a man or a woman.

> "I'm having this moment where I'm like- I out myself constantly." – Amanda

> **Text: Graphic Novel.** Catherine's experience was reflected in the *text* particularly well

as Korra was very motivated to come out to the people closest in her lives and when she comes

out to her parents. She also encountered a complicated coming out experience that did not result

in acceptance or rejection. Instead, Korra's parents are initially very accepting, however, proceed

to encourage Korra and Asami to keep their relationship secret due the cultural customs of the

Water Tribe.

> Tonloque: Just be careful, Korra. It's Best to keep your personal life private (Dimartino & Konietzko, 2018, p. 20).

But eventually they overcame these cultural beliefs that served as a barrier of acceptance for

Korra and came to accept Korra's relationship and her queer identity unconditionally.

> Tonloque: About what I said when you and Asami came to visit-
> Korra: It's all right, dad. I know the Water Tribe has its customs.
> Tonloque: Yes but I don't want them to dictate how I talk to my own daughter. I don't need to tell you our traditions can be a bit… emotionally stifling… and I want you to know- you and Asami have my support no matter what (Dimartino & Konietzko, 2018, p. 124).

We saw a similar complex reaction from a close friend of Korra's who is initially very

uncomfortable after hearing that Korra and Asami are dating. However, after taking some time

and having a conversation with Korra, he comes to accept her relationship with Asami.

The hopes of the participant data were that representations in media show realistic

portrayals of bisexual, pansexual, and queer identities; one's that reflected the lived experiences

of queer people and showed more intersectional representations of different races, cultures, and

bodies. With many representations focusing on white queerness, not many portrayals paint an

accurate picture of racialized queer women and their experiences. This comic showed the

complicated intersections of coming out as a queer Indigenous woman from a culture that

restricts queerness. The text also subverted other tropes by portraying a positive result for Korra

and Asami after coming out to their friends and families where are they fully and unconditionally

supported by everyone important to them.

**Paratext: Social Media.** The *paratext* revealed that though total acceptance was

unrealistic, it had a positive impact on queer fans who found the portrayal hopeful and healing.

Korra's own experience reflected those of the fans where so often parents try to be accepting and supportive of their child yet are influenced by their cultural beliefs and customs. One *Reddit* user, as we saw in a previous quote show, stated that after seeing Korra as a positive queer role-model, he was excited to come out to his friends, yet was still feeling anxious about coming out to his parents out of fear that their religious beliefs would be a barrier to being accepted. The way Korra's father speaks to her also proved to be reflective of reality for many queer people. Below, we see one user breakdown why Tonloques' statements to Korra were both harmful and reflective of queer experiences with coming out into these culturally contested spaces.

> The statement may have been 'Be careful', but for a queer youth, it can also come off as off-putting when you are only just accepting yourself and being true to yourself (*Reddit*).

In addition to being reflective of reality, it also helped fans feel more comfortable with their own coming out experiences. Below is a quote from a *Tumblr* post that features a coming out narrative. It explains how coming out to her parents went well, yet she had not experienced the closure or relief that she expected to come afterwards. She goes on to explain that seeing a character she greatly admired be confirmed as bisexual was the true closure and validation, she needed for coming out. As a member of a marginalized group, she stressed the importance of representation and knew that it made her sexuality "real".

> I had a dialogue planned in my head so I could get out what I needed to say without shakily stumbling over scary words like 'bi' and 'girls'. All things considered; it went well. What I hadn't considered was how emotional voicing thoughts that had been cooped up inside my head for years would be- it had taken me until I was almost 22 to be sure enough to say it. But the moment the words 'not-one-hundred-percent straight' slipped from between my lips I burst into tears, taking not just my parents, but myself aback. I hadn't expected to cry. In fact, I'd expected to feel relieved. Wasn't this supposed to generate some form of closure? I thought I would feel more confident. I thought a weight would lift from my chest. Instead, I felt scared. This was real now (*Tumblr*).

**Personal Acceptance**

Personal acceptance was concerned with the internal acceptance of the self and personal identity. It is greatly influenced by cultural and relational acceptance where an individual can internalize harmful messages about their sexuality that they hear from personal relationship and cultural beliefs. *Personal Acceptance* looks at the ways queer people overcome these harmful beliefs, how they navigate their own identity, and ultimately how they come to accept themselves as a queer identified person. The *context* included sub-themes around *Identity* and *Stereotypes/Beliefs* where participants shared how they came to identify under certain labels, their feelings of isolation, accepting their identity, and the ways they internalized religious and cultural beliefs from race, nationality, queer culture, and religion. The *text* included sub-themes of *Cultural Beliefs* and the *Queer Experience* where Korra and Asami both struggle with their identity and the internalized doubts they have about their relationship and how they embrace their identity and work together. *Identity*, the *Queer Experience*, and *Representation* were the sub-themes that emerged in the *paratext*. Posts on social media from fans discussed how Korra's sexuality helped them reflect on their own, helped them accept themselves and feel comfortable with the label of bisexual, and how Korra's journey reflected many common experiences queer youth face that resonated with them.

***Representation of Queer Identities had an impact on the acceptance of self***

This map revealed that *Cultural* and *Relational Acceptance* had a significant impact on how a queer person embraces themselves. We see that bisexual and queer people are particularly sensitive to the reproduction of problematic stereotypes that heterosexual people might not notice. Harmful beliefs harboured by religion, culture, friends, and family can become internalized by queer people that can lead to negative perceptions of the self. Queer

representations that rely on one-dimensional portrayals and stereotypes can be damaging to not only cultural perceptions of queer identities, but to queer people themselves. However, when these identities are represented justly, they can be so powerful, it can become a pivotal influence in a queer person's identity. We see that exposure to media can help people realize that bisexuality exists and that they identify as such. Exposure to positive queer people and queer representations in media can become a place for queer youth to learn and identify themselves where family and culture and family has failed them.

**Context: Bisexual Data.** Participants voiced that they had never considered queerness bisexuality as a possibility due to the lack of education and exposure on the topic as well as the presence of bisexual erasure.

> Because I hear people saying that, say, if I say bisexual and I'm really a man people will be like, 'Oh, then you're straight.' And if I'm dating a woman, they'll be like, 'Oh, you're a lesbian.' And it's like it's never – it's not – orientation is more about yourself than the people you're seeing at a particular moment. But people do think that – people want you to fit into category. - Abena

Many had also been taught that sexuality was a binary where you were either felt attraction to men *or* women.

> I thought it was either/or and I couldn't reconcile the fact that I felt attraction for people that were women and people that were men… and then I'd say 'well, maybe its not possible. - Catherine

This was often due to the religious and cultural perceptions already discussed that framed queerness as taboo and not to be spoken of. In situations where they knew queer and bisexual identities did exist, they were taught harmful stereotypes from media and religious and cultural influences.

> Every time I'd heard somebody talk about bisexuality it was rather negative or dismissive, that maybe it wasn't real… A lot of the 'you're just scared to come out as gay,' which I think was the probably predominant one for a conservative high school. And then also that greed factor, that you're just- you know, you're insecure and you're

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looking for attention. And you-you're greedy and, like this girl in the lunch room said, 'You want to have your cake and eat it too,'… And part of it is maybe this stereotype about queer [people being] whore… kind of hypersexual but not settling down. - Abena

Though they originated as relational and cultural influences, they were eventually internalized and negatively impacted the ability for participants and social media users to accept themselves. In *Cultural Acceptance*, we saw that television representations had an impact on the cultural perceptions of bisexuality. Some of these were internalized and lead to problematic beliefs about bisexuality and the self. However, the opposite was also true where we saw that positive examples of bisexual representation were also internalized and gave more positive feelings. In reference to the intersectional representations of queerness in *Orange is the New Black*, one participant stated:

> I think people should see more representations of different kinds of queer people. *Orange is the New Black* is bad here and there, but… It's one of the few programs that's showing different kinds of people… So I do see some representation, I find it more hopeful. - Abena

**Text: Graphic Novel.** Rather than reflect what was said by the participants and social media users, the text acted as a catalyst to these experiences. *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars* not only included multiple queer and bisexual characters, but also did not reproduce the harmful stereotypes and beliefs that were described in the *context* and *paratext*. Instead, it pushes against many of these beliefs and offers a realistic, yet hopeful, portrayal of what it's like to be a young queer person and a racialized bisexual woman in particular. The visuals of this graphic novel also paint Korra as the epitome of self-acceptance by showing her embrace and be proud of her identity. She openly displays her love and affection for Asami in public and is excited to share this part of her life with the world. Korra lived up to the desire of the participants who shared they hoped to see more intersectional representations that showcase different types of queer identities, races, and bodies and where bisexuality is not erased. In addition to having three

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different queer characters that embrace this intersectionality- all whom live within different intersections of race, age, sexualities, and body type- this comic served as a space where bisexuality is a valid and normal identity. While Korra is currently in a relationship with a woman, her past relationships with men are never erased and instead considered as a meaningful and valuable part of her past, thus pushing against the idea that queer identities are on a binary or that sexuality is defined by your current partner.

**Paratext: Social Media.** This holistic and intersectional representation of queerness led fans to internalize positive beliefs about themselves and overall feel more comfortable with their identities. *Tumblr* and *Reddit* users also expressed similar sentiment as the participants from the *context* in that they were unaware bisexuality was a possibility until they saw Korra portrayed as openly queer.

I didn't even know bisexuality was a thing (*Reddit*).

For another fan, the representation of Korra's character made something "click" and helped them realize that they were bisexual.

> I am female, and I've always considered men and in particular women attractive, but not really known what those feelings were or how to identify them… Seeing the relationship between Korra and Asami just made something click in my head and it was a huge 'OHHHHHHHHHHHHH I get it now' moment (*Reddit*).

It helped other fans come to terms with their own identities and experiences as queer racialized women.

> [The Legend of Korra] has made me accept my sexuality and has helped me through it a lot… Legend of Korra made me accept myself. I know it might not be much, but to me, it means so so much. I told my mom… this is a new beginning in my life (*Tumblr*).

> I knew I was bi long before the finale of LoK, but I was very uncomfortable with it. Seeing two characters who I greatly admired being bi and true to themselves made me feel so much more comfortable with who I was. I was 19 at this time, but I wished that I could have had bi characters like them growing (*Reddit*).

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This representation also proved to be healing for queer youth. Where some felt that the existence

of Korra saved at least one if not more queer youth, we saw others as mentioned who have had

the comic help them come to terms with their own negative experiences as a queer youth. The

following is a message that was sent to the creators after the confirmation that Korra was

bisexual.

> "I've read enough reviews to get a sense of how it affected people. One very well-written
> article in Vanity Fair called it subversive (in a good way, of course) … I would say a
> better word might be 'healing'. I think [the] finale was healing for a lot of people who
> feel outside or on the fringes, or that their love and their journey is somehow less real or
> valuable than someone else's… That it's somehow less valid. I know quite a few people
> in that position, who have a lifetime of that on their shoulders, and in one episode of
> television [they] both relieved and validated them. That's healing in my book (*Tumblr*).

One fan expressed their satisfaction with seeing Korra as *the* hero of the universe, as opposed to

a token side character, a joke, or a villain as queer and racialized characters so often are. They

stated that this is the first time many queer and racialized people had ever seen *themselves* in

such a role.

> The reason you see so many tears and screaming and disbelief in response to the finale is
> that for some of these kids, this is the FIRST time they have ever seen themselves as the
> hero, kid show or otherwise (*Tumblr*).

Multiple users also stated that they wished that they had representations such as these in the

media growing up.

> I believe if I saw this when I was younger, it would have clicked a lot sooner for me
> (*Reddit*).

Korra and Asami identifying as bisexual helped fans in the *paratext* identify, understand, and

accept themselves. It influenced their relationships with other people and it reflected their own

lived experience as a queer person that validated them and promoted healing from trauma

experienced as a queer youth. They were able to see themselves in Korra because of the similar

experiences she endured like struggle, hardship, self-harm, self-loathing, conflict between sexuality, spiritual and cultural identity-all narratives common to the queer experience.

**So What?**

In the various accounts taken from the *context* and *paratext* analysis, it is clear from my analysis that representations of queer identities in dominant culture have greater implications on *Relational* and *Personal Acceptance*. So often is our self-worth based on perceptions of queer identities based on what we hear from others and the broader cultural beliefs about queerness (Key, 2015). Therefore, personal acceptance becomes so strongly tied to our relationships and cultural beliefs which can be conveyed through messages in media. Throughout my manuscript and as highlighted by the participants in the *context*, there was a focus on the problematic messages being conveyed through media about queer identities and it's the negative impact on queer consumers. Therefore, as reinforced by the literature, when we constantly are barraged by repetitive messages that reinforce negative stereotypes about bisexuality and queer identities as a whole, they become internalized and can have a negative impact on self-worth and wellbeing (Gerbner et al., 2002).

In addition to sharing what harmful massaging looks like in media and how its impact, participants from the *context* expressed the changes they would like to see in future representations of bisexuality and queerness. As previously mentioned, there was a desire to see more realistic representations of bisexuality that did not reproduce stereotypes and that reflected more intersectional depictions of queerness. The *text* demonstrated these desires and at times even went beyond these hopes. Korra, Asami, and Kya are all queer women that inhabit different races, bodies, and ages who also struggled with many of the experiences shared in the *context* around culture, spirituality, and acceptance.

The text living up to, and even exceeding expectations, was also recognized in the *paratext*. Fans in the paratext were very aware of overall negative or non-existence nature of bisexual and queer representations. However, rather than further prove the harmful effects of poor representation, the paratext revealed the true potential of just representations that relay positive messages about queer identities. In the analysis, we saw people self-actualize, come to realize their own identity, find self-acceptance, reconcile with difficult experiences in relation to their identity, feel of validated, find meaning and inspiration, and overall, just feel more hopeful about themselves, their identity, and the queer experience.

### What does this analysis mean for comics?

Despite seeing established queer fans of the show and comic find this representation healing, there still seems to be a disconnect between this comic and the queer community. Whether due to being perceived as children's media or its fringe comic format, it appears that most queer people are unaware of this representation according to my analysis. By the time the study used in the *context* was published in 2018, the show had completed its run on the air and the comic had already been published, yet the participants from the context were overall unaware of its existence. We know though comics are on the rise and comic book movies have been a staple pop culture over the last two decades, comics themselves still tend to maintain a level of fringe culture in mainstream media consumption and many people do not look to it as a primary way to engage with media (Scott & Fawaz, 2018).

Pushing comics to the forefront of queer culture is then an important next step for those who wish to see themselves more accurately in media. With its long history involved with queer culture, this analysis serves as encouragement to engage with comics as a potential for queer world-making and queer community building (Councilor, 2021). As mentioned, they not only

can act as historical archive for queer culture but can be a place to explore and imagine queerer

futures and queerer worlds that hold our past, present, and future (Fawaz, 2019). With Korra and

Asami's sexuality initially continuing this pattern of being excluded from TV, we see that

comics continue to be a safe space to tell queer stories and resist heteronormativity that

dominates other mediums. This comic is a direct example of the history of comic books being a

safe space for queer identities to be represented while TV representation falls flat. Where the TV

show was restrictive, the tradition of comics allowed it to be explored and represented in its full

intention. We as a community should continuing to elevate queer voices and queer stories in

comics where they are so often excluded in mainstream mediums of media (Meyer, 2020).

As we move towards pushing comics to the forefront of queer culture, I also seek to push

queer culture to the forefront of mainstream media/comics. The complex legacy of this graphic

novel has made it a put it in a contested space between queer and mainstream comics. While I

would not officially classify it as a queer comic, it undoubtedly shares themes with queer comics

as it was specifically made *for* the queer community and under a famously 2SLGBTQ+ indie

publisher, Dark Horse (Chochinov, 2021). Because of its status as an indie comic, I also would

hesitate to classify it as a part of mainstream media. However, due to the large audience garnered

by its roots as a TV series, it still received a large reception (Chochinov, 2021). Therefore, it is

clear that this comic is a bridge between mainstream and queer comics and is the embodiment of

the future of comics where queer comics become more mainstream, and mainstream comics

become queerer.

This portrayal of bisexuality garnered a positive reception from various ganders, races,

and ethnicities as shown in my analysis. Thus, proving that an in-depth, holistic, and complex

queer character who is not a victim of sexualization, villainy, or humor can be embraced by all

audiences. Furthermore, this comic shows that while inequities for queer writers are alive and present and that there is still a deep need to support queer creators themselves, there is also the possibility that straight writers can include complex queer characters in their stories in ways that serve to promote the queer politic in just ways. While we should always uplift and support queer creators and writers and acknowledge that there is an overabundance of non-queer creators who are benefitting there is also the possibility of people with the right politic to be encouraged and celebrated when they do it well so that we can create more just representations in the future.

### *What does this analysis say about all media?*

This analysis encourages celebrating and pushing the boundaries of queer representation in *all* forms of media, not just comics. With *Avatar* having such a loyal and large fanbase, its influence is culturally significant, particularly among its young audience. With creators Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko in development with several more *Avatar* projects, as well as their acknowledgement that they still have a lot of work to do with representing queer identities, I think we can expect more queer representation in the future in mainstream children's media in the future that reject heteronormativity and push up against the status quo (Chochinov, 2021).

Since being the first openly queer character in children's media, many other shows have featured queer characters. We have seen queer characters and relationships in *Steven Universe*, *Owl House*, and *Adventure Time* (Haasch, 2021). Children's media has long portrayed male and female relationships without the stigma of sex. They often represent love, friendship, and overcoming obstacles together (Chochinov, 2021). Children's media also has the remarkable potential to do this with queerness as we see with the *Legend of Korra*. Because queer identities have primarily been represented in an adult targeted media, it often is concerned with the sex side of sexuality, queerness is often reduced to simply having sex. With children's media we see

that queer relationships can be so much more than this. They can be loving, innocent, and valid.

Korra's existence as an openly confirmed bisexual woman, established *Avatar* as a safe space for

bisexual and queer women where their identities are considered valid, loving, and real.

We are also seeing a push towards including queer characters and storylines in movies

and popular TV shows as well, however, this is proving to be a much slower process, particularly

for large media corporations such as Disney and Warner Brothers. While there several movies

that feature several characters with long established queer identities in comics- Carol Danvers in

*Captain Marvel*, Valkrie in *Thor: Ragnarok*, and Wonder Woman- their identities have been left

out on the big screen (Ahlgrim, 2019). However, after pressure from fans, actresses, and

filmmakers, Marvel has confirmed that Valkrie's bisexuality will be confirmed and represented

in *Thor: Love and Thunder Movie* (Singh, 2019). It was also reported that Pixar's film *Lightyear*,

featured a same-sex kiss that was cut out of the movie, however, this scene was restored due to

recent backlash concerning Disney and their support of Anti-2SLGBTQ+ legislation in Florida

which I will explore more in Chapter 3 (Lee, 2022). Despite these concerns and the slow-moving

pace of queer representation in mainstream television and movies, I am feeling more hopeful

with the inclusion of a gay superhero, Phastos in Marvel's *Eternals* this past year, as well as

Deadpool's confirmation of his pansexuality, and the very recent confirmation of Peacemaker's

bisexuality on DC's *Peacemaker* (Ankers, 2022).

### What does this analysis say about Leisure?

As we see pandemic restrictions lifted and we have more leisure activities available to us

it is uncertain what further changes we will see to our leisure habits, particularly regarding media

consumption. However, as media has connected virtually where we have been physically apart

from one another, it would be a disservice to ignore the impact it has had in the field of leisure.

We as a field should be having an increased focus on digital leisure and media consumption as a whole. Rather than simply focus on the negative effects TV, social media, books, video games have on our physical, social, and mental wellbeing, we should be shifting towards embracing a more holistic approach.  This approach should consider the larger implications of media in order to stay relevant as a field in an increasingly digital world (Shultz & McKowen, 2018). It is *not* just a form of passive escapism as our field so often suggests, but an *active* engagement with culture and a tool for learning about different worldviews, experiences, and identities (Zuzanek & Mannell, 1983; Chochinov, 2021; Kim, 2017).

Just as sports as long being a space for cultural and political revolution for race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion, so too should leisure recognize that media also holds this potential. What could be considered as a simple leisure activity to pass the time or to escape daily stresses, this analysis instead suggests engaging with media, such as reading comics, has the power to shift cultural perceptions of an entire group of people. We see that it also impacts personal feelings, can give hope and inspiration, and as one user from the *paratext* pointed out, it can save lives.

> "And despite all the problems you created and encountered, I wanted to assure you that the final scene saved the life of at least one queer youth, and probably many more, simply because they saw themselves in *your* characters" (*Tumblr*).

Something that the power to influence lives in such a meaningful way, while being one of the most accessible forms of leisure should be considered more carefully in our field moving forward.

**Now what?**

Queer representation is at an all-time high according to GLAAD's annual *Where we are on TV* with 11.9 percent of characters appearing on prime-time television identifying as openly

2SLGBTQ+and 27 of these characters identifying as bisexual (GLAAD, 2021). These record-shattering numbers and the positive reaction we saw from *The Legend of Korra* fans in my analysis, we are seeing that queer narratives are worthy of telling. As we see the active queering of mainstream media, 2SLGBTQ+ identities are getting harder to erase and ignore. It is showing that queer identities not only exist, but they will not be silenced for the comfort of heterosexual audiences.

However, despite this increase of representation, we should continue to be critical of the messages being relayed through media. While some would argue that all representation is good representation because it symbolizes existence, we know that problematic representations can negate the positive ones where people internalize the messages being conveyed about queer identities (Gerbner et al., 2002). Furthermore, recent waves of queer politics have seen the 2SLGBTQ+ being commodified and exploited for corporate gain, including in media (Brennan, 2020). As more queer characters and storylines appear in media, we should be considering the capitalist motivations behind these representations. With an increase in intersectional representations of queerness, we need to be more critical of what these representations are saying about racialized and disabled queer people. Most importantly, we should be encouraging queer people to be hired at every level of the creative teams in media more often where we will see advocates fighting for just representations and efforts at every level.

Every year, more people identify as 2SLGBTQ+, particularly with younger generations, and as such, these representations are becoming ever more important (Flanders et al., 2019). As demonstrated in my analysis, it can help educate people on different sexualities, help people accept themselves, decrease feelings of isolation, and validate people's experiences. In the *paratext*, many fans shared that they wish they would have seen the representation of Korra at a

younger age as it would have helped them realize they were queer sooner, overall reducing feelings of confusion and loneliness. I am hopeful that with this increase of queer representation, future queer generations will not wish they had seen these representations earlier in life, as they will be common and normal in media for all ages.

I think this comic is an excellent insight into what I expect to see from queer representation in the future. In my hopes, I want to move away from essentialized depictions or queer coding and into these queerer worlds where these representations are a reflection of reality that reinforce that anyone and everyone can be queer, and that queerness can look like anything. I want to see stories and worlds where queerness is not othered in relation to heterosexuality, and rather a completely normal and common experience in life. As we move towards the future of representation, I refer to the words of one of the participants from the *context*: "I am hopeful".

**Chapter Three**

Despite the fact that I do feel more hopeful, this topic still maintains an uphill and ongoing battle. As I write this manuscript, 2SLGBTQ+ identities, representations, and rights are at the forefront of western politics. Recently, the Florida senate passed the "Parental Rights in Education" bill that would outright ban "classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity" in primary schools (Sopelsa & Walker, 2022). It is more infamously known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill as it targets queer youth and prohibits books that feature 2SLGBTQ+ characters and narratives, pride flags, and "classroom instruction by school personnel or 3rd parties on sexual orientation or gender identity" in kindergarten through 3rd grade where parents can sue school districts for any alleged violations (Sopelsa & Walker, 2022).

I cannot express how devastating it is to see this bill even exist, let alone be passed. This feels like a bill from another decade, one that is far less accepting than the one we are in now that positions queer identities as a threat to children and their wellbeing. As someone who grew up in a catholic school board with a policy that reflected the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, it was very confusing and difficult to come to terms with identifying as something other than straight. As schools started becoming more open and accepting with queer identities at younger ages, I hoped that other queer youth would not have to experience this. However, this introduction of this bill will certainly lead to more of these feelings in queer youth.

I was not alone in these feelings and the bill received international pushback as it was a clear violation of 2SLGBTQ+ rights. Activists began researching those who supported the bill to expose these people and corporations for their support of bigotry. Among those revealed to have donated money to the senators who sponsored the bill was Disney (Pulver, 2022). Human rights groups, 2SLGBTQ+ advocates, and social media called out the company and its CEO Bob

Chapek for these donations and not using the company's massive platform to condemn the bill (Pulver, 2022). In response he came out and said "Corporate statements do very little to change outcomes or minds… they can be counter-productive and can undermine more effective ways to achieve change… I believe the best way for our company to bring about lasting change is through the inspiring content we produce, the welcoming culture we create, and the diverse community organisations we support, including those representing the LGBTQ+ community" (Pulver, 2022).

Employees at Pixar immediately contradicted this statement in a letter for addressed to the CEO that charged Disney with intentionally removing 2SLGBTQ+ content from their films (Pulver, 2022). There have been similar accusations from Marvel directors having 2SLGBTQ+ scenes cut from their movies (Singh, 2019). The letter stated "We at Pixar have personally witnessed beautiful stories, full of diverse characters, come back from Disney corporate reviews shaved down to crumbs of what they were. Nearly every moment of overtly gay affection is cut at Disney's behest… even if creating LGBTQIA+ content was the answer to fixing the discriminatory legislation in the world, we are being barred from creating it" (Pulver, 2022). Since this letter, Chapek and various Disney platforms shifted their previous stance on the bill and expressed their support of the 2SLGBTQ+ community and their desire to produce 2SLGBTQ+ content (Barnes, 2022). As mentioned, they have also restored a same-sex kiss in their upcoming movie *Lightyear* as a result of this backlash (Lee, 2022). However, Disney and Pixar employees were still unsatisfied and demanded greater changes to the future of queer representation in Disney projects and staged a walkout. The hashtags #DisneySayGay and #DisneyDoBetter trended across social media where Disney was critiqued for their lack-luster support of the queer community (Barnes, 2022).

I remember my own experiences with this lack-luster support from Disney where they advertised queer representation, only for it to be "crumbs." As a Marvel fan, when *Avengers: Endgame* was advertised as having 2SLGBTQ+ representation and with Captain Marvel set to appear in the movie I was beyond exited that her character would be confirmed of as bisexual (Sharf, 2019). Imagine my disappointment when the queer representation that was advertised turned out to be less than two minutes involving an unnamed character who mentioned he went on a date with a man. *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* had a similar insulting display of queer representation after being advertised as having queer representation (Collins, 2019). With companies advertising that their film features queer representation while simultaneously minimizing these scenes and characters to a point where they have no significant impact on the plot in order to keep it marketable to conservative audiences, this can undoubtedly be considered a newer form of *queerbaiting*- "a term that describes a tactic whereby media producers suggest homoerotic subtext between characters in popular television that is never intended to be actualized on screen" (Brennan, 2018, p. 189).

This concern with anti-2SLGBTQ+ legislation and *queerbaiting* in the absence of meaningful representations furthers the importance that my research is a topic that needs to continue to be discussed. There is such a resistance to representing 2SLGBTQ+ identities at personal, political, and corporate levels despite the evidence pointing to how significant representation plays in the queer community. It is incredibly frustrating to see a corporation with as much cultural influence like Disney to be so callous with their representations. Disney has produced some incredible projects in recent years that have had a meaningful impact and have promoted various cultures such as *Black Panther, Coco, Shang-Chi, Moana, Encanto*, and most recently, *Turning Red*. These are all movies that have employed hundreds of marginalized

identities and shared beautiful stories of race and culture, and yet when it comes to 2SLGBTQ+ community they continue to erase these identities.

Even in a world where Disney embraces 2SLGBTQ+ content, there is still a broader crisis in terms of how these representations on the whole are received by audiences and consumers. There is still enormous push-back when identities that do not inhabit straight, white, male bodies are represented. Recently, I came across a meme as seen in in *Figure 6* that I think represents this quite well.

**Figure 6**

*36 White Male Protagonists?*



It was used in response to a white male on twitter criticizing that he found *Turning Red*- a movie that features Mai, a young Chinese Canadian, undergoing puberty- "exhausting" because he was not represented as a white, adult, male in the movie. Whenever a non-dominant identity is represented, it is either heavily critiqued such as *Turning Red*, or it is dismissed as being "woke." It demonstrates this privileged mindset where, despite still being the dominant identity represented, straight, white, males feel they are entitled to be represented to in every piece of media or that other identities are a threat to their own. The irony being that for those of us who

have not been traditionally represented in mainstream media in the past, we have found ways to make connections and identify with other characters. Even now, I found Shang-Chi to be incredibly relatable and entertaining despite the fact that I am not a man, or Chinese, or straight.

With this privilege of always being represented, there is a lack of empathy to marginalized groups who rarely see themselves in media. Through lurking on social media, I have found that when a new queer content is announced, it is met with many heterosexual people saying, "who cares?". I remember having a conversation with a family member about stickers saying, "Features LGBTQ+ Characters!" appearing on comic books. He condescendingly told me that he does not care about who the characters have sex with so why do they bother advertising it? I think that when you have never struggled to be meaningfully represented, it can be easy to be trivial about the importance of representation. Because as we have seen in my analysis, people *do* care to see stickers like that, and they *do* care about a character's sexuality if it is one that has been erased from mainstream media. What I told my relative is how I feel we should respond to this privileged response to more diverse representation in media: "It's not for you". Not everything is made to cater to the straight, white, male, and nor should it.

**Personal Journey**

I started my master's journey in the Fall of 2019 as a coursework student. However, after my first semester of school I had come to thoroughly enjoy research and after discussion with Lisbeth decided to pursue a thesis-based pathway. Completing a master's degree in the midst of a global pandemic, dealing with my mother's difficult cancer diagnosis, and learning more opening about my own struggles with mental health has been an enlightening experience for me. It has been two years of reflection on my personal, academic, and career goals as well as well as on myself, my identity, my relationships.

*Pandemic Learning*

My first semester in Fall of 2019 was pre-pandemic and was I was inspired to continue the rest of my master's as a thesis student. During this time, I felt that I had learned more than I ever had in a single term of school, it was also the most enjoyable time I have ever had in education. I felt that I was able to experiment, take risks, and explore my interests without fear of repercussions on my academic performance. Unfortunately, midway through my second semester, 2nd semester, COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic and the university closed for two weeks. This originally came as a blessing as I was feeling the stress of classes, deadlines, and my personal life build up. I soon came to regret this as two weeks off turned into never returning to campus for the rest of my graduate studies.

The chaotic end of my second semester marked the official switch to a thesis-based pathway. It meant that I no longer had classes and I was strictly reading and writing for my thesis on my own time and at my own discretion. While I had initially had a plan to work on campus four days a week to maintain a schedule, the pandemic ensured that that this did not happen. Not having any schedule proved to be immensely difficult for me as I struggled with ADHD, general anxiety about the state of the world, not having a set or comfortable workspace, and seeing my family members all day, *every day.* As such, the first few months I struggled to get any work done yet at the same time felt burnt out as I felt guilty about not getting work done.

As someone who already struggled with online learning in the past, the switch to online was an incredibly difficult transition for me. It was a very isolating experience where I felt disconnected from other grad students, my supervisor, and academia as a whole. In addition to feeling isolated, it was incredibly exhausting. I was feeling burnt out from attending online classes and meetings, competing with misinformation, the ever-changing global politics, and

sense of anxiety about the state of the housing market, climate change, and the pandemic. At this point, two years later, my state of mind can be summed up by a tweet I saw recently "I am way passed burnout, I am now ashes in the wind".

This complete and total burnout I was feeling along with several delays to my academic goals have ultimately discouraged me from seeking out a PhD, or at the very least taking a *very long* break. I have had to re-evaluate my plans on when I wanted to graduate two separate times. Each time was incredibly disappointing and frustrating as I knew it would come with another semester of running on fumes. However, the second time I had to re-evaluate was after my proposal, feeling overwhelmed as well as the build-up of stress and disappointment was so devastating that I experienced a mental breakdown, or as Lisbeth calls them- Menty B's. I had a discussion with Lisbeth afterwards and created a plan that would take longer but would ease some of the pressure I was experiencing and would overall be less overwhelming.

Having my full-time workspace and my relaxation space become one was a particularly difficult thing to manage. It made disconnect from work virtually impossible and it was very difficult to truly decompress after a day of working. I felt that I had no off switch where I was constantly thinking about the work I have done, feeling guilty about the work I had not done, and stressing about the work I had yet to do. At a certain point, after a long theoretical journey, rather than just resisting this urge to separate my leisure and academic life, I just decided to incorporate my leisure with my research. Thus, this desire to focus my research on representation was born.

### Personal Growth

During the course of my thesis, I have experienced personal growth along with academic growth. In addition to struggling with the pandemic, I also had to overcome the stress of the diagnosis, treatment, and recovery of my mother's breast cancer. While it certainly was made

easier with my family supporting and leaning on each other, there were some incredibly difficult moments. I struggled with trying to stay positive, being strong for my family, and focusing on my studies. Fortunately, the mutual support and love from my family helped all of us navigate and overcome this difficult time together.

Reading through the bisexual data as part of my research also contributed to personal growth for me. The unfiltered data helped me reflect on my own experience as a queer woman, particularly those with religion and labelling were very validating for me. Some of the things the participants were saying were things that I have experienced as a queer woman living in Waterloo Region. I saw myself in some of the narratives shared and it promoted some self-reflection in my own biases, privileges, and internalized homo/biphobia. When I first began my master's, I was more comfortable with the identity of bisexual, but after reflecting on my own experiences and those of the participants, I started to feel that this label did not 'fit' my identity and have instead come to identify as queer. Furthermore, the more I interacted with queer research, queer theory, and other queer identifying people, I started to feel more comfortable with being open about my identity as a queer woman.

One of the most significant obstacles I faced throughout this whole process is anxiety and my struggle with perfectionism. It led to negative feelings about myself, including those of self-doubt where I feel that nothing, I produce it good enough. As someone who was not traditionally gifted in school prior to my post-secondary education, I feel often times that I do not belong in this program or in research. It has been an uphill battle with trying to acknowledge that I do not have to produce perfect work. I have been fortunate to have Lisbeth's incredible patience and support as I struggle with perfectionism. She has encouraged me to be kinder to myself and

constant reminders that completing a masters is a place to learn how to do research and to develop research skills.

### *Research Process*

As mentioned above, I started in the coursework option for the program; however, after taking a qualitative research class with Lisbeth I realized that I would like to explore research in more depth. After discussion with Lisbeth, I decided to switch to the thesis option and work with her as my supervisor. Unfortunately, because I became her student late in the academic year, I only had her as an in-person resource for a few months before the pandemic.

I did not have a specific topic of interest in mind coming into my thesis, rather, I had several. For the early months of my research, it was a matter of narrowing down these interests and tailoring to something that I was passionate about. After noting significant themes of religion in the participant data, as well as my own experiences with the Waterloo catholic District School Board and their ongoing issues with homophobia in their schools, I originally took interest in the ways that religion limited or shamed queerness. This progressed into looking at the ways capitalism limits and represents queer identities, and then how media represents queer identities. I used the participant data to inform a brief proposal of the impact capitalism has on media representations, and why media representations were important. I planned to move forward with a critique on capitalism using exclusively use the participant data for this research. However, when I discovered this graphic novel in my free time, I realized how impactful this representation was and how it reflected the hopes, desires, and experiences of the participants from the secondary data. Continuing to explore representation in media allowed me to move away from capitalism, and instead focus on this text being a bright spot for queer and bisexual representation. After my proposal and in conversation with Shana MacDonald, I then recognized

the value of social media engagement and decided to include as a part of a three-tier analysis that went on to be my *text, context, and paratext.*

### Working with Secondary Data

With the global pandemic and the new reality that came with working online from home, Lisbeth and I decided to use secondary data as part of my research because it was both the more convenient and safer option. Using secondary data meant that I was given the transcripts of the narrative interviews conducted by Lisbeth in her study of bisexual women living in Waterloo Region. I then took this data and read through it with a new lens informed by my research interests. It was very cool to see how many different ways you could look at the data with different research angles. It was almost overwhelming to have virtually unlimited possibilities to look at the data. One of the disadvantages to using to secondary data is that I was unable to choose the topic and research questions in the interview. However, I think this proved to be an interesting experiment that eased me into the research process. In my qualitative research class, conducting my own singular interview was incredibly stressful and overwhelming. I think it also allowed me to take my time with choosing a research topic as I was able to read the data several times over and experiment with different theories. It certainly reduced anxiety and overwhelmed feelings I was experiencing.

### Working with Graphic Novels

As mentioned earlier, I had really struggled at the start of the pandemic with finding a balance between my academics and leisure. At first, I tried to resist the pull to combine the two, but after learning about the significance of media in the participant data, I decided instead to incorporate the two with one another. In the field of Recreation and Leisure studies, it's quite common to intertwine one's leisure activities and academics. Taking something I loved and

turning into a body of work turned out to be a more positive experience than I thought. With this particular project, I think there was a risk of overconsumption or overanalyzing that could have led to a burnout or disinterest with graphic novels or even *Avatar*, one of my favourite series'. However, instead of feeling burnout with these things, I experienced the opposite.

In reference to *Avatar*, I was able to rekindle some nostalgic memories from my childhood and appreciate the subtle and the rare depiction of a positive use of queer coding. Furthermore, the creators have expressed a commitment to continue to work on their activism, representation, and elevation of queer voices and stories which excites me for the future of this franchise. In reference to graphic novels, this is something that has been a favourite form of leisure of mine since I was young. I remember reading my first comic book, *The Amazing Spider-Man: Maximum Carnage*, introduced to me by my dad from his collection. By age 4, I received my first comic book, an *X-Men* comic featuring Storm. Later, I became enthralled with the graphic novel series *Bone* and the standalone graphic novel, *Watchmen*. However, as life got busier with sports and school, I started spending less time reading comics. This project reignited that passion and helped me develop a new appreciation for the queer side of comics that I never had before. It has been very exciting to have this old passion of mine collide with my modern politic and identity. I find it very cool that the comics and graphic novels I used to read when I was younger, before I realized I was queer, were influenced by queer comix and queer creators, and the irony is not lost on me that *X-Men* was my very first comic.

### *What would I have done differently?*

If I was to do this research again, or at the very least something similar, I think I would like to work with my own data. Conducting my own narrative interviews with focused research questions about queer representations would provide a more in-depth look on the ways we

interact with media representations of queer people and the messages being relayed about them. I think that this would allow me to explore the concept of queer worldbuilding that I only briefly touch upon in this manuscript. I also would like to explore some of the underlying influences of media representations. While I briefly discuss them at times, my research revealed the significant impacts of capitalism and religion when it comes to representation and censorship. With this research I focused more on the direct influences of representation on fans and queer people, in future research I would look at the ways that capitalism and religion influence these representations and the messages being relayed.

I think if this were a larger project, perhaps for a PhD, I would consider bringing in more graphic novels to have a more full and diverse representation of queer representations of graphic novels. I focus a lot on the representation of bisexuals in this graphic novel, but perhaps bringing in other queer identities, or conducting a temporal examination of graphic novels where I look at queer representation from different decades would bring in a more thoughtful critique. Furthermore, bringing in comics that have queer creators and discussing the differences of representations of queerness through a queer lens versus a heterosexual lens as well as using comics from creators of colour to address the whiteness of queer representations and comics as a whole.

Lastly, as mentioned in the earlier section, the reality of living in a pandemic led to a creative burnt out. Prior to the pandemic I got to explore an array of topics in ways that complimented my energy and creative ability. I made a create-your-own-adventure novel for a class and really enjoyed stepping out of my comfort zone by making a podcast and a twitter feed for my qualitative research classes. In a perfect world, I would have explored CAP more thoroughly for this research, but creatively I have just been very drained. I think the subject of

the research and many of the resources I drew on like Lisbeth's research would have been an interesting place to explore creating a graphic novel or comic strip for representing the findings of this research. Perhaps down the road I can still explore this or use this research to inform the creation of a graphic novel. At any rate, this was something that I was disappointed I could not explore; however, I simply did not have the creative, emotional, or academic capacity to generate a piece of work like this at this particular moment in time.

**Moving into more hopeful days…**

This has not been a linear or individual journey by any means. My thesis has been a series of instabilities and insecurities but also inspirations and is the product of love and support from my friends, family, and mentors. I can confidently say that I am not the same person or researcher I was when I began my masters in 2019. I hope to one day regain my passion for academia that I lost in the pandemic as I did truly enjoy doing this work. I loved examining different pieces of media and their underlying messages, and I felt uplifted finding beautiful examples of queer representation. Perhaps in the future, this work will serve as foundation for my own graphic novel. Looking forward, I am both nervous and excited to end this chapter of my life and move on to a new one. Writing this thesis has consumed my life these past 2 years and it has become a part of my identity. I am afraid, relieved, and inspired to be from this experience.

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# Appendix

*Social Media Sources*

| Tumblr | https://bryankonietzko.tumblr.com/post/105916338157/korrasami-is-canon-you-can-celebrate-it-embrace |
|---|---|
| Tumblr | https://michaeldantedimartino.tumblr.com/post/105916326500/korrasami-confirmed-now-that-korra-and-asamis |
| Tumblr | https://queertoonqueertoons.tumblr.com/post/115718691688/on-queer-identity-and-experience-in-su-v-lok |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLastAirbender/comments/6pqh4c/turf_wars_turf_wars_part_1_discussion_thread/ |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLastAirbender/comments/2py7vq/all_spoilers_thank_you_bryk_for_touching_my_heart/ |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/bisexual/comments/8d4bbs/avatar_legend_of_korra_helped_me_realise_my/ |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/bisexual/comments/8d4bbs/avatar_legend_of_korra_helped_me_realise_my/ |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/korrasami/comments/3zy07l/this_show_has_made_me_accept_my_sexuality_and_has/ |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLastAirbender/comments/6pqh4c/turf_wars_turf_wars_part_1_discussion_thread/ |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLastAirbender/comments/6pqh4c/turf_wars_turf_wars_part_1_discussion_thread/ |
| Tumblr | https://benditlikekorra.tumblr.com/post/135222355707/seeing-a-woman-of-color-validate-my-experiences |
| Tumblr | https://lokgifsandmusings.tumblr.com/post/118159026583/i-see-a-lot-of-myself-in-you-a-reflection-of |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLastAirbender/comments/6pqh4c/turf_wars_turf_wars_part_1_discussion_thread/ |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/bisexual/comments/2x9c6m/representation_first_the_legend_of_korra_now_the/ |
| Tumblr | https://benditlikekorra.tumblr.com/post/135222355707/seeing-a-woman-of-color-validate-my-experiences |
| Reddit | https://www.reddit.com/r/bisexual/comments/8d4bbs/avatar_legend_of_korra_helped_me_realise_my/ |
| Tumblr | https://stompwang.tumblr.com/post/109730585887/amp |
| Tumblr | https://www.reddit.com/r/bisexual/comments/8d4bbs/avatar_legend_of_korra_helped_me_realise_my/ |