

5-2022

## **A Content Analysis of LGBTQIA+ Representation in Anime & American Animation**

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**A Content Analysis of LGBTQIA+ Representation in Anime & American Animation**

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SBS 402: Senior Capstone Seminar II

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**Table of contents**

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Literature Review</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Theory</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Findings &amp; Analysis</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>39</b>

### **Abstract**

This capstone project examines the ways the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community is portrayed in Japanese and American animation and the differences or similarities the portrayals share. My methodology for this study includes a qualitative method. The qualitative research conducted for this capstone project involves a content analysis of three American animated series and three Japanese animated series. Two to three episodes were analyzed for each series, consisting of fifteen episodes altogether. This study will draw on Queer theory to examine and highlight how queer identities and culture are depicted in the two different forms of animation. This capstone project aims to analyze and understand how this form of media represents queerness. This research finds that LGBTQIA+ representation in anime included sob stories and tokenism but lacked representation of queer relationships. While subversive humor, portrayals of casual queerness, and representation of setbacks were present in American animation.

***Key Words:*** LGBTQIA+, animation, media representation, queer theory

## Introduction

The history of Animation began even before cinema, but Disney's *Steamboat Willie* (1928) was the first sound-synchronized animated cartoon. Early animation was simple; primitive means were used to simply comedic and childish short films. Animation was dismissed as infantile for a long time, but that idea progressively started to diminish (Dobson, 2010). Fast forward a few decades later, animated shows like *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, *Daria*, and much more deal with much more serious issues and topics. Such animated shows challenge social norms, traditional family values, and boundaries of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer representations (Johnson, 2010). Animation content has changed over the last few decades and continues to change; while cartoons can still be comical, they also touch on quite serious issues and topics.

Animation has always had a history of queerness. There is a long history of constructing or subverting reality, extending the boundaries of anatomy, gender, and sexuality in animated animals and human characters. Unconcealed references to homosexuality have been present in animated shows as early as 1932 in Max Fleischer's cartoon *Any Rags*. In 1934, the Hollywood Production Code was enforced, which banned any "sex perversion or any inference to it" in any film (Griffin, 2004). As a result, creators found new creative ways to insert queerness and extended the boundaries of the production code (Blodget et al., 2019; Griffin, 2004). Queer coded their characters through mannerisms, customs, speech patterns, friendship dynamics, and more to get around the censorship code creators. While there has been an increase in LGBTQIA+ representation in animation over the past few decades, the representation has not all been positive. In animation, the villainization of queer characters, persistent tropes, and stereotypes are still present (Santos, 2019).

Through this capstone, I examine and compare LGBTQIA+ representation in American and Japanese animated television series to better understand how both cultures explore and portray gender and sexuality. Through conducting a qualitative content analysis of three American animated series and three anime series, I had the opportunity to analyze and compare how such mediums portray the LGBTQIA+ community. This capstone project answers the following research question: In what ways, if any, does LGBTQIA+ representation in Anime compare to queer representation in American animation? This capstone first reviews the previous literature, focusing on three prevalent themes: queer coding, queerbaiting, queer resistance, and heteronormative resistance in animation. I then comprehensively discuss the methodology I utilized to collect the data and answer my research question. I will then go on to present and analyze my findings. This capstone will conclude with my conclusion and recommendations for future research.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Queer characters have always been present in American and Japanese animation, but there has been an increase in queer visibility in recent years. There are several pieces of literature on the area of LGBTQIA+ representation in American cartoons, from adult animated sitcoms to children's animated series (Brennan, 2018; Dennis, 2003; Dhaenens et al., 2012; Dhaenens, 2014; Dunn, 2016; Johnson, 2010; Kim et al., 2007; Lugo-Lugo et al., 2009; Perea, 2018; Ravela, 2017; Raymond, 2013; Santos et al., 2019). The literature on LGBTQ representation in Anime, on the other hand, is extremely limited (Blodget et al., 2019; Garg, 2019; Hoskin, 2018). To better understand how the LGBTQIA+ community is portrayed in the medium of animation, I will

incorporate previously scholarly works to expand on the analysis of my research. After reviewing the literature available, the three major themes discussed more often are queer coding, queerbaiting, queer resistance, and heteronormative resistance.

### **Queer Coding in Animation**

Queer coding is a way around censorship in Animation, characters may not be explicitly stated to be queer, but there is enough subtext for an audience to read them as such (Dennis, 2003; Perea, 2018). Queer coding can occur verbally and visually, and these identity markers can be anything from dialogue, behaviors, images, songs, clothing, jokes, background design, and even secondary characters and friendship dynamics (Perea, 2019). Cartoons can and must be approached through three different though interconnected areas. These areas are production, audience response, and textual analysis, animators can introject, and audiences can decode same-sex desire and queer characters (Dennis, 2003). It is important to note that some queer signifiers found in animation do not necessarily hint at queer sexuality,” it is about many other things—outsider identity markers that change with time in a social structure that shapes our identities through performativity” (Perea 2019, p.8). Outsider identity signifiers in animation such as *Lilo & Stitch* and *Dumbo* hint those characters have experienced otherness and, in return, have found a “chosen family;” this helps form the definition of queer identities (Perea, 2019).

Cartoon characters often exhibit a mix of masculinity and femininity features that leave more room for subtext and interpretation (Dennis, 2003; Johnson, 2010; Santos, 2019). Male non-human Characters such as SpongeBob from *SpongeBob SquarePants* and “Him” from *The Powerpuff Girls* both can shift between a display of overt masculine aggression and flowing feminine passivity. This, therefore, leaves more room for interpretation (Johnson, 2010; Santos,

2019). Characters such as “Him” also display characteristics that are assigned to the female gender, such as his clothes, shoes, and makeup, such characteristics of his character challenge the binary order culturally accepted as "normal" between gender and sex (Santos, 2019). SpongeBob’s character facial design is a blend of masculine and feminine signifiers. His exaggerated eyes and, eyelashes, rosy cheeks are all associated with feminine characteristics, while his long-extended nose and wide-tooth mouth are male signifiers (Johnson, 2010). The character of Bugs Bunny has appeared in drag in various episodes over the years. He can effortlessly adopt many female signifiers while also discarding his traditional masculine traits; this can be read as a representation of gender ambiguity (Dennis, 2003; Johnson, 2010). Such characters that display subtexts of cross-dressing and exhibit a mix of feminine and masculine signifiers challenge the traditional notion of anatomy and gender; their asexual blank slate opens the door for analysis and interpretation (Johnson, 2010).

Animation hints at same-sex relationships through friendship dynamics and cartoon duos; characters are often coded as romantic partners. Although characters are not explicitly identified as queer, there are enough subtexts to pinpoint same-sex desire through an interaction between two same-sex characters (Blodget et al., 2019; Dennis, 2003). The lack of providing sufficient backstory or details of a domestic situation in animated shows” opens a space to subvert hegemonic heterosexuality and allow same-sex desire or identity into the reading” (Dennis 2003, p.133). Participating in social events as a couple or sharing a living space, refusing or failing to pursue a romantic relationship with the opposite sex, or visibly expressing desire through flirting can all be identified as signifiers of same-sex desire (Dennis, 2003; Johnson, 2010). There are various animated shows where same-sex relationships triumph over heterosexual desire, and characters such as Yogi and Boo Boo are identified as romantic couples (Dennis, 2003).

*Steven Universe* is believed to be the queerest and most gender-progressive children's animated show on television because it allows genders outside the spectrum to exist and flourish (Dunn, 2016; Ravela, 2017). *Steven Universe* makes use of its narrative magic to push boundaries of gender representation, its ability to push the representation of genderqueer and agender characters such as Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl (Dunn, 2016; Ravela, 2017). Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl are known as crystal gems (extraterrestrial species). They all seem to take on female forms and pronouns but are described as agender and state their feminine gender traits as illusory (Dunn, 2016). The magical ability of the gems known as "gem fusion" opens the door for further queer representation in the show. The gems can fuse their bodies together through fusion to achieve a greater magical and physical power. Through this spectrum, the show can address agender desire and genderqueer representations (Dunn, 2016; Ravela, 2017). In order to fuse their bodies together, the gems must perform musical segments known as the "fusion dance" (Dunn, 2016; Ravela, 2017). The fusion dance is interpreted as a queer performance that expresses a queer desire (Dunn, 2016; Ravela, 2017). It is certain that fusion is a semi-sexual or desire-coded occurrence between the gems (Dunn, 2016). There are a number of reasons why fusion is believed to be a semi-sexual occurrence, including one of the gems deemed the dance inappropriate for young Steven (main character) to see, the body language of the dance itself, and coded desires such as flushed cheeks, heavy breathing, and daringly deep dips (Dunn, 2016). Fusion becomes a source of pleasure, frustration, and longing for the gems (Ravela, 2017). Throughout the seasons of *Steven Universe*, a new character named Stevonnie is introduced, which is a fusion of the main character Steven (male) and his best friend Connie (female). Stevonnie does not (either physically or mentally) fit within female or male categories, making them deliberately genderqueer; the character also displays androgynous physical features (Dunn,

2016). Trans representation in Steven Universe aims to separate gender identity from sexual orientation, physical sex characteristics, and gender presentation (Dunn, 2016).

### **Queerbaiting in Animation**

Queerbaiting is a marketing technique used by writers and networks to gain queer viewers' attention and support by hinting at homoerotic suggestiveness without ever actually depicting such queer relationships or sexual interactions. (Brennan, 2018) Unlike queer coding queerbaiting such homoerotic hints are usually shut down with denial and mockery, once more reinstating a heteronormative narrative (Brennan, 2018). The definition of queerbaiting is ever-changing, and it can vary depending on the viewer, context, cultural expectations, and norms (Garg, 2019). It is important to note that queerbaiting can happen beyond the domain of the text and can also be present in the paratext. This means producer-led texts that result from interactions between fans and producers that encourage fans' queer interpretations (Garg, 2019).

The definition of queerbaiting is redefined in the context of cartoons aimed at children; the unresolved subtext is not erotic but instead romantic. Superficial background queer representation without commitment or direct representation within the text is a form of queerbaiting in children's animation (Blodget et al., 2019). Therefore, this feeble representation is easy to ignore and deny by audiences and studios; this allows heteronormative resistance to develop (Blodget et al., 2019). Queerbaiting is often used as a strategy to "protect" children from queer sexualities (Blodget et al., 2019). This is referred to as the oppositional, compulsory heterosexual politicization of the child viewer, who must be sheltered from all queer sexualities (Blodget et al., 2019). Queerbaiting in children's animated shows is less about creators and directors benefiting from it but more about the ongoing power struggle of queer representation

and fear of losing “straight” dollars and viewers. Due to this fear, characters are lowered to an “easter egg” queer, relying on paratextual knowledge and readings to not affect the series' success with homophobic viewers (Blodget et al., 2019). This leads to late affirmation with queer-coded relationships. They are only labeled queer in the show's final moments when the commercial viability is no longer at risk. This positions queer relationships at the lower tier of representation and pushes heteroromantic expression (Blodget et al., 2019). In series like *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra*, same-sex relationships remain unlabeled until the show's final moments. This setup of relationships within the two series shows audiences that only queer couples must remain canonically unacknowledged (Blodget et al., 2019). These queer relationships in *Adventure Time*, *The Legend of Korra*, are never acknowledged within the body of canon works; instead, there is a brief or unexplained indication of these relationships (Blodget et al., 2019). Animated shows like *Adventure Time* and *The Legend of Korra* acknowledge queer relationships and characters but still lack the representation, continual affirmation, and acceptance that matters for presentation (Blodget et al., 2019).

*Free! Iwatobi Swim Club* and *Yuri!!! On Ice*, both demonstrate queerbaiting in very distinct ways. For example, *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club* signifies queerbaiting more traditionally by taking advantage of homoerotic situations between heterosexual characters without ever pursuing any homosexual relationships (Garg, 2019). Anime series such as *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club* is popular in the fujoshi culture due to the physicality of attractive male bodies in close proximity to each other and the intensity of male homosocial bonds between the characters (Garg, 2019). Fujoshi culture can be described as a term for heterosexual female audiences that enjoy manga and anime that feature homosexual relationships between men. Fujoshi culture can be best compared to a Japanese version of slash culture in Western fandoms (Garg, 2019). Such anime

series fall under the Yaoi and shounen-ai genre, best known as “Boys’ Love” (BL); while queer characters and relationships are present, they are problematic due to the harmful portrayals of gay men and fetishizing relationships (Garg, 2019). Such problematic portrayals do not further the cause of positive queer representation and can be considered another form of queerbaiting due to the fact that it is being marketed as queer content but does not deliver positive depictions and desires of LGBTQ+ characters (Garg, 2019). While *Free! Iwatobi Swim Club* does not fall into the “Boys Love ” genre; it shares elements found in the BL anime series.

Queerness in *Yuri!!! On Ice*, on the other hand, is not hinted at or joked about but instead presented by actions displaying affection and intimacy, such as skating dance routines and a partially obfuscated on-screen kiss (Garg, 2019). *Yuri!!! On Ice* is free from any problematic elements and stereotypes found in the “Boy’s Love” series. While this paves the way for a more promising positive queer representation, such representation can be easily ignored or dismissed by viewers due to its lack of explicitness and remaining canonically unacknowledged (Garg, 2019). While the series portrays markers of an intimate relationship, the lack of sexual explicitness does not allow the relationship between the two characters to be seen as romantic or sexual (Garg, 2019). Creators often use this technique; this can also be a non-traditional form of queerbaiting in animation (Garg, 2019).

### **Queer Resistance and Heteronormative Resistance in Animation**

Despite the increase in queer representation in television over the years, many argue that networks continue to evoke dominant ideologies that reinforce heteronormativity (Kim et al., 2007; Raymond, 2013). Animated sitcoms such as *American Dad* and *Family Guy* use gender-/sexuality-based associations that aim to critique social gendered and sexual stereotypes

through parody but rightfully fail at it (Raymond, 2013). While this aim to critique heteronormativity, it can be interpreted as poking fun at the closed-minded stereotype of gay identity, while others might interpret them as an accurate depiction of queer behavior. Regardless of the different interpretations by different viewers, the associations aiming to critique social stereotypes instead re-create hegemonic divisions we often see on television (Raymond, 2013). Animated sitcoms are marked with an undeniable double-codedness. Many viewers applaud such sitcoms for their undeniable satire, while others, despite them, for their subversiveness towards queer representation (Dhaenens et al., 2012; Raymond, 2013).

Contrary to what Chase Wesley Raymond discusses, Frederik Dhaenens states that queer resistance is segmented into queer themes and characters with the aim to expose or/and disrupt normative patterns and notions from within (Dhaenens et al., 2012; Dhaenens,2014). It is important to understand that while television can strengthen and reinforce such dominant notions of gender and sexuality, it can also destabilize and disrupt heteronormative ideals (Dhaenens, 2014). Sitcoms such as *Family Guy* apply postmodern strategies such as exaggeration, literalization, and hyper stereotyping to create queer resistance (Dhaenens et al., 2012). Although sitcoms such as *Family Guy* can question, mock and critique heteronormative ideas and practices, they are not allowed to offer political stances or transgressive counter-discourses. While they refrain from taking any political stance, the content they create can be interpreted as queer resistance (Dhaenens et al.,2012). As a consequence,” queer resistances in the adult animation sitcom thus most likely reside in between the articulations of complicity and critique, sometimes masked as pastiches putting outdated stereotypes of queerness to the fore, and sometimes as parodies holding normative and repressive practices up to mockery” (Dhaenens et al. 2012, p.135)

While *Sailor Moon* is a Japanese cartoon, it has found popularity in the United States. Like many other Japanese series, *Sailor Moon* was repurposed for American audiences (Blodget et al., 2019; Hoskin, 2018). Queer characters, relationships, and depictions of gender fluidity in *Sailor Moon* were censored from the North American version (Blodget et al., 2019; Hoskin, 2018). Two men in a romantic relationship were rewritten with one male character as a woman, while the relationship between Sailor Neptune and Uranus (both female characters) was explained away as “cousins” (Blodget et al., 2019; Hoskin, 2018). Queerness found in *Sailor Moon* was not translatable in North America, and such complexities of queer identities and desires were lost in translation. Such censorship is interpreted as heteronormative resistance that maintains heteronormativity and normative bodies (Hoskin, 2018). Queer characters found in the original Japanese version of *Sailor Moon* fell outside of the normative hetero identities and therefore abjected from the Western world and dismissed from the cultural imaginary (Blodget et al., 2019; Hoskin, 2018)

Heteronormative resistance is exceptionally present in Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks Animation (Lugo-Lugo, 2009). Children’s animation aggressively enforces heterosexual relationships and banter in what might seem like pointless scenes. For example, in the animated film, *The Road to El Dorado*, heterosexual relationships are introduced after a series of scenes where the two main characters’ (both male) sexuality could be fabricated as unclear. (Lugo-Lugo, 2009). Their sexualities are presented unclear because of coded desire for one another after both men had bathed naked together. Shortly after a heterosexual relationship between one of the male characters and a female character (Chel) is introduced, this clarifies to the audience that the two male characters are sexually “normal” (Lugo-Lugo, 2009). Such seeming incorporations of heterosexuality into the narratives of animated films are not necessary,

and the basic message could have been served without them (Lugo-Lugo, 2009). In animated films such as *The Road to El Dorado*, creators always find a way to incorporate a straight love story; this serves as a function and conveys that heterosexuality is the norm (Lugo-Lugo, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The existing literature provides insight into LGBTQIA+ representation in children's animations as well as adult animated sitcoms. Children's animated series tend to queer code their characters in the margins. The character's sexual orientation is not explicitly stated, but there are enough stereotypical gay signifiers that sub-textually tell audiences the character is queer (Dennis, 2003; Perea, 2018). For decades creators have found subtle ways to hint at the character's queerness without confirming it. In rare instances, some children's animated series might have slight background queer representation, but this is usually without any commitment or direct representation (Blodget et al., 2019). This is another marketing technique used by creators known as queerbaiting. While queerbaiting is an entertainment ploy to attract queer viewers, the objective of such a technique is different when it involves younger audiences (Blodget et al., 2019). Creators often use this technique in order for heteronormative resistance to develop. This makes the superficial queer representation easy to ignore or deny (Blodget et al., 2019). Heteronormative resistance is present in various children's animated shows and films (Lugo-Lugo, 2009). Heterosexual relationships and heterosexuality are strongly enforced so much that *Sailor Moon* was repurposed for American audiences (Hoskin, 2018).

Adult animated sitcoms, on the other hand, are marked with a double-codedness in terms of LGBTQIA+ representation. Animated sitcoms critique heteronormativity through pastiche and parody (Dhaenens et al., 2012; Raymond, 2013). Scholars argue that such postmodern strategies

create a text that can be read as being able to both recalculate and reverse hegemonic discourses. (Dhaenens et al., 2012). These postmodern strategies can also be interpreted as subversiveness towards queer representation. While television can use these postmodern strategies to demonstrate queer resistance, these articulations of resistance can only become resistant when audiences are able to read them as such (Dhaenens, 2012).

### **Theory**

The primary theory I discuss in this capstone project is queer theory. Queer theory is not a theory in the traditional sense; it is characterized by various methods of cross-examining desire and its relationship to identity. It aims to question and challenge heterosexual norms and embraces what is nonnormative (Watson, 2005). The queer theory is not a unified body of work but, instead, one that continues to evolve and aims to understand the complexities of identity (Watson, 2005). Queer theory has been able to provide scholars with an insightful perspective to explore the intercession of heteronormativity in popular media and culture. Various scholars count on queer theory to question the negotiation of heteronormativity in media and popular culture, suggesting that television maintains a binary, rigid and hierarchical approach to biological sex, gender, and sexuality.

While many scholars rely on Queer theory to convey that popular media and culture only reinforce heteronormativity, others rely on queer theory to challenge that idea. A number of scholars argue that television has the power to portray queer characters and themes that resist heterosexual norms; television can take part in representing queer resistance through two types of representational strategies. These two broad sets of representational strategies are referred to as queer deconstruction strategies and queer reconstruction strategies. Queer deconstruction

strategies aim to resist heteronormativity along with the practices, institutions, norms, and values that maintain it. (Dhaenens, 2014; Dhaenens, 2012). Three sub-strategies are present in queer deconstruction: strategy of exposure, strategies of contradiction, and strategies of parody. The strategy of exposure is present in series where queer characters are aware of the heterosexual matrix but do not oppose heteronormativity; however, the series represents such pain and anger felt by such queer characters whose identities and desires are not considered the norm. While strategies of contradiction introduce instances of queerness in settings and situations controlled by heteronormative principles, these contradictions aim to question established heteronormative norms and values. Finally, strategies of parody aim to challenge, mock, and criticize heteronormativity through postmodern textual strategies such as intertextuality, exaggeration, literalization, and reversal (Dhaenens, 2014; Dhaenens,2012). Queer reconstruction strategies, on the other hand, go beyond that and aim to represent queer and practical alternatives to the heteronormative way of living. Queer reconstruction can be present in two ways; the first is queer identities and desires are presented as intelligible or queer institutions, and practices are represented as more practicable and preferable ways of living compared to the heteronormal way. Queer theory can be used to explore and challenge scholars that aim to expose television as a medium that solely restates heteronormativity and instead argue that television is capable of subverting heteronormativity (Dhaenens, 2014; Watson, 2005).

Heteronormativity has the power to institute a social-cultural hierarchy between subjects who fall into heterosexual norms and subjects who do not or cannot conform to such ideals. Queer theory can address questions of non-heteronormative bodies that do not conform to such heteronormal ideals. In this piece of literature, “queer” is interpreted as all bodies that are awkward, erotic, and challenge the established norms of society and culture. (Santos et al.,

2019). This piece of literature draws from other studies and their ideas that queerness is the body manifested by the resistance of the heterosexual matrix. While such queer bodies can be present in animation and are resistant to the heteronormal, they often are portrayed as villains or something to fear. Such popular television tropes bring forth harmful queer stereotypes. Such flawed representation allows the audience to associate immorality with queerness. (Santos et al., 2019).

### **Methodology**

There are various methodologies in social research. Among them is content analysis. Content analysis is potentially one of the most important research methods in the social sciences (Krippendorff, 2004). The term content analysis has various definitions, including a research tool favorable for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying detailed messages from verbal, visual, or written data to describe and unify phenomena (Bengtsson, 2016). Krippendorff defines content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, pg.18). As a research method, content analysis has both quantitative and qualitative methodology, and it can also be used in both an inductive and a deductive way. (Bengtsson, 2016; Krippendorff, 2004). The difference is that qualitative content analysis is numerical. Facts from a text are presented in the form of frequency expressed as a percentage or actual numbers of key categories. In contrast, qualitative content analysis data is presented in words and themes, making it possible to draw interpretations of the results (Bengtsson, 2016). Qualitative content analysis can be used in either an inductive or deductive way. Deductive analysis generally means applying predetermined codes to the data while inductive analysis is more of an exploratory approach codes/themes emerge as the research goes through the data. Before beginning a content

analysis, the research must also determine whether the analysis should be manifest or latent. In a manifest analysis, the research describes the actual literal subject matter in the text, while in a latent analysis, the research seeks to find the underlying meaning of the text (Bengtsson, 2016; Duriau et al., 2007).

There are various advantages associated with content analysis over other methods. Content analysis can be described as an unobtrusive technique. This means that this data collection method does not interfere with the subjects/phenomena under study. Since such methods are not obtrusive, there is less chance to create contaminated observations. Content analysis is also context-sensitive. This permits the research to process data texts that are significant, informative, and even representational to others. Another advantage of this method is that content analysis can cope with large volumes of data. While this method can cope with large volumes of data, it can also be used to analyze small samples of texts. Content analysis can perform small-scale studies with minimal requirements (Duriau et al., 2007; Krippendorff, 2004). Analytical flexibility is another key strength. This reverts to the two levels of analysis mentioned earlier: manifest and latent content. The analysis of content can be conducted at either level. In addition, this method can also be used to conduct inductive and deductive research, which adds more flexibility (Duriau et al., 2007; Krippendorff, 2004). A significant advantage of content analysis lies in the coding scheme. If the research finds any flaws with the coding scheme along the way, they can be corrected. Content analysis can also be used in conjunction with other methods in an effort to support the understanding of an experience, meaning, or process. Finally, some additional advantages of content analysis are that it is an inexpensive research method, and this method can handle the unstructured matter as data (Duriau et al., 2007; Krippendorff, 2004).

Qualitative content analysis has a history in the social sciences and social research (Bengtsson, 2016). Unlike quantitative content analysis, the qualitative content analysis approach provides the researcher with comprehensive and clear meanings and insights into the text being analyzed. QCA is an effective approach that allows researchers to understand social reality or phenomena objectively but scientifically (Shava et al., 2021). QCA is flexible, and data can be verbal, visual, sampled from other sources, or collected by other researchers. The data can be used non-reactively. The data does not need to be collected from interviews or questionnaires and can be collected from home. Researchers can conduct an analytic study of newspaper accounts, magazines, archives, television shows, films, social media, and various content (Bengtsson, 2016; Shava et al., 2021). Like any other research method, some limitations come with qualitative content analysis. The one significant weakness of QCA is that it might not be appropriate for open, explorative research since it is limited to examining already recorded messages. QCA can also be a labor-intensive, time-consuming process (Shava et al., 2021). QCA has certain advantages and disadvantages, but the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. Qualitative content analysis is a practical research tool that allows researchers to make comparisons across different media, including comparing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, and asexual (LGBTIQIA+) representation in Japanese and American animation.

This qualitative research focuses on identifying how the LGBTQIA+ community is portrayed across two different mediums of animation: Japanese and Western animated series. The goal is to better understand what type of representation is included and not included and to identify and unpack the play of dominant ideologies within mainstream texts. The animated series selected for this study were identified through anime blogs, GLAAD annual reports and

personal knowledge. The criteria for the show were to have at least one explicit queer character, that character had to be a main character or recurring supportive character. The series could not be older than the year 2010, the first season had to be aired no later than that year. I analyzed three Japanese and three American animated series, two to three episodes per series. I examined a total of fifteen episodes altogether. For the anime series I chose *Paradise Kiss*, *Wandering Son*, and *Stars Align*. For the American series I chose *Big Mouth*, *BoJackHorseman* and *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*. After selecting the content and getting familiar with it, I then transcribed every episode to text. I began coding the selected texts manually in three coding stages. Beginning with a low level of abstraction with initial codes, and then gradually moving to high level of abstraction with axial codes and focused codes.

### **Findings & Analysis**

The content analysis of the three Japanese animated series presented three recurring themes: sob stories, tokenism, and lack of portrayals of queer relationships. My analysis of American animated series and the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters determined three main recurring themes: subversive humor, representation setbacks, and casual queer representation.

#### **Portrayals in Anime**

The LGBTQIA+ community has had a long history of complicated, offensive, and often coded representation in film and television. One of the biggest issues media has had with representation comes from unrealistic, exaggerated, and offensive stereotypical portrayals of queer characters. All three-anime series analyzed portrayed all queer characters in a refreshing and non-stereotypical way. The portrayal of non-binary/gender-questioning Yuta and transgender Shou from *Stars Align*; openly bisexual George and transgender Isabella from *Paradise Kiss*; transgender Yoshino, Shuichi, and Yuki from *Wandering Son* offer a portrayal that viewers at

home can identify with. All three series presented a realistic portrayal of queer issues and queer experiences but lacked representation of queer relationships and proper queer character development.

### **Sob Stories**

The anime series explores journeys and stories, and along with those stories, many queer issues and struggles arose throughout the series. This type of representation is what is called “sob stories,” realistic depictions of the struggles that many individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community face. One of the struggles discussed in all three series is gender and social dysphoria. Gender dysphoria can be described as the feeling of discomfort or distress that might occur in individuals whose gender identity differ from their sex assigned at birth or sex-related physical characteristics. There is a scene in Stars Align when we learn about the transgender character Shou and his struggle with the discomfort of wearing a girl's uniform,” he said it didn’t feel like his gender was right when he was young. In middle school, wearing the girls' uniform was brutal for him, but realized no one else felt like that... His own existence made him feel uneasy and alone.” This discomfort and unease with wearing a school uniform and having to live as their undesired gender are also present in the other two anime series. Along with gender dysphoria, the series also touches on social dysphoria, and this is where pronouns and misgendering come into play. In paradise Kiss, we see Isabella, an openly transgender woman, express discomfort over how she is addressed and viewed by others. In the following dialogue, we see Isabella expressing discomfort with her butler misgendering her:

Isabella: Good morning, Sebastian.

Sebastian: You are up early.

Isabella: Say, Sebastian.

Sebastian: What is it, young master?

Isabella: Could we do something about the way you address me? I'm not young either...

Sebastian: But you dislike being referred to by name. How would you prefer to be addressed?

Isabella: How about "young mistress?"

Sebastian: Certainly, I will consider it if you call me Ueda.

Isabella: But you are still Sebastian to me.

Sebastian: Just as you are young master to me.

We learn that Isabella once struggled with gender dysphoria and continues to struggle with the idea of how the outside world perceives and addresses her.

The three series analyzed all cast light on the LGBTQIA+ experience from various angles. Part of the LGBTQIA+ experience is coming out, every experience is different and personal, but it is incredibly challenging and scary for all. *Stars Align* shows capture a realistic and heartfelt coming-of-age queer experience. The series follows Yuta "Yu," who comes out as non-binary: "I have no idea what I want to do or who I want to be...If I have to say, I think I am non-binary. Though, it does not feel right to have to be categorized. But still, people always want some sort of label one way or another. How do I find out what I want or learn about who I really am and who I wanna become one day?" While this scene is about Yu coming out as non-binary, it also touches on the pressure of labeling one's sexual orientation and gender identity. This is an example of what many LGBTQIA+ individuals experience in the process of coming out and coming to terms with one's identity. Like Yuta, many feel their gender cannot be neatly defined within the margins of the gender binary. While many individuals have the privilege of coming out on their own terms and time unfortunately that is not the same experience for everyone. The

anime series also sheds light on outing, which is the act of deliberately or accidentally sharing someone's sexual orientation/gender identity without their knowledge or consent. *Wandering Son* focuses on two queer best friends who long to transition, for most of the series, they feel they need to hide their desired gender identities. One of the protagonists, Shuuichi (MTF), is outed on three separate occasions. The first time she is deliberately outed in front of all her friend as a “crossdresser”:

Chizuru: Nitori, can you grab a fork?

Shuuchi: Oh, Sure.

Fumiya: Nitori? Nitori...Oh, I know.

Shuuchi: Here.

Fumiya: The Nitori who loves to cross-dress!

[All gasp]

In another scene, she is also outed by her sister during family dinner, and in another episode, she is outed by her sister's boyfriend. The anime also addresses the outing of another character, Yuki, who is an openly transgender woman that is who is like a mentor to both transitioning pre-teens. Yuki had a similar experience where her classmates forced her to come out,” I did not have a choice...Everybody forced me to put on a sailor uniform. They made me confess my love to some boy I did not like.” *Wandering Son* sheds light on how damaging and hurtful outings can be. Along with outing and coming out, the series also touches on experiences where queer characters experience rejection/disapproval and bullying.

### **Lack of Queer Relationships**

All three anime series portrayed how important it is for queer individuals to have healthy friendships and a strong support system, all three series lacked portrayals of queer relationships/romance. All anime series analyzed in this capstone project set out to show how

important allyship and healthy, strong friendships can be for queer individuals. In *Paradise Kiss*, Isabella is encouraged to dress and be who she wants to be by her butler and close friend, George; in *Wandering Son*, both Suuchi and Yushino are able to get through all the hardships, adversity, and shame imposed on them by others due to their friendship and support for one another; in *Stars Align* Yuta is surrounded by friends that respect and care for them. When Yuta is being bullied or made uncomfortable throughout the series, his friends and teammates make sure to come to his aid. During a scene in the locker room, a classmate strips his shirt in front of Yuta, who purposely keeps their eyes forward. The classmate notices this, and he says, "Huh? Come on, look at this! Aren't you—" before he can finish his sentence he abruptly gets cut off as Yuta's friends come to their defense yelling, "Cut it out. Our manager is sensitive. That is right. He is bad at dealing with rude brutes like you."

While there is plentifulness of scenes like this one showing strong support systems, there is a lack of queer relationships in all three anime series. In *Paradise kiss*, one of the main characters is a proud bisexual fashion student, but throughout the series, he is in a relationship with straight, cisgender women, and his bisexuality is put on the backburner. Isabella, who is a transgender woman and George's best friend, has been in love with him since she could remember, yet that relationship was not explored further. The anime neglects to give her any romance or relationship development of any sort, unlike the other straight leading characters. This is a recurring theme in *Stars Align* as well; while it is revealed that Yuta has a crush on the captain of the tennis team at the beginning of the anime, that storyline is not further explored or addressed for the rest of the anime. The anime series did not feature any queer relationships but there was an abundance of heterosexual relationships.

### **Token queer**

A form of representation that is not entirely good representation is token representation. Token representation occurs when a queer character is introduced but does not play a notable role in the plot or does not have their identity meaningfully explored. The characters are not tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect. All three anime series had more than one explicit queer character, but two out of the series had token characters. These characters had far less screen time and were not developed sufficiently or were not essential to the plot. The majority of the queer characters in the anime series were limited to one specific episode dedicated to their sexuality, identity, or a coming-out scene, and while they were not erased for the rest of the episodes, they were not developed further.

In *paradise Kiss*, episode nine is dedicated to Isabella and her identity. Unfortunately, that is the only episode when Isabella is given a good amount of screen time and characterization. For the rest of the series, Isabella's character is not further developed and receives very minimal screen time occupying scenes in the background making tea, preparing snacks, or giving advice to other characters. In addition to receiving less screen time and no character development, the one episode that is supposed to be dedicated to her identity somehow is ultimately more about how one of the main characters got into fashion. This episode focused on her coming out story and the first time she ever wore women's clothing, but it is more about her best friend George and the power of fashion than about Isabella," I couldn't be born as a girl, but by dressing as a girl... I was given a magical hope. Beautiful dresses give people courage. With that belief, I've been making dresses with George." Token characters are also present in *Stars Align*; non-binary Yuta, and transgender Shou receive less screen time, and their characterization is limited to a single episode and remain in the background for the remainder of the series.

### **American Animation: Subversive Humor**

Past animated shows have used queer characters for laughs to reinforce negative stereotypes and tropes of the LGBTQIA+ community. My analysis demonstrates that while the shows use humor, they do not make queer characters the butt of the joke. *Big Mouth* is an animated series about a group of teenage friends going through puberty. The animated series has opened discussion for a range of issues and hardships young people face during puberty, including sexual identity through raunchy humor. The show does not shy away from discussing and joking about taboo topics, but it does so in a way that does not come across as homophobic. In season four, the show introduces a new character, Natalie, a transgender teenage girl. During her introduction in the first episode of the season Natalie is deadnamed multiple times, quizzed by the boy campers on why she “decided” to become transgender as well as ask her a series of invasive questions, she is also deals with forms of gender policing from the girl campers who want to make her “pass” as a girl. Instead of passively tolerating all this casual transphobia, she throws back insults and sticks up for herself:

Nick: Uh, are you going to sleep here?

Natalie: No, I'm staying in the girls' bunk.

Background character: Nice, nice. So this is all a scam so you can just watch, you know, girls change and stuff?

Natalie: Yep. You figured out my master plan.

Background character: Do you pee standing up or lying down?

Natalie: The fuck? Do you pee lying down?

Seth: You know what, everyone? I'm just gonna ask the thing that we're all thinking but not asking. What does your crotch look like?

Natalie: Oh, God. This is a disaster, but don't cry. They'll think you're weak, and they'll pounce. My crotch looks like the back of your mom's head while she's slurping me off.

This specific scene utilizes humor to purposely highlight various popular transphobic arguments and then rapidly shuts them down. In season three, the show also touches on biphobia when Jay, one of the characters, comes out as bisexual. While the portrayal of bisexuality was not completely accurate (I will further discuss this later) in this season, it did mention various ways bisexuality is invalidated, fetishized and the double standards for men and women. After coming out as bisexual Jay experiences biphobia by many of his classmates, in a specific scene his bisexuality is dismissed:

Jay: I don't know if you heard any of what I just said, but, uh, pretty sweet I'm bi, huh?

Mathew: Oh, honey, you can just say you're a top, you don't have to say you're bi.

Jay: What?

Mathew: How do I say this? Usually, when a guy comes out as bi, he's just making a rest stop on his way to Gay Town.

Jay: Gay Town sounds fun, but I have thought a lot about it, and I belong in Bi-ami. [chuckles]

Caleb: Bi-ami is not a real place.

Mathew: See, Caleb gets it.

This is one of many various harmful ways bisexuality is often invalidated, the idea that it does not exist. Individuals that come out as bisexual are going through a phase or are just confused or

undecided and will ultimately realize they're either homosexual or heterosexual. Other bisexual stereotypes discussed include only coming out for attention:

Jay: Hey, hey! So?

Andrew: What?

Jay: What about my big news?

Andrew: Oh, that you're bi? Yeah, we just assumed that was a ploy for attention.

Jay: What? No way! Seriously, guys, I'm bisexual.

The double standard of bisexuality is also addressed, bisexual men are stigmatized while bisexual women are fetishized in society:

Nick: Yeah, we're, we're pretty uncomfortable with this.

Andrew: No judgment, bi's-- bi's weird.

Jay: You guys suck. When you heard that Ali was into guys and girls, you thought it was so cool.

Andrew: Because in her case, it is. I mean, Ali has very smooth, porcelain skin. She's number one on my skin list.

Nick: I guess what Andrew's trying to say is bisexuality just feels different for boys than girls.

Jay: Well, that's totally fucked!

Andrew: Yeah, man, you're right, it's a double standard. But standing here with you half-naked, ah, I'm a little uncomfortable.

These two specific scenes realistically and correctly shed light on common insults/stereotypes and immediately shuts them down. Jay's portrayal of bisexuality in a queerphobic society is something that many queer individuals can relate to.

## Representation setbacks

While animated series like *Big Mouth*, do not shy away from exploring various aspects of sexuality and sexual orientations, that does not mean that their portrayals are by no means perfect. Unfortunately, in season three the animated series only got some things right about bisexuality and pansexuality and missed the mark on certain aspects of their portrayals. In season three a specific scene undid a lot of the great work the animated series had done as far as queer representation. The show introduced a new character, who proudly introduces herself as pansexual:

Ali: Okay, um, I play soccer, I'm a Ravenclaw, and not to make all you normies shit your Old Navy undies, but I am pansexual.

Nick: Uh, hi, Nick Birch, Gryffindor. The pansexual thing sounds intriguing. Could you speak to that some more?

Ali: Pansexual means I'm into boys, girls, and everyone in between

Nick: I thought that was bisexual?

Ali: No, bisexuality is so binary.

The shows attempt to depict distinctions between bisexuality and pansexuality was wrong for several reasons. To begin with claiming bisexuality is “so binary” is incorrect and a quite common assumption many individuals have. This assumption is not only incorrect, but it put out the dangerous message that bisexuals are only attracted to cisgender men and females and is not inclusive of transgender and non-binary identities. Bisexuality means you can be physically, romantically, and/or emotionally attracted to people of more than one gender. Ali goes on to explain her own identity with a food metaphor that does not correctly define pansexuality, “Being pansexual means my sexual preference isn’t limited by gender identity...It is like, some

of you borings like tacos, and some of you like burritos, and if you're bisexual, you like tacos, and burritos. But I am saying, I like tacos, and burritos, and I could be into a taco born a burrito, or a burrito, that's transitioning into a taco. And honey, anything else on the fucking menu.”

There is a lot of things wrong with this definition of pansexuality, not only did the show described it with astonishing binary terms but they failed to distinguish that pansexuality means that someone is attracted to people regardless of their gender and not that someone is attracted to all genders. “Using ‘burritos’ and ‘tacos’ as stand-ins for genital organs is a dangerous binary construction of the spectrum of biological sex but shows a troubling depiction of transgender individuals. The troubling description of transgender identity, “a taco that was born a burrito”/ “a burrito that is transitioning into a taco” implies that transgender individuals are of a separate gender all together and that they need affirmation through medical transition. This description of transgender identities is very harmful and dehumanizing. While the show did an excellent job addressing the stigma affecting bisexual men go through hey failed to define bisexuality and pansexuality accurately and respectfully.

### **Casual Queer Representation**

There are not many television shows that portray casual queerness, especially animated shows. *BoJack Horseman* and *Kipo and the Age of the Wonderbeasts*’ are an exception. Both animated shows are an example of casual representation, and this is when a character is part of the LGBTQIA+ community, but they are not solely defined by their sexuality or gender identity. *Kipo and the Age of the Wonderbeasts*’ is the first children's animated show that explicitly and candidly used the word “gay.” This animated show did not wait for the last episode to confirm the queerness of a character, dance around the characters' sexuality or queer coded them. In episode four of the first season of *Kipo and the Age of the Wonderbeasts*,’ the main character

Kipo works up the courage to confess her feeling for Benson another main character. To my surprise he kindly tells her that he does not see her in a romantic way not because there is anything wrong with her but because he is gay:

Kipo:I don't know if it's that I'm turning 13, but I feel different right now.And I feel like I need to tell you that...  
[sighs] I think I like you.

Benson:Oh...Oh! Oh...

Kipo:[sighs]You don't feel that same.

Benson:Oh, no! No, I like you, too.Really, really like you!  
You're all kinds of awesome!But you should know something...[chuckles]

Kipo:You like me as a friend.

Benson:Yes!Because... I'm gay.

Kipo:Oh...[gasps]Oh!I totally misread your signals.Is it OK if I curl up into a ball right now? Thank you, though, for just, uh, I don't know, being you?OK, that was a really dumb thing to say.I think I'm just trying to say, I'm glad we're friends.

Benson's coming out was not made into a huge deal, but it was not ignored by characters around him either. The show soon moves on to the plot of the episode but that is not the only time Benson's queerness is portrayed in the show, unlike other children's animated series that rely on one single major coming out moment/episode followed by no references to a character's queerness. Throughout the series there Benson's queerness is not pushed to the backburner, there is a development of a romantic relationship. Benson and Troy's relationship is portrayed in the most nonchalant way possible; they have scenes professing their love for each other, a prom proposal scene and many heartfelt scenes of them flirting, embracing and kissing. The series does not shy away from displaying queer romance, When Troy and Benson meet for the first time the two lock eyes, the screen turns pink and a song starts playing with lyrics explicitly

referencing falling in love with someone,” Can it be true...Think I’m falling in love with you. You make me feel so blue.” *Kipo and the Age of the Wonderbeasts*’ is a notable example of respectful and positive queer diverse representation, not only does the series provide a straightforward and casual attitude to Benson's and Troy's’ sexuality, their romantic life and sexuality are important but do not define them, and they are LGBTQ characters of color.

*BoJack Horseman* is another example of diverse casual portrayal of queerness. The series is not known to shy away from addressing topics that are considered taboo and normally ignored, like depression, addiction and detrimental illnesses, abortion, and asexuality. Asexuality is an underrepresented orientation in all mediums of media, *BoJack Horseman* is the only series with a openly asexual main character where his identity is adequately explored but does not define his character. Todd’s asexuality is portrayed in a realistic and genuine way. In the end of the third season Todd’s asexuality is hinted at when his ex-girlfriend questions his sexuality:

Emily: Todd, can I ask you something?

Todd: Of course.

Emily: What’s your deal? I feel like you like me, but you don’t like me but you like me. And I don’t know what that is. Are you gay?

Todd: Whoa. Why would you even-?

Emily: You can tell me if you’re gay. It’s fine. This isn’t the 1600s or some places in the present.

Todd: I’m not gay. I mean I don’t think I am. But I don’t think I’m straight, either. I don’t know what I am. I think I might be nothing.

Emily: Oh well, that’s okay.

Todd: Yeah?

Emily: Yeah of course.

This scene is a very realistic depiction of what it is like to be asexual in a society that struggles to see anything beyond “straight” and “not straight. Todd’s’ response is also a realistic, relatability

portrayal of what it is like questioning and struggling to come to terms with your sexuality/identity in a society where asexuality is ignored. In season four, Todd finally comes to terms with his sexual orientation and comes out as asexual:

Todd:I guess they're not gonna put you in the best friend hall of fame.But I don't know that I loved her. I don't think I'm allowed to be in love.

Bojack:Don't say that. You do so much for everybody.

Todd:Thanks.It was shitty what you did with Emily, but, um... I think I'm... asexual.

Bojack:A sexual what? Dynamo, deviant? Harassment lawsuit waiting to happen?

Todd:No. Asexual,not sexual.

Bojack:Ohh.

Todd:I'm sure you think that weird.

Bojack:Are you kidding? That's amazing.

Todd: It actually feels nice to finally say it out loud.I am an asexual person.I am asexual.

These two scenes are an example of how both friends react with acceptance and without judgment. Both reveals are acknowledged but not made a big deal, and the show carries on normally after. Todd's' asexuality is thoughtfully explored and intertwined throughout the rest of the series. Todd is portrayed as a character that happens to be asexual and not an asexual character that is entirely defined by his sexuality.

### **Analysis**

This study finds that Japanese animated series representation of the LGBTQIA+ community includes sob stories, tokenism, and a lack of portrayal of queer relationships, while American animated series portray queerness through subversive humor and casual queer

representation but also face setbacks with the inability to accurately define queer sexual orientations. When discussing diverse and meaningful representation in spaces such as animation, there are various criteria to look at. First, is the representation diverse in terms of representation of various sexual orientations, gender identities, and racial diversity? Secondly, does the portrayal of queer characters pass the Vito Russo test? Lastly, if they pass the test, is the representation accurate and unproblematic?

After analyzing both American and Japanese animated series depictions and portrayals of queer characters, the data shows that American animation had the most diversity when it came to the number of various identities and sexualities portrayed. Out of all 3 Japanese animated series, there were a total of 8 canon queer characters; 5 of them were transgender, two of them were bisexual, and one was non-binary. In the American animated series episodes, there were a total of six canon queer characters: two gay men, one asexual, pansexual, transgender, and bisexual. The results show that in Anime, there is a high representation of transgender characters, but other sexual orientations are underrepresented. In American animation series, various sexualities and identities are represented. Racially diverse queer characters are extremely hard to come by in any form of media, and there is no surprise this statement holds true to animation. Out of all six queer characters analyzed in the American animated series, only two were people of color. Now, it is no secret that most anime characters are Japanese, given the fact that anime is from Japan, but many series have introduced other POC. With this being said, anime has the potential of portraying racially diverse queer characters, but unfortunately, that is not the case. When it comes to anime, racially diverse queer characters are almost non-existent. My findings conclude that there is also a lack of representation of queer POC in both animated mediums.

According to GLADD, the Russo test is designed to analyze how LGBTQIA+ characters are represented in fictional work. To pass the analytical test, the following must be true: the film or show contains at least one character that is identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer, and that character must not be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity, and the character must be tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect. My data concludes that none of the anime series were successful in passing the analytical test. While all three series included at least one character that is part of the LGBTQIA+ community, the other two criteria were not met. *Stars Align* and *Paradise Kiss* fail to pass the second and third requirements. The queer characters are predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity, and their removal would not have a significant impact. *Wandering Son* has identifiable queer characters, and they are tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect, but they are solely defined by their gender identity. In comparison, all three American animated series passed the Russo test. Queer characters in *Big Mouth*, *BoJack Horseman*, and *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* are not solely defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity and are tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect.

While passing the simple test is a step in the right direction toward positive and meaningful queer representation, that does not mean that the representation is free of problems or offensive content. It is important for media to include substantial, multidimensional queer characters that pass this simple test, but it is also important to portray these characters in a respectful, accurate, and non-problematic way. While the three American animated series passed the Russo test, it does not mean that all were free of flawed representation. *Big Mouth* specifically had some setbacks with their queer representation. While they had done an excellent

job in the previous seasons, there were a few problematic scenes. Their definition of bisexuality and pansexuality missed the mark by perpetuating stereotypes that surround both sexualities. The other two American animated series were free of problematic portrayals. While none of the anime series passed the Russo test, that does not mean the representation was necessarily negative. All three anime series were free of problematic stereotypes and portrayals. The representation of queer characters was tokenized, which is one of the reasons they did not pass the Russo test. In conclusion, while the American animated series passed the analytical test, not all representation was unproblematic and accurate. Queer representation in anime was fairly accurate but not free of flaws either. In terms of all three criteria discussed above my data concludes that American animation had overall better queer representation compared to the anime series in terms of quantity and quality.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the extensive and undeniable progress regarding LGBTQIA+ visibility and representation over the past decades, there is no denying that significant issues remain with respect to the quantity and quality of portrayals of sexual and gender minorities in animation. In regard to my research question my findings show that American animation representation of the queer community subverts negative stereotypes through humor and portrays queerness in a very casual way, but there were some flaws with inaccurate definitions of sexualities. The representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in anime series contained realistic struggles the queer community face, token characters, and there was lack of queer relationships. My finding demonstrates that there has been undeniable shift in how the LGBTQIA+ community is portrayed in the last few decades but there is still room for improvement. To move forward and achieve better quality and diverse queer representation the writer's room needs to be diversified.

To truly create inclusive and meaningful queer representation there must be an increase in diversity behind the scenes. Majority of writers and directors are straight, cisgender, white male, which needs to change in order to achieve better representation. It is also important for writers and directors to at least do research on the sexuality or gender identity being portrayed if they aren't part of the group themselves.

This work expands upon previous literature by providing a qualitative study on how two forms of animation portray characters that are explicitly stated as queer. Past literature focused on queer coded characters in children and adult animated series (Brennan, 2018; Dennis, 2003; Dhaenens et al.,2012; Dhaenens,2014; Dunn, 2016; Johnson, 2010; Kim et al.,2007; Lugo-Lugo et al., 2009; Perea, 2018; Ravela, 2017; Raymond, 2013; Santos et al., 2019;(Blodget et al., 2019; Garg, 2019; Hoskin, 2018). By focusing on two distinct cultures scholars can begin to understand how LGBTQIA+ representation differs in both forms of animation in terms of quality and quantity.

### **Limitations and future research**

There were some limitations to this qualitative study including time strains and limited content. Due to the limited time I had to complete this study, I was only able to analyze fifteen episodes total. A sample of more episodes might paint a better picture of how the LGBTQIA+ community is portrayed in both forms of animation. This research opens ways for further research of the LGBTQIA+ community and their portrayals in animation. My study was limited shows in streaming services, this opens the possibility to explore and compare how queer representation in streaming services and cable TV differ. Another suggestion for future research involves comparing LGBTQIA+ representation in the two common forms of audiovisual translations in anime, subtitled and dubbed. There has been a history of major changes in various

anime series once sold and brought to American audiences. A big example is Sailor moon, in the English-dubbed version two queer characters were rewritten as cousins (Hoskin, 2018). Further research on the English-dubbed and the Japanese-subbed versions of anime series could expand on this research. A final suggestion for future research includes analyzing and comparing how animation portrays queer POC characters versus White queer characters. All suggestions would contribute to queer studies and media studies.

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