

How the media portrays/represents LGBTQ+ persons.

Key words: portrayal, representation, analysis

Introduction

In this proposal we will be looking at the representation of the LGBTQ+ community in current day media, the specific media we will be covering will be Film, TV including streaming such as Netflix, HBO max and Disney+, literature and lastly graphic novels, in which then will lead into the analyzation of two graphic novels called Heartstopper and the girl at sea, which both have different ways of representing the LGBTQ community and the issues surrounding queer persons. Looking at characters and how their sexuality and or gender is presented will give insight into future projects and help in avoiding stereotypical representations or characteristics from occurring (Epstein, 2013 pp.64-66)

Film & TV

Representation of LGBTQ folks has increased over the last few years, medias such as television, streaming services, and books have seen an increases of LGBTQ characters or story's including LGBTQ characters, the inclusion of character and or stories of the LGBTQ verity is over all a good thing, some depictions and or treatment of said characters leaves room to be desired (McInroy & craig, 2016), an example of this would be the 'bury your gays' trope, in were the moment a character is confirmed to be queer they are killed off for no good reason other than that they are queer, this trope sees LGBTQ persons as disposable and or not deserving of a happy or satisfactory ending. The 'bury your gay' trope was originally used for LGBTQ authors to tell stories without backlash or breaking the law, but in the modern age there is no use for it, it just contributes to poor representation (Hulan, 2017, pp.17).

"This year's study found that of the 775 series regular characters scheduled to appear on scripted broadcast primetime programming for the 2021-2022 season, 92 characters or 11.9 percent are LGBTQ" (Deerwater 2022)

GLAAD's 2021-2022 report of LGBTQ representation states that there has been an increase in LGBTQ representation by 2.8%, these increases are mostly found on streaming sites and or services such as Netflix, Hulu, HBO max and Amazon video (deerwater,2022). Streaming services is just one area of television media that's seen an uptake in LGBTQ representation over the past couple years, one media that has been lagging in LGBTQ representation is mainstream cinema, the best example of this would be Disney (Donegan, 2021).

Disney's representation of LGBTQ characters and story's is often described as one dimensional and stereotypical, and if an LGBTQ character is included into the story, it is often for a limited time or as a one-off character often appearing for one minute or less (Barnes, 2022). LGBTQ representation is important to further the acceptance of the community, representation in films, TV and streaming are helping people to accept and engage the existence of the community, this type of representation is also helpful toward the community itself, especially to adolescents who may be discovering their sexuality of gender, having representation keeps them from feeling alone (cook, 2020).

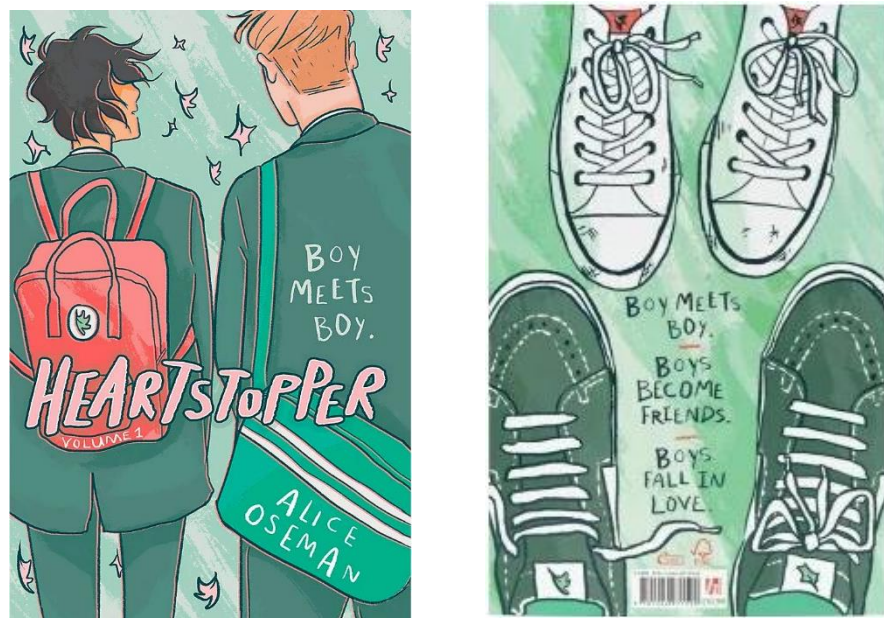
Books, picture books & graphic novels

Books in general are more diverse than film and TV when it comes to representation, with books the author doesn't necessarily need to go to a publishing agency, see Amazon's self-publishing for an example (Deborah, 2014). Since books don't need to be confined into a run time they have the freedom to explore more characters, their development and plot lines, this gives the author more room to add representation and diverse characters, it also allows the author to explain and discuss sexuality and gender on a deeper level, this combined with the internal monolog of the characters, ends up resonating with readers, this is also a useful tool for educating children and young teen on the LGBTQ community, this could be due to parents not really understanding or knowing the subject matter themselves (Epstein, 2013). Literary and illustration may also give a clearer understanding on topics that are harder to grasp or understand from different perspectives.

Picture books have more recently had an increase in the representation of the LGBTQ community; however, the representation tends to be limited to the depiction of lesbian parents or gay parents in a typical heteronormative relationship, nuclear family and white picket fences, this type of representation does not showcase the diversity of the LGBTQ community, it typically excludes different gender identities and other sexuality's (Hedberg, Venzo & young, 2020).

Heartstopper by Alice Oseman

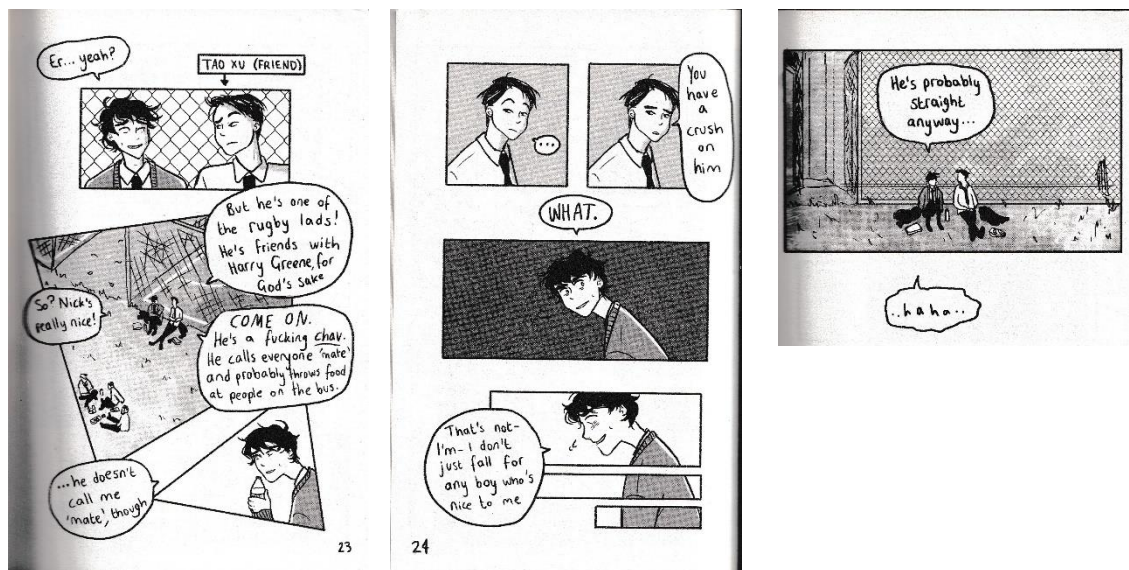
"Charlie, a highly-strung, openly gay over-thinker, and Nick, a cheerful, soft-hearted rugby player, meet at a British all-boys grammar school. Friendship blooms quickly, but could there be something more ...?" (Alice Oseman, 2018).



Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper volume 1* (2018)

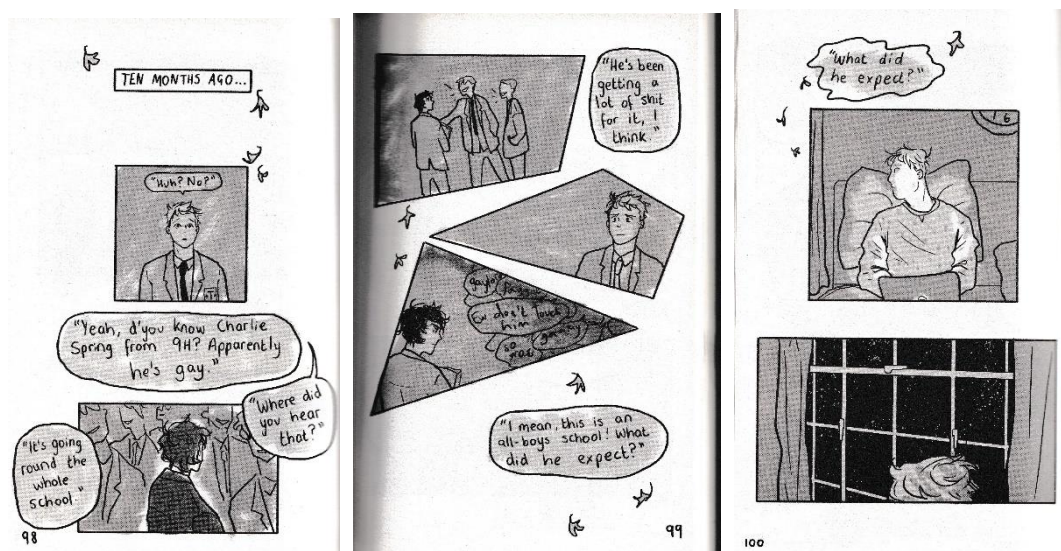
Originally publicised as a webcomic on various sites such as Tumblr, Tapas and Webtoon, Oseman's comic features many different types of representation of the LGBTQ community, including trans persons, gay, bisexual, and lesbian persons, the representation is not only limited to one couple of character the whole cast is diverse and have their own struggles and conflicts. This comic recently became more popular due to the 2020 Netflix's adaptation and renewal for a following season (Alice Oseman, 2018).

Colour, since this comic/graphic novel is all illustrated in black and white, colour and its meanings don't play a role in the story as a whole, so I will be looking at the covers, all of the covers of the books uses soft almost playful colours, this could be a nod to the pure innocence of the books (Adams, 2017. Pp,24-31).



(Alice Oseman, *heartstopper volume 1*, 2018)

Here we can see two characters discussing and speculating about another characters sexuality, they discuss the way in which the character looks and acts in regards their sexuality, this could be seen as basing assumptions on stereotypes, media and in the real world often, when thinking of homosexual and bisexual men are stereotypically seen as flamboyant, loud and effeminate, this goes the same for lesbians and stereotypical assumptions of them being not-feminine, this is not to say that these qualities are bad, but not embodying these quality can lead to others from the same communities to ostracize and question the person sexuality (Vieira, 2017).



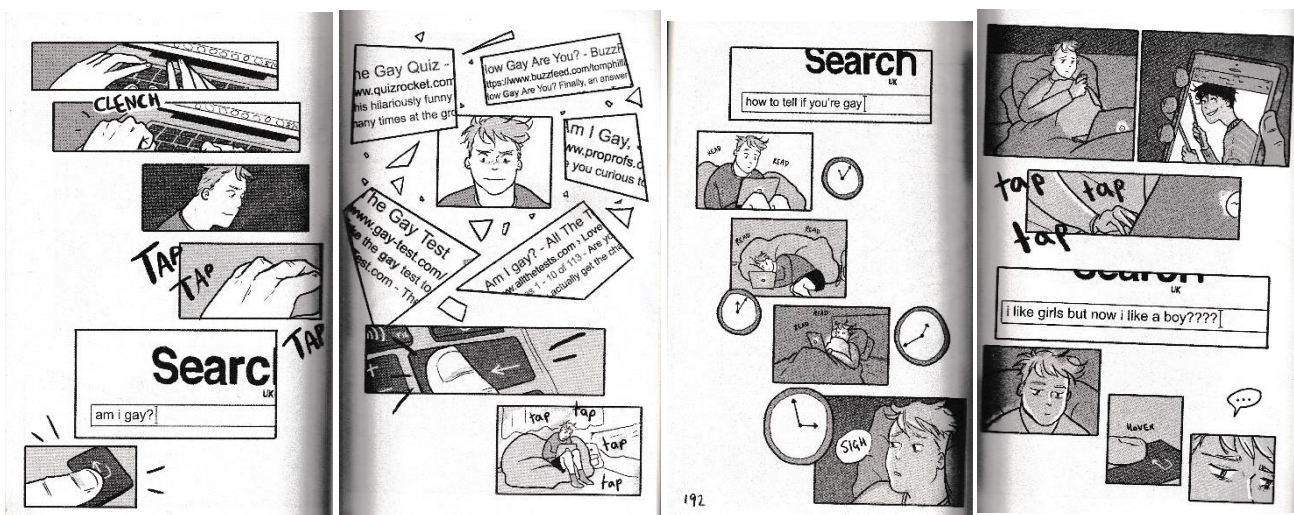
(Alice Oseman, *heartstopper volume 1*, 2018)

Homophobia and bullying targeted at one's sexuality and identity, this is shown and explained throughout the four volumes of *Heartstopper*, the character known as Charlie is depicted as being the victim of this type of bullying, the series doesn't show the beginning of it, but it does depict the aftermath and affects it had on the character.

In pages 480 to 500 the character known as Harry, who throughout volume one and two is known to make homophobic remarks towards Charlie, again engaging with negative stereotypes this then leads to a slur being said, this is all played off as a joke to Harry. Often homophobic and sexist remarks are most likely to be the fault of the person being insecure about their position or masculinity, anti-gay humour is often used to refer their position in a group (Hosie, 2017).

"Stereotyping means having fixed views of a group of people based on their group identity; again, such views generally are negative, but they can be positive as well" (Epstein, 2013)

Although there is possibility that stereotyping can be positive, the argument is that all stereotypes are negative because it regards the stereotype over the individual person. Pages 480 to 485 depict the character Harry engaging with these stereotypes (Epstein, 2013. Pp.63-73).



(Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper* volume 1, 2018)

Throughout the volumes Nick's journey and self-discovery of his bisexuality is shown, throughout volume one the focus is on his and Charlie's developing relationship and his questioning of his sexuality, volume one doesn't mention bisexuality all through the volume this could be to show the viewer the confusion and the 'one way or the other' mentality, often bisexuality is shown as a sort of indecision, it is spoken as an 'you must choose one' either homosexuality or heterosexuality, when in reality sexuality is not-binary (Epstein, 2013, pp.134-139). "the phenomenon of 'bi erasure' is the process of rendering bi-identified people and their experiences invisible within discussions of LGBTQ+ identities, experiences, and issues" (Stewart, 2022) this can be seen/shown in the images above, where Nick goes through countless websites and internet searches but it is never shown if he even found the term bisexual, this is latter confirmed on page 320 where the character Charlie introduces Nick to the term bisexuality, this can be read as a the character searching for information about sexuality only to come to the 'one or the other' stand still (GLAAD, 2016).

Overall *Heartstopper*, volumes one till two, have a lot of different story moments to do with aspects of the LGBTQ+ community, above is just some key aspects that are integral to the story, graphic novel covers other important issues as well, issues such as the way lesbian couples are seen, coming

out and mental health issues relating to bullying, all while having an diverse cast of characters including a transgender character and sexuality's that are shown in a positive/happy light, (Epstein, 2013, pp.141-142).

'The girl at sea' by molly knox Ostertag

"Fifteen-year-old Morgan has a secret: She can't wait to escape the perfect little island where she lives. She's desperate to finish high school and escape her sad divorced mom, her volatile little brother, and worst of all, her great group of friends...who don't understand Morgan at all. Because really, Morgan's biggest secret is that she has a lot of secrets, including the one about wanting to kiss another girl." (Ostertag,2021)



(Ostertag, *The girl from the sea*, pp.148-149, 2021)

Throughout the book the use of background solid colour is used, these are often used when an high emotion is being conveyed, pink is the most prominent through out the book as it signifies morgans romantic feelings, pink often symbolizes love and passion among other meanings, blue is used to show emotional distress and orange is used in association with positive interaction with her brother, this gives the viewer an clearer understanding of the emotions displayed (Adams,2017 pp.26-31)

Throughout the story, the character known as morgan is shown to think of her sexuality as a burden, something she puts off because of other stressful factors in her family E.g., newly divorced parents. Outside factors are known to affect if a person decides to 'come out' factors such as media coverage of sexuality or gender in a negative light, an example of this would be the current vilification of transgender folks (stonewall, 2022), or more personal factors such as unsupportive parent and or family (Seager Van Dyk, Aldao & Pachankis, 2022), here morgans mother is excepting of her daughter sexuality, discussing that being who you are is not a burden or a cause for concern, this graphic novel shows the ideal response of 'coming out'.



(Ostertag, *The girl from the sea*, pp.128-129, 2021)

Outing, according to oxford languages is “the practice of revealing the sexual or gender identity of a person” typically without their consent. Here it is shown that the younger brother of morgan is the one to reveal that morgan has a girlfriend, this can be read as siblings having sibling behaviour, but others may read it as ‘outing’ of a family member without their consent, here it is treated as a moody teenager vying for attention, when in reality ‘outing’ someone can have lasting consequences to that persons mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2023), other factors may be in play as well such as an unsafe living situation (stonewall, 2022).



(Ostertag, *The girl from the sea*, pp.188-189, 2021)

Towards the end of the book morgan becomes more outgoing with her sexuality instead of hiding it, this leads to a confrontation with morgans friends, in where Morgan admits that she did not want anyone to know about her sexuality because they would treat her differently (Meyer, 2003). In the panels above it show a conversation between morgan and one of her friends, the conversation

consists of the friend asking why Morgan didn't tell her about her sexuality, it is not said in a malicious way, but it gives off the feeling that Morgan owed an explanation on her sexuality to that friend, often for queer people it is as though they are expected to explain why they are the way they are.

Overall, *The Girl from the Sea* is a book that is targeted at a younger audience and is focussed on the relationship of one couple whilst having an overall story, there are some issues with diversity when it comes to the queer representation, this lack of diversity has also been found in children's picture books where there is a lack of representation of bisexuals and transgender folk. *The Girl from the Sea* deals with the issues mentioned in a soft dulled down type of way, making it easier for younger audiences to understand. (Epstein, 2013, pp.132-133)

Conclusion

In conclusion these graphic novel/comics are distinctly different from one another, Osman's *Heartstopper* focuses more on the progression of a queer relationship, the ups and downs, the finding out of one's sexuality, it doesn't play into stereotypes that are often found in literature and TV making the characters their own fleshed out people with personalities rather than a select few characteristics (Epstein, 2013, pp.63-73). These both cover difficult topics in a respectful and approachable way, a way that the reader can understand and engage with (Burger, 2028 pp.11-17). One reason for why these two representations is different could be due to the books length, while *Heartstopper* has had four book releases and each chapter is in comic format leading to a conclusion in each chapter while 'the girl by the sea' is a singular book story, it doesn't leave much room for character development and such.

While there is diversity when it comes to these two graphic novels, there is a distinctive lack of representation of non-binary and/or asexual/aro persons, labels typically under the Q in LGBTQ, not many books, movies or TV series touch on the queer aspect of representation, aspects such as questioning persons or persons that don't go by a label (Epstein, 2013, pp.155). As time moves on more and more representation of the LGBTQ community is going to increase throughout different types of media, there is already an increase alone from 2020 of 2.8 percent in scripted TV series. (Deerwater, 2022)

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