

An analysis of hidden curriculum for LGBTQ+ high school students through teen-centric shows and movies

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Abstract

Hidden curriculum has been shown to have direct influences on the perceptions and notions of a variety of different curricula, especially in graduate schools. This study analyzed hidden curriculum in LGBTQ+ centric media that is aimed at teenagers. The purpose of this study was to analyse the underlying themes that are propagated towards queer youth, bearing in mind how influential media can be. Shows and movies were selected via a crowdsourcing method and eight media were chosen to be analyzed. Each of these shows and movies had a high-school aged protagonist, were set in the United States and were released in the last 3 years (2017-2020). After review, the most prominent themes that emerged were conformity to stereotypes and typecasting, lack of representation, out-groups and lack of acceptance as well as mental health and self-esteem issues. It was observed that hidden curriculum is extensively seen in media and can be used as a valuable teaching tool to both promote or discourage certain attitudes and behaviours, an expedient to build communities and a resource to spark conversations about the notions of sexuality and gender.

Keywords: Hidden Curriculum, LGBTQ+, Media, Teenagers

Introduction

Background

Hidden curriculum refers to tacit rules and norms that are propagated in a variety of different settings. First coined by Philip W. Jackson in 1968 (Jackson, 1968), an important difference is that while formal education uses mediums like courses and lessons to teach skills and pass on knowledge intentionally, hidden curriculum is taught through hidden and implicit academic, cultural and social messages— often unintentionally (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2015). Analysis of music classes has shown that everything from which music pieces are selected, how students are punished, financial requirements and program structures send messages to students to articulate certain traits, attitudes and behaviours (Oare, 2019). Examples of hidden curriculum can be found in law and medical schools, as well as physical education and sports (Rajput et al., 2017; Moss, 2013; Jung et al., 2018).

Influence of Media

With an increasing number of Americans getting their daily news from social media (Shearer et al., 2015), it's influence in the modern world cannot be overlooked. It is perhaps even more vital to consider the increasing influence on

children and teenagers. Countless research studies and experiments showed correlated data that extensive exposure of violent video games can lead to desensitization of children towards violence (Carnagey et al., 2007; Ellis et al., 2019). Similar research shows that exposure to media has gendered influences on cognitive habits of teenagers (Bailyn, 2011), have extensive influence on body image and eating disordered attitudes (López-Guimerà et al., 2010). Recent findings have gone as far as to show that media can have direct influence on the perceptions and notions of gender and sexuality (Wood, 1994; Meyer, 2013; Gruber & Grube, 2000; Brown, 2002). It has become pivotal that media be analyzed from the perspective of global health (Galea, 2007).

Queer Media

Estimates show that 11% of American adults have experienced same-sex attraction in their life (Gates, 2011). However, less than 3% of all research articles published in the last two decades are LGBT-centric and most lack theoretical depth (Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2017; Renn, 2010). In recent years, queer representation on media has become a lot more mainstream. While representation may seem like it is widespread, intensive representation is hardly seen. With a decelerating rate of new queer characters being introduced while plots continuously killing them off at a high pace, statistics show that while lesbian and bisexual women form less than 1% of all characters on popular shows, they account for about 10% of all deaths (Framke et al., 2016). The literary trope, known as 'bury your gays,' is often characterized by the death of one of the partners in a same-sex couple leading the other to realize that they aren't actually queer. This reiterates the ingrained homophobia present in our society, where media is forced to portray bad endings for queer characters in order to be popular (Hulan, 2017). Queer characters are also shown to have deep-seated mental health issues, much in line with the real world, where LGBTQ teenagers are four times more likely to have depressive thoughts,

self-harm and attempt suicide than their straight peers (Campbell, 2018).

Existence Of 'Gaydar'

Gaydar is defined as 'an ability to perceive a person's homosexuality without being explicitly told so' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is considered to be almost a 'sixth sense' and is generally more prevalent in the homosexual community than in the general populace (Colzato et al., 2010). Empirical research initially shows that English listeners can identify someone's sexuality based on auditory cues alone (Fasoli et al., 2017). While more research continues to be done with respect to how truly veracious this is, in an interesting study conducted recently, the following results were derived—

Gay speakers were identified as gay or bisexual by 75% of the participants, and heterosexual speakers were identified as such by 89% of the participants. Also, 67% of the participants were able to correctly recognize both speakers and only one participant got both wrong (Sulpizio et al., 2015).

Recent years have also seen people being able to recognize sexualities off of gendered facial cues, mannerisms or even a mass clump of different factors (Zimman, 2010; Johnson et al., 2007).

Methodology

Selection of Media

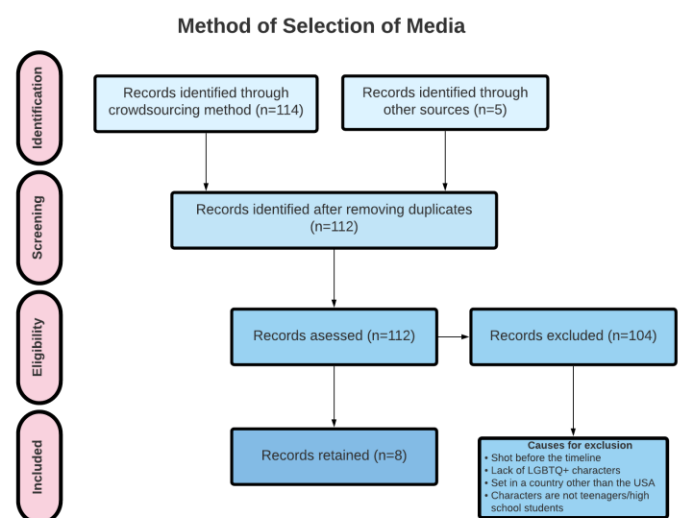


FIGURE 1. A Prisma Flow Diagram depicting the process of selection of the media for the research study.

Shows and movies were selected through a crowdsourcing method (Figure 1). A spreadsheet was sent to multiple high school communities on social media platforms such as Discord and Slack. The spreadsheet was allowed edits for a span of 24 hours and totaled a final collection of 114 movies and shows. Five additional shows and movies were selected based on recommendations from editorials on *Rotten Tomatoes*. After deletion of duplicates, a total of 112 media was left. The media was then rescanned where four primary questions were asked—

- Does the record have queer characters?
- Was the record released in the last three years (2017-2020)?
- Is the record set in the United States?
- Are the characters teenagers/high school students?

After the elimination of the media that did not fit into the criterion, the following media was chosen—

- Shows and release year
 - Trinkets (2019)
 - One Day At A Time (2017)
 - Never Have I Ever (2020)
 - Riverdale (2017)
- Movies
 - The Prom (2020)
 - The Half Of It (2020)
 - Alex Strangelove (2018)
 - Love, Simon (2018)

A brief summary of the selected media can be found in Appendix A.

Viewing Protocol

The shows were viewed for as long as the characters were still in high school to ensure authenticity and accuracy to the study. For example, *Trinkets* was viewed in its entirety while *Riverdale* was considered until season 5 episode 3, after which the show had a six-year time jump. Movies were watched in their entirety.

Notes were taken after every episode to gauge overarching themes while ensuring uninterrupted viewing to prompt better understanding of the plot itself. For movies, notes were taken by the hour. Important and noteworthy examples were also mentioned.

Post completion of all media, overlapping themes were analyzed that were highly prevalent in most, if not all, selected media. Since, the study did not involve human subjects, approval from the institutional ethics review board was not required.

Results

Conformity to Stereotypes and Typecasting

With the science of ‘gay-dar’ being significantly researched, it cannot be ignored that these research studies lay down the cornerstone for the portrayal of diverse characters and sexualities in media. Be it the possibility of a ‘queer’ accent or the identification of queer people through non-traditional traits or characteristics, their portrayal— often by straight and cisgender actors— is extremely exaggerated (Colzato et al., 2010; Fasoli et al., 2017; France, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007; Sulpizio et al., 2015; Zimman, 2010). It is deeply reminiscent of the aggrandized mannerisms employed by homophobic people to mock, bully and often traumatize queer individuals.

The best example of this is the uproar following a Golden Globe nomination for James Corden’s extremely stereotypical depiction of a gay man in *The Prom*. Barry Glickman, portrayed by Corden— a cis and straight man, is “tremendously offensive and extremely flamboyant” and according to multiple members of the LGBTQ+ community, extremely ironical to the plot of the movie that advocates for equal treatment of queer individuals and gay rights (Carras, 2020).

A similar issue is visible in *Trinkets*, where Elodie and one of her love interests— Jillian— are both portrayed in an extremely masculine manner— reinforcing the ever-present emphasis on butch lesbian identities. The ‘short hair-baggy clothes’ cliché is also reinstated throughout the series for the two characters. Furthermore, the ‘dark and depressing life’ typecast for lesbians is

fortified, with Elodie having borne the weight of parental bereavement, being a kleptomaniac, intense trauma and sadness and settling in with her step-family in a completely new place. Recurring character AJ is also a textbook archetype of gay men.

A similar trend is seen in *Never Have I Ever*. Fabiola Torres is cast as having intensely masculine traits from the very beginning, even before she is revealed to be queer. A similar situation is seen with her love interest Eve, who before even showing the minutest of interest in Fabiola, is seen to have masculine traits. Fabiola and Eve both portray the 'short hair-baggy clothes' cliché and while not explicitly seen with Eve, Fabiola's struggle with dressing more feminine is visible.

It must be noted here that when referring to masculinity, this analysis refers to the behaviours, traits, and styles associated with the social constructs of masculinity as well as the butch subculture of the lesbian identity.

Lack of Representation

A general lack of representation was widespread among the media analyzed. The portrayal of queer teenagers is much celebrated, simply because it is extremely rare to find shows that accurately display them in the first place. What this inevitably masks is the massive lack of representation of innumerable sexualities and gender-identities, as well as people of color portraying them.

Cases in point include *Love, Simon*, *the Prom* and *Alex Strangelove*. In all of these movies, the lead characters are white. In the first two, their love interests are people of color, but they have little screen time and few lines. Furthermore, they are both closeted until much later in the movie. Interestingly, in *the Prom*, Alyssa (Ella's love interest) is a person of color who shows a more effeminate aspect of lesbian identity, something seen rarely in media.

One Day At A Time is an example of good representation, with one of the primary characters—Elena, is a Latinx lesbian, and her first love interest is a non-binary lesbian. Episode 3 from Season 2 entitled 'To Zir, With Love,' is

particularly pioneering in this respect, which sees Elena planning to go to an event with a multicultural group of gender non-conforming and queer friends and using multiple and non-traditional pronouns with ease.

Something similar albeit a lot more typecast is seen in *Trinkets* through the character of Sabine—a white pop-singer who identifies as pansexual. Sabine is intensely narcissistic and conceited, but the most contentious thing is perhaps the commitment issues and inability to maintain a monogamous relationship, a false stereotype associated with all sexualities under the bisexual umbrella.

Riverdale has four queer characters in the now permanent cast. While the cast only has one African-American cast member, half of the queer characters have minority ethnicities—Toni Topaz who identifies as bisexual and is African-American while Fangs Fogarty who identifies as gay is played by an actor of joint Jamaican and Chinese descent. In the original *Archie* comics, Jughead—who was revealed to be asexual in 2016, and numerous other characters have had coming out stories—revealed in 2019. Jughead identifies as straight on the show, and a wide range of diverse sexualities and gender preferences inspired by the 2019 comic strips are yet to be seen (Browning, 2016; Villarreal, 2019). The comics are a pioneer of representation, revealing one of the first openly-gay comic books characters—Kevin Keller—and portray a gay marriage in the books years before it was legalized (Babbar, 2011). The character was retained by the series.

The Half of It is a great example, where an Asian character is seen grappling with a homophobic environment, dealing with isolation and unpopularity while struggling to come out of the closet. Not only does the movie depict a rarely-seen minority as the lead, but also adds multiple dimensions to her character. Similarly, the movie shows a journey of multiple characters rather than fixate on the protagonist or start at a point of self-realization.

Within most of the analyzed media, little to no representation was seen of transgender, non-binary and aromantic-asexual people and a

handful characters of sexualities within the bisexual umbrella were visible. In general, much like research related to queer people in real life, it was observed that female characters were seen to have higher representation under the bisexual umbrella, whereas more male characters were either seen to have an affliction with just the opposite sex or just the same sex (Turvey, 2015).

Out-groups and Lack of Acceptance

Media vehemently portrays queer individuals as outsiders to most settings. Be it creating a whole different clique dedicated to them or showing them as having an inability to socialize in the first place with straight teenagers, otherness and out-groups are almost explicit in the media. While usually set more in the background, homophobia and the fear thereof are also prevalent extensively in these shows and movies.

A pivotal example of this is Alex Strangelove, where the titular character's friend group were seen to look down upon queer people all the time, and even shame Alex when he admits he is questioning his sexuality. Peer pressure is also seen when Alex is forced to pursue a sexual relationship with his girlfriend, believing it will be a step in eradicating him of his beliefs. One of the characters— Dell— goes as far as to shame another student for their pansexuality to convince Alex that queerness is a 'slippery slope.'

The Half Of It is also set against a similar backdrop, where principal character Ellie is seen as a loner who doesn't like to socialize, is defenseless against rampant racism and does not have any friends. Never Have I Ever's Fabiola generally keep to herself- prevalent when she tries her hand at building a robot all alone. While her entire friend circle is seen as an outgroup all together, the others find it relatively easier to engage with peers.

One Day At A Time sees Elena's mother- Penelope- extensively struggling with accepting Elena's sexual identity, and her father abandoning her at her Quinceañera because of it.

In Love, Simon, the title character also seems to be rather afraid to come out because it might append his family and friendship dynamics.

The Prom's lead Emma is thrown out by her parents for being queer. Jillian (Trinkets) admits that her mother could not stop crying once she came out. Riverdale's Cheryl also struggles with internalized as well as her mother's homophobia.

Mental Health

Serious emotional and psychological issues are seen with almost all queer characters in the analyzed media. This is perhaps directly correlational to the mental health issues intensely prevalent in queer teenagers. Be it seasonal sadness or deep seated and highly entrenched psychological issues, a wide range of concerns arise with LGBT characters. Deprecating sense of self as well as possible homophobia are also highly visible.

In Riverdale, for example, Cheryl Blossom shows numerous symptoms of borderline personality disorder as well as depression- be it her fierce obsession with Heather or a terrible family dynamic. Her brother's death, sexual assault and her suicide attempt are major red-flags for depression. Her mother's homophobia and her attempt to force herself to be straight impacted both her mental health as well as her sense of self. Ellie Chu (The Half Of It) displays a lot of traits of anxiety and discombobulated self-perception, especially prevalent in her being forced to behave like an adult because of her shambled family, the racism that is prevalent in her locality as well as the alienation she experiences. One Day At A Time's Elena also struggles extensively with self-perception, anxiety and panic attacks.

Simon (Love, Simon) and Alex (Alex Strangelove) show symptoms of anxiety. Alex also displays symptoms of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Elodie is a kleptomaniac as well as shows symptoms of underlying depression. She says she started shoplifting after her mother's death because it makes her feel emotions. She possesses her mother's ashes until the end of season two, showing she is unable to move past the death. Moving to a new place supplemented with parental bereavement while undoubtedly struggling with peer pressure doesn't just show

Elodie struggling with her identity but also flags deep seated trauma.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study revealed several unique themes that haven't been extensively explored in mainstream research. The most important of this is perhaps internalized homophobia, which isn't seen explicitly in real life dynamics. Considering themes such as mental wellbeing and out-groups are often studied, the lack of certain others might incite in queer teenagers' feelings that they alone have such experiences. The depiction of such ideas in the media should be used as a tool to normalize conversations around them (Corp, 2020). Behaviours of fictional characters can be used to both promote certain attitudes and discourage others. This doesn't just help in building a community beyond the classroom, but also reduces instances of demeaning particular individuals by using them as an example.

From the viewpoint of education—LGBTQ+ experiences, ideas and history have long been excluded from high school curriculum and this poses a dangerous threat- setting the precedent that queerness is abnormal and the students who feel it are inherently different (Korengold, 2020). The use of fictional characters for education has been contested (Ornelas & Parikh, 2019), but the intense influence they can have on teenagers simply outweighs the harms (Cavanaugh & Cavanaugh, 1996; Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Barnett et al., 2006). It has been shown that it is possible to utilize television mediums as pivotal educational tools (Hirt et al., 2012), and it is hoped that the findings of this paper will be used in a similar way.

Although this paper did not focus on the influence of these shows and their themes at an individual or organisational level, the extent to which they are visible in the classroom as well as the roles of cultural backgrounds and ethnicities in the depiction of queer youth, these may be interesting grounds for future studies.

Limitations

Since these shows were selected within a limited time-frame and only focused on a single

culture, media that may have been substantially important could not be considered. Therefore, the possibility of other themes that may have been visible due to additional shows or movies cannot be dismissed. Additionally, The different running time of the media may have also influenced the analysis of the overarching themes, due to a variety of paces of character development.

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Appendix A

Synopsis of Selected Media

- Shows
 - Trinkets- A grieving teen (Elodie) finds an unexpected connection with two classmates (Tabitha and Moe) at her new high school after they all land in the same Shoplifters Anonymous group. They are bonded by their mutual secret shoplifting habit and their shared sense of being outsiders.
 - One Day At A Time- The series centers on a Cuban-American family led by the mother, Penelope, a separated military veteran raising Alex- a socially inept tween and a strong-headed, feminist daughter Elena. Penelope's Cuban mother, Lydia, helps her take care of the kids and the house chores.
 - Never Have I Ever- After a traumatic year, an Indian-American teen (Devi) just wants to spruce up her social status — but friends (Fabiola and Eleanor), family and feelings won't make it easy on her. Devi, an overachieving high school sophomore has a short fuse that gets her into difficult situations.
 - Riverdale- Drama based on characters from the Archie comic-books series set in Riverdale, where aspiring musician Archie, his best friends Betty and Jughead, and the new girl Veronica deal with life, love and high school.
- Movies
 - The Prom- After their expensive Broadway production fails, a troupe of hilariously self-obsessed theater stars swarm into a small conservative Indiana town in support of a high school girl (Emma) who wants to take her girlfriend (Alyssa) to the prom.
 - The Half Of It- The Half of It revolves around the friendship between shy, straight-A student Ellie, and school jock Paul Munskey as they work together to write love letters to Aster Flores, the girl they're both secretly in love with.
 - Alex Strangelove- A high school senior (Alex) plans on losing his virginity to his girlfriend (Claire). Things get complicated when he meets a handsome and charming gay kid (Elliot) from the other side of town who unwittingly sends him on a roller-coaster journey of sexual identity.
 - Love, Simon- Everyone deserves a great love story, but for 17-year-old Simon Spier, it's a little more complicated. He hasn't told his family or friends that he's gay, and he doesn't know the identity of the anonymous classmate that he's fallen for online. Resolving both issues proves hilarious, terrifying and life-changing.