

Perception of Sexuality and Gender Identity in Anime: How Positive Representations Could Be Used to Combat LGBTQ+ Discrimination

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Abstract

People within the LGBTQ+ communities are often stigmatized and rejected. Most occurrences of LGBTQ discrimination are actually microaggressions or ostracism that is performed subconsciously due to our inherent bias. One possible way to address the adverse effects of unconscious bias is by introducing entertainment into the lives of children and adolescents through a hidden curriculum designed to normalize LGBTQ+. Hidden curriculum has shown to have a direct influence on a person's ideology and behavior. This research paper will focus on how the hidden curriculum found within Japanese animation or anime can combat discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities. Animes were selected utilizing criteria set within the article, and 4 were chosen for in-depth analysis. Specifically, the author reviewed examples of internalized homophobia and interpersonal discrimination, and prejudice found in these animes. It is discovered that promoting animes (or any type of media) with a positive representation of LGBTQ+ could diminish a person's bias and prejudice to an extent. Therefore it is crucial to use television shows and movies (anime or not) as pivotal educational tools in promoting equality.

Keywords: Anime, LGBTQ+ discrimination, hidden curriculum, effects of media

Introduction

People within the LGBTQ+ communities are often the minorities, forming enclaves to resist discrimination and avoid people, stigmatization, and rejection due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Brown, 2007; Green, 2008). The Human Rights Campaign defines sexual orientation as "an inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people." Gender identity is described as "one's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves." Although advancements have been made to prevent prejudice due to sexual orientation - such as the Supreme Court case, Obergefell v. Hodges, which legalized same-sex marriages - people within the LGBTQ+ community often face harassment from local law enforcement, which often impedes the efforts of national actions for equality (Kazyak and Stange, 2018; Mallory et al., 2015). Across all countries, there is a historical and contemporary trend where a change in the social environment has resulted from increased rights and visibility for the LGBTQ+ group on the national level, yet frequent local community discrimination is still quite evident (Kite and Bryant-Lee, 2016). As seen in China, where the government removed homosexuality and bisexuality as a category from the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders 3 (CCMD-3) in 2,000, but many mental health professionals

continue to hold the belief that homosexuality is just another mental health disease, similar to depression, that can be cured through "conversion therapy" (Wang et al., 2019; Cen, 2017).

Continued intolerance and marginalization caused by our homophobic society have continued to take people's lives and opportunities in the LGBTQ group. Just 4 years ago, in June of 2016, a massacre at Pulse NightClub claimed the life of over 50 people, many of whom were murdered for identifying as part of the LGBTQ group (Durso, 2017). Most occurrences of LGBTQ discrimination are actually microaggressions or ostracism that is performed subconsciously due to our inherent bias in which no amount of federal laws could diminish (DeSouza and Wesselmann, 2017; Frith, 2015). Bias is part of our identity shaped by the culture, people, and situation that person surrounds himself with, contributing to a person's daily social perception and behavior (Greenwald and Lai, 2020). One possible way to address the adverse effects of unconscious bias is by introducing entertainment into the lives of children and adolescents through a hidden curriculum designed to normalize LGBTQ+.

This tactic has been used before to achieve similar outcomes. For example, an attempt to combine entertainment and education to educate and influence young adults on sexually transmitted diseases achieved great success (Glik et al., 2010). Entertainment could also be used to subconsciously shift the behavior and attitude of an individual through prolonged contact. Data from 98 independent studies show that playing violent video games resulted in a positive correlation of increased aggression that affects the participants both short and long term (Greitemeyer and Mugge, 2014). A few available studies have found that mainstream mass media directly affect our perception of our sexuality and influences our behavior (Brown, 2010).

This paper will focus on how the hidden curriculum found within Japanese animation or anime can combat discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities. Anime was chosen as the type of media contended due to its wide following across the globe, as shown by its market value of around 23.56 billion USD (not counting the visual novel, anime-related games, and manga) (Grand View Research, 2021). A systemic analysis was conducted to determine how anime could normalize the LGBTQ+ community in parts of our society that is homophobic.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method systematic review to support the thesis for this paper.

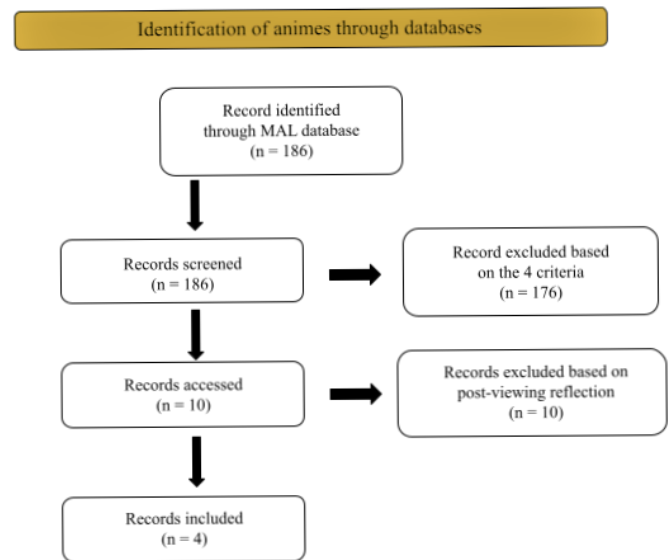


FIGURE 1: Depicts the process of selection for animes used in this study.

Animes were selected utilizing the genres shounen-ai (boy's love) and shoujo-ai (girl's love) onto an online database for anime titles called My Anime List for review (Figure 1). Initially, there were 186 shows under the category of Shounen-ai and Shoujo-ai.

These shows were then screened based on the 4 criteria listed below.

- The show's relevancy on the topic of LGBTQ+. More specifically, getting rid of the shows that feature an LGBTQ+ character as a running gag to fit into a comedic stereotype or characters irrelevant to the main plot.
- The quality of the show is based on public ranking given out in My Anime List and Anime-Planet.
- The relatability of these shows compared to average teenagers/high school student's daily life. Although supernatural/sci-fi-themed shows were included in this study, flat-out fantasy shows were not due to the preposterous events happening within the show.

After comparing the synopsis, reviews, and online recommendations of these anime to the criteria listed above, these 9 shows and 1 movie were chosen for further screening.

- Anime Shows
 - Hourou Musuko (2011)
 - Aoi Hana (2009)
 - Mikagura Gakuen Kumikyoku (2015)
 - Neon Genesis Evangelion (1995)
 - Yuri!!! on Ice (2016)
 - No 6 (2011)
 - Citrus (2018)
 - Lupin III (1971)
 - Cowboy Bebop (1998)
- Anime Movies
 - Doukyuusei (2016)

The shows were viewed in their entirety. 4 questions were considered following each viewing session to check for eligibility.

- Question 1: Was this anime a positive representation of the LGBTQ+ community?
- Question 2: Did I develop a new understanding regarding the unique experiences of people who identify as

LGBTQ+ due to behavioral, emotional, and cognitive differences?

- Question 3: Did I develop a new perspective of the LGBTQ communities as a whole?
- Question 4: If I witness a similar situation in real life, would I be more likely to perceive the situation as normal?

Lupin III, Mikagura Gakuen Kumikyoku, Cowboy Bebop, Neon Genesis Evangelion, No 6, and Doukyuusei were excluded in the paper due to insufficient LGBTQ+ content found within the show. The final 4 shows that are included in this paper are (See Appendix A for more information about the following animes) :

- Hourou Musuko (2011)
- Aoi Hana (2009)
- Yuri!!! on Ice (2016)
- Citrus (2018)

Post viewing of the anime, overlapping themes are analyzed with the content of the show itself.

A secondary systematic review was also done to support the thesis (Figure 2). A broad range of search terms was used across databases Pubmed, Google Scholar, and JSTOR (See Appendix B for search terms). After compiling all the search results, duplicates and articles unavailable to the author were excluded. In this stage of evaluation, articles were examined based on their title or abstract. Two ideas are presented within this paper, the effects of hidden curriculum and media and injustices experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community; if the article doesn't specifically have a section that dealt with these two points, it was excluded. 335 articles were screened based on title or abstract. A final of 122 articles was thoroughly examined utilizing the complete text, and 41 articles were included in the final review due to relevancy or redundancy. An additional 7 articles were found through hand searching methods.

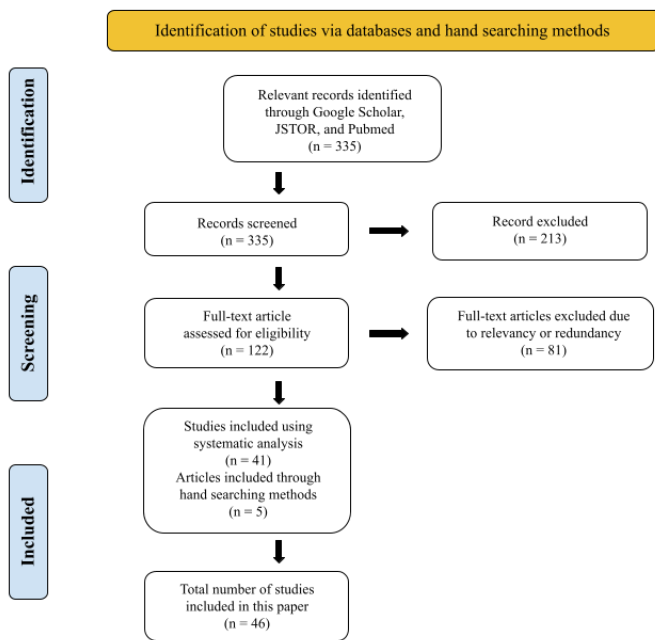


FIGURE 2: PRISMA flow diagram depicting the systematic review of 335 articles evaluated in this study.

Results

A person's development of his own moral value, ethics, and perception of what's right or wrong includes all pedagogical, cultural, and social factors they surround themselves with (Bornstein, 2017; Berry, 2005; Lickona, 2006). This process is also responsible for a person's character and behavior (Zuhal, 2012). A person's character also measures their willingness to maintain a respectful attitude and conscious decision to not discriminate against people with differing viewpoints in sexuality and gender identity (Battistich, 2005; Dodd, 1991). In our past, media that told stories of LGBTQ+ characters are often queer-coded - a character whose sexuality is not confirmed but is coded as a queer through stereotypes and exaggerated traits and characteristics (Fisher et al., 2007; Pullen, 2016). Due to our homophobic culture, coded characters are often shown as depressed, desperate, or perverse (Kim, 2017). Due to the way media often changes our social cognition, dictating how we should feel about ourselves or others, queer-coded characters that spread negative (often false) information about the LGBTQ+ community

is dangerous, to say the least (Firth, 2019). This was one of the causes of hostility towards LGBTQ+ groups that are experienced frequently, with 51% are reported to have been called slurs, 53% experienced microaggression, and 51% experienced some forms of violence (Casey et al., 2019). This data exemplifies the importance of a more positive representation of the LGBTQ+ community in media. The paper will now be listing the overlapping themes between the 4 anime reviewed to break down the positive expression found within them. It is also important to note that these anime were not selected randomly but based on how well they represented their LGBTQ+ characters in a more developed and realistic manner.

Internalized Homophobia

The internalization of homophobia exists due to LGBTQ people living within a heteronormative society and developed a need to compensate for their lack of normalcy through self-loathing, self-abuse, and a more extreme emotional state (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). Internalized homophobia is a significant cause of mental distress that results in self-harm or suicide (Shidlo, 2013). A study at LA Trobe University found that 42% of gay participants indulged in weekly alcohol consumption to escape reality (Hillier, 2010). The fears of being excluded from their preferred social groups often cause many gays to reject their sexual orientation and act in a way that goes against their wishes.

A similar issue is visible in Hourou Musuko. Hourou Musuko tells the story of Shuuichi, who was assigned male at birth but wishes to be a girl, and Yoshino, who was assigned female at birth but wishes to be a boy. At the show's beginning, both characters acted as their birth gender to the best of their ability even though they were in constant dysphoria. At most, they would hint at their hobby of crossdressing without ever finding the courage to admit to the people around them of the gender they would like to be identified as due to fears of being isolated. The characters also

show signs of anxiety about one's own sexual orientation. Being mistaken by the community around them, the two main characters had a misbelief that their sexuality was simply a phase in which they can "grow out of. This fear led them to give up their love interests because they believed their relationship could not be permanent. Within the show, some side characters often support their sexuality, but their self-suppression and thought-policing made them unable to come out. A similar issue is visible in Aoi Hana. Aoi Hana tells a simplistic story surrounding two childhood friends Fumi and Akira separated when they were young before reuniting in high school. The two share a mutual love with one another, however, not as a love interest but under the context of friends. Although they show signs advancing their bond, they are unsure if it's possible to even sustain a same-sex relationship. When Fumi got into a homosexual relationship with an upperclassman, she was ecstatic at first before finally breaking down and clamoring to her friend, "Please don't hate me. Don't think I'm disgusting." Similarly, in the real world, LGBTQ+ members are more likely to have increased social anxiety over other's perceptions and a greater need to achieve gender conformity than people who are heterosexual (Skidmore et al., 2006; Pachinkis and Goldfriend, 2006). The story continues to develop as both characters struggle to find their sexuality and learn how to speak up about how they truly feel. Coming out as part of the LGBTQ+ community is not as static as western media perceives it to be. It is a long struggle of self-discovery and overcoming society, stigma, and yourself (Rosenburg, 2017).

In Yuri on Ice, the internalized homophobia was not about self-hatred or self-discovery but focuses more on finding the courage to express oneself beyond the gender traditional gender norms. It tells the story of Yuuri, an inspiring figure skater who is depressed due to his string of losses, and Victor, who is a 5-time world champion, determined to train Yuuri to help him win the next Championship. In the world of figure skating, it is

generally frowned upon by the judges, tv audience, and sponsors alike for male skaters to adopt a more feminine style. This story tells its tale through its animation. As Yuri gets better at figure skating, he discovers that being more feminine with his movement suited him better than a masculine role. He begins to perfect this more eloquent movement style to express his love for Victor, his coach. This story examines the hardship of portraying your sexuality to the public.

Interpersonal discrimination and prejudice

Humans naturally respond emotionally to interpersonal discrimination and prejudice, including anger, jealousy, loneliness, shame, guilt, social anxiety, and embarrassment (Leary, 2015). People strive for social acceptance and belonging, and being faced with discrimination, ostracism, and stigmatization might cause someone to be anti-social and socially avoidant (Richmond and Leary, 2009). These forms of discrimination often come in the form of unintentional derogatory messages known as microaggression (Nedal et al., 2016). Regardless of age, income, education, and self-rated health, any person experiences some psychological distress from any level of discrimination (Ajrouch, 2010). Social distress shares similar psychological responses as physical pain; thus, we must understand the consequences of unconscious microaggressions on people with different sexuality and gender identity (Rita et al., 2016).

In Hourou Musuko, when Shuuichi wants to try on her sister's dress, her sister catches her in the act and calls it disgusting. This lowered Shuuichi's self-esteem and caused him to wander off from home to seek comfort. This scene demonstrated the vulnerability of individuals with nonconforming sexuality. A study showed that those who disclosed their sexual orientation to family members often received more verbal and physical abuse and quickly became more suicidal as a result (Augelli, 1998; Katz-Wise et al., 2017). Another example was when Shuuichi was teased for writing in her journal, "Juliet, why are you a girl?"

Why am I a boy," referencing the Romeo and Juliet story. In this scene, she expresses her discontent with her gender but cannot do anything about it. The people around Shuuichi continue to repudiate his identified gender daily in small-scaled microaggression. Although each act doesn't seem to be too prevalent, constant getting berated for your own sexuality in the forms of microaggression and victimization would eventually lead to stress on the body and mind (Haines et al., 2017; Nadal, 2018). Victims are often left more doubtful of themselves and worries excessively about their sexuality (Seelman, 2016). Another pivotal example can be found in Aoi Hana. Aoi Hana depicts a world similar to ours in which the heteronormative code is slowly becoming less prevalent, but unconscious discriminatory actions are still very much a thing. The people at their high school have a gossip culture in which groups love to discuss who is homosexual and who is dating who. Although gossiping is seen as a frequent social activity, it inspires fear in someone who is actually homosexual. Our main character Fumi was afraid to become the topic of the gossip; as a result, she struggles to maintain her identity as a lesbian. She chooses to actively hold back her "gay" feelings onto many women that she wanted to date.

The anime, Citrus, is also a great example of this occurrence. Citrus is about the development of their relationship with two girls (Mei and Yuzu) as they try to understand the confusion of the feelings of their romantic person towards one another. After they have started dating, Yuzu constantly runs back home crying due to the homophobic threats in school. Sexual minorities are often the target for bullying and cyberbullying in school (Abreu and Kenny, 2018). Such discrimination resulted in 28% of the reported homosexual teenagers having suicidal ideation (Bouris et al., 2016). Other studies have shown that teenagers experienced a higher chance of mental health problems, high school drop-out, substance abuse, and troubles with the law (Remafedi, 1987; Lock, 1998).

Discussions

The study revealed some of the LGBTQ+ representation found within anime that mainstream media has not yet explored. Many research papers focus on how media misrepresents or underrepresents the LGBTQ+ community while ignoring that some shows help combat the stereotype or biases by having a more realistic and empathetic representation of LGBTQ+. Hidden curriculum is a concept that explains how culture, structures, and institutions influence a person's cognitive behavior (Athina, 2015). It is not just a simple transmission of information but a process of socialization in which morals, norms, values, and beliefs are subconsciously conveyed to the viewer (Mahood, 2011). This means that promoting animes with a positive representation of LGBTQ+ could diminish a person's bias and prejudice to an extent. For example, people could watch the anime, Hourou Musuko, to understand the thoughts and feelings of people who consider themselves transgender. They get an opportunity to empathize with the characters and get the chance to feel emotionally distraught when these characters get discriminated against. The viewers can develop an emotional bond with these fictional characters because we can witness their growth. This will result in a greater understanding of people with different sexuality or gender identities, reducing bias.

There is imputable evidence that media influences people, both emotionally and socially (Anderson and Bushman, 2003). Life in modern times depends on the media that is both invasive and persuasive; thus, it has become the key to communicating good social values (Deuze, 2011). The media has played a fundamental role in the world's relationship with transphobia and homophobia, both in the historical disparaging remarks about the LGBTQ+ community as well as the current Gay Pride Movement (Hubbard and Hegarty, 2014). Due to the effects of media, well-thought-out shows portraying LGBTQ+ couples satisfied with their lives are an essential

representation of the LGBTQ+ community. It is crucial to use television shows and movies (anime or not) as pivotal educational tools in promoting equality.

Conclusions and Limitations

The animes chosen to be used in the analysis put a lot of emphasis on finding LGBTQ+ characters that go beyond filling a character trope or his sexuality in a comedic effect intended to make light of the social stigma at hand. It is important to note that there are many subtle LGBTQ+ characters found in anime in which the shows never commit to articulating their romance - only same-sex crushes portrayed in a very unrealistic and fetishized manner. Even characters popular within the homosexual romance genre are not good representations of the LGBTQ+ community due to the moe love presented historically in Japan (Galbraith, 2009). Because no research was done surrounding the negative representations found in anime, it is hard to make a decisive conclusion on the effects of anime and how it could influence a person's belief and behavior. More studies with greater sample size and participants from a broader range of backgrounds need to be conducted to determine the effectiveness of this strategy to combat LGBTQ+ discrimination. Future studies could also include the roles of cultural knowledge and ethnicities in their perception of these pro-LGBTQ+ animes. This paper only aims to introduce the possibility of how we approach the problem of LGBTQ+ discrimination; by shifting away from some focus from fighting for civil rights in Congress, courtrooms, or out in the streets (although this is equally important) to a more subtle approach of normalizing the LGBTQ+ communities in the beliefs of young adults through the use of hidden curriculum found within anime or any type of media.

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Appendix A: Information regarding the selected anime.

- Hourou Musuko (2011)
 - Studio: AIC CLASSIC
 - Director: Ei Aoki
 - Genres: Drama, Romance, School, Seinen, Slice of Life
- Aoi Hana (2009)
 - Studio: J.C. Staff
 - Director: Ken'ichi Kasai
 - Genres: Romance, Shoujo Ai, Slice of Life
- Yuri!!! on Ice (2016)
 - Studio: MAPPPA
 - Director: Sayo Yamamoto
 - Genres: Comedy, Sports
- Citrus (2018)
 - Studio: Passione
 - Director: Takeo Takahashi Naoyuki Tatsuwa
 - Genres: Drama, Romance, School, Shoujo Ai

Appendix B: Search terms

- Concept 1: Discrimination among LGBTQ+
 - Sexuality, gender identity, discrimination, LGBTQ+, microaggression, systematic prejudice, queer-coding, unconscious bias, oustracism, homophobia, and transphobia
- Concept 2: Effects of media and its hidden curriculum
 - Hidden curriculum, character, behaviors, positive representation, bias, social values, and media