Increasing LGBTQ+ Visibility in Children’s Television

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**Abstract**

Despite the growing inclusivity of LGBTQ+ characters in television, there is little LGBTQ+ representation in children’s television. Moreover, current LGBTQ+ representation in children’s media usually depicts white, gay men and harmful stereotypes of the queer community. This is significant as television may influence children’s social and psychological development. Scholars have presented four suggestions for increasing LGBTQ+ visibility in children’s television. These include addressing queer characters directly, “counting” the number of LGBTQ+ characters in a script, demonstrating the similarities queer individuals share with non-queer individuals, and acknowledging the challenges the LGBTQ+ community faces today. However, there are no children’s teleplays that capitalize on these suggestions. To explore what a gender-inclusive children’s television series may look like, I will write a child-oriented teleplay with multifaceted queer protagonists. Moreover, this teleplay will incorporate these four suggestions. Finally, professors familiar with the LGBTQ+ community will guide my screenwriting process. Through this teleplay, children’s television writers and LGBTQ+ scholars may use my script for their own work. This script may also help to eliminate toxic LGBTQ+ stereotypes in the media. Finally, this teleplay may prompt children to become advocates for the LGBTQ+ community.

**Introduction**

Although the LGBTQ+ Rights Movement has made progress since the 1969 Stonewall Riots, there has been a recent backlash on the queer community. Particularly, on March 23rd, 2018, the Trump Administration placed a ban on transgender individuals from serving in the military. Moreover, on October 22, 2018, the Trump administration proposed to write transgender individuals out of legislation (Green, 2018). These actions blatantly dehumanize members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Furthermore, the political retaliation against the LGBTQ+ community is reinforced by a lack of queer representation in the media. Notably, there is a stunning lack of LGBTQ+ visibility in children’s media (Puglise, 2016). For this reason, this paper will investigate what a gender-inclusive children’s teleplay may look like. It will also discuss the process of writing this teleplay and the expected outcome. In turn, this teleplay may combat toxic heteronormativity demonstrated in the media and the United States’ political climate.

**Background**

Currently, there is little LGBTQ+ representation in children’s television. For instance, in 2017, Disney Channel’s *Andi Mack* featured the first gay protagonist in an American children’s series (Wong, 2017). Moreover, only seven children’s shows since 2005 have featured a same-sex couple in an episode. These couples were usually not reoccurring characters. Also, these shows did not acknowledge other LGBTQ+ identities (Puglise, 2016). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ individuals are typically depicted as white and male. This reinforces heteronormative and queer normative ideals that harm non-white and non-male LGBTQ+ individuals (Eguchi, Calafell, & Files-Thompson, 2014). Finally, queer television characters are portrayed as flamboyant and hyperfeminine. This is a stereotype that erases authentic LGBTQ+ stories from children’s television (Evra, 2004).

Additionally, scholars argue that television may significantly impact children’s beliefs and attitudes. Particularly, cultivation theory states that audiences may “cultivate” perspectives similar to those displayed on television. This process depends on how realistic the television show is, how much television exposure each individual receives, whether or not an individual has access to other information sources, and genetic factors (Gerbner, 1986).

According to cultivation theory, children may be vulnerable to adopting adverse racial and gender stereotypes. This is because children may not have access to other information sources to influence their beliefs. Also, most children have not received extensive educations. Finally, very young children cannot distinguish between stereotypes and personal beliefs. Although most children grow out of this phase, some may continue upholding stereotypes depicted on television (Evra, 2004).

Fortunately, researchers have suggestions on how to strengthen LGBTQ+ representation in children’s television. Logan (2016) argues that writers and educators must address gay and lesbian characters directly. This action makes audiences aware that there is nothing shameful about identifying as LGBTQ+. Lemish (2010) also advises writers to “count” the number of lead LGBTQ+ characters in each show. This action holds writers accountable for creating diverse, inclusive series. Furthermore, she states that writers must emphasize the similarities LGBTQ+ characters share with non-LGBTQ+ characters. This allows non-LGBTQ+ audiences to empathize with queer individuals.

Finally, Lemish argues that writers must acknowledge the different needs of LGBTQ+ characters. This action will show non-LGBTQ+ individuals the challenges queer individuals face today. Consequently, it may turn non-LGBTQ+ audiences, including children, into LGBTQ+ allies. Moreover, this action may validate the emotions of queer individuals marginalized by systemic injustices. If children’s television acknowledges acts of institutionalized homophobia such as the Trump Administration’s, it may bring some justice to the LGBTQ+ community (Green, 2018).

In spite of these suggestions and the need for gender-inclusive children’s shows, there are few children’s teleplays that incorporate queer voices. For this reason, I wish to write a children’s teleplay with several authentic LGBTQ+ protagonists. This teleplay will demonstrate what a gender-inclusive children’s show may look like. It may also be useful for researchers examining how LGBTQ+ characters influence children’s beliefs. Most importantly, this teleplay may serve as a stepping stone for increasing LGBTQ+ representation in children’s media.

**Methods**

I must work with LGBTQ+ community members to guide my writing process. This will ensure that the teleplay represents authentic LGBTQ+ stories. It will also prevent my teleplay from unintentionally stereotyping queer individuals. My faculty mentor is Judy Battaglia, Clinical Assistant Professor of Communication studies at Loyola Marymount University. She has offered to connect me with several Communication Studies faculty members that identify as queer. Specifically, she will connect me with Norma Bowles from the Theatre Arts department. Professor Bowles can help me develop entertaining, inclusive storylines. In addition, Professor Battaglia will connect me with Professor Nina Lozano. Professor Lozano specializes in rhetoric, social and political movements, and feminist and women’s studies. She can make sure my teleplay is relevant to movements for LGBTQ+ rights. Also, she can make sure that the rhetoric I use is progressive, gender-inclusive, and understandable for children. Finally, I will work alongside Professor Battaglia. Her prior research examines how the media presents race, sexuality, gender, and culture. From her expertise, she can oversee my writing process.

Additionally, I must work with a screenwriting professor. Specifically, I can work with screenwriting professor David Clawson. Professor Clawson has written multiple children’s screenplays and the young adult novel *My Fairy Godmother is a Drag Queen.* This novel explores LGBTQ+ stories in a compelling, forward-thinking manner. In the same way, Professor Clawson can help me create a compelling, forward-thinking teleplay. Also, he can make sure my script follows the correct format for a children’s television show.

**Budget**

For this research, I will need Loyola Marymount University summer housing and transportation access. The summer housing will allow me to work with Professor Battaglia, Professor Bowles, Professor Lozano, and Professor Clawson. Moreover, if I need to meet with a professor, media professional, or LGBTQ+ rights organization outside of LMU, the transportation fees will allow me to reach these resources. I will mainly use ride-sharing services for transportation.

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| Loyola Marymount University Summer Session I | $1,628.00 |
| Transportation Fees | $40.00/Week for Six Weeks: $240.00 |
| **Total Cost:** | **$1,868.00** |

**Timeline**

I will write my screenplay over six weeks during the Loyola Marymount University Summer Session I. This session will begin on Monday, May 20th, 2019 and end Friday, June 28th, 2019. I will split up my work as listed below.

**Monday, May 20th – Monday, June 3rd**

* Move in
* Meet with Professor Battaglia, Professor Lozano, Professor Bowles, and Professor Clawson 2-3 times each
* Meet with any recommended contacts, industry professionals, or queer rights activists
* Complete an outline of my children’s teleplay

**Monday, June 3rd – Monday, June 10th**

* Complete first draft of children’s teleplay
* Contact Professor Battaglia, Professor Lozano, Professor Bowles, and Professor Clawson for help
* Give first draft to each of these professors and any other mentors

**Monday, June 10th – Monday, June 17th**

* Receive revisions from mentors
* Make changes as needed
* Meet with each faculty mentor 1-3 times
* Complete second draft of children’s teleplay and give to research mentors

**Monday, June 17th – Monday, June 24th**

* Receive second draft revisions from mentors
* Make changes as needed
* Meet with faculty mentors as needed
* Complete third draft of children’s teleplay and give to research mentors

**Monday, June 24th – Friday, June 28th**

* Receive third draft revisions from mentors
* Make any final changes to teleplay
* Meet with faculty mentors and other contacts to discuss options for dissemination
* Move out

These steps will ensure that my teleplay is at its best quality.

**Expected Results**

I expect to have a children’s teleplay that features complex, compelling, and diverse LGBTQ+ protagonists. The teleplay will highlight the similarities between LGBTQ+ characters and non-LGBTQ+ characters. In turn, this will help young audience members connect with queer individuals over shared interests. Furthermore, this teleplay will acknowledge the challenges the LGBTQ+ community still faces today. This will help children become aware, global citizens. It may also prompt young audiences to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights.

Moreover, the teleplay must not use euphemisms to describe queer individuals. This would create an “us” versus “them” dichotomy between the LGTBQ+ community and non-LGBTQ+ persons. It would also insinuate that identifying as queer is abnormal. Instead, the teleplay must embrace LGBTQ+ identities. It can accomplish this by openly recognizing characters as “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and more. Consequently, this action may encourage children to dialogue about LGBTQ+ identities. It may also prevent young audiences from stereotyping queer individuals. Finally, it may improve self-esteem levels for children who identify as LGBTQ+.

I have multiple options for dissemination. First, I can enter my teleplay to screenwriting competitions that specialize in LGBTQ+ inclusivity and children’s television. Some of these competitions include the LGBTQ Screenwriting Competition, the Diverse Voices Screenplay contest, The Film Empire’s Diversity Screenwriting Contest, and the Screencraft Family Screenplay Contest. I can also submit my teleplay to screenwriting labs. These are programs where writers work on scripts with industry professionals. I can submit my teleplay to the Outfest Screenwriting Lab, Diverse Voices Screenwriting Lab, The Disney/ABC Writing Program, and the CBS Diversity Institute’s Writers Mentoring Program. Finally, I can submit my teleplay to an undergraduate academic conference. Specifically, I can submit it to the QScholars Undergraduate Research Symposium, the Kenyon College Queer and Trans Studies Conference, and the Bay Area Undergraduate Communication Research Conference. These dissemination options may allow professional screenwriters to advise me on my writing process. These options may also open up my teleplay for scholarly dialogue. This will allow scholars in queer studies, media studies, and communication studies to build off of my work.

**Conclusion**

This paper examines what an LGBTQ+ inclusive children’s teleplay may look like. Particularly, this teleplay will address LGBTQ+ identities directly, have a substantial amount of LGBTQ+ characters, discuss the similarities between queer characters and non-queer characters, and acknowledge the challenges the LGBTQ+ community faces today. Consequently, this script may combat harmful queer stereotypes demonstrated in the media. It may also help non-LGBTQ+ children connect with LGBTQ+ individuals over common interests. Furthermore, it may increase dialogue between queer scholars, media scholars, and television industry professionals. Finally, this teleplay may encourage audiences to become LGBTQ+ rights advocates. This is especially crucial in wake of the United States’ political hostility towards the queer community. However, by creating compelling, complex LGBTQ+ characters for children’s television, we can prompt children to become aware, empathetic, and global citizens.

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