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Channel-Surfing for the Non-Binary

Brandon Schlemmer

St. John Fisher College, bschlemmer_no@sjfc.edu

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Channel-Surfing for the Non-Binary

Abstract

Overview: The power of the media is remarkable. What we see on TV has the potential to shape our future and how we perceive others, as well as ourselves. Whether we are conscious of this phenomenon or not, we are the very byproducts of what television and other forms of entertainment present to us. With this in mind, we are able to see the flaws that are embedded in our society as a result of the media's influence. Today we see a growing number of children and adults coming out in the world identifying their gender as non-binary. The flaw that comes with this empowering movement is that there is a backlash from the public based on these gender non-conforming individuals. A primary way to improve this dilemma is for the media to incorporate non-binary characters into current television programs. By incorporating this concept into the everyday norm, genderqueer and gender variant individuals will feel better represented in a world they felt restrained in for so long. We have seen the benefits of having gender expansive representations in the media through television shows like *Steven Universe*, *The Riches* and *Ugly Betty*, and it is critical that the media creates more gender expansive characters for children.

Professor Cunningham's Reflection: Brandon's essay is impressive as a finished product that offers a polished and articulate argument on the necessity of providing nonbinary and gender-expansive youth with compelling media role models whose characters enable them to both imagine their own identities as possible and to see their lived realities reflected on the screen. His paper stands out for the complexity of the argument he constructs against a binary gender system, for the strength of the evidence he uses to support it, and for his skillful integration of source materials. Beyond this, Brandon's work is impressive for the invisible labor that remains unseen in the final product as he switched angles through the writing process, refined and strengthened his thesis multiple times, and came to better understand how to communicate the need for role models who were not yet fully present in media but also not yet fully reflected in the critical sources he initially utilized. Ultimately, Brandon's essay is an example of 199's research-based writing at its best.

Brandon Schlemmer

Dr. Cunningham

WGST 199

2 May 2019

Channel-Surfing for the Non-Binary

The power of the media is remarkable. What we see on TV has the potential to shape our future and how we perceive others, as well as ourselves. Whether we are conscious of this phenomenon or not, we are the very byproducts of what television and other forms of entertainment present to us. With this in mind, we are able to see the flaws that are embedded in our society as a result of the media's influence. Today we see a growing number of children and adults coming out in the world identifying their gender as non-binary. The flaw that comes with this empowering movement is that there is a backlash from the public based on these gender non-conforming individuals. A primary way to improve this dilemma is for the media to incorporate non-binary characters into current television programs. By incorporating this concept into the everyday norm, genderqueer and gender variant individuals will feel better represented in a world they felt restrained in for so long. We have seen the benefits of having gender expansive representations in the media through television shows like *Steven Universe*, *The Riches* and *Ugly Betty*, and it is critical that the media creates more gender expansive characters for children.

Over the years, we have seen a shift in what television is providing for viewers. Recently, we have seen a growth in the amount of diversity in characters in terms LGBTQ+ identity. Looking back at shows in the 1990's like *Will and Grace*, we are able to see the lack of representation of a full spectrum of representation across the American demographic. When *Will and Grace* aired in the 1990's, we saw a limited representation of gay males. In a review for the

reboot of *Will and Grace* in 2018, *USA Today* writer Andrea Mandell describes the characters in the reboot as “unapologetically gay” (1). This creates the notion that the original airing of the show posed limiting qualities to the representation of the typical homosexual male. By seeing that television has become braver in what it chooses to air, we see that the representation of the gay male has become more accurate than what it was before. As a result, gay males are better represented in a positive light, as opposed to a stereotypical caricature. But the problem still remains for those who identify outside of the binary. Today we only see a few accurate depictions of those who identify on a spectrum separate from a two-gender binary. These shows contain examples for gender expansive individuals by portraying crossdressing and non-binary characters in an attempt to expand the limited definition of traditional gender. By incorporating this concept into more television shows, non-binary children will finally gain the role models they need to openly exist in today’s world.

The primary reason television must increase the number of gender-expansive characters is to provide a role model for gender variant children. By increasing the number of role models in television for a particular group or demographic, the odds of feeling more accepted rise and a sense of community increases. PhD and chair of the Mass Communications Department at Iona college, Tony Kelso, states that the media has a strong hold on young people’s development of their sense of self (1060). Basically, it is during those critical years of childhood development that children formulate their identity and where they see themselves fit into society. This can be a crucial period because it could either make or break the decision of the child to express themselves or close themselves off. Role models for gender variant children can come in various forms like tiny “hints” that allude to gender-expansive ideas. A television show that displays these values is *Ugly Betty*. The show features a boy named Justin Suarez, who exhibits gender

non-conforming traits through his flamboyancy and interest in fashion (Kelso 1075). While we do learn as the show progresses that Suarez is gay rather than identifying as genderqueer or gender variant, he does display traits that allude to gender dysphoria due to his interests in typically female dominated interests. This is a positive representation for children because it breaks down the barrier of what gender must be, and instead presents the idea that it can be a reversible or malleable construct.

Providing a role model can also be beneficial for genderqueer individuals by rendering examples and evidence that they can flourish in an ignorant society. One of the main fears for gender variant children is that they won't fit into society's norm and that they won't be able to live a full and happy life if they come out. In an article by Eli Dunn, he discusses how the television show *Steven Universe* breaks the boundaries by manifesting the full and happy lives genderqueer children can have just by being themselves (1). This show is unique in that it expands to so many horizons related to LGBTQ+ values, whether through sexuality or gender. An example of this can be seen through three space gems known as the "Crystal Gems," who identify as agender (Dunn 2). These three beings use female pronouns but make it known that their gender is only a "human construct" (Dunn 2). This is a powerful and bold move for the creator of the show, Rebecca Sugar, due to the controversial topic of discussion. This is a beneficial source of television for gender variant children because it gives them role models to view and relate to. Also, by seeing the confidence and internal happiness of each of the characters in this cartoon, it better helps them understand that it *is* possible to have happiness while being out of the closet.

The television show *Steven Universe* not only relates to genderqueer children, but it also brings the overarching realm of gender into play. The plot of this show has various levels of

depth to it, in relation to how it tries to connect to all the demographics of its audience. Dunn explains how the use of “fusion” on the show dissociates the binary by representing a “distinctly carnivalesque space where gender-play and performance are integral to social interactions and identity-formation” (3). First off, “fusion” happens when two gem beings physically and mentally combine to form one ultimate being based on their characteristics. This gender-play idea that Dunn mentions demonstrates the notion that gender is a social construct and can therefore be broken. It also reveals that gender can be put on and taken off like a performance, giving genderqueer individuals that edge to express how they really feel and want to present themselves. The mere presence of having a non-binary example in television encourages audiences to understand that they are just another part of “nature’s diversity” (Kelso 1075). These Crystal Gems are the catalyst for genderqueer and gender variant children in their coming out journey, and are the sole role models, but ones we need to see more of in the media.

Increasing the number of gender expansive characters in television will broaden the understanding of what gender really is for parental audiences. The definition of gender itself has so often been connected to the biological sex of a human being. But in actuality, gender is “culturally constructed” (Yavuz 397). What many don’t understand is that “sex” is the biological term and “gender” is the term that refers to how a person personally identifies and sees themselves in society, based on this culturally constructed concept (Yavuz 397). Because of this misconception in terminology, so many people believe that gender and sex are interchangeable. As a result, parents remain ignorant to what their gender variant children are experiencing, and it becomes harder for children to express themselves. The media is a main contributor to this ignorance, as it reaffirms that gender is limited to just the binary as opposed to a spectrum (Zaslow 244). For instance, a news story about a boy who identified as gender-fluid was only

accepted by the media because it was seen as child's play (Zaslow 244). It can be seen here that often media coverage doesn't even consider the thought of gender-fluidity, but only of "child's play." Those who do such media coverage shut down the notion that gender is a spectrum, because they don't want to disprove pre-existing concrete beliefs about the binary.

But this ignorance doesn't have to exist. Instead, parents and adults can better understand the existence of gender as a spectrum, as opposed to a binary, with the inclusion of gender expansive characters in television. By seeing examples of other children displaying gender fluid behavior, parents will better be able to understand and accept this concept. This can be seen in the show *The Riches*. In this television program that aired between 2007 and 2008, there is a character named Sam that displays hints of gender variance. Sam is the son in the family who chooses to cross dress by wearing wigs, dresses, jewelry, etc. (Kelso 1076). But what is interesting about this show is the parents' reactions. The parents do not see this as an issue for their child and therefore don't scold him (Kelso 1076). The only times the parents interfere in this gender-play activity is when he has to go out in public. Here, they make him choose to identify as a boy or a girl when stepping out of the house (Kelso 1076). Sam identifies as a male in the show, so it is clarified that he is only crossdressing. While this show does shed some harsh light on the parents by making their son choose between dressing as a boy or a girl, thus potentially reinforcing the notion of a binary (rather than a genderqueer or nonbinary identity), it offers a beneficial representation on how the parents do accept and normalize gender play behavior within the household. Inside the walls of their home, they see this behavior as normal and nothing out of the ordinary, allowing their child relative freedom.

By implementing gender-expansive characters and values into cartoons, adults are better able to understand the existence of a spectrum. Going back to the show *Steven Universe*, we are

better able to see the impact it has on adults based on its “magical” content. According to Dunn, the magic of the show allows gender identity to be disconnected from physical gender traits (2-3). This is beneficial for adults because it allows for them to forget about the binary for at least a minute, and for once, accept the existence of a spectrum. Dunn also touches on the idea that changing gender presentation through magic can allow for someone to disconnect “perceived gender” from “gender identity” (3). In essence, Dunn believes that magic can allow for not only parents, but all viewers, to understand that the way someone presents themselves can be totally different from how they identify. The effects of *Steven Universe* offers various levels of genderqueer and gender variant representations that are beneficial to the education of parents and adults.

One of the main social problems in our nation right now is the lack of understanding that gender is not confined to the binary. The media has an overwhelming amount control over viewers. It is clear to see these flaws manifest in today’s society based on the public’s ignorance in gender terminology and understanding. In an ABC News’ *Primetime Live* story, the title was “Should Boys Be Allowed to Dress like Girls?” This title on its own is problematic because it reaffirms the idea of a binary along with the intended shame that comes with crossdressing. This title creates a connection between sex and gender and reinforces the idea of a two-gender binary as opposed to a spectrum (Zaslow 244). This headline also reinforces gender ranking by suggesting that it is “lesser” to dress like a girl and that a boy who does so is trading down. The reason why this is so important is because news stories “function as ideological apparatus contributing to the construction of individual identities” (Zaslow 245). Since television news has a strong grasp on the development of children, painting a negative picture of the group or

community someone belongs to can lead to parents having negative feelings towards them. As an effect, the children of those parents will feel as if they are in the wrong and shouldn't come out.

A contributing factor towards the binary in news broadcasting often comes with how the news stations report on the lives of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. The stories that we see in the media today often translates to how these communities can't conform (Zaslow 244). By focusing on the "not being able to conform" issue, it highlights the existence of a binary by stressing the importance in conforming to either male or female. In one examined case, a journalist critiques and explores gender non-conformity as a "biological misalignment" instead of looking at the construct of a gender binary through a "critical lens" (Zaslow 245). The ignorance of these reporters and journalists stems primarily from this binary belief; there is a need to be educated on the fluidity of gender. By keeping this critical lens fixed on this one aspect of gender, parents and adults will remain ignorant and blind to this reality.

Another aspect of news reportings that challenge the fluidity of gender is the media's focus on transgender lives. When anything related to gender is shown on public television, it is usually related to transgender individuals and their journey in becoming their proper gender: male or female. This idea of being in the "wrong body" is what so many people get confused with because it connects the two different concepts of sex and gender, which ends up supporting the binary (Capuzza and Spencer 216). This focus on transitioning from male to female, or vice versa, creates the notion that there are only two genders. While it is good to see that transgender lives are coming into the light more, it is damaging in the fact that it conceals the reality that gender is a spectrum. While there are trans individuals who identify as male or female, there are also many who are genderqueer or nonbinary. Also, the belief that gender dysphoria is only associated with the binary and the need to transition is the main issue for genderqueer and gender

variant individuals. In other words, television has normalized the misconception that gender and sex are interchangeable and that gender dysphoric individuals all share one experience (Capuzza and Spencer 216). This major problem is why so many Americans believe that a single binary exists. By incorporating gender expansive characters who reduce the focus on the binary, America will become more educated on how to distinguish the differences between sex and gender. As a result, we would see better representation and a greater appeal of acceptance for genderqueer and gender variant children.

One last reason why we need more gender-expansive representation in television is partly due to LGBTQ+ youth not feeling comfortable identifying outside the heteronormative domain. A major problem with not only genderqueer and gender variant children, but all LGBTQ+ children, is that they don't have any relatable examples on television. Instead of seeing a community they belong to, they see a heteronormative and cisgender reality where they do not fit in. In one examined case, a gender variant child felt that transitioning into secondary school made them have low self-esteem because of the cissexism experienced (Yavuz 400). This is a perfect example of the gender-expansive human experience for a child. Because there are no role models and no one to identify with in reality or television, the child automatically feels singled out, leading to low self-esteem. This feeling of isolation is one of the primary reasons why LGBTQ+ kids are afraid to venture outside the heteronormative landscape.

The coming out process for LGBTQ+ youth, including gender-expansive youth, is often associated with isolation before actually coming out. So many feel this sense of being alone prior to coming out, but scholars suggest that it is a key moment and feeling in the coming out experience for queer individuals because it is a part of the problem with stigmatized identities (O'Flynn 153). O'Flynn suggests that this feeling is natural in the coming out process because

there is a common stigma associated with the person someone identifies with and is choosing to become. There is a fear behind it because people do not want to upset the current reality that already exists by disrupting it with an automatic change of self-identity. But there doesn't need to be a fear that exists if there is an increased representation for all LGBTQ+ youth in the media to show that they are not alone.

The coming out process is difficult for most LGBTQ+ people, but the benefits of it are monumental in a way that allows for them to drop the curtain between them and the world. Associate Professor at York University, Alice Maclachlan, states that staying in the closet pushes a person to keep a significant part of their life separate from reality and concealed from the people who matter most (308). The consequences of children not coming out are detrimental not only to them, but to the relationships with whom they are connected. By increasing the number of gender-expansive examples in television, it will be easier for these children to come out and preserve the relationships that could potentially be lost. While increasing representation in television is mostly beneficial, we do see some depictions in the media that can limit one's ability to come out. According to Capuzza and Spencer, stereotypical representations and incorporating transgender people in the media can implement transphobic emotions and thoughts into the minds of viewers based on certain examples (215). This could possibly limit genderqueer children from coming out because of the hate and backlash the public would be giving the transgender community based on one certain depiction that they didn't agree with. Therefore, it is more important to have a few *accurate* depictions of certain demographics in the media as opposed to having a large number of bad examples. This idea of quality over quantity is what must be taken seriously in television for gender varying children. Otherwise, these children will remain "in the closet," forever afraid to show their true colors.

While some would say the number of gender expansive representations is currently lacking in television, others might say that the sole existence of a non-binary character in one show suggests a great progression in our society's journey in acceptance and understanding. When looking back at television shows from the 1990's like *Will and Grace*, one is able to see a progression from the stereotypical gay caricature to today where we see accurate depictions of non-binary characters in the show *Steven Universe*. Not only have we progressed in the realm of heterosexuality, but we have also grown in how we perceive gender and our understanding in gender fluidity. In essence, the topic of gender today has become increasingly talked about *because* of the implementation of gendered values in children's television.

While the topic of gender is becoming a major topic in the media, the number of representations still remains limited. This generation only has a few options to look to when trying to personally identify with a group. It is commendable that our society is becoming more progressive in its efforts to address gender, but the speed of it is lacking. Children feel isolated and remain in the closet, as discussed in O'Flynn's article, because they cannot find accurate representations with which to identify (159). The fear of entering this slow-moving world alone is the primary drawback for young children who identify in the gender-expansive realm. With no group or community to look up to in the media, children will remain isolated and fearful of embracing themselves.

The media can be a beneficial tool when used properly to convey a message to its audiences. But the unfortunate reality of it exists within the creators of television content. For a society to be this progressive and advanced, one would expect television to have an increased number of gender expansive characters and values that are also accurate depictions. For better outcomes for gender-expansive children, television show creators need to become more inclusive

to all demographics including the LGBTQ+ community. In future generations, we will see positive outcomes for those who identify outside of the binary if this issue is taken seriously by television creators. Hopefully, we will see the magic of “fusion” and inclusion come together and create a perfect world where the non-binary is well-represented.

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