



Bisexuality in Media: A Dangerous Game of Telephone

Panic in My Eyes

The voices of the women around me rang loud and unwavering. They believed in what they were saying, and this was not a place where I could make my voice heard. It started off innocently. I sat at a dinner table with my boyfriend's mom, her friend, and the friend's family members. My boyfriend's mom was the only person at the table who really knew me, and even she did not know what I was feeling inside. To be honest, most of this memory is a blur. I think my mind has tried to erase it for my own sanity, but the words were too harsh to ever forget. While I do not remember why this conversation started, I do remember everyone sharing their opinions on the LGBTQ community. I sat in silence the whole time, just waiting for someone to say something beyond offensive. They sat around the table talking about people they knew who were transgender. The women shared their views, and surprisingly, no one had said anything problematic yet. *Yet*. Then the shoe dropped.

Sloppy

Selfish Bologna

They want everyone

I just can't support that

These were the ways that bisexuality was talked about by one family member that sat at the dinner table. No one else's comments mattered anymore. Their support for lesbian,

gay, and trans people, while great, felt fake. You cannot pick and choose which parts of a marginalized community you want to support. I wanted to shrink away. Could I somehow make myself invisible? I looked at my boyfriend's mom with a silent panic in my eyes, and she looked back with an understanding look. While she was present at the table with me, she did not participate in this conversation. That was comforting to me, but even she did not know the depths of how uncomfortable I was. She assumed I was looking at her like that because they were representing everything I stand against, and I was, but there was so much more to it than that. I felt trapped. I wanted to say something. Say anything, but I could not get myself to do it. First, it did not feel like my place. I only actually knew two of the people at this table, and only one of them really well. These people did not know me, so there was no way they would care about or listen to what I had to say. Second, I felt stunned. These women had no idea they were trashing my very existence. Of course they didn't, because no one does. My bisexuality has been sort of an open secret. Some people know, but many people don't. None of the women present at this time knew. Not even my boyfriend's mom,

and that is why she didn't understand the panic in my eyes.

I panicked because the words this woman used to tear down the idea of bisexuality did not belong solely to her. She was not the source of the problem. She is not alone in her beliefs. I have heard all the dominant stereotypes. That bisexuality is fake, gross, or selfish are views I have heard voiced by many people in my life and in the media. This was not an environment I felt comfortable coming out in. This struck me to my core. At this point, it had been about a year since I finally accepted my sexuality, so all this hostility was new to me. How did it make the people who have faced this hostility their whole lives feel? That is when I decided what had to be done. By this, I mean that it was time for me to research why so many people shared these views and opinions on bisexuality. How does it impact those who identify as bisexual? For the purpose of this essay, I decided to define bisexuality in the way that I personally define it. Personally, I define bisexuality as being attracted to a person for who they are as an individual, rather than their gender. This night was my experience, but there is a world of hate out there, and I want to find the reasons and understand the consequences.

Representation Matters

My uncomfortable experience forced the wheels in my head to start turning. While unmistakably aware that these opinions were not unique to that family member, I wanted to know why. Why does she and so many other people in this world believe these things about bisexuality? I decided to set my focus on media (television shows and movies in particular) as well as look at one magazine interview. I chose to analyze media because it is where most people find their information these days. People in today's society tend to believe what they're told, rather than look further into what is being portrayed.

Before I began researching the forms of bisexual representation in the media, I decided to do some research on representation. Why does it matter? Does it really have that much of an impact? I felt I could not go on with this essay without highlighting why this is such an important topic to begin with.

Nathan N. Cheek (2016) argues that, "Research on media representation is important because such representation can be internalized, which can then lead to self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders, among other consequences" (p. 1). While this exact quote may not be about bisexual

representation, the basis remains the same. Growing up, we are taught that media portrays "the norm." If the media says something negative about someone's identity, it would not take long for that person to feel the same way. Cheek (2016) goes on to say, "Moreover, media representations can perpetuate stereotypes, thereby potentially continuing the cultural derogation of negatively perceived groups" (p. 1). This is where moments of discrimination like the one I detailed above come into play. Throughout her life, that woman came across media that portrayed bisexuality in a way that made her think poorly of the identity, which led to her believing and spreading these stereotypes as if they were fact. Bisexuality will constantly be seen as something wrong as long as people like this woman are fed incorrect stereotypes that they then spread like wildfire.

The portrayal of any identity in any form of media is always going to influence the people who come across it, whether they know it or not. It is our job as a society to provide these viewers with the correct information, so people do not get punished and shamed for being who they are. By "correct information," I mean allowing viewers to see different identities portrayed in media as human, just as any other identity in this world. In

order to truly represent certain identities in the best, most positive way possible, I believe that individuals who actually identify as what is being portrayed should be in charge of how they will be represented. For example, if writers of a television show want a bisexual character, they should enlist a bisexual writer to help ensure that bisexuality is being portrayed in a positive light. It can be argued that not every way a character is portrayed can be seen as negative, but it is more about the consequences rather than the first viewing. For example, I believe that bisexual characters should be portrayed as any other character in the television show or movie they appear in. Making a character's story all about their differing identity, while shining a light on who they are, still treats them as though that is the only thing that is important to them as a human.

Some Sad 'Glee'

With a better understanding of representation, and the harms it can cause if not done correctly, I began my research into popular media outlets. My first stop was the infamous show *Glee* because I know it is a show that has differing identities that could potentially provide the media with lots of great representation. *Glee* first premiered in 2009. It was created by Ian Brennan,

Brad Falchuk, and Ryan Murphy (IMBd.com, Inc., n.d.). *Glee* is home to some of the worst forms of representation, especially in one particular episode. *Glee* began with lots of potential. The characters were different, and it seemed as though identities that did not get representation were finally going to get their chance to shine. There was a Jewish girl, Rachel, with two gay dads. The show touched on teen pregnancy. They had a closeted gay character, Kurt, who was trying to come out to his dad. The show had a Latina character, Santana, who later discovered her own sexuality. There was a fat, black woman character named Mercedes, and a character in a wheelchair called Artie. It seemed as though *Glee* was going to take TV where it rarely has been before, but then they completely missed the mark. The show takes its first step into the bisexual community in the season 2 episode "Blame it On the Alcohol" (Brennan & Stoltz, 2011). In this episode Rachel, a straight character, and Blaine, a character previously believed to be gay, share a drunken kiss during a game. The episode continues and the audience finds out that Rachel has developed a crush on Blaine after their kiss. The two decide to go on a date, and that is when the representation goes south. Kurt, another gay character who

has been seen to have feelings for Blaine, trashes the idea of this happening. Blaine argues that he might not be gay, but rather bisexual. Kurt disregards the idea of bisexuality even being a thing by saying that gay people only say they are bisexual so they can “feel normal,” (Brennan & Stoltz, 2011). It is not rocket science to see how this can influence the opinions of the show’s audience into believing negative things about bisexuality. The fact that these ideas are coming out of the mouth of a gay character helps to make it more believable to others. A fellow discriminated identity is saying that bisexuality does not exist; they are part of the same community bisexuality is associated with, so how can he be wrong?

The episode’s representation of bisexuality only gets worse from this scene on. This was the show’s opportunity to show the truth behind bisexuality, whether they wanted this character to be bisexual or not. The two characters go on their date, and it goes well, but then later in the episode they decide to just kiss to see how they feel. After their kiss, Blaine thinks for a moment, and then says, “Yeah, I’m gay. One hundred percent gay,” (Brennan & Stoltz, 2011). The idea that he is gay just because he did not enjoy one kiss with

one girl is what keeps people like that family member from changing their views. That woman could not get behind bisexuality because she believed people that identified that way are interested in everyone, and they wanted to be with everyone. For *Glee* to have Blaine exclaim that he knows he is gay because he did not enjoy their kiss perpetuates the idea that bisexual people are, in fact, attracted to every person they come across. In other words, they are saying that Blaine must be gay because if he were bisexual, he would absolutely be into this one girl, because he must be.

The Impact of *Glee*

With any form of representation, good or bad, comes a response. I am using this opportunity to take a look at how people responded to season 2, episode 14 of *Glee*. I decided to take a look at the comments underneath a video found on YouTube of the scene where Kurt shares his opinion on bisexuality. People tend to share their honest opinion on YouTube because they can hide behind their username, so I thought this would be the best place to start. In order to find a variety of comments, I looked at multiple videos uploaded of the same scene so I could do my best to find as many comments as possible (juliannenor, 2013; Ian, 2016). The first

batch of comments I came across had the same idea: they were surprised at how this scene went down. One viewer commented, “Kurt, I feel a little insulted by your definition of bisexuality,” (The one and only Tardis, 2017). While it is unclear how this commenter identifies in terms of sexuality, this does not matter because anyone has the right to feel disappointed in the lack of/inaccurate representation of any community. This scene had the potential to provide viewers with an accurate view of bisexuality, but its writers and producers took the wrong direction. Another viewer commented as well, “It’s so surprising and appalling that Kurt goes on about being open minded and now he is saying there is no such thing as bisexual,” (Jacob Dunbar, 2018). His comment seems to suggest that the opinions coming from this scene do not match up with who the character is. If this seems out of character to those who watch the show, one cannot help but ask the question: Who does this opinion actually belong to? One could not help but wonder how the writers of this show truly feel about bisexuality, if this is how they choose to represent it. The last comment I came across in this first batch was a negative sentiment about bisexual people. The comment suggests that the idea of bisexual people hanging out with

gay people is absurd, because they claim that there were no bisexual people when they attended school (Glen Jones, 2018).

The second batch of comments I looked at provided an insight on how this scene impacts those who do identify as bisexual. The first comment I came across stated, “Wow this is appalling. For a second, I actually thought they would turn a biphobic situation around and make it educational, but nope, it’s just biphobic all around” (itsjulia, 2017). This person called it like they saw it. In their view, the whole scene was attacking bisexuals and their very identity. How would this make people feel about themselves? This question led me to the next few comments I read. One stated, “Good job *Glee* of making bi people feel worse than they already do on mainstream TV” (Fred S., 2017). Looking at these comments also helped me to understand how all of this can impact someone when it comes to coming out. One person admitted, “I watched this before I really knew for sure I was bi and it actually made me feel so much worse. Like somehow people can’t be bi,” (Maddy Krebs, 2019). Another person echoed a similar sentiment when they explained that they always felt as though, in order to feel comfortably part of the LGBTQ community, they needed to emphasize

their attraction to the opposite sex rather than their attraction to the same sex (dani dkg, 2019). Seeing these comments really forces one to think about the true nature of their words. If *Glee* had handled this episode differently, then people watching this before they came to terms with their identity may have felt differently about themselves. While this *Glee* episode was just one example, the number of comments suggests that the more hurtful representation there is, the more harmful it is for the bisexual community.

Time Doesn't Change Everything

Bisexuality and the confusion on how to properly represent and define it is not a new thing. In Leland's 1995 *Newsweek* article, the idea of some sort of bisexual rise is highlighted. However, instead of writing the facts as to what bisexuality is, this article focuses more on different views of it, and how people react to it. An overarching theme prominent throughout the entire article was the idea that bisexuality equals more sexual relations. The article, when talking about bisexual relationships, focuses on the sexual parts, rather than the emotional parts of a relationship. This reminded me of what the woman I came across said. I could not help but think maybe if she saw a different view on bisexuality,

then maybe that whole awkward situation would not have happened? She did not come up with these opinions by herself. She had to come across something in her life that led her to this 'revelation.' While I will never know for sure if it was this specific article that lead people to their incorrect and negative views, I know that this article is not an anomaly. There are others out there, and until we fight for change, there will continue to be more articles like this one.

One specific line in Leland's (1995) article stood out to me the most. This line suggested that bisexuality causes an incurable insecurity in relationships because it gives people the idea "that we may not ever really be able to fulfill our partners or be fulfilled ourselves" (para. 12). This plays into the stereotype that those who identify as bisexual need constant sexual attention because they want everyone, as echoed by the woman at the dinner with my boyfriend's mother.

Bisexuality is not a new thing. Negative representation and attention towards bisexuality is not a new thing. These stereotypes and opinions started somewhere. Leland's article might not have been the beginning of biphobia, but it gives us an idea on what it looked like back then and how long this has been going on for. This article was written in

1995, and this essay is being written in 2020. Twenty-five years have passed, but have we really made much progress?

Bohemian Rhapsody

Unfortunately, *Glee* is not alone when it comes to television shows and movies paying bisexuality dust when it comes to representation. A prime example of bierasure is in the movie *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Singer, 2019). While I am well aware that Freddie Mercury is a real person, and Queen is a real band, I am choosing to look at this from a fictional perspective. Mercury's journey and sexuality are his to define, and that is why I am viewing him as just a character.

Bohemian Rhapsody premiered in 2019, produced by Graham King and Jim Beach ("Bohemian Rhapsody," 2020). In the film, Mercury is shown falling in love with a woman, Mary, during his journey to fame. He even proposes to her at one point in the movie, and pens a song titled, "Love of My Life" for her. Throughout the film it is clear that Freddie has a deep connection to Mary. However, the film also shows scenes where it is insinuated that he has love affairs with men while away on tour.

All of these secret affairs come to a head in one particular scene. Mary and Freddie sit on their couch, watching a recording of Queen playing "Love of My

Life," (Stark Productions, 2019). Mary is visibly upset, and after a while, Freddie looks at her and states, "I think I might be bisexual," (Stark Productions, 2019). Mary looks right back at Freddie, and says, "Freddie, you're gay," (Stark Productions, 2019). Not only does she completely ignore what he has identified as, she disregards the possibility that he could both love her and be attracted to men. I chose to use this scene because it is a true story for many bisexual people out there. Due to scenes in popular television shows and movies like this one, there are people out there who believe bisexuality does not exist and have no problem erasing one's identity when they come out.

This was a dangerous scene to put in a movie about such an iconic person. One cannot help but wonder how this will impact how parents who watched this would react to their children if they identified as bisexual, like Freddie tried to do so. There are also the children who may see this scene and think that bisexuality is not a real thing. This scene had the potential to be a great example of coming out and how to respond to it, but instead took the road into danger.

Jane the Virgin Gets It Right

While negative representation is quite common in media, positive

representation is not impossible. Although media has a long history of completely disregarding the true nature of bisexuality, it would be a disservice for me to ignore when representation has been done correctly. *Jane the Virgin* is a perfect example for how shows should and could introduce a bisexual character, and exactly how to represent bisexual identity without relying on harmful stereotypes. *Jane the Virgin* centers on a religious young adult who is artificially inseminated by accident. The show focuses on how this impacts her life and everyone in it (IMBd, 2020). The show decided to represent bisexuality in the season four, episode five episode, “Chapter Sixty-Nine” (Gillard & Sciarrotta, 2017). In this episode, Jane finds out that her current boyfriend, Adam, is bisexual and has been with men in the past. At first glance, it seems as though *Jane the Virgin* is going to face an epic failure when it comes to proper representation of bisexuals, but instead viewers are lead to a beautiful scene at the end of the episode. Initially, Jane pretends as though finding this out does not bother her, but then she goes on a spiral throughout the episode. She finally decides to come clean to Adam. The show began dismissing bisexual stereotypes almost immediately. Jane politely asks Adam if his true destination

was finding out that he was, in fact, gay. Adam disregards this right away, “No, definitely not,” (Gillard & Sciarrotta, 2017). Adam goes on to explain that it simply means he is looking for a connection, and not a gender. This one sentence goes against the entire episode of *Glee* (2009). *Glee* insinuates that bisexuality is not real. *Jane the Virgin* assures its viewers that it most certainly is. Jane then admits that she is well aware that she is not able to provide Adam with what a man could, but he explains that she cannot provide him with what any other woman could either. He assures Jane that none of that matters, “I don’t want to be with anyone else, regardless of gender” (Gillard & Sciarrotta, 2017). This sentence debunks what the woman I encountered had to say. She was going on and on about how bisexual people want everyone, but *Jane the Virgin* explains how untrue this is for Adam. He explains to her that his attraction to other people, regardless of what gender they identify as, does not matter to him because none of them are her. The entirety of this episode shows everyone that proper representation is possible. If the proper care and respect is put into it, bisexual people can and should be included in media, but only if it will leave a positive impact for them.

While *Jane the Virgin's* depiction of bisexual people is better than both *Glee* and *Bohemian Rhapsody*, we cannot ignore the fact that it did get a few things wrong. While my focus for this essay was bisexuality and the bad reputation that media gives it, I do have to comment on the lack of visibility for transgender and non-binary people here. The focus of being attracted to both men and women erases those who may not identify as either. It also paints bisexual people as all accepting and understanding of transgender and non-binary people. As with all different types of identities, there are bisexual people who do discriminate against others. Therefore, it is untrue of me to say that gender does not matter to *all* bisexual people. However, I do believe that the representation seen in this episode was a step in the right direction, and it is the direction we need to keep going in.

The Importance of Intersectionality

I would be remiss as both a feminist and a writer if I did not bring up the complex intersections of erasure and violence that bisexual people face. As previously mentioned in the beginning of this essay, representation is incredibly important for every and any identity that exists. It helps the people who may identify as a race, sexuality, gender, etc. that may not

be considered 'the norm' realize that they are not alone, and nothing is wrong with them. However, it is just as important to learn that not every person that shares an identity shares the exact same experience.

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to refer to the unique forms of oppression that Black women experience at the intersections of racism and sexism (1989). Ahir Gopaldas defines intersectionality as "the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression," (2013, p. 90). In simpler terms, this quote is saying that all of our different identities work together to create our own unique experiences. For example, I am a woman. Being a woman in this society comes with many sexist challenges. I am also white. This means that I was born with the privilege that many white people, regardless of gender, have. In my experience of being a woman, I have more privilege and less oppression and experience different types of oppression than a black woman.

I bring all of this up to say that there was not much intersectionality with non-white racial identities in the examples of representation I came across. *Glee* itself has a lot of diverse characters, based on

race, ability, sexuality, weight, etc., but the three characters I mainly discuss are all white, and only one is a woman. The character questioning their sexuality was a man. *Bohemian Rhapsody* is about the journey of a man as well. Freddie Mercury, while possibly portrayed as white, was not actually white in real life (“Freddie Mercury,” 2020). *Jane the Virgin* (Gilliard & Sciarrotta, 2017) was better by the fact that the character that was bisexual was a Latino, but he was also a man.

While I know there is representation of bisexual women out there, these three examples are quite popular and known. There are not many other forms of oppressed identities within these examples. We as a society cannot just code a character as bisexual and applaud ourselves for “doing the right thing.” We need to actually do the work to make sure we are representing the identity in the right way, and also include all of the other types of identities in addition to bisexuality.

Letter from the Author

I went back and forth with myself for quite a while when writing this paper. I knew this topic was extremely important and needed to be talked about, but bringing myself into the equation was scary. Like I mentioned in the beginning, I am not out. Not completely, anyway. For me to write this essay and say to my readers, “I am bisexual,” I had to really make sure I was ready. That is when I felt it in my bones. Not only did I want to include myself, I felt as though I *had* to. I wrote about a few different examples of bisexuality being tossed away as if it is not real, as if it is an excuse to get with anyone and everyone, etc. How could I sit here and talk about how important it is for bisexual people to be viewed as real and valid if I cannot do the same for myself? The way I see it is, we cannot let people who are biased against bisexual people win. They are wrong and we know they are wrong, so why should we hide who we are because of them? I am who I am, and someone’s factually inaccurate opinion of me will not hold me back. My name is Samantha Newsom, and I am bisexual. Your opinions do not define me.

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