

“A QUEER SANDBOX TO PLAY IN”:
A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SHOWTIME’S TV SERIES THE L WORD:
GENERATION Q (SEASON ONE)

by

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi’kma’ki,
the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi’kmaq.
We are *ALL* Treaty people.

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DEDICATION PAGE

To my little thesis writing buddies, my cats – Simon, George, and Charles.

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ABSTRACT

Motivated by my own positionality as a lesbian identifying queer woman, this thesis explores how lesbian characters are represented in the first season of the popular U.S. television show *The L Word: Generation Q (GenQ)*. Using critical discourse analysis, I investigate how heteronormativity and homonormativity impact characterizations of lesbians within *GenQ*. I found that representations of lesbian relationships in *GenQ* uphold engagement and marriage trajectories, as well as reinforce norms of monogamy. Additionally, *GenQ* depicts lesbian partnerships as unstable, and place cheating as a defining feature of these relationships. Moreover, my analysis reveals that *GenQ* presents bisexual characters in ways that erase their distinct sexual identity. Overall, I found that *GenQ* does contain heteronormative and homonormative representations, and characterisations of lesbian, bisexual, and other queer women in this show are built on stereotypical assumptions of queer people that reinforce problematic norms around monogamy, consumerism, marriage, and class.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
GenQ	The L Word: Generation Q
TLW	The L Word

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this research is to examine the ways lesbian characters are represented in the popular U.S. television show *The L Word: Generation Q* (2019; hereafter, *GenQ*), the sequel series to *The L Word* (2006; hereafter, referred to as *TLW*). Both shows portray the work, life, and relationships of lesbian and bisexual women in Los Angeles.

I aim to highlight representations of the queer community that may perpetuate heteronormative and homonormative understandings of queerness. To demonstrate how *GenQ* and the characters within it represent contemporary notions of queerness, I wish to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How does *The L Word: Generation Q* represent lesbianism?
- 2) In what ways, if any, do heteronormativity and homonormativity impact how lesbianism is represented in *The L Word: Generation Q*?

The answers to these questions will provide insight into what it means to be queer and how television shapes and reflects those meanings.

Positioning of the Researcher

I am a queer/lesbian identifying woman, and I believe that it is important that readers recognize and understand the impact this has had on this research project. I chose representations, sexuality, and television media as my research areas because I have experienced first-hand what it feels like listen to and watch media that may not accurately reflect the queer community to which I, and many of my family and friends, belong. Identifying as a queer/lesbian means I am well positioned to notice subtle representations of lesbianism within *GenQ*, such as

how the character Finley is shown using a carabiner¹ clipped onto her bag or pants to hold her keys. This costuming is reality-informed, is very common within my friends group and in fact something I do. I found it funny, and this representation left an impact on me.

My own experiences inspired and motivated me to focus on lesbian representations in *GenQ*. In addition to being a lesbian, I'm in my mid-twenties, and therefore part of the target age bracket to whom Showtime is marketing the series. I am the same age as some of the characters on *GenQ*, however, I don't live in urban Los Angeles – in fact, I am far from it with my rural upbringing. My social location makes me well placed to meet the objective of this research, to analyse the television show *GenQ* and uncover lesbian representations that overlap with themes of heteronormativity and homonormativity.

A Brief Introduction to The L Word Series

Prior to the 1990s, representations of lesbian (and other queer groups) were largely absent from the television landscape. In 1997, Ellen DeGeneres came out publicly as a lesbian – in both her real life as well as in her ABC sitcom *Ellen* (1994-1998), where she played the character Ellen Morgan. DeGeneres coming out as a lesbian was a pivotal event in the history of lesbian television representation, setting off a chain reaction that allowed the introduction of shows like *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and *The L Word* (2004-2009) (Lee & Meyer, 2010; Beirne, 2008; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Herman, 2005; Dow, 2001).

The L Word premiered on Showtime in 2004 as a melodrama about fictitious young lesbians in Los Angeles, California. *TLW* ran for six seasons, and was the first series with transgender, lesbian, and bisexual characters. The legacy of *TLW* is complicated and nuanced;

¹ This is a small to medium size clip that holds objects, such as keys. Throughout season one of *GenQ*, the character Finley can often be viewed using one to hold her car keys.

the show has been applauded for emerging at a time when there was consistent lack of representation of lesbian and queer women (Moore, 2007). However, there is a divided critical response to the series. In both its popular and scholarly reception, *TLW* was critiqued for its negative representations of bisexual and trans characters, as well as lack of racial and ethnic diversity (GLAAD, 2020; Campisi, 2013; Lee & Meyer, 2010; Beirne, 2008; Pratt, 2008; Moore, 2007).

Nearly a decade after the end of *TLW*, a spin-off series was created (Showtime, 2019; GLAAD, 2020). Positioned as a sequel to *TLW*, *GenQ* presents a new ‘generation’ of queer characters whose lives overlap with the lives of characters from *TLW*: Bette Porter (played by Jennifer Beals), Shane McCutcheon (played by Katherine Moennig), and Alice Pieszecki (played by Leisha Hailey). In a promotional interview leading up to the premiere of *GenQ*, actor Jennifer Beals (who plays Better Porter, a main character in both *TLW* and *GenQ*), discussed how groundbreaking *TLW* was for lesbian representation on television (Jones-Cooper, 2019):

“We had had a very successful run... ‘The little lesbian show that could’,... did well. And we thought something would take its place. And then it didn’t. There were certain shows that occupied sort of a similar space, but not, you know, *that*. And so Katherine Moennig and Leisha Hailey and I are all friends and we started talking about, ‘Wouldn’t it be interesting to bring the show back?’² And then we started seeing in online chat rooms and social media, people were talking about, *The L Word*, and you know, very very dedicated fans. And then we also began to realize that, you know, there was this new generation coming up, that hadn’t been represented yet either. And this generation was changing how we talk gender identity and sexual orientation, and basically at the bottom line talking about um, embracing authenticity to a degree um, to which the culture really hadn’t seen before” (1:16-2:18).

From the onset, statements by Beals about *GenQ* reveal an acute sense of awareness of the role representations play for the lesbian and broader queer community. Beals highlights pertinent issues facing lesbian, and other queer women, particularly lack of representation on television.

² Beals, Moennig, and Hailey are also Executive Producers on *GenQ*.

From Beals' reference to social media, it seems that those behind the series are clued into the criticisms of representations in *TLW*, and importantly the effect these have on the wider queer community. Beals identifies the 2016 US election result as driving *GenQ* into production:

"And then the 2016 election happened and we knew that this divisiveness was coming. We knew that the LGBTQ community would be attacked, which it was, right from the get-go. And we wanted to offer visibility as a form of agency and self-worth and many many other things." (2:30-2:54).

Beals "visibility as agency" comment speaks to the impact television representations have.

According to GLADD (2020), *GenQ* has taken steps to fix the problematic representations that were present in the original, *TLW*. Showtime (2020) describes the show as representing a "group of diverse, self-possessed LGBTQIA+ characters experiencing love, heartbreak, sex, setbacks and success in LA." In addition to Bette Porter, Shane McCutcheon, and Alice Pieszecki, viewers are introduced to a new 'generation' of characters which includes Dani Nunez (played by Arienne Mandi) and Sophie Suarez (Rosanny Zayas), their roommates Micah Lee (Leo Sheng), and Sarah Finley (Jacqueline Toboni). There are supporting characters in *GenQ* who overlap and interconnect in a complex and layered social circle. My focus was contained to those identified by Showtime (2020) as main characters in the *GenQ* series.

The creation of *GenQ* came at a time when television was plagued by a toxic trope referred to as "Bury Your Gays." which saw queer female characters' plots revolve around death and dying. In fact, 2015 was the deadliest year for queer females on television according to GLADD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) with character after character death:

Since the beginning of 2016, more than 25 queer female characters have died on scripted television and streaming series. Most of these deaths served no other purpose than to further the narrative of a more central (and often straight, cisgender) character. When there are so few lesbian and bisexual women on television, the decision to kill these

characters in droves sends a toxic message about the worth of queer female stories (GLAAD, 2017, p. 3).

This trope fails queer women by sending a dangerous message that queer, bisexual, and lesbian lives are disposable (GLADD, 2017). The number of queer women characters being ‘written off’ television shows in 2015 left an obvious gap in representations of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women on cable television, and it is with the creation of *GenQ* and the queer characters within it, that this gap has finally closed (GLADD, 2020).

The first episode of *GenQ* aired in December 2019, with the network framing it as a “reunion” (Showtime, 2020). In their description of the series premiere, Showtime (2020) offers a concise account of *GenQ*’s major plot points:

Ten years after we last left them, we find Bette running for mayor of Los Angeles; Shane as she returns to the city after a setback; and Alice learning to balance co-parenting with her fiancée Nat and Nat’s ex-wife Gigi and the rising success of her talk show. We meet PR exec Dani Núñez, her girlfriend and TV producer Sophie Suarez, their best friend and roommate Micah Lee, and the charming assistant, (Sarah) Finley.

Throughout the first season of *GenQ*, characters deal with conflicts around parenthood, friends, partners, and family, and with their careers.

This thesis will demonstrate how *GenQ* represent lesbianism and how heteronormativity and homonormativity impact that representation. Exploring discourses of queerness will provide insight into current understandings of what it means to be queer, and how these understandings are created and formed.

Chapter Summaries

In the following chapter I summarize the literature that currently exists surrounding *TLW* and lesbian representation. I begin by defining and describing heteronormativity and homonormativity and their manifestations on television. I interweave this discussion with quotes

from producers, executive, and cast members associated with *GenQ*, revealing their understanding of these social structures, and impacts they have on social order. I outline the importance of representation, and offer a timeline of ways lesbian, bisexual, and queer women have been represented on television. I offer examples of heteronormativity and homonormativity in television series, including *TLW*, focusing on the use of feminine tropes, or as Lee and Meyer (2010) call “lesbian chic.”

In the third chapter, I describe the method used to conduct my analysis. I begin by defining what critical discourse analysis (CDA) is and describing its use. I chose to focus on CDA as outlined by Fairclough (2010), drawing on his four-stage model in conducting CDA. I include a brief overview of the relational, dialectical, and transdisciplinary elements of Fairclough’s model. Lastly, I conclude by defining queer representation as it relates to this study and examination of *GenQ*.

In Chapter Four, I describe my findings from my critical discourse analysis, highlighting themes and patterns I discovered in the first season of *GenQ*. My analysis provides insight into ways that heteronormativity and homonormativity manifest themselves in representations of lesbian and bisexual women on television today. In this chapter, I focus on key findings from my analysis of *GenQ* in two sections. The first section focuses on the characters Dani Nunez and Sophie Suarez. I begin with season 1, episode 1 (S1E1): *Let’s Do It Again*, where I detail a proposal scene. Building on this, I turn to findings in S1E4, *LA Times*, where a second engagement between Dani and Sophie is featured. I describe the scene and the importance of the camera angle used, and the gaze it creates – placing particular emphasis on how *GenQ* sexualizes characters in ways that align with heterosexual understanding of lesbian sexuality. To conclude this section, I discuss the role of conflict in Dani and Sophie’s relationship as presented in the

first season of *GenQ*. I again return to S1E1, *Let's Do It Again*, this time turning my lens to an interaction between Dani and her father Rodolfo. In this, I detail relevant overlaps between this scene and a scene from *TLW* featuring Bette Porter and her father. Using both of these scenes, I show how the L Word Franchise fails twice in representing the parental relationships of queer women, normalizing parental homophobia. I conclude this section by noting the role of infidelity in Dani and Sophie's relationship in the first season of *GenQ*. I show how representations of infidelity build on the "lesbian death" and "lesbian bed death" trope of by framing lesbian intimacy as disposable.

In the second section of the fourth chapter, I focus on the character of Alice Pieszecki and her talk show, *The Alice Show*, which is featured throughout the first season of *GenQ*. I begin by demonstrating the overlap between *The Alice Show* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, highlighting how the mannerisms and host persona of Alice, as well as set design and style, mirror that of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. I explain how this may (albeit inadvertently) erase Alice's bisexuality – instead seeing her read as a lesbian woman, like DeGeneres. I examine how *GenQ* speaks back to queer representation in media through use of American Olympic soccer player Megan Rapinoe, and academic and author Roxanne Gay, both of whom make appearances on *The Alice Show* playing themselves. Using multiple episodes from *GenQ*, I show how both Rapinoe and Gay's appearances in the first season establish hierarchal ideas of queerness through representations that discuss heteronormativity, polyamory, and feminism.

I conclude this thesis by discussing how normative lesbian, bisexual, and queer representations in *GenQ* reinforce problematic stereotypes of queer people. I highlight the importance of studying lesbian representation in a television context and reflect on the contradictions that queer representations in media face today. I also outline directions for future

research on *GenQ* that are worthy of analysing but were outside the scope of this project. I conclude by reflecting on limitations relating to CDA.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Representation is a key issue in relation to the *L Word* series (*TLW* and *GenQ*). Referring to a conversation between herself and Ilene Chaiken (co-creator of the *TLW* series), Jennifer Beals, who plays Bette Porter, said:

I was very much like, ‘If we can just save one person. If we could just introduce that one girl who lives in the middle of nowhere, who has no access to her community, to this larger community, that’s just really what I want to do.’ And she’s [Chaiken] like, ‘And let’s make good television also!’” (Giorgis, 2019).

Beals and Chaiken are acutely aware of the impact their series and the representation within it have on its viewers. Beals acknowledges that for many questioning youth – like myself growing up – there is not a lot of access to queer community, especially if you live in a rural area.

However, Beals’ comment here also demonstrates how queerness has come to be associated with urban life, and this has trickled into representations of queerness on television. I grew up in a very small rural community – I feel it is accurately described as the ‘middle of nowhere’—and I share many qualities with the girl Beals describes; for years I had no access to my community. This isolation had a substantial impact on my sexual identity and coming out process – one of which is my association of queer life with the ‘big city lifestyle.’ Conner (2021) notes that LGBTQ people in rural areas come to view their sexual identity differently compared to urban folk, resulting in a questioning and critiquing of the value of the emphasis on urban queer lifestyles. Conner (2021) notes that representations of rural queerness on television have a common narrative that queer country life is fraught with harsh trials and the solution is to flee to urban centers where, as Jennifer Beals says, there is access to “larger community.” Such plots are seen in films *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991), both of which show queer characters as isolated and unable to express their sexual identities due to their rural

upbringing (Conner, 2021). These representations normalize urbanity as an inherently queer characteristic. But, as Conner (2021) found, research suggests that many queers who migrate to the city ultimately choose to return to their rural roots. I can attest to that choice; city life was not for me and I returned my rural hometown.

Turning from personal narrative to literature, my aim with this review is to summarize the literature on lesbian representation, and provide an overview of the critical reception of *TLW*, including academic critiques and viewer responses. This chapter has three sections. The first describes heteronormativity and homonormativity, and summarizes how the literature considers representations of lesbian women on television to have been impacted by these norms. The second section summarizes critical and descriptive work on lesbian representation on television. Here, I explain how the literature presents lesbian representations on television, historically as well as presently. The third section summarizes literature on how representations impact viewers, narrowing my focus to the discussions of *TLW*.

Theoretical Framework: Heteronormativity and Homonormativity

Heteronormativity is a system that privileges heterosexuality over other sexualities. Warner (1991) coined the term, however heteronormativity pre-dates its recognition. The term describes the ways heterosexuality is socially and culturally favoured, shaping what is considered ‘normal’ and ‘deviant.’ Monogamous heterosexual relationships between two cisgender partners are positioned as natural and superior to other sexualities (Robinson, 2016). Heteronormativity is sustained by social institutions such as schools, churches, and the family.

Media institutions in various forms, such as television series, reinforce the “heterosexualization of society” (Warner, 1991, p. 7). Defining media is difficult due to the speed with which new technologies emerge, but Laughey (2007) proposes the common feature of

media is that it communicates messages to its audience. 'Mass media' refers to the broad intended audience of media, and includes forms of communication such as movies, radio, newspapers and magazines, and the internet (Laughey, 2007). Luhmann argues that "no interaction among those co-present can take place between sender and receivers" (2000, p. 2), meaning that our engagement with mass media is a one way street – we cannot respond to messages and are not in direct contact with them. With this feature, forms of communication delivered live, such as lectures, theater productions, or concerts, are excluded from being defined as part of mass media (Luhmann, 2000).

In response to gay rights movements focusing on marriage equality, Duggan (2003) used the term "homonormativity" to describe what she saw as a façade for "broad, multi-issue neoliberal politics" (p. 66). According to Duggan, homonormativity is a portrayal of queer life that is domesticated and depoliticized instead of radical and resistant to heteronormativity (Duggan, 2003). Homonormativity creates and upholds a definition of queerness that aligns with socially favored norms around gender, class, race, and politics. Homonormativity is often used as a strategy by queer groups asserting that they are 'just like heterosexuals' except when it comes to their romantic relationships. Claims to be like others may aid in gaining legal rights and privileges (Duggan, 2003), but homonormative strategies may also limit the advancement of sexual minorities by situating access to rights within heteronormative institutions, like marriage (Robinson, 2016). Heteronormativity and homonormativity have impact on the everyday lives of queer individuals. Heteronormative discourses legitimate and reinforce discrimination against sexual minorities, excusing and supporting homophobia - the irrational fear of queer people – and heterosexism – discrimination against sexual minorities (Robinson, 2016).

The process of an individual recognizing they are not straight (i.e., ‘coming out’ to oneself) invites critical reflection on the institutions and norms that regulate gender, identity, and sexuality. Warner (1991) describes this experience as the “dawning realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture” (p. 6). Queer individuals may become aware of heteronormativity and its processes even if they are not able to articulate it (Robinson, 2016). This is something I experienced in my personal coming out process, as I began to understand that I was assumed to be straight by others. Perhaps a fish doesn’t realize it’s in water until it is removed; the act of coming out, over and over and over again, resulted in my acute awareness of heteronormativity and its impact on social organization. At that time, I lacked the language to describe the social structures and forces I was feeling. When I began university and enrolled in an Introductory Sociology class, I was afforded new language to label the roles of heteronormativity and homonormativity in my life.

Those involved in *GenQ*, including creators and producers, have discussed their own understandings of heteronormativity and its relationship to characters on the show. This includes Marja-Lewis Ryan who is Executive Producer and showrunner (formal title, meaning essentially main writer) for the series. Ryan speaks candidly about heteronormativity when asked about the journeys of the original cast of characters throughout *GenQ*, saying:

“... for Alice, we talked about the idea of wanting to be a queer person and realizing that maybe there are some things that aren’t for her is a real journey that a lot of queer people go on. They are not as queer as they hoped to be and that is OK. You can still be gay and want a heteronormative lifestyle. You are still invited to the party. We talked about the idea that Shane doesn’t want kids and never wanted kids, but wants to make this woman happy and wants to love somebody. However, she ultimately does not want kids and that is OK; women not wanting kids is OK” (O’Conner, 2020, para. 11).

Here, Ryan says that there is no correct form of queerness, yet it is possible to be “not as queer as they hoped to be.” With this, Ryan establishes that representations of queerness in *GenQ* are

meant to frame heteronormativity as okay. This comment reveals how representations in the series might be created with the intent to normalize ideas that as queers we can fall short when it comes to ‘achieving’ our sexuality.

Dhaenens (2013) argues that television representations of gay and lesbian women present characters and storylines that “partake in or desire to participate in institutions and practices that privilege the heterosexual matrix” (p. 305). According to Butler the heterosexual matrix is:

... that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. [It is] ... a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (2007, p. 194).

The heterosexual matrix exists within a restrictive environment of ‘cultural intelligibility’ where heteronormativity is reinforced and upheld as a standard (Butler, 2007). This is one way to explain expectations and ideals we have about sex, gender, and desire, and why we often make assumptions about an individual’s sexuality based on what we view. Many scholars have noted the impact that heteronormativity and homonormativity have on representations of lesbian existence on television (Dhaenens, 2013; Lee & Meyer, 2010; Berine, 2008; Pratt, 2008; Ciasullo, 2001). Since television is a highly visual media, heteronormativity depicts lesbian characters through presenting their bodies as feminine (Lee & Meyer, 2010; Ciasullo, 2001). Scholars note that femininity makes lesbians appear straight to viewers who do not question characters’ sexualities (Lee & Meyer, 2010; Berine, 2008; Caisullo, 2001). Pratt (2008) argues that *TLW*, parent series of *GenQ*, presents lesbians who are thin, educated, well-off, and ‘femme.’ Lee and Meyer (2010) agree with this analysis, arguing the main characters in *TLW* are “relatively thin, successful, and sexy—and any one of them could pass for straight,” which further reinforces heteronormative ideas of lesbianism (Lee & Meyer, 2010, p. 247). Lee and

Meyer label this form of representation as ‘lesbian chic’, and maintain that this television trope presents a socially acceptable lesbian that is “gentle, sensitive, soft-hearted, soft-spoken, absolutely non-butch, [and] stereotypically feminine” (Lee & Meyer, 2010, p. 237). Feminine lesbian representation is non-threatening because it does not contest established gender relations or roles, as a character who is a masculine presenting lesbian women on television might be thought to do.

Ciasullo (2001) argues that presenting lesbian characters as highly feminine emphasizes their ‘sexiness’ for heterosexual audiences to consume, highlighting how lesbian representation on television is created with the straight viewer in mind and upholds a heteronormative gaze. According to Bierne (2008), these types of representations undermine accurate and positive representations of lesbians in mainstream media. Not only do they reinforce heteronormativity (the idea that heterosexuality is best and should be adopted or mimicked), but they also reinforce homonormativity by implying that a particular type of lesbian is best— the lesbian who is white, upper-class, thin, and feminine. As Lee and Meyer (2010) state, “most lesbian representations tend to promote the safe, femme, straight friendly lesbian” (p. 237). This leads to normalized lesbian and queer identities that reinforce power differences of gender, race, and class (Duggan, 2003; Lee & Meyer, 2010; Campisi, 2013). In terms of impact on viewers, these representations are important to consider as they present a narrow image of lesbianism for viewers to identify with, or on which to base understandings of others.

Leading up to the release of *TLW* (2004), lesbian representations were limited in the North American television landscape. Showtime’s *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), an American adaptation of a British production of the same name, focused on a group of gay men (Beirne, 2008). However, the American production of *Queer as Folk* featured two lesbian characters,

Lindsay Peterson and Melanie Marcus, which was noteworthy as up until that time most lesbian characters on television were positioned in relation to heterosexuality, rather than in relation to male gayness. Despite this, there were problems in how Lindsay and Melanie were presented. Beirne (2008) identifies a lack of sexuality, noting the characters are rarely shown together in sexual activities. Even in a television world revolving around queerness, like that of Showtime's *Queer as Folk*, this exclusion of lesbian sexuality sustains gender distinctions that privilege men as active by desexualizing lesbian women (Beirne, 2008). Beirne (2008) maintains that representations of gay men in *Queer as Folk* exist in a "homonormative environment rather than a heteronormative one" (p. 99), and Kongerslev (2010, p. 82) adds that the series representations of lesbians are "based on sexist notions about women."

Representations of straight characters can also reinforce heteronormative ideas of queer sex and sexuality. Adkins (2008) critiques the television series *Sex and The City (1998-2004)* for doing just this. *Sex and The City* centers around four women living in New York City, best friends Carrie Bradshaw, Miranda Hobbes, Charlotte York, and Samantha Jones. Adkins (2008) critiques the character of Samantha, shown having what other characters label a "lesbian relationship" with artist Maria Reyes. The reaction of Samantha's friends to the relationship, Adkins (2008) explains, frames it as "another sexual escapade" and refuses to take it seriously (p. 117). Samantha's potential lesbian identity and sexuality are presented to viewers as a temporary novelty "to be consumed and played with" (Ciasullo, 2001, p. 577). At one point, Charlotte dismisses Samantha's relationship as motivated by a desire to manipulate her friends, saying she is "just doing this to bug us" (Adkins, 2008, p. 114). Samantha ends the relationship, a decision supported by her friends, who consistently doubted her ability to maintain a relationship with a woman. By framing Samantha's lesbian relationship as just another sexual

adventure, unsupported by her closest friends, *Sex and The City* perpetuates heteronormative representations of lesbian sexuality as temporary and disposable (Beirne, 2008).

Sex and The City, and representations like that of Samantha, are noteworthy in relation to the creation and release of *TLW*, and many parallels can be drawn between the shows. *TLW* has been viewed as a substitute for *Sex in The City*, which concluded shortly after *TLW* premiered. Dennis Cass notes similarities between the structuring of these series, reporting that “just as Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte, and Miranda served as comic surrogates for different attitudes toward sex and men, the characters of *The L Word* perform a similar function, and not just for women and same-sex couples” (2004, para. 4). Perceived overlap between *Sex and The City* and *TLW* was capitalized on and reinforced by Showtime, who ran advertisements for the series stating, “Same Sex, Different City” (Cass, 2004). This advertisement highlights the parallel, the main difference being the location of West Hollywood in Los Angeles for *TLW*, as opposed to New York City for *Sex and the City*.

There is another common theme between *Sex and The City* and *TLW*, and that is the use of feminine identity markers that result in lesbian characters being presented as straight passing. Although *TLW* filled a needed gap in television representation of lesbian women, featuring characters in central roles living successful and sexual lives, Lee and Meyer (2010) are also “concerned that these images merely replace conventional representations that purport heteronormativity and homophobia, ultimately subjecting lesbian representation to a continued hegemonic position in the landscape of television” (p. 244). In the case of *TLW*, the casting of the show continues to perpetuate the “lesbian chic” identity, with queer women represented strategically to capture both heterosexual and queer audiences. This can lead viewers to dismiss

the seriousness of the social messages or topics presented in shows like *TLW* (and *GenQ*, too) (Lee & Meyer, 2010).

Who We Are on TV: Lesbian Representation on Television

Stuart Hall describes how representation connects culture and meaning, stressing how it “*is* an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (1997, p. 15, emphasis original). According to Hall, meaning is created in all aspects of culture, but the primary facilitator of meaning is language. This includes spoken language, but also body language, music, and clothing (Hall, 1997). Meaning is created and produced in many places, one of which is mass media (Hall, 1997). Television is a form of powerful mass media that can create and spread “values, assumptions, and stereotypes” about specific groups to the wider public (Raley & Lucas, 2006, p. 20). Television possesses high status in the North American social world and has played an influential role in the struggle for the queer community to achieve social inclusion and acceptance. According to Beirne (2008), television is the “ultimate conferrer of visibility” for queer groups (p. 46). This perspective is important when considering television and representation, especially in relation to *GenQ* and other series which contain representations of lesbian as well as bisexual and queer women. Knowing the central role television plays, it comes as little surprise that queer couples spend a great deal of time engaging with and viewing television. Genadek, Flood, and Roman (2020) measured same-sex couples’ shared time in the United States using a sample from the American Time Use Survey,³ finding that same-sex couples without children spend over 80 minutes a day

³ The American Time Use Survey is a US national time diary survey, Genadek, Flood, and Roman’s (2020, p. 480) study drew a sample of 631 same-sex couples from this. This included 356 women and 275 men in same-sex relationships.

watching television together (Ganadek, Flood, Roman, 2020). Knowing how much time queer couples spend engaging with television, it is important to examine representations in *GenQ*, and other television series that contain queer characters.

Those involved in the creation of *TLW* and *GenQ*, including actors who play the characters and screenwriters who write the episodes, seem aware of the symbolic role that their representations play. In an interview with Shapiro (2019), Kate Moenning, who plays the character Shane McCutcheon in both *TLW* and *GenQ*, notes her age (at that time 24) when the original *L Word* began filming, and recalls that she was not out of the closet as a lesbian at the time the show aired. Moenning explains that “there was a lot of conflation between myself and the character I played, and I was feeling pressure to acknowledge certain parts of myself, but I didn’t have a clear understanding of who I was yet” (Shapiro, 2019). Here, Moenning describes how she began to see overlaps between aspects of the character’s sexuality and her own, which later enabled her to acknowledge her own lesbian sexuality. It is important to note that in Moenning’s case, some of this growing comfort would come from acting the character and not just viewing it on television. However, the power in these representations is their ability to influence identity, and this impact is felt by the actors who play these characters. Marja-Lewis Ryan, Executive Producer and showrunner on *GenQ*, has spoken about the impact the original series had on her own identity and career. In an interview with Goldberg (2019) Ryan explained that her desire to write on the *GenQ* series was motivated by the influence of Ilene Chaiken’s work and writing in the original Showtime series *TLW*, saying:

The pitch was that I grew up watching the show. I was in my late teens when it came out — and it changed my life. I wouldn't have been a writer if I didn't know who Ilene Chaiken was. Knowing that I could write stories about lesbians made me become a writer. The show went off the air in 2009, and my first movie [*The Four-Faced Liar*] came out in 2010, and it was very much because of that show. My pitch was to honor the

spirit of the first and make it more inclusive. All the problems that we all saw with the original — I was there, too.

For Ryan, representations of lesbians on television ultimately shaped her professional career.

Knowing that Ilene Chaiken had successfully written and created *TLW* inspired Ryan to write her own queer characters and storylines and provided the foreground needed for her to pitch *GenQ*.

Ryan also references the “problems with the original,” acknowledging the criticisms of *TLW*.

Pratt (2008) explains that much of this critique towards *TLW* centered around main characters’ lack of racial and ethnic diversity, as well as its handling of trans topics and issues. As discussed above, *TLW* has been critiqued for its heteronormative lesbian representations as ‘femme’ (Lee & Meyer, 2010; Pratt, 2008).

The characterizations show in *TLW* and later *GenQ*, have their roots in earlier portrayals of queer women. McInroy and Craig (2017) note representations of 1960s through to the 1980s saw queer people “stereotyped as comic relief, villains and/or criminals, mentally and/or physical ill, and victims of violence” (p. 34). The 1990s saw a slight rise in lesbian representation with the introduction of queer characters in main roles. *Roseanne* (1988-1997) featured bisexual and lesbian characters, and the wildly popular *Friends* (1994-2004) contained lesbian characters, although they occupied peripheral roles and were not central to the plot (Beirne, 2008).

However, acceptance of these queer characters by the main characters may have set a template for straight acceptance of queer women. Prior to these representations, lesbian and queer women were largely left out of television (Beirne, 2008), and when they were included, their appearance often used negative stereotypes to emphasise their difference from heterosexuals (Padva, 2008).

Many scholars point to the coming out of Ellen DeGeneres (who played Ellen Morgan on the sitcom *Ellen*, which aired on ABC from 1994-1998) as the tipping point in representation of lesbian women on television (Lee & Meyer, 2010; Beirne, 2008; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Herman,

2005; Dow, 2001). Comedian Ellen DeGeneres was a highly popular figure in American cable television, dubbed ‘America’s sweetheart’ for her role as the character Ellen Morgan. The Puppy Episode, featured in the fourth season of *Ellen*, first aired on April 30, 1997 on the ABC network. Perhaps the most important scene in the episode occurs when Ellen confesses that she is gay to a woman in whom she has a romantic interest. Ellen Morgan can be seen struggling to get the words out of her mouth before finally exclaiming “I’m gay” —unaware that she has spoken in front of a working microphone, broadcasting her announcement to the entire airport (Marlens, et al., 1997). Lo (2005) describes what followed as a “media blitz” as DeGeneres came out in both her professional and private life, making her the first lesbian main character in a television show, as well as one of a handful of open lesbian celebrities in the public eye at that time (Moore, 2008). Ellen DeGeneres’ professional, private, and public “coming-outs” evoked a tidal wave of lesbian representation in the late 1990s, and are largely seen as a pivotal moment in the visibility and representation of lesbian women on television (Lee & Meyer, 2010; Beirne, 2008; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Herman, 2005; Dow, 2001). Beirne (2008) describes Ellen’s coming out as one of the most important events in lesbian television history.

Paired with DeGeneres coming out in real life, Ellen Morgan’s coming out had a lasting impact on viewers. The director of the Puppy episode, Gil Junger, said that fans have approached him, stating that DeGeneres coming out representations saved their queer family members’ lives (Strachan, 2017). Dow (2001) argues that DeGeneres’ coming out publicly as a lesbian on television gained attention for lesbian representation in media more generally. Herman (2005) also emphasizes the significance of DeGeneres's actions, arguing that media discourses of ‘coming’ out play a meaningful role constructing lesbian and gay sexualities, and in supporting the politics of queer movements.

DeGeneres' coming out was over 20 years ago, and lesbian representation on television has changed significantly since, but progress has not been linear. Beirne (2008) describes it as "marked by advances and retreats, breakthroughs and hiccups" (p. 3). One example of retreat in representation can be seen in the increase since 2014 of the trope of lesbian death, particularly on cable television (GLAAD, 2016; 2017). The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLADD) defines the 'bury your gays' trope as a trend in North American television in which a disproportionate number of queer characters are killed off within a series, often to advance a straight leading character's storyline (GLADD, 2016). GLAAD found that during the 2015-2016 television season the use of the lesbian death trope skyrocketed, with over 25 queer female characters dying or being killed on broadcast or streaming television (GLAAD, 2016; 2017). GLAAD's annual *Where We Are on TV* report tracks the presence of LGBTQ characters on scripted series that air on primetime⁴ between June 1st and May 31st of each year, but does not include movies or films.

With limited representation of lesbian and queer women on television, finding that lesbian characters are often killed is alarming, as is the context in which these deaths occurred. GLAAD used strong language to describe the impact, saying it sends a "toxic" message by positioning the queer community as secondary and dispensable (2017, p. 3). There has been significant response and critique from queer audiences on use of the lesbian death trope, particularly surrounding the series *Orange Is The New Black* (OITNB). OITNB is a Netflix original series whose main character, Piper Chapman, is sentenced to 15 months in a minimum security prison for a minor drug offence. GLAAD (2017) notes that OITNB is worth paying

⁴ GLADD (2020) defines Primetime television as including shows that begin at 8:00 PM Eastern Time/Pacific Time and end at 11:00 PM Eastern Time/ Pacific Time, Monday through Saturday – with the exception of Sunday which begins at 7:00 PM.

close attention to for its 11 queer characters. However, the series has not managed to steer clear of the lesbian death trope, killing 2 of its series regulars (GLAAD, 2017).

In response to GLAAD's findings on the state of lesbian representation, Ruderman-Looff (2019) investigated the trope of lesbian death in OITNB, examining the character Tricia Miller who is killed off in the series. Miller, one of the youngest characters in the prison drama, was well-liked by audiences for her ruthless personality. Although Ruderman-Looff's study offers a strong critique of the prison industrial complex and criminal legal system, it also speaks to the context of these characters' deaths and how they were represented. This is salient to Tricia Miller's death in a closet, which Ruderman-Looff argues is "one of the most heavy-handed details ... because a lesbian life literally expires in a space where queer bodies metaphorically hide" (2019, p. 493). This representation gets more complicated as it is juxtaposed with the sexual identity of Piper Chapman. As Ruderman-Looff puts it – it is not clear whether Piper Chapman "is 'out' or 'in' the closet." Tricia Miller's death in the closet ultimately answers this question through the representation of both literal and symbolic lesbian death (Ruderman-Looff, 2019, p. 493). Miller's death is meant to also show that Chapman is still in the closet in regard to her lesbian sexuality, and that it would be unsafe for her to change that anytime soon (Ruderman-Looff, 2019). As GLAAD (2017) noted, the lesbian death trope often furthers normative (cis-gender, straight) plots, and this can be seen in OITNB through characters Tricia Miller and Piper Chapman. OITNB uses death to show that staying in the closet may be the safer decision (Ruderman-Looff, 2019).

With such a high occurrence of lesbian death on television, it comes as no surprise that viewers react strongly to character deaths. Waggoner (2018) examined social media response to the lesbian death trope, or its broader relative, the "bury your gays" trope. Waggoner's focus was

contained to *The 100*, a television series which features a group of individuals surviving in a post-apocalyptic society (Waggoner, 2018). In season 3, episode 7, recurring character Lexa is fatally shot after it is revealed she had a relationship with another female character, Clarke. After this episode aired, fans were quick to turn to social media to chronicle their feelings, expressing grief over Lexa's death through the creation of GIFs, fanfiction, and the mass unfollowing of the series' producer Jason Rothenberg on Twitter (Waggoner, 2018). Fans organized campaigns to change the state of queer representation, beginning with a commitment from fans not to watch the show—tanking its ratings to the lowest ever. These campaigns raised a staggering \$60,000 for the Trevor Project – a suicide hotline dedicated to queer youth (Waggoner, 2018). Fans used social media to express their dislike, creating the hashtag #LGBTFansDeserveBetter which trended worldwide on Twitter, as well as hashtag #CancelThe100, but the show went on to be renewed. Waggoner (2018) demonstrates that fans who view lesbian representations have strong feelings about them and go to great lengths in order to ensure their voices are heard on the matter.

Since then, television has struggled to re-establish lesbian representation and replace characters lost due to the death trope. In GLADD's *Where We Are On TV* report (2020), it is noted that numbers of lesbian and queer female characters on television began to regain ground after significant decline. This improvement is attributed largely to *GenQ*, which had 18 queer characters, many of which are women, leading GLAAD (2020) to identify Showtime as the most LGBTQ-inclusive network.

Impact of Television Representation: Visibility and Identity Development

Early research on lesbian and queer representation in television analyzed characters and storylines for helpful or harmful contributions to queer visibility in mainstream media (see

Adkins, 2008; Beirne, 2008; Burgess, 2008; Heller, 2008; Hidalgo, 2008; Moore, 2008; Pratt, 2008). Analyzing queer visibility was important in regards to the LGBT rights movement attempting to gain traction in the quest for marriage equality in the US (Campisi, 2013), and noteworthy due to the United States' significant global influence in social and political movements. Television can promote 'American values' on a national and worldwide stage – a comment by President Joe Biden (then US Vice-President) highlights this, asserting that television series “*Will and Grace* probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody’s ever done so far” (Doyle, 2012). Biden refers to how *Will and Grace* taught viewers about queerness, particularly through its representations of gay men through the character Will Truman.

In the American western context, 2015 was a momentous year for progress in terms of legal rights, as the US Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage legal (Georgetown Law Library, 2021). But despite marriage equality in the US, gains in television representation still fell behind, as GLAAD (2017) notes that 2015 was “a very deadly year for queer female characters” (p. 5), with many plots centered around death and dying. Waggoner (2018) describes this period as part of a decades-long “Bury Your Gays” trope. So, while marriage equality saw tangible gains in the US, television representation of lesbian and bisexual queer women saw massive setbacks through character death (GLADD, 2020), highlighting how visibility in the real world does not carry over to television.

Increases in representation have been noted by scholars and may allow for greater access to queer identity (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Campisi, 2013; McInroy & Craig, 2017). Media and television scholar Joshua Gamson argues that when examining queer media representations it is essential to ask “who is invited, and by whom, and at what price, and with what political and

social consequences?” (in Burgess, 2008, p. 213). Television representations of lesbian women are a primary source of knowledge about queer identities for *all* people (Gray, 2009, in McInroy & Craig, 2017). Hermans (2012) argues that viewers base their perceptions of marginalized groups on representations in popular media, whether those representations are accurate or not. Television shows are where many people first ‘meet’ a queer person, and how viewers go on to perceive and treat those who are queer in real life is shaped by these television encounters (Railton & Watson, 2005). If television is a resource to which all members of society turn for knowledge about queer people (McInroy & Craig, 2017), then this makes media all the more significant for queer community.

Media can help queer people feel more secure in their identity, particularly if representations are affirming. Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) explain that queer people often mirror the queer models they see in popular media, idealizing and admiring them. This is important to the coming out process as it shapes queer identity by providing examples of how queer people look and act. When queer people see positive queer figures in media, it may support them to develop an improved “sense of self-efficacy in terms of coming out and achieving a fully developed identity” (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 332). If media images support identity development, as Gomillion and Giuliano suggest, then it is important to understand these representations. Television and popular media are some of the venues to which younger queer generations turn to learn what it means to be queer, and how to build and validate their identity as a queer person (McInroy & Craig, 2017).

McInroy and Craig (2017) investigated the impact that media representations of queer people have on emerging queer adults. Using grounded theory design, they interviewed queer adults aged 18-22 years old, exploring how television representations impacted self-identity.

Participants consistently considered television the dominant medium for representation, describing it as accessible and able to create dialogue and understanding (McInroy & Craig, 2017). McInroy and Craig (2017) demonstrate that queer youth search for queer characters on television, and use what they find to understand their own sexual identity prior to coming out. Participants indicated that negative, one dimensional, and stereotypical representations dominated television, causing them to feel that such roles “were not representative of their lives...or...of LGBTQ young people generally” (McInroy and Craig, 2017, p. 39). Participants identified heteronormative ideals of queerness on television, with one participant, Tara (19), pointing to the role of stereotypes:

Most of the time [representations of gays and lesbians are] very stereotypical. If it's a guy they're probably either the big buff attractive [guy] or...the little [guy]. When it comes to a girl it seems they're either the super pretty...lipstick lesbian or they're this sort of masculinized [girl] (p. 39).

Despite these limitations, participants felt that viewing queer characters on television gave them a “sense of possibility” (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 38), and that television representations of queer people might spark meaningful discussion around sexual identity, or help viewers shape and define their own sexuality. McInroy and Craig's (2017) findings makes clear the connection between television, representation, and identity.

Young queer adults in McInroy and Craig's study also described representations of queer people in *TLW* as reference points for queer identity. One participant, Ella (22), referenced the effect viewing *TLW* had on them:

It was probably on The L Word [that I first saw a LGBTQ character]. I even started watching it because it had lesbians. I was 15 or 14 and that's what was so exciting....They were like right there in the real world. And it felt legitimizing...I was invested in the characters' lives and I wanted to know what was going to happen. And it was especially cool that one of them was bisexual and married to a woman...It was validating. (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 38)

Ella describes how *The L Word* provided them examples of what a lesbian might look like, legitimizing and validating their own sexual identity. McInroy and Craig's (2017) findings make clear the connection between television, representation, and identity. Young queer adults describe how engaging with television representations of queer people is important in validating their sexual identity, as well as creating reference points for queer identity. Ella's comments identify how television shows like *The L Word* can be significant for lesbian and queer women, particularly to legitimize and validate sexual identity. Queer characters in *TLW* are "legitimizing" and "validating" and feel as if they are part of "the real world" to those who view them.

McInroy and Craig's (2017) research is also important to consider in relation to forms of merchandizing of *GenQ*. From baby onesies, coasters, mugs, laptop sleeves, and journals – the official *GenQ* website from Showtime offers about every type of merchandise imaginable for purchase (<https://store.sho.com/collections/the-l-word-generation-q>). Many of these items contribute to how the show spills out into "real" life; official *GenQ* products let a viewer feel they exist in the same world as the show. For example, the website offers merchandise promoting *The Alice Show*, a fictitious talk show hosted by character Alice Pieszecki in the first season on *GenQ*. *The Alice Show* shirts, masks, and mugs might reinforce the feeling that *GenQ*, and the characters within it, are real people. In addition, many of these items come with the option to personalize them by adding a name. Thinking back to the Jennifer Beals' hope that shows like *TLW* would allow viewers access to community (Giorgis, 2019), it seems that what she hoped does occur (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Although rooted in consumption, various forms of show merchandise may contribute to the perception that the *GenQ* world, and the queer characters in it, reflect real life.

CHAPTER THREE METHODS: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Introduction

In this research project, I critically analysed the first season of the television show *The L Word: Generation Q (GenQ)* for representations of lesbian, bisexual, and other queer women. I sought to identify instances in *GenQ* where portrayals aligned with patterns of heteronormativity and homonormativity. I conducted a qualitative analysis that drew from Fairclough's (1993; 2013) understanding of critical discourse analysis (CDA). This method was well suited for my study due to its ability to discursively examine power relations, which was key in enabling me to uncover heteronormative and homonormative discourses in *GenQ*. The data analysed for this research project included the first season of *GenQ*, which I viewed in its entirety multiple times. The first season of *GenQ* contains a total of eight (8) episodes, which average approximately 54 minutes in length. In addition, I examined *GenQ* promotional materials such as show websites, video and audio interviews of cast and production members, and posts on Reddit about the series. I immersed myself in the data, watching the series as well as collecting online material from the series as supplemental data. In this chapter I detail my methodological approach, beginning with Fairclough's understandings of CDA. I give an overview of the relational, dialectical, and transdisciplinary elements of Fairclough's CDA model, then discuss the 4-stage structure of analysis that guided my data collection. Lastly, I conclude by defining queer representation as it relates to this study and examination of *GenQ*.

Methodological Approach: Critical Discourse Analysis

For this study, I took a critical discourse approach to analyze representations of lesbian, bisexual and queer women in Showtime's television series *GenQ*. 'Discourse' describes "forms of cultural communication...that...involve human beings exchanging meanings about the world

in which they live” (Dant, 2013, p. 1). Fairclough (1993) uses the term ‘discourse’ to refer primarily to spoken or written communication, but also includes “other semiotic [this is, sign-making or symbolic] modalities such as photography, and non-verbal (i.e., gestural) communication” (p. 134). For this project, I use discourse to refer to language use (spoken, written, or non-verbal) as well as other semiotic (meaning making) processes like images and gestures, thereby including forms of simultaneous audio-visual communication, such as television. Fairclough draws on linguistic theory, mainly systemic functional linguistics, which sees discourse “as shaped (even in its grammar) by the social functions it has come to serve” (Meyer, 2001, p. 22). Referring to language as discourse signifies that it will be investigated as a social practice “in a social-theoretically informed way” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 134). Focusing on social practices allows for the combination of social structure and social action necessary when examining lesbian representations in *GenQ*.

Critical discourse analysis engages critical scholarship, using Marxist, feminist, queer, and other ‘outsider’ perspectives to consider how the form and content of communications can improve real-world lives. Wodak (2011) notes that critical discourse analysis (CDA) is not a single theory or distinct method. Van Dijk explains this feature best, saying that CDA is “at most a shared perspective” on doing linguistic, semiotic, or discourse analysis (1993, p. 131). As such, CDA is a methodology—a style of approach—rather than a method, which makes it difficult to specify what the process of CDA actually is. This is due to the wide variety of theoretical and empirical approaches to draw from when analysing discourse, as well as to the variety of linguistic tools used and defined. In the case of my research, I found the flexibility helpful as it required me to consider my process and methods and make sure they fit my object of study, *GenQ*, and would allow me to answer my research questions. This also allowed for

understandings of heteronormativity and homonormativity to fit in this process. It is an undertaking to identify ways a theoretical framework pairs well with CDA – but, once this is achieved the result is an increased understanding of the method.

I drew my understandings of CDA predominantly from Fairclough (1993; 2013), who contends that CDA has three characteristics, the first being that it is *relational*. This means that when conducting CDA the focus is on social relations, for as Fairclough explains, “we can only arrive at an understanding of [discourse] by analysing sets of relations” (2013, p. 3). This relational aspect allows for the examination of the discursive elements of power relations. To apply Fairclough’s first element of CDA, I needed to go beyond identifying lesbian characters and codes, to detail the types of relations signalled by the characterizations and details. This feature of CDA was key, for example, when examining representations in S1E3, *Lost Love*, where Dani and Sophie are seen touring The Biltmore as a potential wedding venue. The relational element of Fairclough’s CDA was useful in uncovering and considering class relations in this particular scene. Fairclough’s second element of CDA is that it is *dialectical*, meaning discourses shape, and are shaped by our social world. The dialectical relationship between texts or objects are “not fully separate in the sense that one excludes the other” (2013, p. 4). Said differently, relations between elements are different, but not discrete or fully separate. This allowed me to view *GenQ* from multiple perspectives and see how representations related to multiple elements. This was important when considering how *GenQ* is shaped by previous queer television representation, but also how it is shaping present and future representations.

Fairclough’s third, and last element of discourse analysis is that it is *transdisciplinary*, which allows for ‘dialogue’ across different methods, frameworks, and theories (Fairclough, 2013). This means that there are multiple ‘points of entry’ when conducting discourse analysis. The

benefit of this feature in my research is that it allows for CDA to work in dialogue with sociology and social science research to investigate effects of discourse. This third element facilitates the interaction between my theoretical framework drawing from heteronormative and homonormative theories, academic background, and my personal identity as a lesbian woman.

This heterogeneity of methodological and theoretical approaches allows me as the researcher to improve my aims and goals, making room for originality and innovation (Wodak, 2011). Instead of working to make my object of study researchable *within* my methods, I worked to make my methods suitable for investigating *GenQ* – and in doing so, hoped to allow for a more developed understanding of both my methodology (CDA) and my object of study, *GenQ*. This allowed me to examine the music, dialogue, characterization, and plot of *GenQ*, constructing the objects of my research in a way that was coherent and researchable for myself as the analyst. Bringing these three essentials of CDA together, Fairclough (2013) says:

What then is CDA analysis *of*? It is *not* analysis of discourse ‘in itself’ as one might take it to be, but analysis of dialectical *relations between* discourse and other objects, elements, or moments, as well as analysis of the ‘internal relations’ of discourse (p. 4).

Here, again the importance of CDA in viewing language as action is stressed. Doing this, Fairclough (2013) argues, allows the researcher to uncover how discursive practices are told and connected, as well as how they are dialectically related to our social world.

Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) have established that CDA is useful in researching language as it relates to power and ideology, as well as for revealing the discursive elements of social and cultural change. Applying this thinking to analysis of television, it is revealed to be a site of power and struggle that contains extensive language use. The language used in *GenQ* is important to consider in relation to homonormative ideals of queerness, which Duggan (2003) notes are often rooted in consumption and spending, linking queerness to the market economy.

For example, comparison of the titles *The L Word*, and *The L Word: Generation Q*, reveals that the *TLW* franchise is not only referencing lesbian and queer identities, but through its reference to generations, is taking up familial language that also distinguishes American consumers by age group. *GenQ* reflects generational cohorts like ‘Generation Z’ (See Miller & Grace, 2018).

The social context of language is an important consideration when conducting CDA. Fairclough explains that “language use is always simultaneously constitutive of (i) social identities, (ii) social relations and (iii) systems of knowledge and belief—though with different degrees of salience in different cases” (1993, p. 134). CDA is used in analysing structural relationships of power, discrimination, and control (Wodak, 2011), and investigates how social wrongs and inequality are expressed, constituted, and legitimized through communication. Language and discourse are important to consider in relation to power because they can challenge and subvert it in both the short and long term (Wodak, 2011).

According to Fairclough (2013) from a critical discourse perspective, social reality is made up of concrete social events and abstract social structures, and what mediates or connects these two elements is social practices. Scholars who employ CDA approach communication as a social practice, which allows them to investigate relationship(s) between discourse and other parts of ‘the social’ (Fairclough, 1993). Simply put, CDA is an analysis of relations between discourse and social events and structures (Fairclough, 2013). What this means in the context of my analysis of *GenQ*, is that I view discourse about lesbian identity as a practice that shapes the social world. Representations of lesbian identity, such as costumes, plot, and soundtrack choices in *GenQ*, and the discourses engaged with those representations, are actions – they represent and identify the queer community (Fairclough, 2013). These representations are shaped by social structures like heteronormativity and homonormativity, but also race, class, and gender, and

politics (for example). According to Machin and Mayr (2012) “images can be used to say things we cannot say in language” (p. 9), and this is certainly the case in *GenQ*; the overt message is that of revolution, as characters in this series experience “life, love, and setbacks” without being placed in relation to heterosexuality. As *GenQ* writer showrunner Marja-Lewis Ryan puts it: *everyone* is invited to the party, the implication being that members of the queer community (and others) are represented in *GenQ* through non-exclusionary discourses.

Discourse provides a context for power to be enacted, exercised and reinforced, as well as questioned, critiqued and resisted (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak, 2011). Through viewing discourse as a social practice, CDA reveals how it is both a social and historical mode of action. This relationship is dialectical, “it [discourse] is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 134). In the case of television, Fairclough and Wodak’s work means that discourses in *GenQ* do represent lesbian and queer women, but they also shape viewers’ perceptions and knowledge of queer communities. They may reinforce relations of power, or challenge, critique and resist them. Wodak (2011) proposes that CDA can be thought of as a guide for human action. There is a focus on power and ideology because they shape and impact viewers, often without their knowledge or awareness. Through describing and explaining power relations in language, CDA unpacks the status-quo, allowing viewers to critique media by identifying and questioning social wrongs and inequality. Media forms, particularly television, draw large numbers of viewers, and this has been the case with *GenQ*, and its parent show *TLW*. Large viewership makes it important to critically examine themes in these shows and to consider how television discourse changes viewer opinions, particularly regarding marginalized groups like the queer community. Who is included (and how), and what is excluded is important to consider in relations to power structures and how they influence social groups and status. Using

CDA to examine *GenQ* will reveal patterns and messages that connect to broader discourses, social contexts, and institutions.

Using CDA in this project helped me to connect the representations in *GenQ* to discourses of heteronormativity and homonormativity. I viewed television as a field that contains discourses, and approached discourse as a network of social practices that change over time and vary from place to place. To characterise the field of television in North American media at this time, I considered *how* practices networked together. I narrowed my focus to discursive events and structures in Season One of *GenQ* (2019-2020), looking at textual moments of the show, and identifying how genres, discourses, and styles were articulated. Using CDA allowed me to critically examine the discursive elements and representations in *GenQ*, enabling me to answer my research questions about how *GenQ* represented lesbianism, while also identifying and connecting discourses to processes of heteronormativity and homonormativity in the broader social order.

4-Stage Model of Analysis

It was important for me to have a process to follow when conducting analysis of *GenQ*. However, it was equally important to be able to watch *GenQ* in a way that yielded findings that were not narrowed by pre-determined codes. Fairclough identified a four-stage process that I used to conduct CDA: Stage 1: Focus upon a social wrong, in its semiotic aspect; Stage 2: Identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong; Stage 3: Consider whether the social order ‘needs’ the social wrong; and Stage 4: Identify possible ways past the obstacles, in this case heteronormativity and homonormativity (2013, p. 235). Fairclough (2013) stresses that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to using CDA in social research, however, the four-stage model provided structure that enabled me to plan and conduct my analysis of *GenQ* in an organized

way while allowing reflexivity in my data collection. To illustrate how I used Fairclough's model in my research, I will describe the stages sequentially, discussing the method and how it was applied to *GenQ*. Nevertheless, Fairclough's method is not sequential or linear, and how researchers move through the stages depends on the text and research project.

Fairclough (2013) explains that stage one involves selecting a research topic that relates to the social wrong, and careful consideration must be given to choosing a research focus that can be effectively analyzed in a transdisciplinary way. In my project, stage one consisted of working to develop the project itself. My aim was to narrow my object of study to something that I could complete within the requirements of my Master's program, and later, during global pandemic circumstances⁵. I entered this project with an existing personal and academic understanding of media and representation, excited about queer representation and eager to analyze it. I saw a quickly growing output of queer representation on television (both traditional and online) that led me to focus on television and lesbian representation, specifically *The L Word: Generation Q* (2019). After selecting my research topic I sought theoretical perspectives in addition to CDA, and built my literature review for this thesis. I decided to examine discursively any instances of heteronormativity and homonormativity, which I identify as social wrongs.

Fairclough's (2013) remaining stages involve examining the social wrong and its place in the social order. In my project, stage two consisted of identifying heteronormative and homonormative structures obscuring or normalizing representations of lesbianism on television. This took form in much of the literature review work. Stage three involved questioning and

⁵ Oh, you thought I would not mention Covid-19? Wrong! This thesis was completed from my living room, during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

considering the usefulness of these representations, and I examined specific lesbian characterizations in relation to norms that reinforce power, specifically, those relations that underly the wrongs of heteronormativity and homonormativity. Stage three encompassed most of my analysis of *GenQ*, as I watched, and re-watched the first season in its entirety to identify representations of lesbian women and how they engage with discourses. Fairclough's fourth stage is to propose "possible ways past the obstacles," (2013, p. 235). Here, I considered the social context to improve future representations, looking to the literature for work on lesbian representation and television to understand patterns of representation, particularly normalizing ones. The use of Fairclough's stages was also informed by my own perspective as a lesbian, which allowed for a distinct avenue of engagement with these representations, particularly when thinking about overcoming obstacles to better representation.

Using Fairclough's (2010) four-stage model of CDA helped me attain structure in my research process and it guided me in the early stages of the project. However, as Fairclough (2010) explains, this model has no defined order, or level of application. When using it in my project, the most useful stage for my analysis was the first, focusing on the social wrong in its semiotic aspect (Fairclough, 2010). This allowed me to identify and consider representations that overlap moments of heteronormativity and homonormativity in *GenQ*.

Defining Queer Representation

My literature review work revealed that lesbian women are represented in distinct ways in comparison to other queer groups, especially in relation to heteronormativity and homonormativity. This was the case in *TLW*, which has been found to represent lesbian women in ways that line up with many heteronormative and homonormative ideals of lesbianism by presenting characters who are thin, well-educated, wealthy, and feminine. These representations

do not challenge normative ideas of femininity, instead reinforcing them with the added consequence of making lesbian characters appear straight because they line up with so many heterosexual norms (Ciasullo, 2001; Berine, 2008; Pratt, 2008; Lee & Meyer, 2010; Dhaenens, 2013). I considered the possibility that some of these representations may have carried over into the GenQ series, considering three of the main characters (Bette, Alice, and Shane) from *TLW* feature prominently in the first season of *GenQ*. The focus of lesbian women in this project is also shaped by my own perspectives, as a lesbian identifying female. Narrowing my focus to lesbian characters maximized my positionality and my knowledge about media representations from my honours thesis research, where using CDA I examined the song lyrics of Canadian queer-musicians Tegan Quin and Sara Quin of the band Tegan & Sara. In addition, narrowing the focus of my analysis was appropriate for my research timeline. I needed to be realistic about completing the project and earning my degree during global pandemic circumstances.

My view is that lesbian representations, whether a fully-developed character or solely the target of a joke, come to inform *all* viewers (regardless of sexuality) about queerness. My experience reinforces this; growing up I found myself searching for any scrap of queer female representation on television I could find, even if it was coming from a straight perspective. What I think of queer people, even as a queer person myself, *is* and *has* been shaped by representations of others, particularly those on television. I was not aware of it then, but I was seeking validation of my own lesbian identity. This thesis may provide a framework for understanding queer television representation, including instances where straight television characters pretend to be queer.⁶

⁶ Examples of this can be seen in television series such as *New Girl* (2011-2018) where in S2E7 *Goldmine*, a character pretends to be gay to make them appear less threatening to a cis-heterosexual male character. In addition,

I operationalized queer television representation to include the following elements:

- 1) a character identifies themselves as queer, even if only temporarily;
- 2) a character is identified as queer by others, including mistakenly;
- 3) a character mimes behaviour or activity that a reasonable viewer might assume to imply queerness.

Each of these elements of queer representation can be identified discursively in television series, and allowed me to identify queer representation within *GenQ*. In creating this definition, I considered how I might arrive at an understanding that would encompass queerness indicated verbally, visually, through action, symbol, or silence. I knew that when examining television, I needed to account for how varieties of queerness might be indicated through dialogue, costume/styling, mannerisms, body language, and music. Showtime's description of the series as a group of "self-possessed LGBTQIA+ characters" clearly defines the series as featuring diverse queer representations, and there are ample instances where characters are identified as lesbian, bisexual, or queer.

Research in queer television studies, particularly concerning lesbian and other queer women, has largely divided itself between categorizing queer representation as 'positive' or 'negative' (see, for example: Bierne, 2008; Lee & Meyer, 2010; Campisi, 2013). I attempted to shift from this binary to question and consider the context of representations, and uncover how representations are shaped by social structures like heteronormativity and homonormativity, but also race, class, and gender. This understanding of representation enabled me to pay critical attention to queer, and particularly lesbian discourses in *GenQ*, and how they construct and present topics like lesbian sexuality and queerness to viewers.

in *Lucifer* (2016-) S3E13 'Til Death Do Us Part, the two main male characters pretend to be in a relationship in order to advance the plot.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

To answer my research questions regarding how *GenQ* represents lesbian and bisexual women, and to investigate what impact heteronormativity and homonormativity have on these representations, I analysed Season One of *GenQ* in its entirety. I immersed myself in the data, watching the first season multiple times. Each episode began with a short recap of previous plot points and ended on a cliff-hanger, including the final episode. As a result, much of the conflict in the series is left unresolved. I viewed representations in this season as a site of power and struggle, revealing overlaps of themes related to norming. I examined characters' spoken dialogue, critically examining and uncovering how *GenQ* discusses queer existence and topics. I conducted a critical discourse analysis, informed by my own perspectives as a lesbian woman.

As expected, the series contains an abundance of lesbian as well as bisexual and queer female characters. In addition, *GenQ* also contains narratives regarding politics, relationships, and class, including times where topics such as feminism, polyamory, and heteronormativity are explicitly discussed by characters. I examined the characters paying close attention to spoken language and identifying representations of heteronormativity and homonormativity according to Robinson (2016) and Duggan (2003). I found that many of these topics center around Dani and Sophie in their relationship, as well as Alice and her interactions within her talk show, *The Alice Show*. In the following sections I describe and discuss the discourses I identified using excerpts of script (spoken dialogue), and explain how they contain heteronormative and homonormative elements and references, as well as how they speak back to the broader context of queer representations on television.

“Rings are just a symbol of the patriarchy ... but I still want you to have one”: Representing Lesbian Relationships in GenQ

GenQ features multiple representations of lesbian relationships. While viewing the first season, I found that each of the main characters have romantic relationships that are central to the plot. In total, there are five romantic relationships that occur in relation to the main characters and their storylines in the first season: Alice dates Nat (and briefly Gigi too), Shane dates Quiana, Bette has an on and off again relationship with Felicity, Finley dates Rebecca (albeit very briefly), and lastly Sophie and Dani are a featured couple. In the following section I focus on characters Dani and Sophie who are introduced in *GenQ*, particularly zooming in on their relationship throughout the first season. *GenQ* puts substantial focus on this couple, who are shown together frequently and in multiple contexts through season one: hanging out with friends, at work functions, during tense family encounters, and in (many) intimate moments.

Within the first five minutes of viewing season one it became clear that that *GenQ* would, at some point, feature a wedding between Dani and Sophie. In the opening moments of episode one, *Let's Do It Again*, Micah⁷ bluntly asks Dani when she is going to *finally* propose to Sophie asking, “So when? What are you waiting for?” Although the viewer is not told how long Dani and Sophie have been together, it is implied that they should have become engaged *by now*. Micah clearly believes this, with the pressure he places on Dani, reflecting his belief that the next logical step in their relationship must be engagement, with marriage to follow. *Let's Do It Again* goes on to feature a proposal between Dani and Sophie (see Figure #2). In this scene, late in the first episode, Dani has arrived home from an emotionally charged day at work with her father, Rodolfo, in which he was dismissive of his daughter’s sexuality, relationship and commitment to

⁷ Micah is a trans character in *GenQ*, featured in a supporting role as a roommate to both Dani and Sophie in the first season of this series.

Sophie. Receiving no validation or reassurance from her father has impacted Dani as she begins to set up the living room. She is anxious as she rushes to tidy a stack of books and pour two glasses of wine in anticipation of Sophie's arrival home. Sophie too has had a stressful day at her job, and when stepping in the door exclaims "Oh fuck, what a shitty fucking day!" before throwing herself onto the couch (S1E1, *Let's Do It Again*). Dani responds by offering Sophie an already poured glass of wine. Without asking about her day, Dani moves forward to begin the proposal. Moving across the living room, she tells Sophie how much she loves her, from the way she talks to the TV to the way she dances with her eyes closed. Dani lowers herself down on one knee in front of Sophie who is seated on the couch, and presents an engagement ring. Sophie responds by saying "Do not fuck with me!" and "No, no, no" (S1E1, *Let's Do It Again*), expressing a range of emotions in her body language and facial cues, from confusion to surprise before beginning to cry. She ultimately says "Yes," after a prolonged pause that Dani acknowledges by saying she "waited a long time to say yes" (S1E1, *Let's Do It Again*).



Figure #1: Still shot from GenQ S1E1: Let's Do It Again. This scene takes place in a living room, Dani is on one knee as she proposes to Sophie, who is sitting on the couch. A wine bottle with two full glasses sits next to them, and lit candles are in the background.

When Dani goes to place the ring on Sophie it does not fit her finger, foreshadowing that the couple might not be a proper fit. But without missing a beat Sophie makes a joke, saying:

SOPHIE
Rings are just a symbol of the patriarchy.

DANI
Yeah, but I still want you to have one.

SOPHIE
Yeah, I'll still take it (both laugh).

Ring traditions, like proposals with an engagement ring, are historically connected and associated with a rise in consumer capitalism in the Western, American context (Howard, 2006). Sophie's joke references the symbolism rings have in a wedding, calling them representative of patriarchal structures – which is indeed true. Engagement rings also signify commitment and marriage, and according to Howard (2006, p. 58) wearing an engagement ring is a symbol of “success in the competitive marriage market”. Engagement rings are distinct from wedding rings

due to their financial cost. Hass and Deseran (1981, p. 8) explain that when it comes to engagement rings, the price “of a symbolic gift is a guarantee of the bona fides [wealth, credentials] of the giver”. In giving this ring to Sophie, Dani is also showing off her ability to afford an expensive, impressive engagement ring to symbolize their relationship. This moment between Dani and Sophie is quickly interrupted by their friends Finley and Micah, who rush down the stairs and into the living room to celebrate the engagement.

In this first proposal in *Let's Do It Again*, Dani is the initiator and is placed in a conventional masculine role, getting down on one knee to propose to Sophie. The presentation of an engagement ring is grounded in heteronormative relationship practices as well as patriarchal norms, which are explicitly acknowledged, but not subverted. This scene also features other conventional romantic signals, including the candlelight and wine. Overall, I view this first engagement scene to be anticlimactic, lasting less than three and a half minutes. I hoped the proposal scene might reference their past feelings or significant events as a couple. This expectation is the product of a long-standing lack of representation of lesbian commitment in television shows. Despite increases in visibility of queer women on television, there are still numerous harmful tropes that are employed. Cheating (and other forms of commitment failures) signify just one example of many patterns that the characterizations of lesbian relationships follow on television, but not only are lesbians represented on television as failing at romantic relationships, they are also often depicted as lacking in their family and friend circles too (Parker, Sadika, Sameen, Morrison, & Morrison, 2019).

In *GenQ*, these sorts of representations are foreshadowed in the lead-up to this scene. There is almost no back story on Dani and Sophie's relationship provided, with the exception of Micah saying they have been together long enough that an engagement is expected (S1E1, *Let's*

Do It Again). Other details such as how they met, or significant events in their partnership, are absent in the build up to the proposal. This has the effect of limiting Dani and Sophie's relationship storyline in *GenQ*. This lack of history leading up to the engagement likely impacted the effect this scene had on me, and my subsequent interpretation of it. It becomes difficult as a viewer to care about characters' stories if not given a reason why one should be invested. Presenting a proposal in this way, that is within the first episode of the series and without any relationship history, leads viewers to question the reasonableness of this engagement between Dani and Sophie. The fact that the ring does not fit Sophie's finger furthers this assumption and alludes to problems that may arise later in the series. From the beginning of the series there are signs that the relationship between Sophie and Dani has been rushed, and the pair will not last as a couple.

These storylines and trajectories of lesbian characters coincide with findings from McInroy and Craig (2017). In their study of messages about sexual orientation and gender identity from LGBTQ representations in traditional media, LGBTQ participants reported that gay and lesbian characters storylines and trajectories were often limited, and lacking in complexity (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Participants indicated that social expectations and norms often accompany these types of representations, like that of the engagement and marriage trajectories both of which can be seen in the first season of *GenQ* with Sophie and Dani. While Dani and Sophie's storylines are not necessarily limited, they can be seen frequently throughout *GenQ*. The focus of Dani and Sophie's story is narrowed to their engagement and forthcoming wedding.

Episode four, *LA Times*, features the second engagement scene between Sophie and Dani. This impromptu moment has important differences from the first engagement. This second proposal scene places Sophie and Dani naked, in a bathtub together, resulting in a much more

intimate situation (see Figure #3). Sophie is in a bubble bath when she is interrupted by Dani, who enters the room already undressed. When Dani moves towards the tub and begins to clamor over its side, Sophie responds with annoyance and resistance, saying “No, no, no ... no nobody invited you!” before giving in to make room for Dani in the tub (S1E4, *LA Times*). The conversation that follows is tense. Dani says she knows Sophie is mad at her, but Sophie claims she is not. Instead, she just wants Sophie to talk to her and open-up more. When Sophie asks Dani why she is struggling to communicate, Dani responds:

DANI
Uh, sometimes I-I think about the night we met
SOPHIE
Yeah.
DANI
At Akbar. You had a girlfriend.
SOPHIE
Yeah
DANI
That scares me.
SOPHIE
It does?
DANI
Yeah. You were so willing to leave her. And I-I guess part of me wonders if if-if you'll leave me, too.

In this conversation Dani references Akbar, a popular gay-friendly bar in West LA where they first met. Sophie responds by jumping out of the tub and running into the next room, and when she returns she is holding a ring which is revealed to have belonged to her great-grandmother. The familial significance of this ring work to frame Dani as becoming an accepted member of Sophie’s extended family. Sophie presents this ring to Dani, telling her that it is a reminder that she is always with her and will never leave. Dani responds by saying “Thank you, I love it” (S1E4, *LA Times*).



Figure #2: Still shot of Sophie and Dani from S1E4, LA Times. They are naked in a bathtub filled with bubbles.

Although I consider this scene to be a second engagement between Sophie and Dani, it is not a second proposal. When the ring is presented, it is not positioned as a question, and Dani's response of "Thank you," as opposed to "Yes," reinforces this. Sophie excitedly tells Dani she got the ring Dani gave her resized, but when asked where it is Sophie says it is in her dresser – not on her finger, possibly. Although Sophie not wearing her engagement ring again hints that something is amiss, the song "If You Think It's Love" by King Princess plays as the scene cuts out, with the lyrics "And if you think it's trust/ It is/ And if you think it's love/ It is." This scene is much more intimate than the previous more conventional proposal occurring in *Let's Do It Again*. The nakedness of both Sophie and Dani reflects both an emotional intimacy and their physical closeness in the tub a lack of barriers. Additionally, unlike the first episode, there are no friends that come busting in afterward. Instead, the scene ends with the two beginning to kiss, with Dani leaning over top of Sophie before cutting to black, preserving the intimacy and privacy of this shared moment.

An important feature of this scene (S1E4, *LA Times*) is Dani and Sophie's nudity while they are together in the bathtub and the sexuality it depicts. The scene includes a third person camera angle throughout to enable a full shot of Sophie's breasts as Dani climbs into bathtub. In addition, the camera angle enables a full shot of Dani's inner thigh and buttocks as the camera rises up through her legs and pans across her legs and lap. Candace Moore (2007) discusses how the original series, *TLW*, marketed themselves on the appeal of sexuality, which went on to become one of the series most successful tactics. Strategies of lesbian representation through sex appeal included using the male gaze. Building on the work of feminist film scholars Laura Mulvey (1989) and Ellen Strain (2003), Moore (2007) calls this a 'touristic' male gaze in *TLW* that caters to both straight and queer viewers. There are multiple representations of heterosexual sex in the first season of *TLW*, as identified by Moore (2007), but no representation of straight sex in the first season of *GenQ*. However, cis-het men don't have to be present to manifest the male gaze, especially when critically viewing Sophie and Dani in S1E4 of *GenQ*. There are attempts in these scenes to flip the script of conventional romantic relationship practices, taking non-traditional spins through the two engagements. However, these representations also fit within a heteronormative narrative centred on marriage and use sexual strategies of representation that may fetishize or objectify the characters.

Each engagement between Dani and Sophie is preceded or followed by conflict. The conversation leading to their second engagement began with Dani and Sophie discussing problems in their relationship, a theme that carries throughout the season. Much of this conflict comes from Dani's relationship with her father, Rodolfo, strained in large part because of Dani's sexuality. In S1E1, *Let's Do It Again*, Dani is shown working for her father's company, Nùñez Inc., where she is placed into many difficult and stressful situations. By the end of the first

episode Dani abruptly quits her father's company to be PR Executive on Bette Porter's mayoral campaign. Dani's exit from Nùñez Inc. comes, in part, due to her strained relationship with her father, Rodolfo.

As mentioned above, Dani's emotionally draining day at work is compounded by a conversation with her father, Rodolfo, as she exits the office building. Dani's father offers an impressive promotion to Senior Vice President as an acknowledgement of how hard she has been working as a director of communications, and suggests he take her to dinner to celebrate:

RODOLFO

We'll celebrate this weekend. I'll make reservations somewhere nice hmm?

DANI

Yeah. I'll-I'll ask Sophie.

RODOLFO

Who? I'm just kidding. Invite your friend.

DANI

Dad, you know she's not just my friend.

RODOLFO

Yes, yes. I actually was-I think-it's important to have fun when you are young. I'll see you this weekend, hmm? Drive safely.

Here, Rodolfo makes an ill-considered joke, making it seem that Sophie is a stranger to the family. Although he quickly clarifies this is a joke, the harm of his words has already been felt by Dani. Dani's father undermines her relationship as just for "fun" as opposed to serious and committed, and re-frames Sophie as just a "friend." What is viewed here is homophobia, however viewers who lack a queer lens may instead label Rodolfo's comments as a mistake or misunderstanding instead of a disrespectful rejection of Dani and her partner. This scene between Dani and her father in *GenQ* bares striking similarity to events in *TLW*, where Bette and her father, Melvin, are featured (although infrequently) across its six seasons. Lee and Meyer (2010) identify one example of the ways Bette's relationship with her father is represented in *TLW* through a tense conversation at a restaurant in Season 1 Episode 5 of *TLW, Lawfully*:

MELVIN
This child—you're gonna be taking care of it, and Miss Kennard?
BETTE
Dad, we're a couple. We are starting a family.
MELVIN
If that makes you happy.
BETTE
Well, doesn't it make you happy? I mean, you're going to have another grandchild.

MELVIN
That is biologically impossible. Unless there's been a medical breakthrough that I don't know anything about, the possibility that this child will be my grandchild does not exist. Therefore, I am happy if that's what you want in your friendship with Miss Kennard. But, I cannot realistically be asked to participate in this fiction of your creation. (Lee & Meyer, 2010, p. 239).

Here, Bette's father refuses to recognize her relationship with Tina, calling her "Ms. Kennard," labeling their partnership as a friendship, and refusing to recognize the family that his daughter Bette has formed with her partner. As Lee and Meyer (2010) explain, these family representations in *TLW* are problematic in that they fail to offer any resolution to these sorts of parental conflicts, and leave family problems depicted as incomplete. Bette's relationship with her father is not featured in the first season of *GenQ*, however, the same type of familial representations are picked up between Dani and her father, Rodolfo. These scenes are just shy of 10 years apart. What has changed? More importantly, what hasn't? Simply put, there has been not much improvement. There is a continued lack of effective ways to deal with parental conflict. Most relevant in these conflicts between Dani and her father in *GenQ* is dismissal, beginning in S1E1 with Rodolfo pretends to not know who Sophie is, before calling her a just friend, distancing himself from her and his role as Sophie's future father-in-law.

Rodolfo faces few to no consequences for this or his other actions to follow. Instead, Dani bares the brunt and lets it affect her relationship with Sophie. In episode three, *Lost Love*, Rodolfo books what he says is a tour of a potential wedding venue for Sophie and Dani, later revealed to be The Biltmore. The Biltmore is a famous historic hotel located in LA. Their

website⁸ lists many politicians and dignitaries who have chosen this as a venue, including Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Texan Governor George W. Bush (who went on to be elected President of the US), and Former South African President Nelson Mandela. The Biltmore venue is high class, and in *GenQ* the planner uses the words “luxury” and “sophistication” to describe what a wedding there would look like. Rodolfo appears to be attempting to make up for his previous disrespect towards his daughter and her relationship, but this visit worsens things. This scene highlights differences of power and class between the couple and their families: Dani and her father are dressed in suits, while members of Sophie’s family appear to have just come from work, with her mother in medical scrubs. While on the tour, members of Sophie’s family inquire about bringing their own food to the venue:

SOPHIE’S FAMILY

Where does the food go? Because we need few tables to put everything we’re bringing.

PLANNER

Well ... we actually don’t allow outside food but we have several excellent menus to choose from. We’ll set up a tasting as soon as possible, and then our restaurant will prepare a menu according to your needs.

This upsets Sophie, who sees it as important to have homecooked family food at the reception, in addition to feeling embarrassed by her family’s inexperience with the norms of a high-class venue like The Biltmore. Following this, the planner reveals that Rodolfo has already booked the venue, paying a non-refundable deposit to hold the space. This was done without the knowledge of Dani and Sophie, who until this moment believed they had been on a casual tour. Rodolfo tells them their wedding is set for the 10th of May.

⁸ <https://www.millenniumhotels.com/en/los-angeles/millennium-biltmore-hotel-los-angeles/#home>

The scene ends in a tense and uncomfortable situation for all characters involved. This surprise increases conflict between Dani and her father, as well as in her relationship with Sophie, which is shown as they exit The Biltmore:

SOPHIE

Don't you want to marry me and not feel like we got to keep our spines straight?

DANI

Of course I do. I don't want to hurt him. I don't want to hurt his feelings.

SOPHIE

I know. But you're hurting mine instead.

Sophie's use of the word 'straight' when describing how she feels she must act in order to keep Dani's father happy alludes to Rodolfo's difficulties accepting his daughter and her engagement. The type of acceptance that Rodolfo gives Sophie has made her feel like she must act straight. Duggan (2003) argues that homonormativity upholds an "assimilated, gender appropriate, politically mainstream portion of the gay population" (p. 44). This results in a gay population that includes itself within existing structures, adopting a point of view that upholds gay normality. As a result, diversity and inclusion for the gay population begins to look like an assimilated queer that upholds hierarchies and distinctions of race, gender, sexuality, class and nationality (Duggan, 2003). Rodolfo's actions at The Biltmore wedding venue reveal a homonormative frame of mind, particularly in relation to class. Rodolfo does show involvement in the wedding and its planning, but it is under his terms. Doing so ensures that the wedding remains high-class and high-status, which guests will be able to recognize. This excludes Sophie's family who are not used to venues like The Biltmore. Rodolfo is concerned with ensuring his daughter's, and by extension his own, class is maintained in this marriage to Sophie, and his acceptance is conditional on this. Additionally, this move on Rodolfo's part may also be viewed as an attempt at sabotaging Sophie and Dani's relationship. Placing Sophie's family in

this situation at the Biltmore is a trap; the juxtaposition between the elite nature of The Biltmore venue and Sophie's working class family makes them appear "poor". This, in Rodolfo's eyes, confirms what he has been trying to tell his daughter Dani all along: that Sophie and her family just aren't their "type" of people.

In Episode Five, *Labels*, a suggestive event occurs between Dani and Sophie, again as a result of Rodolfo's actions. Arriving home from a run, Dani notices some items sent over from her father including a box of chocolates and documents which are later revealed to be a prenuptial agreement (hereafter, prenu)⁹. At first Dani jokes to Sophie about the chocolates, saying she is "pretty sure my dad got these, but I definitely should've lied and said they were from me" (S1E5, *Labels*). The light mood created by this joke is quickly wiped away when Dani recognizes the papers to be a prenu. Sophie and Dani acknowledge this signing is likely a bad idea that will worsen an already strained relationship, but they are desperate for Rodolfo's approval and support. Just as they come to this decision, Sophie's close friend Maribel¹⁰ interrupts them:

MARIBEL

Uh, guys? Um, there's a really weird clause here.

DANI

What? W-What is it?

MARIBEL

I'm an immigration attorney, so I really could be wrong.

DANI

Just tell us what it says.

⁹ A prenu is a contract signed prior to marriage that allows a couple to determine control of financial and other assets in the event of a marriage dissolution.

¹⁰ Maribel is a supporting character who can be seen throughout the first season of *GenQ*.

MARIBEL

Okay, well, Sophie, if you give birth to any children, they can't claim Dani's family's money.

DANI

What?

MARIBEL

But if Dani has the children, then they'll be part of her family's trust.

SOPHIE

Wow. Damn. Okay. Wow, so my kids aren't part of his family now.

DANI

We are not signing that.

By including this clause in the prenup, Rodolfo reaffirms his feelings towards Dani and Sophie's relationship and upcoming marriage, and engages in another explicit homophobic action towards them. To Rodolfo, Sophie is lesser and her and Dani's relationship is not viewed the same as a heterosexual one. This moment builds off earlier scenes in *GenQ*, as well as in *TLW*, where heterosexual fathers reject and dismiss lesbian relationships. Here, Rodolfo's actions explicitly demonstrate that he only respects and values children that are personally birthed by his daughter as part of his family lineage.

Within the same episode, Dani and Sophie, still fuming, confront Rodolfo about the biological clause agreement in the prenup (Figure #4). This takes place on a staircase, and Rodolfo and Dani alternate stepping up and down stairs, shifting power and position over one another as the conversation intensifies:

DANI [*standing **below** Rodolfo]

What the hell is wrong with you?

RODOLFO [*standing **above** Dani]

Dani, calm down. What's going on?

DANI [*standing **below** Rodolfo]

You were just gonna slip in that biological parent clause?

RODOLFO [*standing **above** Dani]

Everything is up for discussion.

DANI [*standing **below** Rodolfo]

If Sophie gives birth, that kid will be mine.

RODOLFO [*standing **above** Dani]
Daniella, if you were a man— (Dani cuts her father off).
DANI [*standing **above** Rodolfo]
Do not finish that sentence. I am telling you, don't.
RODOLFO [*standing **below** Dani]
I'm trying to protect you.
DANI [*standing **above** Rodolfo]
How? How are you trying to protect me?
RODOLFO [*standing **below** Dani]
The lawyer said that clause was just standard.
DANI [*standing **above** Rodolfo]
Is it standard for straight people, too?
RODOLFO [*standing **below** Dani]
No. I'm trying to do what's best for my family.
DANI [*standing **above** Rodolfo]
She is your family. Our kids will be your family. Why is it so fucking hard for you to see that?

Sophie is present for this scene as well, although she exchanges few words with Rodolfo. Dani is visibly upset, and firmly tells her father that any child of Sophie's is her child too. Dani affirms there will be no prenup and the scene dissolves.



Figure #3: Still shot of Rodolfo, Dani, and Sophie from *GenQ* S1E5: *Labels*. This scene takes place on a staircase, Dani and Sophie are angrily confronting Rodolfo about a prenup, contained in an envelope seen carried by Dani.

Lee and Meyer (2010) describe how in the original *TLW* there were few representations of how to navigate “coming out, acceptance and dialogue with non-queer family, friends” (p. 246). These types of representations are important, as Lee and Meyer (2010) point out, for the advancement of LGBTQIA rights. Lee and Meyer (2010) consider it troubling that main characters in *TLW* have little to no contact with anyone outside their network of queer friends, and this includes Bette, Shane, and Alice – who are carried on to the *GenQ* series. Family relationships are hardly shown in *TLW*, and most interactions with straight characters are laced with homophobia (Lee & Meyer, 2010). In *GenQ*, Dani is frequently seen with her father, Rodolfo, however, there is not a single time they are relaxed or at ease with each other. Instead, they are shown in moments of tension with Rodolfo engaging in homophobic behaviours. Dani’s response to these is anger and frustration, and rightfully so, but her reactions are devoid of any

effective or constructive response. This shows that tensions between queer and straight characters are best resolved through avoidance.

The most significant source of conflict for Dani and Sophie, aside from Rodolfo, is their relationship. Dani and Sophie can be seen disagreeing or arguing in every episode with the exception of the first. In S1E2, *Less Is More*, Dani's job switch results in tension between her and Sophie as they argue over communication. In S1E3, *Lost Love*, following their viewing of *The Biltmore*, Dani and Sophie argue about the state of their relationship with Rodolfo. S1E4, *LA Times*, when asked by Finley how things in her relationship might be improving, in a tone that is seemingly defeated Sophie states Dani is doing "her weird distant thing" – confirming that their disagreements and struggles have been continuing. In the final four episodes of *GenQ* conflict in Dani and Sophie's relationship begins to reach a boiling point, and they are increasingly shown in disagreement with one another. In S1E5, *Labels*, Dani and Sophie argue while driving home from their tour of *The Biltmore*. In S1E6, *Loose Ends*, Sophie again vents to Finley about her relationship frustrations, saying that "She [Dani] left at four o'clock in the morning, and I haven't heard from her since." In the same episode, following a few drinks, Sophie again speaks to Finley about Dani, saying: "You know who's mean? Dani. Little fucking fuck" (S1E6, *Loose Ends*). In Episode Seven, *Lose It All*, this pattern continues as Sophie's grandmother takes a serious fall and ends up in hospital. Unable to take the morning off, Dani goes to work and it is Finley who is at the hospital to support Sophie when she feels overwhelmed, bringing her Cheetos, Funyuns, and Snoballs¹¹ – what Finley proudly calls "all the major food groups" (S1E7, *Lose It All*). When Sophie cries over Dani not coming to the hospital, Finley hugs her and calms her down. While at the hospital, Finley and Sophie kiss. This seems

¹¹ These are types of American junk food snacks.

insignificant at first, given the emotional scenes in the lead up. So, as a lesbian viewer I was not surprised that Sophie would do something impulsive.

In the eighth and final episode of the season, *Lapse In Judgement*, Dani suggests to Sophie that they skip the wedding and elope to Hawaii instead. Sophie agrees, although she appears a bit hesitant, perhaps because she kissed Finley and has yet to tell Dani. Dani books the tickets and she and Sophie agree to meet at the airport at the end of the day. However, shortly after arriving at work Sophie is pulled into the green room of *The Alice Show* by Finley. They have a short conversation about their time at the hospital before kissing again, then having sex. Sophie's kiss at the hospital and sex with Finley in the green room are not revealed to Dani at all in season one of *GenQ*. After sleeping with Sophie, Finley decides to fly home, saying she needs to work on her personal growth. This conveniently positions Finley at the airport around the same time that Dani and Sophie depart for Hawaii. These events leave Sophie conflicted in her commitment to Dani. Dani is shown calmly arriving at the airport as Sophie, aware of Finley's imminent departure, seems to struggle in making up her mind about where to go. It is not shown whether Sophie gets on the plane with Dani to Hawaii or if she reunites with Finley, and the season ends on a cliff-hanger, with the question of Dani and Sophie's marriage unanswered.

There is an association between infidelity and lesbian relationships in *GenQ*. This theme has perhaps been carried on from the parent show, *TLW*, where lesbian relationships are also represented with cheating as a common feature – for example, in *TLW* S1E12 where Bette cheats on her girlfriend Tina with a carpenter who is fixing their home's air conditioning, and this trope recurs in S3E5, when Shane cheats on her then girlfriend Carmen. Parker and colleagues (2019) discuss how the infidelity tropes can reinforce prejudice toward sexual minorities – particularly queer women. As discussed within the literature review chapter, there has been an increased use

of the lesbian death trope on television in the last five years, with a disproportionate number of lesbian, bisexual, and queer female characters killed off (GLADD, 2016; 2017; 2020). Infidelity tropes, according to Parker and colleagues (2019), build off of a framework of evil lesbian tropes, lesbian death tropes, and promiscuity tropes, all which reinforce ideas of lesbian women as emotionally unavailable. Dani and Sophie's relationship in *GenQ* is jeopardized by infidelity tropes and as a couple they are not portrayed as healthy and supportive.

Alice is the New Ellen: Maintaining “A Poppy, Fun, Palatable Lesbian Brand”

The first season of *GenQ* re-introduces Alice Pieszecki, a character carried over from *TLW*, where she played a central role throughout its six seasons. In *TLW*, Alice is best known for her creation of ‘The Chart,’ a white board connecting all the lesbian relationships (including one-night stands) she and her friend group knew of in LA (Bellino & Rodeman, 2019). Alice is the only bisexual character in both the *TLW* and *GenQ*, despite being branded and referred to as a lesbian in scenes during *GenQ*. In *GenQ* she heads an eponymous talk show that occupies a central role in the first season of the series. Alice is the star, her friends appear on it, and the studio where Alice's show is filmed is where Sophie and Finley work throughout much of the series. Sophie is shown in important network and writing meetings, while Finley is shown getting coffee and running errands as an underpaid and overworked intern.

From my first time viewing *GenQ* I noted that *The Alice Show* felt strangely similar to *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. As discussed in the literature review chapter, Ellen DeGeneres is a well-discussed figure in relation to representation of lesbian women on television (see Beirne, 2008; Dow, 2001; Herman, 2005; Lee & Meyer, 2010; Raley & Lucas, 2006). In April of 1997, DeGeneres publicly came out as a lesbian on *Ellen* (March 1994-July 1998), her American cable television series. After a short-lived sitcom called *The Ellen Show* (Sept 2001-January 2002),

DeGeneres became host of a daytime talk program, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, which ran from September of 2003 until September of 2021. Few talk shows are led by lesbian, bisexual, or queer women, and the most widely known and popular on American television is Ellen DeGeneres. I recall when I came out one of the most common responses from straight friends attempting to show support was “I watch Ellen, she’s great!”, reflecting how common place Ellen DeGeneres is in conversations regarding queerness.

Beyond the fact that their talk shows are eponymous, similarity between the *Alice* and *Ellen* shows is achieved through the persona and demeanor of Alice, as well as the set design. Throughout the first season of *GenQ*, Alice incorporates similar mannerisms and style as DeGeneres, such as her open, non-threatening hand gestures, choppy blonde hair, and wide smile (see figure #5 A and B); her host persona features elements of humor and silliness mimicking that of DeGeneres. The set style of Alice’s show mirrors that of *Ellen* (see figure #6 A and B), from its usage of blue neon lighting as well as layout of the set with its interview chairs at right angles to one another, facing the audience. A comment online by a Reddit user in response to these representations in *GenQ* sums up the overlap between *The Alice Show* and *The Ellen Show*: “Oh I see Alice is Ellen, that’s cool” (User: Chazzyphant, /r/theLword).



Figure #4 A & B: Alice in *GenQ* and promotional picture of Ellen for her talk show, note the similar mannerisms, persona, and characterization between *GenQ*'s Alice and Ellen DeGeneres.



Figure #5 A & B: Promotional picture for Ellen's talk show versus still shot of *The Alice Show* in *GenQ*. Comparison between the two reveals key similarities which can be seen in the positioning of the chairs, blue LED signage in background, and audience layout.

Purposeful attempts to imitate Ellen DeGeneres' host persona and show design, paired with featuring guests representing real queers, results in *The Alice Show* effectively giving the same feel as *Ellen*. One perhaps unintended effect of this is that it can lead to Alice being read as a lesbian, overshadowing her bisexuality. Ellen is a lesbian woman, and her impact on media representations of lesbianism cannot be overstated (see: Lee & Meyer, 2010; Beirne, 2008; Moore, 2008; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Herman, 2005; Lo, 2005; Dow, 2001). Lee and Meyer (2010) remark that, in *TLW*, Alice is bisexual, and as noted by Moore (2007), Alice speaks about her attraction to male and females, and uses the term bisexual to describe herself. However, representations of Alice in *TLW* don't seem to support this and cast doubt on her chosen label, according to Lee & Meyer, because she is primarily seen with lesbian friends, and her relationships with men are hardly acknowledged nor discussed. In addition, in the original *TLW* Alice creates 'The Chart' – but isn't seen linked to any men on it, as Lee and Meyer (2010) note. But Lee and Meyer (2010) inaccurately assume that bisexuality only exists and is valid if it is represented by simultaneous relationships with both women and men. This is problematic because it reinforces stereotypes of bisexual women being hypersexual, and overlooks other potential partnerships bisexual people may have with non-binary folks, for example. For *GenQ* to create such overlap between *The Ellen Show* and *The Alice Show* might result in viewers who go on to believe the character Alice is a lesbian – when she is in fact bisexual. These sorts of representations act as forms of bisexual erasure, and work by removing bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation.

While conducting my analysis, I found that characters' interactions in the context of *The Alice Show* speak to the broader state of queer representation in media. In this research project, my goal was to examine how a current television series represents lesbianism, however I did not

expect the series to explicitly reference queer representation and heteronormativity, which *The Alice Show* attempts to do. In a move that departs from the expected, interviewees on *The Alice Show* include real people, featuring Megan Rapinoe in episode three and Roxanne Gay in episode eight. Megan Rapinoe is an outstanding American soccer player who identifies as a lesbian woman. In addition, she is a well known political activist – often outspoken against the 45th president of the United States, Donald Trump (see Manasan, 2020). Alice references Rapinoe’s “legendary soccer career” but does not elaborate further on this. This implies that it is expected the audience will be familiar with Rapinoe from real world experience. However, this requires viewers to fill in character details with real events from Rapinoe’s life, blurring the line between fiction and reality. Viewers might be able to piece Rapinoe’s important life details together from Alice’s interview questions, but unless you had prior knowledge of Rapinoe you might not realize she is a guest star on *GenQ* playing herself. I found myself having to search some of the topics brought up during the interview, as my familiarity with Megan Rapinoe is limited to the sport sphere. So, even as a lesbian viewer myself, I was an outsider to some of this knowledge. The same can be said about Roxanne Gay’s appearance in the season finale, *Lapse in Judgement*. *The Alice Show* features Roxanne Gay, who identifies as bisexual. Roxanne Gay is an American novelist and writer, best known for essays in her book *Bad Feminist* (2014). She is also a well known social commentator and critic who draws from her own personal experiences with race, gender, and sexual identity, and much of her written work is deconstructionist and centers around feminist and racial issues (Gay, 2021). When Alice is introducing Roxanne, it is clear from her excitement that this is a valued and high profile guest. However, Gay’s appearance on *GenQ* is accompanied by little explanation of who she is and what she has accomplished. In comparison to Megan Rapinoe (whose background is hardly explained),

Roxanne Gay is given even less of an overview, again leaving viewers to fill in the gaps. This shows that the writers and producers of *GenQ* assume that viewers have existing knowledge about both Rapinoe and Gay, so key personal details are left out of *GenQ* and therefore it is assumed that the audience is already familiar with both characters' real life backstories.

Alice states the coffee preference of each guest as they are welcomed onto the show stage. Although not stated by Alice, it is assumed that guests are served this coffee from the café set that appears on the set of *The Alice Show* (see: figure #7). This café features all the gadgets of a working coffee shop, with coffee bean grinders, espresso machines, syrups, and even pastries. In S1E3, *Lost Love*, Alice says that Rapinoe's coffee order is, "an Americano with a little bit of almond milk and not a single sugar." The positioning of coffee on *The Alice Show* is not mistake or coincidence. The role of coffee in the queer community is historical, as the inconsistent and ever changing legal and social landscape has resulted in the need for safe spaces, one of which being queer coffee shops (Faranda, 2016). For centuries queer coffee shops have provided an incomparable space for the queer community to gather, serving as radical safe spaces for community collaboration and activism (Joseph, 2018). The often overlooked Compton's Cafeteria Riots, took place in California in 1996, in response to a police raid at the all hours coffee shop (Armstrong & Crago, 2006). The resulting riot began with a steaming hot cup of coffee – thrown by patron at a police officers face in response to mistreatment (Myers, 2013). This event at Compton's Cafeteria played a key role in the chain of events that led to Stonewall Riots, and serves as an example of when the queer community radically fought back against legal oppression and harassment (Armstrong & Crago, 2006; Myers, 2013).



Figure #6: Still shot from S1E3, Lost Love, featuring the set of The Alice Show. In the background a staged coffee shop can be seen that is loaded with multiple coffee bean grinders, espresso machine, syrups, and pastries.

Faranda (2016) notes that media and coffee culture are intertwined, allowing products to be marketed and thus become emotionally attached to particular groups or individuals. Their research looked at how queer participants in coffee shops in their study respond and engage with homonormative discourses. Faranda (2016) established that coffee shops, specifically those located in the Church and Wellesley Streets of Toronto, exist and work in ways that reinforce coffee cultures and provide a place for LGBTQ identity to be constructed and shaped. However, this was not without the reinforcement of consumption and spending practices. This work demonstrates the role that coffee, particularly queer coffee shops, continue to play in relation to queer identity. However, O’Flynn (2019) argues that these associations with non-queer pieces of culture (like coffee) have resulted in a new stereotype of queer representation – seen through the uptick in the use of iced coffee in online media, from viral memes to tweets. The coffee signifier has been used in *Love, Simon* (2018) – a blockbuster movie that follows protagonist Simon Spiers, a high school teen, as he navigates his emerging queer identity (Manzella, 2018). In the

opening moments of the movie, which features internal monologue, Simon can be heard saying “We do everything friends do: We drink way too much iced coffee, we watch bad ‘90s movies, and hangout at Waffle House dreaming of college and gorging on carbs” (Manzella, 2018). Other forms of media – from television and movies – have not been immune from this, as seen in *GenQ* with the positioning of coffee on *The Alice Show*. The result of this, according to O’Flynn (2019), is a the LGBT+ community projecting queerness onto a broader range of seemingly non-queer activities – many of which are economic activities rooted in consumption. This upholds a homonormative frame through the focus on identifying with patterns of consumption, and Duggan (2003) notes that homonormative discourses often adopt a superficial model of culture that aligns with business interests and practices – in this case the purchasing of coffee.

In addition to highlighting her coffee order, Alice welcomes Megan Rapinoe onto the show by labelling her as one of her personal “gay heroes,” but also as “America’s gay sweetheart” (S1E3, *Lost Love*). One aspect of homonormative discourses that Duggan (2003) identifies is its emphasis and reliance on a “the Americanism of model gay ‘heroes’,” who are positioned to reinforce calls for equality and inclusion, as well as political goals (p. 46). In Episode three of *GenQ*, this sort of language is used by Alice as she familiarizes her audience with Megan Rapinoe. Duggan (2003) explains that in the early 2000s within the US, these types of ‘gay hero’ rhetoric were often used to boost political demands – particularly for inclusion in spheres like marriage and the military, boxes that, at least within the US, have now been checked off as ‘achieved’ by queer groups. This, according to Duggan (2003) is an assimilationist type of thinking, versus “flamboyant in-your-face gay” activism because it distances itself from and ignores inequalities, particularly economic ones (p. 49). Today, these sorts of discourses persist,

as seen in *GenQ* this ‘gay hero’ rhetoric is present throughout Megan Rapinoe’s appearance on the show.

Alice begins the question portion of the interview by referencing to Rapinoe’s soccer career, then asks for her coming-out story:

ALICE

Oh, so, okay, I'm gonna get into your legendary soccer career, but before we do that, I would love to hear your coming out story, if you're willing to share.

MEGAN

Of course (Audience cheers loudly). Yeah, right? Go, gays! Um, well, I didn't realize that I was gay growing up, which, looking back, is a big shock. I didn't really figure it out for myself until college ... Well, I mean, listen. I'm from, like, kind of a small town. ... It was, like, a conservative area, so there wasn't a lot of, like, hey, there's this, you know, mommy and daddy option or this mommy and mommy option or this daddy and daddy option. So there wasn't a lot of that going on. ... So, yeah, we had some confusion ... early on. So as soon as I went to college, um, spread my wings on my own ... I pretty quickly found out that I was gay. Yeah. So that was amazing ... It was really great¹².

In this portion of the interview, Megan uses codes that are easily recognizable by queer viewers in the know: “small-town,” describes small-minded and “conservative” signals lack of support for queer community.

Following this, Alice asks what Rapinoe would say to her younger self in relation to sexuality, and Rapinoe responds, “You’re gay! Obviously!” (S1E3, *Lost Love*). Rapinoe goes on to say that coming out has been wonderful for her and she has loved it, implying that others can experience the same validation. The interview concludes by Alice asking about the gayest things that have occurred in the locker room as well as who her celebrity crush is, significantly less serious topics. The scene ends by Alice announcing to the camera they will return following a

¹² I have edited this quote to remove what I deem to be conversational flow aspects from Alice who regularly engages with Rapinoe as she tells this story, saying things such as “mhmm,” “for sure,” and “yeah” to indicate that she is listening and agreeing with Rapinoe.

commercial break to talk with Megan about “equal pay in sports and her new partnership with TIME'S UP [a non-profit, discussed below]” (S1E3, *Lost Love*). Megan Rapinoe’s interview and appearance on *The Alice Show* in *GenQ* is concluded following this.

This moment in *GenQ* is one of the few in the first season where discourses surrounding coming out are presented. Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) note that popular media play a role in reassuring and validating identity by showing examples of queerness, and this can be important for queer audiences who view representations, like that of Megan Rapinoe’s in *GenQ*. According to Gomillion and Giuliano, when audiences view affirming queer figures in media, it can reinforce and achieve self-efficacy in the coming out process, and McInroy and Craig’s (2017) found that young queer adults use queer characters on television to aid in development of their sexual identity and coming out journey. This is important in relation to representations of Megan Rapinoe, who in her appearance on *GenQ*, directly addresses the topic of coming out using her personal and lived experiences, adding another layer of importance to these representations. Rapinoe is able to maintain a relaxed and happy demeanor while describing her coming out process as “amazing” and “great,” despite feeling “confusion” while growing up in a conservative small town. These representations are more powerful because this is Rapinoe’s real lived experience that she is detailing, and in an extremely positive frame.

However, these potentially affirming representations are overshadowed by the ‘gay hero’ narrative set out by Alice at beginning of the interview (S1E3, *Lost Love*). With this, Alice echoes the language of homonormativity in her use of “gay hero” to describe Rapinoe as she dances onto the show’s stage. The result is a boosting of Megan Rapinoe’s political associations, which are mentioned as the interview is wrapped up with Alice’s nod to her work with TIME’S UP – this reference is one such example of a time I was an outsider to knowledge presented

about Megan Rapinoe. Prior to viewing *GenQ*, I was unfamiliar with this organization and Rapinoe's involvement with it. TIME'S UP is a non-profit organization that is focused on gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Their website outlines three main goals: safety (from discrimination), equity (leveling the playing field), and power (challenging status quo). Their central vision is that every person, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender identity, or income will be safe at work from discrimination, and have equal economic opportunities and success (TIME'S UP, 2021). TIME'S UP use of safety, equity, and power mimics language Duggan (2003) associates with homonormativity – specifically the buzzwords equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Here, as Duggan (2003) has argued, we see the result of the American gay hero discourse is to reinforce versions of equality and inclusion, as well as political goals, as seen in Megan Rapinoe's representations in *GenQ* S1E3, *Lost Love*. The discourse of EDI and TIME'S UP ignore why employees might feel unsafe, or why they are lacking in equity and power in their workplace. These policies are implemented and used as a tokenistic nod to discrimination that leaves the economic and social structures that preserve it untouched. Additionally, they do not resolve existing economic inequalities. The impact that race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or gender identity (for example) have on workers is ignored. The promotion of EDI between workers fits comfortably within the capitalist marketplace of labor, instead of recognizing and challenging how these systems are constraining – particularly for the queer community. Megan Rapinoe's involvement in TIME'S UP suggests she make be engaging in these same sorts of tokenistic behaviours, too. By bringing Rapinoe on the show, *GenQ* also engaging in these practices that just deflect criticism and give the façade that minorities groups are being treated fair and equitably. When queer becomes a commodity, its impact is a shrinking of gay spheres, leading to washed down, streamlined rhetoric that focuses

on diversity, equality, and inclusion (Duggan, 2003). Gay equality becomes lost within the umbrella of neoliberalism through these sorts of marketable queerness (Duggan, 2003).

In the series finale, *Lapse in Judgement*, Alice interviews Roxanne Gay, an American writer (see Figure #8). The interview begins with Alice stating that she identifies with Gay's concept of 'bad feminism', to which Gay responds:

ROXANNE

You know, I hear that from women a lot, and I think it's because, for a lot of us, we have this idea of what a feminist is as angry and man-hating and hairy, which- -there's nothing wrong with any of that, but, you know, there has to be space in feminism for us to be human and flawed but also to really care about the state of women in the world¹³.

In these moments *GenQ* assumes viewers have quite a bit of prerequisite knowledge, not only about the topic of feminism but also Roxanne Gay's position on it. At the time of viewing Episode Eight, I was not familiar with Gay's essays or her take on this topic of 'bad feminism.' It is unfortunate that, as in the case of Megan Rapinoe, Gay is not afforded much airtime to discuss who she is outside of *GenQ* and why viewers should be invested in her appearance on the series. Quick internet searching reveals (without surprise) that there is much more detail and layers to the concept of 'bad feminism' than Roxanne Gay is able to present in *GenQ*. However, I base my analysis on what *is* presented – and from this Roxanne Gay's comment seems to be an attempt at discussing feminism through semi-humorous discussion. Ultimately, what Gay says in relation to this topic on *GenQ* doesn't do anything to disconnect man-hating, hairy stereotypes often associated with feminist discourses. Roxanne Gay's comments gloss over deeper explanation of

¹³ Frankly, I couldn't help but question what being 'hairy' even had to do with any of this? It is surprising that Gay would place this outside of a feminism that leaves room for being human and caring about women. How it is framed by Gay makes it seem like it's associated with anger and man-hating, with the implication that men won't be interested in hairy women. I wonder what Roxanne Gay thinks of this characters representations in *GenQ*, but I am confident her thoughts would not be without criticism.

feminism or ‘bad feminism.’ Gay appears to contradict herself, saying that there isn’t anything wrong with being a person who is an “angry and man-hating and hairy” feminist only to then go on to say that feminism should leave room for people to be “flawed” – implying that perhaps there may just be something wrong with that particular type of person. Her character on *GenQ* presents a narrow conceptualization of feminism that is negative, and fails in effectively explaining what her vision of feminism is.



Figure #7: Still shot from S1E8, Lapse In Judgement, featuring Alice and Roxanne Gay on The Alice Show.

Jackson (2020) explains forms of “celebrity feminism as potentially damaging through the limited meanings of feminism it makes available” (p. 16). Jackson (2020) also critiques celebrity feminism for reinforcing neoliberal rhetoric of equality between men and women through its basic and apolitical presentations. This type of rhetoric is present with *GenQ* and its characterization of Roxanne Gay, with her broad description of feminism. This is clear in this

case, however it is not Gay's fault. She likely has little (to no) control over producers and editing of *GenQ*, what's included and what isn't.

In her next question for Roxanne, Alice asks:

ALICE

Yeah. Thank you. Can you be a bad queer?

ROXANNE

Oh, absolutely. Historically, in the queer community, we've tried to resist heteronormative ideas. And, so, these days, to be a bad queer is probably to want a wife and two kids and a picket fence.

Here, Alice and Roxanne work together to establish that one can “absolutely” be a bad queer and that this has something to do with “heteronormative ideas.” The above scene is an attempt by *GenQ* at discussing heteronormativity. Again, *GenQ* assumes that audiences are in the know – this time about the history of the queer community in relation to heteronormativity. Gay goes on to specify that in today's queer community, bad queerness has to do with wanting a domestic life. Whether intended or not, Roxanne Gay's comments regarding “a wife and two kids and a picket fence” can be seen as a reference to homonormativity, making having a wife and children into just another commodity to obtain. According to *GenQ*, the correct form of queerness once looked like collecting commodities, something all queers should want to achieve in their life, without which they run the risk of becoming a “bad queer”. Duggan (2003) describes homonormativity as part of heteronormativity; one aspect of it sees queer life mimic heterosexual life in regards to neoliberal values of domesticity. With this, it appears *GenQ* both critiques but also sometimes reinforces homonormativity and heteronormativity. For audiences in the know, it is clear that *GenQ* fails in an effective critique of these structures. The resulting representation is an explanation that sees bad queerness become associated with heteronormativity, implying that what makes one a bad queer is in part not resisting

heteronormativity, without acknowledging why heteronormativity is so difficult to resist in the first place.

This idea of bad queerness is further developed as Alice takes this understanding laid out by Roxanne and applies it to her personal experience:

ALICE
I think I might be a bad queer.

ROXANNE
Oh, really? How so?

ALICE
Well, I've been in a relationship with a really wonderful woman - for about two years. And we were really happy, and not too long ago, we introduced a third person into our couple.

ROXANNE
Like, a poly situation?

ALICE
With her ex-wife.

ROXANNE
Wow. That's certainly an original way of getting into polyamory.

ALICE
I wouldn't recommend it.

ROXANNE
You think?

ALICE
But that is the queerest thing I could ever do, right?

ROXANNE
Oh, absolutely. On a scale of one to what the fuck, that's way out there.

ALICE
Right? Righ't. 'Cause I thought I was this cool, open, you know, understanding queer lady who wanted to live outside of every box, and I'm not. I'm just, uh I'm heartbroken.

ROXANNE
Yeah, that's understandable.

ALICE
Because I just want Nat. You know, just Nat.

Alice shifts the focus on the interview by bringing in her personal situation, taking what Roxanne has said and applying it to what is occurring in her relationship with Nat. In the moments that

precede this, ‘bad queerness’ had been established by Gay in relation to heteronormativity – something she described as wanting to live within “the box.” In this case, ‘the box’ is a domestic family life with a wife and children. Using Roxanne Gay’s comments, *GenQ* asserts that these are ideas that the queer community has tried to resist.

However, this conversation surrounding Alice’s personal situation brings with it a discussion of ‘bad queerness’, polyamory, and heartbreak. Alice explains that she wanted to go outside of the box, become cool, open, and understanding – and in her mind this polyamorous relationship was supposed to achieve this ideal. But the result is something Alice wouldn’t recommend, and it has left her heartbroken and negatively impacted her relationship with Nat. To round it all off, following these comments, Alice’s interview with Roxanne is cut off by Nat, who steps out of the audience to make amends. *The Alice Show* interview with Gay is derailed as Nat and Alice literally kiss and make up (see Figure #8).



*Figure #8: Still shot from S1E8, *Lapse In Judgement*, with Alice, Nat, and Roxanne Gay (as herself). Alice’s interview with Gay has just been interrupted, and Gay appears surprised as Alice and Nat embrace each other, kissing.*

GenQ uses representations of Alice, Nat, and Gigi’s poly relationship to reinforce norms of monogamy. This is done at the expense of Roxanne Gay’s interview on *The Alice Show*, as Gay’s character is quite literally cut off so that Alice can work towards correcting her own “bad” queerness. Heteronormative discourses includes the positioning of monogamous heterosexual relationships as best in relation to other sexualities (Robinson, 2016). These norms are carried on and upheld in homonormativity, which favours compulsory monogamy (Duggan, 2003). Homonormativity is ‘the box’ that Alice describes, and it works to reinforce neoliberal and heteronormative ideals of a monogamous and domestic family life. In my countless hours of pouring over *GenQ* online content, I came across an interview with showrunner for the series, Marja-Lewis Ryan. In this conversation, Ryan speaks of the journeys of the cast members in the

first season, including Alice. Perhaps the most relevant being Ryan's statement that, in regards to *GenQ*'s message with Alice, "You can still be gay and want a heteronormative lifestyle. You are still invited to the party." I knew this quote would be important to consider again, especially given the interview and subsequent article was in response to the season finale, episode eight. It is clear that Marja-Lewis Ryan is referencing this moment in S1E8 where Roxanne and Alice discuss heteronormativity and 'bad queerness.' However, what Ryan says versus what the character Alice says are ultimately very different. *GenQ* has stated that it wants to show that everyone is "still invited to the party" regardless of how queer they are, yet also implies one sort of queer might be better than the other, establishing that there is a hierarchy of queerness after all.

Bringing both Rapinoe and Gay as guests on *The Alice Show* required a great deal of strategizing for Alice, and by extension Sophie. Of note is a conversation that occurs in S1E1, *Let's Do It Again*, between Alice, Sophie and members from the talk show's network Barry and Drew, both of whom are introduced for the first time to viewers in this scene. Alice is reprimanded for having Bette Porter appear on her show, but what is said to her by members of the network is also important when thinking about the guests that appear on *The Alice Show*:

BARRY

Bottom line is, and I hate to be the bad guy here, but you can't change your interview guest at the last minute. You can't just interview your friends, right?

ALICE

Well, I thought it went really well. Didn't you?

BARRY

You got lucky. When we bought your podcast, we bought a brand. A poppy, fun, palatable lesbian brand. We want to build off that.

ALICE

I do, too. I really do. It's just I'm a very curious person, and I think my audience is, too. And I just want to give them a little credit. You know, I think we have a real opportunity to make an impact.

BARRY

And we will always be completely open to your ideas. But we got to stay true to our Season One audience, right?

SOPHIE

But they might be interested in something more substantial.

DREW

It's unlikely (laughs).

In Barry's eyes (and by extension the networks, too), Alice is a commodity, a brand, and a "poppy, fun, palatable lesbian" one at that. With the mentioning of Alice's podcast, this scene features a small nod to *TLW*, as podcasts were a key part of Alice's character in the original series. Alice responds by grouping herself and her audience together, saying she is "curious" like them and that there is an opportunity for "impact." The word queer could just as easily be substituted "curious" and used by Alice as she advocates for her viewer base, regardless – Barry is dismissive of Alice's "ideas." This interaction is also interrupted by Drew Wilson, who scoffs at Alice's assertion that viewers might be seeking more impactful representations, dismissing the suggestion entirely. Barry introduces Drew as positioned to help Alice following her misstep of bringing Bette on as a guest. Barry tells Alice that Drew has written for "Seth [Meyers], Sarah [Silverman], and all the Jimmy's [presumably, Fallon and Kimmel]" as statement that he is sure will prove to Alice that Drew is more than capable to help her improve the show, while maintaining "the brand that your audience has come to love" (S1E2, *Less Is More*). Barry, Drew, and the network fail in recognizing the importance of queerness on *The Alice Show*, even in relation to branding and commodifying Alice. Drew's comments frame him as an outsider to queer identity, unlike Alice and Sophie who bring a breadth of lived experience. Barry fails to even correctly recognize that Alice is a bisexual, and Alice's inability to correct this misstep reveals who is really in control of *The Alice Show*. Drew and Barry are comfortably policing Alice's expressions of her sexuality on her show. Thus, their role on *The Alice Show* is to make

sure that Alice, and her employees, stay in line with the network's mandate. For the network, the most pressing matter has to do with their corporate interests and ability to market and sell Alice as a brand – they could not care less about social or cultural impacts.

The power dynamics of *The Alice Show* are also revealed here, specifically with Drew and Barry whose comments display they are strangers to queer identities. Barry and Drew seem unable to recognize this, despite the detrimental impact on their workplace rapport and relationship with Alice and Sophie. This failure becomes apparent following Alice's departure from the discussion, leaving Drew, Barry, and Sophie remaining. Drew and Barry switch the focus of the conversation to brainstorm topics and interview questions for upcoming guests; one idea includes playing drinking games, blindfolded. Sophie responds with a suggestion of her own:

SOPHIE

Yes, and she [guest] and Alice could have an honest conversation about the importance of queer representation in film.

DREW

Well, sure, *sure*.

BARRY

Yeah, yeah. Uh, Drew will fill in the details.

Here, Sophie attempts to prompt Drew and Barry towards an impactful conversation topic, but her push for more substantial discussion has not been taken seriously by Drew or Barry. Even when Sophie encourages them towards recognition, she is blown off. By assigning Drew to 'fill in the details' Barry is giving the task to the individual with the least knowledge about queer representation in film. Barry has reassigned Sophie's idea to Drew, instead of allowing her (who proposed the idea) to fill in the details and draw on her personal experience as a lesbian.

Alice does what the network asks at the expense of her personal morals, but it does not pay off. In Episode 7, *Lose It All*, Alice calls a meeting with the network. This act is a direct

attempt by Alice to get back control of her show which she feels has been slipping since the new network mandates were instituted. Drew interrupts and apologizes for being late. Alice responds by telling him she didn't expect he would be present, but continues with the meeting. Alice explains she is proud of what her show has accomplished, particularly when it comes to non-conventional queer guests (like Bette Porter and Megan Rapinoe). Alice begins to say that her voice is not being heard, but is again cut off, this time by Barry. Alice may have called the meeting, but Drew and Barry are taking control of it. Barry tells Alice that her "show is on the bubble," a term to describe a show at risk of being cancelled, and that the only solution is "a couple viral hits" and "short form, catchy content" (S1E7, *Lose It All*).

Later in the same episode, Drew catches up with Alice to discuss this meeting and what occurred in it. Drew again compares Alice to Stephen Colbert, and Alice reminds him that her situation is different. She has little success changing his perspective:

DREW

Come on, I know you were talking about me when you said there are too many voices in the room.

ALICE

Of course I was, Drew. Of course I was talking about you.

DREW

I-I'm trying to build you a queer sandbox to play in.

ALICE

Oh, my God, just those words!

DREW

I'm obviously not tapped into your whole world.

ALICE

No, you're not. We can agree on that.

DREW

You have one more show this season, and we need a viral video.

Drew tries to assert to Alice that his actions (namely his homophobia, patronizing, and interruptions) have all been attempts to help her. Drew seems adamant that *The Alice Show's*

shortcomings and reason for being “on the bubble” are due to Alice’s deviation from the network mandate with her queer guests. Drew’s sandbox metaphor leaves the implication that queerness might be able to fix neatly into a box, in addition to infantilizing Alice through associating queerness with child’s play. He thinks he has been “build[ing] ... a queer sandbox to play in,” but if anything, the box that Drew is giving Alice is a coffin for the queer content of her show.

The interactions between Alice and the network (represented by Drew and Barry) speak to the broader context and state of queer representations in television. In my literature review, I found that most television lesbians are depicted as straight-friendly, meaning that they are feminine, thin, and pretty, aligning with many heterosexual female norms. The result is a pattern of representations on television that uphold a heteronormative idea of lesbianism (McInroy & Craig, 2017; Lee & Meyer, 2010). In *GenQ* S1E1, *Let’s Do It Again*, Barry speaks to Alice, saying that her show’s brand must be “a poppy, fun, palatable lesbian” one. This comment speaks to the broader context of lesbian representations on television, particularly the pattern of straight-friendly lesbians (Lee & Meyer, 2010). *GenQ* critiques the current state of lesbian representation on television through the characters and dynamics of Alice, Sophie, Barry, and Drew on *The Alice Show*. But, as seen with Megan Rapinoe and Roxanne Gay’s characters in the first season of *GenQ*, there still are key gaps in writers’ knowledge and ability to discuss and represent lesbian, bisexual, and queer female characters and topics like heteronormativity, polyamory, and feminism.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In this research project, I sought to identify and examine moments of heteronormativity and homonormativity in representations of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in *GenQ*. Homonormativity is a portrayal of queer life that is domesticated and depoliticized instead of radical and resistant to heteronormativity (Duggan, 2003). Heteronormativity is a system that privileges heterosexuality over other sexualities (Warner, 1991). Homonormativity is a term used to describe how heteronormative beliefs and systems are privileged in queer culture, and these sorts of understandings create and uphold definitions of queerness that align with socially favored norms around gender, class, race, and politics (Duggan, 2003). I wanted to know what potentially troublesome and harmful representations were in this series and the role homonormativity played in them, and hoped I might recognize progressive representations of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, too.

I began by examining literature and research on queer representation, with a focus on lesbian representations in television. From this, I gathered that lesbian, bisexual, and queer representations often present characters in highly feminine ways that align with many heterosexual norms, making them appear less queer, and reinforcing heteronormative and homonormative understandings of what it means to be queer and what queerness can look like. In addition, I found that lesbian, bisexual, and queer women are subjected to a slew of harmful tropes on television, from being cast as villains and criminals to being stereotyped as comic relief (GLADD, 2020; McInroy & Craig, 2017). Further, I found that the most prominent trope in television representations – the “Bury Your Gays” trope – is perhaps the most dangerous of all (GLADD, 2020; Ruderman-Looff, 2019; Waggoner, 2018). This trope is used frequently, and results in the death of a high number of queer female characters on television. Seeing lesbians

repeatedly killed reinforces ideas that queerness is disposable, and if these characters are templates for queer viewers like the literature claims, it is alarming to think that representations of lesbians on television do not depict them living to be elderly and instead show them dying at a young age (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Campisi, 2013; McInroy & Craig, 2017).

Drawing on this literature, I used critical discourse analysis to examine lesbian representation in *GenQ* analyzing each of the eight episodes of Season One. I drew predominantly from Fairclough (1993; 2010) to shape my understandings and application of CDA. This method was well suited for my study due to its focus on examining relations of power to uncover normative patterns related to sexual identity within lesbian representations in *GenQ*. Data for this research included the first season of *GenQ* – in total eight episodes at an average runtime of 54 minutes each. I paid closest attention to representations that endorse or critique heteronormative and homonormative patterns.

Overall, I found that *GenQ* does contain heteronormative and homonormative representations in its characterizations. At times these representations are critical in nature, but most uphold stereotypical assumptions of queer people and reinforce problematic norms around monogamy, consumerism, marriage, and class. Throughout the first season of *GenQ*, there are numerous moments of family conflict, all of which center around Dani and Sophie and their romantic relationship. In S1E1, *Let's Do It Again*, Dani's father Rodolfo refers to Sophie as a "friend," dismissing their relationship as just for fun. These representations overlap with important events in the original series, *TLW*, identified by Lee and Meyer (2010) – in S1E5 *Lawfully*, Bette's father Melvin undermines her relationship with then partner, Tina, refusing to acknowledge her as nothing more than "Miss Kennard" and labeling their time together as a "friendship." In both instances, their relationships are not taken seriously and dismissed as a

coming of age activity, positioning lesbian identity as just another stage in heterosexual development thereby making lesbianism a temporary activity that should be used to reinforce and strengthen heterosexuality. The parental conflicts in *GenQ*, like *TLW*, are devoid of effective mitigation strategies, instead the lesbian characters are forced to prioritize their fathers and tolerate their homophobic comments and navigate around or even embrace their heterocentric values. These representations uphold heteronormativity by suggesting it is more important to maintain toxic parental relationships than to resolve conflict and set boundaries.

Although *GenQ* does contain moments of critical and resistive representations, these are undermined by the presence of harmful and toxic portrayals. In the context of lesbian character death on television, *GenQ* picks up the burden of representation. The ‘lesbian death’ trope identified by GLAAD (2016; 2017) is thus far absent from *GenQ*; its first season steers clear of this trope, strongly criticized, and condemned by queer viewers in online sites like Twitter (see Waggoner, 2018). *GenQ* had well documented fan response, strengthening Waggoner’s (2018) finding that viewers use online sites to express their views and opinions of lesbian and bisexual (as well as other queer) representations. However, there are representations of lesbian infidelity in *GenQ*, which as Parker and colleagues (2019) explain, reinforce the framework of the lesbian death trope, upholding ideas of lesbian as hypersexual and unable to commit emotionally. By showing Dani and Sophie’s relationship as unfaithful and unstable, *GenQ* strengthens associations between queerness and promiscuity, reinforcing prejudice against queer women.

I applaud the featuring of real-life queer individuals on *The Alice Show* in the first season of *GenQ* with Megan Rapinoe in episode three and Roxanne Gay in episode eight, but it is not without its problems. Rapinoe is introduced by Alice as a “gay hero,” taking up the language of homonormativity. Duggan (2003) explains this may reinforce and enhance political demands – in

this case, boost the political associations that Rapinoe speaks of on the show including TIME'S UP which aligns with neoliberal visions of equality and inclusion. However, in her time in the series Rapinoe also discusses personal experiences of coming out. McInroy and Craig (2017) found that queer youth look to queer characters on television to understand their own identity and coming out. Rapinoe's presents a candid telling of the story of her sexuality, including not coming out until college, being from a small conservative town, and having to navigate heteronormative expectations had prohibited her from realizing there was "this mommy and mommy option or this daddy and daddy option" (S1E3, *Lost Love*). That experience may resonate with viewers of *GenQ*, particularly those who are younger and still figuring out their identity. However, this storyline doesn't challenge reproductive demands or question the value of parenting.

In Roxanne Gay's time on *The Alice Show* within *GenQ* there is an attempt to address and discuss these discourses of heteronormativity and homonormativity— but it is a swing and a miss. *GenQ* presents heteronormativity in tandem with bad queerness, reinforcing the idea that there are correct and incorrect ways to be queer. Gay says that "to be a bad queer is probably to want a wife and two kids and a picket fence," offering a vision that nods to neoliberal values of marriage and domestic family life (Duggan, 2003). With her comments to Gay about her personal relationship, Alice describes her journey of trying to resist heteronormativity (and homonormativity) through a polyamorous relationship. But how *GenQ* presents this discussion is hazardous, particularly through Alice's statement that she "wouldn't recommend" the decision to contest these social structures as it left her heartbroken and ruined her relationship. *GenQ* positions monogamy as best, especially in relation to polygamous relationships, reinforcing heteronormative and homonormative ideals of queerness in spite of an apparent critique of them.

The findings outlined in Chapter Four suggest that *The L Word: Generation Q* upholds largely heteronormative and homonormative standards of queerness. In S1E4, *LA Times*, for example Dani and Sophie are seen naked in a bathtub, and the camera focuses often on their breasts. This uses lesbian sex to appeal to a heterosexual male gaze, similar tactics having been used in *TLW* (Moore, 2007). *GenQ* makes lesbians look and act like straight women, and this aligns them with heteronormative understandings of conventional female sex. The effect of this is presenting a version of the lesbian that is palatable to straight audiences through its offerings of sexual content that continue to objectify women.

Additionally, the findings outlined in Chapter Four show that *GenQ*, with its representations of queerness in *The Alice Show*, reinforce new homonormative stereotypes through the use of the coffee shop signifier, strengthening ideas that queer activities should be economic and rooted in consumption. In a discussion and reflection of *TLW*, Moore (2007) says:

Without reading *The L Word* as simply a commodification of lesbianism manufactured to sell to the masses, or applauding it uncritically as ‘authentically’ lesbian representation, I see the show as both a capitalistic production and a sex-positive, feminist, queer phenomenon (p. 20).

Here, Moore (2007) identifies the great contradiction that faces most queer representations on television today – any show with queer characters is hailed as ground-breaking and praised for its accuracy. But, when these same representations are taken up by academics and critically analysed, what is revealed are representations rooted in relations of power; working to uphold an idea of the lesbian (and of bisexual and queer women) that reinforce heteronormative and homonormative views. Moore’s points about *TLW* apply also to the first season of *GenQ*. In my introduction, I quoted Jennifer Beals in an interview with Jones-Cooper (2019), in which she discussed how after *TLW* concluded, she expected some other queer show to take its place but to her surprise, nothing did. And so *GenQ* came to fill that gap. These comments align with

GLADD (2020), who note that *GenQ* makes up most of the queer representation on cable television. I applaud those associated with the series for identifying a representational gap and aiming to fill it. However, as this thesis reveals, there is still much work to be done to improve these representations.

Directions for Future Research

In finding the focus within *GenQ* for my research project, a number of topics and directions for further research became clear. There are many elements in *GenQ* worth analysing that were outside the scope of my project. I conducted my work as a member of the show's target audience, a young 20-something lesbian, but it would be worth examining how queer people of different generations perceive *GenQ* and similar shows and how they feel such programs represent and shape their identities. Future studies could address the impact that representations in television have on the self-image and identity of queer people, particularly on the emerging generation of queer youth. Studies could incorporate methods that allow the researcher to speak directly with queer community members who such representations impact. Future research can build on findings about the frequent use of online websites and forums (like Twitter and reddit) by fans responding to queer representations on television. Research could explore how viewers transform and reimagine homonormative representations as a way to negate them, through mediums like memes and snark boards.

Other elements in *GenQ* that should be examined in future projects include the character of Sarah Finley in relation to alcoholism. Season one of *GenQ* included foreshadowing of this issue as Finley is shown drinking much more than other characters, resulting in serious consequences for the character. Also, Bette Porter's teenage daughter, Angie, begins dating a girl

from her class, and future work could analyze her coming out, especially in relation the response of her parents, Bette and Tina Kennard. Lastly, the character Micah, who is a trans man, should be critically analysed in relation to the broader state of trans representation on television. Key elements in *GenQ* regarding Micah's character and the series attempts at addressing topics of transitioning and body dysmorphia, may be problematic in their portrayal.

Limitations and Final Considerations

When familiarizing myself with CDA, the multiplicity of what it means to “do” critical discourse analysis became painfully obvious to me as a researcher. Breeze (2011) notes that there are many theoretical positions and approaches to CDA, which has led to confusion about what a critical discourse analyst is. Meyer (2001) notes that popular names in CDA have completely different goals and emphasis in their perspectives; Teun A. van Dijk, for example, focuses on knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies in relation to discourse, and Ruth Wodak is linguistically orientated and dedicated to establishing a theory of discourse. Norman Fairclough stresses the importance of social conflict in discourses, paying closest attention to elements of dominance and resistance (Meyer, 2001). This lack of consensus about what makes CDA ‘critical’ reduces clarity and precision in definitions of CDA. Breeze (2011) argues that “the heterogeneous nature of CDA ... sets a complex task for the researcher trying to trace exactly what the justification for a particular stance or interpretation might be” (p. 498). This rings true in the case of my research, and required me to spend a great deal of time considering how I would examine queer representation using CDA.

For researchers who employ CDA, a lack of specificity in the definition can allow flexibility. Those who employ CDA methods are not limited to specific theories or concepts, enabling them to draw on multiple sociological concepts, schools and theories to strengthen their

analysis. In the case of my research, I found this flexibility helpful. It required me to think harder to understand CDA and how to use it in. However, lack of specificity about how to use CDA also means that there are few resources that tell the researcher how to do CDA correctly. Lastly, the very design of CDA means another researcher could focus on *GenQ* using the same theoretical and methodological frameworks as myself, but produce different results.

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