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### **Parallel Braids:**

An examination of Gay Identities

What does it mean to call yourself Gay, or Queer, or Homosexual? Are these words synonymous? Do they indicate anything about your identity beyond your preference in sexual partners? If so, what? These are the important and complicated questions I will be examining in this paper. Inspired by Jose Jorge Mendoza's conception of a braid of whiteness, I will argue that gay identities are built by the interweaving of three distinguishable strands of a braid, those of physical aesthetic, gendered performativity, and socio-political goals. While each of these strands can be conceptually distinguished from the other, they are tightly intertwined in the way they are encountered by gay individuals. Furthermore, there is disagreement in the gay community, and society at large, regarding how gay men fit within each strand, giving rise to two parallel braids of gay identity: one of mostly-white, fit chaste bodies, masculinity, and a middle-class assimilation into the mainstream, which I will call the Homonormative braid; and the other of any combination of darker, non-muscular or sexual bodies, or femininity, or of existence in compartmentalized communities at the fringes of urban centers, which I will call the Transgressive braid.

### **Prevailing Definitions**

Labels are important, and labels are complicated. This is especially true for labels about one's identity that carry certain expectations of how to behave and therefore have a profound impact on one's identity formation. While we might claim that the label 'gay' refers to one's sexual

preferences and nothing else, that would require us to ignore the much more flexible way it is used in modern discourse. The word gay is often used as an adjective to describe things beyond human beings (gay art, gay culture etc.), and is separated from a label like MSM (Men-who-have-sex-with-men) because it reaches beyond its narrowest definition. In fact, we're at a point in culture that actor James Franco famously called himself gay "up until the point of intercourse," and while the claim is questionable, the sentence still makes a certain sense, it contains meaning, which it would not if the label 'gay' did not extend beyond intercourse. The literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin said, "to study the word as such, ignoring the impulse that reaches out beyond it, is just as senseless as to study psychological experience outside the context of that real life towards which it was directed and by which it is determined." (Bakhtin 1214) Clearly, there is more to identifying yourself as gay than just who you have intercourse with, and in keeping with Bakhtin's suggestion, we should study this label as it is experienced by individuals in their daily lives and develop an understanding of the additional dimensions implied by it.

In 1993 James Donovan conducted a scientific analysis of the use of the words Homosexual and Gay in periodicals and arrived at separate definitions for the labels Homosexual and Gay. "Homosexual as a noun refers to persons practicing homosexuality who are also knowledgeable and proficient in the cultural and subcultural expectations of appropriate behaviors associated with homosexual activities... This word does not imply etiological theory of psychological states (e.g. that the person has a particular kind of self-concept or identity)" He then distinguished 'gay' from 'homosexual,' as being "a way of life" and an "acceptance of homosexual behavior," formally defining it as "a noun that refers to homosexuals who share social and psychological attributes such as positive self-identity (as far as their sexual orientation is concerned.)" (Donovan 40-41) While the academic discourse regarding queer theory has made significant advances since

Donovan conceptualized these definitions, I believe they accurately reflect the distinction that these two labels have in mainstream public consciousness to this day. Indeed, we can now easily identify some of these specific shared attributes that contributed to defining gay self-identities if we look at gay communities and culture. While looking at every shared aspect of gay culture would be an undertaking beyond the scope of this paper, focusing on the three specific dimensions of physical aesthetic (looking the part), gendered performativity (acting the part), and socio-political goals (thinking the part) allows us to gain a useful understanding of gay identities and their most significant strands.

### **Visualizing Identity**

In José Jorge Mendoza's essay titled "Illegal - White Supremacy and Immigration Status", Mendoza discusses the history of barring non-white individuals from US citizenship through measures like the Dred Scott decision and the Chinese Exclusion Act. By looking at an analysis of Supreme Court decisions that denied citizenship claims of specific individuals due to their lack of perceived whiteness, Mendoza arrives at a conceptualization of a braid of whiteness that is constructed out of three interwoven strands, Race, Ethnicity and Nationality. "These three strands are themselves also braids that can share a similar structure and/or similar thinner strands; this is why at times it can be hard to differentiate the three main strands. For example, the thinner strand of language might be found running through both the strands of ethnicity and nationality." (Mendoza, *Immigrants*, 43) In examining gay identity, I identify the three large strands of physical aesthetic, gendered performativity, and socio-political goals. These strands are also composed of smaller strands which can overlap, such that race or physical fitness which would primarily be strands of physical aesthetic, also influence gendering. Muscularity is seen as inherently masculine and Asian voices are considered effeminate.

Mendoza's task was to visualize whiteness, a term he saw as "often reserved for the default racial or ethnic position upon which other racialized or ethnicized groups are measured." This gives rise to a hierarchy where "whiteness is often associated with a kind privilege... which provides its bearers with the freedom of having their race, ethnicity and nationality constantly in the background," (Mendoza, *Illegal*, 205) and denial of whiteness creates a feeling of being a perpetual foreigner. This paper, however, is tasked with visualizing gay identities, which are on the opposite end of the spectrum. Instead of being the default, they are measured against heteronormative values and carry the burden of having a gay individual's aesthetic, gendered performance, and politics constantly be in the foreground, while always being treated as an outsider, even when allowed admission into communities of privilege.

Mendoza points out that even though whiteness was defined in a top-down manner for the purpose of retaining power and maximizing exclusion, the three strands still allowed for flexibility in who was included. "In emphasizing one or a combination of these strands, whiteness can be granted to social groups that previously were denied full white status, while at the same time can be rescinded from groups that at different times and different places might have been considered (if only provisionally) white." (Mendoza, *Illegal*, 202) However, gay identity, which started out as a bottom-up construction of a marginalized group to maximize inclusion, functions differently. Because of the bottom-up construction, gay identities are less homogenous than whiteness and they have evolved through a less cohesive presentation. This means that each strand has multiple competing presentations, rather a singular requirement to affirm whiteness. With time, social progress, and increasing representation, these diverse facets of gay culture have coalesced into two distinctive braids, those of homonormativity and transgression. These braids, and their strands, are not primarily used to exclude; acknowledging that you can be gay and belong to any race, age,

fitness level, you can be masculine or effeminate, you can assimilate or not. However, while nobody would consider stripping you of your gay identity due to where you belong on any of the strands, they still have a strong influence on the formation of this identity. The strands of gay identity, unlike those of whiteness, are impermanent and adoptable, though not completely transient, giving gay individuals a modicum of choice in how they construct their identity. Since a gay individual's aesthetic, gendered performance and politics are constantly in the foreground, having two easily recognized braids that weave those three strands together makes these braids prescriptive, so that where you are on each strand has a strong influence on where you are expected to be on the others, thereby shaping what being gay should look like for you, and guiding your self-construction.

Before discussing each of these strands individually, I would like to clarify that the examples used to define both manifestations of each strand are, by definition, exemplary. Most real people exist somewhere in between these ideals, but I still define the strands using these ideals because they are what most individuals are measured against, and what they believe they need to model themselves after.

### **Physical Aesthetic**

In her discussions of racial embodiments, Linda Alcoff argues that the “process by which human bodies are differentiated and categorized is a process preceded by group oppression.” (Alcoff 184) She argues that the visibly perceived and perceptible differences, even if socially constructed, are ‘real,’ due to the value judgements they rely on and expose. Quoting Grasz, she points out that “It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body of a determinate type.” (Alcoff 185) Given this importance of perceived visual

cues for categorization, the first strand of the braids of gay identity is physical aesthetic. This strand would include all the subtle and overt cues that make someone say, “he looks gay.” And while that might not be the most enlightened statement, it carries a certain truth to it in a large majority of cases, even if not in all. Because homosexuals have historically been an invisible population, subtle cues to signal their membership to the group to other gay men have been cultivated over time. Now, with the explosion of discourse and media representation, “The notion of having to look a particular way in order to appease the wants of the male gaze becomes the relevant mode of behavior within gay culture.” (Lanzieri 283) While the ‘particular’ way that a gay man is expected to look is more varied today than it was in the past, there are still two dominant looks that are prominent in public consciousness.

The aesthetic that has gained prominence only recently but is now often seen as the face of gay pride is the image of the handsome, well-kept white man, who goes to the gym regularly and dresses in semi-casual, expensive, but conventional clothes. Think Matt Bomer, Neil Patrick Harris, Anderson Cooper, or Pete Buttigieg wearing a suit or a golf polo and framed in an extremely ‘family-friendly’ manner. This is the chaste, easy on the eyes aesthetic that appeals to the heterosexual mainstream because of the perceived safety from deviant sexual impulses; the man you’d take home to meet your mother instead of taking to the bedroom. This is Cameron and Mitchell from *Modern Family* not sharing a single kiss till a fan campaign called them out on it, while having entire plotlines about the kids walking in on the heterosexual couple having sex.

The second, more traditional gay aesthetic is of the strange looking, usually older man dressed in outlandish clothes, swaying his hips as he walks and letting his hands go limp as he talks. Think of all the queer-coded gay uncles from classic TV, or the image of the mincing homosexual. While this image has gotten less outlandish and more heterogenous with social

progress, it still carries with it a sense of unconventional faces, unconventional clothes, a visible sexuality, and a strangeness. Think Titus Andromedon on *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.

### **Gendered Performativity**

According to Judith Butler, gender is “not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv) Following this definition, my second strand of the braids of gay identity, gendered performativity, is concerned with behavior. While most queer theorists, Butler included, argue for a sharp distinction between gender and sexuality, this distinction has not taken root in the public consciousness. Even as representations of masculine homosexuality have flourished in recent years, these are still seen through the lens of sexuality. For the heteronormative masses, gay masculinity is not straight masculinity. It’s not exemplified by ‘burping loudly, farting and scratching your balls in public’ (Clarkson 198), it’s characterized by deep voices with a lack of inflections, with stiffer movements, emotional reserve, and economic success. This construction of gay masculinity has arisen in response to, and as a rebuttal of, the effeminate gay stereotypes of high-pitched voices, limp movements, emotional outbursts, and economic dependency that have existed for ages and is seen as social progress. This hierarchical value attached to gay masculinity has created an antagonism between those who want the face of the gay community to be a ‘normal’ guy and those who feel that this movement towards masculinity erases and denigrates the existence of feminine gay man. Gay social/sexual dating profiles are littered with words “masc for masc” or “no fems, no fats and no blacks or Asians.” In a study by Sanchez, a majority of gay men scored 5 or higher (out of 7) when asked the questions: “How important is it to you that you look masculine in public?” and “How important is it to you that your partner looks masculine in public?” (Sanchez 113) In an

essay exploring how a “straight-acting gay identity is positioned in opposition to cultural stereotypes of gay men that conflate femininity with homosexuality,” Jay Clarkson presents phenomenological evidence taken from the website ‘Straightacting.com’ which highlights the divide between gay men who strive for a hypermasculinity that is tied to acceptance into the hegemony and those who embrace femininity or cannot attain this masculine ideal. This aggressively contested divide highlights and thereby solidifies the behavior that characterizes each side, leaving each gay man to pick a side and model their behavior after one of the two firmly entrenched gendered performances.

### **Socio-political Goals**

The LGBTQ+ movement has been remarkably successful in a relatively short amount of time, compared to other social justice movements. From a long-awaited decriminalization in 2003 (Lawrence v. Texas) to the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2013 (United States v. Windsor), with protection against hate crimes, employment discrimination and the right to serve in the armed forces along the way, there have undoubtedly been significant legal gains for gay in recent years. But legal rights are not the same as social acceptance, and assimilation into a heteronormative society is not a goal that everyone in the gay community agrees with. These differing socio-political goals form the third strand in the braids of gay identities. The mission statement of New York City’s Gay Liberation Front, formed in the wake of the Stonewall Riots in 1969, defined themselves as such: “We are a revolutionary group of men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished.” (Klaich 16) This revolutionary energy, while still strong in the academic community of queer theorists, has dissipated from those at the forefront of the LGBTQ+ rights. Organizations like the Human Rights Council, or the American Civil Liberties Union, which are



not exclusively queer organizations, have taken the dominant place in LGBTQ+ political discourse and have steered our political priorities towards Marriage equality and the right to serve in the military, rights which are firmly entrenched in the kind of social institutions (like family) that the earlier generations sought to abolish. These “political efforts towards same-sex marriage illustrate a strategic shift whereby sexual and intimate citizenship is constructed as inextricably dependent upon social consensus. And in order to foster consensus, it is argued that radical politics must be replaced by containment – or, one might feel tempted to think, (hetero)normative compliance.” (Santos 57) But this strategic shift doesn’t just reorder our priorities to move marriage equality to the top of the list, it discards radical politics all together and labels them as problematic. The unwillingness of the mainstream to embrace the queer community is blamed on the radicals instead of the mainstream.

On a more micro level individuals on the assimilative strand consider their sexuality just one facet, maybe even a small facet, of their identities, though I would argue that their sexuality has a significant influence on how they navigate the homonormative braid in order to assimilate. They usually live in suburban, majority heterosexual, neighborhoods and their social circles don’t include many other LGBTQ+ individuals. In contrast, those on the revolutionary strand are aware of the impact their sexuality has on their identities and consider it a major, if not *the* major, component of their self-definitions. They usually live in urban centers, in gayborhoods like the Castro district or Chelsea and mostly socialize with other members of the queer community. Most people on either strand don’t consider their lifestyle as a political act, though it is deeply influenced by, and influences, the political strategies of the LGBTQ+ movement.

### **Parallel Braids**

The braid given more power from outside the gay community, and therefore given preference from within more gay communities is one I will call the homonormative braid and it is formed by the interweaving of rich-fit-chaste aesthetic, masculinity, and assimilation. “Homonormativity is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Dugan 50) In an analysis of queer representations on the TV show *The New Normal*, Jonathan Branfman discusses a tactic used by mainstream television attempting to normalize gay characters, where a masculine protagonist is contrasted with a feminine foil. Quoting Fejes, he notes that these protagonist characters “often embody many types of classed, racialized, ableist normativity: They are usually young, white, Caucasian...well-muscled, [with a] smooth body, handsome face, good education, professional job, and a high income” (Fejes 115) In seeking to gain mainstream acceptance for the gay community, these representations instead bifurcate the community into the ‘normal’ gays that have minimal differences from societal understandings of ‘normal’ and the ‘stereotypical’ otherized gays that conform to what society expects gay men to look like. By portraying both the ‘normal’ gay and the ‘other’ gay, who the protagonist is contrasted with, these programs undercut their goal of moving away from historical stereotypes of the community. Instead, these dual representations solidify the presence of the stereotypical gay man in mainstream consciousness, while also creating a second category of ‘straight-acting gay.’ Because “This model of representation employs a hierarchy of gay masculinities to displace the stigma of gayness onto “flamboyant” gay men, so that more conformist (normatively masculine) gay men can win acceptance.” (Branfman 1677) it doesn’t increase acceptance for the gay community as a whole,

only for the homonormative presenting gay men. Tying acceptance to this specific braid attaches a positive value to it in the community and it becomes a prescriptive suggestion for those who have the ability to mimic the look of these 'normal' characters. However, this also attaches a negative value to those who are not presenting on the homonormative braid, who are then seen as culpable for any reluctance or discomfort that the heterosexual majority still holds towards the gay community.

The Homonormative braid of gay identity extends beyond the fictional portrayals as well, though it retains its constructed and idealized nature even in the 'real' world. *United States v. Windsor*, the case which resulted in the Supreme court's overturning of the Defense of marriage Act and legalizing Same-Sex Marriage at a federal level, was a rich, white woman. In fact, Dolores Klaich wonders if "in a country still awash in racism and classism, would an overweight, impoverished woman of color who is lesbian have been as acceptable a plaintiff as was this attractive, wealthy, former IBM executive with a house in the Hamptons?" (Klaich 16) The Ryan White CARE act, providing federal funding for HIV positive US residents (a majority of whom are gay men), is named after a straight White middle-class child, even when its purpose is to serve low-income patients. The Matthew Shepard & James Bryd Jr. Hate Crime Prevention Act that extended Hate Crimes laws to cover sexuality is named after an athletic white victim. The first openly gay cabinet secretary or presidential candidate, Pete Buttigieg, is an attractive, white, middle-class looking man with a husband literally named 'Chaste(n)'. While they obviously did not choose his name, the name does conjure up an image of chastity by association, which I believe was helpful in make Buttigieg palatable to the mainstream. Buttigieg is also a practicing Christian and a Navy veteran from a small town, further bolstering his homonormative credentials. We repeatedly see that any political breakthroughs for gay men require a figurehead who fits the

homonormative ideal to spearhead them, since these homonormative identities allow the mainstream to identify with the individual, despite, not because of, their sexuality, thereby building the necessary political capital.

But the cost of this progress is the entrenching of this homonormative identity as the ‘normal’ or ‘good’ gay identity. This becomes especially problematic when we consider the fact that this identity is a constructed ideal and does not accurately describe the lived experiences of most gay men. Judith Butler thinks that “heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and failing. . .” (Butler, *Imitation*, 313) I would say the same for homonormativity. Pete Buttigieg the political persona is not Pete Buttigieg the actual person. His personal life is unlikely to be as chaste, sanitized, and heteronormative as he portrays, and even to the extent it is similar to his persona, it is due to careful construction and practice of his homonormativity in order to gain mainstream acceptability. For people not perpetually in the public eye, this construction can be temporarily adopted and discarded, allowing them to code-switch between the homonormative and the transgressive braid depending on their company and context. Using a personal example, I was advised to do this code-switching when applying for my green card. Even though I initially met my husband through *Grindr* for a sexual encounter, my immigration lawyer told us to create a false narrative for the immigration official conducting our green card interview. I doubt that the authentication of our marriage would have been as smooth if I hadn’t played up my masculinity, created a false chastity regarding our sexual relationship and married a middle-class white guy who looks the part. While I had the ability to code-switch when necessary, not all gay men have that ability. More importantly, even for those who do, the need to code-switch and the constantly awareness of the

homonormative standard that is expected of you creates a feeling of deviance and otherness similar to Mendoza's perpetual foreigner status.

The second braid, the one the homonormative braid was constructed to contrast, I will call the transgressive braid. This is the braid you are prescribed if your deviation from the social norm along any of the three strands, or multiple of them, is too great; if you're too dark, or poor, or slutty, or femme to assimilate. In agreement with Kimberlé Crenshaw's belief that the experiences of those marginalized within their marginalized communities are often erased from the dominant discourse, and following Alcoff's example of using lived experiences to build an epistemology of the micro-processes of subjective identity that are an important source of the formations of individual identity, especially those where the subordinate group plays a role in shaping these formations, I will be using individual experiences to illustrate this transgressive braid.

"As a brown, genderqueer, femme, leather boi, English-educated immigrant fag, I am forced to constantly negotiate my presence in this country, which is guided by complex gender, race, class and border control regimes," (DasGupta 16) says Debanuj DasGupta as he talks about how his experiences in the Midwest in 1997 shaped his identity. After constant rejection by the blonde-white dominated gay community, he found a masculine white jock stud who wanted to tie him up and fuck him. Over the course of his next three years in college he submitted to race-based master/slave roleplay while realizing that even within the marginalized gay community, he was the other, and that might be the best he would be offered. "Deep in my heart, however, I knew that while he enjoyed sex with me and several other Asian men, he wanted to fit in with his white upper class gay neighbors by dating another rich white boy." (DasGupta 19) He details how this formative welcome to American gay society pushed him further to the margins, encouraged him

to play the femme/sub role that was expected of him and give up any hopes of upward mobility or mainstream acceptance (a lesson that was further instilled post 9/11.)

Ali Abbas was confronted by fellow attendees at a LGBT leadership conference about how he could claim to be both an Arab and an advocate of LGBTQ+ rights. “Because this individual asked me where I got off still ‘playing into’ my culture, he assumed that somehow his upbringing as a white middle class US American was the norm. This gung-ho attitude resonates with the masculinist attitudes ubiquitous in gay spaces where men who are ‘nelly’ are routinely denigrated.” (Abbas 33) He then goes on to examine the ties between the ‘straight-acting’ liberal gay men who define themselves by their masculinity, patriotism and upwards social mobility and the political priorities of the LGBTQ+ movement: civil rights and privileges linked to citizenship, like gay marriage, and the right to be a soldier and kill for your country. These ties make these privileged, normative gay men view the LGBTQ+ community (though they usually just focus on the G and ignore the rest) as their personal cultural property and start gatekeeping the community to defend it from those who would seek to change or expand its homonormative confines.

Ezra RedEagle Whitman finds himself struggling to find community that he feels like he belongs. He feels a spiritual connection to his native identity and recognizes that the role of the two-spirit within native tradition allows him a place for his sexuality but feels unable to accept that role because “nothing felt spiritual about my raunchy sexual desires. Accepting the mystic power of a Two-Spirit made me feel like I had to give up sexuality altogether.” (Whitman 86) Unwilling to pay the cost of chastity that he sees as the cost of assimilating with his tribe, he instead tries to assimilate into the homonormative gay community. Because he already deviates from the chaste ideals of the homonormative aesthetic, he finds himself compensating along the other dimensions by “mimic(ing) the goofy antics of consumer-driven gay ideals: prioritizing gym memberships and

physical fitness above all else” (Whitman 86) But this tenuous assimilation is predicated on the suppression of any feminine instincts he has and strict adherence to the one dimensional vision of masculine strand of the homonormative braid, leaving him to wonder “Where is that pretty little thing who could pull off those graceful bird-like dances clad in nothing but a shabby towel? The poor thing is smothered under bland, tasteless ideal imposed by one-dimensional takes on masculinity which have taken priority over spiritual strength and duty,” (Whitman 89)

These stories give us insight into the functioning of the transgressive braid as an alternative to the homonormative. While the homonormative braid is tightly bound and homogenous, the transgressive braid is looser. Since this braid is defined by its lack of access, it acts as a release from the pressure to conform to a singular ideal, making it more heterogenous. DasGupta and Abbas found themselves excluded from the homonormative braid due to not fitting the physical aesthetic it prescribes, which led to DasGupta finding community with others on the fringes in New York City like his undocumented Mexican roommate and with the femme crowd. Whitman, desiring to assimilate, has to deny parts of himself and fixate on meeting the homonormative ideal in a way he would not feel pressured to if he lost the desire or the ability to exist at the lower end of the homonormative braid.

While the transgressive braid, defined by its exclusion from the homonormative, creates solidarity between people who might have been excluded for very different reasons, it still consists of splintered subcultures rather than scattered individuals. Perhaps a couple decades ago the transgressive braid had more room on it for individuals who conformed with nothing, but in present day, there is so much discourse and labelling of every niche and sectioned community that every identity has gatekeepers. The transgressive braid has room for identities as variable as bear culture and the radical fairies, but once you find your niche, there is still a pressure to conform, though

perhaps not as strong as it would be on the homonormative braid. Further complicating this braid are identities which are clearly not homonormative, but include homonormative strands in them, like the leather subculture, which is hypermasculine, but clearly not assimilative, chaste or clean-cut or the 'sassy gay friend' persona that is propagated by shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which is clearly effeminate and otherized, but could be considered assimilated, though not at the same level of access or privilege as a homonormative identity, since it is defined by its ability to be of service to heterosexuals.

### **Conclusion & Impact**

When looking at the socially constructed facets of gay identity, we can see three major strands that intertwine, those of physical aesthetic, gendered performativity, and socio-political goals. However, these three strands form two very different braids, one of homonormative ideals, which is given preference by society, and one of transgressive ideals, which is portrayed as a place for outsiders by political messaging and media representations. This gives rise to a lived experience where, as part of coming to terms with one's sexuality, one must consider whether he can fit into the homonormative vision, and perhaps if he wants to (though the pull of acceptance for those with the option is hard to reject), or if he will be cast into the role of the transgressive. While it is possible to live entirely on the transgressive braid due to its heterogeneity, the homonormative one is more elusive and homogenous. It's a well-constructed image one can adopt in situations where conformity is valuable or necessary. But this code-switching contributes to a problematic feeling of otherness that becomes tied to gay identities. Which of these braids one fits on, or how and when one shuttles between them, guides his identity formation along all three strands.

So why does this matter? Because Media representations have a strong impact on the formation of identity for most children, but play an even more central role in the case of gay



individuals, who often lack enough role models in the community they grow up in. Micheala Meyer argues that Adolescents and young adults frequently rely on fictional media narratives as a primary source of information when forming identity particularly when the adolescent/young adult's subject position is marginalized or stigmatized." Citing a wide range of evidence, she highlights that for most young gay men, "the only access to information about homosexuality available to these men was through mass media, primarily television." Additionally, very few of those interviewed knew non-fictional gay men before coming out, and in most cases "used fictional media as their sole source of information on homosexuality, and in essence, as an explanation of how to be gay." (Meyer 240) While there has been an increased awareness among the creators of these fictional narratives regarding the presence of minority characters and actors in the shows they produce, most of this attention has been directed towards the mere inclusion of characters belonging of marginalized groups, without enough attention towards the sub-spaces these characters occupy within their larger communities. A recognition of the impact of this messaging and the unequal representation and incomplete narratives found in media is important for content creators, especially those creating content being consumed by young people whose identities are still being formed, in order to make more informed ethical decisions regarding who and how they choose to depict.

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