

**Social Acceptance of LGBTQ+ Community through Netflix using two
of its series
From Problematization to Normalization**

„Stories affect how we live our lives,
how we see other people,
how we think about ourselves “
(Michael Morgan)

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Popular Music and Media

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1. Introduction

In a society that continues to be dominated by heteronormativity, small steps are being taken towards the acceptance and normalization of the LGBTQ+ community in social structures. Visual representation of members of the LGBTQ+ community in current popular media can contribute significantly in this process of breaking these taboos.

Television, but also streaming services which have developed rapidly this last decade, with films and series, can play a significant role in the formation of sexual and gender identity of (LGTBQ+) youth providing information about sexuality, gender roles and non-normative relationships that are not always available at school and at home.¹

Netflix is a platform that provides a large catalogue of series and films for a monthly fee. Series and films can either be viewed directly through the internet or downloaded to be seen later without internet access.² As a video streaming platform, Netflix offers a wide variety of LGBTQ+ series. The two series focused on here (“Sex Education” and “Heartstopper”) are available on this platform.

“Sex Education” addresses content that is still taboo in today’s society. Although the information it conveys is important for the formation of identity, it is often not being discussed openly. Topics relating to sexuality and identity are addressed in a continuous narrative, so the series takes the first steps toward the breaking of taboos.

“Heartstopper” is an adaptation of a series of graphic novels written by Alice Oseman in which a reality is portrayed in which members of a LGBTQ+ community no longer have to fight to be seen - in which their community is unconditionally part of society.

Both series represent LGBTQ+ communities from different perspectives and show different phases of acceptance and normalization. Because of this, they are chosen as example series in this paper.

¹ cf. Vázquez-Rodríguez, Lucía-Gloria u. a.: *The Role of Popular Culture for Queer Teen Identities’ Formation in Netflix’s Sex Education*, *Media and Communication*, 9(3), 2021, P. 198

² cf. N.U.: *Wat is Netflix?*, Netflix, <https://help.netflix.com/nl/node/412>, last accessed 03-02-2022

The aim for this paper is to present and explore the social contribution of these Netflix series. This goal is met by explaining the representation of the LGBTQ+ community and the possibility of identification beyond the series themselves.

The following section deals with the term LGBTQ+ and the associated community from both a social and a media perspective. "Sex Education" explains how the LGBTQ+ community is portrayed and what relevance this has in today's society. "Heartstopper" shows a LGBTQ+ community from a different angle. Finally, it is explained to what extent both series can contribute to the normalization of LGBTQ+ communities as unconditional parts of society. Not just on Netflix, but in the everyday, real world as well.

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2. LGBTQ+ from a social and media perspective

Nowadays, society is permeated by media, which in turn are shaped by society. For example, on YouTube, people from the LGBTQ+ community upload videos that tell their personal stories. In doing so, they help others to identify and connect with like-minded people. By using YouTube, they try to overcome the norms imposed by the heterocentric culture in society with the help of visibility and acculturation.³

Part of the youth in the LGBTQ+ community gets information about a shared culture in order to be able to act better within the queer community as well as to survive in the mainstream culture. Viewers see different depictions of queerness and the people in the videos portray themselves to show that they exist and that they are “real”.⁴

Even if there are many positive ways to use social networks and streaming services, the information and its sources should always be reflected on and used critically.

2.1 LGBTQ+ - a definition of terms

Primarily, LGBTQ+ is an abbreviation of the English terms for the sexual orientations and gender identities “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer”. The “+” stands for the limitless sexual orientations that exist in society. This includes, for example, asexuality and pansexuality.⁵

The term queer is used to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that don not fit into the mainstream. It is often used as a “catch-all” term to include as many people as possible, including those who do not identify as exclusively heterosexual and people with non-binary or gender-biased identities. However, since this is also covered by the “+”, the “Q” is now more often used for the term “questioning”. This includes people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁶

³ cf. Pullen, Christopher (Hg.): *Queer youth and media cultures*, Basingstoke 2014

⁴ cf. *ibid.*

⁵ cf. HRC Foundation: „Glossary of Terms“, hrc.org, n.y., <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>, last accessed 11-07-2022

⁶ cf. *ibid.*

In 2021, 70% of the people (global country average) identified as heterosexual.⁷ It is important to remember that people who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community belong to the other 30% and are still minorities in society.

It's a community whose followers (unconsciously) feel that they have to succumb to and conform to the dominant norm of 'being straight' in order to be valued and accepted.

"Through the capitalist system's "othering" of non-heterosexual people, that queer population strives to become the best heteronormative capitalists they can be in order to be accepted."⁸

"Othering" means that what a person knows is emphasized and made the norm; people with other characteristics are stereotyped and classified as different or even as "foreign". In this case, consumption in the capitalist system arises out of insecurities and a desire to belong.⁹

"Instead of breaking out of stereotypes and the status quo, queer identity becomes tangled within them, a limiting script instead of something liberating, complex, and diverse."¹⁰

In the 1970s and 1980s physical spaces where the queer community congregated developed. Within these physical spaces they had the opportunity to find acceptance and support in a world that was generally very hostile towards the LGBTQ+ community.

With the migration to digital communication and an increasing cultural tolerance of the LGBTQ+ community these physical spaces are slowly disappearing, being replaced or overshadowed by dating websites, social networks or other digital communication. It varies from individual to individual whether they prefer these physical spaces or digital communities. Some individuals might even use a combination of both to connect in the 21st century.¹¹

2.2 Current portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community on Netflix

Narration is a communicative act, because here applies the reverse, in the process that a person is told a story, these people create meanings from what they see and hear, they

⁷ cf. Boyon, Nicholas: „LGBT+ Pride 2021 Global Survey points to a generation gap around gender identity and sexual attraction“, Ipsos, 09-06-2021, <https://www.ipsos.com/en/lgbt-pride-2021-global-survey-points-generation-gap-around-gender-identity-and-sexual-attraction>, last accessed 1100702022

⁸ Siebler, Kay: *Learning Queer Identity in the Digital Age*, Missouri 2016 P. 8

⁹ cf. *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.* P. 8

¹¹ cf. *ibid.*

create connections and recognize stories.¹² Narrating means creating a closed world, creating a cosmos. In the filmic narration, two units of narration are combined; the mimetic and diegetic narration. The mimetic narration shows what is happening in a dramatic action, which is understood as an imitation in which the author speaks through the characters. In diegetic narration, a narrator narrates the action and it is clear that the narrator himself is speaking.¹³ The characters are not intended to speak. Film, television and series combine diegetic and mimetic narration: they tell by showing and they tell by speaking about something they don't show.¹⁴

Stereotypes are often found in Netflix's catalogue. Stereotypes are a categorization of people, but also objects, into classes, types or (social) groups. First of all, this is a cognitive process, which is emphasized when defining the stereotype. This is also where the difference between a stereotype and prejudice lies, as there is a larger affective dimension to prejudice. Thus, stereotypes are reduced to the cognitive component and seen as the cognitive part of the prejudices.¹⁵

The LGBTQ+ community can usually be found in series that belong to the "coming of age" genre. The term "coming of age" comes from the English "to come of age". It defines a genre in the film and series industry that deals with coming of age as the name already suggests. It's a relatively young genre and it conveys stories that focus on the psychological growth of the main characters as they move from adolescence into adulthood. The discovery of one's own (sexual) identity is a recurring theme.

In coming-of-age films, today's youth is not shown as a social problem, but *instead* social values and practices are regarded as problems of the youth. Especially with the recent films in this genre, the prospect of future potential that has yet to be realized is celebrated *upon*. However, none of the recent films' present youth itself as a celebration of today's pleasure. On the contrary, the present is mostly portrayed as a time that creates fear and suffering,

¹² cf. Hickethier, Knut: *Film- und Fernsehanalyse*, Weimar & Stuttgart 2012 P. 109

¹³ cf. *ibid.*

¹⁴ cf. *ibid.* P. 109

¹⁵ cf. Petersen, Lars-Eric & Six-Materna, Iris: „Stereotype“, in: *Handbuch der Sozialpsychologie und Kommunikationspsychologie*, hrsg. von Hans-Werner Bierhoff & Dieter Frey, Göttingen 2006, P. 430f

prompting protagonists to seek a better future: a future in which the problems of the present are mitigated.¹⁶ Stories in the coming-of-age genre can be told with characters of any age, but regardless of age, they undergo a form of growth that results in a more mature consciousness.¹⁷

2.3 Social relevance of the LGBTQ+ performance on Netflix

As sociologist Michael Morgan put it, stories affect how people live their lives, how they see other people, and how people think of themselves.¹⁸

Cultural products such as series represent open possibilities for interaction, the meaning of which is interwoven between the authors and the readers. They decode these possibilities by bringing in their specific socio-political backgrounds, intersectional identities and individual fantasies with which desire and identity are produced.¹⁹

In the generation of the Baby Boomers (born between 1945 and 1965) 81% identify as being “straight”.²⁰ In the United Kingdom in 2020, Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2010), 76% identify as “straight”, but 54%, of these 76%, was exclusively attracted to the opposite sex. This younger generation is more sexually diverse; From the 76%, only a little more than 50% is exclusively attracted to the opposite sex.

Also, younger people are more familiar with different types of sexuality.²¹

In addition, people use series to escape from reality and everyday life for a short period of time. Escapism describes this flight from reality, which happens either consciously or unconsciously. These escapist worlds are based on unreal or improbable people who are

¹⁶ cf. Fox, Alistair: „Coming-of-Age cinema in New Zealand: Genre, Gender and Adaptation“, Edinburgh 2018 P. 4f

¹⁷ cf. *ibid.* P. 5

¹⁸ cf. Boboltz, Sara & Yam, Kimberly: „Why On-Screen Representation Actually Matters“, *huffpost*, 24-02-2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-on-screen-representation-matters_n_58aeae96e4b01406012fe49d, last accessed 31-05-2022

¹⁹ cf. Vázquez-Rodríguez, Lucía-Gloria u. a.: *The Role of Popular Culture for Queer Teen Identities' Formation in Netflix's Sex Education*, *Media and Communication*, 9(3), 2021, P. 199

²⁰ cf. Shrimpton, Hannah: „Sexual orientation and attitudes to LGBTQ+ in Britain“, Ipsos, 26-06-2020, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/sexual-orientation-and-attitudes-lgbtq-britain>, last accessed 16-06-2022

²¹ cf. *ibid.*

characterized by either a very good or a very bad character and their successes and failures suitably serve the presumed desires of the audience.²²

Findings from the so-called mood management and selective exposure research point to a connection between mood and media content.²³ In addition, the use of media offers the opportunity to negate other roles from everyday life or to suspend them for a limited time. On the one hand, the use of media serves the withdrawal from day-to-day life of the individual, on the other hand, it supports certain social activities that otherwise cannot be carried out so easily or subtly. The use of media, for example series, can help people with navigating through the daily life up to a certain extent.

It has already been mentioned that people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community are still minorities in society. Series that represent this minority are also part of the minorities in the streaming offering. The media offer usually includes components that help the re-establish effective interpersonal contacts.²⁴

People want to see themselves in the productions, they want to see people with whom they can identify. In order to make this possible, the characters have to be significantly more diversified in order to come even more close to depicting the diversity of reality.

²² cf. Müller, Severina: *Flüchten mit Facebook. Potenziale der eskapistischen Nutzung sozialer Medien*, Baden-Baden 2018 (= Nomos Universitätschriften Medien und Kommunikation Bd. 4) P. 61

²³ cf. *ibid.* P. 62

²⁴ cf. *ibid.*

3. The series used

To understand the following part, it is important to have a rough outline of the narrative of both “Sex Education” and “Heartstopper”. Both series are British. The first season of “Sex Education” was released in January 2019, until today there are three seasons and the fourth season has been announced.²⁵ The first season of “Heartstopper” premiered in April 2022, and less than a month after its release, Netflix announced that the series had been renewed for two more seasons.²⁶

3.1 “Sex Education”

“Sex Education” follows Otis Milburne, the son of a sex therapist, but inexperienced and shy himself, who attends Moordale Secondary School. Together with his classmate Maeve, he starts a “sex clinic” where they give other classmates advice on sexual issues for a certain fee. He also notices how bad the sex education in his school really is. As the seasons progress, it’s not just about the advice, Otis himself also has his first sexual experiences and tries to find his way into the adult world.

Adam Groff is one of the students and at school he is known as the bully. He is the son of the (former) headmaster. He has a troublesome relationship with his father and their talks often end in a fight. In the story his father sends him to military school, from which he is kicked out. In the course of the series, Adam realizes that he is bisexual and he makes more and more effort to show his feelings and to articulate them.

Eric Effiong is Otis’ best friend. He is gay and comes from a religious Nigerian/Ghanaian family. He behaves as openly gay which sometimes causes trouble for him in everyday life. He doesn’t really get bullied because of his identity, but because he once got an erection during a performance of the school band. Eric and Adam (who previously bullied him) have a

²⁵ cf. Netflix: „Breaking New out of #TUDUM Sex Education has been renewed for Season 4!“, *Twitter-Account von Netflix*, 25-09-2021 at 18:42, https://twitter.com/netflix/status/1441805326605508610?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1441805326605508610%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_%ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.whats-on-netflix.com%2Fnews%2Fsex-education-season-4-netflix-renewal-status-everything-we-know-so-far-05-2022%2F, last accessed 12-06-2022

²⁶ cf. Thao, Philip: „‘Heartstopper’ Season 2 Will Say “Hi” to More Queer Joy. The gay panic continues“, *Netflix*, 20-05-2022, <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/heartstopper-season-2-renewal-confirmed>, last accessed 12-06-2022

secret relationship until Adam has to go to military school. Eric is dating Rahim but realizes he still has feelings for Adam. Ultimately, Eric and Adam get back together after Adam returns to school and openly expresses his feelings for Eric. At the end of the third season, however, the two are separated again.

Maeve Wiley lives in a trailer park; she is actually really intelligent but suffers from the social class in which she was born. She was raised by her brother who is a drug addict. Her mother is also a drug addict and seeks contact with Maeve again in the course of the series.

However, it turns out that she hasn't changed and is still addicted to drugs, even though she says she isn't. Maeve is trying her best to make good choices and she tries to get herself a good life.

There are other characters highlighted throughout the series. However, this would go beyond the scope here.

3.2 "Heartstopper"

"Heartstopper" focusses on Nicholas (Nick) Nelson and Charles (Charlie) Spring. Both attend the all-boys school Truham Grammar. Charlie Spring is a shy guy who behaves openly as gay. Because of that he gets bullied a lot. At the beginning he is in a secret relationship with Ben Hope, but it is pretty obvious that they *are in* a toxic relationship.

Elle, one of Charlie's friends, used to go to Charlie's school as well, but switched to the all-girls school Higgs, when she came out as transgender. Tao and Isaac also belong to Charlie's friend group.

While Elle is trying to fit in at the new school, Charlie falls in love with a guy in his form named Nick. Both Tao and Charlie are 100% sure that Nick is identifying himself as straight. At the same time Nick is reflecting and doubting all the new feelings he has. At Harry's birthday party a friend (Tara) tells Nick that she's a Lesbian and at the party Nick and Charlie later share their first kiss resulting in Nick running away. Charlie believes that he messed everything up, but on the next morning he finds Nick standing at his front door in the pouring rain. While Charlie tries to apologise, it is Nick who says that he's the one who should be saying sorry, because he walked away. He was surprised and confused; he says that he needs time to figure everything out. They keep their relationship secret and Imogen asks Nick out on a date. Nick agrees to go on a date with her because he doesn't know how

to say 'no', but also agrees to go to Charlie's birthday party on the same day. Meanwhile Nick starts doing some research on being bisexual and tells Tara that he and Charlie are going out. At the same time, they are trying to link Tao and Elle. Nick and Tao get into a fight with Harry. *Charlie, believing that everything is his fault, almost stops everything that is going on between him and Nick. Nick then takes Charlie aside at the Truham and Higgs sports day and tells him that he wants them to be together. A couple of days later they have their first proper date, just the two of them. Nick wants to confide it to the people that matter to him and starts that same night by admitting it to his mother.*

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4. Representation of the LGBTQ+ community – “Sex Education”

When people talk about the portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community in film- and series productions, some might say that “too many” queer roles are being cast these days. “But queer representation isn’t going to brainwash your child [...]. Because heteronormativity already has.”²⁷ One should take into account that portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community doesn’t replace the heterosexual relationships and cisgender identities on screen and they don’t aspire to do so. They simply add something to it and give the LGBTQ+ community its place in these productions, which is long overdue.

“Sex Education” shows that taboo-breaking conversations and discussions are not only important in adulthood, but should already be there when growing up *as a child*.

This chapter illustrates the LGBTQ+ community from different perspectives using the series “Sex Education”.

4.1 Implementation of the topic in the narration

The title of the series refers to the subject that it deals with, as well as an issue that can be seen in both, the narration of the series and in reality. It shows that the current sex education curriculum in schools is in desperate need of an update. The series highlights a critical information gap, about how education systems are failing to meet the socio-emotional needs of the youth and their families.²⁸

In the narration of “Sex Education”, Otis and Maeve are able to fill the knowledge gap that is left by the education system at Moordale High School with appropriate and youth-focused information about sexuality. They are able to do this, because of their knowledge, their perspective and most importantly through their knowledge.²⁹

The narration that is portrayed in “Sex Education” breaks taboos. Otis Milburne’s school environment is systematically used to address various issues of sexuality. Teens spend most of their time in school, and it is a place with many different individuals, each with their own issues and preferences when it comes to sexual- and gender identity.

²⁷ Given, Florence: *Women don’t owe you pretty (The small edition)*, London 2021 P. 42

²⁸ cf. Dudek, Debra u. a.: ‘Own your narrative’: teenagers as producers and consumers of porn in Netflix’s *Sex Education*, *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(4), 2021, P. 511

²⁹ cf. *ibid.* P. 505 f

Featuring multidimensional characters with understandable problems, the show embodies one of television's most progressive views of sex.³⁰ Beyond the stereotypes and beyond the "groups" are individuals like Maeve, who has a bad reputation, comes from a poor family, but is also a very good student.³¹ Otis himself shows a certain maturity; the young people around him, on the other hand, behave rather immature. It is precisely this contrast that ensures the balance between humour and a healthy attitude towards sexuality.³²

Various sexualities and gender identities, such as pansexuality, bisexuality, asexuality and non-binary, are portrayed throughout the series. With this series includes and accepts a variety of sexual and gender identities that remain largely unexplored in the education system.³³ The third season introduces the first non-binary character; at the same time, the students have to wear school uniforms for a certain period of time. This emphasizes a reoccurring phenomenon that non-binary people encounter again and again. Some clothing items that are allowed in school uniforms are only for boys and some only for girls; this can be discriminating towards transgender and non-binary students. To avoid this, there should be gender-neutral school uniforms everywhere. So far, this has only been the case in a few schools.

"Sex Education" features a realistic depiction of teenage sex. Young people are effectively educated about sex, which is often not the case in the sex education program at school. The series shows that people are not alone with their insecurities and doubts. The series also emphasizes the meaning and importance of communication.³⁴

4.2 Representation of the LGBTQ+ community in the soundtrack

Looking at the soundtrack of "Sex Education", the name Ezra Furman is one that you see quite often. She came out as a transgender woman in April of 2021³⁵ and uses the pronouns

³⁰ cf. Berman, Judy: „An old-fashioned teen sex comedy with a Gen Z twist“, TIME, 14-01-2019

³¹ cf. *ibid.*

³² cf. *ibid.*

³³ cf. Dudek, Debra etc.: 'Own your narrative': teenagers as producers and consumers of porn in Netflix's *Sex Education*, Information, Communication & Society, 25(4), 2021, P. 506

³⁴ cf. *ibid.* P. 509

³⁵ cf. Torres, Eric: „Ezra Furman Comes Out as a Transgender Woman“, pitchfork.com, 21-04-2021, <https://pitchfork.com/news/ezra-furman-comes-out-as-a-transgender-woman/amp/>, last accessed 09-08-2022

“she/her” and “they/them”.³⁶ They also are bisexual and before they came out as a transgender woman, they described themselves as gender neutral.³⁷

Ezra Furman’s music appears 13 times in the soundtrack of the first three seasons; with this she is by far the most frequently reoccurring artist in this soundtrack.³⁸ While this shouldn’t be idealized, the fact is that even if this is just one-person, marginalized groups are seen and given a place to speak up and show themselves. This is a phenomenon that can also be seen in the acting of the show. One of the ideas behind the narration, is for example, to depict minority groups in society, is thus continued on the musical level.

The series’ soundtrack is eclectic and cinematic. Based on what has been seen, it cannot be determined where Moordale High School is located. The school looks like a big American high school and it seems like it’s summer all the time. The soundtrack consists of a good mix from the 1970s, 80s and 90s, but there are also newer songs represented.

For example: “Under Pressure” by Queen and David Bowie is used. Freddy Mercury was bisexual and David Bowie, as an androgynous person, was one of the most recognizable faces of the glam rock era. The Velvet Underground is also featured on the soundtrack, and they are also often associated with the queer community.

Other artists and bands featured on the soundtrack include: LCD Soundsystem (lyrically represented, performed by Ezra Furman), The Rolling Stones, Missing Persons, Billy Idol, Timbuk3 and Bob Seger.

Most of this music can be traced back to the styles of the new wave, post-punk, rock and glam rock era. These styles and these times are linked to an ever-increasing visibility of the queer community.

4.3 Opportunities of identification

³⁶ cf. Furman, Ezra: „Ezra Furman“, Twitter.com, <https://twitter.com/ezrafurman>, last accessed 09-08-2022

³⁷ cf. N.N.: „Pretty punk rock: how Ezra Furman found freedom in gender fluidity“, theguardian.com, 03-07-2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/03/ezra-furman-gender-fluidity>, last accessed 09-08-2022

³⁸ cf. AT EASE: „Sex Education (S1, S2, S3) – Netflix Soundtrack“, Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/OSmKzbbBAMsplOGCiETzYp>, last accessed 09-08-2022

People with whom we deal in everyday life are perceived as persons; on the other hand, the people we meet while watching a television series are (mostly) perceived as people, knowing that they are not real people but characters in a fictitious plot.³⁹

Viewers are familiar with the world in which a particular series takes place because of the obvious repetition of familiar elements.⁴⁰ In everyday entertainment, people often talk about an ironic treatment if the series heroes and the design of a series are criticized and discussed.

Characters in series become both, topic of conversation and self-affirmation. People identify with a particular character by acknowledging that there are people like themselves, especially in terms of sexual and gender identity.

³⁹ cf. Keppler, Angela: „Person und Figur. Identifikationsangebote in Fernsehserien“, in: *Montage, AV: Zeitschrift für Theorie & Geschichte audiovisueller Kommunikation*, 1995, Bd. 4 (2), P. 85

⁴⁰ cf. *ibid.* P. 86

5. Normalizing LGBTQ+ on Netflix

Normalization is not possible without the problematization explained in chapter four. The LGBTQ+ community has the opportunity to express themselves in both, what is seen (narration) and in what is heard (music). The music goes beyond the series, it is often integrated into everyday life and an artist can really benefit from the use of their music in series. However, problematization is only part of the process of acceptance. Normalization also means that characters who are part of the LGBTQ+ community have a deeper personality and that their story goes beyond 'just' being queer. There has to be representation of the LGBTQ+ community that takes a positive look at the future, that gives hope, even if it's only for the moment and can be used as escapism.

5.1 "Heartstopper" – a LGBTQ+ romance

"The idea that the show might end as it did – with a tear-jerkingly joyful celebration of young queer love in full bloom, depicted gorgeously – seemed impossible."⁴¹ A depiction of queer that the television industry hasn't shown many times until now. "We need queer stories with happiness at the forefront, too. It's a way to change realities. It felt like an optimistic retelling of real life [...] even if some of the challenges are more easily overcome in the show than in real life."⁴² „A lot of queer representation over time and currently, it's very dark and gritty and just an overwhelmingly pessimistic view."⁴³ Most of the LGBTQ+ series that exist talk about the misery that the LGBTQ+ community has to endure, the optimistic and cheerful nature of (first) love usually is pushed back or not addressed at all.

This optimistic perspective also comes forward in the song "Colours of You", written for the series by Baby Queen (pseudonym of Arabella Latham). The positivity of love emerges here. The song is written from Nick Nelson's perspective, and the phrase "You look at me and the

⁴¹ Segalov, Micheal: „*Young, gay people being out and happy? It's revolutionary! Meet the Heartstopper generation*“, theguardian.com, 31.05.2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/may/31/young-gay-people-being-out-and-happy-its-revolutionary-meet-the-heartstopper-generation>, last accessed 31-05-2022

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Gao, Max: „*Heartstopper*“ stars want to keep telling their characters' love story“, nbcnews.com, 05-05-2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-pop-culture/heartstopper-stars-want-keep-telling-characters-love-story-rcna27494>, last accessed 31-05-2022

darkness leaves"⁴⁴ conveys the upbeat reality from the series into the music, it literally illuminates this positive perspective.

"I used to see the world in black and white, now I'm covered in the colours of you"⁴⁵; this sentence can have a couple of different meanings. The dichotomy of black and white can be transferred to that of homo-/heterosexuality. In addition, society still mostly presents itself in binary terms. This can make it difficult to acknowledge one's sexuality (or identity) when neither of these terms apply to an individual.

The sentence "Red, orange, yellow, green, blue. Purple, pink and indigo too"⁴⁶; refers to the rainbow flag, which stands to acceptance and tolerance of different life forms and has become a symbol for the LGBTQ+ community.⁴⁷ Purple, pink and indigo explicitly explain the colours that are present in the bisexual flag. The pink named here stands for loving the opposite sex, the indigo refers to the love for the same sex and the purple, which is the overlapping and narrower stripe, stand for the attraction to both sexes.⁴⁸

In "Heartstopper" nothing is left to coincidence. The play of colours is completely planned. Different shades of blue are usually used for Nick, while yellow tones are often used for Charlie. These colors are also used in the attributes and collide in moments that bring Nick and Charlie closer together (for example the umbrella when they kiss in the rain). Bright colours are used, Nick is often irradiated with the colors of the bisexual flag, even the rainbows that form when rain and sunshine collide are used deliberately here.

The viewer is constantly brought closer to what is happening and then moved away again, through this back and forth one finds oneself in a continuous excitement of perception.⁴⁹

This interplay between approach and distance creates the cinematic reality.⁵⁰

The song "Why am I like this?" by Orla Gartland makes five simple words incredible powerful. It is used in a scene where Nick comes home after spending the day with Charlie

⁴⁴ Baby queen: 28-04-2022, „*Baby Queen – Colours of You (Official Audio)*“, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PEgHSfi0qw>, last accessed 01-06-2022

⁴⁵ ibid.

⁴⁶ ibid.

⁴⁷ ibid.

⁴⁸ cf. Wilber, Jennifer: „Show your true colors: a guide to bi pride symbols“, *owlcation*, 29-06-2022, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Show-Your-True-Colors-A-Guide-to-Bi-Pride-Symbols>, last accessed 26-07-2022

⁴⁹ cf. Hickethier, Knut: *Film- und Fernsehanalyse*, Weimar & Stuttgart 2012

⁵⁰ cf. ibid.

and Nick starts to realize that there might be more to his feelings towards Charlie. At the end of the scene, he takes his laptop and looks up “Am I gay?”, throughout the whole scene “Why am I like this?” plays. For a part of the song, the sentence “Why am I like this?” is replayed many times and many people feel represented because they exactly know the feeling that is portrayed by the narration and the music on screen.⁵¹

5.2 “Sex Education” & “Heartstopper” – two contributions to social acceptance

The series “Sex Education” and “Heartstopper” show that open conversations and queer representation are possible. Even though both series choose a different strategy to reach their public and therefore society, both ensure a positive response from the viewers. The reactions to the series derive not only from the content that is discussed, but also from the way in which it is portrayed and supported by the music.

Moments and touches that are not necessarily intimate can be very intimate in the context of the narrative and make a significant contribution to a person’s physical and mental state. While this isn’t unique to LGBTQ+ productions, it should be given careful consideration as this is still relatively new territory.

In order to record these stories well, the role of the intimacy coordinator cannot be underestimated. This role was not always as present as it is today. Since the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the rise of the MeToo movement in 2017, this role is more important than ever.⁵² David Thackeray, intimacy coordinator for both “Sex Education” and “Heartstopper”, makes clear that there is more to it than just sex and kissing scenes in both, the heterosexual and homosexual relationships that are portrayed. It’s about the extent to which actors feel comfortable in portraying these intimate moments. This is a discussion that needs to be addressed prior to shooting and the scenes, like any other, need to be analysed beforehand. A scene should not only tell a story but should also be felt, it should be sensed by the viewer. “There’s a purpose to it and when you see the actors or characters comfortable, that’s when it really works”.⁵³

⁵¹ Orla Gartland: 08.02.2019, “*Orla Gartland – Why am I like this?*”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJgnWnb7wG8>, last accessed 16-09-2022

⁵² cf. Gregory, Aodhán: „Heartstopper’s Intimacy Coordinator on Capturing Young Gay Love: ‘They wanted to get it right’“, *attitude*, 20-05-2022, <https://attitude.co.uk/article/heartstoppers-intimacy-coordinator-on-capturing-young-gay-love-they-wanted-to-get-it-right/27095/>, last accessed 12-07-2022

⁵³ *ibid.*

6. Conclusion

The normalization of the LGBTQ+ community in society cannot only be “romanticized”, but also needs a realistic perspective. The LGBTQ+ series available in the Netflix catalogue do not work against each other, but they work together in the process of the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in society. Series like “Sex Education” and “Heartstopper” work hand in hand.

“Sex Education” definitely didn’t put “rose-coloured glasses” on, especially when you compare the series to “Heartstopper”. “Sex Education” also shows that the sex education in today’s schools is in desperate need of a different, more modern approach. Without series like “Sex Education” the path for series like “Heartstopper” would have been more difficult and it is questionable if this series would have come out and triggered such a positive and beautiful response.

LGBTQ+ representation on Netflix is in high demand and commercialism is always part of the production. Is the social impact of a series less because of this? No, not necessarily. But, the greater the demand, the more certainty there is that a series will be successful. The commercial side must not be forgotten and silenced by putting on these “rose-coloured glasses” in the narration.

Nevertheless, both of the series discussed here, contribute to the normalization of queerness in society, each in their own way. The LGBTQ+ community might feel a little more valued, more visible and included. “Sex Education” addresses taboo topics directly and presents a wide variety of sexual- and gender identities. “Heartstopper” no longer questions and problematizes sexualities and gender identities, but instead processes them as ‘natural’ in the narration. In doing so, they recreate a desirable reality full of hope.

However, the images presented in both series must not be idealized, because reality still has a long way to go to complete acceptance.

In addition, “Heartstopper” has made it, so to speak, into the British Parliament, with this desirable reality. Like Pollard, a Labor MP, brought up the show, and specifically the role of Yasmin Finney (who plays Elle) as a transgender actress, in the debate on transgender conversion therapy. „The class and visibility of her as a trans actor [...] has saved lives. [...] where diversity is celebrated, not excluded, where people are drawn together by a broad

hug, not with a big stick. [...] The message should go out to young LGBT people that regardless of who you are and who you love you have the right to be loved, you have the right to be saved and you have the right to be valued, not just by society, but in the law as well."⁵⁴

Series are not meant to educate mankind, but they can be a good stimulus for discussion. Like all media offerings, LGBTQ+ series provide topics of conversation. All of this in the hope that the verbalization and visualization of the content will ensure that, at some point, conversations are no longer necessary.

Whether you identify as straight, cisgender, or belong to the LGBTQ+ community, the narrative can only be changed by diverse consumptions and by diverse content. And this is exactly where the power of the consumers is hidden. Through their consumption, the catalog of streaming services can be further diversified. Through their consumption, they show that this content is in demand and needed in today's society.

This is done in the hope that these on-screen offers and representation will make a social contribution and that there will be a future in which the LGBTQ+ community is an unconditional part of society.

⁵⁴ Maskell, Emily: „Heartstopper and Yasmin Finney are ‚saving lives‘ says Labour MP Luke Pollard, The Labour MP for Plymouth mentioned the show during a debate on the ‚conversion therapy‘ ban.“, attitude.co.uk, 14-06-2022, <https://attitude.co.uk/article/heartstopper-and-yasmin-finney-are-saving-lives-says-labour-mp-luke-pollard-1/27241/>, last accessed 01-07-2022

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