

The Marginalization of Sexual Minorities in *Friends*

A Critical Analysis of Queer Representation on Television

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This thesis aims to analyze how sexual minorities are discriminated against through language use in the situation comedy *Friends*. The goal is to examine what effects the queer representation in the series may have in real life. The main sources of this study include five episodes from different seasons of *Friends*. Other sources consist of books, articles, and online publications presenting previous research as well as recently increased public discussion about the topic.

More specifically, this study focuses on the representation of lesbian and gay characters in *Friends* as well as compares how homosexual and heterosexual identities are received and portrayed in the series. In addition, this thesis aims to analyze the underlying attentions and insinuations hidden beneath the language use about the queer community. The main results of this research prove that the LGBTQ+ representation in the series can be hurtful towards queer individuals as well as have an impact on the audience's attitudes in real life. It is also revealed that heteronormativity reigns the treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals in *Friends*, creating a certain hierarchy among different sexualities. This study is concluded with suggestions to use television as a medium for promoting equality as well as to learn from problematic representation of the past in order to make television series more progressive in the future.

Key words: LGBTQ+, queer, gay, representation, *Friends*.

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1 Introduction

In this thesis, I will critically examine the representation of same-sex couples in the American situation comedy *Friends*. It is a television series that follows six adults between their twenties and thirties that live in Manhattan, New York. The main characters include Rachel Green, Ross and Monica Geller, Chandler Bing, Phoebe Buffay and Joey Tribbiani, who all live in the same building. The show has 10 seasons and it aired internationally from 1994 to 2004. The show portrays the characters' personal relationships as well as different events throughout their lives, often in a humorous manner. The series has become immensely popular throughout the world, and it is available on various streaming platforms.

Sexual minorities, or the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and more) community, appears in *Friends* quite regularly as characters or in discourse, but its representation can be seen as discriminatory especially during modern times. As all of the main characters are heterosexual, the show is liable to present same-sex couples as the 'other' or the 'odd ones out' compared to heterosexual couples, reinforcing the notion that their relationships are somehow abnormal or deviant. The problem with this type of treatment is that it not only reflects but also perpetuates societal prejudices. Moreover, stereotypes surrounding sexual minorities are often reinforced through both language and actions, thereby contributing to the ongoing marginalization of LGBTQ+ individuals. In *Friends*, queer characters are neither afforded the same respect nor normalized to the extent that heterosexual characters are, creating an environment where queer identities are positioned as somehow inferior or less valid.

With this study, I aim to analyze and raise awareness about the discriminatory and negative discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals in *Friends*, as it is globally a very influential and widely consumed television series. By doing so, I aim to contribute to the broader cultural conversation about the need for respectful discourse and the promotion of equality regarding sexual minorities. The significance of my research lies in its potential to shed light on how discriminatory language and actions in widely consumed media, such as *Friends*, contribute to the creation and reinforcement of negative stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people. The impact of media representations on social perceptions cannot be underestimated, as television can have a central role in shaping societal norms and values. The purpose of my thesis is to analyze how the negative representation of the LGBTQ+ community in *Friends* may affect how people view homosexuality in real life. Moving forward, I will present the background for my

thesis, after which I will move on to the material and methods. Afterwards, I will discuss the results of my study which I have obtained through analyzing my chosen material. My thesis will end with a conclusion including the most important points regarding my research question.

2 Background

In this section I am going to cover what kind of previous research has been on the topic of my thesis, after which I will move on to presenting the history of queer representation and how discrimination affects LGBTQ+ youth. Lastly, I will introduce the core concepts and theories in this study before moving on to material and methods.

2.1 Previous Research

Previous discussion on the topic in question has highlighted that *Friends* frequently fails to portray queer people and their relationships in a respectful manner (see, for example, Fida 2020; Lang 2019; Miller 2019; Snyder 2021), and online conversation about the issue has increased in recent years. The series is often described as ‘a product of its time’ which may explain, though not excuse, its lack of progressive representation. It is clear that when *Friends* aired in the 1990s and 2000s, the world viewed queer people in a considerably different light than today, which can be seen in the treatment of LGBTQ+ characters in *Friends*. While some previous analyses of queer representation in *Friends* exist (see, for example, Fida 2020; Lang 2019; Miller 2019; Snyder 2021), the majority of available literature is limited to articles published in online magazines and journals, rather than within academics. Through my own research, I intend to illustrate negative portrayals of queer couples in popular media, which will allow me to develop an academic contribution to this underexplored topic.

2.2 History of Queer Representation

Queer representation is marked by invisibility, where heterosexuality is clearly visible in various representations (McNicholas Smith 2020, 19). In recent years, the portrayal of LGBTQ+ people in popular culture has been the subject of increasing public discussion as queer characters are increasingly normalized into contemporary media, and more and more celebrities are publicly identifying as LGBTQ+ (McNicholas Smith 2020, 1). A growing number of people have therefore become vocal advocates for LGBTQ+ rights and equality, which stands in stark contrast to the outdated portrayals found in tv-series from the 1990s and early 2000s (see, for example, Armitage 2018; Rampersaud 2021). It is common that gay characters are depicted on television in stereotypical, mocking, or joking manner, in hope of provoking laughter from an audience that is largely heterosexual (Bond and Compton 2015, 720), and *Friends* has a habit of including gay jokes or references to homosexuality very frequently (McNicholas Smith 2020, 24). When one views the series through a contemporary

lens, it becomes clear that much of the language and behavior once considered acceptable is now recognized as very problematic and even harmful. In Snyder's (2021) view, *Friends* is "problematic representations galore", where the "treatment of the LGBTQ+ community is [...] deeply embarrassing at best and horrifying at worst."

2.3 The Effects of Discrimination on Queer Youth

Researchers are increasingly concerned that LGBTQ+ youth experience various kinds of health and mental health issues, such as "depression and anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, attempted suicide, and homelessness" (Parker et al. 2018, 383). Moreover, the issues continue into adulthood, resulting in elevated levels of drug use, which indicates that there is a clear demand for interventions and policies that address their wellbeing (Parker et al. 2018, 383–385). These issues are attributable to stigma and discrimination experienced within the LGBTQ+ community (Parker et al. 2018, 383). For example, illicit drug use is more common among sexual minorities who reside in states that have high structural stigma than among sexual minorities who live in states that have low structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2015).

Discrimination of gay men and women is very common in the US (Bond and Compton 2015, 717). Therefore it is crucial to find solutions to address the stigma around sexual minorities, including paying attention to the manner in which the queer community is represented on different societal levels. This includes popular media as it has been proven to have an effect on people's real-life attitudes and perceptions concerning the LGBTQ+ community. For example, according to Bond and Compton (2015, 718–719, 727–728), "exposure to programs inclusive of gay characters [is] significantly correlated with endorsement of gay equality" – whether the viewers developed a positive or negative attitude towards queer people depended on whether gay characters were portrayed in a positive or negative light. This means that non-inclusive representation is another form of marginalizing queer individuals in society.

2.4 Core Concepts

As I am interested in examining the queer representations in *Friends* through the lens of equality and social justice, my research is closely linked to feminist and queer theory, as well as to Critical Discourse Analysis and pragmatics. This study is centered around the analysis of how television is connected to the perception of different sexualities on a societal level, as well as heteronormativity as a phenomenon.

Sexuality can be defined in multiple ways, but in this thesis, I am referring to sexual identity in relation to the gender to which a person is typically attracted (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “sexuality,” n.). *Heteronormativity*, on the other hand, can be defined as a situation where “heterosexuality constitutes *the* standard for legitimate, authentic, prescriptive, and ruling social, cultural, and sexual arrangements” (Yep 2003, 13). It is ubiquitous. It can be found “in our individual and collective psyches, social institutions, cultural practices, and knowledge systems” (Yep 2003, 11). It is also visible on television, where the representation of sex, gender, and sexuality is often “binary, rigid, and hierarchical” (Dhaenens 2014, 520).

In *Friends*, heteronormativity can be spotted when comparing the representation of heterosexual and homosexual identities in the series, revealing that heterosexuality is not subject to astonishment in the same way that homosexuality is. In the series, no one is ridiculed or disrespected because of their heterosexuality. Instead, being heterosexual seems to be the underlying assumption for characters in the show, making anything that deviates from it into a talking point and worthy of excessive attention. Reasons behind why homosexuality is often seen as more negative than or inferior to a heterosexual identity – whether it be on television or in real life – might be linked to how sexuality has been attempted to be reduced to the heterosexual and legitimate couple on a societal level (Foucault 1978, 45). The notion of *normality* is based on *normativity* which, in turn, is caused by *norms* that are seen as equivalent or superior to other options (Canguilhem 1991, 144). In other words, what people consider ‘normal’ is the extension and the manifestation of underlying norms, giving it the power of a rule and pointing it out at the same time (Canguilhem 1991, 239). Therefore, when an event occurs that diverges from the ‘normal’ and preferable, it will often be viewed as repulsive and detestable since norms are regulated by “the polar opposition of a positive and a negative”, expressing discriminations of certain qualities associated with the negative (Canguilhem 1991, 240). This may explain why some sexualities are considered deviant in relation to heteronormativity.

Furthermore, I use the term ‘queer’ in this study to primarily refer to people with sexualities that do not correspond to heterosexual norms. As my study is not necessarily related to gender minorities, which are often also referred to with the term ‘queer’, I focus on the aspects of queer sexualities instead of the whole spectrum of queerness. Another theoretical term that I will utilize in this study is *male gaze*. Relevant to analyzing how lesbians are treated in *Friends*, Mulvey (1975, 11) defines the male gaze as a phenomenon where women are the passive objects of male desire while men are active lookers projecting their fantasies onto

women. I will approach my research question through these aspects, enabling me to critically assess the ways in which language, stereotypes, and cultural norms intersect to shape the portrayal of LGBTQ+ people in *Friends*.

2.5 Critical Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been defined by one of its founders, Norman Fairclough (1995, 132), as the study of the “relationships of causality and determination between [...] discursive practices, events, and texts”, as well as “wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes”. CDA also explores how various discursive practices, events, and texts are produced “by relations of power and struggles over power” (ibid.). In other words, its purpose is to “reveal the way power is diffused through the prevalence of various discourses” within a society (Locke 2004, 1). This theory functions as an underpinning for my thesis, directing me to analyze the prevailing social structures and relations in the *Friends* discourse concerning LGBTQ+ individuals. I am using CDA in this study to examine how the language use in the series is connected to LGBTQ+ inequality and power relations on a wider, societal level.

Pragmatics also offers me an important set of tools for the critical analysis of language use in the world of *Friends*. It involves the study of meaning through the lens of language use (Huang 2017), including the following central topics: *implicature*, i.e., what is implied (Grice 1975), *presupposition*, i.e., what is taken for granted (McConnell-Ginet 2014) and *speech act*, i.e., what is done through language (Austin 1962). Pragmatics is particularly important in the analysis as it relies on the notion that there is a significant difference between the linguistic meaning of a sentence and the messages actually expressed through the utterance (Huang 2017, 2). I am using pragmatics in this study to specifically inspect the relationship between the two, focusing on what messages and insinuations are actually conveyed through the characters’ utterances and what they are based on.

3 Material and Methods

In my thesis, I examine multiple episodes from *Friends* that include relevant examples of the issue at hand. LGBTQ+ people are addressed throughout the show, but I have chosen a few episodes to pinpoint a number of problematic cases. The episodes I have chosen include the following: “The One Where Monica Gets a Roommate” (season 1, episode 1), “The One Where Nana Dies Twice” (season 1, episode 8), “The One with the Lesbian Wedding” (season 2, episode 11), “The One with Rachel’s Big Kiss” (season 7, episode 20), and “The One with the Male Nanny” (season 9, episode 6). For the sake of convenience, I opted to use transcribed versions of the episodes that I found on different websites to ensure reader accessibility. I have, however, carefully checked that each of the transcripts is in accordance with the original episodes.

Some challenges are inevitable when analyzing this particular topic, leaving gaps or certain inadequacies concerning my study. These include the potential lack of objectivity; it is not always entirely possible to determine whether some of the discourse regarding LGBTQ+ individuals found in *Friends* is problematic. In particular, a critical discourse analyst is often liable to take sides, and it is challenging to remain impartial on impactful social subjects such as the topic of this thesis. While a lot of people find the queer representation in *Friends* troubling, some others may not, and it is debatable whether the creators of the show should have done it differently while making the series in the 1990’s. In addition, relying on scripts poses another challenge for this study as everything that happens in the episodes might not be sufficiently mediated through the written form. Therefore, nonverbal communication, such as expressions and gestures, might not be fully conveyed to the reader when I present the episode examples in the analysis section.

Another limitation for this study is the lack of existing academic studies on homophobia in *Friends* specifically. There is, however, no shortage of research on homophobia in general as well as non-academic research on homophobia in the tv-series, which I have pieced together to form a solid foundation for this study. In spite of the challenges and limitations concerning this thesis, I claim that there is enough evidence of discriminatory framing of LGBTQ+ individuals in *Friends* that it can be defined as a problem. I see the lack of academic studies on this topic as an opportunity and as an indication that more research is needed in this field. Especially when taking into account the vast popularity of *Friends*, the effects of harmful discourse within the series should not be overlooked. I aim to analyze what kinds of harmful

effects the inadequate framing of queer individuals in *Friends* can have on people in real life, highlighting the potentially underestimated impact of widely consumed media.

4 Analysis

Next, I will briefly explain the problematic scenes included in the episodes I am utilizing in this thesis. I will go over what happens in the episode, as well as introduce the aspects that make the examples problematic. First, I will take a look at how lesbians are treated in *Friends*, moving on to a similar analysis concerning gay men afterwards. A more thorough analysis will be included in the Discussion section.

4.1 *Friends* and Lesbians

During its 10 seasons, *Friends* included a significant number of jokes that can be deemed offensive. In *Out Magazine*, Lang (2019) notes how especially the male characters of the show display a noticeable discomfort and even contempt toward sexual minorities, and how often queer individuals are played for laughs whenever getting screen time. This can be seen, for example, through the show's treatment of lesbian characters, who are commonly sexualized in the show. In the very first episode of season one, the character named Ross discusses his breakup with his wife due to her coming out as lesbian. The character named Joey teases him about the fact that Ross did not know that she was a lesbian, and states that:

(1) sometimes I wish I was a lesbian (s01e01)

In the tv-series, Joey's character is known as a ladies' man (Thomas 2020), someone who habitually sexualizes women in different contexts, and therefore his statement (1) most likely has a sexual meaning. It is also a clear example of male gaze as a male character projects his fantasy on a female character (Mulvey 1975, 11).

Joey's inappropriate comments about lesbians become even more evident in season 7 episode 20, where Rachel reveals that she ended up kissing her friend Melissa while drunk in college. Joey then constantly sexualizes her during the rest of the episode – he stares at her in a suggestive manner while fantasizing about Rachel and Melissa kissing. He also flirtatiously asks Rachel if she would like to order some sangria (on which she and Melissa got drunk in college), and wants to join Rachel and Melissa for dinner to videotape them. He sees the women as sexual objects in an erotic spectacle (Mulvey 1975, 11). His behavior during this episode is portrayed as very humorous, whereas today it could be even interpreted as harassment.

Lesbians are also denied respect and equality in the 11th episode of season 2 where Ross's ex-wife Carol is getting married to her girlfriend Susan, and all the main characters of *Friends* attend the wedding. The episode begins with Ross being surprised by the news of Carol and Susan getting married and questions if they will really get married:

(2) as in "I now pronounce you wife and wife" married? (s02e11)

This example reveals his skeptical attitude towards their relationship. Further in the episode, Carol is upset about her parents not attending her wedding due to not accepting her relationship with Susan, which makes her consider whether she should cancel the wedding altogether. However, Ross convinces her otherwise and she proceeds to go through with the wedding.

At the wedding, Joey and Chandler fret about not being able to make advances on the female guests since they think they are all lesbians. Joey expresses his frustration to Chandler:

(3) just seems so futile, you know, all these women, and nothing (s02e11)

Chandler responds that now Joey must understand how he feels on a daily basis, since at this point in the show it has been implied that Chandler has difficulties with attracting women. He states that:

(4) the world is my lesbian wedding (s02e11)

Earlier in the episode Phoebe claims to have the soul of Mrs. Adelman – an old lady who died on her massage table – attached to her body, manifesting itself spontaneously by making Phoebe say and do things that were typical of the deceased lady. During the wedding ceremony, Mrs. Adelman displays her bafflement towards Carol and Susan's marriage through Phoebe, exclaiming that:

(5) now I've seen everything (s02e11)

Next, the episode skips over the rest of the wedding ceremony – Carol and Susan are not shown to say 'I do' or kiss. During the wedding reception, Chandler continuously tries to approach a seemingly lesbian woman, telling her to ignore the fact that he is a man and to just see him as a person, but she rejects him.

4.2 *Friends* and Gay men

Friends is not only discriminatory towards lesbians – a similar negative attitude is portrayed towards gay men. Over the course of *Friends*, it is a recurring joke that people think Chandler is gay (Snyder 2021). For example, in season 1 episode 8 Chandler’s coworker tries to set him up on a blind date with a man because she thinks Chandler is gay, by which he is truly perturbed (Fida 2020). Chandler tells the others about the incident, expressing his disgust by saying:

(6) Couldn’t enjoy a cup of noodles after that (s01e08)

Rachel, Monica and Phoebe respond to this by adding that they also thought Chandler was gay when they first met him. The others then agree that Chandler has a certain quality – without elaborating further – that makes people think he is gay. In other words, it is presupposed that he is gay (McConnell-Ginet 2014).

Throughout the episode, Chandler tries to figure out said quality, while the others keep mocking him in this way. At the end of the episode, Chandler talks to his coworker Lowell – the man who another coworker, Shelly, tried to set Chandler up on a date with. He explicitly tells Lowell that he is not gay, to which he answers that he knows, claiming that gay people like him have a certain “radar” that allows them to tell whether a person is gay or not. After Chandler asks him whether he thinks Chandler has a gay quality, Lowell says:

(7) Speaking for my people, I’d have to say no (s01e08)

Being a gay man is also suggested to be a negative attribute in season 9 episode 6 where Rachel and Ross are looking for a nanny for their baby. They encounter Sandy, a male nanny candidate, and Ross is instantly very disturbed about the fact that a man wants to be a nanny as he sees that the job is strictly for women. When Rachel and Ross interview Sandy for the position, Ross asks him if he is gay, to which Sandy answers that he is heterosexual and engaged to a woman. During the interview, Sandy is revealed to be very sensitive and prone to crying when talking about emotional matters. Ross comments this by stating that:

(8) you gotta be at least bi (s09e06)

After the interview, Rachel is extremely pleased with Sandy and wants to hire him, but Ross is very reluctant towards the idea. They hire him anyway, and Sandy proves to be amazing at his job. Despite all of Sandy’s qualifications for the job, Ross thinks that his sensitivity and

aspiration to be a nanny is too weird and ends up firing him. Although Ross's behavior can be seen as a very serious issue, as it is presupposed that men and women have fixed gender roles (McConnell-Ginet 2014), the whole thing is played for laughs.

5 Discussion

While *Friends* could be dismissed as a product of its time, many other series from the same era “were well ahead on LGBTQ+ representation – from Blanche learning to embrace her gay brother on *The Golden Girls* to the groundbreaking same-sex wedding in *Roseanne*” (Lang 2019). *Will and Grace* “helped pave the way for LGBTQ+ acceptance, while *Friends* made queer people into punchlines” (Lang 2019). Research shows that portrayals of gay characters on television may have an effect on heterosexuals’ attitudes toward homosexuals and the various issues they encounter in everyday life (Bond and Compton 2015, 718). This makes the gay jokes in *Friends* a concerning issue due to its popularity especially among young adults, since “they may be highly sensitive to media messages about gay sexualities” during this developmental period (Bond and Compton 2015, 718). This was demonstrated in an experimental study conducted by Levina, Waldo and Fitzgerald (2000). The research participants, all heterosexual, were asked to watch a video that depicted gay people either in a positive or negative way. Seeing positive and negative depictions resulted in having similarly positive or negative views of gay people.

Next, I will take a closer look at the examples provided in the previous section and examine what makes them discriminatory towards LGBTQ+ people. I will start with analyzing the treatment of lesbians in *Friends*, moving on to gay men afterwards.

5.1 The Sexualization and Disrespect of Lesbians

Based on the treatment of lesbian characters in the examples presented, lesbians in *Friends* are diminished and commonly sexualized. Starting with Joey’s comment (1), he implies that he would find pleasure in having a woman’s body while engaging in sexual acts with women. Even while knowing that lesbians are not attracted to men, he refuses to leave them alone from his male gaze and projects his fantasies onto them (Mulvey 1975, 11). This behavior highlights his lack of respect for lesbians and constant sexualization of women, which is played for laughs on many occasions in the show. Joey’s inappropriate comments towards Rachel about her history with Melissa are another example of this: he is not fazed at all about technically harassing his friend, and instead he solely focuses on trying to make his fantasy about the two women come true.

Next, Ross’s attitude towards Carol and Susan’s lesbian relationship is evident in example (2). He does not believe a lesbian marriage to be as valid and normal as a heterosexual

marriage, and thus he has trouble understanding the concept of two wives being married to each other. Surely, he is also upset about the fact that Carol left him for Susan, but his bewilderment toward the whole idea of two women getting married is very heavily displayed in this scene. Despite *Friends* airing a lesbian wedding, its purpose was primarily to highlight how Carol and Susan's relationship made Ross uncomfortable, considering that the wedding ceremony itself was not depicted in the episode (Lang 2019). Moreover, when Carol is brought up in conversation by the main characters, it is not because she and Ross have a shared custody over their child, but because she is the butt of their homophobic jokes (Snyder 2021).

When Carol contemplates canceling the wedding due to disapproval from her parents, a same-sex relationship is once again portrayed in a negative light – instead of letting Carol and Susan's wedding be an event full of love and happiness, the creators of the show decided to include a familial tragedy which almost caused the wedding to be canceled altogether. This is an interesting choice, considering that acceptance, support, and affirmation with one's family have been proven to promote the health of LGBTQ+ youth, whereas rejection within one's family is thought to result in negative health effects (Parker et al. 2018, 384).

At Carol and Susan's wedding, Joey and Chandler's comments (3) and (4) make it seem like they do not see women – or lesbians, in particular – as normal people, and instead through male gaze as objects for their sexual desires (Mulvey 1975, 11). Therefore they cannot enjoy themselves at the wedding since they are not interested in mingling with the other guests in a non-sexual context. It is implied that, for some reason, all the women (excluding the main characters) at the wedding are lesbians, which Joey and Chandler can see instantly. With this setting, *Friends* creates an image that lesbians mostly spend time with other lesbians and that their sexuality defines them so strongly that outsiders can see it just by looking at them. Here, *Friends* segregates lesbians from heterosexuals by making it seem like lesbians only socialize with each other as Joey and Chandler struggle to connect with any of the guests. In addition, Chandler's refusal to accept that lesbians are not attracted to men shows how little respect he has for them – he clearly does not believe that women could turn down a man to be with another woman, that they do not exist for male desire (Mulvey 1975, 11), which is proven by his constant effort to approach the seemingly lesbian woman who rejects him, attempting to change her mind. It is taken for granted “that women need the company of men” (McConnell-Ginet 2014, 327). Chandler's behavior highlights that aside from making sexual advances, he does not see any other reason to interact with the women at the wedding. If he did, he most

likely would not have a problem with a lesbian not being attracted to him and would see the situation as an opportunity to socialize with her platonically.

At the altar, the focus is shifted on the shock factor of a same-sex wedding with Phoebe's exclamation (5). This punchline was seen as problematic in the online article by Fida (2020), stating that since season two of *Friends* happens in the 1990's, it seems impossible that Mrs. Adelman lived to be 82 without ever witnessing or hearing about two women in love and getting married. Therefore, it can be debated whether the joke was believable and suitable for the era of *Friends* or just simply offensive.

With all the constant marveling and skepticism towards their relationship and lesbians in general, it is safe to say that unlike heterosexuals, Carol and Susan did not get to have their wedding in peace. Their wedding was constantly overshadowed by appalled comments and severe family drama, which shifted the focus away from celebrating the love between two people. From the disbelief of Ross to the snarky comments made by wedding guests, it becomes clear just how much Carol and Susan's wedding was either frowned upon or made fun out of. As displayed by cutting out the part where they say their vows and kiss, Carol and Susan are not shown to display affection towards each other in the same way that heterosexual couples do. This is a phenomenon discussed in the article by Bond and Compton (2015, 720), stating that "gay characters are rarely shown engaging in on-screen sexual behaviors that would visibly represent their same-sex attractions".

In addition to their wedding, when Carol and Susan have screen time together during the rest of the show, their mannerisms seem more like that of two friends. Therefore, a trope called "Bury Your Gays" can be used to describe the treatment of Carol and Susan's relationship, defined by Cover and Milne (2023, 811) as "a perceived cultural shortfall in the quality, depth, continuity, or framing of a gender- or sexually-diverse character". The trope addresses how narrowly minority characters are depicted on screen despite including them in a series and highlights that the prevalence of the trope across television series indicates its recognizability (Cover and Milne 2023, 812). The "Bury Your Gays" trope can be applied to Carol and Susan since their relationship is constantly undermined and portrayed as inferior to or less significant than heterosexual relationships.

5.2 The Ridicule and Disparagement of Gay Men

In *Friends*, an underlying derisive attitude can be recognized towards gay men. First of all, they are segregated from heterosexuals by reinforcing the notion that gay people are easy to spot due to their looks or behavior, usually with the assumption that gay men are more feminine than heterosexual men (Blashill and Powlishta 2009, 783). This phenomenon is present in Chandler's obsession to find out what about him makes people think he is gay. When Chandler becomes a laughingstock due to having an alleged 'gay quality', the show suggests that being gay is something to be ashamed of – and people thinking that a heterosexual person is gay is offensive to that person. In other words, it is implied that being homosexual is abnormal, something to avoid, whereas being heterosexual is normal, something to strive for (Canguilhem 1991, 239–240).

Upholding outdated attitudes and stereotypes about gay men in *Friends* is not only limited to heterosexuals, but homosexuals can be caught doing this as well. When Chandler consults Lowell about his situation, Lowell's answer (7) further aligns with the stereotype that gay people are all the same and thus distinguishable from heterosexuals, or the 'odd ones out'. He thinks that since he is gay, all other gay men can be considered "his people", giving him the authority to speak in behalf of all of them. Claiming that gay people have a certain "radar" for recognizing each other, Lowell suggests that being gay is such a significant attribute to a person that it defines them completely, enclosing them in a clear-cut societal category. On the other hand, since Lowell disagreed with Chandler's friends, he also revealed that Chandler's 'gay quality' was only based on a heterosexual trope upheld by his friends. Moreover, Chandler's panic about people thinking that he is gay also highlights how the construction of a non-heterosexual identity in media contexts is often marginalized or presented in a less positive light than heterosexual identities (Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013, 528–529). This can be seen in the mocking attitude that Chandler's friends have towards him being mistaken to be gay in addition to his own panic about the situation.

It is also presupposed, simply taken for granted, that a 'real' man is not gay. When Ross has a hard time understanding that a heterosexual man wants to be a nanny, not only does he talk about sexual minorities in a problematic manner, he also creates an image that working as a nanny is not suitable for (heterosexual) men. By only accepting female nannies, Ross seems to think that the job is strictly for women. His negative stance towards Sandy's personality suggests that in his eyes, being a proper heterosexual man does not include emotional

behavior or working in a 'feminine' profession. Thus, when he concludes that Sandy must be queer in some way, he reveals that a gay or bisexual man is not a real man in the same way a heterosexual man would be. As discussed by Motschenbacher and Stegu (2013, 521), sex, and sexuality are, in part, defined by heteronormativity, whereas a person with a different identity is somehow deviant. According to Avila-Saavedra (2009, 19), mediated constructions of masculinities – such as Sandy's case above – “not only trivialize gay masculinities but also heterosexual masculinities that fail to represent the values associated with 'real' men.” Ross's comment (8) suggests that he would have been more comfortable with hiring Sandy if he was bisexual or gay, but him being both heterosexual and a nanny was too weird for Ross, causing him to go so far as to fire Sandy. In other words, since Sandy's personality did not fit into Ross's perception of a proper, masculine, heterosexual man, Ross became so uncomfortable around him that he could not trust Sandy with his child.

These portrayals of gay identities participate in their reception on a societal level as television reinforces the dominant notions of gender and sexuality (Dhaenens 2014, 521). Considering the immense audience that *Friends* reaches due to its popularity, the impact of its LGBTQ+ representation on people's real life attitudes becomes a clear concern. Dhaenens (2014, 529) addresses the issue in their article, stating that “[by] [u]sing gay men and women as vehicles to consolidate the supremacy of the heterosexual matrix, television has the power to participate in a sociocultural discrimination of people and practices that are excluded based on their non-normative identities”. There is a clear distinction between the treatment of heterosexuals and sexual minorities in *Friends*. During the series, one does not witness a character panicking because people think that they are heterosexual, or a heterosexual couple receiving appalled comments about their relationship. Therefore, it is possible to interpret that in the world of *Friends*, sexual minorities are not equal to heterosexuals.

It also seems that in the series, being a gay man is viewed as worse than being a lesbian woman, probably because it disrupts the male gaze as a man is then seen as the object of sexual desire by other men (Mulvey 1975, 11). This is visible when comparing the reaction towards Chandler's alleged 'gay quality' and Rachel kissing Melissa in college, for example. When Rachel reveals her history with Melissa, she is not ridiculed in the same way as Chandler about possibly being a member of the queer community, and is instead constantly sexualized and fantasized about by Joey. Rachel also does not seem offended about being associated with a lesbian, but is more annoyed about Joey's implications. It is notable that she neither feels the need to prove that she is heterosexual nor obsesses over someone thinking

that she might be queer, whereas Chandler claims to not have been able to even eat after hearing that people thought him to be gay. One can analyze the underlying norms about what is allowed for men and women here: unconventionally heterosexual men are seen as abnormal as there seems to be a strict mold for 'real' men, and the ones who differ from it are thus ridiculed, and since women should be sexually appealing, being a lesbian is more acceptable because it seems to further reinforce their sex appeal by making them the object of men's fantasies. In summary, the male gaze (Mulvey 1975, 11) has a central role here as lesbian identities are only sexualized by men in the selected episodes while women are not shown to partake in similar behavior.

It is important to acknowledge that language is not idle chatter, but about doing things with words (Austin 1962). The problematic jokes about the queer community in *Friends*, or any other series for that matter, cannot be detached from society, and thus get a much more deeper meaning through their real-life effects. Consequently, more attention needs to be paid on the representation of minorities on television, not only because of the negative effects of discriminating representation but also in order to utilize television in promoting equality. Television can be a powerful tool for discrimination, but it can be equally important in subverting harmful heteronormative notions, which makes it a "double-edged sword" (Dhaenens 2014, 521). Furthermore, as long as heteronormativity maintains a hierarchy among people's sexual identities, queer theoretical projects are needed to examine how heteronormativity manages the politics of representation (Dhaenens 2014, 529).

6 Conclusion

After studying how television programs affect the audience's real-life perceptions and analyzing the episodes of *Friends* used in this study, it is clear that the discriminating representation of sexual minorities in the series can be seen as a relevant concern. As research shows that LGBTQ+ representation on television has a real impact on people's attitudes, it is not insignificant how the queer community is portrayed in a massively popular tv-series such as *Friends*. Based on the episodes I have used as examples for the purpose of this study, it is evident that offensive LGBTQ+ representation is a recurrent issue in *Friends*. The episodes I chose for this study varied from one season to another, included different plotlines and were produced during multiple years, and yet the same issue remained. The problematic treatment of the queer community becomes even more highlighted when comparing the series to its contemporaries, which seem to be well ahead of *Friends* in queer representation, especially when taking into account that *Friends* did not get more progressive in later seasons. Overall, it can be stated that the way in which LGBTQ+ individuals are treated in the series is cheap, unfair and hurtful, considering the disrespect, disparagement and erasure of non-straight identities in *Friends*.

When compared to the representation of heterosexuality, it can be easily recognized that queer people are not equal to heterosexuals in the world of *Friends*, but rather stand out in a negative light. Heteronormativity therefore creates a certain hierarchy in the series, dictating that a heterosexual identity is the accepted norm and anything different from it is somehow deviant. Queer individuals are therefore treated differently in *Friends* by not allowing them the same respect, freedom, or peace as heterosexuals, which is manifested through the sexualization of lesbians and ridicule of gay men as well as the segregation of these identities from the heterosexual majority. It seems as though if any character is part of a sexual minority in *Friends*, it must be highlighted in some way, denying the character any sense of belonging or equality and at the same time declaring the non-heterosexual identity as abnormal. This sort of treatment can easily be reflected in real life, where the attitudes towards queer individuals mimic the ones that people are used to witnessing on television, making it a deeper issue of equality worth researching.

In this study, I have presented that the LGBTQ+ representation in the *Friends* situation comedy is discriminatory, which makes it problematic due to its possible effects on people's attitudes in real life. I have supported my thesis by presenting relevant previous research on

the topic and applying it to the episodes of *Friends* that portray such harmful treatment. The results of this study show that the concern about television participating in further discrimination of the queer community is well-founded and that *Friends* is a relevant example of this phenomenon. Considering that previous research proves LGBTQ+ representation in television to have an effect on the audience's perceptions of queer people in real life, and that *Friends* often includes gay jokes that can be deemed offensive, it becomes justified to analyze the series from a critical point of view.

Even though the LGBTQ+ representation in *Friends* cannot be changed, it is important to pay close attention to the issue in order to learn from it. The creators of future television shows, in particular, can learn a great deal of what to do better thanks to the problematic examples in *Friends*. Therefore being mindful about queer representation while watching the series, or any other series for that matter, as well as having open discussion about possible issues should be strongly encouraged. Consequently, much more progressive and inclusive television programs can be made in the future, participating in the promotion of equality in our society as a whole.

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