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More Than Representation Heartstopper: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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MORE THAN REPRESENTATION HEARTSTOPPER: A MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

MORE THAN REPRESENTATION HEARTSTOPPER: A MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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This thesis is a multimodal critical discourse analysis of Netflix's *Heartstopper,* written with the goal of understanding its methods of representation and queer world creation. Through analysis of the ideology of heteronormativity as it relates to masculinity, internalized homophobia, homophobia, and mental health, I expand upon the significance of queer representation for queer audiences, heterosexual audiences, and producers of queer media. Through a nuanced analysis of these themes, I display how and why *Heartstopper* has had enormous success and expand upon the cultural phenomena surrounding this media. Finally, this thesis places these nuanced analyses into the real-world reaction to this media, as seen through Actor Kit Connor's coming out experience.

Key Words: Multimodal critical discourse analysis; Heteronormativity; *Heartstopper*; Masculinity; Internalized Homophobia; Homophobia; and Mental Health.

This thesis is dedicated to Alice Oseman, the creator and illustrator of *Heartstopper*, for creating something that has changed my life. To Ethan, your friendship and never-ending support has meant the world to me.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Heartstopper, a Netflix series produced by SeeSaw Productions, shot to the top of the Netflix's top-ten within two days of its release, garnering over 53,460,000 watch hours (Netflix 2022a; Netflix, 2022b; Netflix, 2022c) for season one and over 55,500,000 watch hours for season two (Netflix, 2023a; Netflix, 2023b; Netflix, 2023c). As mentioned by Kit Connor (Nick Nelson) in an interview with Charlotte Edwardes (2023), the popularity of the show was unexpected. This popularity only seemed to be verified when Netflix green-lit *Heartstopper* for two more seasons less than a month after the release of the first season (Netflix, 2022d). Not only has *Heartstopper* become popular on Netflix, it has also become somewhat of a social phenomena. Fans of *Heartstopper* quickly took to social media, creating a fan base that exists across X (Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, Threads, Wattpad, Archive of Our Own, Tumblr, and YouTube. Through interactions with the cast, fans became obsessed with the story and actors, resulting in millions of posts across platforms about the show and the actors. Not only is *Heartstopper* a fan favorite, but it also frequently appears in popular press articles. These articles range from personal impact statements to general news about the cast.

Heartstopper has had a deep impact on me as a person and as a researcher. I first watched *Heartstopper* in December of 2022. I had no idea this production would have a lasting impact on me. As a partially out of the closet lesbian, I found that the show presented a cast of young queer characters with similar thoughts and experiences to my own. I identify as a white lesbian and use she/her pronouns. Born and raised in Colorado, USA my perspective comes from the United States and lived experiences of the LGBT+ community. I have personal lived experience with coming out, internalized homophobia, overt acts of homophobia, heteronormative relationships

expectations, and struggles with mental health and identity. My perspective allows for authentic and realistic analysis of the effects of heteronormativity as seen in Heartstopper.

Heartstopper quickly became a topic of conversation with my, partially out of the closet, gay male best friend, and then a diving board for us to finally openly discuss our thoughts and experiences on coming out and our struggles with internalized homophobia. As a media scholar, I quickly began thinking and writing about the impacts of this media, even going as far as to convince my professor (to be thesis advisor) to host a viewing of the first two episodes and an open discussion afterward, during a required graduate course. After this class, *Heartstopper* was constantly on my mind. After writing a paper on *Heartstopper*, I knew I still had a lot more to say and to address, and so I began to pursue a discourse analysis of *Heartstopper* for my thesis. Since my first interactions with the show, I have come out to my peers and family, something I once believed I could never do. Through conversation with my LGBT+ identifying friends, I noticed that many of them held similar sentiments and changes in their lives due to this show.

With this in mind, I began exploring the reactions to *Heartstopper*. One that really stuck with me was from Philip "Phil" Lester (2023) a 37-year-old gay male YouTuber (@amazingphil), who has been on the platform since 2006, and came out as gay in 2019:

> *Heartstopper* makes me feel two things. Firstly, it makes me feel a bit sad on the inside, because me growing up would never even imagine holding another boy's hand walking through the school corridors and stuff like that. So, I'm just kind of sad for myself at that age, not having things like this to watch and realize that it could be normal, and everything would be ok. But I'm really happy it's out there on TV now, and so popular and everyone is getting exposed to the fact that queer relationships are normal. It's just a great thing and I'm really happy it exists. (4:51-05:20).

Phil touches on three important sentiments about *Heartstopper*. As reflected in interviews with production staff and cast (British, 2023), adult LGBT+ viewers often feel a little bit of sadness for their younger selves, wishing that this media had existed when they were young (Hits, 2022). However, the *Heartstopper* community/fandom is happy that this media exists for young LGBT+ individuals now. In an interview with British GQ (British, 2023), Kit Connor (Nick Nelson) shares how some fans have used Nick's coming out scene in Season 1 Episode 8, to come out to their own families. In the same interview, Joe Locke (Charlie Spring) shares how "*Heartstopper* has helped lots of younger people in my own school feel more confident in who they are" (British, 2023, 06:52-07:04) . Furthermore, this media displays queer relationships as *normal* for ALL viewers, including the heterosexual viewer with little knowledge of the LGBT+ community. Therefore, this media appears to behave in two ways, as representation for LGBT+ relationships and identities, and as an educational tool for the non-LGBT+ viewers, achieving both of these objectives through means of production, world creation, and representational diversity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since the impacts of this show have been commonly featured and discussed by the cast in interviews and in popular press articles, I will be focusing on the production and textual analysis of this show. This approach will allow me to focus on the following research questions:

1. How does *Heartstopper* as a production operate?
    1. What elements of production are used?
2. What are the methods of world creation that Oseman employs?
    1. Does Oseman use deconstruction, reconstruction, or common tropes to tell this story?

    2. How are these tropes and methods used?
3. Why/How has this show had an impact on the queer community?
    1. What themes are covered?
    2. What kind of representation exists in this show for the queer community?
4. Why/How has this show had an impact on the heteronormative audience?
    1. What themes are covered?
    2. What messages/lessons can be taken from *Heartstopper*?
5. What makes *Heartstopper* unique?
    1. What are the production and textual elements that *Heartstopper* has included?
    2. What lens and worldview is this show created within?
    3. Has *Heartstopper* had negative impacts?

LIMITATIONS

This research was conducted by one researcher, meaning that elements of qualitative analysis may be interpreted differently depending on the reader, however this is a common critique of qualitative research. Further, *Heartstopper* consists of two seasons with a total runtime just over 8 hours, meaning that there are some elements of analysis that may have been missed.

DELIMITATIONS

Ultimately, *Heartstopper* is full of a variety of non-hegemonic examples of queer identities, and in creating this thesis, not every topic could be addressed. This paper focuses mainly on themes of masculinity, internalized homophobia, homophobia, mental health, and social effects. This means that discussions of gender as it refers to feminine identities and trans/non-binary are extremely limited within this thesis. As a researcher, I excluded discussions

mainly as a limiting factor to what I could write in my thesis to provide structure. However, I acknowledge that these conversations need to occur in their own spaces, where the power of the patriarchy and transphobia can be fully addressed, which could be their own thesis in means of content and analysis topics. Race is an important part of the social power structure and interacts with LGBT+ identities in complex ways. This in of itself could be its own thesis, and the racial power structures and racial representation within media, which is an element this show largely ignores.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate these research questions, I employed a variety of methods. My main method comes from the perspective of multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2023). This method originates from the perspective of social semiotics, which includes breaking down the use of language within social contexts to find the ideas, values, and identities used to communicate meaning, while exposing the power held within the text (Machin & Mayr, 2023). This allows me to break down the components of communication that create meaning in both visual and sociolinguistic forms. The aim of this analysis is similar to discourse analysis (generally attributed to Michel Foucault), to find meaning beyond the words in a sentence, by situating language into context (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Further, the multimodal aspect of this approach allows for the analysis and discussion of visual, audio, and production elements (Machin & Mayr, 2023). As outlined by Machin & Mayr (2023), multimodal discourse analysis allows for a variety of approaches to analysis due to the complexity of media in the modern age, which has allowed me to personalize methods to be tailored for *Heartstopper*.

In pursuing this method, I conducted different levels of analysis. The first level of analysis that I conducted was a close reading of *Heartstopper*. I began with a general watch of

the series, noting moments and production elements that stood out to me. Next, I went looking for transcripts of the episodes to help with textual and thematic analysis. Unfortunately, these transcripts were not in the correct formatting that I needed for this use. So, I manually formatted the transcripts, which resulted in a line-by-line close reading of the entire series. While I thought this formatting would be a waste of time, the in-depth interaction with the script became invaluable to my thematic analysis. While reformatting the transcripts, I looked for broad themes that *Heartstopper* covers as they relate to heteronormativity. I came up with a list of representational themes that included queer love, mental illness, coming out, bullying, queer joy, homophobia/queerphobia, internalized homophobia, hegemonic masculinity, idealized femininity, trans identities, lesbian identities, gay identities, the ace spectrum (asexual/aromantic), friendship, LGBT+ in sports, forced outings, eating disorders, identity, and self-discovery. At this point I knew that I could not realistically write about all of the themes I had identified. So, I identified two major running themes in the show, which I broadly identified as masculinity and experiences of homophobia. These two themes naturally paired with internalized homophobia and mental health, respectively, through established academic research, so these themes were also included.

After identifying these themes, I conducted another close watch and reading of the series. This watch and reading required coding *Heartstopper*, which was accomplished by hand coding and writing all visual and audio into the preexisting transcripts. This watch of the series allowed me to identify any production and visual elements that fell within these themes. The close reading of the series allowed me to directly pull excerpts from the show for textual analysis. I then paired these excerpts with academic work to best analyze the discourse of heteronormativity and social semiotics used in *Heartstopper*. In culmination, these methods seek to analyze

representational methods, as well as queer world creation methods employed in *Heartstopper*, with the hopes of generating an understanding of how and why this media has had such a broad impact and become a cultural phenomenon.

DEFINING SPECIAL TERMS

Within this paper there are a few special terms that should be defined to facilitate the most accurate analysis and discussion on *Heartstopper*. Throughout this thesis I refer to *Heartstopper* by name, as well as a text, media, and production. Within this thesis I use the term 'queer' as a reclamation of the term to the LGBT+ community, acting as an interchangeable term for the LGBT+ acronym. This paper also includes the term subversion, of which I am using the second definition outlined by the Oxford Dictionary, "subversion (of something) an act of changing something to its opposite, especially when this challenges fixed ideas or expectations" (n.d.). (See more about the use of subversion in Chambers, 2007). These subversions are often in reference to social norms and relational scripts. Social norms refer to the unwritten social rules and expectations for behavior within a society, often created by the shared values, beliefs, and attitudes of a group of people, and function as a guideline and expectation for behavior. Lastly, relational scripts specifically refer to the expectations around dating and intimate relationships as constructed through ideological social norms like monogamy, marriage, and heteronormativity. In referring to specific episodes, I use a Season and Episode abbreviation, for example Season 1 Episode 6 "Girls" is notated as S1:E6.

FRAMEWORKS

To best analyze *Heartstopper* and answer my research questions, I will begin with looking at queer representation and media to contextualize *Heartstopper* with other forms of queer media. I will then turn to the common LGBT+ tropes that have been displayed in TV.

Next, I will look at queer world creation and the methods in which queer media acts as a subversion. Lastly, to explain the varying effects of media and engagement, I will discuss media theory.

Representation, according to Stuart Hall (1997), is the "process by which members of a culture use language… to produce meaning" (p. 61). Hall (1997) expands upon this understanding of representation from a constructivist approach (learners construct knowledge, rather than passively taking it in), to detail how, "it is us – in society within human, cultures – who make things mean, who signify" (p. 61). Further Hall (1997) acknowledges that representation varies by culture, and therefore one important aspect of representation is acceptance of cultural relativism and acknowledgement of the need to translate across cultures. Using the analogy of an artist and a landscape, Hall (1997) describes representation as the intentional choice to include or exclude a part of the scenery, the constructed meaning of the painting, and the spectator who must interpret the two. As Michael Johnson Jr. (2013) expands upon representation as it applies to LGBT+ communitiesand media representation describing how:

> Television functions as a mechanism that provides regular confirmation and reassurance that sexual (and racial) minorities not only exist, but also possess commonly shared bonds of affinity developed through the operation of social stigmatization and marginalization. Extensive communication research makes clear that media can also shape an individual's concept of themselves in relation to others while also shaping one's perceptions of cultural values and norms by which television characters may serve as proxy. (p. 236)

To understand how television as an industry has played a key role in the lack of LGBT+ representation, a description of the Production Code Era is needed. As detailed by Chon Noriega (1990), the Production Code Era, 1934-1968, describes a time in media history where the depictions of LGBT+ identities and relationships were infrequent and highly contested. This lack of representation is not due to a lack of trying as Noriega (1990) details and describes through a series of films, but rather this lack of representation was due to The Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, was a guideline for the self-censorship of what was considered 'appropriate' to broadcast.

The Hays Code is a set of guidelines for the self-censorship of television and film media, as this code was to assist production companies in the creation of self-policed media, to minimize and avoid outside censorship. The Hays Code states, "this art [referring to motion pictures] appeals at once to every class," as a justification for the need for motion picture censorship. However, the code outlines relatively modest and conservative values, meaning that even though this art may appeal to all, it may not display all. Particularly, LGBT+ media at the time was censored because, "any inference of sex perversion," was prohibited (Noriega, 1990).

This results in a lack of LGBT+ representation and the creation of the practice of queerbaiting. As researched by Noriega (1990), queer media was still created during this period, but was often censored, and, in some cases, destroyed. This created the media practice of queerbaiting as a form of acceptable LGBT+ representation. Queerbaiting as defined by the Oxford dictionary is, "the incorporation of apparently gay characters or same-sex relationships into a film, television show, etc. as a means of appealing to gay and bisexual audiences while maintaining ambiguity about the characters' sexuality," and, "harassment, abuse, or target provocation of gay people" (Oxford, 2023). Although the Hays Code was abolished after an

influx of overseas media and a massive influx of TV media, the practice of queerbaiting still exists today. As researched by Woods & Hardman (2022) queerbaiting is mainly employed by media industries in an attempt to broaden viewership to the LGBT+ community. In modern days common media examples of queerbaiting within TV are John and Sherlock (*Sherlock),* Crowley and Aziraphale (*Good Omens),* Dean and Castiel (*Supernatural)*, and Dumbledore and Grindelwald (*Fantastic Beasts)*. The fandom use of the term queerbaiting is also researched by Joseph Brennan (2019) who explains how fandoms have adopted this term and the varying uses of the term.

After the abolishment of the Hays Code queer characters began to appear on screen. As researched by Ron Becker (2006) generally queer characters did not commonly appear on television until the 1990s. The first queer characters to appear on TV were often side characters who had no opportunity for character growth (Becker, 2006). As time approaches the 2000s, queer characters were more commonplace; however, queer characters often assimilated to heteronormative relational scripts (Becker, 2006). Becker expands on how queer relationships and identities were portrayed on TV. Through an analysis of 85 TV episodes, Becker (2006) came up with three general ways in which queer characters and plot lines were portrayed in relation to heterosexual characters, arguing that TV mediated the gay panic of heterosexuals in the 1990s and early 2000s. These portrayals are described as the helpful-heterosexual, the hip heterosexual, and the heterosexual-homosexual (Becker, 2006). The helpful-heterosexual outlines a common trope where heterosexual character helps a homosexual character, acting as a method to place the heterosexual at the center of the narrative by making them a hero (Becker, 2006). The hip heterosexual describes a trope in which a heterosexual character is more attuned to LGBT+ culture and helps a homosexual character embrace or accept their homosexuality and

LGBT+ culture (Becker, 2006). Once again this places the heterosexual character at the center of LGBT+ culture. Lastly, the homosexual-heterosexual, the most common trope, describes a heterosexual character who has been assumed to be LGBT+ and must prove their heterosexuality while evading homophobia (Becker, 2006). The homosexual-heterosexual trope reverses heteronormativity by making a heterosexual character prove their heterosexuality in the face of speculation about their identity. This places heterosexual characters into a homonormative environment, but ultimately focuses on the heterosexual experience (Becker, 2006).

As more time passed, queer characters began to become season regulars with opportunities for character development; however, as Jay Poole (2014) reports most queer characters did not have the opportunity for romantic on-screen relationships. As queer character opportunities developed, so did the perspective of queer world making, acting to critique heteronormative codes and script methods as instances of queer resistance.

According to Frederik Dhaenens (2014), there are two main methods of queer resistance on screen: queer deconstruction and queer reconstruction. As Dhaenens (2014) defines and details, queer deconstruction is based on ideas of deconstructionism as presented by Derrida (1997) as a means to, “expose, question, and subvert the discursive mechanisms of heteronormativity,” (Dhaenens, 2014, p. 522). Queer deconstruction typically has three strategies of exposing heteronormativity: exposure, contradiction, and parody (Dhaenens, 2014). The method of exposure displays how heteronormativity operates by demonstrating the friction, instabilities, and incoherencies of heteronormativity (Dhaenens, 2014). As a representational method, exposure makes explicit how assumed metrics of identity - gender and sexuality - are socially constructed to preserve the authority of the heterosexual power matrix; while, harming and denying access to those outside the matrix (Dhaenens, 2014). The method of contradiction

inserts queer identities into heteronormative spaces, allowing for the queer character, or story, to function as a contradiction to the heteronormative space (Dhaenens, 2014). This allows for the questioning and reframing of the assumed universality of identity categories, or of certain heteronormative standards and values. Lastly the method of parody is often used to display how current representations are derived from past representations (Dhaenens, 2014). Consequently, parodies are both contributing to and critiquing the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity (Dhaenens, 2014).

However, deconstruction comes with many critiques, with the main criticism being that it exposes heteronormative power, with no obligation to fix it (Dhaenens, 2014). This is part of the reason early queer TV characters did not have room for character development or romantic relationships. The existence of a queer character still exposes heteronormativity, but the mere presence of a queer character does not negate the heteronormative bias that exists within TV and society (Dhaenens, 2014; Becker, 2006; Poole, 2014).

Queer reconstruction, however, refers to a method of worldmaking that does not begin with a heteronormative understanding of society (Dhaenens, 2014). Rather, it seeks to create a world that exists outside of 'normality.' This allows for heteronormative biases to be exposed without highlighting heteronormative behavior, thereby creating an opportunity to see the world from a different perspective (Dhaenens, 2014). The two main methods of this approach focus on the creation of intelligible representations of queer identities, relationships, and desires, as well as the display of queer institutions as more viable or preferable over heteronormative institutions of norms (Dhaenens, 2014), creating narratives in which queer identities and relationships are not treated as an issue, inferior, or a spectacle, rather displaying them as normal, equal, and typical. The latter refers to subversions of the heterosexual institutions and norms, like the

concepts of marriage, home, family and the norms of monogamy, stability, and longevity, which can be subversively articulated through the screen (Dhaenens, 2014). However, a common critique of these methods is that it creates unrealistic expectations or inauthentic examples of queerness (Dhaenens, 2014). This importantly nods towards a trend of more realistic or 'authentic' representation specifically within queer media. This shift is both beneficial and detrimental to the genre. More authentic representation allows for the reconstruction of heteronormative assumptions. But 'authenticity' can be a subjective and broad term that may not apply to the entirety of the spectrum and may bring assumptions about identity into play.

To understand how these frameworks apply to a show like *Heartstopper*, I will now turn to media theory. There are a couple of approaches that can be taken when conceptualizing media and the effects of media. A common theory used to describe media effects is the hypodermic needle theory (commonly attributed to Harold Lasswell 1927), also referred to as the magic bullet theory. This theory posits that media has a direct and immediate effect on the audience through the injection of content wholly and uniformly through audiences. However, this theory assumes the audience to be entirely passive and uniform while consuming media, oversimplifying the mass communication process. For these reasons, I will be focusing on theory where audiences take an active role in the media consumption process, in order to more accurately reflect the way in which audiences engage with modern day media. I will do this by addressing the reinforcing spiral theory to describe how viewers select media, social cognitive theory to address how mass media can encourage observational learning and subsequent changes in belief or behavior, and the differential susceptibility model to expand upon our understanding of how media affects each person differently.

As theorized by Michael Slater (2007), the reinforcing spirals theory describes the role of communication in forming, reinforcing and sustaining attitudes and social identities in the face of competing perspectives. Proposing that people tend to select communication sources and content that reinforces their beliefs and social identity, Slater (2007; 2015; 2020) posits that such beliefs and behaviors can be reinforced by such communication selectivity. Acting as both an outcome and a variable to media use, "the influence of exposure to particular types of media content, will influence subsequent strength and accessibility of social group identification, attitude, and behavior over time" (Slater, 2015, p. 2). This means that some media users fall into a reinforcing spiral of content (commonly displayed in conspiracy theory groups online) or as a variable of addressing dynamic media effects.

The second framework, social cognitive theory, is important to understanding heteronormativity and *Heartstopper*, as it considers the media aspect of this research. This theory refers to both a media studies practice, as well as a media effects field of study. The former refers to the use of social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework applied to media representation, while the latter examines the attitudinal or behavioral change related to media consumption. The basis of social cognitive theory begins with psychologist Albert Bandura (1977) and his development of social learning theory, which would later become social cognitive theory. Social learning theory posits that behavior can be learned from observation, commonly called observational learning and modeling behavior (Bandura, 1977). However, when Bandura noted that not all behavior observed was imitated, this realization led him to incorporate cognitive processes into the model, creating social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). To learn behavior there are four sequential steps that must occur: (1) attention to model and model's behavior, (2) retention of modeled behavior, (3) motoric reproduction, translating observed behavior into

motoric action in memory, and (4) motivation, which includes personal experience, and the reinforcement that a person receives directly or vicariously (Bandura, 1977). This theory articulates how individuals learn, or react, over time by observation of stimulus in direct environment or in the media, and attempts to explain how and why the media influences us.

A more recent understanding of media effects was developed by Patti Valkenburg and Jochen Peter (2013), to gain a better understanding on "(a) why some individuals are more highly susceptible to media effects than others, (b) how and why media influence[s] those individuals, and (c) how media effects can be enhanced or counteracted" (p. 221). The Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM) deploys previous explanations for media effects like Social Cognitive Theory, The Limited Capacity Model, and the Reinforcing Spirals Model (see more theories on Valkenburg & Peter, 2013, p. 222). The DSMM "consists of an integrated set of four related propositions that set forth the relations between the media and non-media variables that have been proposed in earlier media-effects theories" (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013, p.226).

The four propositions of the DSMM, as detailed in Valkenburg & Peter (2013) are: (1) Media effects are conditional, meaning that the characteristics of the audience are a determining factor in whether and how media has an impact (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). This includes factors like gender, personality, attitude, temperament, motivations, cognitive development, emotional development, social development, and the social-context factors in the micro, meso, and macro levels (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). (2) Media effects are indirect, due to the variables of audience attention and retention (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Within this proposition, considering the psychological and physiological processes that occur during media consumption as a mediator between media use and effects. (3) Differential susceptibility factors have multiple

roles; implying that variables (given in proposition one) also moderate the effects of media use on the response states (given in proposition two)(Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). (4) Media effects are transactional between media use, response states, and differential susceptibility variables (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Proposing that media effects can influence development, identity, and social context when they incorporate media content into their selves (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), the DSMM builds upon the idea that media effects are dependent on and influence developmental, dispositional, and social factors (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Expanding upon our understanding on why and how media effects vary person to person.

ORGANIZATION OF STUDY

Using this research and methodology allows me to analyze and expand understanding on queer media, the impact of queer media, and the creation of queer media. In order to accomplish this I have organized this thesis as follows: this chapter introduces the media text, *Heartstopper*, as well as the motivation for the study, the frameworks that guide this research, the resulting research questions and topics, the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of the study. This chapter also covers and outlines the methodologies and general outline of my argument.

Chapter one introduces the current literature about heteronormativity and places *Heartstopper* in conversation with subversions of heteronormativity though the means of world creation methods and production. This chapter examines the first season of *Heartstopper* as a deconstruction of heteronormativity with some reconstruction elements and places the second season as a reconstruction of heteronormativity with some instances of deconstruction. This chapter provides as a thematic analysis of the production and world creation of *Heartstopper*.

Chapter two places *Heartstopper* in conversation with literature surrounding masculinity and internalized homophobia, using case examples to display this interaction. Chapter three

situates the impact of *Heartstopper* by focusing on the interactions of heteronormativity with homophobia, mental health, and social effects. Bringing the importance of nonhegemonic media portrayals to the forefront of change by assessing the effects of homophobia and heteronormativity on mental health and social interactions.

Chapter four offers a summary of the media analysis conducted throughout chapters two, three, and four, situating them in conversation with the coming out experience of a star of the show to display how the *Heartstopper* ethos was ignored by some members of the fandom and ultimately caused damage to a cast member. Finally, I conclude with how queer media should proceed following the release of *Heartstopper*.

CHAPTER II

HETERONORMATIVITY & HEARTSTOPPER AS A PRODUCTION

Heartstopper functions as a means to deconstruct and reconstruct the heteronormative power structure. To understand how *Heartstopper* is able to accomplish this, we need to first understand the power structures in which *Heartstopper* has to operate and overcome in world creation by reviewing the literature on heteronormativity. After establishing the show's contexts, I will introduce *Heartstopper*'s main ensemble and themes in season one and two, establishing the deconstructive and reconstructive elements of each season.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As defined by the Oxford dictionary, heteronormativity is "the assumption that normal and natural expression of sexuality in society are heterosexual in nature. A heteronormative society is constructed morally, socially, and legally to position other forms of sexuality as deviant and to discriminate against non-heterosexuals" (Oxford, 2023). A lasting ideological position enforced by the state and church made homosexuality illegal in many countries, although recently homosexuality has become decriminalized in some western states (Oxford, 2023). Heteronormativity has a pervasive history that has been tracked through the field of psychology by Kevin White (2004) and Dennis Manning & Chu Kim-Prieto (2017). Beginning in the 18th century, psychologists described homosexuality as, "deviations from 'normal' sexuality" (Manning & Kim-Prieto, 2017, p. 838), thereby situating heterosexuality as 'normal' and homosexuality as abnormal (White, 2004). In the 19th century this idea evolved into the belief that homosexuality was, "pathological in nature," as Manning & Kim-Prieto state, "Akin to insanity, homosexuality was considered to be a mark of a deeply disturbed individual" (2017,

p.838). These ideas inspired Sigmund Freud in the 20th century to research the cause, prevention, and cure of homosexuality (Manning & Kim-Prieto, 2017).

Freud's published research findings included the idea that homosexual people are sexually and psychologically immature, and that homosexuality is a result of choice conditioned by family relationships (White, 2004). This positions the heterosexual as mature and *not* a result of conditioning, but of regular sexual maturation. This gives power to the heterosexual and using the word 'immature' positions the homosexual as 'less than'. The touch of this bias still exists in research today. As explained by Manning and Kim-Prieto (2017), there are five *current* assumptions of heteronormativity in research: (1) assumption of heterosexuality, (2) assumption of identical psychological processes, (3) focus on the disease model of homosexuality, (4) participant recruitment as a potential source of bias, and (5) measurement validity as a source of potential bias. Although bias has lessened throughout research, it is important to note that bias can misapply theory, ignore confounding variables, and negatively impact validity. This means that historically these biases have skewed nearly every piece of research surrounding the Queer community since the publication of Freud's findings and the social-cultural contexts it supports. This bias has touched even the most neutral of fields. As researched by Megan Parise (2021) heteronormative bias is found in mathematics textbooks. Parise (2021) describes how mathematical questions around relationships or couples, did not explicitly mention heterosexuality, but it was oftentimes an assumption that students needed to correctly make in order to solve the problem. Considering that mathematics is considered to be a neutral practice immune to outside influence, Parise (2021) proves that heteronormativity exists even within the most 'neutral' of discipline, making heteronormativity extremely pervasive within the fields of education and research.

Now that some of the historical contexts, pervasiveness, and influences of heteronormativity have been addressed, it is important to establish the functional definitions and understandings of heteronormativity for this thesis. The definitions and distinctions I will be using for the differing functions and prejudices created by heteronormativity have been collated, researched, and established by Joseph Marchia and Jamie Sommer (2019). These nuanced branches of heteronormativity allow for the most conducive approach to analyzing representation within *Heartstopper*. To create these branches of heteronormativity, Marcia and Sommer (2019) collected and analyzed queer academic theory looking for themes, approaches, and explanations for heteronormativity. This research produced four branches of heteronormativity; heterosexist-heteronormativity, gendered-heteronormativity, hegemonic heteronormativity, and cisnormative-heteronormativity (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). These branches appear to build on top of each other, with each branch pointing to a specific kind of prejudice that is produced through heteronormativity.

Beginning with heterosexist-heteronormativity, this framework mainly stems from the research of Michel Foucault (1978), Michael Warner (1991) and Irving Seidman(1991) (as detailed in Marchia & Sommer, 2019). This perspective of heteronormativity comes from the belief of heterosexism, the belief that heterosexuality is in its nature natural, good, or superior. This works to outline social codes amongst sexuality; as described by Marchia and Sommer, "sexualities other than heterosexuality are rendered invisible, assumed deviant, and denied" (2019, p. 283), therefore validating the heterosexual experience and consequently making the homosexual experience subservient (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). However, sexual orientation does not live alone in social contexts. Sexuality is often socially tied to biological sex and patriarchal gender norms.

Gendered-heteronormativity describes how heteronormativity, idealized femininity, and hegemonic masculinity work together, and was created out of the research by Adrienne Rich (1980), who studied the connection between the lesbian identity and societal beliefs about women's 'innate' attraction to men. Rich (1980) claimed that heterosexuality has been *prescribed* to women through the norms of the patriarchy. While men are not held to such strict expectations of heterosexuality, men still experience assumptions about their sexuality based on perceived gender presentation (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' describes how this cultural norm prescribes heterosexuality to all women, and only to traditionally masculine presenting men (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). This creates a unique dynamic in terms of how lesbianism is viewed in comparison to male gay identities.

Going one step further, hegemonic-heteronormativity explains the intersection of enactments of hegemonic masculinity, idealized femininity, and heteronormative expectations of sexuality and subsequent relational scripts (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Built mainly from research of Judith Butler's (1990) concept of presumptive heterosexuality, this framework clarifies that "dominant culture renders certain gender expressions as deviant" (Marchia & Sommer, 2019, p.271). For example, men are expected to enact hegemonic masculinity, which is often described with terms of control, discipline, and power (Haywood et al., 2017). Hegemonic masculinity reinforces heteronormativity relational scripts by creating boundaries for intimacy between men and women; further, it creates boundaries between men and other men (Marchia & Sommer, 2019; Haywood et al., 2017), and creates rules for interactions between men and women, and men and other men. As Chris Haywood et al., (2017) expand, these boundaries limit the relationship that heterosexual men and women can have (expectation to be more than platonic) and limits the platonic relationship between men and other men by

stigmatizing same sex platonic touch as ‘gay’. By conducting an ethnographic study of four high school men, Michael Kehler (2007) expands upon the limitations of friendships between males. The participants explain feeling pressure to justify and defend their masculinity, which manifested through homophobia and avoiding any kind of ‘femininity’ as a way to fulfill ‘the need to be normal’ to be accepted by peers (Kehler, 2007). This allows for femininity to be weaponized against the queer community, as well as creating limitations on gender expression and romantic relationships. This also creates heteronormative relational codes: asserting that men and women cannot be ‘just friends,’ platonic touch between two males is inherently sexual, and the touch between two women as inherently platonic.

Lastly, cisnormative-heteronormativity brings into light the full *spectrum* of the LGBT+ community. Within this branch the assumption of cisgendered identity, a gender identity that aligns with sex assigned at birth, expands our understanding of heteronormativity, by also acknowledging the assumption that gender identity and sex assigned at birth are *always* the same (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Here sexuality and gender are explained as a spectrum, rather than neat and tidy boxes, which acknowledges ambiguous and fluid identities that are often invalidated by the binary assumptions of heteronormativity (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Further, this includes erasure of polysexual identities (attraction to multiple genders), because the monosexual identity (attraction to one gender) is validated within heteronormativity (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Here we also see the important differentiation of gender and sexual identity as two *distinct* entities that are socially associated with each other (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). This adds more clarity to the understanding of sexuality and the enactment of gender (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). This is the most comprehensive understanding of heteronormativity (Marchia & Sommer, 2019).

I would like to take this moment to expand upon the understanding of heteronormative relational scripts by explicitly laying out how the relational script is written through these frameworks. This creates a relational script that reads: a cisgendered-heterosexual male and a cisgender-heterosexual female are married, with biological children reared by the female, which exists in a larger patriarchal society, where men typically have power over women. Everything that falls outside of this script is considered socially subservient, rendered invisible, or labeled as 'deviant.' These pervasive relational scripts and codes that are developed out of heteronormativity as a whole; however, the expectation that this script is followed has begun to lessen over time. However, the bias is not erased—it now simply exists in different, less obvious, but still damaging forms (this includes, but is not limited to microaggressions, feelings of shame, or pity)

HEARTSTOPPER'S METHODS OF WORLD CREATION

Now that a complex understanding of heteronormativity has been established, I can discuss how *Heartstopper* acts as both a deconstruction and reconstruction of heteronormativity by describing the creation of *Heartstopper* and the technical production elements that went into the creation of the show. *Heartstopper* is a television adaption of the Graphic Novel series "Heartstopper," written and illustrated by Alice Oseman, produced by Netflix, in partnership with SeeSaw Productions (Still, 2022). The story of "Heartstopper" was initially published as a webcomic before being picked up for a publication deal. As detailed by Das & Farber (2020), online media spaces can create a space for "novel ways of self-presentation that offer an alternative account about queer life, and one which defies established boundaries of gender and sexuality" (p. 4). The creation of this story happened in an online environment where Oseman felt comfortable showing alternatives to normative relationships. Oseman uses methods of both

deconstruction and reconstruction, presenting alternative relationships, which defies the established boundaries of heteronormativity.

To facilitate a conversation on this media, I pause here to introduce the main ensemble, as well as two key side characters. These introductions are based on the content in both seasons one and two, and the following characters can be attributed to Alice Oseman (2022; 2023). The main relationship in this show occurs between Charlie Spring, a white gay male who was outed at school and experienced bullying, and Nick Nelson, a white male, who comes to terms with his bisexuality through his relationship with Charlie and his coming out process. Tao Xu is an Asian heterosexual male, and Charlie's best friend, whom he fiercely defends and attempts to protect from homophobia. Elle Argent is a black trans woman, who transfers from Truham (an all-boys grammar school), to the all-girls school HIGGS, following her transition. Throughout season one and two, Tao and Elle begin to explore their feelings for one another and develop a romantic relationship. Tara Jones is a black lesbian who navigates coming out publicly with her girlfriend Darcy Olsson. Tara experiences homophobic comments about her sexual identity and acts as a support person through Nick's identity navigation and coming out. Darcy Olsson is a white lesbian, in a relationship with Tara Jones, who appears to have unending confidence in her sexuality, but in reality she experiences a hostile and homophobic home life that causes her to struggle with feelings of internalized homophobia. Isaac Henderson, a white aromantic and asexual male, and part of Charlie's friend group, discovers his identity through an attempted relationship with gay classmate James in season two. Imogen Heaney is a white female and is Nick's childhood friend, who is framed as presumably straight through the majority of season one and two because of her crush on Nick and relationship with Ben Hope. However her sexual

identity is left ambiguous at the end of season two because of her interactions with classmate Sahar.

Lastly, there are two characters that fall outside of the main ensemble, Ben Hope and Harry Greene. Ben Hope is a white closeted presumably bisexual male, who was in a secret relationship with Charlie at the beginning of season one and initiates a relationship with Imogen in season two. Ben Hope deals with internalized homophobia and acts as a perpetrator of intimate partner violence in his relationship with Charlie through a non-consensual kiss and instances of emotional manipulation. Finally, Harry Greene is a straight white male who fulfills the character trope of the school bully who has bullied Charlie and Elle, and commonly reiterates homophobic rhetoric.

This show is incredibly inclusive; however it must be noted that the main characters are two white men. While both Nick and Charlie are queer characters, and the inclusion of Nick Nelson's bisexuality and hegemonic presentation of masculinity subverts the bias against polysexual identities (attraction to multiple genders: bisexuality, pansexuality, etc.) and the assumption of traditional masculinity as being synonymous with heterosexuality, it is important to note that representation of queer characters are most frequently gay white men. Within the inclusivity of the show, there is a variety of queer experiences that are displayed, as seen with Tara and Darcy's, Elle and Tao's, and Isaac's relationships (or, in the latter case, lack thereof). While these other relationships may be seen as accessory to Nick and Charlie, they contribute to the reconstructive nature of this show and decenter their comparatively normative experiences.

The base story of "Heartstopper" was adapted from a graphic novel into a television show (Still, 2022). In the case of this adaptation, a majority of the plot and storylines have been kept the same, with many identical scenes from the graphic novel appearing in the television show

(Still, 2022). While the graphic novel mainly features the relationship between Charlie Spring and Nick Nelson, the show offers more ensemble storylines, while maintaining the whimsy of the graphic novel. This shift from one broad romance story to multiple, as described by Oseman herself, was a needed shift for the adaptation to screen in terms of narrative storytelling and length of content needed to create a TV show in comparison to the shorter graphic novels (Still, 2022). This is not the only shift that *Heartstopper* has made in its adaptation process. A key difference between the mediums is the perspective of the story. In the graphic novels, the story is told mainly from Charlie's perspective, however, the show centers Nick's journey and experiences much more. I posit this shift as an important narrative piece that allows Oseman to deconstruct the nature of heteronormativity in season one and reconstruct homosexual relationships as intelligible in season two.

Shifting to center Nick's perspective allows Oseman to write from the perspective of identity exploration and coming out experience, which situates Nick at the beginning of the series as behaving similar to Becker's (2006) trope of the helpful heterosexual, using this common trope as the starting point for this narrative. Nick is positioned as the helpful heterosexual in season one episode one, where he intervenes and stops Ben from nonconsensually kissing Charlie. In opposition to this trope, Nick begins a journey of questioning and identity exploration due to his developing friendship and later feelings for Charlie, rather than as a point to secure his heterosexuality due to his friendship with Charlie. This creates the opportunity for Oseman to deconstruct heteronormative standards that Nick has applied to himself and others have applied to Nick.

This is not the only trope that Oseman employs to deconstruct heteronormativity. Through Nicks' perceived heterosexuality, Oseman plays on the common 'the homosexual

heterosexual' trope as defined by Becker (2006). Rather than needing to prove Nick's heterosexuality due to speculation about his gayness, Oseman positions Nick as needing to prove his queerness due to assumptions about his innate heterosexuality. This strategy creates a narrative perspective that is more approachable for the heterosexual audience members by beginning deconstruction with familiar TV tropes about gay characters. Further, positioning Nick's story at the center of the TV adaptation allows Oseman to deconstruct heteronormativity through Nick in season one, to the point that at the end of the season, the initial tropes have been long forgotten and reconstructed into a queer narrative, journey of identity, and relationship. This is beyond the scope of what Becker (2006) had even begun to theorize on the future of queer media. While Oseman does not employ these queer tropes for long before deconstructing them, the inclusion of these tropes nods to a long history of queer representation and expectations of queer characters. These tropes create a jumping point for the heterosexual viewer to be able to place and understand queer relationships, while also serving to represent queer characters and subvert heteronormative expectations in an intelligible way for both the queer and heterosexual audience members.

By displaying a variety of queer relationships, Oseman is able to deconstruct heterosexist beliefs about the existence of queer relationships through the method of exposure and contradiction. The existence of queer characters, relationships, and experiences throughout the show exposes the assumed metrics of socially constructed aspects of identity of sexuality and gender. This exposure is seen throughout both seasons but is especially pertinent in season one through Nick's sexuality exploration, and Nick's coming out experiences in season two. By situating these narratives within a heteronormative society, Oseman also employs the method of contradiction. The coming out experiences of Tara (in season one) and Nick (in season two)

situates these characters into heteronormative spaces, like same-sex schooling, but Tara and Nick act as contradictions to heteronormative expectations. This is seen through the assumptions and comments made about these characters and their relationships by peers, both in person and digitally (comments on Instagram posts).

Throughout season two, more queer relationships and discovery emerges, allowing for Oseman to continuously display queer relationships and experiences and framing queerness as everywhere. This tactic helps to deconstruct assumptions about the presence of queerness, but more importantly reconstructs heteronormativity. This reconstruction occurs through the presence of a wide variety of identities and generations, as well as the progression of the main relationship of Nick and Charlie. At the end of season one, Nick expresses that his relationship with Charlie has improved his life (Oseman, 2022, S1E8). Through season two, the audience gets to experience these improvements and expressions of happiness with Nick and his relationship with Charlie (Oseman, 2023). This helps to build queer relationships as intelligible with the heterosexual audience, who may not have ever witnessed a queer relationship. This is also seen as Nick begins to come out and his relationships with his new group of friends improves and so does his satisfaction with life. This is displayed through Nick coming out to his family and by witnessing how much Charlie means to him at the end of season two (Oseman, 2023, S2E7-8). While both seasons of the show use tactics of deconstruction and reconstruction, season one acts as mainly a deconstruction of the assumptions of heteronormativity, while season two works to establish these queer identities and relationships as intelligible. Season one introduces queer characters within heteronormative societal spaces and encourages the audience members to question the assumptions and power structures within our own society, while season two builds

on that momentum by portraying these relationships and identities as easily understandable and comprehensible.

PRODUCTION

This is momentum accomplished through the narrative screenwriting of *Heartstopper*, but importantly through the production of *Heartstopper*, which also situates the creation and development of *Heartstopper* as a reconstruction of heteronormative production practices. One major ethic of the production of *Heartstopper* is authenticity. In an interview with Tara Bitran, executive producer Patrick Walters explains how and why authenticity was at the core of the creation of this media (Bitran, 2022). Walters states, "casting Heartstopper authentically was the absolute priority. It's the only way we could have ever done it. The spirit of the piece is all about making people who don't feel seen, seen," which extends to the creative staff as well. Within the same article, Eros Lyn, series director, describes why queer creatives (for example, makeup and hair artists, photographers, designers, etc) are important to the creation of *Heartstopper*, stating "they could bring their experiences and identify the bits of the story that can only be from an LGBTQ perspective" **(**Bitran, 2022). Centering authenticity of the queer experience across all elements of production. This signals a shift in approaches to creating queer media and a cultural shift towards more authentic forms of representation.

The reconstructive nature of the production also follows through to the technical elements of creating the show including pre-production, cinematography, production design, sound design, editing, visual effects (animation in this case), and post-production. Further, the cast, crew, and creative team working on *Heartstopper* were made up of almost entirely queer identifying creatives (James, 2022). This includes roughly half of the soundtrack of the series, which features queer artists like girl in red, Baby Queen, and beebadoobee (James, 2022). In a virtual

interview with The National Film & Television School (NFTS), director Euros Lyn and cinematographer Diana Olifirova explain some of the technical aspects of the show that help in reconstructing the subversion of heteronormativity (Winnan, 2022). As Olifirova explains, she was directed to use lighting to her advantage, to allow for the color of the lighting to add onto the story and world creation (Winnan, 2022). With the use of technical aspects of film, the crew was able to create rainbow lens flares (see figure 1) and the 'bisexual' (blue, pink, and purple) lighting (see figures 2, 3, 4), which served as reminders that this is a queer story in every aspect (Winnan, 2022). In other words, queer aspects of *Heartstopper* appear not only in the content of the story of Nick and Charlie, but also in the production and the world in which these characters exist.

Figure 1

Rainbow Lens Flare

Note. Rainbow lens flare, in between Nick and Charlie as they walk through the hall (Oseman, 2022, S1E1, 04:00, Fair Use designation[1])

[1] This image is a screenshot from a copyrighted television show and is not in the public domain. It is believed that the use of a limited number of low-resolution screenshots for critical commentary and discussion of the film and its contents on a PhD dissertation or thesis qualifies as fair use.

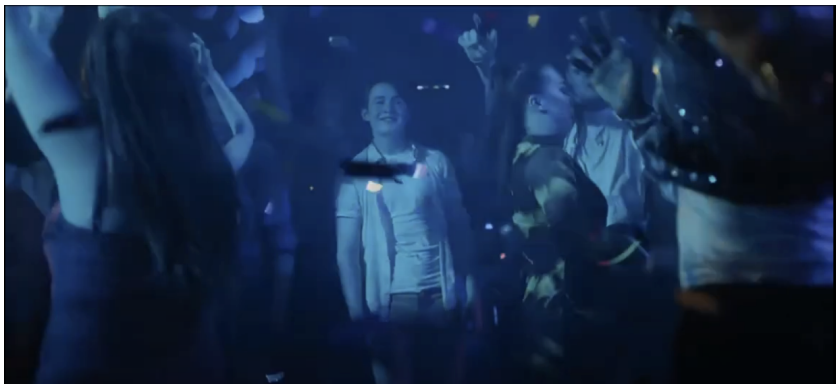
Figure 2

Nick in Pink Lighting

Note. Nick in pink lighting, shown in succession with figures 2 and 3 (Oseman, 2022, S1E3, 16:14, Fair Use designation).

Figure 3

Nick in Blue Lighting



Note. Nick in blue lighting, shown in succession with figures 1 and 3 (Oseman, 2022, S1E3, 16:15, Fair Use designation).

Figure 4

Nick in Purple Lighting

Note. Nick in purple lighting, shown in succession with figures 2 and 3 (Oseman, 2022, S1E3, 16:16, Fair Use designation).

The production of *Heartstopper* not only includes little reminders of the queer world created but uses graphic designs and animations – also referred to as '*Heartstopper* moments'- to vibrantly illustrate the emotion between characters (see figure 5). These serve as both an homage to the graphic novel series and a way to highlight the budding queer relationships shown between: Nick and Charlie; Tara and Darcy; and Elle and Tao (Still, 2022). With each instance of the animations being unique and different among the relationships, Oseman is able to portray three separate romantic (or soon to be romantic) pairings that are not cis-heteronormative, and that highlight important relationship moments with a visual effect, making the message more powerful. This is important since without these elements of film production, the audience could be more likely to write off Nick and Charlie as platonic in the first couple of episodes. This is one of the series-wide subversions of heteronormativity that Oseman implements.

Figure 5

Heartstopper Moment: Leaves

Note. Animated leaves dancing around Charlie, sitting next to Nick for the first time. (Oseman, 2022, S1E1, 02:31, Fair Use designation)

This reconstruction continues through to the score created for the show. As created by Adiescar Chase, the score for *Heartstopper* consists of twenty-five songs for season one (Chase, 2022) and twenty-four songs for season two (Chase, 2023). In an interview with Jemma Jones for On the Record (2022), Chase expands upon some of the choices that went into creating the score to reflect the inner feelings of the characters. This is most noticeable with a specific synth note being bent upwards, as Chase explains, "[B]y bending that note, I feel like it gives you that little heart flutter, or that feeling when you go over a bump in the road in a car, and your tummy does a little flip. That flip can happen, as well, when you see someone you really like" (Jones, 2022). This bent note is first heard when Charlie and Nick see each other for the first time in the series, and becomes a signifier of their shared moments and relationships throughout the series (Oseman, 2022, S1E1). Another series-wide component that Chase built into the score was "a heart skipping a beat being translated through sound" (Jones, 2022). The use of this heart-like

beat is used throughout the series and signifies both positive and negative emotions that the characters experience through manipulation of rhythm and tone. These elements within the score help to round out the world creation tactic of reconstruction, because they express emotion through sound, which can help those who may have never experienced or witnessed these relationships, place themselves into the emotions of the characters on screen.

A final point to make about the general production and world creation of *Heartstopper* is that through season one, these elements aide in the deconstruction of heteronormativity by acting as reminders that although the storyline may begin with recognizable tropes, this narrative is ultimately about queerness and queer relationships. As the deconstructive approach turns more into a reconstructive approach during season two, these elements act as another way to craft these relationships and to make characters' experiences legible. In other words, through the use of visual cues to express feelings—*Heartstopper* moments—and the use of the score to audibly express feeling, the show's creators give audiences an accessible way to understand the emotions and feelings that a queer person may experience in these situations, relationships, and living with these identities. In this way, *Heartstopper* is not only an accurate representation of queer relationships and emotions, but also an easily accessible representation for heterosexual audiences who may need these elements to fully reconstruct heteronormative expectations of these characters and this storyline.

The last element of production I would like to address is the platform of Netflix for the message of *Heartstopper*. Netflix is a global streaming service. *Heartstopper* is available to stream in countries where being gay is criminalized, including in Egypt, where the show trended in the top ten after season one's release (Yee, 2022). When some governments requested that Netflix remove the title for inappropriate content, Netflix responded by saying, "Netflix prides

itself on fostering creative freedom on its platform and giving voice to a variety of stories and perspectives" (Ma, 2022). This has happened with other media productions, including the movie *Lightyear* which was produced and is available to stream via Disney (Yee, 2022; Ma, 2022). This movie includes a same sex kiss, and triggered a similar request to take down the content, so Disney+ removed it from streaming in the 7 Gulf Nations Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE (Yee, 2022; Ma, 2022).

The fact that this show has had so much success indicates the importance of subverting the heteronormal. Heteronormativity has a very real and powerful role in our global society. Further, *Heartstopper* is unique with its TV-14 rating and content material, making it one of the only sources of queer media that is accessible to adolescents, because it does not include scenes showing sex or drugs like many coming of age high school shows feature like *Sex Education, Euphoria,* or *Young Royals*. The absence of explicit sexual content is yet another way Oseman subverts heteronormativity. Hegemonic-heteronormativity and cisnormative-heteronormativity frames homosexual identities as being overtly sexualized, as well as the masculine man as being sexual. In at least the first two seasons of *Heartstopper*, this is not the case, which opens the possibility of what relationships could look like and foregoes what a relationship should look like.

CONCLUSION

Within this chapter I have established the production methods and ethics that were employed to create *Heartstopper.* I have identified the general processes of deconstruction and reconstruction as they apply to the production of *Heartstopper* and have set the scene for specific textual analysis, which will display how these world creation methods appear throughout the series. While this thesis and research analyzes the overall impact and representation within this

show to facilitate a deeper understanding of the perspectives of LGBT+ viewers, heterosexual viewers, as well as the production and creation of the show, *Heartstopper* does not come without critiques. One common critique about *Heartstopper* is that the show approaches queer relationships and queer experiences through rose-colored glasses, which creates an unrealistic representation. While I acknowledge that this portrayal may not be accurate for the entirety of the LGBT+ community, I argue that this 'rose-colored' approach is part of the success of *Heartstopper*. As discussed in an interview with Jessica Rawnsley for The Irish Times, Alice Oseman states, "In *Heartstopper*, I try to explore realistic contemporary issues with a hopeful and optimistic lens… I think this is particularly comforting to the queer community. We [the queer community] want to see our struggles represented accurately in the media, but we also often want media that makes us feel hopeful, comforted, and happy, and I like to think *Heartstopper* does both those things." As I discuss in the following chapters, *Heartstopper* addresses serious issues that are common within LGBT+ communities, including but not limited to, expectations of heterosexuality based on masculinity, acts of homophobia, mental illness, and internalized homophobia, but approaches these topics with an optimistic lens. This choice reconstructs the heteronormative assumption that LGBT+ identities, relationships, and experiences *must be* negative or 'less than' heterosexual relationships, which serves to victimize queer experiences and stories. In creating an optimistic lens and world view, Oseman intentionally and successfully reconstructs this assumption by displaying these struggles alongside positive messaging.

CHAPTER III

MASCULINITY AND INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA

The first theme I will be analyzing is masculinity, which is integral to understanding the series because the presentation and discussion of masculinity are tied to internalized homophobia in both academic literature and the narrative of *Heartstopper.* This chapter seeks to show the communicative episodes that reinforce heteronormativity, and how *Heartstopper* reconstructs heteronormative ideals in these episodes in order to bring awareness and social change to these complex topics. This chapter finds connections between verbal, audio, and visual examples of heteronormative assumptions based on gender enactment, expectations of masculinity and internalized homophobia, and the homophobic rhetoric that contributes to internalized homophobia.

This chapter begins with a review of the literature surrounding masculinity, internalized homophobia, and heteronormativity, which includes a short description of the interactions of masculinity and heteronormativity (Marchia & Sommer, 2019; Thepsourinthone et al., 2020; Misibi, 2018; Weinberg, 1972; Dreyer, 2007). Then, I conduct textual and thematic analyses that will be applied to case examples from *Heartstopper* to display and discuss these interactions. Then, the discussion will turn to internalized homophobia as displayed in *Heartstopper*. As this chapter reveals, gendered and hegemonic heteronormativity create relational and social codes, and recent research has found connections between gendered heteronormativity and internalized homophobia (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). To create the best analysis of the subversions displayed within this text, I will be highlighting important scenes and dialogue for analysis.

To begin this analysis, I would like to clarify that gender, within this discussion, does not refer to biological sex, but rather the societal definition of what creates a ‘man’ or ‘woman,’

following the framework of gender outlined by Judith Butler (2006). Further, I would like to highlight that gender is a societal construct, and expectations of gender and gender roles vary across cultures. This analysis and discussion of masculinity comes from a western perspective, and I recognize that the constructs of masculinity that I discuss apply to a specific culture, western culture. This does mean that analysis and discussion of masculinity as presented in this paper are not applicable to other cultures. *Heartstopper* is a UK-based production hosted on an international streaming platform Netflix, and as a researcher I am approaching this from my American perspective. This means that my perspective is mainly rooted in a patriarchal society, with heteronormative expectations, which is deeply rooted in white supremacy, and funded by capitalism. Additionally, many American attitudes toward sexuality and marriage are based in religion (Monea, 2023). This means that there are additional social codes that are expected of a couple based on their biological sex, gender, sexuality, skin color, and socioeconomic status. (Monea, 2023).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This discussion draws from the frameworks of heteronormativity as outlined by Marcia and Sommer (2019), as well as the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) which is frequently used to discuss the impact of prejudice, social stress, and mental health in LGBT+ groups. These frameworks will allow for conversations about *Heartstopper* to expand and include gender enactment, internalized homophobia, social effects, mental health effects, and more. This allows for the most well-rounded discussion about this text. This is imperative to understanding the representation of queer identities within *Heartstopper*, because it allows me as a researcher to address how heteronormativity might look or be enacted outside of the media. This perspective also honors one of the creative goals of *Heartstopper,* a focus on authenticity, and authentic

representations of queer experiences. Furthermore, this allows for the most relatable and realistic discussion possible about the social structures that queer identities have to navigate. In this literature review, I will address definitions of gendered and hegemonic heteronormativity, then define internalized homophobia, and then tie the definition to subsequent social codes to show how these phenomena are connected.

While I recognize that women also face enormous amounts of societal pressure to engage in idealized femininity (Butler, 2007; Rich, 1980), this analysis will focus on hegemonic masculinity because *Heartstopper* focuses on a male same-sex relationship at an all-boys school. As a result, depictions of masculinity are shown far more in this show than representations of femininity. The facets and societal pressures of hegemonic masculinity are not commonly shown in traditional television and historically have not been discussed in society (Mercer & McGlashan, 2022; Krause, 2014; Carver, 2006). While this is changing, it is important to understand how counter-hegemonic narratives about masculinity interact with heteronormativity and the patriarchy.

Masculinity, and the expectations that are associated with its enactment, are largely derived from the patriarchy. The best analogy to understand how the patriarchy works is to consider the ideal nuclear family (Slater, 1961), typically consisting of a father, mother, and two to three children, frequently imagined with a dog and a house with a white picket fence (Asadi, 2015). Within this family, it is expected that the father is to work, while the mother stays and takes care of the home (Asadi, 2015). In this family, it is generally expected that the father is in charge, and is strong and not emotional, anger being the only exception (Asadi, 2015). This posits a couple of expectations for men to live up to: strong, not emotional, and in charge.

Gendered heteronormativity refers to how interactions of gender and sexuality are displayed and discussed within society and scholarship (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Many of the examples I explore display an interaction of the assumed societal role of a 'male' within a patriarchal society and how these societal roles and codes reflect assumptions about sexuality based on perceived gender enactment. For example, between a traditionally 'masculine' man and a 'feminine' man, most would assume that the masculine male is straight while the feminine man as gay. This illustrates the conflation between gender and sexual identity. Often by extension, masculinity is equated with heterosexuality, while femininity is conflated with homosexuality, specifically amongst young males (Kehler, 2007; Haywood et al., 2017; Ramos et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2016).

Gendered heteronormativity shows how heterosexual relationships should be carried out according to 'typical' displays of gender (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). For example, the ideal relationship should be between a male and female who both follow the expected enactment of their gender (look like their expected gender) and engage in traditional gender roles within the relationship (assimilation to expected gender roles/behavior) (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). While gendered heteronormativity is the key player in a lot of this textual and thematic analysis, hegemonic heteronormativity is also an important factor in analyzing how heteronormativity maintains and reinforces its power. Hegemonic heterosexuality overlaps with gendered heteronormativity, but the key difference between the two is that hegemonic heteronormativity is the method through which societies uphold and reinforce the notions of heteronormativity using soft and hard power (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Hegemonic heteronormativity has more of a focus on the reinforcement and recreation of 'natural' beliefs about behavior, and less of a focus on how we view gender in tandem with sexuality (Marchia & Sommer, 2019).

Gender and sexuality are two distinctly different concepts. Gender is commonly associated with distinctions of biological sex even though gender is socially constructed within cultures and society (Romaine, 1998). Gender is communicated through enactment and assimilation according to what is expected or 'normal'. This refers to the hegemonic expressions of masculinity and femininity, visible in both verbal and nonverbal communication. Gender is expressed commonly through the nonverbal, or embodied, communication, which includes but is not limited to clothing, hair, makeup, posture, social habits, interests, touch, and eye contact. (Romaine, 1998; Dindia & Canary, 2006). Gender is also expressed verbally through tone, pitch, conversational dominance, and conversational goals (Dindia & Canary, 2006). Traditionally, masculine communicators are more assertive, engage in turn-taking and maintaining behavior, engage in touch and eye contact more frequently, engage in face saving or maintaining strategies, and typically are described as more goal-oriented communicators (Dindia & Canary, 2006). Sexuality is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as, "the capacity for sexual feelings; a person's identity in relation to the gender or genders to which they are typically attracted; sexual orientation." This means that sexuality is the sexual attraction to one or more genders. However, the enactment of gender is commonly confused with sexual orientation, through the expressions of sexual prejudice in which 'appropriate' gender roles are affirmed and defended against anxiety rooted in violation of gender norms (Hunt et al., 2016).

As described and theorized by Christopher Hunt et al., (2016) (see also: Kehler, 2007; Haywood et al., 2017; Ramos et al., 2020), the male identity is crafted in opposition to the feminine identity, thereby creating one of the tenets of masculinity as being *not* feminine (Kehler, 2007; Haywood et al., 2017). The gay male identity is often assumed to be feminine because being gay often 'devalues' their masculinity (Hunt et al., 2016; Ramos et al., 2020).

Since, masculinity is constructed in direct opposition to femininity, this leaves labeling gay men as feminine or weak becomes a way of preserving the expected expression of masculinity (Hunt et al., 2016; Ramos et al., 2020). This "expected expression" is typically a heterosexual masculine man, and those who fall outside of these tenets are socially 'othered'. The process and feelings of social othering, or 'being othered' in the case for many queer individuals, can cause feelings of internalized homophobia (Campo-Aris et al., 2015; Hequembourg & Brailler, 2009; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015).

Internalized homophobia describes when members of LGBT+ communities accept heteronormative/homophobic rhetoric, either consciously or subconsciously, and apply those standards to themselves (Thepsourinthone et al., 2021). This means that internalized homophobia can present in a variety of ways and cause a variety of social effects (Thepsourinthone et al., 2021). Research into links between hegemonic heteronormativity and internalized homophobia seeks to understand how the media displays this link, and further the variety of ways in which queer people deal with internalized homophobia. Just like with heteronormativity, internalized homophobia is a complex topic with a variety of explanations for its existence. Some researchers claim that internalized homophobia comes from the complexity of religious upbringings (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015), some claim that feelings of shame or stress come from internal or external factors (Campo-Aris et al., 2015; Hequembourg & Brailler, 2009; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Colliver & Jamel, 2023), and some claim that it comes from exposure to prejudice, discrimination, or hate crimes (Colliver & Jamel, 2023) or the causal relationship internalized homophobia has with occurrences of intimate partner violence (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2019; Gold et al., 2007). Each reasoning has its own justification for sources of internalized homophobia, and there is consensus around feelings of internalized homophobia being dependent

on the lived experience of the queer person (Campo-Aris et al., 2015; Hequembourg & Brailler, 2009; Colliver & Jamel, 2023; Badenes-Ribera et al., 2019; Gold et al., 2007). In other words, these factors work together in a matrix of power, which means that queer identities are subject to criticism from hegemonic beliefs of our society, like the patriarchy, heteronormativity, white supremacy, and capitalism. For some, engaging in counter-hegemonic rhetoric can cause feelings of internalized homophobia.

Internalized homophobia can result in a host of side effects. As reported by Gibbs and Goldbach (2015) queer adolescents who experience anti-LGBT+ messaging from religious parents, guardians, or caretakers are more likely to experience internalized homophobia. Those who experience internalized homophobia are more likely to experience suicidal ideation, or chronic suicidal thoughts (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015). The participants who had both anti-LBGT+ messages from a caretaker and internalized homophobia are more likely to experience chronic suicidality, and are more likely to have planned or recently attempted suicide (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015). The effects of internalized homophobia do not just affect the mental health and well-being of the individual, but also affect the social interactions and communication landscape of the individual. As we see with author Badnes-Ribera et al., (2019), queer relationships that include a sufferer of internalized homophobia are more likely to become abusive, with the sufferer of internalized homophobia being the perpetrator of the violence. As Badnes-Ribera et al. (2019) state:

> Therefore, on the one hand, LGB people with negative feelings about themselves may project their negative self-concept through violent acts toward their same-sex partners. On the other hand, victims with negative feelings about themselves may believe that they

> deserve to be treated abusively and see the abuse as a natural consequence of their LGB identity. (p. 338)

These findings are consistent with Bianchi et al. (2017) who explored relationships between internalized homophobia and relationship quality. Researchers found that there are three key features to pay attention to when assessing effects of internalized homophobia as, level of outness, community connectedness, and depression (Bianchi et al., 2017). Consistent with previous findings, internalized homophobia was associated with relational problems among all participants, regardless of relationship status, single or partnered (Bianchi et al., 2017). Level of outness was found to be an inconsequential factor affecting internalized homophobia, clarifying that being out does not mean a decrease of internalized homophobia (Bianchi et al., 2017). Similarly, community connectedness does not result in better relationship quality, as explained by Bianchi et al., (2017) someone with internalized homophobia may put too much weight into the community and end up ignoring or neglecting their partner. Another explanation offered is that individuals who are experiencing relationship issues could turn to the queer community for support (Bianchi et al., 2017).

Internalized homophobia and masculinity appear to have a connection, as described by Thepsourinthone et al. (2021)., that relates to the social expression of masculinity, heteronormative norms, and social acts, and the subsequent internalization of unspoken social messages (Thepsourinthone, 2021; Ramos et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2016; Haywood et al., 2017; Dreyer, 2007). Tenets and expectations of masculinity are not frequently discussed within society or media spaces (Krause, 2014). This is because men are expected to engage in hegemonic masculinity, without direct instruction, and when men do not engage, there is backlash (Carver, 2006; Asadi, 2015). Masculinity is intended to outline the traits and behaviors

a society expects a male to be. A part of masculinity that has been socially constructed is that masculinity is considered more powerful than feminine or non-binary identities. This means that threats to masculinity also threaten the position of power that men traditionally have in patriarchal societies (Carver, 2006; Asadi, 2015). Further, men are expected to tamp down all emotions other than anger (Carver, 2006; Asadi, 2015; Dindia & Canary, 2006; Haywood et al, 2017, Kehler, 2007). This means that men are not only expected to be relatively emotionless, but that the efficacy of hiding emotions is used as a judgment for masculinity.

This is where a connection between masculinity and internalized homophobia appears. Thepsourinthone et al. (2020) studied the connection between conformity to masculine norms and heteronormativity, and found, in a sample of 489 Australian gay men, that "age, perceived similarity, Conformity to Masculine Norms, and Masculinity Contingency in relation to threats to masculinity were sufficient to predict levels of Internalized homophobia over and above other demographic variables, Perceived Distance to gay men, and other measures of gender norm conformity" (p.7). Previous research found weak or little connections between internalized homophobia and masculinity; however, this research suggests that our previous understanding of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity was not quite accurate (as detailed in Thepsourinthone et al., 2020).

However, there is a repeating sentiment within queer and sociology research, best put into words by Msibi (2018), "structural manifestations of homophobia positions the internalization of homophobia as a key weapon for heteronormativity and the entrenchment of patriarchy…men who engage in same-sex relations internalize negative messages about same-sex desire, thus colluding and conforming to heteronormativity" (p. 71). This sentiment is reflected by authors Thepsourinthone et al., 2021; Thepsourinthone et al., 2020; Ramos et al.,

2020; Hunt et al., 2016; Gold et al., 2007; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Dreyer, 2007 Campo-Arias et al., 2015; Bianchi et al., 2017; Badnes-Ribera et al., 2019. While we are now finding a more accurate way to quantify these connections, it does not mean that these connections have not been there the whole time. *Heartstopper* establishes these connections between masculinity and internalized homophobia in distinct and vivid ways.

ANALYSIS

In order to analyze how themes of masculinity and internalized homophobia are displayed within *Heartstopper*, I begin with an analysis of how Nick Nelson's masculinity is presented within the show and how his character acts as a counterhegemonic example of a masculine bisexual male. I also show how Ben Hope is offered as a comparison to Nick Nelson, as Alice Oseman herself describes. I will then explore the themes and discussions around Nick as they relate to, or assume, his sexuality. I will take this discussion one step further to discuss how facets of masculinity interact with heteronormativity and can contribute to internalized homophobia, as seen in the character Ben Hope. Finally, I will offer an alternate perspective of internalized homophobia as seen through the character Darcy Olsson.

MASCULINITY

Oseman described the dynamic between Nick Nelson and Ben Hope in an interview with Ariana Romero for Tudum, noting that Ben exists as "a parallel to Nick, an anti-Nick" (Romero, 2023). Oseman continues by revealing how both characters are learning to live with their queerness, "Ben takes a much darker and more toxic path, and Nick's confrontations with Ben fuel Nick's anxieties about remaining in the closet" (Romero, 2023). This creates an assumption that Nick and Ben experience many of the same comments and expectations about their identity due to their gender enactment. Nick Nelson is displayed as a traditionally masculine and athletic

adolescent male. Within the first episode, a couple of Nick's character traits are shown such as the nickname 'rugby king', athletic, muscular, traditionally masculine, tall, and popular (Oseman, 2022, S1E1). This display of his hegemonic masculinity is then used to assert Nick's assumed heterosexuality in the following scene:

S1E2: Tao, Isaac, and Charlie talking about Nick Nelson

97 00:07:33 - 00:07:34
[Tao] He's straight, Charlie.

98 00:07:35 - 00:07:38
Like, you only need to glance at him to see that he's a heterosexual.

99 00:07:38 - 00:07:40
Isaac, back me up on this.

100 00:07:41 - 00:07:42
[Isaac] Ginormous heterosexual.

101 00:07:42 - 00:07:43
[Tao] Exactly.

102 00:07:43 - 00:07:45
[Charlie] Masculine guys can be gay.

103 00:07:46 - 00:07:49
You're not exactly the authority on working out who is and isn't gay.

104 00:07:51 - 00:07:52
And bisexual people exist.

(Oseman, 2022, S1E2, 07:33-07:52)

This scene features Tao, the only canonically cis-gendered heterosexual character in the main ensemble. He is the one who doubts Charlie about his interactions with Nick (a major theme in this season). In line 98, Tao's argument about Nick's sexuality is based on how Nick presents as traditionally masculine. The use of the word "glance" states that it only takes a brief or hurried look to *know* that Nick is straight. Tao's assumption completely forgoes even the possibility of

Nick being queer. This is an example of deconstruction of hegemonic heteronormativity by using the strategy of exposure. In other words, Tao exposes the norm by stating, “to see that he’s a heterosexual” (Oseman, 2022, S1E2, 07:35-07:38) stating that *seeing* gender enactment that is traditionally masculine therefore *must* mean that Nick is straight.

However, in lines 102 and 104, Charlie retorts with “masculine people can be gay…bisexual people exist” (Oseman, 2022, S1E2, 07:43-07:52). This is an instance of Oseman using reconstruction to subvert heteronormative assumptions. Heterosexist heteronormativity assumes that men do not question their sexuality and are secure in their heterosexuality; however, this episode concludes with evidence of Nick questioning his attraction to Charlie which will be discussed soon.

Charlie’s lines also call attention to bisexuality, which is a direct exposure of heterosexist-heteronormative assumption. This assumption asserts that all humans are heterosexual and renders queer identities as invisible, deviant, or denied. Charlie calls out that masculine gay men exist (usually rendered as invisible) and are assumed to be straight because of gendered heteronormative assumptions (Marchia & Sommer, 2019), bringing attention to sexualities outside of heterosexuality and homosexuality by suggesting that Nick could be bisexual (a frequently denied identity). This is because there is a direct assumption that if a person is not straight, they *must* be gay. Male bisexual identities are often invalidated or denied. A common homophobic rhetoric asserts that bisexual men are ‘just gay’ and don’t want to say it; this is reflective for bisexual women as well who are frequently told their identity is ‘just a trend’ or ‘for attention’. It is worthy to note that, the audience at this time is primed to see Charlie’s perspective as a kind of wishful thinking that contributes to the ‘fantasy’ element of Oseman’s

construction. This serves to work as a method of exposure and will later contribute to the reconstruction tactic of this series.

In the previous scene with Tao, Charlie, and Isaac, Charlie directly calls his friends out for not only assuming that a masculine man can *only* be straight (gendered heteronormativity), as well as for assuming that the only sexual identities possible for Nick are heterosexual or homosexual (heterosexist heteronormativity). This norm completely eradicates and ignores the idea of sexuality and attraction existing on a spectrum. However, Oseman gives Charlie the lines to call out these unreal assumptions surrounding Nick, his gender enactment, and sexuality. In other words, by not so subtly reminding the audience of these heteronormative assumptions, Oseman exposes the ideal of heteronormativity that is usually rendered invisible.

Further, Nick and Charlie are very touchy friends, and Nick or Charlie *never* say anything along the lines of 'no-homo,' also subverting the expectation of how male friends should behave with each other, as outlined in hegemonic-heteronormativity (Marchia & Sommer, 2019; Haywood et al., 2017; Butler, 2006; Kehler, 2007). Rather than leaving the topic of Nick's sexuality, as we will see in the next scene, Nick's gender enactment continues to cast doubt about his identity within Charlie's friend group:

S1E2: Elle, Tao, Isaac, and Charlie in Tao's Bedroom.

297 00:19:12 - 00:19:13
[Tao] As your token straight friend,

298 00:19:13 - 00:19:16
it's my duty to remind you that sometimes people are straight.

299 00:19:17 - 00:19:19
It's an unfortunate fact of life.
…

308 00:19:43 - 00:19:46
[Tao] Do you know a girl called Tara Jones?

309 00:19:47 - 00:19:50
- [Elle] Yeah.
-[Isaac] Can you ask her if she likes Nick Nelson?

310 00:19:50 - 00:19:53
[Elle] Nick Nelson? You might as well give up right now.

311 00:19:53 - 00:19:55
He's the straightest person I have ever seen.

312 00:19:55 - 00:19:56
[Tao] Thank you!

(Oseman, 2022, S1E2, 19:12-19:56)

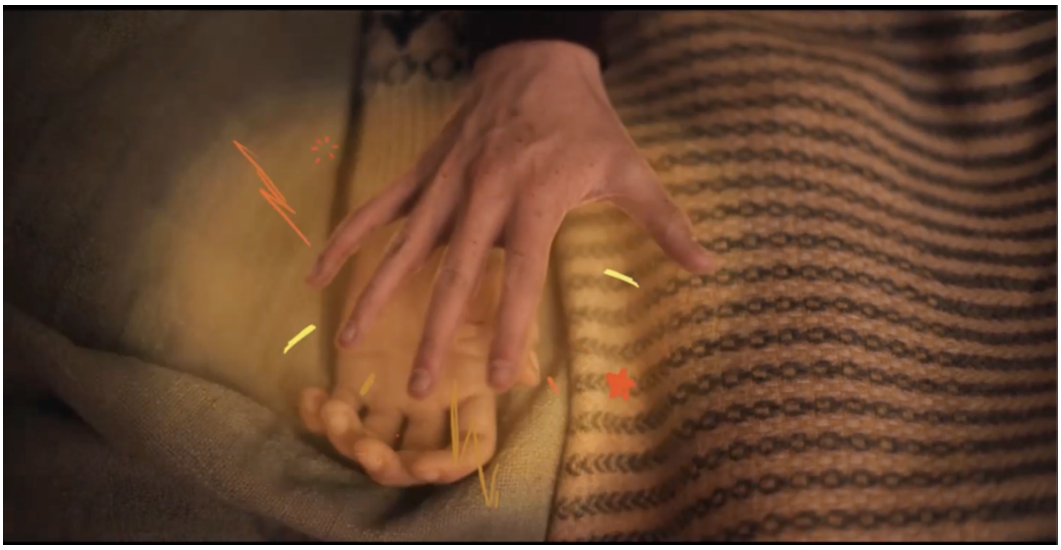
Line 311 states that you can judge someone's sexuality based on the traits they display. In this case Nick is a masculine presenting male, with traditionally masculine interests like rugby and Formula 1. The assumption of hegemonic-masculinity and gendered heteronormativity is that Nick is a masculine presenting cisgender-male; therefore, he must be heterosexual, because of his appearance and interests. Further, hegemonic heteronormativity situates the male sexual identity as being secure, asserting a false narrative that males should never question their sexuality. Through the methods of exposure and contradiction, Oseman deconstructs this assumed norm at the end of this episode by displaying the beginning of Nick's identity navigation.

Later in S1:E2, Nick visits Charlie's house for the first time (Oseman, 2022). After Charlie has fallen asleep during a movie, Nick explores the idea of holding Charlie's hand. As seen in figure 6, the first time Nick attempts to hold Charlie's hand, animations of sparks and warmth are seen between their hands. After this attempt, Nick tries one more time, and this time the sparks are bigger and louder, indicating a growing potential in their relationship. Although this scene does not have any actual conversation, the elements of aftereffects, animation, and

sound design act as a contradiction to the heteronormative standards Nick had been held to in the beginning of the episode.

Figure 6

Heartstopper Moment: Sparks



Note. Nick's second attempt at holding a sleeping Charlie's hand. A larger ball of warmth, with more sparks, and stars begins to grow between their hands (Oseman, 2022, S1E2, 24:37, Fair Use designation).

Even further exposing heteronormativity, this episode ends on Nick beginning to research and officially question his sexuality. This evidence of Nick questioning his sexuality acts as a deconstruction of heteronormativity, using the method of exposure and contradiction. As seen in figure 7 the use of bisexual lighting occurs just before Nick Googles 'am I gay?'. Within figure 7 Nick Nelson is lit in pink on left and blue on the right. This imagery begins with him looking

forward, before turning to his right side. This imagery hints that Nick is bisexual, but is at the moment focusing and questioning his attraction to boys.

Figure 7

Nick in Bisexual Lighting

Note. Shot of the back of Nick Nelson's head. Left side of Nick is lit in pink and the right side is lit in blue (Oseman, 2022, S1E2, 27:36, Fair Use designation).

As Oseman deconstructs the heteronormative assumptions about Nick through season one, she also works to establish Nick's perspective as a reconstruction of heteronormativity. By establishing Nick as being happier and more satisfied in his relationship with Charlie, Oseman positions Nick and Charlie's relationship as a more viable or preferable, which is a method of reconstruction (Dhaenens, 2014). This is seen through Nick's interactions with his family. In which Sara Nelson says to Nick, "You seem much more yourself around him [Charlie]"

(Oseman, 2022, S1:E2, 00:20:48 - 00:20:50) . This is reflected at the end of the season when this scene occurs between Nick and Charlie:

> S1E8: conversation between Nick and Charlie in the hallway during sports day:
>
> 305 00:20:48 --> 00:20:50
> [Nick]I need you to know that
>
> 306 00:20:50 --> 00:20:53
> my life is way better because I met you.
>
> 307 00:20:54 --> 00:20:56
> -You don't have to say that.
> -I do.
>
> 308 00:20:56 --> 00:20:58
> And I'll keep on saying it until you believe me.
>
> 309 00:20:59 --> 00:21:01
> Look, I don't care about getting into fights
>
> 310 00:21:01 --> 00:21:04
> or pissing off my mates or anything like that.
>
> 311 00:21:05 --> 00:21:06
> It's all worth it to be with you.
>
> 312 00:21:07 --> 00:21:11
> You are the kindest, most thoughtful and caring
>
> 313 00:21:11 --> 00:21:14
> and amazing person in the whole world,
>
> 314 00:21:14 --> 00:21:16
> and if you really want to break up,
>
> 315 00:21:16 --> 00:21:20
> then I would respect your decision, but I want us to be together.
>
> (Oseman, 2022, S1E8, 20:48-21:20)

Nick states in line 306, that Charlie has greatly improved his life. This line works to firmly establish their relationship as preferable to Nick. However, this does not just occur in season one.

In season two, episode 7, Nick invites Charlie's family over to a family dinner with plans to come out to his father:

> 388 - 405 00:22:09 --> 00:23:05
>
> [Nick] Sorry. This is ridiculous. Dad, Charlie's my boyfriend. Surprise. I'm bi, he's gay, and I was actually really stressed out about how I was gonna tell you, but you know what? I don't care what you think about it anymore. 'Cause you don't care to even see us more than two times a year. And, you know, every time I do see you, I always think, "This is it." "This is the time when you might actually take an interest in my life," but...you never do. So if you don't care, then... [chuckles softly] ...then I don't care either. [To David] And I don't know why you're acting like you are ten years old, but your bullying just doesn't affect me anymore because, quite simply, I do not care. I like who I am. I like my life.
>
> (Oseman, 2023, S2E7, 22:09-23:05)

In this monologue, Nick asserts that his relationship with Charlie has helped him come to terms with his sexuality, and that he likes his life. This is another way in which Oseman reconstructs heterosexist beliefs of homosexual relationships being subservient, by once again confirming the benefits this relationship has brought to Nick. Further, this monologue serves to establish Nick's feelings about the reactions of his father and brother to his coming out, and makes these feelings intelligible to heterosexual audiences. Through the narrative that brings the story to this point, Nick and Charlie's relationship had developed along with Nick's security in his sexuality, making Nick's feelings comprehensible to the heterosexual audience that has witnessed his journey.

However, not all characters in *Heartstopper* have the same queer experiences as Nick. As I will analyze next, Ben Hope acts as a counterpoint to Nick's story. As discussed above, heteronormativity frequently conflates gender enactment with sexual orientation. While these are

two entirely separate aspects of identity, they heavily rely on and reinforce each other. Particularly within hegemonic heteronormativity and gendered heteronormativity, there is a melding of these two aspects of identity. While there are nuances, usually society equates traditional metrics of masculinity with heterosexuality, strength, and superiority; while, traditionally feminine interests or traits are seen as homosexual, weak, and inferior. This creates a unique dynamic for people who do not align with all of the expectations of their perceived gender enactment. For some, this may feel like not being 'man enough' because of their queerness or not being 'straight enough' because of their interests, traits, or gender enactment. The disconnect between enactment and identity can cause one to overcompensate socially and lead to internalized homophobia.

INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA

To understand Ben Hope's internalized homophobia, I will be analyzing multiple interactions including or about Ben. These cases will show that the expectations of heteronormativity and gender enactment can be dangerously internalized and create internalized homophobia. While Ben deals with the most obvious case of internalized homophobia, he is not the only character to deal with these feelings, and as I will show, Ben's internalized homophobia contributes to a variety of social and interpersonal conflicts. I will briefly touch on Charlie's mental health as it relates to Ben, but Charlie will be analyzed more in depth in chapter 4, where I focus on the social and mental health consequences of homophobic and heteronormative rhetoric. I will then move onto the internalized homophobia that Darcy deals with, because comparing the two cases—Ben and Darcy—allows me to show how internalized homophobia does not *have* to have negative social consequences. Typically, Nick Nelson and Ben Hope are positioned to show a parallel narrative with same situations, but different methods and

consequences, which allows Oseman to show the differences between accepting yourself and dealing with internalized homophobia (Romero, 2023). While this is a clear point of comparison, I argue that Oseman offers another character with similar familial pressures and internalized homophobia, Darcy, that needs to be part of the same conversation. For this reason, I will be comparing Darcy's and Ben's approaches to dealing with homophobic families and internalized homophobia.

> E1:S1: Ben and Charlie, meet after Charlie broke things off with Ben.
>
> Scene summary: Ben asks Charlie to meet after rugby practice. Charlie decides to meet Ben, but what he doesn't know is that Nick has followed Charlie and is eavesdropping on this conversation. Ben believes that Charlie does not want to break off their situation-ship because Charlie fears being 'caught'. Charlie, however, does not want to continue their relationship because Ben has a girlfriend. Charlie expresses that he is not mad about Ben for being in the closet, but for using Charlie to experiment with his attraction to boys. At the end of the interaction, Ben nonconsensually kisses Charlie, then confesses that he likes Charlie. Ben continues nonconsensually kissing Charlie, until Nick stops Ben and pulls him off.
>
> (Oseman, 2022, S1E1, 18:20-20:48)

Charlie meets up with his closeted secret ex, Ben. Ben confronts Charlie and accuses him of being scared of getting caught. In this way, being in the closet is one of the ways that Ben can protect himself from the bullying that Charlie endured after being outed at school. As a character, Ben is using the heteronormative assumption of his peers to evade the negative social reactions (seen with references to Charlie's outing). This is how Ben can use the social power of being perceived as heterosexual against Charlie; however, Oseman is able to reverse this power

dynamic, with Charlie's rebuttals to Ben's claims. Charlie has social power because of his outness and can refute Ben's accusations. In this scene, Charlie has power in being gay, which is an example of queer reconstruction of the heteronormative narrative of heterosexuals having power. Since Ben is in the closet, and has a public heterosexual appearing relationship, he should have social power over Charlie. This is how Oseman reconstructs the heteronorms to give social power to Charlie. We also see queer deconstruction here as well. With Charlie's rebuttal to Ben, he explains that Ben is the one who is scared of being caught, since, for Ben, being gay is shameful. This is a direct exposure of Ben's heterosexist-heteronormative norms, beliefs, behavior, and touches on his internalized homophobia. Ben's reaction to this is to non-consensually kiss Charlie, which aligns with the findings of Badnes-Ribera et al. (2019). However, this is not the first time that Ben has displayed internalized homophobia, as this event was preceded by the following interactions:

> S1E1 - Ben and Charlie
>
> 55 00:03:25 - 00:03:28
> [Ben to Charlie] Still don't tell anyone about this.
>
> …
> S1E1 - Ben, Charlie, and Nick
> 76 00:04:42 - 00:04:43
> [CHARLIE] Hey.
>
> 77 00:04:43 - 00:04:44
> [BEN] What?
>
> 78 00:04:45 - 00:04:46
> Uh...
>
> 79 00:04:46 - 00:04:47
> Just, "hi."
>
> 80 00:04:48 - 00:04:50
> [chuckles] Why are you talking to me? I don't know who you are.

(Oseman, 2022, S1E1, 03:25-4:50)

In line 55, Ben says this to Charlie right after they have kissed and then Ben proceeds to wipe his mouth, as if wiping the kiss from existence. When Charlie says hey to Ben in the hallway (lines 77-80), Ben pretends he doesn't know Charlie. The intent behind pretending that he doesn't know Charlie is to distance himself as much as possible from 'the gay kid,' so as to keep suspicion from peers at bay. However, it also allows Ben to live in cognitive dissonance; if he pretends that he doesn't know Charlie, then it allows him to ignore and suppress his identity to himself and others.

As we see throughout the show, Ben uses a few tactics to hide his sexuality, including but not limited to pretending not to know Charlie (S1E1, 04:48-4:50; S1E7, 03:23-03:27; S2E6, 21:22-21:24), manipulating Charlie's perception of their relationship (S1E7, 07:05-07:42; S2E7, 16:07-18:34), taunting Nick for being with Charlie (S2E1, 09:19-09:52; S2E2, 08:21-09:28; S2E5, 07:07-08:00), and having a 'beard,' a fake relationship used to hide sexuality (S1E1, 10:51-11:10). He also displays a variety of effects from his internalized homophobia, including but not limited to ruining relationships with Charlie, Nick, and Imogen, in addition to his general reputation at the school. This is seen in scenes where Ben assaults Charlie by nonconsensually kissing him (S1E1, 20:18-20:41), assuming Nick has the same internalized homophobic beliefs (S2E2, 09:18-9:28), Imogen calling out Ben's behavior as a boyfriend towards her (S2E4, 23:53-24:31), and lastly by calling Imogen a 'bitch' when she broke up with him (S2E4, 24:34-24:39). All of these scenes eventually lead to Ben deciding to move to HGGS for A-levels (comparable to the United States senior year of high school and Advanced-Placement level exams).

However, Ben's tactics to avoid suspicion about his sexuality are not foolproof as he would like to believe. Imogen, his girlfriend at the time (Oseman, 2023, S2E4), puts some puzzle

pieces together and confronts Ben at dinner in a room of their peers. Imogen claims that Ben is, “obsessed with Charlie,” (Oseman, 2023, S2E4, 24:01-24:10) to the point that he ignored his own girlfriend while in Paris. All these examples hint that Ben is detached from his identity and is seemingly willing to leave his school when his identity could be exposed and furthermore is willing to use his identity as a manipulation tactic against Charlie. This expression of his internalized homophobia towards Charlie negatively impacts Charlie’s mental health. By far the most obvious call to Ben’s internalized homophobia happens in S2E7 where this scene happens.

> S2E7: Ben attempts to apologize to Charlie at Lambert Art School’s Queer art exhibit. (Oseman, 2023, S2E7, 15:58-18:53)

After the queer art exhibit, Nick and Charlie are leaving together when they come across Ben. Ben takes this moment to apologize to Charlie and explain that he can never come out of the closet because his parents are not accepting. While Ben finally admits to Charlie that he did like him, Charlie does not accept the apology, rebutting this admission from Ben with all the damage Ben has done to him. Charlie admits that while he is glad that Ben acknowledged the errors of his way, an apology will never fix what Ben did to Charlie, nor will it repair their relationship or Charlie’s opinion of Ben. Charlie states, “I really hope you become a better person so you don't hurt anyone else. But I don’t wanna be there to see that happen. I don’t wanna see you ever again” (Oseman, 2023, S2E7, 18:23-18:34). After Nick and Charlie exit the scene, we get to see the most outright call to Ben’s internalized homophobia. As Ben stands shocked, a wave of rainbow water comes from the art fair, and slowly approaches Ben’s feet (Oseman, 2023, S2E7, 18:45-18:47). Just as the water is about to touch Ben’s shoes, we see him turn and walk away (Oseman, 2023, S2E7, 18:47-18:53). This symbolizes a decision that Ben has repeatedly made,

and is actively continuing to make, to hide and find shame in his identity, rather than attempting to find a community.

Oseman has discussed how Charlie's relationship with Nick juxtaposes his interactions with Ben (Romero, 2023), but I would like to offer a different comparison by looking at the character Darcy Olsson. Darcy keeps her home life, which the audience sees through season two of *Heartstopper*, relatively private (Oseman, 2023). Like Ben, Darcy experiences homophobic and unaccepting parents. We know this because of the example provided above, where Ben states that his parents would never accept him (Oseman, 2023, S2E7, 16:50-17:00). We get a similar message from Darcy in S2E8 (23:52-24:51) when she discloses the nature of her home life to Tara, her girlfriend.

Darcy also experiences a disconnect of her identity. For her own safety, she must remain in the closet and abide by the ideals of femininity to have a place to sleep at night (Oseman, 2023, S2E7, 28:39-29:13). Darcy also experiences internalized homophobia due to her mother, which she expresses when Darcy states, "Sometimes my mum makes me hate myself" (Oseman, 2023, S2E8, 24:14-24:16). But unlike Ben, Darcy is accepting of her identity in spaces where she is safe. For example, she and Tara are out at school and online. However, Darcy does hide the nature of her home life from Tara. This does cause a small rift in her relationship with Tara, but once she opens up about her home life and the feelings her mother causes, their relationship deepens. Darcy has been able to mitigate some of the social effects of internalized homophobia.

These scenes in *Heartstopper* suggest that people have a choice: to hide in shame forever or to find and create safe spaces for yourself. Dealing with internalized homophobia as presented within this text leaves the viewers to see the conscious or subconscious decision that many queer individuals make when dealing with internalized homophobia. This decision comes down to

either hiding your identity as much as possible or, to find/create safe spaces for yourself. Ben is an example of hiding and being ashamed of his identity. Darcy is a case of sharing the burden. The comparison is that hiding who you are and adopting standards for yourself that are unrealistic (heteronormative) can be damaging to yourself, and relationships with others. But, when you do share and you have created a safe space, you get to have a satisfactory relationship with a person you like or feel safe with. This is the important distinction between the characters. One hides at home for safety (Darcy), and the other hides everywhere because of shame and perceived social stigma (Ben). Darcy is still able to live a happy queer life outside of her home, and opening up about her struggles brings her closer to her friends, which suggests the concept of a found family. But Ben has put on a front and has not been himself, which has driven wedges between himself, Charlie, Nick, Imogen, and eventually most of his peers. As we see when Charlie confronts Ben, Ben's internalized homophobia and hatred for himself was projected on his relationship with Charlie and has affected Charlie's confidence in himself and his trust in others.

CONCLUSION

Through this chapter I have analyzed the themes of masculinity and internalized homophobia as they are represented in academic literature and *Heartstopper*. Through this analysis I have established how Oseman deconstructs and reconstructs notions of heteronormativity as they interact with masculinity. This is usually a method of exposure of the tenets of heteronormativity and then switching to reconstruction as the story and effects of heteronormativity unfold through the seasons. This analysis has shown the manner in which Oseman created the world of *Heartstopper*, and how this world addresses important aspects of heteronormativity while working to expand on how and why this media has had success.

Ultimately, this analysis shows how this media works as both queer representation and as an educational tool for heterosexual audience members. By analyzing how these themes of masculinity and heteronormativity are portrayed, this chapter expand understandings of why *Heartstopper* has been so successful: it offers an explanation for why this media has impacted queer communities, how it acts as an educational tool for heterosexual viewers, and how other productions can learn from the world creation and narrative of *Heartstopper* when creating new forms of queer media.

CHAPTER IV

HOMOPHOBIA AND MENTAL HEALTH

The second representational theme I will be investigating is homophobia and mental health. Within this theme, my goal is to establish a connection between homophobia and heteronormativity using academic sources. Then, I conduct an analysis of instances where heteronormativity and homophobia reinforce each other within *Heartstopper* in order to discuss the social effects of heteronormativity/homophobia, both in *Heartstopper* and in "real" life. The impacts of homophobia include deteriorations in mental health and wellness as well as patterns of self-harm and suicidal ideation. As a researcher, I consider these to be deeply important topics to delve into; however, I recognize that the content of this chapter may be triggering for some readers. To protect readers' well-being, I share this acknowledgement of discussions of self-harm in these following pages, but there are no graphic descriptions or depictions of self-harm. There is, however, a dissection of homophobic rhetoric.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Within this literature review, I will be examining the interactions and reinforcements of heteronormativity and homophobia, with special attention to their social effects, impact on mental health, and connections to self-harm. This literature review reveals how heteronormative assumptions work hand-in-hand with homophobic rhetoric to reinforce each other, which allows for heteronormativity to move past a societal norm and into a hegemonic, 'natural' belief. Prior research into the psychology and history of heteronormativity are included here to demonstrate how this ideal has permeated not only our current media world, but also our historical understanding and portrayal of queer identities.

Homophobia and heteronormativity operate as a reinforcing spiral to maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate the hegemonic ideals of society. As originally defined by George Weinberg (1972), homophobia means "the irrational condemnation of homosexual individuals, which results in violence, deprivation, and separation." However, this definition is contested for a variety of reasons. As explained by Yolanda Dreyer (2007) the suffix *-phobia* suggests the use of *phobia* as a noun, which is defined as, an extreme or irrational fear of or aversion to something. But, in homophobia, *phobia is* being used in the combined form (because it is a suffix in this case), which is defined as, extreme or irrational fear or dislike of a specified group or thing. This definition expands our understanding of homophobia from being an extreme or irrational fear to irrational fear or dislike of a group or thing. This clarification addresses a common misconception that homophobia is rooted in fear of gay people, rather than condemnation of homosexuality and queer identities, and expands homophobia from being an innate trait, to an acquired opinion. This is an important clarification to make when discussing internalized homophobia, because we are discussing perceived condemnation based on sexual identity, and not specifically the fear of self, but a fear and suppression of a part of identity.

Homophobia was first coined by psychologist George Weinberg in 1967. During this time, homosexuality was outlawed in the United States, except for a few states that had decriminalized homosexuality, by 1973 (Weinmeyer, 2014). In the United Kingdom, homosexuality had been decriminalized in 1967 for men over 21 years of age (*Regulating*, n.d.). The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, was passed in the UK (Marriage, n.d.), allowing for the first legal same sex marriages to occur in March of 2014. The United States follows soon after in 2015 with the supreme court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which made marriage equality the law in all 50 states (*The Journey*, n.d.). However, LGBT+ rights and cultural

practices still frequently debated in United States politics and legislature. As reported by the Human Rights Campaign, there have been a record breaking over 520 “anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced in state legislatures” (Peele, 2023). Over 220 of these bills attacked or targeted specifically trans and non-binary identities. The Human Rights Campaign breaks down the specific statistics of the legislature, but it includes bans on trans individuals playing sports, drag bans, bans on educational content in classrooms, bans on books, and bans on gender affirming care for minors (Peele, 2023). All of this legislation proves that, even though major progress has been made in general LGBT+ acceptance, there is still discrimination and prejudice. While social change is mainly noted in large events, like the legalization of same-sex marriage, there is an undercurrent of smaller events happening on a day to day basis that subvert the social mechanics that maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate both homophobia and heteronormativity.

Within this thesis I have heavily implied that heteronormativity and homophobia work in a reciprocal and reinforcing manner, where heteronormativity is maintained and justified by homophobia and vice versa. This means that when we are discussing heteronormativity, we are also discussing the manner in which heteronormativity is reinforced by homophobia, because homophobic rhetoric serves to reinforce and reassert the power of heteronormativity, which creates a system where both homophobic rhetoric and heteronormative work to reinforce and maintain each other in a cyclical fashion.

This means that heteronormativity and homophobic rhetoric work to reinforce societal standards, leaving members of LGBT+ communities more vulnerable to mental health disorders. Prejudice and stigma against minority groups works to maintain dominant roles of power, by socially othering. This social othering is often reinforced by homophobic rhetoric and entrenches the ‘problem’ of homosexuality onto the queer individual rather than onto society as a whole,

which allows for internalization of these norms. This can lead to issues with mental health that are associated with heteronormativity, internalized homophobia, and homophobic rhetoric.

Discussions of mental health surrounding LGBT+ communities are often framed under the minority stress model, which is used to understand and explain elevated levels of mental health disorders within the LGBT+ community. Ilan Meyer, the first psychologist to apply minority stress to the LGBT+ community, discusses the minority stress model as a way of "explaining that stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful environment that causes mental health problems" (2003). Meyer is also the first to coin the term minority stress just a few years earlier, as "psychological stress derived from minority status…based on the premise that gat people alike members of other minority groups, are subjected to chronic stress related to their stigmatization" (1995, p. 38). His future research would look to place minority stress in conversation with physiological and psychological health outcomes.

In his 2003 article Meyer addresses the two common hypotheses for health disparities in minorities: the social selection hypothesis and the social causation hypothesis. The social selection hypothesis theorizes that health disparities are inherent to minority status (Meyer, 2003). Conversely, the social causation hypothesis theorizes that health disparities are due to social stressors and situations that lead to poor health (Meyer, 2003). The minority stress model is an extension of the social causation hypothesis, clarifying that the social stressors and situations compound over time to create chronic stress, which then leads to differing health outcomes over time (Meyer, 2003). The minority stress model has three central tenets: (1) minority status leads to increased exposure to distal stressors, (2) minority status leads to increased exposure to proximal stressors, due to distal stressors, and (3) minority individuals suffer from adverse health outcomes which are caused by exposure to proximal and distal

stressors (Meyer, 2003). Distal stressors are external prejudice or discrimination towards a person. Proximal stressors are a person's internal or subjective response (Meyer, 2003). The minority stress model is one of the most commonly used models to understand and discuss mental health disparities in LGBT+ identifying individuals, except no comprehensive theoretical model has been created for the theory (Rivas-Koehl et al., 2023).

However, two advances within this research seem to be working towards such a comprehensive model. Jeanette Bergfeld and Eddie Chiu (2017) investigate potential mediators for minority stress, and Brian Feinstien (2019) considers rejection sensitivity as a framework for understanding the minority stress model and minority mental health. However, it is important to note that the framework proposed by Feinstien (2019) has caused some controversy and debate in the field. Ultimately, the debate between Feinstien (2019), Meyer et al., (2021), and J. Michael Bailey (2019) seems to boil down to a nature versus nurture debate. Bailey (2019) acknowledges that environment may not be the only factor in mental health disparities and pointed to using familial interviews and mental health assessments to gain an understanding of the prevalence of familial mental illness in LGBT+ individuals. However, as Meyer et al., (2021) argues, biology is not the only factor in the development of mental illness and that the environment must be closely studied.

Although a comprehensive framework has yet to be created for the minority stress model, debate internally in the field acts as a tool for the procuration of a comprehensive model. Encouraging tests of validity and alternative explanations for the mental health disparity among minorities moves the field forward by curating the most accurate model for addressing such nuance and theories.

As discussed under the minority stress model, long chronic stress, due to prejudice and discrimination stemming from heteronormativity and homophobia, leaves members of LGBT+ communities more likely to experience or develop mental illness. As researched by Bockting et al. (2013), LGBT+ individuals are subject to social stigma that presents in discrimination, verbal harassment, social exclusions and physical violence. Jaclyn White Hughto et al. (2015) studied the experience of distress in LGBT+ individuals, as predicted by the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003). The higher prevalence of mental and physical health disparities was researched by Rachel Sandfort et al. (2006). Ronald Kessler et al. (2007) hypothesized that LGBT+ adolescents are most vulnerable due to their developmental stage, and this was confirmed by Graham (2011), who found that LGBT+ individuals had higher risks of negative mental and physical health outcomes. Furthermore, Marshal et al. (2011) found that LGBT+ teens and adolescents are twice as likely to consider suicide and three times as likely to attempt suicide as compared to heterosexual peers. Bryan & Mayock (2016) added to the conversation that of LGBT+ individuals who had attempted suicide 46.7% "felt that their first suicide attempt was related directly or primarily ('very related' or 'very much related') to their LGBT identification" (p. 73). Expanding the scope of these discussions, Jadva et al. (2023) investigated the risk factors of self harm in LGBT+ youth. These authors found that 65.3% of respondents reported self-harm, and that bullying was associated with an increased risk, while a positive school environment posed a decreased risk. Furthermore, Parker & Harriger found that adolescent gay males were at a higher risk of developing disordered eating patterns/habits and clinical eating disorders. The Trevor Project conducted a national survey (*National,* 2019) and found that approximately 39% of LGBT+ adolescents/teems have contemplated suicide and 71% percent reported experiencing discrimination. Lastly, Amy Gower et al. (2018) investigated the effects of

LGBT+ discrimination, bullying, and violence, and found that these experiences of discrimination, bullying, and violence had a negative effect on learning and general academic achievement (Gower et al., 2018). All of this research shows that exposure to high levels of stress due to LGBT+ status can have long lasting, and sometimes permanent, effects on members of the LGBT+ community, further proving the damaging effects of heteronormativity and homophobia.

ANALYSIS

HOMOPHOBIA

To start this analysis, I will highlight instances in *Heartstopper* where heteronormativity and homophobic rhetoric interact and reinforce each other. Throughout the series, we see a variety of examples of homophobic rhetoric and heteronormativity working hand in hand. One of the first instances that the audience gets to see this interaction occurs in season one episode two:

> S1E2: Nick and Imogen chat outside the school gates before school, the Rugby boys are behind Nick.
>
> [Nick has typed a message to Charlie that reads: 'Soooo I was wondering if you wanted to hang out again this weekend', when Imogen sits next to Nick]:
>
> 243 00:16:12 - 00:16:13
> [Imogen] Who are you texting?
>
> 244 00:16:15 - 00:16:16
> [Nick] Your mum?
>
> 245 00:16:16 - 00:16:18
> [laughter]
>
> 246 00:16:18 - 00:16:21
> [Imogen] Whoa. Great joke, Nicholas. Who are you texting?
>
> 247 00:16:22 - 00:16:23
> [Nick] Don't.
>
> 248 00:16:23 - 00:16:26

-[Imogen] Come on, whose DMs have you slid into?
- [Nick] I haven't. God.

249 00:16:27 - 00:16:29
[Imogen] Well, okay, fine.

250 00:16:29 - 00:16:31
[Imogen] He's definitely chirpsing someone.

251 00:16:31 - 00:16:33
[lewd laughter]
[Nick deletes entire message]

(Oseman, 2022, S1E2, 16:12-16:33)

In this scene, there is British slang that needs to be defined to fully understand the implications of this scene. According to the Cambridge dictionary, chirpse is defined as, “to talk to someone in a way that shows you are sexually attracted to them” (n.d.). Within this scene Imogen has assumed that Nick is flirting with someone, implied by both lines 248 and 250. Nick deletes the message at the end of this interaction. There are a few speculative reasons why he might do this. Firstly, at this point in the story Nick has begun to feel attraction to Charlie but has not acknowledged what that means. Further, Nick is aware that Imogen, and the rest of the group, assume he is straight and his relationship with Charlie is platonic. Regardless, at the end of the scene, we see Nick delete the message and begin to look stressed and upset (Oseman, 2022, S1E2, 16:31-16:33). Clearly this interaction affected Nick, which I theorize as one of the first times where he realizes that maybe his feelings for Charlie are more than platonic, because of the unspoken assumptions of Imogen and his friend group.

However, within the next episode, Nick and Charlie navigate Harry Greene’s birthday party. When this scene occurs, after Nick’s friends have made him talk to Tara Jones in hopes to rekindle the one kiss they had, Nick discovers that Tara is a lesbian:

S1E3: Harry and friends, some of which are rugby boys, approach Nick

200 00:11:00 - 00:11:03
[Harry] Hey, look who's by himself. Nick! Where you going?

201 00:11:04 - 00:11:06
[Nick] I'm going to go find Charlie.

202 00:11:06 - 00:11:08
What, that nerdy little Year 10?

203 00:11:08 - 00:11:09
Why do you even hang out with him?

204 00:11:10 - 00:11:11
-He's my friend.
-[Harry] But why?

205 00:11:11 - 00:11:13
[Harry] Do you feel sorry for him 'cause he's gay?

206 00:11:13 - 00:11:15
[boys laughing]

207 00:11:15 - 00:11:16
[Nick] What?

208 00:11:16 - 00:11:18
[Harry] Oh, my God, no, wait, wait.

209 00:11:18 - 00:11:19
Do you think he has a crush on you?

210 00:11:20 - 00:11:21
[laughter]

211 00:11:21 - 00:11:23
Oh, my God, how sad.

212 00:11:27 - 00:11:29
[Nick] That's homophobic, Harry.

213 00:11:30 - 00:11:32
[Harry chuckles nervously] Come on, mate.

214 00:11:32 - 00:11:34
And I really don't like you.

215 00:11:36 - 00:11:37
Happy birthday.

(Oseman, 2022, S1E3, 11:00-11:37)

In this scene the audience is exposed to some of the bullying and assumptions that are made about Charlie. In line 205, Harry implies that Nick should feel sorry for Charlie because of his sexual identity. This implication assumes that Charlie is deserving of pity for his identity, and most importantly, the unspoken message is that Charlie is 'less than' for being gay, which makes him deserving of sympathy and pity. This works to socially 'other' Charlie and any other queer peers they have. Additionally, Harry states that Charlie's crush on Nick is sad in lines 209-211. This is a direct exposure to heterosexist-heteronormativity, which asserts that homosexuality is subordinate to heterosexuality and works to position the heterosexual as natural and the homosexual as unnatural, wrong, or deviant. With both statements, lines 205 and 209-211, Harry positions Charlie as subordinate to himself and Nick because of his sexual identity, and because Harry assumes that Nick is also straight. This is not the last time that Harry uses homophobic rhetoric to assert his social position, but this is the first time that Nick has openly pushed back against his tactics. A similar tactic is used in:

S1E5: Charlie and Tao exit the school gates when Harry throws something at Charlie

114 00:04:45 --> 00:04:47
[Nick] Harry, don't start.

115 00:04:47 --> 00:04:50
[Harry] What? Are you best friends with these weird little Year 10s now?

116 00:04:50 --> 00:04:52
[Nick] Just stop picking on people for no reason.

117 00:04:52 --> 00:04:55
[Harry] Aw! Are you gay for them? [laughing]

118 00:04:55 --> 00:04:56

[Tao] Classic Harry.

119 00:04:56 --> 00:04:59
Resorting to homophobia when you can't think of a good comeback.

(Oseman, 2022, S1E5, 04:45-04:59)

This scene is presumably the first time in which Nick is called ‘gay’ in a derogatory nature since questioning his sexuality. What makes this scene quite interesting for analysis is the context that occurs at the end of episode 4 and the beginning of episode 5, during which Imogen asks Nick out on a date, and he accepts (Oseman, 2022). Just before the beginning of the selected scene, Harry and Nick are talking about his date with Imogen (Oseman, 2022, S1E5). Harry’s intention in line 117 is not to genuinely ask Nick about his sexuality, but as a reminder of how Nick’s social status could change if he continues to defend Charlie and Tao. What Harry doesn’t understand is that this is more than just a social status threat to Nick, it is also foreshadowing of how perceptions about a person can change after coming out of the closet. For Nick, this is the first time he has been called ‘gay’ derogatorily and this is the first time that he is aware that this jab, and its indication to social status, now applies to him. Even further, Nick is exposed to how his rugby friends act as bystanders to the event.

The next scene I will analyze is the only instance of a slur occurring in *Heartstopper*. In season 1 episode 7, Nick and Charlie decide to go to the movies with Nick’s friends, under the belief that Ben and Harry will not be in attendance. However, Ben and Harry both attend the movie night and there are a couple of off-handed homophobic and heteronormative comments from Harry, including, “Oi. Just look at him [Charlie] behind him [Nick]. Like a little girl” (Oseman, 2022, S1E7, 03:11-03:14), and “Why can’t any of you ever bring a girl with you?” (Oseman, 2022, S1E7, 03:27-03:30). The case above shows how Harry uses homophobic rhetoric to reinforce his social status and further reinforcing the status quo and expectation of

heterosexuality. However, this next case is unique, as this is the first time that Nick actually puts Harry's social dominance to the test. Leading up to the fight scene, Harry decides to interrogate Charlie's gayness with questions about his type and if he has a crush on Nick or not (Oseman, 2022, S1E7, 05:23-06:22). Nick is the only one of the boys to attempt to shut down Harry's invasive line of questioning (Oseman, 2022, S1E7, 05:35-06:02). When Charlie has to leave, Nick walks him out of the theater outside to apologize for Harry's behavior and the other boy's silence (Oseman, 2022, S1E7, 06:30-06:50). When Nick returns the following scene occurs:

S1E7: Nick confronts Harry, and friends, after Charlie's departure:

154 00:08:23 - 00:08:25
[Nick]Go on then. What's your problem with Charlie?

155 00:08:26 --> 00:08:28
[Harry] He doesn't exactly fit in with us, does he?

156 00:08:29 --> 00:08:32
He can't play rugby, he's got this weird friend [Tao] who won't leave me alone.

157 00:08:33 --> 00:08:35
You can't just bring some gay boy into our group

158 00:08:35 --> 00:08:37
and expect us all to immediately love him.

159 00:08:37 --> 00:08:39
[Nick] So this is a problem with him being gay?

160 00:08:39 --> 00:08:41
[Harry] Come on, none of us are being homophobic.

161 00:08:41 --> 00:08:43
[Nick] Just shut up, Harry!

162 00:08:43 --> 00:08:45
You made him so uncomfortable with your gay questions.

163 00:08:45 --> 00:08:48
[Harry] Someone really needs to learn to take a joke.

164 00:08:48 --> 00:08:50
[Nick] But you weren't joking though, were you?

165 00:08:50 --> 00:08:51
You saw the perfect opportunity

166 00:08:51 --> 00:08:54
to make someone feel miserable and humiliated, as usual.

167 00:08:54 --> 00:08:57
[Harry] I'm sure he can deal with it. He's probably used to it by now.

168 00:08:57 --> 00:08:58
[Harry and group chuckles]

169 00:08:59 --> 00:09:00
Aw. You're getting so angry.[Harry shoves Nick]

170 00:09:00 --> 00:09:03
You can't help wanting to protect him, can you?

171 00:09:03 --> 00:09:05
Because he's a pathetic little fag.

172 00:09:06 --> 00:09:08
[Nick punches Harry and a fight ensues]
[boys exclaiming]

(Oseman, 2022, S1E7, 08:23-09:08)

This scene is the most obvious example of outright homophobia within the show. Harry's lines about Charlie begin with sentiments of othering and belittling, until he says lines 157-158. In which the sentiment changes, when Harry states that Charlie's identity as a gay man, is why the 'group' doesn't accept Charlie. I think that it is important to note, Harry is the only one speaking. So, while this is technically only Harry's personal thoughts or prejudice, no one in the group – besides Nick – stops Harry or intervenes. This leaves the audience and Nick to view their silence as acceptance and compliance with Harry's implications and behavior. As the interaction progresses, Harry perpetuates more heterosexist-heteronormative assumptions and norms with

lines 167. This line implies that Charlie is deserving of 'feeling miserable and humiliated', because he should be 'used to it' (Oseman, 2022, S1E7, 08:51-08:57). This shows that Harry not only expects Charlie to tolerate his behavior, but that others should treat Charlie in the same way, and that Charlie deserves to feel that way because of his sexuality. This has massive implications for mental health. Harry does not stop here and continues, with lines 170 and 171, by stating that Charlie needs protecting, is pathetic, little, and a fag (Oseman, 2022, S1E7, 09:00-09:05). This is an assertion of hard power from heterosexism that asserts that LGBT+ identities are inherently subservient to heterosexual identities. His lines work to belittle LGBT+ identities, and to agitate Nick. As established above, Nick's friend group is operating off the assumption that Nick is straight, so when Harry says the f-slur, it is overlooked that this slur can apply to Nick, or other group members, as well. This is one of the ways in which heteronormativity and homophobic rhetoric work to reinforce and maintain each other.

While there is no way to definitively say what motivated Nick to punch Harry, as a researcher I think it's important to acknowledge the nuances of motivations he may have had. Firstly, in general the use of a slur, as an attack, is the largest motivating factor. Secondly, he is protecting Charlie and himself. Lastly, and potentially most importantly, Nick communicates a very clear message to the group: behavior like Harry's is unacceptable, and Nick is more than willing to express his distaste physically (in comparison to his bystanding peers and continuously bullied, Charlie).

While physical altercations are not usually productive in nature, in this context physicality and embodied communication permits the message to clearly be sent to Harry and the rest of the group. Slurs and homophobia are not acceptable, and certainly not around Nick. Part of the reason why this unspoken communication seems to be so important is that Nick is

operating under the veil of heteronormativity. It seems, through this interaction and others, that homophobia is an expected thought and behavioral pattern from Harry. Further, his group of friends does not call out this behavior in the way that Nick does. As I mentioned earlier, this is the first time that Harry's social dominance tactics are truly tested and result in social consequences. Because Nick has only previously told Harry to stop or attempting to distract Harry, this punch seems to come as a surprise to Harry and the remainder of the boys. After this interaction, it appears that the other boys do eventually join in and break apart the fight. The audience does not know the direct aftermath between the boys. However, in season two we discover the actual repercussions for Harry's behavior and the other bystanders. Nick distances himself from his friends (Sai, Christian, and Otis) within the group who did not stand up for Charlie (Oseman, 2023, S2E3, 01:16-02:02), and Nick ignores and dismisses Harry (Oseman, 2023, S2E3, 22:18-11:55). Further, Sai, Christian, and Otis also cut their friendship off with Harry over this incident (Oseman, 2023, S2E3, 01:29-01:48). The final consequence that the audience sees for Harry is Charlie's denial of his apology for previous homophobic behavior, and the exclusion of Harry from Tara's birthday party in Paris (Oseman, 2023, S2E7, 18:48-19:31).

MENTAL HEALTH

Now that a connection between homophobic rhetoric and heteronormativity has been established, I will turn to the social and mental health effects of heteronormativity. To begin this conversation, I will be looking mainly at the mental health of Charlie Spring, as his struggle with mental health as it relates to homophobia is displayed the most. It is important to address the effects of heteronormativity, to understand how this ideology affects members of this minority group. Much like how homophobic rhetoric and heteronormativity work to reinforce each other,

the effects of heteronormativity (like mental health) also work to maintain heteronormativity and heterosexism. While the disease model of sexuality has long been abandoned in academic circles, the stigma from the AIDs crisis (specifically towards gay men), the echoes of psychological demonology (16th-18th century belief that mental illness is caused by demons), and the classification of homosexuality as a mental illness, is still present. LGBT+ identifying people are significantly more likely to experience mental illnesses. The connotation that comes with increased mental health issues in the LGBT+ community, is often used as a justification for the treatment that LGBT+ individuals face. This is one of the contradictions of heteronormativity; LGBT+ individuals are more likely to experience mental health issues because of prejudice and heteronormativity but are then blamed for the existence of said mental illness. This turns the blame back onto the LGBT+ individual and devaluing the severity of the mental illness and the experience of the LGBT+ identifying person. This devaluing of mental health issues within LGBT+ communities works to reinforce heterosexist standards of heterosexual superiority. Further, homosexuality was previously labeled as a mental illness by the psychologists who contributed to the creation of the first Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-I, 1950s). This was removed in the second publication of the DSM, nearly 25 years later, meaning that there is a historical stigma of viewing homosexuality as a mental illness.

As discussed in depth and analyzed in the previous chapter, Ben Hope deals with internalized homophobia, which ends up being projected outwards towards Charlie and results in a host of damaging mental health effects. It is important to note that at the beginning of the series and throughout the series, Charlie experiences bullying in school from his peers. While the audience is privy to flashbacks and commentary about Charlie's outing, it is not something the audience gets to witness. The audience doesn't need to witness the bullying to understand the

deep and long-lasting impact this has had on Charlie's mental health. As established earlier, heteronormativity and homophobic rhetoric work together to reinforce and maintain social norms. In Charlie's case, experiencing verbal abuse about his sexuality has manifested—canonically, this is in the comic books, but only briefly touched on in the episodes—in OCD and anorexia nervosa. While this is what Charlie is officially diagnosed with, I speculate that Charlie has also dealt with anxiety, PTSD, and depression because of his peers' reaction to Charlie's subversion of heteronormativity and the subsequent homophobic rhetoric that was used against Charlie. Most of this speculation on my part comes from the visuals of the show, and not the spoken dialogue. In scenes with Charlie in the hallway or locker room, he is visibly nervous and even seems to cave his body in to better blend into the other boys. Further, Charlie hyper focuses on Nick's coming out wanting it to be perfect "I'm gonna do everything I can to make sure Nick doesn't have to deal with what I did. I can protect him. I can make sure he never feels pressured or stressed or scared" (Oseman, 2023, S2E1, 27:48-28:08). Within this line it is implied that Charlie experienced all the negative things he listed and is attempting to shield Nick from the same situations and same emotional repercussions: pressure, stress, and fear.

The repercussions of Charlie's experience with being outed and bullied affected him deeply. There are a couple of scenes in which Charlie opens up about his emotions that display how his experiences have affected him. The first scene in which this occurs is S1E6, where Charlie is discussing the recent fights with Harry with his sister Tori:

> S1E6: Tori and Charlie
>
> 13 00:01:21 - 00:01:23
> [Charlie] Before I met Nick, I was sort of
>
> 14 00:01:24 - 00:01:26
> going out with this other guy [referring to Ben Hope].
>
> 15 00:01:28 - 00:01:29

I liked him, but...

16 00:01:31 - 00:01:34
he made me feel like I was ruining his life.

17 00:01:34 - 00:01:36
Like he didn't want me to even exist.

18 00:01:39 - 00:01:41
And now Nick's lost all his friends,

19 00:01:41 - 00:01:43
and he's getting into fights because of me.

20 00:01:44 - 00:01:46
And I just feel like

21 00:01:47 - 00:01:49
maybe I do just ruin people's lives.

22 00:01:52 - 00:01:54
And it would be better if I didn't exist.

23 00:01:57 - 00:01:58
[sniffling]

24 00:02:02 - 00:02:04
[Tori] You're not ruining my life.

25 00:02:05 - 00:02:06
[sobs quietly]

26 00:02:06 - 00:02:07
Thanks.

27 00:02:11 - 00:02:13
I could make us some pizza for dinner?

28 00:02:14 - 00:02:15
Would that help?

29 00:02:18 - 00:02:19
I'm not very hungry.

30 00:02:20 - 00:02:21
I might just eat later.

(Oseman, 2022, S1E6, 01:21-02:21)

Within this scene, the audience becomes aware of just how much his relationship with Ben and experience with Ben's internalized homophobia affected Charlie. This is the first instance where we hear the effects of Ben's actions. This validates the research that those who experience internalized homophobia are more likely to be perpetrators of intimate partner violence, therefore making the partner more likely to experience negative mental health effects (Badnes-Ribera et al., 2019; Gold et al., 2007). As discussed in the literature review, extended periods of stress due to LGBT+ identity raises the risk of suicidality (Marshal et al., 2013; Bryan & Mayock, 2016: Jadva et al., 2021; National, 2019). Within lines 21-22, Charlie expresses a suicidal ideation that things would be better if he 'didn't exist' (Oseman, 2022, S1E6, 01:52-01:54). Oseman is able to expose the severity of the effects of homophobia through Charlie. Lastly, line 30 is the first time where Charlie's disordered eating is verbally addressed. Prior to this scene, the audience only sees Charlie's struggles with eating (Oseman, 2022, S1E1, 09:14; 12:10). In season two episode five, Charlie passes out while on a school field trip, presumably from not eating enough through the day. After Charlie has woken up and been taken care of by the adult chaperones, Nick and Charlie have the following conversation:

S2E5: Nick and Charlie discussing Charlie passing out

388 00:24:07 - 00:24:08
[Nick] Charlie.

389 00:24:12 - 00:24:14
I've noticed you, uh, don't really eat a lot.

390 00:24:15 - 00:24:17
Um... Generally.

391 00:24:18 - 00:24:19
Or...

392 00:24:19 - 00:24:22
I don't know. It kinda feels like it's gotten worse lately?

393 00:24:23 - 00:24:25
Like, I feel like you eat less than you used to.

394 00:24:29 - 00:24:29
[Charlie]Yeah.

395 00:24:32 - 00:24:34
-I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.
-Hey, no.

396 00:24:36 - 00:24:38
[Nick] You have nothing to be sorry about. I just...

397 00:24:39 - 00:24:40
I wanna understand.

398 00:24:50 - 00:24:52
[Charlie] I know I don't eat like normal people.

399 00:24:53 - 00:24:58
Some days I'm fine, but other days I feel like I need to...

400 00:25:01 - 00:25:02
control it.

401 00:25:04 - 00:25:09
I used to do it a lot last year, when everything at school was really bad.

402 00:25:12 - 00:25:16
Sometimes it feels like the only thing I can control in my life.

403 00:25:20 - 00:25:21
That makes zero sense. You can forget I said--

404 00:25:21 - 00:25:22
[Nick] It does make sense.

405 00:25:24 - 00:25:26
Okay, maybe I don't totally get it, but...

406 00:25:28 - 00:25:30
I still wanna know if you're feeling like that.

407 00:25:30 - 00:25:31
If you're having a bad day,

408 00:25:31 - 00:25:36
or... if there's anything that I can do to make things less stressful.

409 00:25:36 - 00:25:38
Cheering you up.

410 00:25:38 - 00:25:40
I'm your boyfriend, Charlie.

(Oseman, 2023, S2E5, 24:07-25:40)

In this scene, the reasoning behind Charlie's abnormal eating is more clearly exposed. Rather than just brushing off a meal with his sister, Charlie actually opens up about *why* he has struggles eating. Specifically, within lines 401-402 where Charlie describes how he used to do it more frequently, as a coping mechanism while being bullied. Charlie felt, due to this hostile environment, that the only thing he had control over was food (Oseman, 2023, S2E5, 25:12-25:16). Charlie's direct experience with heteronormativity and homophobia took away his control in social situations. As explained in the minority stress model, experiences of minority groups expose members to long term and often chronic stress (Meyer, 2003; Parker & Harriger 2020). Charlie acts as an example of detrimental mental health issues due to long term chronic stress, unique to minority groups like the LGBT+ and POC (people of color) communities. The last instance in which Charlie openly discusses the effect that homophobia and bullying have had on him is in S2E8, where Nick asks Charlie to talk about being bullied:

S2E8: Nick and Charlie discuss Charlie's experience being bullied

505 00:30:25 --> 00:30:28
[Charlie] Someone just heard Tao talking about me coming out.

506 00:30:30 --> 00:30:33
I think it surprised me how homophobic people were.

507 00:30:35 --> 00:30:37

I thought things were better nowadays.

508 00:30:43 --> 00:30:46
People would just call me disgusting to my face.

509 00:30:53 --> 00:30:54
And it went on for so long

510 00:30:54 --> 00:30:57
that I think I started to believe what they were saying.

511 00:31:02 --> 00:31:04
It made me really hate myself.

512 00:31:10 --> 00:31:11
So much that I...

513 00:31:16 --> 00:31:16
I used to...

514 00:31:26 --> 00:31:28
I used to cut myself sometimes.

515 00:31:35 --> 00:31:36
I don't wanna feel like that anymore.

516 00:31:54 --> 00:31:56
[Nick] Do you still do that now?

517 00:31:57 --> 00:31:58
[Charlie] No.

(Oseman, 2023, S2E8, 30:25-31:58)

Displaying a scene like this in the media is extremely important to educating the heterosexual audience to the realities of experiencing prejudice due to minority status. This allows those who are not queer and/or do not personally know a gay or trans person, to see and experience the detrimental effects of heteronormativity and homophobia on the LGBT+ individual. Furthermore, as discussed in the second chapter, *Heartstopper* approaches these topics with rose colored glasses, making it clear to audiences that, even though characters are experiencing very

serious social norms and expectations, everything will be okay. This is a key part of playing to a queer audience: allowing a realistic but optimistic story for LGBT+ viewers to experience.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have analyzed the themes of homophobia and mental health as they are represented in academic literature and *Heartstopper*. Through this analysis I have established how Oseman deconstructs and reconstructs element of heteronormativity as it applies to homophobic rhetoric and mental health effects. This world building method is similar to the method used in the previous theme, deconstruction via exposure followed by reconstruction; but, the theme of homophobia and mental health happen on a different timeline. With subtle exposures in the beginning of season one to more concrete exposures in the latter half of season one and through season two. The reconstructive process for this tenet of heteronormativity has only just begun in the end of season two and will likely continue into season three. This chapter has shown how Oseman created the world of *Heartstopper* and how these creation methods address important aspects of heteronormativity, while working to expand on the success of this media. This analysis has displayed how *Heartstopper* works as queer representation and as an educational tool for heterosexual audiences. Analyzing how these themes are displayed, offers an explanation for the impacts on queer communities, the educational opportunity for this media with heterosexual audiences, and how similar productions can learn from the world creation methods and narrative of *Heartstopper* when creating new forms of queer media.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the series *Heartstopper*, demonstrating the importance of understanding its textual and production contexts with respect to the future of LGBT+ programming. Through an investigation of key themes, I have explored *Hearstopper*'s particular interest in understanding queerness as both a mode of representation and a logic of production. To investigate the popularity and success of *Heartstopper* by analyzing elements of representation, I have employed many of the methods and goals pursued in critical discourse analysis. By discussing the production and general creation of the show, I have expanded upon the method and approach that producers may take in creating new queer media. In order to explain the impact that this show has had on queer communities and the general cultural phenomenon that *Heartstopper* created, I have analyzed and investigated instances of masculinity and depictions of internalized homophobia, as both deconstructions and reconstructions of heteronormativity. Lastly, I analyzed instances of homophobia and mental health as addressed within *Heartstopper*. This analysis contributes to understanding why representation has made *Heartstopper* a phenomenon, as well as to expanding understandings of the success of *Heartstopper* for three key groups: LGBT+ viewers, heterosexual viewers, and those who wish to produce queer media in the future.

As more queer media is released, following the success of *Heartstopper*, this kind of analytical and qualitative research can help to build awareness of why certain shows resonate with audiences. In addition, I hope that research of this nature is actually used in the processes of production and creation of queer media. Taking this kind of research seriously will aid in the creation of more reconstructive forms of queer representation by outlining the manner in which

queer narratives can be constructed to include accurate LGBT+ representation for heterosexual viewers. I look forward to a future when, with more queer media being produced, the elements of deconstruction will not need to be so heavily relied upon to create an intelligible queer romantic narrative. But in order to understand the larger cultural picture of *Heartstopper*, I must also consider how *Heartstopper* is resonating among the audience.

WIDENING THE SCOPE: KIT CONNOR

The instance of actor Kit Connor, who plays Nick Nelson, coming out gives insight into some of the limits of these ideas when it comes to the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in society. While *Heartstopper* has greatly changed how queer media portrays LGBT+ identities, relationships, and experiences, not all fans of the show took the messages and lessons to heart. Actor Kit Connor quickly rose to fame after his performance in *Heartstopper* as Nicholas "Nick" Nelson. After the premiere of the show and his rise to fame, Connor, like many of his costars, frequently used and interacted with fans through social media, mainly Twitter and TikTok. This means that Connor was privy to the assumptions and opinions of his fans, which came along with fans following Connor and his costars around and posting photos of them. One photo of Connor went viral within the fandom; in the photo, Connor is featured holding hands with Maia Reficco, an American actress, while filming for *A Cuban Girl's Guide to Tea and Tomorrow* (not yet released). The photo was then used as fuel for speculation about and around Kit Connor's sexuality and his relationship to Reficco. The speculation also comes from Connor's attendance at a pride event, *for Heartstopper*, earlier in the year. Crucially, this ambiguity only further fueled fan speculation leading to accusations of queerbaiting by hinting that he could be LGBT+, but never breaking far enough away from heteronormative standards and expectations to be perceived as LGBT+. In response to fans' hate posting and accusations after his departure

from Twitter, Connor came out as bisexual in a tweet that denounced fans of the show who accused him of queerbaiting as missing the point of the show.

Kit Connor's public coming out experience was mainly through the social media app Twitter. Connor's coming out experience featured two tweets: one announcing his departure from the app on September 12, 2022, "this is a silly app. bit bored of it now, deleting twitter :)" (Connor, 2022a). This was a tweet in response to accusations of queerbaiting that grew from Connor being seen holding hands with Reficco. After accusations increased, Connor tweeted on October 31, 2022, "back for a minute. i'm bi. Congrats for forcing an 18 year old to out himself. i think some of you missed the point of the show. Bye." (Connor, 2022b). Connor has yet to return to Twitter and has even deactivated his account. This unfortunately means that his tweets now only really exist in screenshots. Further, after his coming out, many people who accused Connor of queerbaiting deleted their tweets or even deactivated their own accounts.

The example of Kit Connor falls a bit outside of expectation for queerbaiting claims. In an interview with Charlotte Edwardes, for the *Guardian* (2023), Connor opened up about his coming out experience. Connor explained, "I knew that I was a queer man, but I didn't feel I wanted the world to know. Not because I was ashamed, but because it was private" (Edwardes, 2023). He had reflected similar sentiments in May 2022 on a podcast interview on "Reign with Josh Smith" in which Connor states:

> We're [the *Heartstopper* cast] still all so young and to start sort of speculating about our sexualities and maybe pressuring us to come out when maybe we're not ready, I mean for me, I just feel like I'm perfectly confident and comfortable with my sexuality, but I don't feel the need to really … label myself, especially not publicly. (Smith, 2022, 7:46-8:18).

Some of the expectation of his non-heterosexuality comes from portraying the character Nick Nelson, who is a bisexual male in a relationship with a gay man (Charlie Spring). Because there are so few representations of bisexual men in relationships with men in mainstream media, there was some confusion about Connor's sexuality, and this encouraged fans to speculate and prod. Throughout all of this confusion, the people involved in the production of *Heartstopper* have been very open about the fact that most actors and crew are part of the LGBT+ community.

Some fans on Twitter pointed to executive producers' statement that selecting actors who are part of LGBT+ communities was an important part of the casting process. As Euros Lyn and Pat Walters both describe for *Tudum*, "authentic" casting was a priority (Bitran, 2022). In this article it is clarified that authentic, in this context, refers to casting actors who had "an essence of that character in them" (Bitran, 2022). However, the fact that "authentic" appears four times within one paragraph implies that the term is being deployed to mean "truthful, accurate, or factual." Except, we can see how the vagueness of claim of "authenticity" could be interpreted within fan communities. As a result of the terms overuse, fans thought that Connor must be a queer-identifying individual in order to be "authentic." For those fans who interpreted Connor's hand-holding as "evidence" he was straight, this moment led to accusations of Connor being a straight man "queerbaiting" the fandom. In an unfortunate case of misunderstanding the word "authentic"—which performance studies scholars avoid due to this impossibility of deciding who is the arbiter when defining "authentic"—Connor was placed in an impossible scenario: compelled to come out before he was ready, or acquiescing to stay in the closet and have his reputation as an actor damaged by these claims.

Connor would not be the first, or the last, presumably straight person to play a queer character, but that didn't seem to matter to the fandom. What really mattered was that fandom

felt misrepresented or duped by Connor's ambiguous sexual identity, when they had been promised "authentic" casting. This assumes that each character in *Heartstopper* could only be played by an actor with the same sexual identity, which was not the intent of the producers, nor is that accurate with respect to the remainder of the cast. Pointing to why the idea of authenticity in casting —which they are not using in the way of its only queer people involved— is being interpreted in that way by nature of the larger discourse of heteronormativity and how we understand its relevancy for politics. Therefore, everything that happens to Connor is a byproduct of heteronormativity, in which people think this claim of authenticity *must* mean he is queer, and when he instead appears with a woman, fans began to suggest that he is somehow queerbaiting.

This also points to a misuse and misunderstanding of the term queerbaiting. As discussed previously, queerbaiting is a media industry practice that occurs within the creation of media. But fans took this term and applied it outside of the media creation context and to a real-life person. Accusations of queerbaiting act as a probe of sexual orientation, in which the implication is that a queer person is forced to come out or that a heterosexual person is acting outside the "norm," implying a negative connotation toward nonnormative behavior, and subsequently a negative reaction from LGBT+ communities surrounding that person. Connor fell victim to heteronormative standards by not presenting "queer" enough, while fans speculated about his heterosexual identity due to his romantic relationship with Reficco.

This points to a niche kind of heteronormativity that erases and invalidates polysexual identities, meaning attraction to multiple genders, such as bisexuality and pansexuality. This heteronormative assumption stems from the idea that everyone is monosexual (attracted to one gender) and is enacted through methods experienced by Connor. His queer identity was

invalidated and erased due to a seemingly heterosexual relationship (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). This is commonly discussed within LGBT+ communities and in some academic literature as *bi erasure* (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Bi erasure acts as the method through which this heteronormative standard is enacted, upheld, and reproduced in society.

This points to a societal friction and pressure occurring through the lens of this media. Because Connor felt the need to respond in this way, it demonstrates in some ways the pressures that are created while framing a text as "authentic". *Heartstopper* is a piece of queer media that has been globally released to a heteronormative society. Because *Heartstopper* acts as a form of nonnormative representation, friction around the show is to be expected. Due to Kit Connor's parasocial relationship with his fans, his attendance in the Pride parade for *Heartstopper'*s float at London Pride 2022, speculation of a relationship with Maia Reficco, the overuse of the word "authentic" in press surrounding *Heartstopper*, and the unexpected popularity of the show (Edwardes, 2023), a perfect storm was created to place Connor as the societal friction of this media. Connor's story acts as a warning to those who would create or star in queer media: no matter how clear the messaging may be, there may still be detrimental effects for members of the community. Although *Heartstopper* deconstructed and reconstructed notions of heteronormativity, this media exists in a heteronormative society. So while some may learn lessons from queer media, there is always the opportunity for some to ignore lessons or believe that they do not apply to them because they are queer themselves or that celebrities *owe* their identity to their audience.

Just about a year after coming out, Connor discussed the decision to post his tweets in a few interviews with Edwardes (2023). Connor talked about how he has changed as a person, and how his coming out tweet has affected him (Edwardes, 2023). Connor talked about not feeling

regret about coming out but wishes he had been able to do it another way (Edwardes, 2023). He reflected on the tweet saying that "forced" was not the most accurate word in hindsight, but that it reflects how he felt in the moment (Edwardes, 2023). Connor reflected on the time by describing the family nature of the *Heartstopper* cast and crew supporting him as best as possible (Edwardes, 2023).

While Connor experienced a difficult situation that placed social pressure on him to come out, the reception to his coming out and the coverage of his coming out shows how social change can come from Connor's experience and how *Heartstopper* can be used as an educational tool for those outside of the fandom and LGBT+ culture. This moment taught many people that it is vital, in interactions with LGBT+ communities and people, to come from a place of goodwill and kindness, and it educated viewers on the potential negative social effects that result from coming out. While Connor's experience does not reflect the message of the show—that no queer induvial should ever feel pressured to come out before they are ready— there is still a basis of etiquette that *Heartstopper* teaches around engaging with LGBT+ communities and coming-out experiences.

Importantly, the creatives who worked on this media appear to whole-heartedly believe the messages within *Heartstopper* and to express distaste when others do not. This can be seen through Oseman's response to Connor's tweet "I truly don't understand how people can watch Heartstopper and then gleefully spend their time speculating about sexualities and judging based on stereotypes. I hope all those people are embarrassed as FUCK. Kit you are amazing 💖" (Oseman, 2023b). This belief and perspective are very telling about the creation of *Heartstopper* and the importance of this media. This perspective points to the method of world creation and

production culture that reaffirmed these messages, but it also points toward the ways individual interpretations of this media do not always align.

This brings about two important discussions production culture and fan culture. In the production of this media authenticity and recognizing queer struggle were clear goals of production, which was created by the staff and crew selected to work on this show. This already accepting and empathic culture allows for the reaffirmation of queer struggles; however, these efforts can only extend so far off screen. Fans are not fully involved in production and are not privy to the culture of production. Further, fans exist within a heteronormative society and culture and must navigate these biases while viewing this media. This means that the way in which we discuss and portray queer media must always consider the heteronormative lens of society because that is ultimately where a majority of fans' perspective comes from. While Oseman did accomplish this within *Heartstopper*, it is also clear that aspects like advertisements —or opinion pieces like Bitran (2022)— also need to take into account the heteronormative perspective. Specifically, within the Bitran (2022) piece, more care should have been taken with the use of the word "authentic" especially when it comes from the executive producers Pat Walters and Euros Lyn.

What *Heartstopper* has accomplished in production methods and queer world creation should be studied and should act as a blueprint for future approaches to queer media world building. Through its creative intertwining of modes of engagement—meaning both visual and audio cues—*Heartstopper* deconstructs notions of heteronormativity and reconstructs a world that honors and amplifies queer relationships. This research shows how the show's creators and characters accomplish this world building by attending to themes of masculinity, homophobia, internalized homophobia, and mental health. Nevertheless, *Heartstopper* exists in a world that is

dominated by heteronormative values and media objects and must navigate demands placed on its cast and creators. The “real world” moments endured by Connor serve as a warning to media creators to be mindful of discourses and terminology surrounding their shows. I hope that future queer-media creators learn from this lesson that shows like *Heartstopper* may attract widespread followings, but these are fictional media objects in a non-fictional world that is still grappling with homophobia, internalized homophobia, and toxic masculinity. *Heartstopper* is a glimmer of what a better future might look and feel like.

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