

Assets, Allies, Friends, and Family:
Transgender and Nonbinary Representation in Youth-Rated Animated Television
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Abstract

Amid the rise of anti-transgender legislation in North America, especially against transgender minors, it is crucial to investigate what discourses about trans people are currently circulating in the media, and what messages they send to both trans and non-trans people. The bulk of trans representation on TV over the last few decades has centred tragic narratives over joyful ones, and reified the gender binary more than challenged it. Even if trans representation is present, it has been one-dimensional, stereotypical, and ultimately harmful to trans people. In this study, I used critical discourse analysis to examine recurring transgender and nonbinary characters in recent youth-rated animated television shows available on Netflix and Disney+. Compared to previous trans representation focusing on tragedy and deficit, the characters within my study were portrayed in significantly positive lights. They were confident in themselves, capable when solving problems and facing down enemies, and fully integrated into their various social groups. Across all the target characters' narratives, love, joy, and belonging took precedence over rejection, tragedy, and suffering. Positive and holistic trans and nonbinary representation should continue to be included across all forms of media, but especially youth-rated media. Through such representation, trans youth may foster and find joy in their queerness, and audiences may be driven to combat the ever-growing anti-trans moral panic.

Keywords: Transgender, nonbinary, youth-rated media, animated media, television, media representation, critical discourse analysis

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Introduction

A child sits down to watch television after school. The newest episode of their favourite series features a transgender character who openly discusses being trans, is proud of that identity, and is loved and respected by the rest of the cast. The adults in this child's life—parents, teachers, and politicians—attempt to erase trans people from public life by restricting their access to medical treatment, preferred bathrooms, in-school support, and so forth. Meanwhile, the child has never felt more validated than when they saw this character. They finally have someone through whom to understand their emerging trans identity, and because this character thrives in their world, the child learns that a joyful queer life is possible for them, too.

This is the reality for many young trans and nonbinary people. Where other institutions push trans people to the wayside, if not directly attack them, the media provides space to advocate for trans rights and build communities for collective action. Entertainment media is especially crucial here. By reflecting diverse trans and queer experiences in books, films, and television series, trans people gain stories from which to draw pride and resilience, and non-trans people may educate themselves and challenge their transphobic and anti-queer biases. In this honours thesis, I critically analyze trans and nonbinary representation in recent youth-rated animated television. I begin with a three-part literature review on the effects of media representation on queer identity, how social power and popular culture interact, and previous research on existing transgender media representation. Using critical discourse analysis, I analyze how trans and nonbinary characters are portrayed, the discourses present in their portrayals, and the implications of such representations on the sociological field and trans politics overall.

Literature Review

First, I must clarify the terminology I will use throughout this review, as the vocabulary for the queer community varies across regions, time periods, and studies. A common acronym used in Canada is 2SLGBTQ+ and other variants beginning with ‘2S,’ in recognition of Two-Spirit people and their significance in the Indigenous cultures of Turtle Island. As none of the reviewed literature refers to Two-Spirit people, and my study sample did not include any Two-Spirit characters, I will not use this acronym. I will use ‘queer’ when referring to the queer/LGBTQ+ community as a whole; ‘transgender,’ ‘trans,’ and ‘nonbinary’ when referring to those specific identities; and any terms that are needed to be accurate to the literature I review. Some terms within the reviewed literature are considered outdated and derogatory towards trans people (e.g. transsexual, transvestite, and transgendered), and I will only use these terms when taking direct quotes from said sources. This discretion regarding terminology is vital to respect the queer people, experiences, and issues discussed herein.

Media Representation and Trans Identity

Transgender representation in the media acts as a catalyst for trans people’s identities to be realized and expressed (Ghazali & Nor, 2012; Mocarski et al., 2019; Ringo, 2002; Riseman, 2021). Respondents across multiple studies state that before being exposed to such representations, they didn’t know that transitioning or identifying as transgender was an option (Mocarski et al., 2019, p. 428; Ringo, 2002, p. 24; Riseman, 2021, p. 240; Shelley, 2008, p. 138). The media did not *cause* the respondents’ trans identities, per se, but presented the terminology and concepts needed to express their already “instinctive” understandings of themselves (Ghazali & Nor, 2012, p. 186). Trans and non-trans people alike have also reported turning to queer

characters in entertainment media as role models while exploring and coming into their queer identities (Ghazali & Nor, 2012, p. 188; Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011, p. 344; Mascarino et al., 2026, p. 3047). Those characters didn't need to be explicitly queer to fulfill that role, either: one respondent noted, "There really wasn't anything... that I could recognize myself in. And I think mutant [*X-Men*] maybe was as close as I could get" (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011, p. 345). Further, trans media representation is crucial to trans people's mental health: without it, trans people are left confused, isolated, and at risk for myriad mental health struggles (Craig et al., 2015, p. 264; Veale et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2024). In this sense, transgender media representation is not only visibility for its own sake. It is solidarity, mental health support, and even suicide prevention for trans people.

Scholars also point to the importance of the internet in trans people's identity journeys (Craig & McInroy, 2014; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Ringo, 2002). Between traditional/offline media (e.g., TV, film, books, and news) and internet/online media (e.g., social media and video sharing sites), the latter tended to be more welcoming to queer people and authentic to their experiences (Craig & McInroy, 2014; McInroy & Craig, 2015). We may more aptly distinguish each media type by who is in charge of either one: non-trans people putting forth uninformed or transphobic narratives, versus trans people talking about their genuine experiences being trans. Offline media perpetuated stereotypes about trans people, if they represented them at all, while online media made space for trans people to assert their own narratives and offer guidance to those just coming out (Craig & McInroy, 2014, p. 101; McInroy & Craig, 2015, p. 613). This distinction proves the importance of both the presence and nature of trans representation; negative representation reinforces stereotypes about trans people, while positive representation allows trans people to realize and joyfully express their trans identities.

Beyond the existence of transgender media representation, trans people's interpretations of said representation also impact how they negotiate their trans identities. Research demonstrates some positive opinions of the various queer media representations with which respondents engaged (Craig et al., 2015; Ghazali & Nor, 2012; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011), but more often than not reflects respondents' criticisms of harmful or inaccurate representations instead, and the repercussions for queer people who are exposed to such narratives (McInroy & Craig, 2015; Mocarski et al., 2019; Sanz López, 2018; Villegas Simón et al., 2024). Negative portrayals of queer people can create a sense of threat towards the queer community, thereby impeding queer people from embracing their identity or coming out to others (Craig & McInroy, 2014, p. 103; Shabahang et al., 2024, p. 13). Respondents across multiple studies addressed how trans media representation did not illustrate the vast spectrum of experiences that 'transgender' can cover, the negativity thus being drawn from how narrow said representation was (Mocarski et al., 2019; Sanz López, 2018; Villegas Simón, 2024). Celebrity representation, through figures such as Caitlyn Jenner, often depicted transness within a strict gender binary (male vs. female), which is unattainable, unaffirming, and can be dangerous for many trans people (Mocarski et al. 2019, p. 425). Further, trans characters' story arcs have often been tragic in nature, and as such, lead audiences to associate transness with suffering, with few positive or joyful narratives to counteract that (Villegas Simón et al., 2024, p. 29). Through these narrow representations, trans people are dehumanized and constructed as other, rather than shown holistically. Such one-dimensional representations, which exclude the majority of queer people and their experiences, do just as much damage to how queer people interpret their identities as a total lack of representation (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 347-348; Sanz López, 2018, p. 1831).

Of crucial note is that participants frequently disagreed on which media representations were accurate or affirming and which were inaccurate or damaging (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Mocarski et al., 2019; Sans López, 2018). For example, while one respondent considered Adam Torres from *Degrassi* (Schuyler et al., 2001-2015) a “realistic” depiction of the trans experience, another called his depiction “archaic [and] transphobic” (McInroy & Craig, 2015, p. 610-612). Neither interpretation is more valid than the other; rather, they illustrate the variety of opinions trans people hold about trans representation. There may be some objective ways to analyze transgender representation as positive or negative, such as scanning for outdated terms like “transvestite,” or harmful stereotypes like trans characters as serial killers (McInroy & Craig, 2015, p. 610; Shelley, 2008, p. 135), but trans people themselves will still interpret those characters and stories differently from each other. These differing perspectives establish the value of diversifying trans representation beyond binaries and stereotypes, so all trans people might have media representation that affirms and inspires them.

Transgender representation in media and trans people’s well-being surrounding their trans identity are inextricably tied. Trans media representation creates space for trans people to embrace their trans identities and connect with others like them. As well, trans media representation often reproduces harmful stereotypes that leave the majority of trans people out of media narratives and pave the way for anti-transgender discrimination. The under- and misrepresentation of trans people undoubtedly stems from trans people’s position as a marginalized group in society. As such, the relationship between media and identity is also inextricable from the social power dynamics that surround and feed into it.

Gender Hegemony and Queer Artistic Resistance

The media is rarely neutral on any issue, especially given the small number of companies that control a vast portion of the media (Guttmann, 2024); those companies' interests and goals shape the media we engage with and, therefore, how we are socialized. With this in mind, we must critique harmful dominant narratives, examine how they are maintained when they do not benefit everyone equally, and investigate how dominant narratives and groups are resisted by those they victimize. Various sociological theories may help us understand how power and culture interact. Foundational theories by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels detail how dominant groups exercise power over others through economic structures and processes (Storey, 2001, p. 82-83). However, economics is not the only worthwhile sphere of study for Marxist analysis: "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx & Engels 1970, p. 68). In other words, economic dominance always coincides with ideological dominance. The Frankfurt School coined the term "culture industry" to illustrate how ideology is used to maintain power over others (Storey, 2001, p. 85): dominant groups tailor a society's culture to maintain their interests, while also meeting certain needs of subordinate groups to ensure they remain docile and in service of dominant interests. Within the media industry, we see this bare-minimum meeting of needs when any instance of queer representation is met with praise, quality and accuracy notwithstanding (Capuzza, 2014; Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Monaghan, 2021; Sandercock, 2015). Through these bare-minimum offers, dominant groups "[limit] the political imagination" of the masses (Storey, 2001, p. 86). With a few particular needs met, subordinate groups (hopefully) won't demand more and upset the status quo.

Louis Althusser (1971) contends that this social control through ideology affects the views of both dominant and subordinate groups. Just as subordinate groups are told that they are

not actually being controlled or oppressed, dominant groups are likewise led to believe that oppression is necessary and beneficial for everyone involved (Storey, 2001, p. 96). As such, ideology does not reflect the reality of social power dynamics (i.e. one group wielding its social power against other groups), but an *imagined* reality that requires effort to sustain (Althusser, 1971, p. 338-339). Certain ideas must be portrayed as beneficial for all, and certain things must be ignored or outright denied to keep up the illusion— what Althusser terms as an ideology’s *problematics*. Ideologies reveal their problematics through both what is and what is *not* said. In the case of media representation, problematics will arise based on which narratives and characters are represented and which are not, such as trans people post-transition versus pre- or mid-transition (Mocarski et al., 2019, p. 425). As mentioned earlier, this maintenance of ideology—especially the handling of problematics—is accomplished through multiple social institutions, or “ideological state apparatuses” (Althusser, 1971, p. 336), acting simultaneously and over entire lifetimes. The media is crucial in this maintenance—from local news to entertainment to internet media—because it permeates all levels and facets of society.

Of course, this imposition of ideology does not occur unopposed. As such, maintaining ideology requires mitigating resistance, whether that means shutting it down entirely or making compromises to quiet the opposition. Antonio Gramsci (1971) speaks on the latter, asserting that *hegemony* consists of negotiations on the part of both dominant and subordinate groups in society. He contends, as does the Frankfurt School, that dominant groups make small compromises with subordinate groups, just enough to satisfy them and prevent them from wanting more (p. 86). Such concessions can be seen regarding transgender media representation: although trans representation has increased over time (Ghazali & Nor, 2012; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Mocarski et al., 2019; Ringo, 2002), the changes have been incremental and do not

encompass the full spectrum of the trans experience. Trans representation remains within the bounds of harmful or inaccurate stereotypes (McInroy & Craig, 2015, p. 610; Shelley, 2008, p. 135), strict binaries (Mocarski et al., 2019, p. 425) and discourses that some now consider outdated or inaccurate (McInroy & Craig, 2015, p. 610). By including transgender representation in media, but on the terms of the dominant ideology, transness is then “deprived of [its] antagonistic force” and no longer challenges the status quo (Storey, 2001, p. 88).

This aforementioned ideology and status quo encompasses the gender binary, the sex binary (which excludes intersex people), and the establishment of straight sexuality as the norm. Acclaimed gender scholar Judith Butler (2002) refers to these ideas collectively as the “institution of heterosexuality.” They argue that neither sex nor gender are natural things; both are cultural constructions made to uphold the “economic needs of... heterosexuality” (p. 143). The strict division between male versus female and masculine versus feminine is not natural, but ideological: we are socialized to believe in and uphold it rather than being born with it. They further contend that only particular expressions of gender and sex are considered “intelligible,” or understandable within institutional heterosexuality (p. 23-24), namely, men who are masculine and women who are feminine. These binary standards leave out transgender and nonbinary people, but also cisgender people who do not perfectly conform to heterosexual gender ideals. In this sense, gender-nonconforming people of all kinds, cisgender or not, operate as *problematics* for heterosexuality. Heterosexuality must ignore gender-nonconforming people or deny their validity, because their mere existence threatens heterosexuality’s status as an undeniable truth.

Trans-exclusionary radical feminism is a perfect case study of how ideology and hegemony operate in terms of dominant gender discourses. As an ideology, trans-exclusionary feminism denies the validity of trans people’s struggle for rights to reify the struggles for

women's rights, while still narrowly defining 'women' in ways that leave out non-trans women (Jones & Slater, 2020). This anti-trans discrimination, while painted as being for the good of women's rights, only "[protects women's] own power domains" and paints trans people as a threat (Boyacı & Boyacıoğlu, 2023, p. 105). In terms of hegemony, trans-exclusionary feminists use their concessions from the dominant group (men and the patriarchy) as a reason not to let trans people have their own concessions, or genuinely resist patriarchy as the root of gendered oppression. Trans rights are portrayed as endangering "women's fragile gains" (Ditum, 2018), and transness is made into a topic of debate separate from the "real cognitive and embodied experience of *actual people*" (Armitage, 2020, p. 15, emphasis added).

Transphobia and trans-exclusionary feminism can be seen enacted through resistance to trans-inclusive policies and direct violence against trans people (Jones & Slater, 2020, p. 842-844). Lenning et al. (2021) coined the 'trifecta of violence' to explain and predict this phenomenon of social institutions acting together against disadvantaged groups. Brightman et al. (2024) applied that trifecta to the violence faced by trans people by tracking instances of anti-transgender legislation and homicide in the USA and anti-transgender rhetoric online. All three increased from 2015 to 2022, indicating increased transphobia in multiple spheres of life; numerous scholars have referred to this overall increase as a moral panic against transgender people (Armitage, 2020; Awcock & Rosenberg, 2024; MacKenzie & Marcel, 2009; Walker, 2023). This trifecta of violence demonstrates how both the micro and macro levels of society influence the development of moral panics. Policies feed on and enforce ideology at the macro level, ideology encourages violent actions at the micro level, and actions reify policies and ideology in a loop that keeps subordinate groups disadvantaged and victimized.

While the presented studies and their implications are concerning, the micro-level influences in the trifecta of violence prove that individual action does make a difference in the larger social structure. To end the trifecta's feedback loop, resistance to dominant structures and discourses must go beyond concessions from dominant groups; otherwise, the root of oppression will never be combatted, and subordinate groups will continue to face harm. Such is the case for trans-exclusionary radical feminism, which still operates within gender hegemony and never tackles binary gender as the source of that hegemony. Concessions for one group are weaponized against another group (Armitage, 2020), while neither is given rights, recognition, or true social power. Concessions do more harm than good, if they do anything at all. Therefore, resistance must transcend "engaging with the state for... resolution of violence" (Rojas Durazo & Zepeda, 2024, p. 125) to dismantle societal power structures altogether.

We cannot discuss resistance to dominant media narratives without touching on media-based resistance, specifically artistic activism. Artistic activism, as the name suggests, unites "the creative power of the arts... with the strategic planning of activism... to bring about social change" (Duncombe & Lambert, 2018, para. 1). Such methods of activism need not be elaborate; Awcock & Rosenberg (2024) studied how trans people and their allies have used sticker art to advocate for trans rights and cover up transphobic messaging. They brought distinct attention to stickers with messages such as "bitches for trans liberation" and "bisexual and trans solidarity," which "[fortify] the sense of trans allyship amongst queer communities" (p. 496-497). Similarly, Schmitz et al. (2020) investigated how the internet has been used for queer activism, particularly to create space for queer artists and to affirm the importance of queer art in political movements. While there are myriad environments where artistic activism can take place, Schmitz et al. (2020) argue that online sites allow queer artists to "[make] their

intersectional messages accessible to the general public” (p. 282). Central to both reports on artistic activism is the method’s accessibility; public and internet spaces allow more people to witness and respond to these modes of resistance. While not explicitly referring to public space and accessibility, Rojas Durazo & Zepeda (2024) likewise emphasize queer art and queer artists as critical to queer liberation, particularly against colonial structures that exponentially oppress queer people of colour. Queer art “[affirms the] collective form [of queer people] as a potent organizing tool to shift the socio-political landscape” (p. 134); it demonstrates the power that queer people have to resist dominant discourses and assert their own narratives instead.

Independent queer cinema is an essential site for combating dominant anti-queer ideologies; events such as queer film festivals allow smaller artists to present their narratives on the big screen (Qin, 2020; Schoonover & Galt, 2015). Qin (2020) wrote on the Tokyo Rainbow Film Festival and highlighted how queer cinema acts as ‘pleasure activism.’ Rather than taking a strictly political stance, “the festival prioritizes the entertainment disposition of its contents” and builds “a community that is easily accessible and full of joy and satisfaction” (p. 32). While not directly protesting homophobia and transphobia, queer cinema still fulfills the role of activism through its joyful assertions against dominant discourses. Schoonover & Galt (2015) argued similarly, addressing queer film festivals more broadly: even if there is no overt political intention, “cinema remains crucial to how gender and sexuality can circulate globally” (p. 95). Again, these scholars emphasize the broad public reach of cinema; the accessibility and popularity of films lend queer cinema considerable power in shifting the political and ideological landscape. Media representation through such films can be someone’s first exposure to queer and transgender people. Seeing them represented positively, or represented at all, has been shown to dispel harmful biases that people may hold about trans people (Gillig et al., 2018; Massey et al.,

2021; Schiappa et al., 2005; Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018; Tiwara & Sharma, 2023). Queer representation in entertainment media, especially in independent cinema, combats dominant narratives that portray queerness as abnormal or threatening. Through both explicit activism and simply existing in the public eye, queer people can stake their claim to social space and declare that they belong, despite the discourses that say otherwise.

While the media, among multiple social institutions, work to maintain the institution of heterosexuality that keeps trans people subjugated, queer people and their allies have utilized the media to resist those narratives through both overt political movements and the fostering of queer joy. Because the media is a fundamental institution in negotiations over dominant discourses, analyzing transgender media representation must go beyond the characters and stories portrayed within. We must also deconstruct what ideological motivations and subtexts are present in such portrayals. Only then might we learn which characters and stories are written to be holistic and accurate, and which ones reproduce dominant discourses of binary and cisnormative gender.

Transgender Representation in Television and Youth-Rated Media

Depictions of trans people in news media have grown to be more positive, highlighting trans people's achievements, milestones such as receiving gender-affirming surgery, and ongoing activism for trans and queer rights (Bracco et al., 2024; DeJong et al., 2021; Zhang, 2014). But, transgender voices are still underrepresented compared to cisgender voices, even when discussing trans-related issues (Capuzza, 2014; Khalil et al., 2020), and news stories specifically about anti-trans and anti-nonbinary violence do not always acknowledge how said violence results from and perpetuates the trifecta of violence (Avalos et al., 2023). To remedy this gap in awareness and representation, we can turn our attention to entertainment media, specifically television. Television remains one of the most commonly used media forms today; in 2023, the

average Canadian adult spent 20.5 hours per week watching broadcast TV. While this rate is lower than previous years (23.6 hours/week in 2021), it is made up for by the increased time using the Internet (25 hours/week), which includes streaming videos through TV platforms such as Netflix and Disney+ (PHD Media Canada, 2023). Whether through broadcast or streaming, the continued prevalence of TV consumption demonstrates the significance of including holistic queer representation on TV, especially of queer women, trans and nonbinary characters, and characters of colour. Including these “most underrepresented demographics” allows television to “[accurately] reflect the world and uplift our society’s most vulnerable,” according to the GLAAD Media Institute (2024, p. 22).

The GLAAD Media Institute’s annual ‘Where We Are On TV’ reports track how many LGBTQ+ characters appear on television year to year, across broadcast TV, cable, and streaming services. Since their first report on the 2006-2007 season, LGBTQ+ representation across all platforms has steadily increased, before levelling out over the last five years. The 2021-2022 season set a record high with 637 regular and recurring LGBTQ+ characters across broadcast, cable, and streaming. Of those characters, 42 were transgender; 20 were trans women, 14 were trans men, and eight were trans nonbinary people. An additional 17 characters were nonbinary but not transgender (which GLAAD categorizes separately from transgender characters), making trans and nonbinary characters 9.3% of the LGBTQ+ representation in 2021-2022 (GLAAD, 2022). In comparison, 2023-2024 saw a marked decrease in regular and recurring LGBTQ+ characters on TV, totalling 468; only 24 of those characters were transgender, most of them trans women. Sixteen were nonbinary, but the majority of them had “so little screen time they only barely met [GLAAD’s] methodology criteria” (p. 49). Alongside the overall decrease in LGBTQ+ TV representation, this decrease in trans and nonbinary representation is drastic: “If...

stories [about trans people] disappear, the results could be detrimental” (GLAAD, 2024, p. 22), especially for people who rely on queer characters and stories for comfort, validation, and strength in the face of discrimination (Craig et al., 2015).

These statistics alone demonstrate how tenuous the inclusion of queer representation can be year to year, but they should not be considered alone. As stated previously, queer media representation is not guaranteed to be holistic or accurate to the queer experience just by being present, and additional study is needed to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ representation. Capuzza & Spencer (2017) examined multiple series with transgender characters that ran between 2008 and 2014, including *Glee* (Murphy et al., 2009-2015), *Orange Is The New Black* (Kohan et al., 2013-2019), and *Transparent* (Soloway & Sperling, 2014-2019). While the sampled transgender characters were often depicted facing transphobic discrimination and other hardships—centring trans *tragedy* over trans joy—they argue that these characters represented a massive leap in transgender representation. Compared to TV series that ran prior to the sample period, trans characters were depicted less stereotypically and faced less overt transphobic violence, which deserved (minimal) celebration (p. 226).

Trans Tragedy—storylines that “focus on the negative situations that affect trans people, while the positive ones are minimized” (Villegas Simon et al., 2024, p. 28)—are central to the existing literature on transgender TV representation. Some shows have been criticized for the negative storylines written for their trans characters, such as those of Unique Adams in *Glee* (Murphy et al., 2009-2015) and Adam Torres in *Degrassi* (Schuyler et al., 2001-2015).

Sandercock (2015) asserts that while the inclusion of these characters sets a precedent for future trans representation on TV, their storylines heavily rely on transphobic stereotypes (e.g. transness equalling deception, p. 443-444) and contribute to anti-trans stigma more than they combat it (p.

448). In contrast, other shows have been lauded for decentering trans tragedy. Abbott (2022) compares Linda Murkland in *All That Glitters* (Lear, 1977) and Nomi Marks in *Sense8* (Wachowski et al., 2015-2018), claiming that both characters' conflicts put less attention on their transness and more on other facets of their lives, such as Linda's relationship with her fiancé and Nomi's status as a 'sensate.' While transness is not necessarily normalized in either show, it is not treated as othering or something that makes the characters unlovable (p. 1069).

Also central to existing transgender representation is the Wrong Body Discourse—the assertion that being trans requires a disconnect between one's gender and one's sex (Latham, 2019). This discourse has seen prominent use in entertainment media, such as in *All That Glitters* (Lear, 1997), when Linda states, “I was really a little girl... in the body of a little boy” (Abbott, 2022, p. 1067). It has also been used beyond fictional media: Australian trans celebrity Carlotta has described herself as being “born a woman in the shell of a man” (McIntyre, 2011, p. 25). The wrong body discourse can make transness easier to understand, especially to non-trans people, but it does not reflect the experiences of all trans people; some even consider the wrong body discourse to be outdated and offensive (McInroy & Craig, 2015, p. 610). As well, it portrays transness as having an inherent 'wrongness' to it, such as when Linda compares herself (a trans woman) to “[other] children who have birth defects” (Abbott, 2022, p. 1067). By boiling transness down to body-mind incongruence, the wrong body discourse makes the trans experience “synonymous with suffering” (Latham, 2019, p. 22-23). Thankfully, this discourse seems to have fallen out of favour in some series. Capuzza & Spencer (2017) assert that, while the wrong body discourse was still used in their sampled TV media, it was not the sole lens through which the characters' transness was viewed (p. 223). When coming out as a trans woman, Maura Pfefferman in *Transparent* (Soloway & Sperling, 2014-2019) puts more

emphasis on her appearance than her body: “All my life... I’ve been dressing up like a man. This is me” (Carlson & Sweet, 2020, p. 1076). This line emphasizes that transness does not require a disconnect from one’s body; instead, it asserts accurately representing one’s gender through outward expression, whether the body is consistent with it or not.

Because of the harm that trans tragedy and wrong body discourses do by equating transness with hardship, we must be aware of when those narratives are present and work to combat them. Identifying and combatting these discourses in youth-rated media—media created and advertised for children as the audience (Federal Communications Commission, n.d., “The TV Parental Guidelines” section, para. 3)—is especially crucial, as media is a key socialization agent as youth grow up and discover who they are. Trans youth occupy a very precarious position in our current political climate (Bartko, 2024); as such, we must pay attention to how trans and nonbinary people are represented in media geared toward youth. Positive representation in youth-targeted media can combat anti-trans ideologies early on, and support trans youth as their trans identities develop.

Unfortunately, across multiple forms of youth-rated media, transgender and gender-nonconforming representation is not entirely positive or holistic. Patterson & Spencer (2017) analyzed gendered messaging in top-grossing animated children’s films released between 2012 and 2015. Even without confirmed transgender or nonbinary characters in the films’ casts, the sampled films still depicted certain forms of gender-nonconformity, though not positively. For example, in *Mr. Peabody & Sherman* (Minkoff, 2014), Sherman insults a young King Tutankhamun for “wear[ing] a skirt” and “makeup” as a man (p. 81). In *The Boxtrolls* (Annable & Stacchi, 2014), antagonist Archibald Snatcher is exposed as drag performer Madame Frou Frou, then enacts his villainous plan while still in his Frou Frou makeup, and meets his demise

soon after (p. 85). Such depictions aren't necessarily tied to transness, but the message is the same: not obeying binary, cisnormative gender ideals is deserving of ridicule and punishment.

Other pieces of youth-rated media, especially more recent ones, do include confirmed trans and nonbinary figures; however, these media aren't much better when it comes to reductive narratives around transness. In her analysis of children's picture books featuring transgender characters, Capuzza (2020) found that the sampled books tended to rely on very binary narratives when discussing gender. Clothes and activities were shown opposing each other as either masculine or feminine, with little room for identities that transgressed that dichotomy (p. 330). As well, characters often upheld the wrong body discourse through dialogue, such as, "Nature made a mistake and he should have been born a girl" (p. 330). The framing of young trans celebrities also tends to adhere to these discourses. Most notably, in both the reality TV series *I Am Jazz* (James et al., 2015-2023) and the picture book of the same name (Herschel & Jennings, 2014), Jazz Jennings describes herself as having "a girl brain but a boy body" (Capuzza, 2020, p. 333; McIntyre et al., 2023, p. 219). Evie MacDonald, both in her celebrity appearances and her role as Hannah Bradford in *First Day* (Stradling & O'Mahony, 2020-2022), also reifies binary discourses around transness. Hannah defines transness as one's gender being the opposite of the one they were assigned at birth (McIntyre et al., 2023, p. 221). During an interview about growing up trans, MacDonald recalls receiving stereotypically feminine gifts at the start of her transition (p. 222). On their own, these assertions of the gender binary and wrong body discourses may seem innocuous, or the best way to explain to youth what 'transgender' means, but altogether, they reproduce a narrow, potentially harmful view of transness.

Despite the increased presence of transgender figures in youth-rated media, such representations still do not fully encompass the trans experience. Through upholding the

masculine/feminine binary and the wrong body discourse, these trans characters uphold the Transnormative Frame, through which transness is defined as acceptable only through “the adoption of cisgender institutions by trans persons” (Vipond, 2015, p. 24). In other words, trans people must conform to binary, cisgender norms for society to accept them. Transnormative representations such as those described above offer youth an incomplete view of what transness can be, misinforming non-trans youth and isolating trans and nonbinary youth whom said representations do not reflect. To not fall into the transnormative frame, youth-rated media should include more nonbinary and gender-nonconforming characters, and explore other aspects of the trans experience besides body-based struggles. Above all, future youth-rated media should put trans joy narratives at the forefront. By directly countering trans tragedy narratives and asserting that transness can be (and is) joyful, we may support and foster trans youth’s identity journeys, especially while trans people are under direct political attack. Above all, amid a spike in direct attacks on trans people’s well-being and visibility in society, we must keep our utmost attention on how this marginalized demographic is represented. Where stereotype prevails, we must raise critique, and where trans joy shines through, we must recognize its potential as resistance.

While breaking necessary ground, the existing literature on trans media representation does not reflect all the possible avenues of study on the topic. Studies of trans representation in television are limited to live-action series, making animated television an untapped research niche. Patterson & Spencer’s (2017) research on gender-nonconformity in animated media focused on decade-old youth-rated films, and did not include confirmed transgender characters in the sample. Capuzza’s (2020) study on trans representation in picture books is limited in scope and cannot speak to the wide range of youth-rated and youth-targeted media available for study,

especially given the prominence of television media. Finally, while there is research spanning decades back on trans media representation, there is a noticeable lack of research that focuses on *nonbinary* representation to the same degree as trans representation. This study addressed these gaps by investigating trans and nonbinary representation in youth-rated animated television shows initially released on or after 2018, to answer the following research question: How are trans and nonbinary people represented in recent youth-rated animated television shows?

Methodology

I used multimodal critical discourse analysis to conduct this project and answer the above research question. Critical discourse analysis focuses on the interconnection of micro-level interactions and macro-level structural forces, asserting that “language never appears by itself... [but] always manifests itself as the representative of an ideological system” (Juez, 2009, p. 240). As this method has ties to philosophers such as Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, and the Frankfurt School—whose theories I discussed previously—it was the best and most applicable method for this project. Taking a *multimodal* approach led me to investigate not only the verbal language used, but also nonverbal communication such as tone and body language, social relationships between characters, the structures of power that influence them, and how all those aspects interact with and influence one another (Roderick, 2018, p. 161). Through critical discourse analysis, I examined the interactions trans and nonbinary characters have with other characters across various youth-rated animated TV series, the language used in those interactions, and the discourses reproduced or challenged by those characters.

Sampling & Coding

I employed a multi-step sampling procedure to account for each criterion required for my sample; each new, shorter list became the starting point for the next step. First, I used two Wikipedia lists, five blog articles, and GLAAD's 2023/2024 'Where We Are On TV' report to compile a list of television series featuring queer or transgender/nonbinary characters. Second, I only listed the series that specifically included characters labelled as trans or nonbinary (any characters labelled as 'queer,' 'fluid,' and so on were excluded). Third, I checked each series' Wikipedia page (or a separate Wikipedia page titled 'List of characters in [series]') and only included series in which said trans/nonbinary characters were regular/main or recurring/starring/supporting in the page's cast list (I excluded any characters labelled as 'guest' or otherwise not mentioned in the cast list). Fourth, I checked each series' IMDb page and only included the series that were rated TV-Y7 or TV-Y7-FV in the United States; I chose this rating for its allowance of "fantasy and comedic violence" and potentially frightening elements such as transphobia and bullying (Federal Communications Commission, n.d., "The TV Parental Guidelines" section, para. 3), and its alignment with when many trans youth may begin to feel gender dysphoria and experience gender-related societal pressure (Canadian Paediatric Society, n.d., "How does gender identity develop?" section, para. 20-21; Graham, 2023, p. 99). Fifth, I searched for each series on Netflix and Disney+, the first and third most popular streaming services in the US based on subscriber count (Dean, 2025, para. 4), and only included the series that were on either platform. Sixth, I returned to each series' Wikipedia page and included only those with an initial release date on or after 2018. From a final sampling list of eight TV series, I randomly selected five series (see Appendix A) and produced this final list of five target characters:

- Barney Guttman (*Dead End Paranormal Park*, 2022)
- Double Trouble (*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, 2018–2020)
- Nightshade Malto (*Transformers: EarthSpark*, 2022–2025)
- Raine Whispers (*The Owl House*, 2020–2023)
- Winn Harper (*The Fairly OddParents: A New Wish*, 2024)

I sampled the first five episodes (‘episode’ meaning one video with its own beginning-to-end narrative, running 10–30 minutes) from each series in which the target character spoke at least one line of dialogue (see Appendix B). For each episode, I wrote an overall plot summary, an overview of the target character’s role in the episode, and transcriptions of each scene in which the character appeared. I also made note of each character’s voice actor (via each series’s Wikipedia page) and the actors’ identity labels and pronouns, using interview articles (Adams, 2020, para. 9; Blackwood, 2019, para. 2; Horst, 2022, para. 1; Tobia, 2015), videos (TFcon, 2022, 2:25), social media profiles (Infante, 2026), and in one case, the actor’s own website (Roque, n.d., “About,” para. 5).

I used MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software, to facilitate data analysis for both the character/episode summaries and the transcripts; with MAXQDA, I engaged in multiple rounds of coding to identify larger patterns and themes across the sampled series (Charmaz, 2014, p. 113). I began with coding categories drawn from Capuzza & Spencer’s (2017) analysis of trans representation in scripted television: *Casting*, *Visibility*, *Identity*, *Embodiment*, and *Social Interaction*. Starting with pre-defined categories allowed the data to directly address the discourses reviewed in the literature, such as trans tragedy or the wrong body discourse. As I engaged with the data, however, I treated those initial coding categories as a stopgap and allowed

emerging patterns to refine them beyond what I had started with. This back-and-forth between coding and interpretation enabled the analytic framework to evolve in response to the data, yielding the final thematic framework discussed below.

Ethical Considerations

This research involved analysis of television shows intended for widespread viewing and made publicly available on Netflix and Disney+. As such, no human interaction was involved in this project, and a research ethics review was not required.

Results & Analysis

Nine core themes emerged from the data, illustrated in Figure 1, and together form a meta-theme of *belonging*. The structural themes in the centre of Figure 1 identify who the target characters are, while the substantive themes below illustrate what the characters do, how they interact with others in their series, and how others treat them. This framework expands upon Capuzza & Spencer's (2017) original framework, which I had adopted as a starting point. While engaging with the data, I reinterpreted the Visibility and Embodiment themes, as discussed below, and elaborated upon the Social Interaction theme to produce the Conflict-Collaboration and Rejection-Value continuums. The Characterization theme also emerged organically from the coding process, outside the original framework.

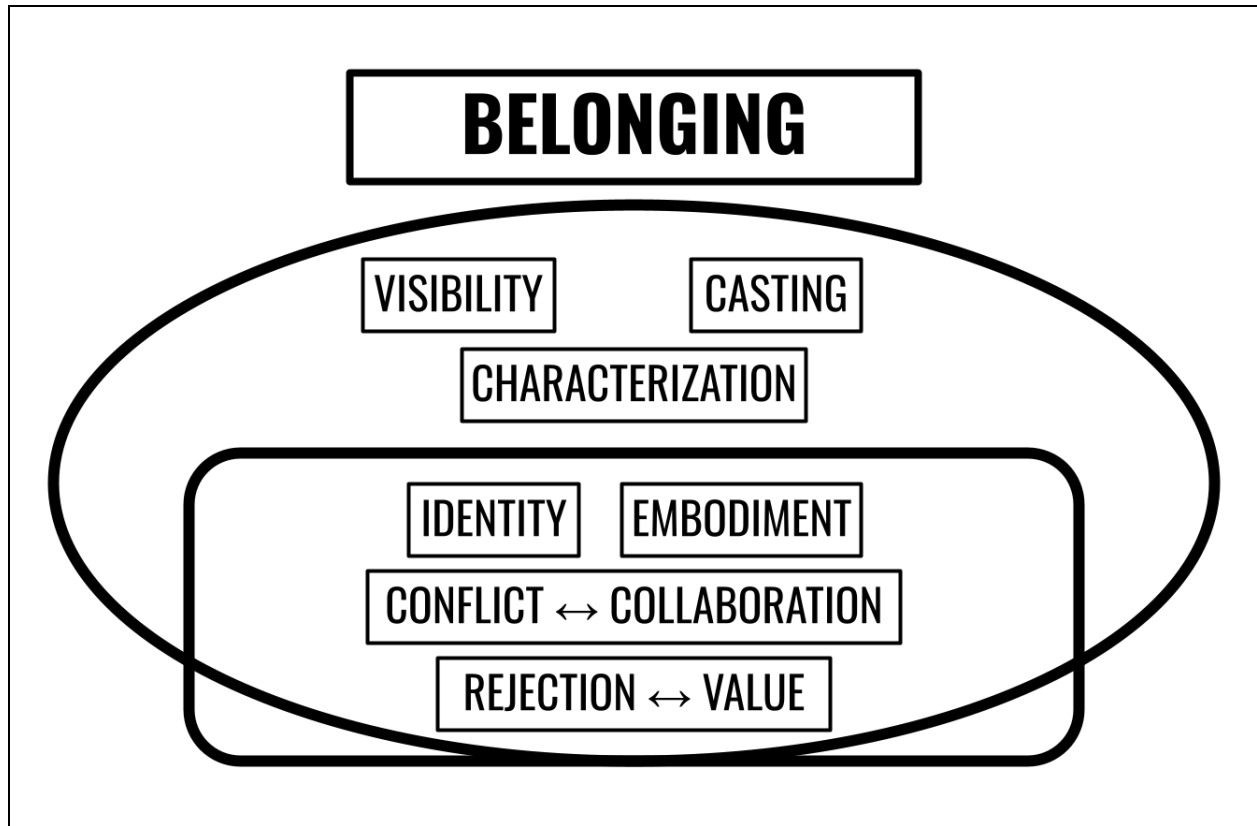


Figure 1. Emergent themes, under “Belonging” meta-theme.

Structural themes

Casting zeroes in on what’s behind the screen: is the target character’s voice actor also queer, and if so, are they queer in the same way as their character? Criticism has been raised when cisgender actors have played transgender characters; such depictions assert that trans people are “pretending” to be their gender (Mocarski et al., 2019, p. 430-431), and uphold binary transnormative ideas of what a trans person should look like (Villegas Simón et al., 2024, p. 31). In either case, the wrong body or the transnormativity discourses are upheld. This concern is fully addressed within my sample: all target characters were portrayed by trans and nonbinary actors who shared identity labels and pronouns with their characters. Barney Guttman, a trans man who uses he/him pronouns, is played by transgender actor Zack Barack. For the sample’s

nonbinary characters (all of whom use they/them pronouns), Double Trouble is played by Jacob Tobia, Nightshade Malto by Zay Infante, and Winn Harper by iris menas. Raine Whispers is played by two voice actors: Blu Del Barrio, as Raine's teenage self in a flashback episode, and Avi Roque, as Raine's present middle-aged self. The creators of *The Owl House* could have chosen to hire a cisgender actor to play Raine's teen self, perhaps hinting at what assigned gender they transitioned from. Instead, they hired a different nonbinary actor, thereby asserting that Raine's nonbinary identity is crucial to their character from childhood to middle age. Within this sample, showrunners made the effort to cast queer actors, and to do so accurately to the characters' queer identities. Deliberately casting actors of marginalized identities is a political choice, demonstrating certain values (Grome et al., 2023, p. 33) and affect how audiences perceive the character (Scott & Paprocki, 2023, p. 37). Casting trans and nonbinary voice actors to play trans and nonbinary characters—notably, ones who share their identity labels and pronouns—espouses that their identities are crucial to their character. Literally and figuratively, trans and nonbinary people are given a voice through this accurate casting of actors.

In Capuzza & Spencer (2017), *Visibility* referred to how often the target character appeared onscreen, measured in number of episodes and minutes of screentime. Here, this theme takes a more qualitative approach to investigate how early in their series the character was introduced, and how central they were to the overall story and the world they inhabit. Barney Guttman, Winn Harper, and Nightshade Malto are introduced and first speak in their series' first season (episode 1, 2, and 10, respectively), while Raine and Double Trouble debuted after the first season (Season 2 episode 7, and Season 4 episode 2, respectively). Barney's sampled episodes are the most consecutive (Season 1 episodes 1 through 5), and Raine's are the most spread out (Season 2 episodes 7, 8, 11, 15, and 19). Beyond this, there is an even spread of

episodes in which the target characters are either central to the episode's plot or supporting it. Most of the target characters were labelled as 'recurring' within my sampling list (implying lower centrality in the overall plot compared to 'regular' characters). But, they each had at least one episode that was central to them and their character journey, such as when *A New Wish* protagonist Hazel plans a sleepover purely to impress Winn (Barbee et al., 2024) or when *She-Ra* protagonist Adora and her team finally catch Double Trouble in their sabotage (Willis & Bennett, 2019b). In all the target characters' cases, they are fully involved and implicated in the overall plot across their sampled episodes. Double Trouble is a main antagonist of *She-Ra* Season 4, Winn is brought into the friend group that opens and closes the *A New Wish* episodes they're in, Nightshade is one of three new members of the Malto family (the main protagonists of *EarthSpark*), Raine is a key player in the rebellion against Emperor Belos (the main antagonist of *The Owl House* Season 2), and Barney is one in a trio of central *Dead End* characters, alongside his talking dog Pugsley and new coworker Norma. Whereas previous media left trans and nonbinary characters in "marginal or comic roles" (Mascarino et al., 2026, p. 3033), the target characters of this present sample are far more visible. Even if the majority of these characters are 'recurring' rather than 'regular,' they all take up space onscreen and are central to their series in their own right.

Characterization—the only theme that emerged organically rather than from Capuzza & Spencer's (2017) framework—refers to the target characters' disposition, emotions, and any archetypes they fit into. Here, I also noted any trans stereotypes that these characters perpetuated. While there were even spreads across most Characterization codes (e.g. 'sad/resigned,' 'proud/victorious,' 'defensive/ready to fight'), some characters were more heavily coded under certain traits than others. Double Trouble was overrepresented under 'teasing/patronizing,'

‘devious/scheming,’ and ‘dramatic/theatrical.’ Barney appeared most under ‘afraid/nervous’ and ‘panicked/terrified,’ but also under ‘humorous/joking’ and ‘laughing/entertained.’ Raine took the lead under ‘angry,’ ‘optimistic/hopeful,’ and ‘great intellect/skills in field.’ Nightshade followed Double Trouble in ‘dramatic’ and ‘scheming,’ followed Raine in ‘great intellect/skills,’ and overtook ‘inquisitive.’ Finally, Winn was the only character to appear under ‘nonchalant/laid-back.’ All the sampled characters have multidimensional personalities and experiences, but based on the coding, they still have their archetypes: scaredy-cat who copes through humour (Barney), inventive but awkward genius (Nightshade), down-to-earth popular kid (Winn), sly and cunning villain-in-disguise (Double Trouble), and charming rebellion leader (Raine). One should note the lack of repetition in the archetypes shown here. Nightshade is the only awkward inventor in the sample, Winn the only cool kid, and so on; so, one cannot deduce any stereotypes of trans or nonbinary people based on their character archetypes. Being that there is no one way these characters are portrayed, they demonstrate there is no one way that transness or nonbinaryness *must* be.

Substantive themes

Identity covers the characters’ gender identity, pronouns, and any scenes where those things are explicitly discussed. How do the target characters talk about it, and how do others around them react? For three of the five sampled characters, their identity and pronouns are *never* mentioned onscreen, whether by themselves or other characters. Even so, other characters use they/them pronouns for them without hesitation or mistake, and no other gendered language is used to refer to them. Nightshade’s pronouns are mentioned twice across the sampled *EarthSpark* episodes: once when informing Optimus Prime of their pronouns in their debut

episode (“He or she just doesn’t fit who I am.” / “My apologies. Please switch *their* piece”) (Dubuc et al., 2022, 2:22), and once when introducing themselves to Tarantulas two episodes later (“Well, my name is Nightshade, my pronouns are they/them, and I am not a typical protoform”) (Catt & Humphreys, 2023, 7:54). In either case, there is no significant reaction to their assertion, whether positive or negative; their pronouns are respected without fanfare, and Nightshade’s nonbinary identity is *normalized* through these interactions.

Barney Guttman is the main exception under this theme, with four out of the five sampled *Dead End* episodes including a plotline or scene that explores his struggles with not being accepted as trans. This even includes an outright coming-out scene, when he tells his new coworker Norma, “It’s not the park... It’s me. I’m trans”) (Paglia et al., 2022, 20:24). *Dead End Paranormal Park* is the only sampled series that included conflict related to a target character’s transness or nonbinaryness. One must note that Barney never struggles with *being* trans, but with his parents and grandmother not fully accepting him, and the insecurity and relationship turmoil that creates (Steele et al., 2022; Akhtar & Whitaker, 2022; Bardekoff & Whitaker, 2022). Even so, Barney is never misnamed or misgendered onscreen, and when he comes out to Norma, she accepts it without question or fanfare. Barney is not broken or at fault for the conflict that comes with being trans, and he finds a community that accepts and supports him through his new job at Phoenix Parks. When the target characters’ genders and pronouns are discussed, they are never questioned, debated, or portrayed as inherently wrong. In all cases, the target characters’ gender identities are one facet of a complex character, and they all find support and validation in those around them.

While in Capuzza & Spencer (2017), *Embodiment zeroes in on the trans body* (e.g., medical transition, genitals, the wrong body discourse), I broadened this theme to examine the

target characters' appearance, body language, and all things related to self-expression, including how others treat them for it. Three out of five target characters were human or human-adjacent—Raine was depicted as an elf, but elves are a majority within the setting of *The Owl House*, making their elf-ness normalized. As well, Raine is the only character in the sample explicitly depicted as not racialized as white, though their exact race or ethnicity is left ambiguous. Of the two distinctly non-human characters, one was a shapeshifting chameleon-like person (Double Trouble), and the other was a giant robot that could shape-change into an owl (Nightshade). This diversity in depiction is key; transness and nonbinaryness are not depicted as strictly one thing or the other, but instead across a range of appearances and body types. Double Trouble stands out under this theme, being nonbinary, a shapeshifter, a main antagonist, *and* consistently portrayed as inhuman or monstrous. Double Trouble also engages in villainy through deception and sabotage, using a stereotypically feminine alter ego named Flutterina (who uses a higher-pitched voice, wears frilly pink clothes, and often acts like a child or a damsel in distress). When shapeshifting, acute focus is placed on their more monstrous traits (e.g. sharp teeth, clawed hands, a lashing tail, slitted eyes with nictitating membranes) to clue viewers into their trickery. Being that Double Trouble is the only confirmed nonbinary character within this series, viewers may be led to associate their nonbinaryness with their villainy, their monstrosity, and/or their ability to “wear other people as costumes” (Nolfi & Clotworthy, 2019, 13:56). Double Trouble's portrayal reinforces the stereotype of trans people as deceitful (Riseman, 2021, 232; Sandercock 2015, p. 443), and as such, depicts a narrow and potentially harmful version of nonbinaryness.

We can contrast Double Trouble's portrayal with two other target characters in the sample: Raine also acted as a double agent, and Nightshade also shapeshifts (to a degree). On the one hand, Raine falls under the mind control of Emperor Belos, and clashes with *Owl House*

protagonist Eda because they “can’t associate with wild witches anymore” now that they serve him (Terrace & Coburn, 2022, 13:27). In the final sampled episode, it is revealed that their brainwashing was an elaborate act, and was actually in service to the rebellion *against* Emperor Belos (Marcus & Lorenz, 2022). Even if Raine’s nonbinaryness is associated with their deception, that association is less salient without the ability to shapeshift, and their deception ultimately serves a heroic cause. On the other hand, Nightshade is a Transformer, a mechanical being that can change forms between a humanoid robot and a vehicle or animal. The cast of *EarthSpark* is comprised of, arguably, more Transformers than humans. As such, it is more difficult to associate Nightshade’s shapeshifting with their nonbinaryness, because they are far from being the only one with that ability, like Double Trouble is. All this said, even if Double Trouble’s portrayal is not entirely accurate or authentic, they still contribute to the range of body types and presentations across the sampled characters. Overall, there is a lack of focus on the target characters’ bodies or any incongruence between their bodies and their genders. The wrong body discourse is absent, aside from a short montage clip in which Barney wears a chest binder (Akhtar & Whitaker, 2022, 1:13); as demonstrated under Identity, the characters’ transness and nonbinary-ness are just reality, not something to question or debate.

The *Conflict-Collaboration* continuum compares scenes of combat, peril, problem-solving, or being in opposition to others, versus scenes in which characters help each other, give each other advice, and either lead others or take others’ direction. Throughout the sampled episodes, target characters are involved in various types of Conflict, whether that be familial disagreement, solving deadly puzzles, battling monsters, or going hand-to-hand with their foes. Some target characters face perils particular to them, such as Raine being ‘brainwashed’ to serve and support Emperor Belos (Terrace & Coburn, 2022, 10:06), Winn

hiding from pudding zombies with their friend Jasmine (Simmons et al., 2024, 7:37), and Barney dying at the hands of conniving game show host Hox (Resella & Whitaker, 2022, 13:45).

Overall, however, the conflicts and peril in each series are not solely directed at the target characters. Just as much as they are victimized, they are the problem-solvers and rescuers for other characters, too. The target characters are full participants in the conflicts in their series and, most often, come out victorious in the end, with the help of their friends and allies.

There is diversity in the nature of Collaboration between target characters and others around them. Raine and Nightshade tended to take more active roles, leading and helping others, while Barney and Winn took more passive roles, following others' direction and being helped instead. Double Trouble occupied a mixed position here; they remained at the beck and call of their employers, the villainous Horde, but influenced Adora and her team by acting through their various disguises, including Flutterina (Sreebny & Manrique, 2019a; Willis & Bennett, 2019a). Notably, though, this sense of collaboration is present in all five sampled series. There are no moments in which target characters lack support or deprive others of it. Raine is a stand-out case under this theme, being overrepresented under the 'taking charge' code due to their many leadership positions as a coven head, rebellion leader, Emperor representative, *and* IFWOT conference guide (Marcus & Underwood, 2022; Terrace & Coburn, 2022; Terrace & Lorenz, 2021). Raine holds a position of authority within their various social groups, rather than being ostracized or pushed to the sidelines. Across all sampled series, the target characters are fully included in their groups and the worlds they inhabit, whether as a friend to rely on or an authority figure to follow.

Finally, the *Rejection-Value* continuum compares moments of anger, defensiveness, or (like the title suggests) rejection by or toward the target characters, versus ones in which the

target characters are appreciated and loved, or show love and appreciation to others. Instances of Rejection *by* the target characters tended to have a sense of care underlying them; they did so to hold personal boundaries or to prioritize other friends and loved ones. For example, when Raine breaks up with protagonist Eda in a flashback scene (Terrace et al., 2022, 10:08), the rejection is not done out of hatred for Eda, but to protect their well-being, and Eda's by extension, as they each moved down their different career paths. Moments of rejection *against* the target characters were also not wholly malicious, with one notable exception: Double Trouble. As a spy-for-hire, their to-be coworkers are naturally distrustful of them upon first glance; once hired by the Horde, though, they are strictly watched to ensure that they do as promised and keep under the heroes' radar (Nolfi & Clotworthy, 2019; Sreebny & Manrique, 2019a; Sreebny & Manrique, 2019b; Willis & Bennett, 2019a; Willis & Bennett, 2019b). The rejections that the other target characters face are far less consistent; they do not persist across all five of their sampled episodes, and the issues related to such rejection are forgiven, resolved, or dismissed within the episode in which they occur. Though the target characters do face Rejection, it does not permanently shape how they interact with others (i.e., they are not perpetual victims of tragedy), and it occurs much less often than when they are accepted and valued by others.

Especially notable under Value is that all target characters are portrayed as desired, wanted, or pursued in some way. Winn is lauded as a cool, popular kid, and Hazel spends an entire episode trying to impress them so they will join her friend group (Barbee et al., 2024). Double Trouble is considered a valuable "asset" to the Horde's operations (Willis & Bennett, 2019a, 2:50); when undercover as Flutterina, Adora calls them "brave and clever" (20:39). Nightshade is happily adopted into the Malto family (Dubuc et al., 2022), and is invited to collaborate on Tarantulas's latest engineering project (Catt & Humphreys, 2023). Barney is

wanted as an employee at Phoenix Parks (Steele et al., 2022), and as a friend to his talking dog Pugsley and his new coworkers (including fellow protagonist Norma), to the point where they fight tooth and nail to rescue him from an unfair death (Resella & Whitaker, 2022, 14:33). Raine is considered a capable and confident leader (Terrace & Lorenz, 2021; Terrace & Coburn, 2022; Marcus & Lorenz, 2022), “one of the strongest witches” at the IFWOT (Marcus & Underwood, 2022, 15:52), and even becomes romantically involved with series protagonist Eda (20:05). The degree and type of value vary between target characters, but overall, the data reflects a significant departure from previous trans representation, which centres the tragedy and social rejection that trans characters face. As mentioned under Collaboration, the Value among target characters and those around them is also reciprocal. Target characters are both rescuers and rescuees, both supporters and the ones receiving support, and they both worry for others and are the object of worry for those close to them. The target characters are fully embedded in their social groups and cared for by those around them. Further, by portraying these characters as desirable and valued, transness and nonbinaryness are likewise shown as desirable and valued.

Discussion

Previous research on trans media representation identifies discourses of *deficit* in trans characters’ identities, narratives, and interactions with others. They lack the correct body (Latham, 2019), the correct presentation to ‘pass’ as cisgender (Vipond, 2015), and they are perpetual victims of suffering and social ostracization (Villegas Simon et al., 2024, p. 28-29). However, in my analysis of recent youth-rated trans and nonbinary media representation, those deficit discourses are overshadowed by ones of joy, authenticity, and *belonging*. The sampled

characters were played by queer actors, did not engage in the wrong body discourse, and faced no pressure to appear cisgender (as evidenced by the majority of the sampled characters being nonbinary). They were centralized, relied on, celebrated, and loved so much more often than they faced peril and rejection; in so many ways, the target characters *belong* in their social groups, worlds, and narratives.

Under the structural themes—the target characters at their base—there is thought and intention behind the target characters’ personalities, their places in the world of the series, and from whose voices their stories are told. Stereotypes wane in favour of diversity and dynamic characterization. Under the substantive themes—how the characters navigate their worlds, and how their worlds navigate them in turn—the target characters are open and proud of themselves, and they are welcomed by others with open arms. Trans joy and pride are required in both structural and substantive aspects, and each one will uplift the other. When trans and nonbinary characters are constructed as whole persons—not just their gender identities, but so much more—they are seen as leaders, friends, and icons which their fellow cast and audiences can admire and root for. And likewise, when there is space carved for trans and nonbinary characters to thrive in their worlds, they become more than victims of tragedy or body incongruence. This kind of positive trans representation is especially crucial in youth-rated media, like those studied herein. Joyful discourses of transness and nonbinary-ness allow young queer people to explore and embrace their queer identities, and find safe havens in those characters and pieces of media.

Project Boundaries

Just as I acknowledged the gaps in previous research when devising this study, we must also acknowledge the boundaries of this study, so that future research may fill those gaps in turn.

By analyzing only the first five episodes in which the sampled characters speak, I may have missed key moments from other episodes in which target characters are referred to while absent, or are present in non-speaking roles (still communicating through body language, relationships, and social structures). I may also have missed more direct conversations or conflicts about a target character's gender identity that occurred in later episodes than those sampled. While limited, this angle is not without its benefits: a character's debut will set the tone and expectations for the rest of their narrative. If a character is portrayed struggling with their gender identity early on, an audience can reasonably expect the character's journey to focus on that. Conversely, if their identity goes unspoken but respected nonetheless, then an audience can expect character development that does not focus on their gender identity.

As well, analyzing trans characters *and* nonbinary characters in the same sample may have left some themes or discourses specific to either identity neglected or missed. Within this study's sample, only one character was trans (Barney Guttman, *Dead End Paranormal Park*), while the rest were nonbinary. This combined focus was necessary for this study, however, because previous literature has focused more heavily on *trans* media representation and far less on nonbinary media representation. This study fulfilled that untapped niche by including nonbinary characters in its sampling, while still including trans characters to best expand on the existing research. Further, this study's inclusion of nonbinary characters allowed me to elaborate on a trans-focused thematic framework (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017) and place recent nonbinary media representation in conversation with trans media discourses. With this niche filled and the groundwork laid, future research can (and should) examine trans and nonbinary media representation separately, especially the latter on its own. Not only may this yield results different from those presented in the current study, but it will also give each identity its own

space for acknowledgement and affirmation. Such specific research will give voice to the distinct and non-monolithic experiences of gender-nonconforming people across the board, transgender, nonbinary, or otherwise.

Conclusion

Whereas previous research on trans media representation foregrounded trans discourses of deficit, this present study on trans and nonbinary representation in youth-rated animated television found those discourses waning in favour of discourses of *belonging*. Trans and nonbinary characters are portrayed joyfully; their identities are normalized, their narratives centralized, and their desirability as allies, friends, and beyond foregrounded. Through both the visibility of transness and the prioritizing of joyful trans discourses, we may challenge the systems that regard trans people as problematics to cast aside. When trans characters take up space onscreen, we can no longer ignore them to uphold the institution of heterosexuality, and when they are positively and authentically depicted, the assertions that transness is traumatic, wrong, or dangerous no longer hold water.

The present study has, crucially, opened a new avenue of investigation into the joys and strengths of trans media representation, rather than its deficits only. Future research should further explore this theme of trans joy in media. This may involve case studies on specific trans characters, similar to Abbott's (2022) work with *All That Glitters* (Lear, 1977) and *Sense8* (Wachowski et al., 2015—2018), or studies involving trans and nonbinary audience members and their receptions of trans media representation, like those conducted by McInroy & Craig (2015), Villegas Simón et al. (2024), and Mascarino et al. (2026). In a methodological sense, this

study also demonstrates how new data can elaborate on previous theme frameworks, while remaining open to new concepts that emerge organically during collection and analysis. For any kind of research, this openness is crucial, such that the analysis responds to the data itself, rather than forcing the data fit a prescribed framework. Especially when previous frameworks may only apply to dominant social groups, future scholars have a duty to properly and holistically represent marginalized groups in their research, through responsive and open data analysis.

Critically, the implications of this study go beyond the academic. Think of the trans child watching television after school, having found role models in the trans characters shown onscreen. With this representation in hand, they are motivated to build a joyful life for themselves, not despite, but thanks to their queerness. Their parents watch over their shoulder, witnessing how trans people are depicted in their child's favourite series, and start to question their beliefs about transness—perhaps it's not so dangerous or confusing as they thought. By directly challenging the dominant anti-trans narratives, joyful trans representation in entertainment *is* artistic activism: creative media as a vehicle for social change. Through this form of activism, we may carve out much-needed creative space to uplift future generations of trans people, educate others on the trans rights movement, and undo the systems that keep trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people marginalized.

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Appendix A: Sampled TV Series with Synopses, Genres, and US Ratings

Citations are provided for the series themselves first, and their IMDb pages (from which I pulled the synopses, genres, and rating certifications) second. Please note for both appendices, *Transformers: EarthSpark* was first released on Paramount+, but the sampled episodes were accessed via Netflix during the study. This likewise applies for *The Owl House* being first released on Disney Channel, and the sampled episodes being accessed via Disney+.

Abramovici, D., Hairston, A.C., Katai, L., Stone, D. Hartman, B., & Seibert, F. (Executive Producers). (2024). *The Fairly OddParents: A New Wish* [TV Series]. FredFilms, Billionfold Inc., Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Nickelodeon, Netflix.

IMDb (n.d.). *The Fairly OddParents: A New Wish*. Accessed August 17, 2026 from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt31456372>.

Synopsis: Hazel, a ten-year-old girl who has just moved to the big city of Dimmadelphia for her father's new job, explores the city on her own after her brother Antony leaves for college.

Genres: Animation, Adventure, Comedy, Family, Fantasy

US Rating: TV-Y7

Steele, H., Bretton, J.S., & Stuart, T. (Executive Producers). (2022). *Dead End Paranormal Park* [TV Series]. Blink Industries, Netflix Animation; Netflix.

IMDb (n.d.). *Dead End Paranormal Park*. Accessed August 17, 2026 from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12642764>.

Synopsis: Two teens and a talking pug team up to battle demons at a haunted theme park and maybe even save the world from a supernatural apocalypse.

Genres: Animation, Adventure, Comedy, Family, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery

US Rating: TV-Y7

Stevenson, N. & Austen, C. (Executive Producers). (2018-2020). *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* [TV Series]. Dreamworks Animation Television, Mattel; Netflix.

IMDb (n.d.). *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Accessed August 17, 2026 from

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7745956>.

Synopsis: She-Ra, Princess of Power, leads a rebellion to free her land of Etheria from the monstrous invaders the Horde.

Genres: Animation, Action, Adventure, Family, Fantasy, Romance, Sci-Fi

US Rating: TV-Y7-FV

Terrace, D. (Executive Producer). (2020-2023). *The Owl House* [TV Series]. Disney Television Animation; Disney Channel.

IMDb (n.d.). *The Owl House*. Accessed August 17, 2026 from

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8050756>.

Synopsis: Accidentally sent to the world of the Boiling Isles before a trip to summer camp, a teenage human named Luz longs to become a witch and is aided by rebellious Eda and pint-sized demon King.

Genres: Animation, Action, Adventure, Comedy, Family, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery, Romance

US Rating: TV-Y7-FV

Ward, A., Nieli, C., Dubai, N., & Lane, C. (Executive Producers). (2022-2025). *Transformers: EarthSpark* [TV Series]. Entertainment One, Hasbro Entertainment, Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Paramount+.

IMDb (n.d.). *Transformers: EarthSpark*. Accessed August 17, 2026 from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14298658>.

Synopsis: Allied with a family of humans, a new generation of Transformers searches for purpose while defending Earth from threatening evil forces.

Genres: Animation, Action, Adventure, Comedy, Family, Sci-Fi

US Rating: TV-Y7

Appendix B: Sampled Episodes

- Akhtar, F. (Writer) & Liz Whitaker (Director). (2022, June 16). Trust Me (Season 1, Episode 3) [TV series episode]. In Steele, H., Bretton, J.S., & Stuart, T. (Executive Producers), *Dead End Paranormal Park*. Blink Industries, Netflix Animation; Netflix.
- Badion, B. (Writer) & Humphreys, M. (Director). (2023, March 3). Hashtag: Oops (Season 1, Episode 11) [TV series episode]. In Ward, A., Nieli, C., Dubai, N., & Lane, C. (Executive Producers), *Transformers: EarthSpark*. Entertainment One, Hasbro Entertainment, Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Paramount+.
- Barbee, N. (Writer), Hairston, A.C. (Writer), Garcia, A. (Director), & Mills, S. (Director). (2024, May 29). The Wellsington Hotellsington / 1500 Minutes of Fame (Season 1, Episode 4) [TV series episode]. In Abramovici, D., Hairston, A.C., Katai, L., Stone, D. Hartman, B., & Seibert, F. (Executive Producers), *The Fairly OddParents: A New Wish*. FredFilms, Billionfold Inc., Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Nickelodeon, Netflix.
- Barbee, N. (Writer), James III (Writer), Selma, N. (Director), & Garcia, A. (Director). (2024, May 21). The Department of Magical Violations / Teacher's Pal (Season 1, Episode 2) [TV series episode]. In Abramovici, D., Hairston, A.C., Katai, L., Stone, D. Hartman, B., & Seibert, F. (Executive Producers), *The Fairly OddParents: A New Wish*. FredFilms, Billionfold Inc., Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Nickelodeon, Netflix.
- Bardekoff, J. (Writer) & Liz Whitaker (Director). (2022, June 16). Night of the Living Kids (Season 1, Episode 4) [TV series episode]. In Steele, H., Bretton, J.S., & Stuart, T. (Executive Producers), *Dead End Paranormal Park*. Blink Industries, Netflix Animation; Netflix.

- Catt, M. (Writer) & Humphreys, M. (Director). (2023, March 3). Missed Connection (Season 1, Episode 13) [TV series episode]. In Ward, A., Nieli, C., Dubai, N., & Lane, C. (Executive Producers), *Transformers: EarthSpark*. Entertainment One, Hasbro Entertainment, Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Paramount+.
- Dubuc, N. (Writer), Malinowski, D. (Writer), & Conway, J.J. (Director). (2022, November 11). Age of Evolution: Part 2 (Season 1, Episode 10) [TV series episode]. In Ward, A., Nieli, C., Dubai, N., & Lane, C. (Executive Producers), *Transformers: EarthSpark*. Entertainment One, Hasbro Entertainment, Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Paramount+.
- Galupo, I. (Writer) & Kwan, A. (Director). (2023, March 3). Bear Necessities (Season 1, Episode 15) [TV series episode]. In Ward, A., Nieli, C., Dubai, N., & Lane, C. (Executive Producers), *Transformers: EarthSpark*. Entertainment One, Hasbro Entertainment, Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Paramount+.
- Marcus, Z. (Writer) & Lorenz, A. (Director). (2022, May 14). O Titan, Where Art Thou (Season 2, Episode 19) [TV series episode]. In Terrace, D. (Executive Producer), *The Owl House*. Disney Television Animation; Disney Channel.
- Marcus, Z. (Writer) & Underwood, B. (Director). (2022, April 16). Them's the Breaks, Kid (Season 2, Episode 15) [TV series episode]. In Terrace, D. (Executive Producer), *The Owl House*. Disney Television Animation; Disney Channel.
- Nolfi, K. (Writer) & Clotworthy, M. (Director). (2019, November 5). The Valley of the Lost (Season 4, Episode 2) [TV series episode]. In Stevenson, N. & Austen, C. (Executive Producers), *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Dreamworks Animation Television, Mattel; Netflix.

- Paglia, N. (Writer), Harris, E.W. (Writer), & Liz Whitaker (Director). (2022, June 16). The Tunnel (Season 1, Episode 2) [TV series episode]. In Steele, H., Bretton, J.S., & Stuart, T. (Executive Producers), *Dead End Paranormal Park*. Blink Industries, Netflix Animation; Netflix.
- Resella, M. (Writer) & Liz Whitaker (Director). (2022, June 16). The Nightmare Before Christmas in July (Season 1, Episode 5) [TV series episode]. In Steele, H., Bretton, J.S., & Stuart, T. (Executive Producers), *Dead End Paranormal Park*. Blink Industries, Netflix Animation; Netflix.
- Schwimmer, A. (Writer), Horab, A. (Writer), Mills, S. (Director), & Selma, N. (Director). (2024, June 5). Weird Science / Mystery She Wished (Season 1, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In Abramovici, D., Hairston, A.C., Katai, L., Stone, D. Hartman, B., & Seibert, F. (Executive Producers), *The Fairly OddParents: A New Wish*. FredFilms, Billionfold Inc., Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Nickelodeon, Netflix.
- Simmons, W. (Writer), Brooks, K.R. (Writer), Selma, N. (Director), & Garcia, A. (Director). (2024, June 3). 28 Puddings Later / Trial and Hair-ror (Season 1, Episode 5) [TV series episode]. In Abramovici, D., Hairston, A.C., Katai, L., Stone, D. Hartman, B., & Seibert, F. (Executive Producers), *The Fairly OddParents: A New Wish*. FredFilms, Billionfold Inc., Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Nickelodeon, Netflix.
- Sreebny, L. (Writer) & Manrique, C. (Director). (2019a, November 5). Pulse (Season 4, Episode 4) [TV series episode]. In Stevenson, N. & Austen, C. (Executive Producers), *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Dreamworks Animation Television, Mattel; Netflix.

Sreebny, L. (Writer) & Manrique, C. (Director). (2019b, November 5). Princess Scorpia (Season 4, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In Stevenson, N. & Austen, C. (Executive Producers), *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Dreamworks Animation Television, Mattel; Netflix.

Steele, H. (Writer), Paglia, N. (Writer) & Liz Whitaker (Director). (2022, June 16). The Job (Season 1, Episode 1) [TV series episode]. In Steele, H., Bretton, J.S., & Stuart, T. (Executive Producers), *Dead End Paranormal Park*. Blink Industries, Netflix Animation; Netflix.

Terrace, D. (Writer) & Coburn, B. (Director). (2022, March 19). Follies at the Coven Day Parade (Season 2, Episode 11) [TV series episode]. In Terrace, D. (Executive Producer), *The Owl House*. Disney Television Animation; Disney Channel.

Terrace, D. (Writer) & Lorenz, A. (Director). (2021, July 24). Eda's Requiem (Season 2, Episode 7) [TV series episode]. In Terrace, D. (Executive Producer), *The Owl House*. Disney Television Animation; Disney Channel.

Terrace, D. (Writer), Owen, J.B. (Writer), Marcus, Z. (Writer), & Lorenz, A. (Director). (2021, July 31). Knock, Knock, Knocking' on Hooty's Door (Season 2, Episode 8) [TV series episode]. In Terrace, D. (Executive Producer), *The Owl House*. Disney Television Animation; Disney Channel.

Williams, L. (Writer) & Conway, J.J. (Director). (2023, March 3). Security Protocols (Season 1, Episode 14) [TV series episode]. In Ward, A., Nieli, C., Dubai, N., & Lane, C. (Executive Producers), *Transformers: EarthSpark*. Entertainment One, Hasbro Entertainment, Nickelodeon Animation Studio; Paramount+.

- Willis, M. (Writer) & Bennett, J. (Director). (2019a, November 5). Flutterina (Season 4, Episode 3) [TV series episode]. In Stevenson, N. & Austen, C. (Executive Producers), *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Dreamworks Animation Television, Mattel; Netflix.
- Willis, M. (Writer) & Bennett, J. (Director). (2019b, November 5). Mer-Mysteries (Season 4, Episode 7) [TV series episode]. In Stevenson, N. & Austen, C. (Executive Producers), *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Dreamworks Animation Television, Mattel; Netflix.