

3-31-2014

# A Different Sort of Normal: Critical Analysis of Five Lesbian Characters' Coming-out Narratives on Contemporary Television Shows

Amanda M. Carlino

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The Rochester Institute of Technology

Department of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

A Different Sort of Normal: Critical Analysis of Five Lesbian Characters' Coming-out  
Narratives on Contemporary Television Shows

by

Amanda M. Carlino

*A Thesis* submitted

in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree

in Communication and Media Technologies

Degree Awarded:

March 31, 2014

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A DIFFERENT SORT OF NORMAL: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FIVE LESBIAN  
CHARACTERS' COMING-OUT NARRATIVES ON CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION  
SHOWS

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Term Degree Awarded: Spring Semester 2014 (2135)

**Abstract**

The spiral of silence and cultivation theories both support the importance of positive lesbian portrayals on television, both for lesbian and heterosexual viewers. Throughout the history of lesbian representation in media, lesbian characters have been both under and misrepresented. This study examined five lesbian characters on recent and current television shows to demonstrate how their portrayals subvert the traditional lesbian representations in media. It is concluded that while Emily Fields, Santana Lopez, Sophie Webster, Emily Fitch, and Naomi Campbell's narratives fall victim to some negative tropes in representation, they are generally revolutionary and powerful storylines, thus increasing positive visibility, providing positive role models for lesbian youths, and helping with a "mainstreaming effect" leading to greater acceptance socially for GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) youths.

*Keywords:* lesbians, representation, sexualities, youth, television

### **A Different Sort of Normal: Critical Analysis of Five Lesbian Characters' Coming-out Narratives on Contemporary Television Shows**

In George Gerbner's essay *Cultivation Analysis: An Overview*, he discusses the importance of storytelling to humans from birth on. Specifically, he explains how television has become the primary, centralized storytelling medium for a huge population, exposing children and adults to messages and ideas that can shape their view of the world at large (Gerbner, 1998).

Television programming has long underrepresented lesbian characters. Only recently have prime time television shows begun to include lesbians not only as secondary or one-off characters, but in lead roles with long-term story lines. Nearly without fail, these storylines will include the narrative of the character's "coming out of the closet" (heretofore referred to simply as "coming out"), or admitting and revealing their homosexuality to themselves, family, friends, and peers.

The importance of lesbian coming-out narratives on popular television shows can't be over-stated. Television has essentially become society's main source of storytelling. What people see on television, they begin to believe is true to real life as well (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Lesbian visibility on television is important for young lesbians both as a representation of role-models, and as a tool for their peers and families to see that lesbians exist and, contrary to what continues to be an unfortunate belief, are normal, as "the media both shapes and reflects society's values" (Carton, 1992, p. 5). When viewers exclusively see characters that are "like them," they are less likely to understand that different types of people exist all around them. When the "values" exhibited on television begin to change, so can the viewership's acceptance of these values.

This study intends to analyze five different narratives for similarities and differences, and then to explore what these narratives mean in a larger sense regarding lesbian representation on television, as well as the problems with the portrayals. Specifically, I analyzed how each character's narrative portrayed coming out to family, coming out to peers, and how the character realized herself that she was gay and what effect this seemed to have. Additionally, I analyzed recurring and similar themes, and will discuss why these portrayals are extremely important. Through the lens of the spiral of silence and cultivation communication theories, I'll explore how these characters' coming-out storylines are important and effective tools for both young lesbians and for heterosexual viewers. My research questions on this topic are:

***RQ 1:*** What are the recurring themes, positive or negative, of these five characters' coming-out narratives (that is, any and all recurring themes were noted, regardless of whether they painted the coming out experience as harmful or helpful), and additionally,

***RQ 2:*** How are these portrayals subverting the traditional lesbian portrayal on television, and further,

***RQ 3:*** What effect can these storylines have on young lesbian viewers and their heterosexual peers/family members?

I chose these questions based upon the thematic categories that emerged throughout the study, and the importance of visibility for lesbian characters from a cultivation and spiral of silence perspective. It should be stated that in addition to character and narrative analysis, my own personal experience colors this thesis. As a homosexual woman who navigated adolescence with few, if any, lesbian role models in media, my interpretation and reflection regarding these

characters and their stories are mine alone. Analysis was approached academically, but the existence of a personal connection to this topic by this author should not and cannot be ignored.

The spiral of silence theory within the study of communications posits that people are slow to voice their opinions and stances when they fall within a minority of a group. The majority opinion is responsible for maintaining what can and cannot be said (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Since the majority in this case is comprised of heterosexuals, the homosexual representation and voice on television is kept to a minimum, and a blaringly small subset of characters. Gross called it “symbolic annihilation,” stating “those in the bottom of the various power hierarchies will be kept in their place in part through their relative invisibility” (Gross, 1991, p. 21). If a minority, or those without power, is made to continually believe that their existence doesn’t matter, or that they are somehow “less,” then it follows they will stay in this position. Without positive role models, GLBT youth are at a disadvantage. Fisher, Hill, Grube, and Gruber (2007) say:

Although television has been criticized for not providing positive role models for adolescents... the lack of positive role models on television is more extreme for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. Most lesbians and gay men grow up in a straight community with few gay role models; thus, they are particularly vulnerable to the portrayals of gay people in the mass media. (p. 168)

In other words, GLBT youth often lack role-models that are like them in real life, and so exposure to such characters in media becomes particularly important. A white heterosexual male, for example, can easily find people “like him” literally everywhere, both in his life and on the screen. Additionally, GLBT adolescents face what Harrison called “special problems.”



Specifically, the “pressure to pass as ‘normal’ can create feelings of isolation and fear of ‘discovery’. To maintain the deception, GLBT adolescents may become hyper-vigilant about self-monitoring behavior, clothing, and body image” (Harrison, 2003, p. 108). This pressure can lead to a host of problems. These include, but are not limited to, self-harm, unsafe promiscuity, and as we have unfortunately seen lately in the news, hopelessness and suicide (Harrison, 2003). The existence of relatable and positive lesbian characters on television can therefore be seen as extremely important to lesbian viewers at home. To see young girls going through a situation similar to their own, lesbian youth might in time feel less alone, and have role models they can relate to. And so the importance of these characters is two-fold: They become important symbols of hope for lesbian youth, and they become important symbols of the reality of homosexuality for heterosexual viewers.

As stated, this study’s topic and content is very personal to me as the author. To offer my own perspective and experience, and to help the reader understand how my personal experiences may have painted my interpretation and conclusions throughout this study, my own thoughts and personal stories are included in italics throughout the text.

*The lack of lesbian characters on television certainly had an adverse effect on me personally. While many lesbians will tell you they’ve known they were gay since a young age (“I’ve known since I was in the womb” is a familiar and long-running joke), a strong Catholic background and lack of exposure to anything homosexual kept me from grasping that I was a lesbian until I was 20, and kept me from fully accepting it until years later. I was scared to come out to my friends, and the idea of telling my parents literally terrified me, even after I’d accepted within my own self that this was who I was. I fully believe that had I been exposed to narratives in which I*

*recognized myself...that is, a young lesbian dealing with her sexuality and navigating coming out to the people she knew and loved...I would have had a much easier time coming out. At the very least, I would have known that others, even if fictional, had gone through what I was and, for the most part, ended up okay and certainly better than before.*

I began my study by exploring existing examples of lesbian characters on television and film. This is followed by the methodology I used for the study of the five characters, the findings my study produced, an analysis of these findings (thematic categories), and my conclusions. All of this was done with cognizance of the history of lesbian representation, current problems and issues faced today by lesbian youths, and of the over-arching effects on and of the cultivation and spiral of silence theories.

### **History of Lesbian Representation in Media**

To put the five narratives explored in this paper in context, it is important to understand the background and history of lesbian representation both on television and elsewhere. Once the existing and recurring portrayal of lesbian characters is established, it is easier to understand why and how the characters in my study are both different and important (and in some cases, how the established stereotypes continue).

### **Lesbians on Television**

The 2012-2013 television season featured 4.4% representation of GLBT characters on the five major U.S. broadcasting networks (ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC, and CW). Additionally, GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) counted 35 GLBT characters on cable this year. Compare this with just seven years ago, when less than 2% of characters on major

networks were identified as GLBT and cable characters weren't even counted, and it is clear GLBT representation on television has come a long way (GLAAD.org).

Not only has the pure volume of lesbian characters on television increased in recent years, the types of stories these characters are a part of has begun to shift, as well. For years, any lesbian representation was marred by tropes like the psychotic jealous lesbian, the suicidal lesbian, and perhaps most troubling, the classic lesbian kiss during sweeps week. By turning a main character "gay" to boost ratings during sweeps week, networks kept their characters from being truly gay...just experimenting. It was okay to try it out, as long as in the end the girl concluded that she still liked boys. Wilkinson describes this representation as "Bisexuality a la mode," lesbianism through a distinctly heteronormative lens, where the lesbian activity is decidedly unthreatening to heterosexual viewers (Wilkinson, 1996). Perhaps the most famous and most troubling example of this trope is that of Marissa Cooper on the widely viewed Fox show *The O.C.* Marissa, straight until sweeps week of season two, suddenly develops feelings for a female character. Fans cynically viewed this as a sweeps week ploy for ratings, and the relationship was wrapped up quickly.

This portrayal is problematic on its own, but perhaps just as troubling was that there were few counter-storylines to show lesbians as full, fleshed out characters with plotlines and challenges of their own. Often, if a coming out story was portrayed at all, it left the lesbian character rejected by family and friends, and depressed (the suicidal lesbian). While this was representation, it could be argued that no representation would be better than this. The symbolic annihilation continues, since despite the flicker of lesbian activity, no true lesbian existed, or if she did, she lived a miserable existence.

For the most part, any GLBT representation on television that attempted to portray the sexuality as “normal” was a flash in the pan, as Doty (1993) explains:

But even middle-class, middlebrow assimilationist attempts to represent queerness as just like straightness have failed to find a secure place in mass culture, for the most part. The gay couples in *thirtysomething* and *Roseanne*, the lesbian couple in *Heartbeat*, Amanda Donohoe's bisexuality in *L.A. Law*, and the lesbian founders of Cicely, Alaska, in *Northern Exposure* were pretty much here today, gone tomorrow on television. (p. 103)

The short-lived nature and unimportance of these characters rendered them largely ineffective from a cultivation standpoint. They were not important on their respective television shows, and a viewer could then interpret that lesbians are unimportant in real life, as well.

### **Buffy the vampire slayer.**

There have been a few exceptions to this rule, however, aside from the characters I'll discuss in this article. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also featured a main character's coming out as a lesbian, in the story of Willow, a witch. Willow's relationship with fellow witch Tara was in many ways groundbreaking, however, the focus was not on a coming out narrative. Willow never distinctly came out as a lesbian, and may in fact be bisexual. Additionally, this storyline followed some of the negative tropes discussed above. When Tara is killed, for example, Willow turns evil, and subsequently becomes the primary antagonist for the show's sixth season. While I applaud the show for exploring a main character's sexuality in, what was at the time, a new way, it didn't portray a nuanced coming out story, and the supernatural elements of the show (Willow's powers becoming stronger as she builds a relationship with Tara, and then getting out

of control when Tara is killed) make it difficult to categorize as a tool for viewers to understand real-life lesbian coming out struggles.

**The women in prison narrative.**

There is an additional trope in regards to lesbian representation on television: women in prison. *Bad Girls*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *The L Word*, among other mainstream television shows, featured lesbian prison storylines. Numerous studies have been done on the existence of homosexual activity in women's prisons, and so it seems a natural setting to include lesbian plotlines. Clearly, however, these stories do not necessarily portray a young lesbian's coming out as positive or hopeful. The fact that these women are in prison at all, and therefore, presumably, criminals, is a problematic representation. Additionally, the reality of homosexuality in women's prisons is that "true" lesbians entering prison are likely to remain faithful to any non-incarcerated partners, and "penitentiary turnouts," or situational lesbians, are more likely to engage in homosexual relationships/acts within the prison, for economic or social gains (Arrigo, Murphy, & Pardue, 2011). Some of the representations within the prison environment plotline can be seen as positive and in fact were widely beloved among fans. Didi Herman, who has written on *Bad Girls* extensively, argues that it uniquely portrayed a nuanced lesbian relationship within a homonormative pretext rather than the dominant heteronormative pretext we see commonly, and points out fans of the show have credited *Bad Girls* with helping them come to terms with their homosexuality (Herman, 2003). However, despite the positive contributions possibly offered by these shows, the overall problem of a prison setting, and resulting assumed criminal background for lesbian characters, remains.

**The lasting legacy of Ellen.**

The sitcom *Ellen* featured the main character's coming out in dramatic fashion, to massive media coverage, in 1997. Acceptance of homosexuality in 1997 was far different than it is now, and the episode (and Ellen DeGeneres's concurrent outing in real life) resulted in some positive accolades from the media (Dow, 2001), as well as backlash from political and religious groups (Herman, 2005). Ellen's character was in her thirties by the time the decision was made to have her come out, however, making her an inappropriate fit for the purpose of this paper. Regardless, her character's arc fits many of the trends on coming out narratives I'll discuss later. Although her sitcom was cancelled shortly after her character's coming-out story was told, Ellen DeGeneres has gone on to become quite possibly the most well-liked and successful lesbian in television history. Her real-life coming out is seen by many to be paramount in the slow but generally improved visibility of homosexual characters on television. While scholars remain conflicted on whether Ellen exists mostly as a token, appealing to a primarily hetero-normative life-view (Skerksi, 2007) or whether she manages to win over audiences while still being effectively subversive and challenges the dominant population (Reed, 2005), it is clear that her very existence has made a difference and has proven itself worthy as a topic of study. I believe that while Ellen has largely played it safe, it is partially her genuinely likeable attitude that appeals to heterosexual viewers, and she has made no effort to hide or minimize her life or her marriage. She has been a trailblazer for modern lesbian representation on television, both through her sitcom and her talk show. It could be argued that none of the storylines I'll discuss in this paper could have happened without Ellen DeGeneres's influence beforehand.

**All my children.**

Another precursor to the coming-out narratives I will discuss later was that of Bianca Montgomery on the U.S. soap opera *All My Children*, during the fall of 2000. Bianca was an existing member of the cast when it was revealed she was a lesbian, and in a relationship with another girl named Sarah. While a groundbreaking representation for its time, in that she was “one of the first gay characters anywhere on television that was not introduced specifically *to be* a gay character” (Harrington, 2003, p. 223), I chose not to include the Bianca narrative in my study primarily because it aired over a decade ago, very little of Bianca’s interaction with her significant other appeared onscreen, and the viewer also saw very little of Bianca’s personal struggle with coming out (mostly the audience was shown the rocky coming-to-terms with her mother). Additionally, as Bianca explored future relationships with female characters, viewers were generally disappointed with the portrayals (Ng, 2007). As a result, fans took to the internet to partake in another facet of lesbian television viewership: creating canon.

**Creating canon.**

A phenomenon found within the lesbian viewership over time, particularly when explicit lesbian relationships were not shown on television, was that of viewers creating their own canon through “fanfiction” (fictional stories written by fans of the show, featuring the show’s characters) and art. This arguably began with the television series *Xena, Warrior Princess*. Fans of the show saw an implicit sexual relationship between the characters Xena and Gabrielle, and, when the relationship was not made explicit on television, took it upon themselves to write storylines and draw pictures exploring the possibility. Sara Jones (2000) explains “*XWP*’s ironic reworkings of history and mythology, together with its connotative, “subtextual” queer

construction of the central Xena-Gabrielle relationship, invite, even require, active interpretative practices from the series' audience" (Jones, 2000, p. 407). Even before the Santana-Brittany lesbian relationship on *Glee* (discussed in depth later in this paper) became actual in-show canon, Santana/Brittany fan fiction stories on the massive website fanfiction.net outnumbered other pairings. Lesbian viewers have longed to see themselves represented on the television screen, and when they couldn't find it outright, they created it themselves. Additionally, GLBT viewers, through a queer lens, are more likely to see homosexual subtext where heterosexual viewers may not. Doty said it thusly: "From where I sit as a feminine gay, I will often see fundamentally lesbian bonding where others see straight homosocial bonding, or, perhaps, a homosocial bonding that jokingly plays with suggestions of lesbian desire" (Doty, 1993, p. 43). This continues today with pairings of heterosexual characters such as Rizzoli and Isles from the show of the same name, and will likely continue until, if ever, lesbian representation on television reaches a comparable level to that of heterosexual pairings. The creation of canon within lesbian fanbases deserves recognition within the constructs of this paper, as it highlights the lack of quality lesbian representation on television in the past.

### **The L word.**

I would be remiss if I attempted to write a paper regarding lesbian representation on television without acknowledging the Showtime drama *The L Word*. From 2004-2009, *The L Word* was the first major show of its kind to present a largely LGBT cast, primarily women, to a large audience. Anticipation among lesbian viewers for this show was immense, and the level of excitement preceding the show can possibly only be matched by the general disappointment felt as the show aired. Strong first and second seasons led to widespread disappointment and outright



anger among lesbians as the show continued, and many argue that the show did more harm than good. For many reasons, I found this show, and its characters, to be ineffective for the purposes of my study. First, while many lesbian characters are represented, the show focuses almost exclusively on their inner-circle, allowing for very little interaction with outside characters in any situation, including their coming-out (Lee & Meyer, 2006). Secondly, the characters in *The L Word* were largely in their late 20s and 30s, beyond the relatable age for youths I was searching for, for my study. Finally, many of the characters in the show eventually—or in some unfortunate cases, immediately—fell into the same tropes that had encouraged me to write this paper in the first place. In fact, the main character of the show, one of the first the audience meets in season one and follows throughout her coming out process, eventually suffers mental health problems and, in the series finale, is killed. Several “lesbian” characters end up with men, and several other characters suffer from mental health problems. Perhaps the most well-liked and relatable character (who actually did have a decently developed coming-out narrative), tennis star Dana Fairbanks, was killed off in season three when she contracted and died of breast cancer. While these are all valid representations of the human condition, and I don’t mean to belittle bisexuality, fluid sexualities, mental health issues, murder, or cancer, they are too common; in fact, they are all that was represented for lesbian characters for decades. Viewers expected more from the first lesbian-centered show on television. Online message boards still fill with vitriol when this show is discussed. Some excerpts from the comments for a Dorothy Snarker written piece, in which show creator Ilene Chaiken apologized for killing off Dana Fairbanks, are:

The L Word had the potential to be so awesome. I remember watching the first episode in San Francisco with a huge crowd and we were so excited about the show. After everyone saw the first few episodes...there was hardly any crowd at all. We were expecting sex and fun and we really didn't get that. (Snarker, 2011)

She continued:

Even I think I bawled a little bit more than I'd like over a fictional death, but Dana... well, was Dana. She was this character everyone could relate to in a TV series which everybody was expecting to represent an entire community -- which didn't do much of that, I think. I realize that the L word is pure fiction and is meant to be romanticized in most bits, of course, but I had some expectations. Anyways, Dana's death... it just stung a little more painfully... here was a mirror of your own little life, shattered. It just prickles on the inside, y'know? (Snarker, 2011)

While the show, from a cultivation theory standpoint, appears to have done some good (Kris, Rossman, & Frueh, 2007), I found the show's troubles too many to include, and chose to leave its characters out.

### **Lesbians in Film**

Lesbian representation in film certainly goes back farther than television. Unfortunately, the same tired tropes we've seen regarding lesbian characters on television may have taken their cue from the movie industry. Within "homosexual" films, that is, films in which the main character is a lesbian and the storyline revolves around this, examples abound of lesbians as murderous, mentally ill, criminal, or just plain evil. Chesney-Lind and Eliason (2006), writing about the portrayal of masculine women, said:

Until recently, film depictions of lesbians were limited to women's prison films, where lesbians were masculine sexual predators, and vampire movies, with lesbians living off the blood of beautiful, innocent girls and women. Even now, with more varied depictions of lesbians available in all forms of media, murderous lesbians still overpopulate the screen. (p. 37)

A sample of "lesbian" films from recent years exhibit many negative portrayals and trends that are problematic both for lesbian viewers and lesbian representation in general. *Lost and Delirious* (2001) features a lesbian suicide after she is spurned by her lover. *Loving Annabelle* (2006) is based upon an illegal teacher-student relationship. *Bound* (1996) revolves around two murderous criminal lesbians, and *Gia* (1998) and *High Art* (1998) both involve mental illness and copious drug use.

Contrary to the negative representation in the films listed above, a handful of recent "lesbian" movies have offered a positive story. *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999), a comedy, initially sends the lesbian protagonist to a conversion therapy camp to rid her of her homosexual urges. In the end, however, it is the gay youngsters who are portrayed as the heroes, and our main character finds love at camp with another lesbian. *DEBS* (2004), a sort of Charlie's Angels parody, spins the "villain with a heart of gold" narrative on its head by making the villain a female, and in the end she does get her girl. And *Imagine Me and You* (2005) features a female-female love story that ends in heartache for the male character and not one of the female leads, subverting the typical and traditional resolution to most female-female-male love triangles portrayed in the past (e.g., *Kissing Jessica Stein*, *Lost and Delirious*, and *Basic Instinct*).

The films mentioned have all been “lesbian” films, that is, films made with a homosexual audience largely in mind. In mainstream heterosexual films, lesbian representation becomes even more problematic. This is best explained using Laura Mulvey’s feminist concept of the “male gaze,” that is, that cinema is viewed through the eyes of a heterosexual male, and the portrayal of females in film will reflect this view (Mulvey, 1975). As a result, lesbians in heterosexual films are consistently portrayed in one of two ways. First, lesbians are often portrayed as sex objects, primarily for the satisfaction of heterosexual men. Ann Ciasullo (2001) argues:

The mainstream lesbian body is at once sexualized and desexualized: on the one hand, she is made into an object of desire for straight audiences through her heterosexualization, a process achieved by representing the lesbian as embodying a hegemonic femininity and thus, for mainstream audiences, as looking "just like" conventionally attractive straight women; on the other hand, because the representation of desire between two women is usually suppressed in these images, she is de-homosexualized. (p. 578)

That is to say, the “lesbian” is hot and sexually desirable, but doesn’t really have sex with women, as this would threaten the heterosexual norm. Female-female physical affection and sexuality is discussed further below.

The second portrayal is that of the dominant lesbian stereotype: that she is masculine and aggressive, and therefore a threat to heterosexual males and females alike (Ciasullo, 2001; Creed, 1995). If this stereotype is portrayed at all, it is as a villain or for comedic purposes, remaining a caricature and not a fully fleshed out character. Her relegation to one of these roles ensures that, through the male gaze, she is still non-threatening. The reality, of course, is that lesbians, like

heterosexual women, come in all shapes, sizes, styles, and stereotypes, but the male gaze is rarely, if ever, interested in seeing more than the two I've discussed above. Indeed, it appears as though Caroline Sheldon (1999) made an observation in *Lesbian and Films: Some Thoughts* that remains relatively true:

In general it appears that despite the emergence of a new consciousness about gayness and womanity, the cinema is entrenched in viewing both as a negative and potentially destructive (either of self or others) unless a safe domesticity prevails in marriage to a 'strong' man. (p. 303)

That is, despite any representation of female homosexuality, the end result for a "happy ending" is for the woman to end up with a man, thus reinforcing the heterosexual norms.

I chose to stay away from film for this paper for three reasons:

1. I believe in the power of television as a medium, particularly for teenage girls who may be coming to terms with their sexuality, both due to its popularity and availability. Specifically, viewers will be watching these shows anyway, they are popular. To view a lesbian film, viewers are forced to go out of their way to find it. Around 60% of teenagers spend at least 20 hours per week, and a third spends upwards of 40 hours weekly, watching television (American Heart Association, 2008).
2. Extensive study has already been done on lesbian representation in film.
3. A film narrative that largely featured a character's coming out story is unlikely, due to the confines of a two hour film, to feature the sort of extended, detailed story arc I was looking for.

### **Displaying Affection**

When the teen-oriented show *South of Nowhere* debuted in 2005, word got out that one of the characters would be a lesbian. Indeed, a relationship formed between main characters Ashley Davies and Spencer Hastings. Quickly, however, it became clear that any physical affection between Spencer and Ashley was tame compared to physical affection between heterosexual couples on the same show. This is a troubling and, for lesbian viewers, an annoying trend in media portrayals of lesbian relationships. Commenters on the popular television recap site *Television Without Pity* started an entire forum topic on *South of Nowhere* titled “hot lesbian hugging” to poke fun at and critique the tentative portrayal of lesbian sexuality on the show, which famously depicted an almost absurd amount of affectionate hair brushing (*South of nowhere...*). Jackson and Gilbertson (2009) suggest that such “erasure of desire through trivialization and ‘girlie’ behaviour functions to make ‘lesbianism’ less threatening to heteronormativity” (p. 219). When female-female sexuality is portrayed explicitly, it is often for the benefit of male heterosexual viewers, rather than to advance lesbian representation in any way. Jenkins (2005), in studying the portrayals of lesbian sexuality in teen movies, argues that “these movies undoubtedly promote a heterosexualized view of female homosexuality” (p. 502). It is extremely difficult to find a lesbian storyline featuring overt sexuality that does not express this sexuality through the male gaze.

### **Methodology**

The five characters I explored are Emily Fields (*Pretty Little Liars*), Santana Lopez (*Glee*), Sophie Webster (*Coronation Street*), and Naomi Campbell and Emily Fitch (*Skins*). I’ve chosen these five characters for several reasons:

1. All of these characters identify as lesbian (as opposed to bisexual) and all came out during their mid to late teenage years...exactly when their primary fan-base would not only be watching, but likely be discovering their own sexualities, as well. According to the American Psychological Association, "For most people, sexual orientation emerges in early adolescence without any prior sexual experience" (American Psychological Association, 2008).
2. All of these characters were already established members of their respective casts, as opposed to short-term characters specifically introduced to be a sweeps week or "very special episode" example of homosexuality.
3. Each character's storyline is well developed and ends on a relatively positive note, avoiding the traditional negative lesbian tropes in media.
4. Most importantly, each character's storyline strongly features their coming out to friends, family, and themselves.

Additionally, the coming out arcs in all of these shows aired around the same time, and recently, from 2009–2010.

It is of utmost importance to acknowledge that these characters are not the traditional static "lesbian character" previously represented in media. Lesbian representation has been relatively well-studied, and these characters are neither flat stereotypes nor token representations. The assumption is that previous representation has been unsatisfactory thus far, both in number and content.

In order to cover these four criteria, I've used characters from both U.S. and U.K. television shows. In the past, US access to *Skins* and *Coronation Street* would have been limited,

however, in today's media environment, access to these shows on the internet and through streaming programs such as Netflix and Hulu is easy, and both enjoy a substantial U.S. following, despite their foreign origins. While it is unfortunate that I could not find five characters suitable from U.S. primetime shows alone, the characters on *Skins* and *Coronation Street* are readily accessible and well-known and liked within the shows' fandoms.

I studied the plotlines of all five shows from a grounded theory perspective with particular focus on the coming-out narratives (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach eventually led to focus on the character's reaction to her self-discovery of her homosexuality, her parent(s)'s reaction(s), her friends' reactions, and the reactions of her peers. I also noted the characters' storylines before and after they came out to determine their roles in their respective shows. The character development prior to the coming-out storylines was important to determine, since a primary element of this paper is that these characters were not included exclusively as the "token" gay character, but as full, nuanced members of their respective casts. This was executed without bias, as a straightforward analysis of content (which characters had parents who disapproved, which reacted to their situation with self-destructive behavior, and so forth).

I watched each of these shows separately, both when they originally aired and repeatedly throughout the execution of this study (all plotlines are now available for viewing either online, on DVD, or both). Copious note-taking and memo-ing, as well as observations of online fan responses through websites and social media, led to the emergence of categorical themes. As recurring themes emerged I noted them while referring back to the literature on representation I'd already found to create a critical analysis of the five coming-out narratives. Again, my



personal experiences and narrative are woven throughout this study, and the analysis of these stories, in particular their importance and possible effects, are touched by what I know to be my truth.

### **Findings**

To begin, I've written about each character's storyline as it relates to her coming-out, driven by the fundamental research questions of what do these narratives have in common, and how do these storylines subvert the "traditional" representation of lesbians in media described above. These characters consistently moved beyond the negative tropes historically repeated in both television and movies in regards to lesbian characters' portrayals (for a high level summary of each of these five characters, please see Table A1 Character Summaries).

#### **Emily Fields ("Maybe I'm not the person everyone thinks I am.")**

The show *Pretty Little Liars* on ABC Family takes place in the fictional Pennsylvania small town of Rosewood. Four friends—Emily Fields, Spencer Hastings, Hannah Marin, and Aria Montgomery—are high school girls being stalked, harassed, and manipulated by a mysterious person who only goes by "A". Despite the drama and danger produced by these circumstances, the girls still manage to navigate school, their friendships, relationships with their families and significant others, and much of the show focuses on these aspects of the girls' lives.

Emily Fields begins the series in a relationship with a boy her age. Quickly, though, we discover that she's beginning to harbor feelings for her new neighbor, Maya. As the season progresses Emily struggles with her sexuality and eventually comes out to her friends, as well as her military father and traditionalist, uptight mother.

Emily shares a close bond with Hanna, Spencer, and Aria, partly because they are all in constant danger together as a result of the show's premise, but also because they've simply grown up together and been friends for years. As a result, her friends begin to realize how Emily feels about Maya before she can admit it to them, or even herself. Emily tries her hardest to make things work with her boyfriend Ben, and later with another male character, Toby...although by this point her friends were on to her, and her friend Hanna asks her why she took the wrong person (Toby) to the school dance. Hanna then gently makes the statement, "You were Emily dating Ben and now you're Emily dating Maya. We love Emily. No one cares who you're with." This support, as well as the support the other two Liars give her, makes Emily more self-assured and willing to date Maya more openly.

*I remember coming out to my friends. I remember how terrifying it was, the fear of being judged and left out. I also remember the immense relief and lightness I felt when they supported and encouraged me.*

Emily's parents, however, were a harder hurdle to overcome. Emily's father is in the military, but when he comes home from an 8 month deployment, he knows instantly that something is not right with Emily. She's jumpy and scared, and while some of this can be attributed to other events in the show, she eventually confesses to him that she's scared of him and Mrs. Fields...and that it is because Emily is gay. This causes a brief upheaval in Emily's family, as Mr. Fields, unsure of how to react, is ultimately just happy that Emily is alive and well, and wants to see her happy. Mrs. Fields, however, cannot initially accept the news. She thinks it is morally wrong, against their values, and determines that Emily is just confused, and can't be gay.

Mrs. Fields' reaction is, unfortunately, all too accurate and common. Coming out to parents can often result in shame and disappointment, and sometimes, outright rifts within the family (LaSala, 2000). Eventually Emily's mother comes to a point of acceptance, but for the better part of a season, *Pretty Little Liars* demonstrates for the viewers a nuanced and true to life narrative of a teen girl and her loving, but somewhat ignorant, parents coming to terms with homosexuality.

As the series progresses, Emily is given just as many love interests as her heterosexual counterparts. At one point, a potential love interest, Paige, is having her own issues coming to terms with her feelings for Emily, and her sexuality in general. She confides in Emily, and Emily proves to have come full circle in her acceptance of herself. When Paige calls Emily brave for coming out of the closet, they have the following dialogue:

Emily: "I didn't come out of the closet, I fell out on my face. But I'm out, and whatever else happens, I don't have to worry about it anymore."

Paige: "If I say it out loud...if I say, 'I'm gay'...the whole world is gonna change."

Emily: "Yeah. It will." (Episode 1.20).

Emily reassures Paige that being out is better than being in, and that she's brave enough, too.

Emily is a strong character on *Pretty Little Liars*. She is captain of the swim team and a source of quiet resolve and consistency within her group of friends. We as the viewers never see much from Emily in the way of internal struggle over her homosexuality aside from briefly trying to force herself to enjoy being with boys in the beginning of the series. Once she falls for Maya, she seems to know that this is who she is: a girl who likes girls. The support from her

friends helps her come to terms, but early on Emily is not afraid to see where things go with Maya and to be true to herself.

**Santana Lopez (“The only straight I am is straight-up bitch.”)**

Like Emily Fields, Santana Lopez, a leading character on the Fox show *Glee*, began the series dating exclusively boys. *Glee* takes place in a small town in Ohio, Lima. It follows the trials and antics of a high school glee club composed of students from all walks of life at McKinley High School. Santana is a popular cheerleader, cruel and snide with her classmates, and originally only joins the glee club to spy on the members and report back to her coach. In time, she begins to enjoy glee club and befriends the members. Eventually, it is revealed that she has been casually sleeping with her best friend Brittany, another cheerleader at school. This revelation sets in motion Santana’s coming out storyline.

Santana initially brushes off Brittany’s attempts to discuss their feelings for each other as ludicrous, “I don’t make out with you because I’m in love with you,” and as a result, Brittany begins dating a male member of the glee club to make Santana jealous. The ploy works, and Santana slowly realizes that not only is she in love with Brittany... she’s also attracted to girls, and only girls, period.

Santana confesses her love to Brittany, and is subsequently rejected. Not because Brittany doesn’t love Santana back, but because she feels an obligation to her boyfriend.

I want to be with you. But I'm afraid of the talks and the looks. I mean, you know what happened to Kurt at this school. I'm so afraid of what everyone will say behind my back. Still, I have to accept that... I love you. I love you a-and I don't want to be with Sam or

Finn or any of those other guys. I just want you. Please say you love me back. Please.

(Santana Lopez, episode 2.15).

*I remember telling my friend I was in love with her. I remember the rejection. Mostly, I remember feeling entirely alone.*

After this confession, Santana seems to fully acknowledge and accept that she is a lesbian, though she spends the remainder of the season in the closet. She dates a closeted gay male student at their school to keep up a heterosexual appearance, and in voice-overs, it is revealed that she is afraid of the consequences of being out in school. She even refers to herself as a closeted lesbian. There is no question in her mind about what she is, however, she, like most teenagers that age, displays trepidation over how people may react if they were to find out that popular Santana Lopez was actually a lesbian.

Eventually, Santana is outed by another student, but her friends are supportive and understanding (it is notable that Santana at this point is not the first out gay member of the glee club, just the first lesbian, so the kids had had time to adjust to the idea of homosexuality already). The glee clubs sings songs to her showing their support and fully embrace her eventual relationship with Brittany.

Santana is terrified, however, to tell her parents. While it is revealed that her mother and father accepted her sexuality off-screen, there is a scene depicted in which she comes out to her grandmother, with less desirable results. Her grandmother refuses to accept Santana's confession, "I love girls, the way I'm supposed to feel about boys." This is difficult for Santana, as she and her grandmother were very close, but by this time she'd accepted who she truly was, and resigned herself to a broken relationship with her "abuela."

Generally, Santana's story arc on *Glee* could be extremely inspirational for young girls trying to come to terms with their sexuality. She is a strong but flawed character to begin with, shown to have serious social standing within the high school. She has an internal struggle with her sexuality, but eventually comes to accept it with the support of her friends and parents. Despite the loss of her relationship with her grandmother, and several instances of fear of being discovered, Santana's character grows to be an outspoken, proud, and most importantly, happy lesbian. Later in the series she challenges her school's policies regarding same-sex displays of affection, and openly brings Brittany as her date to the Valentine's day dance. Her progression from scared and closeted to out and proud lesbian is inspirational.

**Sophie Webster (“Look, Dad, you know you’re straight...and I know I’m not.”)**

Sophie Webster has been a regular character on the U.K. soap opera *Coronation Street* since she was a baby. The long-running soap features the lives of characters living on and around Coronation Street in the fictional small town of Weatherford, Manchester, England. Sophie's story lines were typically based around her family, but when the character was 16, it was revealed that she was developing feelings for her best friend, Sian Powers. They hang out together all the time and go on double-dates, and for several episodes, their relationship appears to be a typical platonic friendship. Eventually, Sophie begins to fight with Sian's boyfriend, and starts showing small signs of jealousy and protectiveness. Sian's boyfriend makes a move on Sophie, and blames Sophie when he is found out. This briefly severs the friendship, as Sian believes her boyfriend rather than her friend. When Sian comes to Sophie for support after she discovers the truth, Sophie kisses her, and is immediately rebuked. Sian is confused and disgusted, and forgoes her friendship with Sophie. Sophie, depressed and unable to discuss her

problem with anyone out of fear, eventually tries dating boys again, with no luck. Sian eventually returns and apologizes, and they start a relationship.

The girls are initially terrified of peoples' responses, and keep their relationship a secret. One by one, their friends and families begin to find out, with varying reactions. Sophie's sister, Rosie, initially amused and shocked, immediately accepts the relationship and thinks it is cute. Sophie's parents, however, do not react well. Her father has already grown distant from the family, and her mother thinks homosexuality is wrong and disgusting. This is an accurate reflection of the generational differences around acceptance of homosexuality. According to Pew Research, nearly 70% of those under the age of 30 are accepting of homosexuality, while closer to 50% of those over 50 are (PEW 2011).

Sophie and Sian, discouraged by their families' reactions, run away for a time. This, too, highlights a sad but true statistic. According to American Progress.org, while homosexuals make up only 5 to 7 percent of youths, their percentage among homeless youth is anywhere from 20 to 40 percent (americanprogress.org). Upon their eventual return, Sophie's parents agree to try to understand their daughter's sexuality. After bonding over pictures of a young Sophie, Mrs. Webster says,

If I could wave a magic wand, right now and make you normal, I'm telling you I'd do it. But I can't so I'm just going to have to wait for the shock to wear off and in time I'll get used to a different sort of normal.

As the show progresses, Sophie's mother does indeed get used to the "different sort of normal" posed by her daughter's sexuality, going as far as to defend her in public.

Sophie's story also includes a religious aspect. Sophie's character had always been involved in her faith, and while she is in love with Sian and eager to explore their relationship, she worries about how homosexuality is viewed within her church. Her pastor finds out about the girls' relationship, and tells them it is unnatural and sinful. This temporarily makes Sophie doubt their relationship, but her girlfriend Sian stands firm and tells the pastor that she believes they are all equal in the eyes of God.

*I can remember my youth pastor telling us that while it was acceptable to have these "feelings", that it, to be homosexual, to act on it would be a sin in the eyes of God. I remember attending church three times a week—with the straight girl I was in love with—praying for the feelings to go away.*

For young lesbians, particularly those with strong ties to their church, Sophie's story is familiar and instrumental. The viewership is rooting for Sophie through it all, and while some characters both within her family and her church disparage her relationship with Sian, in time, everyone who truly matters comes around, and Sophie and Sian no longer need to hide.

**Naomi Campbell ("And... when I'm with you, I feel like a better person. And I feel happier, less alone... less lonely.")**

Naomi Campbell, a regular character on the second series of the U.K. show *Skins*, is an outspoken, political girl in high school. She is not generally liked, but falls into a ragtag group of characters that make up the cast of the show. The co-ed cast gets into trouble, parties, bonds, and grows up together, an exaggerated, perhaps, portrayal of life for teens in Bristol, England.

It is very quickly revealed that Naomi had tried to kiss another character, Emily Fitch (though it is later revealed that Emily actually initiated the kiss) and, as a result, Naomi is



constantly harassed by Emily's twin sister, Katie. Naomi is defiant when affronted by Katie, but in private she is conflicted.

Perhaps more than any other character addressed in this paper, Naomi's story revolves around her internal struggle. Her mother accepts her daughter's sexuality immediately, and Naomi doesn't seem to care about her peers' criticism of her, regarding her sexuality or otherwise. Rather, Naomi herself cannot immediately accept herself that she is gay. When Emily's mother gives her a warning to stay away from her daughter, Naomi responds defiantly "I'm not gay!" despite the fact that we, the viewers, know that by now she has established at least some sort of romantic relationship with Emily. She continually pushes Emily away, and goes so far as to leave her in the woods after their first sexual encounter with each other, leading Emily to call Naomi out on her insecurity: "I know you, Naomi! I know you're lonely. I think you need someone to want you... Well, I do want you. So, be brave and want me back" (Episode 3.06).

Naomi even attempts, in desperation, to sleep with one of the cast's male characters to convince herself that she's straight. After a few minutes of kissing though, Naomi stops him. It doesn't feel right to her. When her mother sits her down and essentially lets Naomi know that being gay is okay, that Mrs. Campbell thinks her daughter is wonderful no matter what, Naomi finally begins to accept her feelings for Emily, and that being with a girl she loves, even if she is a girl, is better than being alone. "The people who make us happy are never the people we expect. So when you find someone, you've got to cherish it" (Gina Campbell, episode 3.06).

Naomi joins Emily at the school's annual Love Ball, and takes her hand in front of the entire student body. As they exit the dance, Naomi tells Emily she loves her. Emily and we, the viewers, of course, already knew this. It took Naomi the most time of all to figure it out.

### **Emily Fitch (“Emily slept here ☺”)**

In contrast to her eventual girlfriend Naomi, Emily Fitch, another lead character from *Skins*, realizes and accepts early on that she is a lesbian. She is a strong character, and her arc focuses more on her chase of Naomi than on her internal struggle for acceptance.

The only explicit scene of Emily coming out to any of her peers is a brief speech to her friend JJ. JJ has had a crush on Emily for some time, and they are close friends. In a sense, her coming out to JJ is also the first case of Emily fully accepting, and saying out loud, that she is gay. The result is JJ fainting, played for comedic value more than anything else, and he and Emily remain close friends throughout the series. From that point, Emily is comfortable in her sexuality amongst her peers.

The only roadblock in her road to happiness as a lesbian (besides the constant but ultimately harmless harassment from her sister) is her mother, whose ignorance and disdain for homosexuality is no secret. While her mother suspects for a while that her daughter may be involved with Naomi, she blames Naomi for “corrupting” her daughter, and convinces herself that Emily is still straight, going so far as to try and set her up with boys. Finally, Emily comes out in grand fashion, telling her mother not only that she is a lesbian, but that she's been seeing Naomi, and that “She's rather beautiful. So I've been nailing her.”

This causes a rift with her mother, and Emily is even kicked out, another example of the all-too-common divide between families due to a child's homosexuality. Later on though, when

they lose their house, Emily's family moves in with her and Naomi, and it's demonstrated that without Emily, they'd be stuck. Emily's mother finally comes to accept the relationship, albeit it tentatively.

Emily's father, alternatively, is rather accepting of the relationship early on. He has faith that his daughter knows who she is, and when Emily comes to him for advice regarding her relationship with Naomi, he gives it to her honestly and willingly, suggesting she work on their problems and stay together.

Emily's character is a strong role model for lesbians. Her story displays her as a focused, self-assured young woman who is more concerned with school and her social life than her homosexuality, which she'd accepted early on. She is quick to rebuke anyone who disagrees with her sexuality, and eventually even gets the girl she was after. She deals with her mother fiercely, and never doubts who she is or that what she feels is right. She has undeniably become a fan favorite among lesbian television viewers.

### **Analysis**

There are some emerging themes when these five examples are taken as a whole. Through viewing, note taking, and studying of other media regarding these shows (websites, GLBT media forums, etc.) I have identified the following themes, be they positive or negative, and related them to cultivation theory and the importance of such portrayals. This was done in relationship to the literature review of previous lesbian representation, as well.

#### **Drug and Alcohol Abuse**

First, each character discussed dealt with their coming out arc using drugs and/or alcohol. Whether as a response to her internal struggle or her family's negative reaction, substance abuse

is a recurring theme. This is troubling not only because these characters are potential role models, but also because this is an accurate portrayal of a lesbian youth's coping mechanisms while discovering her sexuality. According to the Council on Drug Abuse (2011):

Not only are LGBT youth questioning themselves, they have their peers, parents and media pushing opinions about what they believe is right and wrong... The lack of social acceptance that LGBT youth experience can lead to dangerous behaviour. LGBT youth experience higher rates of cigarette, alcohol and marijuana use, as well as other illicit drugs including cocaine, methamphetamines and injection drugs. Research done by the University of Pittsburgh found that LGBT youth are 190 per cent (on average) more likely to resort to substance abuse, including an increase of 340 per cent for bisexual youth and 400 per cent for lesbian youth. ([www.drugabuse.ca](http://www.drugabuse.ca))

These are daunting statistics to be sure, and they are reflected in the story arcs of the five characters discussed here. It is telling that not a single lesbian character I've analyzed did not fall victim to this vice. Like *Gia*, *High Art*, *The L Word*, *Bad Girls*, and countless other films and programs before them, this trope continues to live on in representation. Fortunately, all five characters overcame these abuses, and the drug and alcohol use did not continue. The correlation between coming out and substance abuse, however, continues to be a troubling one in television representation of lesbians.

### **Parental Reactions**

Another recurring theme is the negative reaction from a maternal figure in the character's life. With the exception of Naomi, every character faced negative judgment and disdain from either her mother or grandmother, and two of the characters were kicked out or felt she had to

leave as a result. Whether purposely done by the writers or not, this trend holds some truth. Studies have found that while most youths come out to their mother first, seeking assumed easier acceptance, they actually rarely find it. Mothers are more likely than fathers to respond to their child's coming out with verbal and emotional abuse, particularly if the child is a lesbian (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Alternatively, every father figure represented on these programs was initially more accepting of his daughter's orientation. While around half of lesbian daughters report that their fathers accepted them initially, this representation may be a bit optimistic (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). It is often true that one family member accepts the situation while the other doesn't, but every father portrayed on these television shows almost immediately showing his full support seems off-base.

### **Ethnicity**

An exciting and surprising facet of these five examples is that two of the five are women of color. In fact, both of the American examples are non-white, with Emily Fields a Filipina, and Santana Lopez a Latina. Visibility for lesbian women of color characters is important. According to the National Coalition for LGBT Health, "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people of color are left vulnerable to cumulative negative health outcomes by a combination of persistent racism and the stigma attached to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity" (National Coalition for LGBT Health). With women of color still widely underrepresented on television, it is good to see that lesbian youths of color are given some characters in which they can see themselves.

**Reactions of Friends and Peers**

Another trend seen throughout each of these five storylines was the eventual, and usually immediate, acceptance from the lesbian character's friends. While Naomi and Emily experienced some negativity from their social group, particularly from Emily's sister, their relationship was generally accepted without question. Santana Lopez, Emily Fields, and Sophie Webster all encountered positive reactions from their friends regarding their homosexuality. This again could be attributed to the fact that the younger the generation, the more they are generally accepting of homosexuality (PEW 2011).

**Heterosexual History**

Three of the five characters, Emily Fields, Sophie Webster, and Naomi Campbell, attempted to become physically involved with a male character after realizing their lesbian feelings. Both Santana and Emily Fitch had relationships with male characters before their sexuality became clear to them. While they all came to the eventual conclusion that they were homosexual and ceased any sexual relationship with males, this is an accurate reflection of the lesbian community at large. Studies show that anywhere from 70% to 85% of lesbians report previous sexual relationships with men (Diamant, Schuster, McGuigan, & Lever, 1999). More than likely, this is due to societal expectations for young girls to participate in heterosexual relationships. This can also be attributed to the internalized homophobia many lesbians feel. The portrayals of these heterosexual relationships, in the cases of these five characters, were not to cast doubt among the audience regarding the character's sexuality. Rather, they were a true life representation of the struggle many young lesbians go through on the way to discovering their sexuality, and made the characters relatable and realistic.

### **Reactions from Outsiders**

Aside from the negative reactions more of these characters received from one or more family members, another recurring theme was lack of acceptance or downright antagonism from other adults on their respective shows. Emily Fields loses her position as captain of the swim team, not because of her teammates' responses to her sexuality, but because of a few loud and angry parents. Santana Lopez is literally forced to come out when her sexuality is publicized and used to slander her coach's political career, and again, angry parents express their disgust at a lesbian being on their daughter's cheerleading squad. Sophie Webster faces adversity through negative reactions from adults in her community, particularly at her church. In all of these cases, the people who express disgust and disapproval at the girls' sexualities are complete or nearly complete strangers who barely know the girls, and they are adults. In each case, friends and family of the girls come to their defense, and this adversity is often used as a tool to further support for the lesbian character. It's also a realistic component of being young and gay. Homophobia exists even among strangers, and a true portrayal of a young lesbian should include such challenges.

### **Lesbian Sexuality and Displaying Affection**

All five characters are repeatedly shown displaying overt physical affection towards her significant other. An entire episode of *Glee* revolves around Santana's anger towards the school's double-standard regarding public displays of affection for homosexual couples versus heterosexual, and Emily Fields is shown with her girlfriend in a scene that strongly implies she has lost her virginity to her. Overt sexual scenes are also shown of Sophie and Sian, and Emily Fitch and Naomi. These scenes contribute explicitly to the storylines of these characters, and

feature no interference or influence of the male characters on the shows. These depictions are revolutionary not just because they are being shown on television programs aimed at least partially towards teens, but also because they manage to avoid the male gaze so prevalent in previous portrayals. However, these shows all feature lesbians who would be considered, in a heteronormative sense, attractive and fit. The “butch” stereotype is avoided, and it could be argued that because of this, these shows are still shying away from completely de-heteronormalizing the characters.

### **Discussion of “Visibility Matters”**

“Visibility matters” has become a mantra among LGBT media writers recently.

AfterEllen.com editor and prolific lesbian blogger Heather Hogan (2010) wrote:

There are people who say that what we do here at AfterEllen.com — all this writing about lesbian pop culture — is superfluous, that it doesn’t matter. But lesbian and bisexual women (including characters) on television and film and radio *do* matter. Not only because seeing a queer character on TV is tantamount to knowing a queer person in real life (thereby breeding acceptance), but because there really are women of all ages all over the world who have only ever heard the word “lesbian” associated with “hell” or “deviant.”(Hogan, 2010)

What she is referencing here, of course, is cultivation theory. If people who have never met, as far as they know, a lesbian in real life, but they enjoy Santana’s witty one liners, or find themselves cheering as Emily Fitch tells off another naysayer, then maybe they’ll be a little more accepting when they find out they do, in fact, know a lesbian or two.



This importance is not lost on the shows' creators, writers, and actors. In an interview with *afterellen.com*, *Pretty Little Liars* creator Marlene King was asked about Emily's character, and her importance, and in an interview with blogger Heather Hogan (2010), said:

I'm so proud of this storyline. I am so glad that we have a chance to bring this character and her storyline to life. And I know that Shay Mitchell (Emily) and Nia Peeples, who plays Emily's mom, and even Peter Roth, the head of Warner Brothers television, has taken a personal interest in this storyline. And we're all honored and proud to be able to bring it to life. And hopefully, it helps other people know that they're not alone.

(*afterellen.com*)

Shay Mitchell, who plays Emily Fields, also understands the responsibility she shoulders in representing a beloved and well-rounded lesbian character on television. In an interview with *Teen Vogue*, when asked about her character, she replied:

It means so much to me when someone says, 'Thank you for playing this role'... It's one thing to entertain people, but it's something else to actually have a small impact on their life in a positive way, and that's why it's important for me to meet my fans. (Burt, 2013)

And GLAAD president Jarrett Barrios gave Santana Lopez's storyline accolades in an *LA Times* article, calling attention to her character's importance:

The story line with Santana struggling with her affection for another teenage girl, calling herself a lesbian but not knowing how to say that out loud yet, is one that hasn't been told on a prime-time network television show at that level, particularly by an LGBT teen of color. We win acceptance and respect from people across America through shows like 'Glee,' simply by having our stories told. (Ito, 2011)

This too, speaks to cultivation theory: if people see something often enough on television, they will eventually accept it as the truth. If lesbians living normal, functional, happy lives becomes a common site on television, viewers can and will begin to accept and respect it.

### **Conclusion**

Coming out is a scary and personal challenge for lesbians, but a necessary one. While staying in the closet can feel safe, due to fear of friends' and family's reactions, it has been proven that in the long run, coming out is the healthier option. Lesbians who have come out report "less anxiety, more positive affectivity, and greater self-esteem" (Deluty & Jordan, 1998, p. 51).

Visibility of realistic and strong lesbian characters on television can help young lesbians tackle this hurdle. It is with this in mind that the implications of this study become two-fold. First, lesbians exposed to people "like them" on television, particularly characters that largely avoid the pitfalls of previous representation, can feel more hope, less alone, and can perhaps feel brave enough to come out themselves. Second, heterosexual viewers, through constant and consistent exposure to likeable, realistic lesbian characters, can themselves cultivate a general acceptance of lesbian women in their real lives.

The findings section outlines the answers to the first research question for this paper (what are the positive or negative recurring themes). I also asked: how do these portrayals subvert the traditional representation, and what effects might this have on young lesbian viewers and their heterosexual peers or family members? I maintain that while some problems, in the form of common and negative tropes, exist in the five storylines I analyzed, the characters generally exhibit new and positive examples of lesbian portrayal on television. Emily Fields and Santana are sporty and popular. Sophie, Naomi, and Emily Fitch are all well-adjusted and

likeable. Perhaps the most important thread running throughout all five of these narratives is that of self-acceptance. Each character, regardless of her family's and friends' responses, eventually came to a place of self-reliance and peace with her sexuality. Hardships and challenges were presented and overcome, and in the end, the five characters were all out, proud, happy lesbians whose storylines continued. Emily Fields, though still contending with the constant danger she's in because of the show's overall plot, no longer feels constantly threatened that she will be outed, and becomes a quiet but strong leader within her group as a result. Santana Lopez and Brittany finally get together and share an out relationship in their school. Sophie and Sian refocus on school and work, since their relationship is no longer the primary source of stress in their lives. And Emily Fitch and Naomi Campbell end up together, happy and in love.

It is of vital importance, from a cultivation theory perspective, that young lesbians see themselves reflected in media with a happy ending. For too long, rooting for the lesbian character meant the viewer would inevitably be let down. Happy endings for young lesbians are entirely possible, and these storylines provide hope for acceptance and healthy, "normal" relationships.

Any medium that could be used to ease GLBT youths' fear of coming out is better than none. Television in particular is relevant, as it is one of the most accessible media for GLBT youths' to access, and in particular for those who are still "in the closet," hiding their sexual identity from friends, family, or even themselves (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). Additionally, positive GLBT exposure on television can create a "mainstreaming effect," essentially drawing those strongly opposed and those strongly allied towards a common ground of general acceptance and better attitude (Calzo & Ward, 2009). These lesbian characters, and their

individual stories of coming out and finding acceptance within themselves, as well as with their friends and families, are important for lesbian viewers, and for viewers of all orientations.

Contrary to the problematic portrayals of past films and television characters, these five characters could, and indeed appear to be, positively influencing lesbian viewers. Pages and pages of posts exist online of young lesbians discussing how important these characters were and are to them.

Regarding the effect positive representation can have in cultivating acceptance among heterosexual viewers, consider that acceptance of homosexuality has come a long way recently. At the time of this writing, 16 states have marriage equality, versus just six in 2010, when these shows were airing (“Marriage equality...” 2013). Pew Research shows that the majority of both Americans and Britons think homosexuality should be accepted in society (Kohut, 2013).

Despite changing attitudes towards GLBT people, coming out remains an extremely personal experience and decision. While it has been shown that coming out yields countless positive results regarding mental wellness and general happiness, the fear that LGBT people feel regarding the impending stigma and possible rejection keeps many in the closet for far too long, with negative and sometimes dire consequences (Legate et al., 2012). Being in the closet is self-defeating and lonely. In the words of Santana Lopez, “every day feels like a war.”

In my research, I found very little connecting cultivation theory to lesbian representation, none connecting to spiral of silence theory, and none on the five characters I’ve written about in this paper. However, through my research, the importance of lesbian representation on television has been made clear. Viewers are deeply invested in these characters and their lives. The cultivation and spiral of silence theories do not just apply, as written about extensively, to

violence, racial and religious minorities, but sexual minorities as well. Due to the general lack of lesbian representation until recently, this is a relatively new topic to cover, and further and ongoing discussion will be needed. My study has shown how these characters' portrayals can help with acceptance, but an additional quantitative study on whether and to what extent they have would be beneficial.

Emily Fields, Santana, Sophie, Naomi, and Emily Fitch are not perfect characters by any means. But through their faults and quirks, they are likeable and most importantly, realistic. As demonstrated in this thesis, they avoided many of the dangerous and hurtful trends that have befallen lesbian characters throughout their representation in media. The "symbolic annihilation" that for so long affected lesbian representation has been, through these five characters, eliminated. It feels like a slow trend in a different direction, and perhaps it is.

*Visibility does matter. It matters to me now, and I know without a doubt it would have mattered to me if I'd been fortunate enough to have been able to watch these characters as a lesbian youth. The spiral of silence needs to be broken, and the only way for that to happen is through consistent, positive representation. For thousands of lesbians, Santana, Emily Fields, Emily Fitch, Naomi, and Sophie have given hope that there are many out there just like us, that coming out won't be the end of the world, and that it gets better.*

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## Appendix

Table 1

*Character Summaries for Emily Fields, Santana Lopez, Sophie Webster, Naomi Campbell, Emily Fitch*

Category	Emily Fields	Santana Lopez	Sophie Webster	Naomi Campbell	Emily Fitch	Conclusion
Television show (country of origin)	Pretty Little Liars (US)	Glee (US)	Coronation Street (UK)	Skins (UK)	Skins (UK)	N/A
Actress	Shay Mitchell	Naya Rivera	Brooke Vincent	Lily Loveless	Kat Prescott	All actresses were outspokenly proud of their character's sexuality.
Hometown	Rosewood, PA	Lima, OH	Weatherfield, England	Bristol, England	Bristol, England	Mix of small towns and urban areas (Bristol), both fictional and real.
Ethnicity	Irish/Scottish, Korean, Filipina	Latina	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Positive representation not limited to white majority.
Age of coming out	16	16-17	15	16	16	All came out during adolescence/high school.
Problems with family acceptance	Yes–Mother No–Father	Yes–Grandmother No–Parents	Yes–Mother No–Father	No–Mother	Yes–Mother No–Father Yes–Sister	Almost all received negative reactions from at least one family member. Characters overwhelmingly received negative reactions from their mothers.
Problems with friends' acceptance	No	No	No	No*	No	All were well-received by their respective friend groups. *Naomi received negative response from Emily's sister, this was quickly resolved.
Other problems (peers, adults other than parents)	Yes–swim team, team members' parents	Yes–Outed in a political ad and judged by community	Yes–Pastor, church members	No	No	Several story arcs featured hurdles involving characters outside of the girl's primary circle.
Eventual outcome	Out and proud, dates Maya and engages in romantic relationships like her heterosexual friends	Out and proud, dates Brittany	Out and proud, dates Sian	Out and proud, dates Emily	Out and proud, dates Naomi	All characters ended up with their romantic interests and were comfortable with their sexuality.