

# QUEER LEADING LADIES

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 2000s, LGBTQ characters have become more common in mainstream media such as film and television. However, some representations of LGBTQ characters may have been included to target non- LGBTQ viewers, who perceived LGBTQ characters as quirky secondary characters, rather than LGBTQ viewers, who sought accurate representations of their identities and experiences. Television representations of queer women have also become more common and diverse in the 2010s than the 2000s. This essay analyzes the representations of LGBTQ characters from both decades in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The L Word*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, and *Orange Is the New Black* through a feminist perspective with a focus on how queer women are represented in their respective series.

## WHY THESE TEXTS?

- Early 2000s couples in TV and movies were mostly heterosexual couples
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer and The L Word portrayed queer women as viable main characters
- Brooklyn Nine-Nine and Orange Is the New Black represented queer women of color
- Representations of queer women in all four shows reflect the agendas of both the writers and the public during the times they originally aired
- Representations from these four shows are neither completely realistic nor completely stereotypical
- Each woman's experience is affected by her sexual orientation, gender identity, and the political climate from her show's time period

# LITERATURE REVIEW

- LGBTQ women were in 2000s mainstream media as a marketing strategy when non-LGBTQ viewers thought LGBTQ people were trendy (Himberg, 2014; Becker, 2006)
- White heterosexual viewers still had racist and homophobic attitudes towards LGBTQ people of color (Becker, 2006)
- LGBTQ representations in mainstream media have more white people than people of color (Eguchi, 2014)
- Marketing strategies of using LGBTQ stereotypes continued in the 2010s (Ng, 2013)
- LGBTQ youth's perceptions of themselves may be affected by representations of LGBTQ characters in the media they consume (Bond & Miller, 2017)
- LGBTQ youth's self-perceptions are also influenced by their peers' perceptions of LGBTQ people (Yan, 2019)
- Non-LGBTQ audiences may also feel more positive or neutral toward LGBTQ characters who "pass" as heterosexual/cisgender (Shugard, 2003)



## BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

- Episode: “New Moon Rising” (Noxon & Contner, 2000)
- Willow struggles with romantic feelings for her current love interest, Tara, and her ex-boyfriend, Oz
- Buffy accepts Willow when she comes out and encourages her to be honest with both
- Example of supportive friendships between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ women
- Willow may be interpreted as a positive role model for lesbian viewers
  - Character development throughout the series
  - Not defined by her sexuality

**Figure 1:** The DVD cover of the fourth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* featuring Buffy (left) and Willow (right) as the protagonists of this season.

Provided by DVD Cover Art: <http://dvdca.com/download/16732-1/984buffy4.jpg>

## THE L WORD

- Episode: “Looking Back” (Turner & Troche, 2004)
- Main cast consists of LGBTQ women
- Jenny, Alice, Shane, Dana, and Tina share their coming out stories
  - Jenny was seduced by a woman who disrupted Jenny’s relationship with her boyfriend and returned to her own boyfriend
  - Alice dated a girl in her band who broke up with her to date other women
  - Shane realized she was a lesbian during childhood
  - Dana’s first girlfriend had homophobic parents
  - Tina came out during her current relationship with Bette
- Shane and Tina’s stories have lighthearted tones and happier endings than Alice, Dana, and Jenny’s stories
- Variety of endings to these stories imply there is not a universal experience for LGBTQ women
- Encourages LGBTQ viewers to embrace their identities and be cautious of the mental and emotional consequences of unhealthy relationships

**Figure 2:** The DVD cover for the first season of The L Word (Turner & Troche, 2004). From left to right, this DVD cover features the characters Jenny, Bette, Tina, and Kit.

Provided by IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0623880/mediaviewer/rm898276608>



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# BROOKLYN NINE-NINE



## BROOKLYN NINE-NINE

Episode: “Game Night” (Noble, Tosh, & Shapeero , 2017)

- Rosa Diaz comes out as bisexual during a precinct briefing
- Jake, Rosa’s friend and coworker, provides emotional support as she comes out to her parents
- Jake starts a game night tradition with their friends and coworkers when Rosa’s parents put their own family game night on hold indefinitely
- Unconditional support from Rosa’s friends demonstrates that LGBTQ
- people may form their own found families
- Captain Holt and Rosa show solidarity as a gay black man and a bisexual Latina woman
- Rosa Diaz is played by Stephanie Beatriz, an openly bisexual actress

**Figure 3:** A promotional picture of the main cast of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* for the fifth season of the show. While most of the characters hold their hands over their hearts in a salute, Jake (bottom right), holds a bag of chips in a similar manner.

Provided by Brooklyn Nine-Nine Wiki: [https://brooklyn99.fandom.com/wiki/Season\\_Five?file=Season5\\_poster.jpg](https://brooklyn99.fandom.com/wiki/Season_Five?file=Season5_poster.jpg)

## ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK

- Episode: “Lesbian Request Denied” (Heder & Foster, 2013)
- Main plot: Piper rejects another inmate’s romantic advances
- Subplot: Sophia Burset struggles with the prison lowering her hormone dosage against her will
- Flashbacks of Sophia facing similar discrimination as a transgender woman during her transition relate to moments in the present
  - Degrading comments
  - Sexual harassment
  - Disapproval from loved ones
- Framing Piper’s storyline as the main plot implies that a black transgender woman’s struggle with discrimination are secondary to a white woman’s internalized homophobia and racism
- Sophia Burset is played by Laverne Cox, an openly transgender actress, and her character pre-transition is played by her twin brother M Lamar

**Figure 4:** A promotional picture for the second season of *Orange Is the New Black* featuring Sophia Burset twirling her hair with a plastic spoon.

Photo provided by Orange Is the New Black Wiki: [https://orange-is-the-new-black.fandom.com/wiki/Sophia\\_Burset?file=Sophia-burset.jpg#Promotional\\_Pictures](https://orange-is-the-new-black.fandom.com/wiki/Sophia_Burset?file=Sophia-burset.jpg#Promotional_Pictures)





## CONCLUSION

All four shows were able to portray complex LGBTQ women whose characterizations were not limited to their sexual orientation or gender identity. While representations of queer women from the 2000s to the 2010s in television shows have become more diverse and complex, there is still potential for future series to have more LGBTQ women as main characters. Representations of LGBTQ women in television from the 2000s to 2010s prove that queer women as lead characters do not take away from the intended impact of their series. They contribute to character development when they have coming out narratives and remain in the main or supporting cast throughout the series. Based on representations in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The L Word*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, and *Orange Is the New Black*, television series should continue to feature queer women specifically to represent the reality and diversity of queer women's experiences.

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