

The Taming of Homosexuality on the Popular Sitcom, *Will & Grace*

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Will and Grace is an Emmy Award-winning sitcom that originally broadcast on NBC from September 21, 1998 to May 18, 2006 for a total of eight seasons. Re-runs of the show are still on television today. The show takes place in New York City and focuses on Will Truman and his best friend Grace Adler. Will is a gay lawyer and Grace is a straight Jewish woman who owns her own interior design firm. Karen Walker and Jack McFarland are Will and Grace's friends. Karen is a bisexual rich socialite, and Jack is a struggling gay actor/singer/dancer/caterer or waiter. The show brought homosexual characters into the picture, and was a huge breakthrough because it was one of the first times we saw gay men as main characters. Before *Will and Grace* there were a few shows that portrayed homosexuality. Bonnie Dow states:

As Foucault has noted about sexuality in general, the history of sexuality in prime-time television is not one of absence and repression, but, rather, one that has followed clear norms for different kinds of silence and speech. Representations of homosexuality have existed since television's earliest days, although, of course, in limited number (129).

The show earned 16 Emmy Awards and 83 nominations during its eight-year time period on television. *Will and Grace* was a staple of NBC's Must See TV Thursday night lineup and was in the Nielsen Top 20 for

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half of its network run, and still to this day remains the most successful series with homosexual characters. The finale of the show had over 18 million viewers making it the most viewed episode of the final two seasons.

Even though homosexual characters were portrayed on *Will and Grace*, we need to question how the constructions of gender and sexuality on the show impact norms and the status quo. This paper asks how *Will and Grace's* construction of gender and sexuality impacts the representation of homosexuality. On *Will and Grace*, homosexuality is tamed by the creation of the queer vs. normal binary, opening up the status quo box, while still being exclusionary and utilizing homo-voyeurism to grab viewers' attention. Homosexuality is made more acceptable on *Will & Grace*, while oppressing queer and anything that does not fit into a narrowly acceptable gender mold.

Representations of Homosexuality through History

Different media have included portrayals of homosexuality including early comedian Milton Berle and *The Jack Benny Show*. During the 1950s, many dramas cast homosexuals as villains, which added an aspect of deviance to gay characters. Many drama series such as *Midnight Caller*, *Marcus*, *Welby*, *Hunter*, and *Police Woman* all utilized the homosexual character as the villain during the 1970s and 1980s.

The gay rights movement in the 1970s pushed for more positive representations of homosexuality in media. The new wave of media in the 70s focused on treating homosexuality as a problem. For example, in 1972, *That Certain Summer* was produced featuring the main character, a gay man, who had to effectively tell his son he was gay. This movie played into the new concept of portraying homosexuality as a problem. *A Question of Love* in 1978 portrayed a lesbian mother fighting for the custody of her son. In 1985, *An Early Frost* was the first movie made for

television about AIDS. The film was about a man coming out and communicating that he was infected with AIDS to his family. Television shows such as, *The Golden Girls*, *Designing Women*, *Rhoda*, *Barney Miller*, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* showed homosexual characters as one-time appearances. The homosexual characters would only be included on the show once, not over an extended amount of episodes. Homosexuality character traits were always framed as a problem and a situation to overcome. Their sexual orientation issue was represented by its impact on the heterosexuals in the shows. Dow states, “homosexual characters are rarely shown in their own communities, homes, or same-sex romantic relationships but are depicted in terms of their place in the lives of heterosexuals” (129). During this time period, sexual desire or sex in general, is not shown in relation to homosexuals.

The 80s and 90s changed some of the typical formats of gays and lesbians in media. Instead of just being featured in comedies, gays and lesbians were represented in both comedies and dramas. *Dynasty*, a soap opera that aired in the 80s, discussed a bisexual male character that fought the battle between choosing male or female partners. *Heartbeat*, also from the 80s, focused on a lesbian nurse who worked in a women’s health clinic run by feminist doctors. With this show, it only ran for one season and her sexuality was only portrayed in two episodes. In 1992, a college student coming out to his conservative, traditional family was portrayed in the film, *Doing Time on Maple Drive*. In the 90s, an episode of *L.A. Law* featured a quick kiss between a bisexual and heterosexual woman. Dow explained:

The Reverend Donald Wildmon’s American Family Association brought its wrath to bear on NBC, threatening product boycotts (as it had done with *Heartbeat*), and NBC responded by disclaiming any attempts to create a continuing lesbian storyline (130).

By the end of the season, both women were sleeping with men. In 1998 and 1999, recurring gay and lesbian characters were featured on shows such as, *Chicago Hope*, *ER*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Spin City*.

Hart looks at the representation of gay men on American television shows, specifically from the 1960s until present day. *Will and Grace* is specifically discussed by focusing on the representation of homosexual male main characters and the extreme differences between the two. Hart explains:

Will remains so low-key about his sexual orientation that it has become almost inconsequential to the show, while Jack is consistently presented as the stereotypical flamboyant queen. In other words, Will and Jack are extreme opposites on the spectrum of possible media representations of gay men (60).

Even though both of these men are homosexuals, their representation, character, and lifestyles are very different. It is important to look into the differences and the constructions of these two males on the show and how this impacts homosexuality. Ideologies about groups of people are constructed through thought and communication and then represented in mainstream media through producers and writers. Representation of gay men on American television is the focus specifically and in relation to *Will and Grace*. The representations of groups such as gays and lesbians impact how our culture views the group. Some people believe that media does not impact them; however, everyone is impacted by constructions, stereotypes, character development, environment, et cetera. As viewers, we learn and identify with characters we see in media, and we cultivate thoughts about particular groups, places, events, and phenomenon. Homosexuality is once again viewed as a problem that needs to be solved or fixed. This is a recurring motif for homosexual characters in American television. Long-standing homosexual characters were not very often portrayed before the 1990s. When they were featured, they were often the

bad guys or constructed as a problem. *Will and Grace* bucks both of these trends but still relies on masculine-feminine binary and the hetero-homo binary, both of which are critiqued by queer theory.

In general, the media representations of groups, and specifically in this case, gay men on television, have the ability to influence the beliefs associated with gay men and the images create perceptions of gay men and their lifestyles. There are different types of representations of homosexuality in media. Negative representations can lead to prejudice, decreased levels of social tolerance, and homophobia. Positive representations can function to decrease stigma associated with homosexuality. The representation of groups can take a positive or negative face. There has been progress made throughout American history in the representation of gay men in the media, but more progress needs to be made. The idea of binaries is prevalent in all of the research on representations of homosexuality in media. The gay man/heterosexual woman couple pairing is important.

Homo-voyeurism

Media representations of homosexuality are usually done in conjunction with the masculine-feminine binary, and have increased recently. With the increase of homosexuality in our media, homo-voyeurism has also increased. Imagine if *Will and Grace* was just another typical sitcom we have already seen. Adding the two gay male characters, gives the viewer a sense of the unknown and a “secret” lifestyle, as discussed previously. Tapping into the concept of homo-voyeurism allows viewers to see what the lifestyle of gay men entails. Manuel looks into the representation of gays and lesbians in television programming, and the increase of heterosexuals watching queered programming. Since the amount of queered programming has increased, she looks at how homo-voyeurism works as a tool of cultural consumerism. Manuel (2019) states:

Viewers watch the lives of others with the television functioning as a safe barrier between themselves and the subject. The television is a tool to invade the lives of others, making public spectacle those lives of the observed while the observer is kept “private” from meaningful interpersonal interaction between themselves and the sexualized Other (278).

This encompasses the idea that we watch people of different lifestyles and demographics on television as entertainment and a spectacle without actually having to interact or get to know them in real life. The television functions as a commodity of consumption, and the viewers partake in voyeurism because they utilize it as an escape. The viewer functions as the voyeur and is impacted by the images and representations crafted and communicated via television. That is, viewers or voyeurs’ attitudes and beliefs are impacted, changed, shaped, or reinforced by mainstream media. According to Manuel:

Homovoyeurism can also be likened to what Kuhn (1985, 71) refers to as a “view behind” the subject, or a “voyeuristic view” of the character that suggests pleasure is taken in the very activity of the gaze. The homovoyeurism is enticed to “become” any of the characters, or to simply remain the outside observer (279).

Homo-voyeurism allows the viewer to be empowered. The viewer utilizes the homosexual characters as a form of spectacle; they can form attitudes about the characters with no comment or intervention by others. Overall, Manuel (2019) claims that heterosexual viewers become homo-voyeurs through their consumptions of queer imagery as spectacle and entertainment, and that barriers are still up for meaningful interaction across homosexual and heterosexual identity boundaries. Queered programming opens up a space for cross-sexual identity, but does not break the communication barrier. *Will and Grace* is known for having gay

male main characters, but there are criticisms. Homo-voyeurism ends up displacing gay and normal binaries to queer and normal and gay and straight binaries, and tames homosexuality on *Will and Grace*. While media representations of homosexuals are a good thing, theory has recently called attention to queer, which deconstructs the gay-straight binary.

Homo-voyeurism also comes into play with the construction of gender and sexuality on *Will and Grace*. People tuned in and still tune into the show because the main characters are gay. If the main characters were not gay, it would just be another typical, sitcom about living in New York City. *Will and Grace* entices us with homo-voyeurism, and then tames the homo while laughing at the queer. The show taps into the cultural belief that homosexuality is non-normative and even scandalous. Including the homosexual males as main characters appeals to a lifestyle that typical mainstream media did not portray and it plays into homo-voyeurism by allowing us to watch homosexuality on our televisions. While the show does promote homo-voyeurism, the show also portrays gay as normative as long as one is not queer. *Will and Grace* says one thing while doing another. It taps into homo-voyeurism by exploiting gay differences for spectacle and sensationalism, while also taming homosexuality. Will is crafted as the masculine, normative, could be straight, gay man the audience is supposed to identify with, while Jack is the flamboyant, feminine, not responsible, gay man the audience is supposed to laugh at. *Will and Grace* does include gay male characters as main characters while functioning within the realm of hetero-normativity by saying that it is okay to be gay, but not okay to be queer. Overall, *Will and Grace* tames homosexuality by tapping into the typical popular culture norms of what it means to be homosexual. The show opens the status quo box of homosexuality while still being exclusionary through many different techniques discussed in this paper.

Situation Comedies / Sitcoms

Fouts and Inch (2005) looked at 22 television situation comedies to determine the incidence of homosexual characters, their demographics, and whether they verbally comment about sexual orientation. The authors' state:

Situation comedies (e.g., *Friends*, *Will and Grace*) were of particular interest because they are the most watched programs by adolescents and young adults and, thus, are the most likely to influence viewers who are at the stage when their body concepts and identities are developing (37, citing (Blair & Sanford, 1999; Fouts & Burggraf, 1999; Steele, 1999)).

These situation comedies have a large impact on our culture and view of homosexuality. Since there are not many positive images of homosexuals in media and in our culture, many young homosexual adolescents do not have role models with whom they can identify (Fouts and Inch, 2005). Homosexual characters are also under-represented in mainstream media. The authors (Fouts and Inch, 2005) think this phenomenon occurs because, "the absence of homosexual characters may serve as a metaphorical model for hiding one's sexual orientation, the message being that if such characters are hidden from view on television, then perhaps homosexual viewers should do the same" (37).

The article also delves into what Dow discusses in her article. She focused on the coming out of Ellen DeGeneres, and that homosexuality is crafted and viewed as a problem that needs to be solved in the media. Since homosexuality is portrayed as a problem or issue that needs to be fixed, heterosexual characters are less occupied and discuss their sexuality less than homosexual characters. Homosexuality is then made more of an issue in mainstream media and is discussed more often than heterosexuality. Since heterosexuality is the dominant, normal, and

socially accepted sexual orientation, characters do not need to talk about their experience. In their content analysis, the authors found that, “only three of the 125 characters (2%) were homosexual; there were no bisexual characters. The homosexual characters appeared in two programs, *Will and Grace* (both Caucasian) and *Spin City* (a Black individual)” (40).

Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) look into how *Will and Grace* places “homosexuality within safe and familiar popular culture conventions, particularly those of the situation comedy genre” (87). Even though *Will and Grace* portrays homosexuality, the show still falls within the popular conventions. By utilizing feminist and queer theories, Battles and Hilton-Marrow look at what happens when media relies on familiar situation comedy conventions. Will and Jack are both gay men, but are both very different. In the past, media has utilized the comic frame to portray gay men. In *Will and Grace*, Jack takes on this comedic and feminine frame, while Will’s character can be read as masculine and straight. The authors state, “Unlike his feminized counterpart, Jack, Will fits well into a mainstream model of masculinity, being handsome, muscular, and physically fit” (90).

This demonstrates that there is a huge underrepresentation of homosexuality in mainstream media. This plays into isolation, marginalization, and invalidation of gays and lesbians in our culture. Adolescent homosexuals have no characters in the media to identify with and develop. Based upon the representation in our media, people may form incorrect beliefs about homosexuals, and negative stereotypes or normal behaviors will be reinforced. The homosexual characters found in the analysis commented on their sexuality more than the heterosexual characters, which imply a huge difference between the two sexualities. In general:

Only 2% of the 125 central characters were homosexual; thus, homosexuality is significantly under-represented in programs that adolescents and young adults watch compared to actual prevalence

rates of homosexuality in North America (10-13%). All the homosexual characters were male and in the 20-35-year-old age group; this indicates that homosexual adolescent viewers have no peer role models with whom to identify. Homosexual characters made significantly more comments about sexual orientation than heterosexual characters. This suggests that television writers/producers present sexual orientation as a significant theme in the lives of homosexual characters (35).

This plays into the idea that homosexuality is not present in our mainstream media, and when it is, the character's main focus is on their sexuality rather than other things. Situation comedies, like *Will and Grace* provide homosexual characters, but close attention needs to be drawn to the construction of the characters in regards to gender and sexuality. Gay characters in media are a topic that has been discussed more and more over the past decades and many critical, feminist, and queer theorists look at and analyze the representation of homosexuality in mainstream media.

Queer Theory

Queer theory developed from women's studies and queer studies. Influenced by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky, and Lauren Berlant, queer theory theorizes about "queerness" itself, and examines the socially constructed nature of sexual identities and acts in relation to gays and lesbians. Queer theory opens up the binary between heterosexual and homosexual to other different or deviant sexuality and sexual acts. Based upon gender and sexuality, identities are not categorized or fixed in queer theory. People are not placed in a single restrictive binary, and it encompasses anything that does not fit into the normative category, which is usually based on the hetero/homo binary. Queer theory, takes a critical approach to challenge heteronormative discourse and focuses on non-

heteronormative sexualities. Derived from post-structuralism, in the 1970s, multiple theorists and authors came together to deconstruct sexual identity and focused specifically on the construction of straight, normative identity. The term was coined in 1990 through Sedgwick, Butler, Adrienne Rich, and Diana Fuss, based upon the work of Michel Foucault. Sedgwick really taps into the creation of homosexuality and heterosexuality in the 19th and 20th centuries and how this time period impacts the constructions today. Sedgwick coined the term queer theory, and the field has grown and impacted many other scholars today. It has made people question and analyze the construction of homosexuality and sexuality in general.

Binaries

Sedgwick's popular book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, is one of the key texts of queer theory. The book incorporates feminism, gay and lesbian studies, gender studies, and queer studies. Sedgwick was one of the "mothers" of queer theory. This theory and her writing come from her heart and from a place of passion for change. In this text, specifically focusing on gay men in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in France, England, and North America, she discusses the challenge between people and their differences, perceptions of sexuality, and each person's independence.

The homo/hetero binary is an important one discussed in depth by Sedgwick in her text, especially in relation to *Will and Grace* and taming of homosexuality. It focused on homoerotic desire around the turn of the century in both American and British culture. She develops her opinions on how this homoeroticism impacts how the ideology of sexuality is constructed and viewed today. She states:

That many of the major modes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—

indeed fractured—by the now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century (1).

Ideas about homosexuality inform the way men view the topic in the West. The incoherence from the constructed meaning on homosexuality has marked society. Shugart (2003) looks into the gay man/heterosexual women couple configuration as a genre. She explains that the representation of gay men has been made visible by this pairing specifically shown in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Object of My Affection*, *The Next Best Thing*, and *Will and Grace*. The gay man's pairing with the heterosexual woman as his best friend heterosexualizes the homosexual male. In *Will and Grace* specifically, the two main characters function more as a couple rather than best friends. They get jealous of each other's significant others, argue like a couple would, live together, and take on the role of soul mates. Similar character development and pairing occurs in the other films Shugart discusses. In the majority of the pairing between the homosexual male and the heterosexual female, there is an aspect of sexual acts between them. For example, in *Will and Grace*, Grace is naked in front of Will multiple times throughout the entire show. The pairing of the homosexual male with the heterosexual female heteronormalizes his sexuality by making him appear to be in a relationship with the female. In general, Shugart (2003) claims that:

...in these texts, homosexuality is not only recoded and normalized in these representations as consistent with privileged male heterosexuality but is articulated as extending heterosexual male privilege. In so doing, blatant sexism is reinvented and legitimized, and gay male identity simultaneously is defined by and renormalizes heteronormativity (67).

Gendered couples are always portrayed in media and film. Shugart argues that the pairing or coupling of homosexual males with heterosexual females heteronormalizes their sexuality. Other authors also discuss the importance of gendering couples.

Both heterosexual couples and same-sex couples are portrayed on television. Playing into the repeated idea that homosexuals discuss their sexuality more than heterosexuals in media representations. According to Holz Ivory, Gibson, and Ivory (2009): “The media, particularly television, have done much to promote and normalize gendered images of men and women in heterosexual romantic relationships” (171). That is, heterosexual couples are what media producers’ craft as normal and acceptable, while homosexual relationships are abstract or non-normative. Media representations of same-sex couples tend to have one feminine and one masculine partner who perform traditional gender roles. Masculinity and femininity are two concepts focused on by researchers of gender role socialization. They utilize personality trait scales to measure masculinity and femininity. When analyzing media, Holz Ivory, Gibson, and Ivory (2009) state: “In analyzing media portrayals, therefore, dominant and submissive behaviors can therefore be used as an indicator of stereotypical gender role behavior” (174). The concepts of femininity and submissiveness and masculinity and dominance are represented in media. Characters that are more feminine are typically submissive while characters that are more masculine are more dominant. Development of attitudes towards sex roles can develop and have been known to develop from representation of gendered media and television shows.

Like many other researchers, Holz Ivory, Gibson, and Ivory (2009) explain the concept of identity and identification. Gay and lesbian viewers may search for representations of their identity in the media. They may learn that one partner needs to be dominant and more masculine, while the other needs to be more feminine and submissive since this message is typically communicated. In relation to heterosexual viewers, who do not

experience homosexuality in their everyday life, the media will be their point of reference for images and perception of homosexuality. Gendered relationships are prevalent in mainstream media. The authors explain:

The phenomenon of the gendered relationship is also reflected and perhaps perpetuated by television. Male and female television characters are portrayed in stereotypically gendered masculine and feminine fashions, and gender roles are prominent in male and female intimate relationship portrayals (186).

Both heterosexual and homosexual couples on television play into the masculine/feminine binary. Even though, this binary does not ring true in everyday life, it is represented and utilized over and over in media. According to the authors: “This study’s findings that same-sex couples on television are portrayed as gendered like heterosexual couples add more support to such claims that television places gay male and lesbian characters involved in intimate relationships into unrealistically gendered roles” (197). Mainstream media places individuals into either the masculine or feminine binary and also genders both heterosexual and homosexual couples. This gendering plays into the binary crafted on *Will and Grace*. Not only does the binary of queer vs. normal impact the taming of sexuality on *Will and Grace*, the concept of homo-voyeurism is utilized to obtain viewers.

Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) look into how *Will and Grace* places “homosexuality within safe and familiar popular culture conventions, particularly those of the situation comedy genre” (87). Even though *Will and Grace* portrays homosexuality the show still falls within the popular conventions. By utilizing feminist and queer theories, Battles and Hilton-Morrow look at what happens when media relies on familiar situation comedy conventions. Will and Jack are both gay men, but are both very different. In the past, media has utilized the comic frame to portray gay men. In *Will and Grace*, Jack takes on this comedic and

feminine frame, while Will's character can be read as masculine and straight. The authors' state: "Unlike his feminized counterpart, Jack, Will fits well into a mainstream model of masculinity, being handsome, muscular, and physically fit" (90).

Sedgwick also discusses binaries in her text on opposing terms through an analysis of late nineteenth century philosophical works and literature. Some of the binaries she explains are, masculine/feminine, private/public, new/old, natural/artificial, and majority/minority. She describes the opposition and relationships between each of the pairs in the relation to the questioning of who and what was defined as homosexual during the turn of the century. Based upon this, each of these functions within the homo/hetero binary crisis as defined by queer theory. She discusses that homophobia is the reason for the homo/hetero binary crisis. There are increasing numbers of homosexuals on TV, but that they are typically not queer. They typically fall under a "normal" hetero-homo binary.

The closet impacts Western culture; every structure is impacted and understood by the closet because sexuality is central to how we view ourselves. Sexuality defines a large percentage of life including communication. Sexuality defines our lives, our values, and us. Since homosexuality is viewed as forbidden or "in the closet," then being homosexual is secret knowledge. The construction plays as a mental schema. When one thinks of homosexuality, they think of it as a secret, and when one thinks of a secret in relation to sexuality, they will assume homosexuality over heterosexuality. Hence, why homosexuals must "come out" today, rather than just being accepted like heterosexuals. Sedgwick doesn't think people should have to decide between two binaries, and that people should not have to compromise to fit into one or the other. She discusses the binaries and conflict between fitting into one or the other defines how homosexuality is constructed and interpreted. The "minoritizing/universalizing" and "transitive/separatist" Sedgwick discusses plays into the homo/hetero binary structure. All of these define

interaction, sexuality, and all social situations for homosexual men specifically in this text.

Her discussion of homosexuality stems from the idea that it actually did not exist before the 19th century. Identifying as heterosexual did not come into being before homosexual did. Without the abnormal sexuality, the normal sexuality did not exist. There were sexual behaviors that were viewed as abnormal, but not an entire group of people that embodied abnormality.

Taming Homosexuality

Will and Grace also pairs characters. For example, Will and Grace are paired and Jack and Karen are paired. In these pairings, the characters find their most successful relationships. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) explain: “*Will and Grace* are oftentimes positioned as a couple and Jack and Karen usually operate as “partners in crime.” (92). This emphasizes the hetero-social pairings. Hetero-sociality is more valued and shown more in the show, rather than homo-sociality. The close relationships are between the opposite-sexed characters, rather than the same-sexed couples. Jack and Will are actually the two characters that are farthest apart. Jack is classified as the queer, while Will is just the normative gay. *Will and Grace* constructs gender and sexuality to create a queer vs. normal binary through character and plot development. Will and Grace fall under the normal binary while Karen and Jack fall under the queer binary. Each of these characters appear throughout the episodes and are shown in pairs. Will and Grace are best friends and live together, while Jack and Karen are best friends and are shown together a lot. The development of the characters in the show plays into the construction of the queer and normal binaries. The characters fall into the normative and queer binaries. The characteristics of the normative “gay” binary include being monogamous, masculine, likable (instead of comic, steady and

reliable, and having a stable job), while the queer “gay” binary is completely the opposite. The queer binary includes non-monogamous sex, being flamboyant, the comedic factor, not reliable or dependable, and not having a steady job.

Will

Will is a lawyer who studied at Columbia University where he met Grace. They actually dated in college, until Jack accused Will of being in denial about his sexuality. Will proposes to Grace so he does not have to sleep with her, but later comes out to her about being gay. Out of anger, Grace does not talk to Will for a year, but later they run into one another and become best friends. He is obsessed with cleaning and organization, is monogamous in his relationships, and lives with Grace. Other characters in the show joke about Will and Grace being a romantic couple and living together rather than just being friends. Will falls into the normal “gay” binary because he is very masculine, lives with Grace, functions in monogamous relationships, is a lawyer with a steady job, is reliable and dependable.

Grace

Grace is an interior designer, best friends with Will, and has a love for food. She acts as a balance for Will and his uptight nature by being messy and laid back. These two characters live together and function more like husband and wife than friends. Her close bond even frustrates Grace’s lovers with Will. They support one another through break ups and judge whom the other picks as their significant other. In the first episode, Grace was about to marry her boyfriend Danny, but Will disapproved. On the way to her wedding, she realizes that Will is right and leaves Danny. She needs somewhere to move, and moves in with Will in the Upper West

Side. They are shown together in pairs throughout the show and make up the normal binary. They each are monogamous in their relationships, are responsible, have good jobs, make a steady income, and are crafted as the characters for the audience to identify with. They are responsible and act as Jack and Karen's role models and parent figures. Both Will and Grace are the normal and acceptable characters of the show.

Karen

Karen is bisexual, married to Stan, and works as Grace's assistant to have time away from him and her kids. She is a multimillionaire, drinks a lot and uses prescription pills, and is closer to Jack and Grace than Will. She actually insults Stan and even communicates that she married him for his money. They end up getting divorced at the end of season 5, and she begins dating in season 6. She sleeps around and does not follow the status quo of what a woman should be.

Jack

Jack is Karen's best friend, superficial, and super flamboyant. He also has multiple sexual partners, jumps from one man to the other, and changes occupations often. He does not attempt to stay in long-term relationships, and even cheats on some of his boyfriends. Jack and Karen are paired together in the show and are crafted as the queer characters. Ironically, Karen and Jack live together even though they mock Will and Grace for doing so. They each make irresponsible life choices, have various sexual encounters, are not faithful to their partners, do not hold down steady jobs, do not have steady incomes, and refer to Will and Grace for help and guidance. Both Karen and Jack make jokes about Will and Grace being sexless lovers and non-romantic life partners. They are created as the comedic characters to make the audience laugh. They are also viewed as

the unacceptable and queer characters of the show. Jack specifically falls under the queer “gay” because he is flamboyant, never gets into a serious relationship, is sexually promiscuous, does not have a stable job, and is not reliable or dependable.

The idea of coming out on television is an important one to look at in this case. In *Will and Grace*, Will comes out in the first season, when he and Grace date in college. He won't sleep with her and finally comes out to her. Jack is already assumed as gay in the show and does not come out. The idea of becoming gay and coming out is not viewed as a problem to be solved or an issue. This reinforces the idea that it is okay to be gay, as long as you are not queer. Both Will and Jack are accepted as homosexuals, but the normative homosexual is accepted over the queer homosexual. This concept also plays into the taming of homosexuality on the show. Other shows stage a large coming out for the homosexual characters, but in this case, Will came out early on in the show, and Jack is already out. This tames homosexuality and reinforces the acceptance of normative and the rejection of queer, once again building into the status quo box and taming of homosexuality and dominance of heteronormativity.

The situation comedies allow for an emphasis on interpersonal relationships between characters rather than their relationship with the outside world. *Will and Grace* most definitely focused on interpersonal relationships between characters, rather than their connections to the larger social world. Will and Grace are always discussing interpersonal things like relationships and their experiences with one another. Every situation and conversation the characters have focuses on their interpersonal relationships rather than their connection to the larger world. Each character on *Will and Grace* builds relationships by discussing their interpersonal life, rather than their public life or their connections to the world at large. We only hear about their interpersonal problems and successes.

The same structure of homosexuality being viewed as a problem occurs. Grace must always deal with the problems raised by Will being homosexual. The creator of *Will and Grace* said that the show was never created to educate the American public about gay life, but was just made to reach a large demographic of people. Because of all of these things, *Will and Grace* actually reinforces heterosexism and can be viewed as heteronormative because it takes on the typical television frame and convention. *Will and Grace* opens the status quo box of homosexuality, but is still exclusionary. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) explain:

Will and Grace makes homosexuality safe for broadcast television audiences by framing its characters within the familiar popular culture convention that equates gayness with a lack of masculinity and through the familiar situation comedy genre conventions of romantic comedy and delayed consummation, infantilization, and an emphasis on character's interpersonal relationships rather than the character's connections to the larger social world (101).

Will and Grace portrays homosexual men, but they are extreme opposites and live very different life styles. Will takes on the masculine "very straight gay," while Jack takes on the flamboyant gay man. Other authors also study this gay representation phenomenon.

Mitchelle (2005) looks at the rhetorical construction of different in *Will and Grace*. She explains how *Will and Grace* produces containment and what is accepted as gay through the rhetorical construction of Jack and Will. She explains *Will and Grace* as the "new homophobia on TV to argue that the program works to enforce hegemonic social relations of inequity in a broader sense as well." (1052). The representations of characters on the show conform to typical and acceptable social conceptions. They remain inoffensive to the audience. That is, *Will and Grace* exposes the viewers to a homosexual lifestyle in two very different ways, while still fitting into the hetero-normative box. Michelle explains

how *Will and Grace* does this by saying, “Both the disavowal of politics and the deployment of humor work in conjunction to secure this effect; they create an effective rhetorical stance by which *Will and Grace* can represent the Other while also appealing to a broad audience.” (1053).

Will and Grace exposes the life of two homosexual men, which taps into the homo-voyeur aspect, while still remaining culturally accepted enough to appeal to a large audience. The show creates homosexuality as a spectacle while creating what is acceptable and valued as a gay man. Jack and Karen’s characters take on the queer and unacceptable role. Both do not hold steady jobs, sleep around, are not monogamous, have little to no responsibility, cannot do much for themselves, and are always asking Will and Grace for advice. Their characters take on what is unacceptable and frowned upon in the queer binary. Each of them is crafted as the characters for us to laugh at and not identify with because they play into everything that is unacceptable. Even though the program has Will and Jack as gay male characters, it still does not break hetero-normativity. Michelle (2005) states:

The program challenges the industry’s tendency to construct heterosexuality as the primetime norm through its characters and storylines, for instance. But the program’s inclusion of gay identity does not perforce produce antiracist, antisexist, or antiheterosexist counterknowledges that will alter inequitable social conditions (1063-1064).

The show features gay characters that are crafted to not offend the audience, while still getting to viewers through the use of homo-voyeurism.

The Finale

Will and Grace is structured like many other sitcoms in American television. It was taped in front of a live audience, and is structured in a way that tames homosexuality in itself. Eighteen million viewers according to Nielsen watched the finale. It was the twenty-third episode of the show's eighth season, which aired on May 18, 2006. In the finale, Grace has a dream about what her life would be like in fifteen years if she still lived with Will, and is pregnant with her ex-husband Leo's baby. He doesn't even know she is pregnant, but shows up at her door to propose. She accepts his proposal to get married again. Two years later, she lives with Leo in Rome for a year, then they move back to New York to raise their daughter Lyla.

Will and his partner are also raising a child together during this time named Ben. During all of this, Will and Grace are not speaking to one another, because Will is mad Grace got back together with Leo. Jack and Karen set them up to be at the same place at the same time. They tell Will and Grace there is an emergency and they need to be at the hospital. Once they all arrive, Will and Grace realize that Jack and Karen set them up, but decide to talk in the cafeteria anyway. Their relationship is still rocky at this time. Karen finds out that she will have no money due to her bankrupt ex-husband. She also finds this out when her credit card is rejected while eating a meal with Jack. After Will and Grace have a reunion dinner with Jack and Karen they try to plan a time to get together, but Will is busy with his partner Vince and their baby Ben, and Grace is busy with Leo and their baby, Lyla. They decide that faith will bring them together. During this time a rich man named Beverly Leslie, Karen's nemesis, offers Jack all of his money to be his boyfriend. He starts to date Beverly for his money. Beverly ends up dying, leaving all of his money to Jack, and he helps out Karen.

Will and Grace re-meet 15 years later when their kids go to college together. Jack and Karen end up living and growing old together with Rosario, Karen's boyfriend. They discuss how they have outlasted many relationships and marriages. They end their evening with the memorable duet of Nat King Cole's song, *Unforgettable*.

Will and Grace's kids eventually marry each other which heterosexually pairs them further, and the finale ends with Will and Grace watching *ER*, all four of the characters together at a bar to toast their friendship. The finale takes us through the ups and downs of the main characters relationships, but in the end of the episode, they end up together and friends again.

The episode plays into the character development and pairings. Will and Grace are paired and the episode focuses on their relationship, while Jack and Karen are also paired. Both Grace and Will are raising their children with their significant others, while Jack and Karen are both still living together and randomly dating. Karen has no money and no career, and Jack received money from a dying Beverly but also does not have a career. Jack's lifestyle is that of the queer, flamboyant, gay man, Grace takes on the normative, straight woman, Will is the "could be straight" gay man, and Karen is the irresponsible, bisexual, divorced, bankrupt woman.

The normative characters, Will and Grace, are crafted for the strong identification with the audience, while the queer characters, Jack and Karen are crafted as the comedic characters. The normal characters play into the status quo of the dominant culture and society. Will and Grace each are independent, have good jobs, are in monogamous relationships, do not sleep around, and offer advice to Jack and Karen. Jack and Karen on the other hand do not fit into the status quo of society. They continue to have multiple sexual partners, are not in monogamous relationships, do not have a steady income, and go to Will and Grace for positive role modeling. The construction of the queer vs. normal binary is perfectly crafted by the character development and pairing of the four characters.

The show also crafts gender and sexuality to tame homosexuality in the show from the beginning to the finale.

Conclusion

Will and Grace constructs gender and sexuality to tame homosexuality and creates a status quo box of what is acceptable and normal for homosexuals. The status quo box is expanded through Will and Grace, but is still exclusionary. Since this show was one of the first to include homosexual males as main characters it is very important to look into how homosexuality is constructed. Will, the character we are meant to identify with, is handsome, masculine, not overly emotional or flamboyant, has a job as a lawyer, and lives with Grace. When you look at how his life appears, it is as if he is a heterosexual man. This character development tames homosexuality in itself. The homosexual normative character is actually hetero-normative in every aspect of his life. The show does not discuss Will being homosexual often nor is he discussing it frequently. If someone who never knew about *Will and Grace* watched the show, they may even assume he is a heterosexual male dating Grace in some episodes. Even though Will is a main character and is homosexual, we need to be aware that his homosexuality and the status quo box of what is acceptable and identifiable remain hetero-normative in nature.

Media representations of homosexuality are appearing more frequently on television and have an impact on viewers. Media representations influence viewers and how they view and think about particular people and groups of people. Hart (2002, citing Gross, 1994) states:

The phrase "media representation" refers to the ways that members of various social groups are differentially presented in mass media offerings, which in turn influence the ways audience members of those media offerings perceive and respond to

members of the groups represented. Because mainstream media offerings are typically presented to audience members as "transparent mediators of reality" in the social world, they regularly contribute to the social "knowledge" media users cultivate about the "real world" and the wide range of individuals who live there (60).

In general, the media representation of homosexuality on *Will and Grace* influences peoples' beliefs on what homosexuality is and what homosexuality looks like. The power of media representations is at times overlooked and needs to be given more attention. According to Hart (2002, citing Estrada & Quintero, 1999):

The representation of gay men on American television from the late 1960s to the present has undoubtedly influenced the way the American public thinks about and responds, both socially and politically, to gay men and the issues of greatest relevance and concern to them. Media representations have shaped the way Americans come to understand the phenomenon of homosexuality and, ultimately, they have had a direct bearing on the already complex relationships within and between various social groups in American society (62).

The media representation of homosexuality on *Will and Grace* play into the queer vs. normal binary, and portrays what is acceptable and unacceptable. Sedgwick explains the excluding of the queer by stating:

To alienate conclusively, definitionally, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure. In this century, in which sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both

identity and knowledge, it may represent the most intimate violence possible (26).

This plays into the creation of the homo/hetero binary, judgment, and negative homosexual stereotypes through homophobia. On the show, queer is excluded while gay is tamed. This is a negative exclusion, because it excludes many people who would have a chance to identify with a homosexual character. The show reinforces the hetero-normative, while excluding the queer, and taming the gay. It creates the status quo box of what acceptable gay encompasses and what unacceptable gay entails. It crafts a negative status quo and norms for homosexuals. Replacing one bad binary with another is not really progress, but just oppression disguised as progress.

Overall, *Will & Grace* tames homosexuality and excludes the queer by creating a status quo box of what is acceptable for homosexuals. The show utilizes three main concepts: first, homo-voyeurism, second, character development, and third, the queer/normal binary to tame homosexuality. This paper only analyzed the finale of the episode and did a brief overview of the episode. It would be advised for future research focusing on the representation of homosexuality on *Will & Grace* to focus on an entire season or more than one episode of the show. Analyzing the representation of homosexuality not only on *Will & Grace* but other shows is very important and should be conducted more in the future of critical theory, cultural and media studies.

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