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Gen Z Sexual and Gender Fluidity in US Scripted Television

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Abstract

This essay addresses the rise in sexual and gender-fluid characters in scripted US television targeting the Gen Z audience (born 1997–2012), based on their moniker as the "queerest" generation, with over 20% of younger US and international respondents identifying as LGBTQ in polls, the majority as sexually fluid (bi/pansexual) or non-binary (genderfluid/genderqueer). By analyzing six series (2019–2023) marketed as "authentically" Gen Z, I argue this shift invests in Gen Z's "hip" attitude towards such fluidity the same way Caldwell argues that 1990's diversification of the televisual audience produced a "programming agenda…that cultivates and rewards distinction in ethnic, racial, and class terms" (2020, p. 376). Caldwell's (2020) theory of boutique programming, described as "a selective, signature world where artistic sensitivity went hand in hand with social relevance and viewer discrimination" (p. 164), exposes how these recent series rely on "visual flourishes…and narrative embellishments" (p. 377) but move beyond cinematic techniques by combining palatial settings and extravagant lifestyles with shockingly explicit sexual situations. Caldwell's (2020, p. 377) assertion that "stardom and gossip defeat the dramatic obligation or need for narrative coherence" is reflected in the 21st century's reliance on social media promotions with hypersexual imagery and expensive designer outfits for its high school-age characters and an entertainment media which highlights their "edgy," "sexy," "explicit," and "provocative" content. Therefore, I argue that, like Caldwell, we should avoid "overestimat[ing] the political value" (2020, p. 376) of these presentations when these non-binary identities are shown as inaccessible, depoliticized, and hypersexualized, which maintains rather than challenges entrenched binary ideals of gender and sexuality.

Keywords

American television; bisexuality; gender non-binary; Gen Z; LGBTQ; television; televisuality; teen series

1. Introduction

This article addresses the rise in sexual and gender fluidity in scripted television targeting the Gen Z audience (born 1997–2012) as a continuation of Caldwell's theory of boutique programming, described as "a selective, signature world where artistic sensitivity went hand in hand with social relevance and viewer discrimination" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 164). Currently, Gen Z is identified as the "queerest" generation in international polls (Ipsos, 2024) with the majority more likely to use a fluid category like pansexual and non-binary than traditional binary labels (lesbian/gay or trans male/female). I analyze six drama/dramedies produced on three streaming channels and marketed as "authentically" Gen Z (Collider Staff, 2023; Hadadi, 2021; Sarner, 2021; St. James, 2019). These television shows are notable for their diverse queer ensembles in American high schools, but using elements of televisuality, I argue they are still problematic because their televisual qualities depoliticize gender and sexual fluidity by sensationalizing its transgressiveness or presenting its normalization as dependent on its elite social and economic setting to avoid threatening the privilege of the heterosexual and cisgender majority.

1.1. Generational Shifts, Queerness, and Moral Panic

This study began when, as a queer media scholar, I sought to reconcile two concurrent but seemingly contradictory shifts in American culture. First, Gen Zers in American and international polls gained attention for identifying as the queerest generation ever, 22%, more than twice their Millennial (born 1981–1996) counterparts and four times the rate for their parents' generation, Gen X (born 1965–1980), with non-cisgender identities at 3%, triple the Millennial rate and six times higher than Gen X (Ipsos, 2024; Jones, 2024). Those who identify as gender or sexually fluid make up the majority of each group (Ipsos, 2023; Jones, 2023, 2024) and represent 76% of all gender non-binary adults in the US or 912,000 Americans (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). A greater number have LGBTQ friends, which is perhaps why the majority of Gen Zers, including those who identify as cisgender and heterosexual, expect diverse storytelling and casting in scripted television and film (Deloitte Insights, 2024; Fowler, 2023; GLAAD, 2024; Ipsos, 2023, 2024). As this age-group primarily consumes streaming products, SVODs (subscription video-on-demand apps) Amazon Prime, Netflix, Max, Disney+, and Hulu have generated teen-focused programming with primary LGBTQ characters in a variety of scripted genres, particularly starting in the late 2010s/early 2020s (Deloitte Insights, 2024). These genres include horror (*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, Netflix, 2018–2020; *The Order*, Netflix, 2019–2020), musicals (*Julie and The Phantoms*, Netflix, 2020; *High School Musical: The Musical—The Series*, Disney +, 2019–2023), mystery (*The Wilds*, Amazon, 2020–2022; *Pretty Little Liars: Original Sin*, Max, 2022–2024), superheroes (*The Runaways*, Hulu, 2017–2019; *Hawkeye*, Disney+, 2021), and comedy-dramas (*Never Have I Ever*, Netflix, 2020–2023; *Love, Victor*, Hulu, 2020–2023).

The second shift was also recognizable to these Gen Zers, since more than half fear the increasingly vitriolic backlash against LGBTQ rights, particularly in US politics (Migdon, 2022). Current political discourse has reinvigorated a 20th-century moral panic that characterizes the LGBTQ community as a threat to children and adolescents (Johnson, 2004; Lancaster, 2011). State legislation, however, often targets LGBTQ youth directly, to prevent legal changes in gender, ban medically necessary transition procedures (American Psychological Association, 2021), eliminate protection from discrimination in schools, and bar education on LGBTQ issues in the classroom (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.; Movement Advancement Project, 2023). The hostility evident in 2023's 500+ state bills imperils this already vulnerable population (Savin-Williams,

2021; Vincent, 2020), with a similar trend in anti-LGBTQ legislation in a number of European countries, while even more chart a disturbing rise in anti-LGBTQ violence (Forest, 2024; Guillot & Coi, 2024).

2. Literature Review: Queer and Trans Characters on Teen Television

Queer theorists have embraced an oppositional framework with heteronormative citizenry (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Edelman, 2004), arguing, "the queer movement challenges the very ideas of normality which underpin social institutions and practices….Binary oppositions are replaced by a proliferation of differences which queer theory and politics refuses to hierarchize" (Weedon, 1999, p. 73). Duggan problematizes this assumption with "homonormativity," which affirms the homo/heterosexual binary through a "politics that does not contest heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them" (Duggan, 2003, p. 50). Trans scholars parallel this concept with "trans normativity," which regulates normative gender roles for cisgender and transgender people alike (Beauchamp, 2019; Fischer, 2019). As binary definitions, homonormativity and trans normativity erase the sexual (bi/pansexuality) and gender (non-binary) fluid majority present in both communities (Diamond, 2008; Hayfield, 2020).

Queer media theorists validate how younger viewers seek affirmation through queer characters (Griffin, 2017; Padva, 2020), a crucial stage in positive identity development (Bond & Miller, 2017; Dajches & Barbati, 2024). Recent teen series are applauded for racially diverse representations and feminist storylines, including for lesbian and trans female characters (Marghitu, 2021; Masanet et al., 2022; Pérez & Valdivia, 2023; Schumacher, 2024). Yet media scholarship primarily addresses fluid identities only within the broader LGBTQ group (e.g., Gitzen, 2024; Jane, 2022). Similarly, bisexual media scholarship tends to focus on adults (e.g., Del Castillo, 2015; Millsap-Spears, 2021), as does analysis of homo/transnormative representations (e.g., Branfman, 2019; Francis, 2021). Those who affirm queer teen characters overlook the relevance of fluid versus binary identities as well as how they uphold homo/transnormativity, as seen in *Love, Victor* (Hulu, 2020–2022), *The Wilds* (Amazon, 2020–2022), and *Never Have I Ever* (Netflix, 2020–2023), recent series otherwise notable for their racially diverse cast and culturally-authentic storylines. Homonormativity has therefore tampered "the queer edge" which previously allowed television producers "to draw newer, hipper, younger audiences in the hyperdiversified landscape of popular forms" (L. Henderson, 2013, p. 61). Those SVODs intent on capturing Gen Z's attention with transgressive sexual content, "the go-to marker of distinctive television trying to push boundaries and tap into contemporary cultural discourses about gender and sexuality" (Macintosh, 2022, p. 24), have moved beyond the binary into sexually and gender fluid identities typified by multipartner triangulated attraction, sexual relationships, and sexual acts.

3. Methodology

My larger book project started with a purposive sampling of US-produced SVOD scripted non-animated television series aired during or after 2018 referenced as "teen" series using IMDB keywords and plot reviews of series:

> Centered around adolescent characters with a focus on cultural milestones and rites of passages…finding the right romantic partner, rebelling against or conforming to adults rules, choosing a career path, coming to terms with one's parents, and establishing a secure identity. (Marghitu, 2021, pp. 3–4)

Relying on a combination of advocacy reports (GLAAD's annual *Where We Are on TV*), popular blogs like Wikipedia (e.g., "List of Dramatic Series with LGBT Characters: 2020"), and LezWatchTV, I eliminated series without LGBTQ primary or multi-season recurring characters and those which were set in pre-2015 time periods (e.g., *Paper Girls*, Amazon, 2022; *Stranger Things*, Netflix, 2016–2022). As a result, my findings may not be representative of all teen-focused programming between 2018–2023, but the resulting series covered enough variations by genre and SVOD that I believe it still offers a representative synopsis of how teen series manage LGBTQ representations for Gen Z audiences.

Prior to and during a full-time research sabbatical, I performed a systematic qualitative content analysis to identify and interpret how the remaining 25+ series represent LGBTQ characters within the series cast ensemble (how many primary characters are identified as LGBTQ?; within this category, how many are referenced or revealed to be binary identities and how many are fluid identities?), the visual representation of the LGBTQ characters (how are LGBTQ characters portrayed in costume and mannerisms that appears typical or atypical of their stated gender identities, or does the LGBTQ character continue common LGBTQ stereotypes?), and the textual representation of the LGBTQ characters (how does their character's sexual and gender identity first appear or is mentioned?; how do character arcs related to sexual and romantic maturation appear the same or differently for LGBTQ characters?; how does the series position similar sexual and romantic experiences, including first love, virginity loss, and rejection, the same or differently for LGBTQ characters?). My interpretation of the findings was informed by patterns identified by queer and trans-media scholarship on current scripted television and film (see Caprioglio, 2021; Edwards, 2020; Francis, 2021; Horvat, 2020; Oppliger, 2022) and feedback from scholars at various conference presentations of my findings. These patterns are now the basis of a work-in-progress book monograph, excerpted here to offer a more limited analysis supported by Caldwell's televisuality theory.

This essay presents representative content of six American scripted teen-focused dramas/dramedies from 97 episodes on three streaming channels, ranging from the deliberately "edgy" Max to the more mainstream Peacock. Marketed as "authentically" Gen Z (Collider Staff, 2023; Hadadi, 2021; Sarner, 2021; St. James, 2019), each series includes multiple LGBTQ main characters in their ensemble casts, yet fluid characters are positioned as the most transgressive with storylines which conflate fluidity with sexual avarice and the inability to procure stable romantic relationships. While neither multipartner sex nor polyamory is transgressive by definition (Gleason, 2023; Schippers, 2016), such characters exemplify how "the conflation of bisexuality and nonmonogamy in the popular imagination…[creates] stereotypes of bisexuals as immature or sexually voracious" (Willey, 2016, p. 9). This promiscuity, in turn, disrupts the relationships of homo- and heteronormative peers through storylines familiar to melodramatic teen narratives (love triangles, crushes on inappropriate adult partners, secret romances) and those pulled from more adult content (multipartner sex, polyamory, sexual fetishes). Moreover, a paratextual analysis of each series' promotional material and social media accounts underscores how the SVODs balance queer niche-casting to the Gen Z audience with transgressive queer-baiting.

4. Caldwell's Televisuality in the Age of Streaming and Homonormativity

Caldwell's (2020) televisuality theory interrogates "the relationship between intellectual surplus and televisual embellishment" (p. 378) when cable "narrowcasting" (p. 368) unleashed a range of "boutique" programming intent on producing "a selective, signature world where artistic sensitivity [goes] hand in hand

with social relevance and viewer discrimination" (p. 164). Caldwell's delineation of how cinematic innovation filtered into the television landscape has been applied most often to "high-end television" (e.g., Sexton & Lees, 2021; Wheatley, 2016), but his explication of stylistic excess identifies an "abundance" evident in a variety of visual and narrative qualities characteristic of recent teen series: the "emotional and stylistic excess" of its melodramatic focus on teen angst (Mittell, 2015, p. 245); the "vicarious social-sexual experience" of teen sexual exploration (Williams, 2008, p. 7); and the constant repositioning of "maturity [and] edginess" in characterizing contemporary teen sexual relations (Schumacher, 2024, p. 360). The usefulness of his analysis to my approach, however, centers on the aforementioned "intellectual surplus" that he identified as a key component to reach the diversified post-network television audience, resulting in a "programming agenda…that cultivates and rewards distinction in ethnic, racial, and class terms" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 376).

In my view, Caldwell's (2020, p. 165) televisuality theory explains why the "sensitive relevance" of the sexual and gender fluidity represented by these Gen Z characters hardly denotes a progressive liberal ideology even though fluidity, by definition, disrupts the traditional binaries between male/female and hetero/homosexual that maintain hetero-, homo- and cisnormativity. Caldwell insists that intellectual surplus in ground-breaking series like *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990–1995) was designed to reach working professionals with "degrees in the liberal arts and humanities" in order to both reward its niche audience's sense of progressive superiority *and* avoid "alienat[ing] *other* viewers" presumably those less progressive and well-educated (Caldwell, 2020, pp. 366, 367, emphasis added). The same self-congratulatory emptiness of this distinctiveness propelled the concurrent 1990s rise in US prime-time representations of "white, affluent, trend-setting" gay men and lesbians "targeted at liberal television viewers, both straight and gay, who may feel that by watching [such] 'sophisticated programs'…they are somehow supporting the struggle for gay rights" (Becker, 1998, pp. 43–44). In the 2020s competitive streaming landscape, these programs rely on its Gen Z audience to appreciate its "distinctive" and "hip" attitudes towards gender and sexual fluidity while homonormative presentations of monosexual and gender-conforming queer teens who are "cute…sweet [and] likeable" assures more conservative or older viewers that gender and sexual binaries remain intact (Dhaenens & De Smet, 2024, p. 13).

While this analysis does not foreclose the possibility that LGBTQ+ Gen Zers value such representations (Gitzen, 2024; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021), I rely on Caldwell's (2020, p. 378) entire equation, "the relationship between intellectual surplus and televisual embellishment," to define the "embellished" elements which simultaneously highlight the series' "queer edge" and then distance its edginess as either inaccessible or inconsequential. To maintain this focus on the continued relevance of Caldwell's analysis, I categorized the elements using his definitions of: (a) "visual flourishes—special effects, graphics, acute cinematography, and editing—and narrative embellishments" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 377); (b) "stardom and gossip [which] defeat the dramatic obligation or need for narrative coherence" (p. 377); (c) and the faux realism of their "highly conscious alternative worlds" (p. 377). My analysis attests to the ongoing applicability of Caldwell's theory to explain why televisual embellishment still saturates US television in the age of streaming without threatening hetero/cisnormativity and the dominance of binary identities.

4.1. Visual Flourishes and Narrative Embellishments

Like "queer edginess," televisual spectacle is a shifting marker of innovative style showcasing decades of digital technological advancements. At its best, its union with narrative connects "fictive emotions…to the

diegesis, reinforcing the sense for the viewer of being present in the fictional world" (Sexton & Lees, 2021, p. 39). The "fictional world" in teen series, however, is based on the viewers' familiarity with, if not also a direct experience of, the American high school, a milieu obsessed with status where interpersonal conflicts play out often simultaneously in the public world of classrooms, sporting events, and parties, and the private teen-only online world. The mystery series, *One of Us Is Lying* (Peacock, 2021–2022, two seasons, 16 episodes), capitalizes on this duality over two seasons which investigate who killed the manipulative outcast Simon (season one) or the bullying jock Jake (season two). Showrunner Erica Saleh integrates numerous narrative embellishments to convey the immediacy of social media posts that encourage suspicion for the title's referenced group, a mixture of familiar teen tropes like the defiant bad boy, the popular cheerleader, and the studious virgin. For example, as popular queen bee Vanessa livestreams accusations against the group (S2E1), the rapid edits shift between her in the hallway and her on the app surrounded by viewers' affirming responses (Figure 1). While Saleh pulls plotlines from Karen M. McManus's novel, she heightens the sexual dynamics by making Maeve bisexual and Janae gender non-conforming. Maeve, a tangential member of the group who functions as a foil for older sister Bronwyn, has a rebellious nature that is integral to her sexuality. One of the series many flashbacks reveals that Maeve sent Simon sexually explicit photos (S1E5), but the next episode (S1E6) explains Simon was instigating a romantic rivalry with Janae, his sidekick in sowing adolescent drama through an anonymous gossip site. Each episode relies on this barrage of information from flashbacks to fuel online indictments which consistently question the primary characters' motivations, but for Maeve, these center on her fluctuating erotic desire. Janae, an introverted loner whose gender identity is revealed in season two (E3), is suspicious of Maeve's stated interest, telling her, "you're transferring your feelings for Simon onto me....It's incestuous and weird" (S2E2), which Maeve agrees is "fucked up." Thus, Saleh's narrative embellishment of Maeve and Janae's identities seems construed to frame Maeve's attraction to Janae as a "pathological mimicry" of her failed heterosexual coupling with Simon (San Filippo, 2018, p. 184).

Euphoria (Max, 2019–2022, two seasons, 18 episodes) garnered attention immediately as "the most unflinching, not to mention explicit, take on modern adolescence ever to hit US television," but visual spectacle is inherent to creator Sam Levinson's exposé of current teen "challenges" which deliberately bait "totally f---g freaked out" parents (Sandberg, 2019). Its young cast has an impressive diversity of sexual fluidity across the gender spectrum with male (Nate, Elliot), female (Jules), and gender non-binary (Rue) characters, although none are labeled as such with any specificity. Levinson's cinematographic flourishes document Rue's drug addiction through entertaining musical hallucinations (S2E4, S2E7), but more often explicate the interior sexual desires of its teen characters. Two episodes——Jules' ecstasy trip at a club

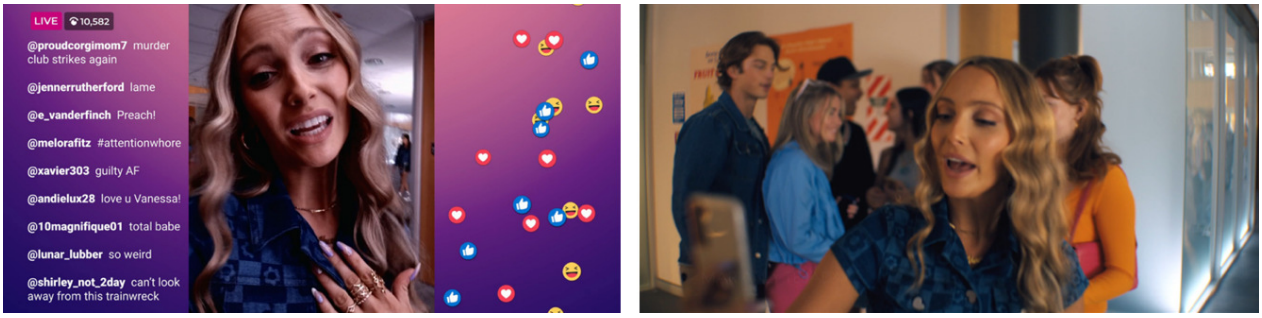

Figure 1. Vanessa livestreams accusations against the group in *One of Us Is Lying*. Source: Oxenburg and Weaver (2022).

(S1E7) and Nate's nightmare (S2E7)—offer sexually explicit depictions of each's fluid attraction. Using diffuse lighting and shifting point-of-view shots, Jules' and Nate's sexual partners are transposed and interchanged. Jules shifts between her actual sexual partner (Anna), her future sexual partner (Rue), and her sexual crush (Nate), with whom she shared an intense but brief and online-only sexual relationship documented, like Saleh's series, by positioning shots of their sexually charged texts and pics against their mundane daily activities (S1E4). Jules' hallucination reaches an orgasmic conclusion, but Nate's dream, which incorporates Jules, ex-girlfriend Maddy, and current girlfriend Cassie, ends with him being penetrated by his own father, Cal, in a recreation of Cal's sexual liaison with trans feminine Jules in season one facilitated by an anonymous hookup app for gay men (S1E1). Despite this difference in tone, the visual flourishes in these scenes, meant to signify their conflicted emotional and sexual interiority, also situate Jules and Nate as so sexually avarice that one partner cannot satisfy them, a stereotypical conflation of bisexuality with "erotic perversion, nymphomania, or sex addiction…[defined as] orgasms receiving preference over gender-of-object choice" (San Filippo, 2018, p. 185). This assessment is demonstrated by other episodes where each has impulsive sex with a new partner—Cassie for Nate (S2E3), Elliot for Jules (S2E4)—that creates more dramatic love triangles.

Another disturbing visualization (S2E2) of Nate's unstable sexual desires occurs after Nate is hospitalized with a head injury. When he starts hallucinating about having sex with Cassie, the scene revels in their attractive nude physiques but eventually devolves into a disturbing flashback from earlier in the episode, switching his adolescent self with teen Nate as he masturbates to his father's taped escapades with male and female partners, including other trans women. Levinson thus reduces each man's attraction to Jules to a stereotypical sexual fetish (Goehring, 2022). Rue's drug-induced hallucination during sex with Jules (S2E4) is more romantic, with a stylized visual montage of them as famous lovers, including the leads in *Ghost* (1990), *Titanic* (1997), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005; Figure 2). The shift between male and female characters may reinforce Rue's "non-binary" gender and expression (Handore, 2022; Whittick, 2019) but again undermines Jules' female identity with this visual masculinization. It is therefore relevant that despite the series' self-conscious elucidation of teen sexual habits narrated by Rue, including choking (S1E1), violent fantasies (S2E2), and a "dick pic" lecture (S1E3), the "perversity" of Jules' sexual fluidity is repeatedly referenced through her attraction to cis men (Nate and Cal) who fetishize her trans body as well as her unstable relationships with sexually fluid drug addicts (Rue and Elliot).

Genera+ion (Max, 2021, one season, 16 episodes) may have been canceled after one season but is notable for its sexually-fluid Gen Z creator, Zelda Barnz, and the show co-runner, her father Daniel Barnz, a film

Figure 2. Rue and Jules as Jack and Ennis from *Brokeback Mountain*. Source: Levinson (2022).

writer/director. Although many characters avoid labeling their sexual identities, the cast covers a generous portion of the LGBTQ spectrum, from lesbians Greta and Luz to gender-normative, sexually fluid boys J and Nathan and girl Riley, gender fluid queer Chester, and gay Bo, along with two gay dads of straight Arianna, and Greta's trans feminine guardian aunt. But the Barnzs set up sexually and gender-fluid characters as the most prone to self-sabotage and unstable romantic relationships from the first episodes with stylistic flourishes. Spatial cross-matches of underwater plunges with similar lighting symbolize emotional angst for Riley (E1) and Nathan (E3, Figure 3), with Riley's leap into Nathan's pool foreshadowing Nathan's jump into the harbor after his drunken confession of bisexuality to his shocked family during his sister's wedding rehearsal. The spectacle of Chester's genderqueer attire in the first episode repeats from multiple character perspectives, each time following his progression through the schoolyard to a stare-down with the vice principal in deliberate defiance of the dress code (E1). Shown repeatedly in Grindr hookups with adult men, Chester shares his fears of dating Bo with Riley, who agrees, "I would not even know how to go on a real non-hookup date" (E10). Even though gay guidance counselor Sam supports Chester (E1), his libido ruins their relationship by anonymously sexting Sam on Grindr (E5), while Nathan manipulates Chester into a fake relationship to agitate his parents, logically imperiling Chester's new romance with Bo (E5). The Barnzs complicate narrative arcs further by opening episodes with flashforward scenes intended to obfuscate first which teen is giving birth in a mall bathroom and then who is the father. Indeed, J's bisexuality, articulated in episode four, serves primarily as a false flag to hide his parenting before it is revealed in episode five. Even though the Barnzs do not incorporate as many stylistic embellishments as Levinson, those integrated repeatedly question the emotional and sexual maturity of the plurisexual or gender-diverse characters.

Like Levinson, Guadagnino documents adolescent hedonism with cinematographic enhancement in his mini-series, *We Are Who We Are* (Max, 2020, one season, 8 episodes). The series privileges the perspective of two younger teens, sexually fluid Fraser and his new friend, gender fluid Harper, on a US military base in Italy. Accolades for Guadagnino's queer romance, *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), led reviewers to assess the series' sex scenes and male nudity (E1, E4) with nonchalance (e.g., Brooke, 2020; Buchanan, 2020). Multiple episodes, though, integrate stylistic choices similar to these other Max series in order to conflate hedonistic drug and alcohol use with sexual exploration and teen emotional instability for these main characters. The first (E4) brings together the series' entire teen cast for a wedding celebration of one teen's older brother prior to his deployment. When Guadagnino segues from a frenetic daytime dance party to dimly lit, partially-nude couples, Harper and Fraser remain spectators to reiterate their sexual immaturity, particularly when Harper's heterosexual teenage brother has a prominent threesome with two Italian girls.

Figure 3. Riley (E1, left) and Nathan's (E3, right) pool scenes. Source: Barnz and Barnz (2021a, left), and Barnz and Barnz (2021b, right).

The second occurs when Fraser surprises Jonathan at his apartment (E7). Like Chester's crush on his guidance counselor or Jules' rough sex with Nate's father, Jonathan is another inappropriate adult choice for the teen character, as he works for Fraser's mother Sarah, the base commander, as a major in the US Army. Earlier episodes (E5, E6) document Fraser's heightened sexual yearning for Jonathan with closeups of his longing looks and intimate touches, so the erotic sensuality Guadagnino adds with soft lighting, wide shots of Jonathan and girlfriend Marta's almost nude bodies, and diegetic music as Fraser is wooed by the two's slow dancing and caresses suggests that it is Fraser's immaturity, not Jonathan and Marta's inability to seduce a 14-year-old boy, that derails their sexual encounter. Symbolic sounds of the downpour and thunder combined with dim lighting accentuate Fraser's emotional breakdown in the street after he runs out of their apartment in shame.

Both of the main characters, then, end the series as sexually frustrated and confused as to where they started. In the last episode (E8), Guadagnino similarly uses cinematic techniques to render the emotionally fraught state of gender-fluid Harper (E8), including disconnected jump cuts as they dejectedly walk through the base after learning of their family's imminent departure. The unexpected transfer forces them to leave Fraser, the only person who affirms their fluid gender identity. A more jarring special effect occurs later in the episode after Harper rejects an older woman's sexual advances backstage at a concert they attend with Fraser. The camera rotates 180 degrees as Harper flees back to the crowded club floor. In this way, Guadagnino graphically suggests that Harper's gender identity has altered their world into a state of unreality that is inconsistent with the real world where they must return as "Caitlin." This reading aligns with Guadagnino's refusal to specify "whether Caitlin [sic] is trans or just exploring," although he is the director and co-writer (Sepinwall, 2020). He instead discounts "Caitlin's" gender as an age-appropriate "process of self-discovery" (Sepinwall, 2020), as if their identity is yet another representation of bacchanalian adolescent excess.

4.2. Stardom and Gossip in Place of Narrative Coherence

By rebooting *Gossip Girl* (The CW, 2006–2012; Max, 2021–2023, two seasons, 24 episodes), Joshua Safran showcases "stardom and gossip" intertextually, replicating a plot centered on an anonymous social media account, referenced in the title, which creates havoc within a New York City private school, a setting each version uses to promote characters' fashion to audiences (Marghitu, 2021). Fashion media then specifies pieces for viewer consumption, like $950 Balenciaga sneakers (Parker, 2021), but even during the series' hiatus speculates "what the characters of the 'Gossip Girl' reboot would wear this fall" (Ilchi, 2021). Ryan Murphy's *The Politician* (Netflix, 2019–2020, two seasons, 15 episodes) is set in a comparatively affluent southern California private school, and his previous pairing of teen fashion with star gossip in series like *Glee* (Fox, 2009–2015) and *Scream Queens* (Fox, 2015–2016) lead to articles promoting *The Politician* as "the most stylish show on Netflix" (Petter, 2019), with links, for example, to a character's $4,000 Chanel backpack (Wasilak, 2019). Both series reflect a pattern foundational to the *Gossip Girl* original of presenting the on- and offline machinations of these super wealthy teens within scenarios the press then promotes as "gloriously implausible—and uncomfortably plausible" (Marghitu, 2021, p. 127).

These series' sexually explicit situations generate so much gossip they seem constructed to shock rather than titillate. The standard set in *Euphoria*'s opening episode when teenage Jules has anonymous sex with Nate's middle-aged father (S1E1) was eclipsed by a locker room scene in season two, which led the press (e.g., Chambers, 2019) to gleefully count the visible genitalia moving in and out of the camera frame focused on an impassive Nate (S1E2). Coverage similarly highlights "one of the more shocking and wildest scenes of

season 2" (Lambe, 2022), a "super homoerotic" (Shafer, 2022) locker room dance number during a school play written by a classmate to expose Nate's sexual fluidity to his peers (S2E7). Levinson's infatuation with a multiplicity of penises (Chaney, 2019) may be why *Genera+ion*'s locker room scene (S1E3) with male nudity a few years later in 2021 garnered little notice, despite Chester and an unnamed teammate discussing fellatio. These scenes pander to press attention but more disturbingly hypersexualize the motivations of these sexually or gender-fluid teen boys, which occurs again when *Genera+ion* aired a single "dick pic" numerous times to reveal Nathan's tryst with his female twin's boyfriend (E2, E3), although deemed "cringeworthy" (Fowle, 2021) rather than erotic.

Nate's and Chester's sexual avarice, however, is overshadowed by the hedonistic escapades of Max, the sexually fluid teen boy in *Gossip Girl*. Max's pansexuality is introduced (S1E1) in a public tryst with a male and female peer in a scene deemed "soft porn" by at least one previewer (Nathan, 2021), then recurs in a four-way sexual romp in season two with classmates Victor, Valeria, and Rex (S2E2). Safran includes a Levinson-esque cinematographic flourish in the season's finale (S1E12), when Max languishes in post-orgy boredom as the camera pans up through a jumble of male and female nudity and entwined limbs. These numerous extended nude scenes continue into season two (S2E1) once Max enters into a polyamorous relationship with an established power couple, bisexual Aki and heterosexual Audrey, after both start lusting after him. Press varies on whether to praise (Belle, 2021) or castigate (Glassman-Hughes, 2023) their polyamory, but the LGBTQ press raved, "*Gossip Girl* is back, and gayer than ever before!" (T. Henderson, 2021). Showrunner Safran did insist the polyamory was part of the reboot's intention "to showcase a more diverse universe…to tell more queer stories" (Aurthur, 2021), but press instead conflated Max's hedonistic nature with his sexuality by addressing him as a "pansexual bad boy" (Sarner, 2021), "pansexual lothario" (McMenamin, 2022), and "pansexual heartthrob" (Setoodeh, 2021). Meanwhile, interviews with the actor playing Max, Thomas Doherty, who identifies as neither polyamorous nor queer, focused so much on Max's sexual fluidity and the triad that Doherty was left recounting repeatedly that he found the experience "liberating" (Gonzales, 2021; Setoodeh, 2021) and "educational" (Setoodeh, 2021; Singh, 2022). Like Fraser and Chester, Max has an inappropriate relationship with teacher Rafa (S1E4), while these multipartner sexual trysts hypersexualize both pansexuality and polyamorous relationships (Schippers, 2016; Scoats & Campbell, 2022). Safran's finale (S2E8), like Guadagnino's, more egregiously frames fluidity as immature self-indulgence. A drunk Max appears only briefly being thrown out of a bar, while the now hetero dyad of Aki and Audrey vacation in Italy (S2E10), their happiness mirrored by the cast's other heterosexual couples.

Like Safran and Guadagnino, Murphy's reputation as a gay marquee producer-creator generates press for all his ventures. Prior to the premiere, Murphy and frequent co-creators Falchuck and Brennan released a poster campaign with one captioned, "we promise you bi partisanship" (Dela Paz, 2019), soon followed by reviews proclaiming, "practically everybody on this show is queer" (St. James, 2019). An overview of season one's press against season two's plot, however, provides a striking example of how Murphy's and lead Ben Platt's gay "stardom" defeat *The Politician*'s "narrative coherence." Like this poster, Platt's interviews reference the overlapping love triangles between Platt's character, Payton, his best friend, River, and their respective girlfriends Alice and Astrid to claim, "no one is free from the queerness, really, on the show" (Guglielmi, 2019) and "everyone is somewhere on the [sexuality] spectrum" (Malkin, 2019). Yet a past threesome with Astrid, River, and Payton, teased as the cause for River's suicide (S1E1), is never shown in season one. When it finally airs in a flashback (S2E1), Payton and Astrid deny any sexual motivation two years later. Payton assures Astrid the "threesome" was unconsummated ("no penetration at all") because,

"I wasn't attracted to River in that way….I knew he wasn't gay,…[or] bisexual," to which Astrid affirms, "I knew he wasn't gay," despite earlier claiming she and River were "fluid" (S1E1). The press's investment in boosting Murphy's "world where everyone's 'a little bit queer' " (Duffy, 2019) explains why season two publicity did not expose the contradiction. Season two further erases Payton's season one sexual fluidity through a throuple with Astrid and Alice, as male–female–female relationships confirm "the male-dominant idea that 'having' many women signifies [heterosexual] status and power" (Schippers, 2016, p. 23).

Social media promotion also highlights threesomes, polyamory, and love triangles as a means to capture its Gen Z audience, even in those series, *One of Us is Lying* and *Genera+ion*, which do not air as many sexually explicit sex scenes to capture press attention. An Instagram post of Maeve first with Simon and then Janae is captioned, "the love triangle no one saw coming" (One of Us is Lying, 2022). *Genera+ion* takes Arianna's comment about her two dads, "they're thinking of bringing a third into their relationship" (S1E2), out of context, as a black and white caption posted with "couples are so 2020. It's all about throuples now" (Genera+ion, 2021a), perhaps to foreshadow a desexualized throuple between heterosexual female friends Delilah and Naomi and their shared male crush, Cooper (S1E12, E15). Two Instagram posts promote the throuple episode, the first captioned, "why be a couple when you can be a throuple?" (Genera+ion, 2021b) and a second proclaiming, "ngl [not gonna lie] dating with your best friend looks kinda fun" (Genera+ion, 2021c). Neither hints at its actual purpose as a school dance date solution, not sexual or relationship exploration, which predictably falls apart when Cooper chooses monogamy with one of the girls. Negative reviews of the series which argue it lacks depth (Juzwiak, 2021) and "doesn't seek a real point of view beyond its capacity to say risqué things" (Lawson, 2021) accentuate how such social media clickbait supersedes the "need for narrative coherence." Like the poster promoting River and Payton as romantically involved, *The Politician*'s Instagram published a shot of them kissing (S1E1; The Politician, 2019a), while another uses a still of the two as hearts explode behind them (Figure 4; The Politician, 2019b). The plot discontinuity is correctly summarized by a Gen Z reviewer: "season one was praised for a story where it seemed that 'everybody's bi,' but in season two, the writers seem to be arguing that nobody is *really* bi" (Nichols, 2020).

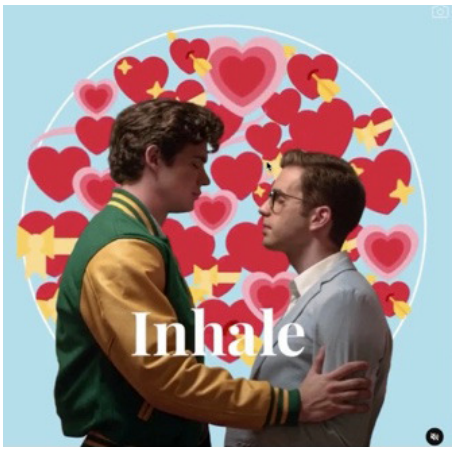

Figure 4. River and Payton in a Season 1 Instagram promotion image. Source: The Politician (2019b).

Unlike the press which lambastes these series for promoting "soft porn" (Nathan, 2021) and "wildly exaggerated [teen] sex" (Naftulin, 2019), my concerns are not prudish but focus on the creators' hype of fluid sexual identities and behavior. Even prior to the pandemic, rates of sexual experience for US teenagers

have greatly decreased (United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), a trend denigrated as an "aversion to sex" (Soh, 2021) and "failure to launch" (Fry, 2023). Thus, these series play into stereotypical generational presumptions about youth "gone wild" with sensationalist plotlines, sexually objectified 20-something actors playing high school students, and social media posts hyping narrative twists as sexually transgressive.

4.3. Faux Realistic Settings That Are Actually Highly Conscious Alternative Worlds

Five of these series are set in wealthy enclaves in southern California or New York City (Peterson-Withorn, 2023), faux "realistic settings" of progressive utopias where one-percenters ostentatiously showcase not only their haute couture, but also their mansions, yachts, and household servants. Tellingly, both regions are repeatedly castigated in conservative US media for their liberal politics (Kleefield, 2022; Media Matters Staff, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Guadagnino's series supports these assumptions, despite being set in Italy on a fictional American Army base. Reactions to Fraser's dyed hair and street fashion are attributed to the family's last posting in New York City, and Harper's father later blames this "fashion victim from New York" for his "daughter's" masculinization (S1E1, E6). Even if *The Politician* is a satire demonstrating "the absurd lengths the rich will go to stay on top" (Sandberg, 2019), Murphy's actors bely its satirical tone in interviews where they laud how their "vulnerable" queer characters (Cobb, 2019) "inspire young viewers to accept their authentic selves" (Guglielmi, 2019). As Himberg contends about *The Politician*, these series frame fluid queerness as "contained within class margins…to the 1 percent," so unattainable to most American viewers (Himberg, 2022, pp. 126–127). The parallel sexual hijinks by parents, whether Arianna's gay dads "exploring a third" (*Genera+ion*, S1E2), lesbian Monet's mom and dad's affair with the same woman (*Gossip Girl*, S2E4), Payton's mother Georgina's male and female lovers (*The Politician*, S1E6, S2E1, S2E4), and the revealed affair between Fraser's lesbian mom Maggie and Harper's conservative mother Jenny (*We Are Who We Are*, S1E7), attests to the setting's sexual liberality as elemental.

As queer utopias, homo/bi/transphobia, when present, is interpersonal and thus easily resolved, a strategy which, as queer media scholars insist (e.g., McLean, 2023; Peters, 2018), avoids confronting hetero/cisnormative systemic inequality. After Aki fearfully comes out to his powerful father, he publicizes his son's identity to refute a gay employee's lawsuit (S1E6), and neither Max's dads nor Audrey's divorced parents bat an eye over their polyamory (S1E6, S2E2, S2E7). Janae's singular declaration of their non-binary identity and romance with Maeve on *One of Us Is Lying* causes no friction at home or school, only their participation in "Simon Says" stunts (S2E4). Maeve similarly never frets about her sexual fluidity or relationship even as her heterosexual older sister agonizes over telling their conservative parents about her "bad boy" boyfriend (S2E7). Chester's genderqueer outfits lead to dress code reprimands (S1E1), but his supportive grandmother raises no concerns (S1E11). His hypermasculine water polo teammates solicit his opinions on fellatio (S1E3) and later cheer him up by twerking until he joins in (S1E8). I would like to believe in a world where parental and peer acceptance, genderqueer expression, and sexually fluid sexual histories are *de rigueur* for all LGBTQ+ teenagers, but pretending it is already so obfuscates uncomfortable realities, including how more than half of US LGBTQ youth experience parental rejection and unsafe school environments (Human Rights Campaign, 2023) and how political debates inflame already high rates of anxiety and depression for queer teens (The Trevor Project, 2023). Including sexual and gender-fluid characters only to have televisual elements discount or dismiss them should not become the standard for teen television creators to engage Gen Z viewers without challenging entrenched binary ideals.

5. Conclusions

My argument demonstrates that Caldwell's analysis of "televisual exhibitionism" or "self-conscious…stylistic individuation" aimed at "niche audiences who are flattered by claims of difference and distinction" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 360) in the 1990s holds true in 2020s America. My framework based on Caldwell's key components of televisuality demonstrates that each series' combination of wealthy fashionable teens, showrunners crowned bad boy "provocateurs" (Buchanan, 2020; McHenry, 2021) with "boundary-pushing" sexual explicitness (Sandberg, 2019), and settings in bastions of US leftist ideology "cultivate and reward" viewers with "specific socioeconomic and political commitments" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 376) without requiring any reflection or action during the increasingly anti-LGBTQ political climate. As I have suggested, Caldwell's theory identifies "how programs…tie acute stylistic looks to alternative narrative worlds" (Caldwell, 2020, p. 84), now aspirational queer utopias whose "*look* is oppositional, but its *attitude*…is mainstream" (p. 307). Caldwell's theory of televisuality continues to be a useful lens to document how seemingly progressive television storylines and diverse casting maintain a programming agenda to capture niche audiences without threatening the dominance of the cisgender, monosexual men currently in charge.

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