

Queering the Princess Role: A Critical Cultural Analysis of Disney's *Frozen*

by

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Abstract

Using a critical cultural approach, I articulate a queer reading of Disney's *Frozen*. In establishing the significance of this study, I address how queer readership positions are formed and why such practices are important. The analysis that follows explains the claim that *Frozen* challenges the heteronormative hegemony. Through various textual items and narrative figuration, the dominant ideological standards regarding expression and reception of sexuality are challenged and subverted. These components combined with audience interpretation of the text contribute to a queer reading of the film. I examine audience receptions of this reading and situate them within the cultural context. Finally, I explain the potential impact of and justification for making Elsa's queer subtext canon in the film's sequel.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It's funny how some distance makes everything seem small, and the fears that once controlled me can't get to me at all. Up here in the cold, thin air I finally can breathe. I know I left a life behind but I'm too relieved to grieve.

– Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez, “Let it Go,” 2013

Elsa's ballad, “Let it Go”, following the unintentional revelation of her magical powers goes beyond the immediate situation to address a much larger theme present in Disney's *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013). Throughout the film, the traditional heteronormative standards that define acceptable roles and behaviors in Disney's princess movies are challenged and rejected. The story follows the journey of two sisters, Elsa and Anna, as they navigate the circumstances surrounding Elsa's controversial magical powers while simultaneously trying to fulfill their responsibilities as royalty. Though Elsa was forced initially to conceal her ability to create and control ice and snow Anna accidentally reveals the powers at Elsa's coronation ball with all of Arendelle's people present. Elsa's powers are misunderstood and feared by society. The backlash that follows plunges Arendelle into an eternal winter and forces Elsa to flee to safety on the North Mountain. Anna must find Elsa in an attempt to save both her kingdom and her sister. An end to concealing Elsa's secret marked the beginning of the path toward acceptance and understanding of Elsa's extraordinary powers from both the people of Arendelle and Elsa herself.

From the time Disney began working on the idea for the film, to when the movie was released in theaters, the process of creating *Frozen* spanned over 70 years (*The Story of Frozen*, 2014). *Frozen* was inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's story, *The Snow Queen*, and was adapted over time to become its own unique tale. In the original story of *Frozen*, Anna was a peasant who traveled to the ice queen, Elsa, to seek help to freeze her broken heart. The production team felt that the ensuing narrative was not genuine to that relationship, so they shifted the story to make them sisters. Elsa was portrayed initially as a traditional evil queen. After much thought, the directors felt it was unfair to portray her as a villain for a component that she was born with. The song "Let it Go" was written to explain Elsa's perspective. This song painted Elsa as a troubled hero rather than a villain and the entire plot was rewritten to accommodate the change. During the song's performance in the film, we see Elsa's character transition from reserved to liberated. "Let it Go" became the defining song for the film, won the Oscar for Best Original Song, and was eventually recorded in 41 different languages (*The Story of Frozen*, 2014). The film went on to win the Oscar for Best Animated Feature and became the highest grossing animated film of all time (Konnikova, 2014).

The widespread success of *Frozen* led to countless interpretations of the film. One in particular that has generated a great deal of critical attention is that of Elsa as a lesbian. The journey Elsa faces regarding her magical powers can be read as analogous to the journey many individuals face regarding their nonheterosexual sexualities. The presence of this parallel and the narrative's relationship to it communicate messages regarding the acceptability of identities that deviate from the dominant values of society. By viewing this text through a queer lens we can identify what messages are being communicated

regarding sexuality and how they either support or challenge the heteronormative hegemony. In doing so we can better understand the reception of *Frozen* and in turn more thoroughly understand the mutual relationship that media texts have with the larger society.

For this analysis and the discussion surrounding it I have chosen to use the term “queer” rather than “gay” or “lesbian” because it better acknowledges and encompasses the complexity and diversity of possible gender expression and sexual orientation. When it is necessary to address a specific perspective beyond general non-heterosexual identification, I will use the more specific terms of “gay” or “lesbian.” To demarcate the boundaries of the term for the purpose of this study, queer will refer to: 1) individuals who do not fit within the normative expectation for sexuality based on their sexual orientation or gender presentation; 2) the perspective and experiences of those individuals; 3) the rejection of prescribed normative standards of sexuality (Kumashiro, 2002); and 4) textual elements that indicate these with or without direct acknowledgement of queer sexuality (Doty, 2000).

The driving question of this study evolved through the research process. Knowing that I was interested in a queer approach to analysis, I began by broadly asking: what meaning does this text communicate regarding heteronormative ideologies? In order to answer this question, I first address the process by which individuals come to internalize social ideology, the role that media texts can play in the process, and the means by which we can understand the connection. Using critical cultural studies as a foundation I explain the application of theory as a critical framework for queer readings and outline my approach to analysis. Noting that theory is inseparable from method in such studies, I

explain the socially constructed nature of the power structures that regulate gender expression and sexuality in order to validate the queer position. To situate the analysis of *Frozen* within its historical context I then provide a review of literature regarding media representations of gender and sexuality in general and in specifically children's media. I also discuss the hegemonic impact of such representations in the process.

With an understanding of the related hegemonic mechanisms in place, I began to understand the queer challenge to heteronormativity communicated in the film and set out to identify the specific queer concepts within the text itself that led me to such an understanding. In Chapter 3, I explore how such meaning is established. Doty (1993) suggests that textual coding within films combines with the act of spectatorship to determine meanings. The means of interpretation are thus, "based not so much on static authenticity as they are on the experience of the [spectator] and the cultural context," (Bennett, 2006, p. 412). Readings are based on an individual's personal experiences and response to the text based on their position in society. As such it is not possible to critically evaluate a text from an objective position as our sense of reality is shaped by our individual desires and identifications (Wood, 1978). Noting this connection, I address how queer readership positions are formed. Additionally, I discuss the role that queer readership plays in the development of queer identity and why it is a necessary strategy in the modern queer representation environment.

From my own point of subjectivity, I then sought to answer: what articulates a queer reading of Elsa? In Chapter 4 I propose my queer reading of *Frozen*. To inform the analysis, I begin with a detailed account of the film that includes the narrative sequence and relevant plot information. After explaining the film, I apply the critical framework

discussed in the previous chapters to analyze the text. I accomplish this in two primary sections. First I analyze the gender themes communicated in the film in relation to heteronormativity. In doing so I examine the roles for female characters, representation of male characters, and the relationships between them. In the second section of analysis, I examine the points of queer identification within the film. I begin by identifying relatable aspects of the narrative. I then analyze the surrounding text to justify such an understanding, examining the characters' relationships to Elsa's powers and recurring textual elements.

Upon articulating one possible reading of the text among the many available, I examine the importance understanding Elsa as queer. Thus, the final aim of this study is to situate a queer reading of Elsa and *Frozen* within its larger historical and cultural significance in order to answer: why does what it means to be Elsa matter? In the final chapter I examine various audiences' reception of a queer reading of the film by analyzing their response to the #GiveElsaAGirlfriend campaign and address how this reception reflects society's view of queer sexuality. I then explain the potential impact of an openly queer Disney princess and in light of their current limited inclusion of queer characters. Using this as justification, I conclude with a call to action for the corporation. As my analysis and discussion will reveal, I argue that *Frozen* challenges the heteronormative ideology regarding acceptable sexuality and presents audiences with a relatable queer character. Additionally, considering the audience reception of Elsa's queer reading, I argue that society is poised to receive a queer princess. Furthermore, based on Disney's sociocultural standing as a purveyor of innocence (Bell, Haas, & Sells,

1995), I argue that having a queer princess could challenge the dominant understanding of queer sexuality as a possibility for children.

Chapter 2: Identifying “Queer” to Understand the Queen

In order to identify something as “different,” we must first understand what it means to be “normal.” As we grow and develop through childhood we learn what is possible for us, normal from us, and expected of us (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). A portion of this understanding is shaped by the media texts we take in (Kellner, 2003). As the dominant purveyor of children’s media, the Disney corporation holds unique power in communicating the dominant ideology of society during the socialization process (Bell et al., 1995). In explaining what messages are normalized in children’s media and the impact they can have on young queer audiences Moncada (2016), who started the #GiveElsaaGirlfiend campaign, stated:

“Growing up, I never saw a princess fall in love with another princess – and neither have girls growing up right now. The entertainment industry has given us girls who have fallen in love with beasts, ogres who fall for humans, and even grown women who love bees. But we've never been able to see the purity in a queer relationship” (Moncada, 2016, p.1).

Ultimately, these depictions communicate that romance is a wonderfully powerful and transformative space for endless possibility, so long as you’re straight. This normalizes heterosexuality in any form, pushing queer sexuality out of the realm of possibility.

In the chapter that follows I examine how these standards of sexual expression are managed and perpetuated with emphasis on the hegemonic process in media texts and explain the methodological and theoretical foundation on which this study is built. To begin I explain the theoretical framework guiding the study and outline the specific approach to analysis. In order to inform and authenticate the reading, I provide a review of literature relevant to queer readings. I address the themes of gender and sexuality as hegemonic conditions. I then apply the understanding of these standards to situate the significance of both denotative and connotative queer media representations within society. With a contextual knowledge of queer representation in place, I then focus on gender and sexuality related to children's media and Disney princess films in particular in order to contextualize a queer reading of Disney's *Frozen*.

Method and Theoretical Framework

The human experience exists as a constant interpretation of the world around us. This interpretation continually defines and redefines who we are, what is happening, and what it means. According to Berger and Luckmann (1967), defining the answer to these questions depends on knowledge that is both subjective and socially constructed. The understanding of happenings in everyday life is dependent on each individual's interpretation of events. These interpretations are based on her/his personal opinions and feelings. Social interactions are equally as subjective as we assign others to categories based on predefined norms. Even the language we use and the way it contributes to our knowledge is socially constructed. The categories we use to define others are based on society's expectation for how certain individuals "should" behave and what roles they "should" fill (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). For example, differences in what actions are

deemed appropriate for men and for women are based on socially constructed gender roles. The various components of reality must be taught and learned in order to perpetuate society (Bourdieu, 1973).

Society's ability to maintain itself depends on a variety of hegemonic functions that operate as systems of control and are enacted through various means. Capitalist economic hegemony depends on social stratification and limited mobility to ensure that the current means of production continue to function (Althusser, 2014). Political hegemony enables a governing entity to dominate international relations with stability via implied power rather than direct force (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2007). Cultural hegemony refers to the dominant group's exercise of authority over and through cultural practice that, in turn, influence the routine thoughts and beliefs of individuals (Gitlin, 1982). The ruling class manipulates the diverse society into universal acceptance of their worldview, thus establishing the dominant ideology which in turn maintains the status quo (Lears, 1985). This is accomplished through the institutionalization of social constructs that maintain existing power dynamics (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Gramsci (1937/1995) suggests that hegemonic ideology is not a natural unified formation like skin that covers a body, nor is it, "artificial and superimposed mechanically, like clothes cover the skin," (p. 16) but rather that it is a product of prolonged effort. This highlights dominant ideology's neverending requirement to enforce its legitimacy and allows critical evaluation of the social constructs required to maintain control (Gramsci, 1937/1995).

Media texts play a vital role in communicating social reality and dominant ideology (Kellner, 2003). They may impact our understanding of how to think, look,

behave, and interact (Kellner, 2003). Understanding the relationship between media texts and society depends on first understanding what the media texts mean and how that meaning relates to cultural hegemony (Gitlin, 1982). In western culture, cultural hegemony solidifies the prevailing standards regarding class, race, gender, and sexuality in particular (Gitlin, 1982). As the United States is a media-saturated society, hegemony in media texts plays a major role in contributing to the androcentric patriarchal society (Kellner, 2003). Critical cultural studies is an interdisciplinary approach to evaluating how individuals develop their internal subjectivity and external identity that depends on critically examining the hegemonic mechanisms that influence them (Barker, 2008). The purpose of critical cultural studies is to critically examine media texts in order to better understand how they contribute to or challenge dominant ideologies (Kellner, 2003). Critical cultural studies also analyzes and critiques how existing power structures in society as a whole are maintained or defied by media depictions (Kellner, 2003).

What does a media text mean? This seemingly simple question requires profoundly multifaceted answers. Meaning can be intended, included, and interpreted in a variety of forms. One possible approach to understanding the meaning of a text is to examine the cultural response to it. Reception theory posits that the primary meaning of a cultural text is developed through the interaction of the text and the audience who receives it (Doty, 1993). Since audience reception is as diverse as the populations that make them up, it can be challenging to understand the complexity of this interaction. Each audience segment, and in turn each individual within those segments, reads the text in her/his own unique way. The ability of one text to be polysemic by conveying multiple meanings simultaneously does not invalidate the significance of the various unique

personal meanings. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Having multiple potential readings allows a text to concurrently hold importance with different audiences for different reasons. Rather than attempt to identify universal inborn components of the text itself, using reception theory to interpret cultural texts allows us to situate the text's significance within the culture of the audience and the subjectivity of the individual (Doty, 1993).

Approach to analysis. For this study I focus primarily on queer textual readings, drawing heavily from Doty's (1993, 2000) approach to understanding meaning as an interaction between the text itself, the audience who receives it, and the culture in which the interaction takes place. Recalling the earlier explanation, queer in this context can refer to individuals, positions of understanding, ideals, or textual elements that defy the normative standards for sexuality in heteronormative society. With this understanding in mind, the notion of "queer" becomes something that is expressive and foundational to identity rather than simply a prescriptive category based on external activity or expression (Doty, 2000; Dyer, 2002). This paradigm allows the nature of queer representation to be understood in terms of day to day lived experiences of queer individuals rather than only by means of sexual activity or explicit declaration of sexual orientation (Doty, 2000). Queer readings, in turn, identify the existing queerness in texts by acknowledging characters, experiences, and emotions that are relatable to queer audiences (Doty, 2000).

According to Doty (1993), there are four major areas that contribute to the queerness of mass cultural texts. The first two are implemented during the creation of the text. These include the external contextual aspects related to the production process, and the internal textual presence of queer characters or sexuality. The rarity of queer

individuals in positions with creative control during production and the scarcity of representation for queer characters in mainstream media typically limit the impact production areas have on the ultimate queer meaning of a text (Doty, 1993). This leaves the primary interpretation of queerness to the audience. The final two areas of meaning are dependent on the manner in which the text is received by audiences as being queer. The first is how the text is received and employed by specifically queer audiences. The second is the understanding of the text as queer in some way by any audiences regardless of their gender or sexuality. Essentially, audience reception is responsible for the majority of actual queerness of a text (Doty, 1993).

Doty (2000) suggests that there are two main approaches employed by audiences to evaluate the queerness of a text. Textual essentialism limits the intended meaning of a text to the mainstream understanding and agreement of what was directly and overtly included in the film. The essentialist approach to understanding meaning and its ability to identify or acknowledge queerness in a text is molded by heterocentrism. This ideology centralizes heterosexuality as the rule with queer sexuality being the exception. Therefore, textual essentialism operates with the assumption that all characters are straight unless overtly declared otherwise. By relying strictly on mainstream agreement, this approach minimizes the potential variation in individual understanding of a text (Doty, 2000). Thus, while it is theoretically possible for each audience member to have a unique interpretation of a text, it is far more likely that many interpretations will be constrained by hegemonic cultural prescriptions. However, even if the majority of an audience agrees with the mainstream perspective, majority is not entirety. Queer reading provides an avenue to broaden understanding of queerness in a text beyond the

mainstream and account for audience variation. This approach positions queerness inside the text by recognizing queer characteristics with or without queer sexuality or identity being explicitly acknowledged (Doty, 2000).

Queer readings do not seek to create queerness in texts but rather to acknowledge what queerness is already present (Doty, 2000). This provides an understanding that queerness exists within mainstream texts and that queer readings exist synchronously alongside mainstream readings. One is no more important or tangible than the other (Doty, 1993). Queer readings are not contrived interpretations dependent on a comparative position to mainstream readings and they do not exist as alternative readings nor are they contra-normative. Rather, queer readings are complete positions of reception for cultural texts in their own right (Doty, 2000). Queer readings can draw attention to the active presence of queerness in mainstream texts and in turn provide a point of connection and unity for queer audiences. Situating the ultimate meaning of a text primarily within audience reception allows all potential interpretations of that text to have some degree of validity. Queer readings of texts are therefore no less significant or legitimate than heteronormative readings. Doty (2000) explains this notion eloquently, “just because straight interpretations have been allowed to flourish publicly doesn’t mean they are the most ‘true’ or ‘real’ ones” (p. 53).

Though queer readings can be positive for queer audiences, analyzing texts from the perspective of a unified identity category can be problematic in its own right. Identifying “queer” audiences as a category risks over simplifying and compressing a diverse group into one standpoint (Doty, 1993). In actuality, queer individuals have no necessary shared characteristics beyond mutual experience of oppression from

heteronormativity (Butler, 1993). The challenge of queer readings then becomes drawing attention to the existence of non-normative sexuality without forcing essentializing categorization (Doty, 2000). Rather than be end-all-be-all signifiers of identity, the categories regarding sexual orientation should be acknowledged inasmuch as they can draw attention to marginalization in order to dismantle the necessity of distinction (Butler, 1993). Queer as a signifier ought to be understood as the rejection, absence, or challenge of traditional normative categories rather than an explicit monolithic category in itself (Doty, 2000). Though the implied categorization of audiences as a unified queer subject is imperfect, it is still better than the queer invisibility that would result in the absence of queer readings (Doty, 2000).

The primary challenge facing queer readings stems from the heterocentric assumption that characters are automatically heterosexual. This ideology in turn necessitates justification of queer positions of reception for cultural texts (Doty, 2000). Essentially, if you believe that a character is queer you are required to prove it before that reading can be granted any semblance of legitimacy. Queer readings therefore rely on intense evaluation of texts in hopes of challenging and in turn altering the ideology that requires it. Nowhere is this burden of proof more heavily applied than in texts related to children (Doty, 2000). While heterosexual romance and sexuality are commonly considered family-friendly topics, queer romance and sexuality is considered adult content. Not only does mainstream ideology seek to protect children from these, it also completely separates the notion queer identity from children's potential self-expression (Doty, 2000). Though children are assigned heterosexuality at birth, queer sexuality is

viewed as more adult and is therefore dismissed from possibility. This makes queer readings of films about or marketed toward children particularly challenging.

This study combines critical cultural theory with reception theory to articulate a queer reading of *Frozen* and examine the significance of that reading for the film's audience. Within critical cultural studies it is difficult to separate the theoretical grounding from the practical undertaking of the study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The theory is an instrument of the method as the critical orientation of cultural studies provides the concrete approach for calling a text's meaning into question. The personal life of the individual conducting the study provides an additional component to this interwoven approach (Geller, 2013). This theoretical backing allows a queer readings approach to analyzing media texts the flexibility necessary to articulate the possible diverse positions of viewership. Such flexibility acknowledges the diversity of queer experience. As such there is no defined set of requirements a text must contain in order to be read as queer (Geller, 2013). Rather than represent an absolute position of understanding or identification, the queer spectator develops as a production of the author's unique understanding of the text as queer (Doty, 1998). As such, queer positions of viewership from both queer and non-queer identifying people (Doty, 1998).

In the remainder of this chapter I examine the power structures that drive dominant ideology in our society and look at how those have been communicated through media representation of queer sexuality. With the historical context in place, in the next chapter I explore how these queer positions of viewership are fashioned and the sensibility from which they are informed. Within the analysis of the film I then identify specific queer themes in order to demonstrate the signs by which queer meaning is

decoded. I critically examine the film from a queer perspective to identify elements within the text that indicate queer themes, queer characterizations, and their historically necessary connection to gender. To accomplish this purpose I carefully watched the film multiple times while making note of any queer related statement, activity, or sign. In time, patterns began to emerge and I was able to distinguish larger recurring themes and motifs, the most significant of which involved Elsa and her self-discovery narrative. Upon recognizing the queer significance of her story, I shifted my focus to understanding her character in its entirety. Borrowing from Phillips (2000), I sought to understand how Elsa as a character and her position within the film were constructed visually, via dialogue, and through performance in order to discern the importance of the subsequent potential audience receptions. In the final chapter I examine audience receptions of similar readings and their significance in society.

The Queer Challenge Against "Normalcy"

Queer readings are a vital approach to understanding both how meaning is created for queer individuals in society and how hegemonic heteronormativity is maintained. Though progress toward acceptance of varying sexualities has been made in recent decades, the presumption of heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation for all individuals remains the prevailing standard in society (e.g., Bull & Gallagher, 1996; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2015; Stein & Plummer, 1994). Heterosexual identities are portrayed as automatic and naturally occurring while queer identities are seen as achieved statuses that an individual must develop (Yep, 2003). This creates two oppositional and immutable categories for possible sexuality, "normal" (heterosexuality), and "abnormal" (non-heterosexuality) (Oswald et al., 2005). The

position of “normal” grants an identity power within society and therefore must be actively upheld as such in order to maintain its dominance (Foucault, 1978/1990). In the process of defending its normalcy heterosexuality goes beyond individual identity to become a social institution (Fuss, 1991). To accomplish this, hegemonic heteronormativity actively perpetuates the notion that heterosexuality characterizes "natural" human identity and is therefore the only valid sexual orientation (Yep, 2003).

The institutionalized validity of heteronormativity results in a social bias that polarizes sexual orientations to create a binary of “good” and “bad” sexuality (Oswald et al., 2005). This bias justifies the identity of heterosexual while marginalizing and consolidating any identity that does not fit within the limited standard of acceptability into the unified identity of deviant (Fuss, 1991; Warner, 2002). In turn, heterosexuality and relationships are favored while non-heterosexuality and relationships are condemned (Herek, 1990). Sustaining the superior status of heterosexuality in this binary system depends on situating all sexualities in relation to the standard of heterosexuality to relegate non-heterosexual identities to the status of “other” (Fuss, 1991). Dominant ideology supports only one sexuality identity, heterosexuality, with all other sexual identities existing merely as counterpart to the standard (Yep, 2002).

Being disregarded as an “other” invalidates the existence and experience of non-heterosexual individuals. Counterpart identities are not allowed access to the position of subject but rather the very meaning of their identity in society can only exist in relation to the standard (Grosz, 2005). The perpetuation of these ideological “standards” requires a continual and active process of normalization at the expense of those who do not conform. According to Yep (2003), “normalization is a symbolically, discursively,

psychically, psychologically, and materially violent form of social regulation and control” (p. 18). Bringing the limiting categories of acceptability and the ideological mechanisms that perpetuate them into question is necessary in order to extend the opportunity for subjectivity to all individuals (Plummer, 2005). In the review of literature that follows I critically examine the devices that perpetuate heteronormativity. I start by exploring the system’s binaries that shape our understanding of sexuality. From there I address how these ideologies have been incorporated into media texts and the significance of such depictions. Finally, I analyze the incorporation of gender and sexuality in children’s media with a particular focus on Disney films to justify the analysis of a specific text, Disney’s *Frozen*, as an article of queer representation.

Power structures as constructs. The ideals that sustain heteronormativity are socially constructed, and as such, deviation from strict binaries exists as a normal development of individual identity (Stein & Plummer, 1994). Rather than merely fringe deviations, they occur as complete natural identities in and of themselves. In order to understand queer identity and its marginalization in society we must first critically examine the social constructs that contribute to heteronormativity. I begin by assessing the societal construction of the gender binary as a product of biological sex categorization. Next, I address the role that gendered expectations play in the development of acceptable individual sexual identity. Finally, I discuss how gender and sexuality are related and how they can function as separate systems of oppression.

To arrive at a binary arrangement of acceptable sexualities, heteronormative ideology necessitates the linkage between a binary biological sex and the binary of gender role performance (Butler, 1993). In order for the binary system to continue

functioning, it requires that performed gender roles completely and exclusively align with the individual's sex (Lorber, 1994). Lorber (1994) argues that although this is the societal norm, the binary concept of gender roles is also socially constructed and highly restricts what would be an individual's natural identity expression. Gender is constructed and reconstructed through social compliance with the process. Conformity is perpetuated as society assigns individuals to one of the two accepted categories for gender based on their biological sex at birth. The difference in handling and treatment that follows based on the child's assigned gender category creates and maintains the difference between the categories themselves. Gender markers reinforce the categories at every stage of an individual's life. From the names they are given, the clothes they are allowed to wear, the emotions they are allowed to express, and the activities in which they are permitted to participate, their gender identity is dictated and molded by the society around them. The social institution of gender is therefore fully dependent on the regulation of and insistence on discrete categorical imperatives in order to create consistency within and difference between the individuals of each category (Lorber, 1994).

As a product of societal regulation, males are expected to communicate masculine traits and females are expected to communicate feminine traits (Lorber, 1994). The social construct of gender is perpetuated by the assumption that the development of gender identity is a product of an individual's biological sex, rather than the outcome of social conditioning. Among other things, males are expected to be predispositioned to authority and automatically be direct, unemotional, active, and dominant, while females are expected to be predispositioned to maternity and automatically be polite, emotional, passive, and submissive (Bem, 1993). This line of hegemonic construction follows

androcentric logic which situates men as more significant than women and in turn reaffirms the patriarchal system in which men maintain primary power and control. Having society prescribe such gender expectations, however, is not enough to perpetuate the institution on its own. The gendered individuals themselves must commit to enacting the standards as well (Butler, 1988). Gender subsists in reality only to the extent that each individual acts it out. Gender is therefore inherently performative in that individuals must act out prescribed behaviors to fulfill the social expectations for their assigned gender to be fully considered a member of that category. In essence, gender is something that you “do,” not something that you “are” (Butler, 1990).

Gender expression is a sociocultural behavioral role rather than a biological fact (Lorber, 1994). Though the social structure of gender identity relies on exclusive categories with clearly differentiated roles, the characteristics and preferences an individual develops are not determined by their biological sex. If gender were a natural result of one’s biological sex then gender nonconformity would only exist in individuals who were born intersex. In reality, men and women do not exist as two completely different yet internally homogeneous groups. Within a patriarchal androcentric society, however, the life experiences of men and women are often very different. The discrete categories of gender are used to enforce hegemonic ideals that rank men above women. This reinforces existing power structures and fortifies the institution of gender itself (Lorber, 1994). At its most fundamental level, heterosexuality is also dependent on the existence of two discrete categories for biological sex that are inextricably linked to two discrete categories for gender (Yep, 2003). These discrete categories allow for the naturalized notion of “opposite” and in turn complementary sexes (Wilton, 1996).

By setting the sexes as opposite and simultaneously complementary, heterosexuality arises as an obligatory product of an intrinsic condition (Fuss, 1991). Viewing sexuality as automatic and compulsory lumps individuals into one of two categories in which heterosexuality is right and queer sexuality is wrong (Rich, 1980). This presents in society in the form of a heterosexual matrix where identification as one sex assumes attraction to the other. Queer sexuality is often viewed through this matrix using Inversion Theory which relegates it to a perversion of the “natural” sex/gender connection asserting that gay men are inherently like women in male bodies while lesbians are inherently like men in female bodies (Bem, 1993). Society mandates strict standards of gendered behavior in order to enforce the connection between gendered behavior and sexual orientation and in doing so regulate the dominant ideology of queer sexuality as “unnatural.” The standards for sexuality are socially constructed and perpetuated in the same manner as those related to gender performance where individuals internalize social guidelines for acceptable behavior in order to act in accordance with predetermined roles (Butler, 1993).

The socially constructed ideologies can be harmful for individuals who do not identify with society’s only acceptable sexuality. The binary system of division between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals is harmful in its nature. Such categories constrain and legislate not only an individual’s ability to express her/himself, but also society’s view of what is acceptable. Once an individual internalizes the ideological connections between sexuality and gender performance and between queer sexuality and deviation from what is “normal,” the fear of being perceived as queer becomes a hegemonic mechanism that perpetuates the institution of heteronormativity by ensuring conformity

to the gendered standards on which the heterosexual matrix is built (Yep, 2003). At the societal level, this perpetuates the acceptability of homophobia which normalizes the aversion to queer sexuality, in turn justifying the marginalization and persecution of queer individuals. Oppression of the individuals who fall into the category of unacceptable “other” is a direct result of breaking sexuality into the categories acceptable and unacceptable (Yep, 2003). In order to dispel homophobia and end marginalization based on sexuality, this categorical view of sexuality must be rejected (Butler, 1993).

Heteronormativity assumes that all individuals are heterosexual by default (Stein & Plummer, 1994). Such a ubiquitous prescriptive assumption creates a disclosure imperative for individuals whose identities do not fit within the accepted standard in which individuals who do not identify as heterosexual must reveal their sexual orientation, a task which is not expected of their heterosexual counterparts (Butler, 1993). This revelation is often referred to as “coming out” in reference to the notion that queer individuals must emerge from a figurative “closet” in which they are expected to conceal their non-normative sexuality (Sedgwick, 1993). Relegating queer individuals to the category of unacceptable perpetuates the presumption that queer identity is fundamentally shameful and therefore ought to be kept secret (Warner, 2000). Considerable research posits that queer identity has been profoundly stigmatized in society based on this premise of shame (e.g., Berrill, 1992; Herek, 1995, 1996).

Contingent to the associated stigma, coming out as queer can be seen as a highly personal, vulnerable, and intimate disclosure of personal information (Herek, 1996). The potential negative backlash related to revealing a stigmatized identity places further pressure beyond the typical pressure associated with disclosing personal information

(Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009) and queer individuals are more likely to conceal their sexuality if they perceive the situation to be unreceptive (Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005). Considering that our society prefers those within the normative standards of sexuality, it may seem obvious to question why one would choose to come out at all. This has various, far reaching answers, many of which are situated in an individual's personal motivation or their negotiation between the potential risk and the potential reward that may follow disclosure in that situation. Many queer individuals avoid disclosing their sexuality in order to maintain the societal privileges of assumed heterosexuality (Fuller, Chang, & Rubin, 2009). Though topic avoidance may have a short term benefit, it can ultimately lead to relational dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). When the potential satisfaction that could be gained from disclosure outweighs the perceived risk, many individuals choose to come out (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Fuller et al., 2009).

The influence of the social stigma surrounding non-heterosexual identities goes beyond personal ideological stances to have real world impact in the daily lives of queer individuals. The psychic scripts that stigmatize queer identity can lead to internalized homophobia where a queer individual believes the heterosexist notion that they are inherently "bad" based solely on their sexual orientation (Dew, Myers, & Wightman, 2006). Internalized homophobia is the incarnation of triumphant heteronormative hegemony whereby marginalized individuals are contributors to their own oppression (Gross, 2001). When internalized homophobia is coupled with the intense social stigma and the normative presumption of heterosexuality, queer individuals can experience psychological turmoil in the imperative to avoid discovery of their sexual orientation

(Pachankis, 2007). In addition to the internal pressure associated with having a stigmatized sexual orientation, openly disclosing a queer identity can also lead to various negative external consequences such as ostracism, verbal harassment, or overt violent attacks (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001; Dragowski, McCabe, & Rubinson, 2016; Herek, 2009; Huebner, Rebhook, & Kegeles, 2004; Thurlow, 2001).

Despite the obvious potential negative outcomes, there are also positive ends that can be reached by disclosing a queer identity. Coming out can be highly beneficial for a queer individual's overall psychological stability and wellbeing, in part due to alleviating the pressure of having to maintain a concealed identity (Herek, 1996; Pachankis, 2007). Coming out can be an important step toward personal self-acceptance that can lead to a boost in an individual's self-esteem and can help develop confidence and security in their sense of identity (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). On a larger scale, queer individuals who come out have better access to the sense of unity and belonging that can come from being an acknowledged member of a group or community (Ben-Ari, 1995).

The traditional vernacular used to describe gender and sexuality has begun to shift toward a more inclusive model that acknowledges the diverse possibilities for identities rather than limiting them to a mere binary (Cameron, 2005). This allows a discussion of gender performance to consider more than the differences between men and women. Previously, the conventional emphasis typically gave preference to the standpoint of white, heterosexual, middle-class men. Though this hegemonic ideology prevails as the accepted standard, more space is permitted for alternate identities to occupy the role of subject. The shift toward a paradigm that acknowledges the potential diversity of identities has led to scrutiny of the suggested innate connection between gender and

sexuality. It has traditionally been assumed that an individual's gender essentially constituted or dictated their sexuality. The binary separation of men and women compelled a system of opposites in which each side of the spectrum was characterized by their attraction to the other. Being attracted to the opposite gender has conventionally been considered as fundamental to being a man or woman as was being born male or female. This near omnipresent acceptance of the connection between gender and sexuality provides evidence of the dominance of heteronormativity (Cameron, 2005).

Butler (1988) argues that the insistence on the connection between gender and attraction is a product of cultural self-preservation. In order for dominant ideology within society to maintain its status, the standards of that society must be communicated to new generations in order to reproduce the existing power structures present in that culture (Bourdieu, 1973). For hegemonic heterosexuality, cultural reproduction is dependent on the normative framing of biological reproduction. Heterosexual relationships, barring anomalous circumstances, have the capacity to produce children. When this is followed by normative gendering socialization of the child, it essentially reproduces the existing arrangement within society (Bourdieu, 1973; Butler, 1988). Heterosexual couples have children who are prescribed to heterosexuality through their traditionally scripted gender expectations. In theory, these children would pair up in heterosexual couples and have children who are prescribed to heterosexuality through their traditionally scripted gender expectations, etc. In this way, the dominant ideologies of heterosexuality and the gender polarization it requires are able to perpetuate themselves by naturalizing their very existence (Butler, 1988).

The process of linking sex, gender, and attraction fully relies on a series of socially constructed binaries (Butler, 1990). The link between an individual's sexuality and her/his gender relies on the complete division of potential gender identity into two isolated categories based on biological sex. This assumes that an individual's sex is easily distinguishable and divisible into one of two automatic and opposite categories. This polarization is a social construct. The seemingly indisputable actuality and certainty of biological sex is in fact quite ambiguous. Biological sex can be interpreted based on internal anatomy, external anatomy, chromosomes, hormone levels, or a combination of these (Sloop, 2012). The incredible variety of possible amalgamations of these factors undermines the notion of an automatic binary. The constructionist binary of gender that results from this binary is performative in its very nature, meaning that the degree to which a person is masculine or feminine is based on enactment of socially prescribed scripts for gender standards. If gender were a natural expression of a biological state, then there would be no variation in gender performances over time. Furthermore, an individual can choose to follow or avoid the scripted standards for their assigned gender. The opportunity for autonomy involved with individual gender identity contradicts the notion of a binary system for gender (Butler, 1990).

Potential fluidity of gender identity and expression logically prevents the possibility of compulsory heterosexuality as the only instinctive manifestation of sexuality (Butler, 1990). Without opposite and distinct genders there can be no natural or automatic version of attraction. Accordingly, the connection between the two ideas is a social construction of hegemonic heteronormativity and as such one holds no inherent power over the other. This stands in direct opposition to Inversion Theory that divides

individuals into opposing gender categories of identity based on the object of their attraction. There is no intrinsic connection between an individual's sexuality and how masculine or feminine they choose to be. Manly men can be attracted to manly men. Girly girls can be attracted to girly girls. Because individuals can choose how they enact their gendered scripting, there is nothing that requires a homosexual individual to express gender nonconformity. On the same note, there is nothing that requires heterosexual individuals to conform to traditional gendered expectations (Butler, 1990).

The concepts of gender and sexuality, and the hegemonic processes that perpetuate their related dominant ideologies, require separate examinations. The concerns regarding gender are not necessarily the same as those regarding sexuality. As such, the items deserve their own consideration. Despite the hegemonically asserted link between gender and sexuality, the two operate as separate systems of oppression (Weber, 2001). The concerns related to the two constructs are interrelated only to the degree that their connection is insisted upon and perpetuated by society. The connection is similar to how evaluations of race and class are related. Based on dominant ideologies in our society, there is some degree of overlap in the necessary considerations regarding representation of gender and sexuality in media texts. The heteronormative link between gender and sexuality automatically connects gender deviation with non-heterosexuality. In this way it is necessary to examine gender role portrayal in order to fully understand the queer nature of a text. At the same time, sexuality has very unique components that warrant individual attention. The analysis that follows will include considerations of both gender and sexuality as they relate to the heteronormative hegemonic process.

Constructing the queer image. The hegemonic ideals related to gender and sexuality are disseminated through a combination of outlets in society. Along with an individual's family and community, media texts provide a channel for communicating and perpetuating the acceptable cultural standards (Kellner, 2003). Media texts do not create ideology, but rather they transmit what dogma already exists within society and communicate the beliefs related to active social movements (Gitlin, 1982). Knowing that our social understanding of sexuality has a strong ideological basis, media texts provide a venue for understanding dominance and the challenges to it (Gitlin, 1982). To situate how the ideals related to sexuality are represented in media texts I first examine the gendered principles for both audiences and characters. I then build on this to analyze the inclusion of openly queer characters and associatively queer characterizations via queer-coding. Noting that visibility can be both beneficial and problematic (Yep, 2002), I also evaluate what liberatory or hegemonic processes are being accomplished through such representation and critique existing queer media messages.

One aspect of popular culture's role in the social construction of reality has served traditionally to define the expectations for genders (Press, 1989). More specifically, media texts have perpetuated the ideology of masculine dominance and feminine submission (Press, 1989). Essentially, men are expected to perform while women are expected to exist as the objects of the man's action, particularly in matters related to sex and desire (Yep, 2003). This is enacted through reliance on a model of representation that gives preference to masculine characters and audiences (Mulvey, 1989). This expectation shapes the agency of characters in texts with male characters represented as autonomous and female characters represented as accessories. In turn, the traditional media format for

scripted narratives gives preference to male-driven stories and rarely features female-driven narratives (Man, 1993).

Texts are designed to cater to masculine spectatorship with feminine characters serving as spectacle. Film and television often cater to heterosexual male viewers by having the camera parallel the diegetic male subject and typically incorporate women as objects to satisfy the male gaze rather than as actual relatable characters (Mulvey, 1989). Catering to the male gaze means that male audiences can form either a narcissistic connection with the subject because they can see themselves in the character and identify with them, or a voyeuristic one with the object based on the pleasure of looking at them from their perspective. Women do not have such access to the position of subject, therefore their relationship to texts is vastly different. Their choices for spectatorship are to attempt to identify with the masculine subject, or to masochistically identify with the feminine object. Both positions require the female viewer to sacrifice genuine identity within and identification with the text (Mulvey, 1989). These trends in media gender representation contribute to the perpetuation of acceptable roles for male and female characters in line with patriarchal ideology (Man, 1993).

Gendered lines of expectation regarding identity performance can impact the audiences view of the character's sexuality as well (Doty, 2000). Heterocentric audiences often rely on gender markers as a means of denoting queer sexuality (Doty, 2000). Such association depends on the connection of queer sexuality to gender expression in accordance with the heterosexual matrix (Dyer, 2002). The link between sexual category and non-sexual mannerisms is mutually involved whereby the mannerisms are assumed to be representative of the category and identification with the category is assumed to

reveal the mannerisms (Dyer, 2002). In a reflection of the androcentric focus of popular culture both gay men and lesbian women are defined in relation to the notion of heterosexual man as the standard (Raymond, 2003). Gay men are presented as weak and womanly (damaged subjects) while lesbians are presented as “unattractive man-haters” (valueless objects) (Raymond, 2003, p. 101).

Essentially, men with effeminate characteristics and women with masculine characteristics are assumed to be queer and it is assumed that all individuals who identify as queer will have non-normative gender expression. Without deviation from the prescriptive gender norms, characters, as with individuals in the real world, are assumed to be straight (Doty, 2000). The assumed connection between sexuality and gendered mannerisms provides the basis for queer stereotypes like “queen” for gay men and “dyke” for lesbians (Dyer, 1983). These are used to negate the individual’s validity and reinforce homophobic bias against queerness (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2002). Because queens are not “real” men and dykes are not “real” women they are therefore tragic. Queens are a point of comedic relief and ridicule while dykes are a source of threat, challenge, and violence (Dyer, 1983). Incorporating these stereotypes into media texts reinforces the heterosexual matrix from which they originate (Doty, 2000).

Media representations of queer sexuality and the related stereotypes can impact the development of queer individuals’ identities and the societal attitudes toward them (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gitlin, 1982). The nature of this representation in modern texts, and its potential impact, must be understood in its historical context. The categorization, and resulting marginalization, of individuals based on their sexuality is a relatively new social development with roots in the Victorian Era (Stein & Plummer, 1994). The

recency of distinction between heterosexual and “other” contributes to the heteronormative hegemonic notion that queer sexuality is not naturally occurring. There are no images of people within these categories from the past therefore mainstream ideology maintains the belief that these people did not exist when instead it was the categories themselves that were absent (Dyer, 1983). Building on this implied absence, modern media texts unquestioningly present heterosexuality as the standard human identity (Levina, Fitzgerald, & Waldo, 2000). Queer sexuality is not allowed a position of autonomous presence in mainstream texts. This creates a spiral of silence in which queer individuals are reluctant to challenge their representation, or lack thereof, for fear of being further shunned from society. The majority assumes there is no opposition to the existing representation and the damaging norm is maintained (Levina et al., 2000).

Over the years mainstream media have painted varying pictures of what it means to be queer, none of which have been entirely favorable. Traditionally, queer characters were either completely nonexistent or depicted as objects of ridicule or loathing (Russo, 1987). This was initially due in part to the Hays Code that governed mainstream film production in the U.S. between 1930-1968 that forbade depictions of homosexuality (Russo, 1987). Even in modern television, queer characters are underrepresented with only 4.8% of recurring roles while 10-13% of the population identifies as queer (GLAAD, 2016). The relative invisibility of queer characters leaves many queer individuals feeling isolated and results in what Gerbner and Gross (1976) termed "symbolic annihilation." The annihilation of positive queer identity in media depictions has a particularly negative impact on queer individuals as they seek identity forming connections (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). According to Russo (1987), media texts have

always served as points of identification for viewers that reflected the world they lived in. Essentially, media texts were a mirror of society that queer individuals could never see themselves in (Russo, 1987).

When queer characters were included in mainstream movies they were presented negatively. In early Hollywood they were presented as pansies or villainized in some way to reinforce the masculinity of the protagonist (Russo, 1987). The inherent villainy of queer characters evolved into depicting queerness as a social disease. Queer characters were shown as figures of terror and were either killed or left to commit suicide (Russo, 1987). In 1950s cinema and forward, as Corliss (1996, p. 67) puts it, “The only good gay was a dead gay.” That trope was finally challenged for the first time by *The Boys in the Band* in 1970 (Russo, 1987). Thirty-two Hollywood films included major gay or lesbian characters in the 15 years between 1961 and 1976 (Gross, 2001). The queer character was murdered in 18 of them and committed suicide in the other 13. Though they were still depicted as tragic, *The Boys in the Band* was the only film where the queer characters survived (Gross, 2001). Queer character depictions began to evolve away from direct villainization but were still very limited into the 1990s (Epstein & Friedman, 1995). Queer characters could exist but only in certain roles and without romance. They may not have been portrayed as the villain worthy of demise, but they were still not allowed to live (Epstein & Friedman, 1995). Modern representation of queer characters has become somewhat more favorable, but such roles are typically only granted to the most socially acceptable type of queer individuals, white gay men (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006).

For queer representation on television, Fejes and Petrich (1993) identified four major recurring guidelines that shaped their presence. First, queer characters were

typically included as one-time characters and rarely given the opportunity for character or relational development. The second guideline required that the character's sexuality be their primary defining quality, and also that it was inherently problematic and created a conflict within the narrative that must be resolved. This conflict gives the basis for the third rule, the problem and its resolution were defined by their significance to the heterosexual characters. Since the conflict inherently flows from the character's most significant quality, the queer character's identity as a whole is framed in relation to heterosexuals and rarely the happenings of their own lives. Queer characters are portrayed without romantic relationships or any connection to the queer community as a whole. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, any depiction of queer sexual activity or desire was absent. Though the characters are defined by their sexuality, they are never given chance to act on it (Fejes & Petrich, 1993).

Examining queer representation through the lens of minority representation provides insight into how it has evolved through time (Gross, 2001). Queer individuals are members inherently of a minority group because they do not conform to the prevailing cultural ideology. Media representation of minority groups can vary greatly based on the cultural environment regarding that group (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Clark (1969) proposed a four stage model for the evolution of a minority group representation in the media. In the first stage, non-representation, the group is not represented in the media at all. From there, the group transitions into ridicule, where the group is represented but only to be the butt of malicious jokes. In regulation, the next stage of representation, the group is represented without ridicule but is only shown in certain acceptable roles. Finally, in the respect stage the group is represented in a variety of

everyday roles with access to stable relationships. These stages are not mutually exclusive and a minority group can be subject to multiple stages of media representation simultaneously (Clark, 1969).

Raley and Lucas (2006) applied these stages of minority representation to queer depictions on prime-time television. The researchers found that depictions of queer individuals were profoundly under-represented in relation to their prevalence in the population. Further analysis revealed that the queer characters who were present were depicted primarily in the ridicule or regulation stages. They also found that queer characters were shown in romantic relationships to a far lesser degree than their heterosexual counterparts. This exclusion indicated that queer representation had yet to reach the respect stage (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Unlike members of other minority groups, queer individuals often develop their identities without having connections to other queer individuals (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). The lack of access to a queer community forces many young people to rely on media representations to inform their understanding of queer identities. Therefore, the nature of queer representation can have a profound impact on how queer individuals view their own sexuality (Fejes & Petrich, 1993)

Hart (2000) also examined the portrayal of sexual minority individuals by examining the history of gay male representation on television. The analysis focused heavily on the hegemonic processes accomplished through media representation. The researcher suggested that media depiction of gay men impacted audience opinions on homosexuality. With gay men continuously and repeatedly portrayed as flamboyant and feminine, audience members who had no independent source of information about gay men were left to believe that what they were seeing was an accurate representation,

which reinforced the heteronormative linkage between gender and sexuality. The author suggests that negative audience opinions regarding queer individuals were perpetuated by consistent inaccurate negative representation of queer sexuality, reinforcing the need for accurate positive media representations of queer individuals (Hart, 2000). The claim that media representation of queer individuals impacts the audience's opinion of homosexuality has been supported over time (e.g., Riggle, Ellis, & Crawford, 1996; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). Research has shown that individuals who were exposed to positive media depictions of queer individuals were more likely to express positive attitudes regarding homosexuality (e.g., Riggle et al., 1996; Schiappa et al., 2006).

Aside from direct inclusion of queer characters, the depiction of individuals who defy normative prescriptions for gender expression, with or without being directly identified as queer, contributes to the hegemonic processes that regulate queer representation as a whole. These characters are overwhelmingly presented in undesirable roles such as a villain, fool, or weakling (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). The association of gender non-conformity with characters who are intended to be disliked has come to be known as queer-coding (Greenhill, 2015). In this phenomenon, the same gender markers employed by society to indicate and construct gender operate to indicate queerness without requiring a direct assertion of the individual's sexual identity (Martinez, 2015). This happens with such frequency that the trope has been labeled "The Sissy Villain" (Sissy Villain, n.d.). In Disney films alone this trope can be observed in the antagonists of Governor Ratcliffe from *Pocahontas*, King John from *Robin Hood*, and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* among others (Martinez, 2015).

The Sissy Villain is but one incarnation of the damaging tropes that have evolved from mainstream queer coding of negative characters. Queer coding has been used to connect homosexuality to pedophiles, rapists, murderers, and virtually every other incarnation of the worst conditions of human existence (Benshoff, 2008; Fejes & Petrich, 1993). Benshoff (2008) suggests that horror films provide a particularly well-defined space to observe these reoccurring connotations. Big screen monsters are often depicted as queer to, “further delineate the depravity of the villain,” (Benshoff, 2008). The persistent correlation of queerness with wickedness echoes the antiquated assessment of queerness as a pathologized classification of identity (Bem, 1993). By relentlessly associating queer characteristics with loathsome characters, the notion that queerness is inherently bad is surreptitiously reinforced. Heteronormative hegemony is thereby sustained without requiring that sexuality ever be directly addressed.

The patriarchal princess. Expectations and enactment regarding gender and sexuality in media texts are not limited to those targeted toward adult audiences. They are incorporated in every level of media production, including live-action texts geared toward children and animated cartoons (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). These depictions can impact how children view gender and the ensuing acceptable behaviors (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011), and normative ideologies that are associated with it including sexuality (Dennis, 2009). Disney films provide an ideal location to examine cultural ideology based on their pedagogical, social, and political potential (Bell et al., 1995). From the general overview of how standards regarding gender and sexuality are depicted in media texts, in the following section I focus on how these standards are included and reinforced in children’s media with a focus on Disney princess films.

Examining gendered performance in Disney films provides insight into the communication of patriarchal and heteronormative hegemony in children's media. According to Wiersma (2001), the representation of gender roles in Disney movies has not evolved to match changes in society and as a result do not accurately communicate current gender equity. In an analysis of 16 Disney films, the researcher found that employment and house work were major areas of discrepancy between reality and Disney films (Wiersma, 2001). Male characters held a wide range of jobs from miner to doctor to space ranger. Female characters, on the other hand, are rarely presented as having jobs at all. This unequal division of labor could be seen inside the home as well. The researcher identified six times as many examples of women performing domestic tasks than examples of men, with a butler cleaning during his work day accounting for half of the male examples (Wiersma, 2001). This representation of gender role performance supports patriarchal hegemony that relegates women to the home and away from power.

The disparity of equitable gender role performance is echoed in the gendered character traits communicated through the films. England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek (2011) examined gender role portrayal in Disney princess movies in particular. They found that male characters were framed as independent and brave while female characters were framed as nurturing and submissive. The performance of these roles was most apparent in the recurrence of climactic rescue scenes where the prince would save the princess. The representation of men as heroes and women as objects needing rescue reinforces the ideology of male superiority (England et al., 2011). Additionally, the depictions of Disney princesses often focus on their sexuality with their body being more important than their mind (Lacroix, 2004). Along with appearance, the women are

defined by their adherence to conventional gender roles and their participation in heterosexual relationships. Indicative of society, even when women are the main character in the narrative, they only exist in so much as their relation to men allows (Lacroix, 2004).

Such representation requires overt implications of sexuality, but many are not comfortable with the notion of sexuality as subject matter for children. In discussing how to incorporate queer literature to elementary classrooms, Schieble (2012) found that sexuality in general was viewed as, “extraneous from children's lives and therefore an inappropriate and unmentionable topic to discuss with children” (p. 208). At face value, this claim seems reasonable enough. Upon closer examination, however, representations of sexuality in children’s media challenge this assertion. Heterosexualization in children’s media is omnipresent, yet it goes unnoticed and without question because heterosexuality is considered normal and therefore viewed as no threat to children. (Schieble, 2012). A more accurate statement regarding this socially held belief might be: queer sexuality is extraneous from heterocentrist possibility and therefore an inappropriate and unmentionable topic to discuss with children. Openly discussing queer sexuality with children would give them the opportunity to consider the possibilities for sexual identity and in turn challenge the notion of compulsory heterosexuality (Schieble, 2012). The societal ideology that holds queer sexuality as more adult and therefore inappropriate for children shapes the way that queer characters are represented, or more accurately not represented, in children’s media.

Though queer characters virtually are excluded from children’s media texts, these texts can still challenge heteronormative ideology in a variety of ways (Dennis, 2009).

Intense same sex friendships, as with texts targeted toward adults, can provide a means of queer identification. These are rarely seen in the main characters of children's texts but are incredibly common among secondary characters (Dennis, 2009). Inclusive framing of sexuality with "you can't help who you love" type statements, and hints that queer sexuality is ordinary or unremarkable can create a queer atmosphere even without direct queer inclusion. Characters are often shown participating in gender-transgressive activities without any negative response (Dennis, 2009). Queer stereotypes are regularly incorporated into adult characters with the gay drama teacher or the lesbian gym coach being commonplace. Another location of queer reading related to children's media comes from textual or extratextual allusions to queerness that require a background knowledge of queer culture or identity to fully understand. These queer references can come in the form of episode titles that mirror queer phrases or film titles, character names that replicate artifacts of queer cultural heritage, and references to the closet, both figurative and literal (Dennis, 2009). Each of these facets for queer reading of children's media challenge the normative view of universal sexuality and provide points of identification for queer audiences (Dennis, 2009).

Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner (2004) found that similar queer points of identification can also be identified in Disney films. The researchers analyzed 26 of Disney's most popular feature films and found that openly queer characters did not exist, but gender-transgressive behavior was commonplace. Eleven of the films depicted male characters with feminine traits. Of these, five were in line with the "sissy villain" trope that reinforces damaging views of queer sexuality. In the other six, however, the queer-coded character was not framed with any negativity allowing the

implication that gender divergence could be acceptable. Only two female characters were depicted with masculine characteristics, one positively and one negatively. Beyond queer-coding of the characters, five of the films included examples same-sex affection. In three it was framed with ridicule and disgust, and only one included positive responses to same-sex affection (Towbin et al., 2004).

The suggestive queer-coding that associates opposite-gender characteristics with villainous characters in films for adult audiences is equally present in those target toward children (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003). Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) found that queer-coding was incorporated in Disney films through a character's physical characteristics, costuming and props, body language, activities, and dialogue. The researchers note that not all of these components are present in each example of gender transgression and villainy. Additionally, one film on its own may not provide tremendous evidence of the hegemonic mechanisms at play. However, the collective evidence across all films suggests that villainy in Disney films has shifted from the *femme fatale* to the *sissy villain*. They found substantial evidence of male villains being portrayed with feminine traits. These representations reinforce the heteronormative notions that women are less than men, that queer individuals are less important than straight ones, and that both are unfortunate things to be (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003).

Disney's *Frozen* challenges the problematic representation of both princesses and villains. The main characters in the film, Anna and Elsa, are outwardly coded as typical pretty princesses but their adherence to traditional princess roles ends with their appearance (Leon, 2013). The film subversively incorporates several androcentric tropes that were integral to the narrative of past Disney films. Though Anna is depicted with the

typical heterosexual infatuation required from princesses, her primary allegiance remains with her sister. Elsa, on the other hand, completely rejects the heterosexual necessity by never having a romantic connection during the film and by claiming ownership of her own body. Additionally, neither character is the subject of a climactic rescue scene (Leon, 2013). These non-normative narrative components along with specific facets of Elsa's story have led to widespread reception of Elsa as queer (e.g., Diaz, 2014; Hunt, 2016; Osenlund, 2013; Shaw, 2013). In the chapter that follows I discuss how such positions of reception are formed. I then discuss the potential possibility and problems that can come from queer sensibility as a reading strategy. Additionally, by examining modern queer media depictions I highlight the importance of queer readings.

Chapter 3: Creating Sensibility: Queer Reading as Identity Strategy

Fashion sense, hairstyle, mannerisms, short fingernails, lifestyle, and conversation: the top result from a quick Google search of “how to know if she’s a lesbian” claims that these are the surefire indicators (Rizon, n.d.). The article goes on to describe how these signs supposedly indicate queerness. Some of the suggested cues play directly into mainstream queer stereotypes: rainbow accessories, short hair, Ellen DeGeneres, etc. On the other hand, many of the other tips would likely have no relevant meaning to an individual outside the lesbian community: snap backs, Tegan and Sara, “chapstick” etc. (Rizon, n.d.). Generalizations of all variety are an inescapable part of our daily lives. They establish a system of shortcuts to help us more easily make sense of the world around us by connecting observable cues to a particular categorization (Dyer, 1999). When related to sexuality, they can indicate how and when to expect queerness. The themes related to queerness, however, aren’t always as flamingly obvious as mainstream representations would imply. More often, the cues related to queer identity and experience are far more understated. Though they may seem subtle at times, queer indicators are still very much authentic and identifiable if only you are aware of how to see them (Doty, 1993).

The polysemic nature of cultural texts allows queer readings to develop from texts without any direct queer representation in the canon of publicly acknowledged narrative

elements (Doty, 1993). Queer audiences, starved for genuine representation, can be drawn to texts that include likable characters who exhibit queer identity markers (Brennan, 2016). The inclusion of queer identity attributes, when characters are not explicitly queer, can evolve into audience adoption as queer subtext (Martinez, 2015). Queer subtext is established when queer readings develop from texts without queer identity or behavior actually being articulated within the text itself (Doty, 1993). This allows audiences to have points of queer identification beyond direct queer representation. In the chapter that follows I explore the development and potential impact of queer positions of viewership within a heteronormative society. I begin by examining the process by which queer sensibility is developed. With particular focus on the formation of queer identity and queer points of identification, I then consider the role queer sensibility can serve as a reading strategy for media texts and the hegemonic processes that stem from it. From there I identify the heteronormative mechanisms at play within modern queer representation in order to articulate the cultural significance of queer readings and justify a queer reading of Disney's *Frozen*.

Sensing the Subtext

According to Gamson (2002), media representations of queerness have “not been simply a site of repression and stigmatization, but a crucial site of self-expression, identification, and individual and collective identity construction” (p. 344). It is this shared experience of repression that gives rise to and unifies the queer community. The lived experiences of queer individuals combined with an understanding of heteronormative conventions yield an interpretive stance that is uniquely queer (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Doty, 2000). This standpoint is not about grasping or fulfilling some

quintessential identity, but rather becoming sympathetic to the realities of hegemonic heteronormativity (Smelik, 1998). This in turn gives queer audiences a position from which to notice indicators of the larger condition of queerness and creates a shared system for understanding, or a queer sensibility (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Bronski, 1984). Queer sensibility unifies queer audiences as an interpretive community for the consumption of media texts (Bennett, 2006; Evans, 1990).

Queer sensibility as a reading strategy challenges the mainstream value system related to cultural expressions and asserts the presence of queerness within mainstream culture (Creekmur & Doty, 1995; Smelik, 1998). Historically, queer subtext has allowed queer audiences to find relatable characters and experiences despite the lack of genuine queer representation (Scout, 2013). Identifying queer subtext acknowledges that queer identity is more complex than just queer sex and expands on the codes used to distinguish it (Doty, 2000). In the section that follows I examine how audiences come to understand these codes, use them to build their identity, and develop a queer sensibility in the process. From the general overview of how queer sensibility is formed, in the following section I describe means by which it is enacted as a queer reading strategy. From there I examine some of the possible functions of queer readings and their potential for exploitation.

Forming a queer sensibility. Identifying a character as queer via subtext requires that indicators of queerness be recognizable to the audience beyond blatant gender nonconformity (Dyer, 1983). Unlike race or gender, however, queerness has no inherent visual markers. Therefore, its recognizability is dependent on framing certain qualities, actions, appearances, and situations as typical embodiments of queerness (Dyer, 1983).

Sexuality becomes a category of internal identity rather than a descriptor of external action. Rather than simply describing how an individual experiences or expresses sexual desire, gay, lesbian, straight, queer, etc., each refers to a type of person with implicit non-sexual characteristics (Dyer, 1983). Incorporating the typification of queer sexuality into texts eliminates the need to directly state a character's sexuality by "establishing it literally at first glance" (Dyer, 1983, p. 5). Visual cues situate the character within a queer identity category and in turn convey personal attributes of the character. This textual shortcut can be accomplished by stereotyping that links a character with activities of the "opposite" gender (a fashionable man, an athletic woman) or with queer narrative functions (an aggressive female protagonist, a male platonic best friend) (Dyer, 1983).

Queer typification shapes and is shaped by both dominant heteronormative ideology and sub-cultural queer identification and expression (Dyer, 1983). The compulsory heterosexual matrix that situates queerness as a deviant aspect of society is the foundation for queer visual categorization. Queer typifications in mainstream society have thus been predominantly correlated with negative themes such as disease, wickedness, and tragedy (Gross, 2001). Two divergent perspectives have opposed the persistent construction of queer identity as perverse. The first contests the categorical imperatives that result from sexual orientations, instead arguing that sexuality is merely a description of activity and implies nothing else about an individual's character or personality (Butler, 1993). The second challenges the insistence on negativity by embracing certain cultural signifiers as a means of intentionally associating with a queer identity category, consequently forming a queer community (Dyer, 2002). Though such championing challenges the heteronormative marginalization of queerness (Creekmur &

Doty, 1995), it also perpetuates the typification of queer identity categories and the related visual cues in media representations (Dyer, 1983).

Historically, the primary means for queer identification in and with mainstream texts has been via “camp” (Bronski, 1984). Queer sensibility is, in part, the product of an individual’s intentional adoption of heteronormative signifiers to avoid detection as queer (Gross, 2001). This deliberate self-presentation gives queer audiences, “heightened awareness and appreciation for disguise, impersonation, the projection of personality, and the distinctions to be made between instinctive and theatrical behavior,” (Babuscio, 1993, p. 25). Camp involves an ironic and aesthetic take on the performance of identity as a means of highlighting queer difference through the theatrical reproduction of mainstream typification cues (Creekmur & Doty, 1995). In its essence, camp is a subcultural discourse that when used privately reinforces solidarity within the queer community and when used publically creates a secret code to identify and communicate with other members of the community while remaining undetected to the mainstream heterocentrist public (Gross, 2001).

Queer identity and the sensibility developed from it is far broader than just the primarily gay male culture of camp. As with the study of culture as a whole, the study of queer culture has focused primarily on the male experience (Bronski, 1984; Dyer, 2002). The foregrounding of gay experience and signifiers has developed a distorted social understanding of what it means to be queer (Dyer, 2002). Historically, lesbian culture and typifications, on the other hand, have garnered almost no critical academic inquiry (Bem, 1993; Raymond, 2003). As such, lesbianism has been rendered invisible (Rich, 1980). It is difficult for society to imagine lesbian identity beyond typical dyke representations

(Doty, 2000). The notion of a lesbian who presents with traditional feminine expressions of gender identity is particularly difficult for mainstream audiences to grasp (Mishali, 2014). This indiscernibility is indicative of society's view of women as sexual subjects. Feminine gender expression has been historically viewed as signifier of submission to the dominant male sexual subject, occurring exclusively to fulfill his desires rather than declare her own (Dworkin, 1987). Society does not allow the possibility for a woman to be sexual unless she is the object of man or an imitation of one (Bem, 1993). It seems as if the only time it is acceptable to be a lesbian in mainstream representations is as a fetish for male viewers (Ristock, 1997; Sender, 1999).

The connection between feminine expression and masculine satisfaction stems from the socially constructed link between sex, gender, and attraction. Any feminine woman is therefore assumed to be straight until proven otherwise, erasing the feminine lesbian, or femme, identity from both mainstream conjuring of lesbian imagery and, in many ways, queer positions of possibility (Mishali, 2014). Choosing to maintain feminine gender expression has been framed as submitting to patriarchal standards and contributing to heteronormativity, as such femmes have been excluded from much of lesbian-feminists esthetics (Mishali, 2014). Not feeling able to concurrently express their femininity and sexuality atop the pressure of compulsory heterosexuality makes many women question the authenticity of their queer sexuality (Rugg, 1997). This in turn strips femmes of their identity and prevents the femme lesbian identity from the possibility of subversion. Including femme identity in our understanding of lesbian esthetics can challenge the social constructed linking of gender and sexuality, deconstructing the hegemonic imperative of compulsory heterosexuality by rendering every feminine

woman a potential lesbian (Mishali, 2014). The scope of existence for media representations of queer women is therefore broadened through queer readings via femme-inclusive queer sensibility.

Queer reading as queer identification. Though historically limited to the expression of gay male culture, queer sensibility has evolved through the gay liberation movement to encompass both male and female experiences as queer readings (Bronski, 1984). The canon of queer aesthetics and mannerisms that inform queer sensibility as a reading strategy are different for queer men and queer women but they primarily relate to female characters during queer readings (Smelik, 1998). Gay-oriented readings are seen in embodiments of feminine excess. This can be seen in the exaggerated behaviors of stars who champion normative aspects of femininity with a flair for the dramatic. For lesbian-oriented readings, they are communicated in masculinized characters. This does not necessarily relate to the character's physical presentations. Instead, queer female readings have to do with autonomous and strong female characters. Each approach challenges the normative assumption of heterosexual male authority (Smelik, 1998). The canon of queer sensibility related to narrative themes or situations, however, is more unified as it emanates from the commonality of queer experience rather than how sexuality may intersect with gender (Doty, 2000).

Bennet (2006) argues that queer sensibility is analogous to Foucault's analysis of the approach to interpretation gained through experience as a doctor. When first beginning to practice medicine, a doctor must carefully analyze the totality of a patient's situation in order to fully develop their diagnosis (Foucault, 1973/1994). After gaining experience, however, doctors are able to identify essential cues that reveal a larger

diagnosis almost instantly and with resounding accuracy. Analyzing the entirety of what can be observed is no longer the primary means for reading the situation because cues allow the diagnosis to be apparent to their trained eye (Foucault, 1973/1994). Similarly, queer subtext can more readily be discovered and in turn decoded by a viewer who is knowledgeable of queer experiential themes (Bennett, 2006). Queer sensibility can play an important role in course of queer world-making but is not universally accessible or applicable (Bennett, 2006). Queer individuals are diverse thus it is unrealistic to suggest a single universalist mindset. Nonetheless, queer sensibility and its related themes provide a queer reading strategy for media texts that do not denotatively include queer representation (Smelik, 1998).

Lipton (2008) found that queer readings can be an important tool for queer identity production that function in three primary ways. The first results from distinguishing characters as queer in order to identify with a representation. Direct representations of queer individuals often reduce the character to their sexuality and do not provide positive and complex characters with whom to identify. Queer readings address this shortcoming by identifying characters as queer based on similarities with the queer individual or the queer community as a whole. This can provide the individual with a point of identification inside mainstream texts that exist and express qualities beyond their denoted sexuality. Queer readings can also function as an outlet for an individual's desire. Direct representations of queer relationships or sexual activity are erratic at best. Queer readings can give individuals an object on which to project their longings. This functions as both sexual and psychological identity construction devices. Reading as a function of desire seeks to answer, "do I want to be them, or be with them?" In spite of

the limited patterns for conduct and expression, queer readings can help individuals delineate the boundaries of their identity. Finally, queer readings can allow individuals to negotiate a space in which they can explore their identity. This accomplishes the function of queer world-making by acknowledging the queer themes of the text as a whole (Lipton, 2008).

Queer subtext becomes problematic when queer audiences perceive it to be intentionally fashioned by media producers in order to attract their viewership (Brennan, 2016). This concept is referred to as queerbaiting and typically has a nefarious implication. It occurs when queer subtext is developed through homoerotic insinuation, without ever coming to fruition (Brennan, 2016). Scout states, “essentially, it’s how creators are capitalizing on the passion of their queer-friendly audiences while avoiding the ire of their all-important conservative straight viewers” (2013, p. 8). Though queer subtext can arise from independent characters or character interactions, queerbaiting is primarily shaped via connections between characters of the same sex (Scout, 2013). For many, the line between queer subtext and queerbaiting is crossed when queer subtext is accompanied by expressed denial of queer sexuality (Fathallah, 2015; Langfelder, 2016; Romano, 2013; Scout, 2013). Queerbaiting generally begins in the form of creating a significant emotional same-sex relationship (Scout, 2013). The pair’s connection and chemistry are developed to a point, then the association of queerness is openly shut down either in the text itself or in extratextual production commentary (Scout, 2013). The disclaimer against potential queerness reduces homosexuality to a punchline while discrediting the possibility that a character being queer is reasonably plausible (Bridges, 2013). By relegating the notion of queer inclusion to a comical suggestion, these texts

reinforce the heteronormativity by perpetuating that idea that queerness is inherently shameful (Fathallah, 2015).

Queerbaiting functions by including experiences and characteristics that can be identified with and related to primarily by queer audiences and succeeds based on the lack of existing representation of interesting or complex queer characters (Scout, 2013). Texts include romantic or sexual cues that are specific to queer identity or sexuality, queer audience members pick up on these indications based on their shared experience, and mainstream audience members fail to notice the hints because heteronormativity has completely eliminated the consideration that anyone could ever be anything other than straight (Bridges, 2013). This creates disappointment on the part of queer audiences while leaving the conservative mainstream out of the discussion (Fathallah, 2015). Queerbaiting can also have a reverse evolution by including some level of physical homosexual activity without allowing any long term relational or identity development (Bridges, 2013). This version of queerbaiting is used exclusively with female characters (Bridges, 2013), harkening back to the notion of female sexuality existing as spectacle (Mulvey, 1989). Including lesbian sexual activity without allowing lesbian identities to develop contributes to the notion that queer identities are limited to sexual actions and simultaneously invalidates the idea that healthy queer relationships are possible.

Bridges (2013) argues that the frustration related to queerbaiting is a product of queer audiences' expectation of inclusion. Queer characters increasingly are incorporated into successful mainstream television shows (i.e., *Glee*, *Gray's Anatomy*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Teen Wolf*, *The Fosters*). The more inclusion of complex queer characters becomes prevalent, the less queer audiences will settle for subtext (Bridges, 2013). In discussing

the outcry against queerbaiting, Gennis (2014) captures the greater principle fueling the discontent queer audiences have regarding unfulfilled subtext.

“That is what fans are calling for when they ask for [a character’s] queerness to come to fruition — simply to be seen. They aren't just [crazed fans], projecting their fetishized desires onto a platonic friendship simply to see two attractive men make out. They're doing so because they want to see themselves accurately reflected onscreen, rather than turned into a plot device or reduced to a dangling carrot to entice a queer audience before shouting ‘No homo!’”

Queer audiences are calling for the types of roles filled by queer characters to be expanded and for more queer characters to be included in media texts as a whole (Gennis, 2014; Remple, 2013; Scout, 2013). By including accurate and complex queer characters, media texts can provide queer audiences with a point of identification while providing “mainstream” audiences with a point of information (Gennis, 2014).

Negotiating Representation and Readership

Unfortunately, the frustration queer audiences feel regarding unfulfilled subtext often carries over to direct textual embodiment of queer sexuality as well. In the following section I address the current nature of queer representation in mainstream depictions, examining two specific examples to illustrate the heteronormative ideology at play within modern queer representation. Informed by this, I explain the potential trauma of this type of representation for queer individuals in order to justify the relevance of queer reading practices. I conclude by situating *Frozen* within the realm of queer readership possibility as a unique text worthy of analysis.

Most openly acknowledged queer characters are presented as having difficult lives with little to no opportunity for genuine long-term happiness (Hogan, 2016). Much like mulattoes in early African American media representation (Bogle, 1973), the modern queer character is often depicted as tragic based simply on the nature of their being (Thomas, 2016). Additionally, though representation of queer characters has improved over time, they still are killed exponentially more frequently than their heterosexual counterparts (Rawson, 2013). Whether in television or film, characters who openly embrace their queer sexuality are rarely permitted to live happily ever after even if they are allowed to survive (Thomas, 2016). Queer characters are profoundly underrepresented in mass media. To have heartbreak or death come to the majority of those that happen to be included perpetuates the ideology that nothing good can come from being queer (Logan, 2016). More often than not, the inclusion of queer characters and their representation are reinforcing hegemonic heteronormativity rather than challenging it (Avila-Saavedra, 2009).

Brokeback Mountain, arguably the most well-known queer movie of all time, perfectly captures the typical heteronormative and homophobic representation of queer characters. Ennis and Jack's relationship is defined by the tension between their own internal desires and the external phobia that frames same-sex relationships (Grindstaff, 2008). The audience is encouraged to identify with them, but, according to Grindstaff (2008), the characters are only open to identification because they fit within normative standards of behavior on all other fronts. Their sexuality is only acceptable in the context of traditional masculinity where they act "normal" in public, are only queer in private, and are performed by straight actors. The suffering faced by the characters is framed as a

product of the normal response to queer sexuality rather than a condition imposed by society and it is in turn represented as inherent to their identity. That Jack dies in the end at the hands of homophobia reinforces this ideology of inherent tragedy (Grindstaff, 2008).

Their repression via heteronormativity is communicated as a natural condition and allows audiences to separate themselves from the systematic causes of homophobia. Viewing such homophobic aggression and the pain that results from a point of subject identification should create a shared sense of suffering (Grindstaff, 2008). The framing of homophobic violence in media texts prevents this from happening. Violence against queer individuals has traditionally had two incarnations within media depictions. Either the queer character is evil and worthy of their fate, as in traditional media depictions, or the aggressor is a pathological individual forced outside the realm of audience identification (Grindstaff, 2008). The second frame perpetuates homophobia as an individual pathology rather than a product of heteronormative hegemony (Bem, 1993). This allows audiences to ignore the systematic contributions to homophobic action provided by society and in turn distance themselves from the responsibility of finding a solution. Both frames serve to reinforce the audience's understanding of normative sexuality and the ramifications of deviation.

This type of discursive violence is reiterated in countless media texts by killing queer characters with disproportioned frequency. The regularity of queer character deaths has spawned the recognition of the media tropes "Bury Your Gays" and "Dead Lesbian Syndrome" (Bernard, 2016). The "plot-twist-death" has become so common with queer female characters in particular that it is no longer a plot twist at all. More than 25 queer

female characters were killed on television shows in 2016 (GLAAD, 2016). This is particularly problematic when considering that across the more than 400 scripted shows on network television, cable, and streaming platforms (Ryan, 2016), there were only 92 lesbian and bisexual women in regular or reoccurring roles at the beginning of the year (GLAAD, 2016). Though queer women only account for around 2% of television characters (GLAAD, 2016), they account for 10% of character deaths (Framke, Zarracina, & Frostenson, 2016). Essentially, if a character was a queer female this season, she had a one-in-four chance of dying and was six-and-a-half times more likely to be killed than her heterosexual female counterparts (Framke et al., 2016; GLAAD, 2016). Historically the odds of death for queer female characters on television have been even higher at roughly one-in-three (Hogan, 2016).

Queer fans have begun to demand more respectful representation. When the television show *The 100* unnecessarily murdered one of its two queer female protagonists in March, 2016, the fans of the show were outraged (Murphy, 2016; Wendling, 2016). The queer relationship between rival leaders Clarke and Lexa began as subtext and eventually became canon (Ryan, 2016). After building the chemistry over multiple seasons Lexa finally acknowledged her love for Clarke and they consummated their relationship. Immediately following this, Lexa's father figure entered the room intending to kill Clarke because he didn't approve of their relationship. In the fight that followed he accidentally shot and killed Lexa. One of television's most powerful and complex queer characters died with no bravery or honor, just a stray bullet (Ryan, 2016). The undignified and unnecessary manner of Lexa's death, coupled with *The 100's* production and marketing contributions to false hope for the audience, made it a particularly

poignant instance of the trauma of current queer representation (Murphy, 2016). *The 100* marketed itself as a progressive light in the darkness for queer representation. The regularity of character deaths in the show combined with the “Dead Lesbian Syndrome” left many queer viewers worried that the pair would be killed. The show’s producer, Jason Rothenberg, deceptively calmed these fears months earlier but after Lexa’s death had already been filmed by tweeting that both characters would be in the season finale (Ryan, 2016).

Lexa’s death was a breaking point for many queer viewers who had dared to believe that, for once, they might have a complex character with whom to identify without having to watch every episode with the fear that it would be the last (Ryan, 2016). Fans of the show began using the hashtag #LGBTFansDeserveBetter immediately following Lexa’s death, gaining hundreds of thousands of tweets in a matter of hours (Wendling, 2016). This hashtag, born out of a painful trope, became an activist effort aimed at seeing more positive queer representation come to fruition. The group LGBT Fans Deserve Better became the unifying force behind the movement with two primary goals (Murphy, 2016). The first was to address the problem by organizing a long-term boycott of the show in hopes that future producers would change their approach to queer representation, and that mainstream audiences would become more aware of the problems and potential negative impact of current queer representation. The second was to lessen the negative impact of these tropes in the meantime by organizing a campaign to raise money for The Trevor Project, an outreach organization for queer youth focused on crisis intervention and suicide prevention. Since the beginning of the effort, the cause has raising over \$165,000. The backlash and ensuing activist efforts that followed Lexa’s

death have drawn greater attention to media representation and treatment of queer characters (Murphy, 2016).

Though queer representation in mainstream media has come very far from the days of outright invisibility or villainy, there is much farther still to go. Queer characters are present, but they are still not depicted with the level of complexity or diversity found in straight characters. Media representation of queer sexuality must become more representative of the lived experiences of queer individuals. In a call to action for television producers over the next year Sarah Kate Ellis, GLAAD President and CEO, echoed the plea of queer audiences, “LGBTQ characters should be treated the same as their straight, cisgender counterparts by the rules of their series’ worlds. This means having the same opportunities for romance, nuanced motivation, developed backstory, and the same odds of death (GLAAD, 2016, p. 3).”

In light of the symbolic annihilation of positive queer characters in direct media representation, queer reading practices become an indispensable resource for queer identity formation. Acknowledging the subtext present in mainstream media allows queer individuals to create a positive meaning for themselves in society that will not (Lipton, 2008). Nowhere is this more significant than in media targeted toward children. Because queer sexuality is framed as an adult topic, queer characters are virtually nonexistent in children’s media (Schieble, 2012). This leads to a spiral of silence whereby queer youth do not speak up to declare their existence because they have never seen themselves with a voice which reifies society’s belief that queer sexuality does not exist in children and in turn cyclically sustains the queer youth’s isolation (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). According to Dennis (2009), understanding the queer meaning in children’s media helps queer

viewers “actively resist the ideological attempt to erase their desires and practices from conscious thought” (p. 739).

This makes queer readings of children’s media an incredibly important instrument in understanding how heteronormative hegemony is perpetuated. Based on their intense gender themes and contributions to heteronormativity in the past, Disney princess films provide an ideal location for such a reading. The narrative arch in *Frozen* and its reception among queer audiences makes it a particularly useful example of the possibilities of queer reading. The film’s depiction of Elsa provides an ideal space for queer youths to explore their identity by allowing both a queer point of identification with an empowered feminine character and an environment for queer world-making as an isolated character finds acceptances and unconditional love. Articulating how a queer reading can come from *Frozen* adds to our understanding of the reception that followed the film and can contribute to understanding the complicated relationship between readership and representation on a larger level.

When considering direct representation, animated Disney movies have never featured an openly queer character despite the diverse gender and sexuality demographics of their audience (Frost, 2016). Until Disney chooses to take that step, queer identification with their princesses will exist only in subtext. In the case of *Frozen*, that subtext is incredibly rich. In the analysis that follows I articulate a queer reading of *Frozen*. I expand on the points of queerness that challenge normative princess story notions of the knight in shining armor, damsel in distress, and love at first sight. Additionally, I acknowledge and articulate the parallels between Elsa’s journey, identity,

and hardships in the film and those of queer individuals in every-day life and describe elements of the film that support such reading.

Chapter 4: Melting the Standards: Heteronormative Subversion in *Frozen*

Here is a film about an adolescent girl who has an elaborate dream-fantasy in which there is not a whisper of heterosexual romance—not even displaced onto other figures. Uh, could this girl possibly not be interested in heterosexuality? Well, according to far too many people I've encountered, including a fair share of gays, lesbians, and straight women, this is not really possible....Tell me, then, where is the heterosexuality in this fantasy?

– Andrew Doty, 2000, p. 51-52

Replace “dream-fantasy” with “struggle to find acceptance” and Doty’s (2000) comment on Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* is a perfect match for Elsa in *Frozen*. Neither is ever communicated as having a tie to heterosexual desire yet many mainstream audiences cling to the notion that both of these young women are indisputably straight without a second thought. Such assumptions, however, lack any denotative evidence within the texts. Just as Doty (2000) demonstrated with Dorothy, claiming that Elsa is heterosexual simply is not supported within the text of the film. Rather, reading such characters as straight is only as valid, or arguably less so, than reading them as queer. In the case of *Frozen*, numerous components of the film support understanding the text as queer. In this analysis I explain how Elsa and the narrative that surrounds her ultimately are queer and thus challenge hegemonic heteronormativity.

Scholars have debated the potential impact of incorporating oppositional ideology into mainstream media (e.g., Croteau & Hoynes, 2014; Gitlin, 1982). Gitlin (1982) argues

that popular media reinforce traditional ideologies by incorporating oppositional stances in controllable ways. It could be argued that *Frozen* plays into this concept by communicating contradictory roles within the acceptable princess movie framework. According to the concept of normalization, however, such presentation can serve the opposite purpose (Croteau & Hoynes, 2014). By incorporating standpoints that challenge traditional ideology into familiar frameworks, such as that of a princess movie, such standpoints may have greater potential to impact audiences as the receiver is more likely to accept the presented roles as normal (Croteau & Hoynes, 2014).

The present study adopts the second perspective, arguing that *Frozen* challenges the heteronormative hegemony. The following analysis contributes to the body of knowledge regarding gender role performance and heteronormative hegemony in popular film by examining the themes related to gender and sexuality communicated in *Frozen*. In order to show how the story supports a queer reading, I begin by giving a brief synopsis of *Frozen* that describes the sequence of events that unfold within the film and includes relevant plot information. From there I identify two major areas of the film in which queerness and the challenge to hegemonic heteronormativity are most pronounced. Within each of these areas I then explain and contextualize three narrative components significant to understanding *Frozen* and Elsa as queer.

Synopsis of *Frozen*

Once upon a time in the kingdom of Arendelle there lived two princesses, Elsa and Anna. The sisters loved to play together but their playtime was much different than that of most children. Elsa was born with something that made her unique, she had the magical power to control ice and snow. *Frozen* begins by showing the sisters playing

with these powers inside the castle. During this playtime Elsa accidentally strikes her sister in the head with her magic. The king and queen rush their daughters to the trolls to seek their help. To save Anna, the troll king, Pabbie, removes all magic from her head, including her memories of Elsa's powers. He tells Elsa that her powers will grow and she must learn to control them in order to stay safe. The king declares that they will isolate her from everyone, including Anna, until she can do so.

The scene cuts back to the castle where we see the doors and window being closed and the sisters being separated. During the following musical number, we see Anna ask Elsa to play numerous times over the span of several years, becoming less hopeful with each rejection. At the same time, we see Elsa's powers grow stronger and her fear surrounding them increase. Her parents give her a pair of gloves to help hide her powers and try to keep her calm. Toward the end of the number, the king and queen leave on what is intended to be a two-week journey but their ship sinks during the voyage, killing them both. After the funeral Anna makes a final attempt to reach out to her sister, sinking to the floor she asks Elsa to build a snowman as she begins to cry. The image pans to show Elsa as a mirror image of pain sitting against her side of the door, surrounded by the ice that keep the two apart.

Leaving the sisters in their divided despair, the film jumps forward three years to Elsa's coronation day, showing people preparing to celebrate as Elsa is crowned queen. This will be the first time that anyone has seen the princesses or been allowed inside the castle since the beginning of their isolation. Of all the people in Arendelle, Anna is the most excited while Elsa is the least. In the musical number that follows the sisters sing about their feelings regarding the day. Anna is thrilled by the opportunity to have human

interaction. In stark contrast to Anna's eagerness, Elsa is dreading the day because is weary about having to keep her powers hidden from so many people. The scene cuts back to Anna and as she is belting the final note in the song the prince of the Southern Isles, Hans, runs into her and knocks her over. He apologizes and the pair exchange flirtatious pleasantries, leaving both with jovial smiles. In the background bells begin ringing to announce the start of coronation and Anna must race back to the castle.

The coronation goes smoothly apart from mild frost appearing on the orb and scepter Elsa has to hold. At the coronation ball that follows the sisters have their first interaction in years. Anna states that she wishes the castle could remain open to people. Though she initially agrees, Elsa quickly remembers why they must be closed, changes her stance, and refuses to give Anna any justification. Upset, Anna excuses herself to go outside. In the process of leaving she trips and Hans catches her. We then see a montage of them walking around the castle talking and laughing, ending with a duet where they proclaim their love for one another. At the end of the ballad Hans asks Anna to marry him and she says yes without hesitation. Hand in hand they return to the ball seeking Elsa's blessing for their marriage. Elsa denies their request and goes to walk away. As she does she declares that the celebration is over and everyone must leave. Anna reaches for her arm to stop her and accidentally removes Elsa's glove. As she turns to face Anna she unintentionally sends a wall of sharp ice from her ungloved hand. With her powers revealed Elsa tries to flee as the duke calls for her capture. Anna and Hans run after her but she escapes.

An eternal winter falls over Arendelle as Elsa makes her way to the safety. Anna then sets out to find Elsa and leaves Hans in charge in her absence. Reaching the North

Mountain, Elsa embraces her powers and creates an ice castle where she can live in peace. While trying to find Elsa, Anna falls from her horse then makes her way to Wandering Oaken's Trading Post where she meets an ice salesman, Kristoff and his reindeer Sven. She convinces him to take her to find her sister but soon after they started, they were attacked by wolves. In trying to escape Kristoff's sled gets destroyed and they must continue on foot. On their journey they meet Olaf, a snowman brought to life by Elsa who agrees to show them where she is. Back in Arendelle Hans is passing out blankets to individuals outside while offering hot food and shelter inside the castle. When Anna's horse returns to the castle, the duke demands that something be done. Hans sets out with a search party to find Anna and bring back summer. The duke's minions join him with instructions to assassinate Queen Elsa if they find her.

On the North Mountain Anna and company finally reach Elsa's ice castle. Anna goes in alone to try to talk her sister into coming back but she refuses. Afraid that she will accidentally hurt Anna again, she asks her to leave. When Anna tells Elsa that Arendelle is frozen she becomes upset and accidentally freezes her sister's heart. As Kristoff rushes to help Anna, Elsa creates a giant snowman who throws them out. Anna begins to show the impact of being struck by the magic so Kristoff takes her to his adopted family, the trolls who first try to marry the pair. As her condition worsens Pabbie tells Anna that it will take an act of true love to reverse the spell, otherwise she will freeze solid. The other trolls suggest a true love's kiss and Kristoff rushes Anna back to the castle so Hans can save her. The next scene brings us back to the North Mountain as Hans and his crew arrive at Elsa's castle. Though Hans tells them not to harm Elsa, the duke's men storm in

and attack her. She is knocked unconscious and taken captive in the process. When she wakes up she is in the castle dungeon in shackles that cover her hands.

When Kristoff and Anna finally make it to the castle she is too weak to walk on her own so he carries her to the gate. Kristoff leaves her with servants from the castle and walks away with his head down. The servants bring Anna to Hans and she falls into his arms, insisting that he kiss her. The others in the room leave to give the couple privacy. Once they are alone Anna explains the situation and her need for true love's kiss. Hans leans to within an inch of her lips before pulling away to reveal that he did not love her and had an evil plan all along. As 13th in line for the throne in his own country, he sought to coerce Elsa into marrying him so he could be king. When he realized that Anna was an easy target because she was desperate for love, he changed his plan to focus on marrying Anna then killing Elsa. After revealing his plan he leaves her there to die, knowing that with her death he would have justification to murder Elsa and be framed a hero in the process for returning summer to Arendelle.

When he reaches the others, he tells them that Anna is dead but that they said their vows before she passed. With his falsely claimed position of authority granted by the fabricated marriage, he sentences Elsa to death for killing her sister. When the guards go to get Elsa from the dungeon she freezes the room, breaking through her shackles and the wall to escape. In doing so she creates a blizzard with howling wind and snow that causes Kristoff to rush back to the castle for Anna. The scene cuts back to Anna as Olaf comes to help her. He builds a fire so she can Anna stay warm and she urges him to stay away so he won't melt but he refuses to leave until they can find another act of true love to save her. As they talk about what true love is, he suggests that it is, "putting someone

else's needs before yours," and that Kristoff had done so in bringing her to the castle. Moments later the window blows open to reveal Kristoff riding across the fjord toward them. Anna and Olaf rush to meet him for an act of true love. As she makes her way across the fjord Anna begins to turn to ice. The blizzard becomes so thick that it is difficult to see more than a few feet and Kristoff and Anna struggle to find each other through the snow.

Hans, however, manages to find Elsa and dishonestly tell her that she has killed Anna. As Elsa falls to the ground devastated the blizzard completely stops. Kristoff, now able to see Anna, runs toward her. She begins to go to him but notices her sister in the opposite direction. As Hans swings his sword to kill Elsa Anna runs between them, choosing to save her sister instead of herself. She freezes solid just before the blade strikes her, shattering it and throwing Hans backwards. Elsa is distraught. She wraps her arms around Anna's frozen form and weeps as the other stand in silence. Miraculously, Anna begins to thaw. Because she sacrificed herself for her sister in an act of true love, the curse had been broken. By seeing how much Anna loves her, Elsa is able to realize that her powers don't have to be feared. She also realizes that if love thawed Anna's heart it could thaw the kingdom as well. She uses new position regarding her powers to melt the fjord and return summer to Arendelle. After the kingdom is returned to normal we see both Hans and the Duke of Weselton thrown out of Arendelle for their treachery.

The scene then cuts to Anna and Kristoff as another wrong is righted. She removes his blindfold to reveal a brand-new sled to replace the one lost in their journey. In his excitement he spins Anna around saying that he loves it so much he could kiss her. Embarrassed by his own statement he stutters that he'd like to and asks Anna if they may.

She kisses him on the cheek and says yes. He then plants a big kiss on her lips and the scene moves away to Olaf, ecstatic about getting to enjoy summer while his own private flurry floats overhead. The rest of Arendelle soon join him as Elsa turns the courtyard of the castle into an ice-skating rink for everyone to enjoy. Anna is happy to have the gates open and Elsa promises that they will never be closed again. The film ends with everyone openly accepting Elsa and her powers as they enjoying the ice during the summer together.

Frozen, in its essence, is a story of acceptance that can be clearly read as analogous to queer experience. With the overall narrative of the film established, I address specific elements that communicate the text's queerness and explain how the text challenges hegemonic heteronormativity. Because gender and sexuality are inextricably linked within society, I first examine the gender themes in *Frozen* that undermine heteronormative assumptions for behavior in princess movies. These include the depictions of female characters, male characters, and the romantic interactions between them.

After establishing the ways in which heteronormativity is challenged in the narrative as a whole via non-conformity to traditional gendered performative expectations, I then focus on the components of *Frozen* that challenge hegemonic heteronormativity specifically based on their connection to queer sexuality. In doing this I examine the elements of the film that allow points of identification with queer experience and queer audiences including Elsa's individual narrative arch, queer related traits in specific characters, and textual elements that are indicative of queerness. By combining the themes of gender performance and queer identification, I demonstrate that

the queerness of this text can be understood to exist with or without explicit acknowledgment of queer sexuality.

Gender Themes as Undermining Heteronormativity

The traditional princess story narrative has become such an accepted part of our culture that many, particularly those raised on Disney princesses, can recite it by heart. In the beginning, the princess, who is always the fairest in the land, is limited by her current situation and desperately seeks a way out. She clings to the hope that finding romance is the solution. In steps prince charming and it is “love at first sight.” He sweeps her off her feet and becomes the catalyst for all the princess’ subsequent actions. The princess ultimately is placed in some sort of perilous situation and the brave prince inevitably becomes her knight in shining armor by coming to her rescue. He saves her from the immediate danger and provides the ultimate solution to the princess’ predicament which remedies any challenge further facing her, true love’s kiss. Then the pair get married and live happily ever after. The entire plot emphasizes that women are helpless and need to be saved by a man. Additionally, this narrative glorifies the potential power of romantic love. It places romance, specifically heterosexual romance, as the principal driving force in the princess’ life. The recurring inclusion of this narrative style and its components provide a formula for Disney princess films that in turn creates an expectation for subsequent films (Zipes, 2010).

The gendered standards of behavior in the princess story may impact the way children understand the world. Through repeated exposure to these stories children learn moral principles and gendered behavioral expectations (Lieberman, 1986). They come to expect reciprocal patterns between behaviors an individual exhibits and the qualities s/he

possesses. In line with this, children learn to anticipate the outcome that will follow different features of a narrative or character. According to Lieberman (1986), “millions of women must surely have formed their psycho-sexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and the nature of the reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales” (p. 187). When stories follow the traditional princess story narrative, they reinforce the dominant gendered ideology that positions men as superior and perpetuates heteronormativity.

Though Disney princess films have been a major source in communicating the traditional androcentric gendered narrative in the past, *Frozen* breaks from the mold in several significant ways. By rejecting many of the standards typical of princess movies, *Frozen* challenges the compulsory gendered foundation of heteronormativity. To demonstrate the ways in which *Frozen* subverts standard expectations for gender, I focus on three areas of conceptual figurations that contrast with traditional princess movies: the functions of the princesses, the framing of the male characters, and the portrayal of opposite sex relationships.

The princess is king. *Frozen*'s challenge to patriarchal hegemony is integrated into the architecture of the story and in turn impacts the characters that operate within it. The film subverts the traditional male-driven narrative structure (Mulvey, 1989) by giving genuine preference to female dialogue and agency. The focus of the narrative structure in *Frozen* is almost exclusively female driven. Throughout the story the audience is encouraged to relate to the female characters while the male characters exist as accessories to the development of Elsa's and Anna's stories. Limiting male characters to supporting roles challenges the traditional narrative structure that privileges male

discourse over female discourse (Man, 1993). Furthermore, the female discourse in the film is shaped independently of the male characters. Rather than motivated by the connection to or actions of male characters, Elsa's actions are motivated by her connection to Anna while Anna's actions are motivated by her connection to Elsa. The connection to one another, the autonomy the sister princesses exhibit, and the roles they portray contribute to the film's subversion of patriarchal hegemony.

The female focused progression of Elsa and Anna's stories challenges traditional standards for female discourse in film. Elsa's character serves as the foundation for the film with particular focus on the development of her powers. From the beginning of the film, the relationship between Elsa and Anna is shaped by Elsa's ability to control ice. The powers are framed as playful, dangerous, or warm at different points in the film based on the princesses' relationship. Elsa's powers initially are hidden, then publicly revealed, and eventually controlled based on her interactions with Anna. The majority of the storyline focuses on Anna and the decisions she makes which are driven by her love for her sister. Anna's interactions with male characters exist primarily to contribute to her relationship with Elsa.

The princesses are the film's enunciators in that they are the protagonists and are the source for all narrative development (Bergstrom, 1979). In essence, Elsa provides the action of the film while Anna serves as the actor. Because Elsa functions as the source for Anna's actions, a role that is typically fulfilled by a male love interest, the film challenges the dominant ideology that insists heterosexual romance must be the most significant driving force in a woman's life (Lieberman, 1986). This invalidates the notion that the presence of a man is a necessary condition for a woman's experience to be

fulfilled, thus reorienting toward an experience of desire that is both woman driven and woman fulfilled (Stacey, 1987).

This counter-normative narrative structure is continued via the autonomy exhibited by the princesses as both Elsa and Anna are represented as sovereign individuals who have full ownership of their decisions and subsequent actions. In contrast to traditional subservient roles performed by women in film (Doane, 1987), *Frozen* depicts Elsa and Anna as empowered and independent characters. Elsa is in complete control of her journey, initially isolating herself, then escaping her captors, and finally thawing the kingdom and returning peace to Arendelle. Anna also has full authority over her actions from leaving to find Elsa against Hans' wishes through her interactions with Kristoff up to her ultimate choice to save Elsa she exhibits genuine autonomy throughout the film. In addition to expressing independence that is typically reserved for male characters, the primary roles performed by both princess are also traditionally masculine with Elsa as ruler and Anna as savior.

Through the princesses' independence and non-traditional roles, the film situates them outside the traditional cinematic framework that reproduces patriarchally subordinated roles for women in society thus allowing them to be genuine subjects rather than merely narrativized spectacles (Doane, 1987). Having the princesses serve as genuine subjects who are driven by their connection to one another constructs authentic female identity within the film and communicates the possibility of identification with a female perspective. This opens the door for genuine feminine spectatorship via narcissistic association, negating the androcentric viewership paradigm that only allows identification

with a male outlook (Mulvey, 1989), and in turn challenging the traditional heteronormative framework of narrative cinema.

Elsa's role in particular has several unique aspects that conflict with a male-focused paradigm and further contribute to understanding her character as subject rather than object. Being crowned as queen gives her the ultimate position of authority in the kingdom. This is a level of autonomous power granted to no other Disney princess or heroine. Unlike Anna who seeks romance throughout the film, Elsa never has or expresses a desire for a love interest. Similar to other fairy tale heroines, Elsa is in trouble and physically separated from society for much of the story (Lieberman, 1986). In stark contrast to these damsels in distress who passively wait to be rescued, Elsa intentionally created her "kingdom of isolation" where she wishes to be left alone. Her official authority and freedom-seeking seclusion essentially make Elsa ruler of two kingdoms. The film rejects the traditional persecuted princess role and communicates that women do not inherently need men for their reign, romance, or rescue. The combination of these aspects challenge the normalization of female subjectivity. Rather than existing in relation to a male standard, Elsa's identity is constructed independently from a hierarchical male character. She is "other" to no man (Grosz, 2005).

In addition to challenging heteronormative standards with her diegetic role, Elsa's function in the film's depiction also deviates from dominant expectations related to voyeuristic spectatorship (Mulvey, 1989). Far from merely being a sexualized object on which to fix our gaze, Elsa controls where we are meant to look. She literally shapes the visual field of the film by creating the object of focus with her powers (Stacey, 1987). In this process, Elsa reaffirms her femininity as she changes her outward presentation to

further accentuate her gender identity as she adopts the traditionally masculine position of actor, which I will more fully explore later. This depiction stands in sharp contrast to another Disney heroine who actively adopts a male role during her journey, Mulan, who must wear men's armor and actively pretends to be a man when she takes control of her situation. As Elsa pursues agency in the film she is not just allowed to maintain her feminine identity, but also emphasize it rejects the heteronormative assumption that females must accept their position as "other" to be allowed to exist as women. Elsa's depiction as traditionally feminine in presentation while being a traditionally masculine autonomous ruler separate from a male love interest communicates a unique challenge to the heteronormative formula of Disney princess films. In relation to all other Disney heroines, Elsa is the least confined to heteronormative gender expectations for authority and agency.

Rejecting the traditional princess movie role of damsel in distress continues in the subversion of the rescuing figure. Anna serves as the primary hero in the film, filling the role that would traditionally be the male knight in shining armor on multiple occasions. During their journey toward the North Mountain, Anna and Kristoff are attacked by wolves. When Kristoff falls from the sled and is defenseless, Anna saves him. Before the scene is over Kristoff nearly slips off a cliff and Anna saves him again. In this scene, we see an interchange of the typical roles for heroism in fairy tale narratives. Kristoff is the one in a perilous situation while Anna is his valiant rescuer, directly reversing the heteronormative expectation for male action in response to female helplessness (Lieberman, 1986).

Anna plays the hero again as the story reaches its climax. When Hans attempts to murder Elsa, she jumps between them sacrificing herself. This defies the typical gendered expectations for behavior in Disney princess movies as it is Anna who performs the active role in the film's climactic rescue scene rather than a prince or other male helper (England et al., 2011). Anna's enactment of opposite-gendered behavior is validated within the narrative by having it ultimately result in a positive outcome. By adopting the traditionally masculine position of the active hero, Anna saves Kristoff, Elsa, herself, and Arendelle when no one else could. This portrayal rejects the notion of feminine passivity and communicates that deviation from dominant gendered expectations is not only acceptable, but that it can be beneficial also.

Dethroning the man. Further deviating from the androcentric focus of traditional narratives, *Frozen* undermines the typical gendered roles in Disney princess stories as it overwhelmingly portrays all powerful men as negatively impacting the princesses. The negative impact of men begins with the first male characters present in the film, Pabbie the leader of the trolls, and the princesses' father, the king. They are responsible for confining Elsa and villainizing her powers. Pabbie removes all Anna's memories of magic and tells Elsa that her powers open her up to potential danger. The king responds by isolating Elsa from everyone, including Anna. This does long-term psychological damage to both princesses: Elsa because she is made to fear her own identity, and Anna because she is cut off from her best friend without explanation. The king provides the initial suggestion to hide Elsa away, the gloves to conceal her true nature, and the motto of repression she follows through the film, all of which I will further examine later. Rather than her rescuers or protectors, Pabbie and her father are Elsa's original

oppressors. This deviates from Disney formula regarding imprisoned princesses who traditionally are held captive by a woman (Zipes, 2010). The typical evil stepmother or wicked witch communicate an easily discernable feminine threat to the princesses. That Elsa is forced into isolation by the only two men in the film who have ultimate positions of power situates masculine authority as the threat within this narrative. In turn this communicates a challenge to the heteronormative notions of male superiority and inherent disposition to power that have been traditionally reinforced within the genre.

The negative portrayal continues with next the male character in power introduced, the Duke of Weselton. His first line exemplifies his forthcoming treachery, “Ah, Arendelle, our most mysterious trade partner. Open those gates so I may unlock your secrets and exploit your riches!” The film references his negativity by consistently referring to Weselton as “weasel town.” The duke’s villainy is perpetuated throughout the movie. The duke is the driving force behind the public alarm about Elsa’s powers and the eventual action taken against her. The duke aggressively attacks the women in power through his own statements and the actions of his henchmen, further challenging typical gender roles for Disney princess movies. Though villains come in many different forms, those who directly attack princesses have been exclusively female (The Evil Queen in *Snow White*, Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella*, Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*, Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, Mother Gothel in *Tangled*). Male villains in princess films, however, have been focused on characters or concerns other than the princess and any negativity the princess faces as a result of the villain’s actions is merely collateral damage (Gaston in *Beauty in the Beast*, Jafar in *Aladdin*, Shan Yu in *Mulan*, Doctor Facilier in *The Princess and the Frog*, Mor’du in *Brave*). The duke is the only man to fills the princess

persecutor role with the motivation behind every other Disney princess villain exclusively divided by gender. This inversion of the formulaic standards for gender in relation to villainy is a divergence from the androcentric assumption that female-female interaction is responsible for direct negativity in a princess' life (Lieberman, 1986) and communicates that negativity can come from male-female interactions also. In turn, this challenges the heteronormative ideology that opposite-sex interactions are inherently positive while same-sex interactions are inherently negative.

Finally, the most substantial negative male character in power is Hans, who is the film's ultimate villain. Hans had a dastardly plan from the beginning, but sought to accomplish it through manipulation rather than overt evil actions. We're foretold of his evil potential when he notes that he is 13th in line for the throne in his own country, a number with ominous undertones historically associated with death or treachery (Thompson, 2002). We do not openly learn of his villainy until almost the end of the film. Throughout the story he is helpful and valiant, publicly embodying the traditional characteristics associated with princes. We are expected to assume that Hans is the typical "prince charming" throughout the movie. That Hans deceptively was portrayed as "good" calls the standards of the genre into question. The classic princess story formula relies on faith in first impressions. The film challenges this by depicting Hans as externally meeting social expectations while internally being evil, communicating that first impressions are a sufficient foundation for love. In turn this challenges the heteronormative ideology that suggests heterosexual romance is inherently positive and transformative.

The only male character portrayed in even a moderately helpful role, Kristoff, fills such a role begrudgingly and unconventionally. Anna has to convince him to come with her on her quest to save the kingdom. He only agrees because, as an ice salesman, he has a vested interest in ending the eternal winter. Through the story, Kristoff develops into a likable character but avoids connotation with the typical fairy tale leading man as he is neither suave nor chivalrous. Far from love at first sight, when Anna first sees Kristoff in Wandering Oaken's Trading Post, her facial expressions indicate a feeling of disgust. He is dressed in plain clothing, covered in snow, and is openly rude and aggressive toward the shopkeeper, bringing to mind more of an abominable snowman than a prince charming. Though Kristoff maintains his rough depiction through the story, he is the only male "good guy" with a primary role in the film. He is gruff, plain, and bad-mannered with little actual concern for the princesses so long as his own needs are met. His actions in the film, though they contribute to an overall positive end, are solely self-serving in the process. Though well in line with societal expectations for masculinity (Bem, 1993), the portrayal of Kristoff's character traits and behavior rejects the formulaic gender expectations for leading men in princess movies that requires genteel behavior and selfless sacrifice. The message is communicated that an individual need not conform to gendered expectations to be valuable or to find happiness.

Along with his demeanor and motivation, Kristoff's contributions to the narrative also champion divergence from heteronormative expectations. The most forthright manifestation of this challenge comes when Kristoff directly questions Anna's claims of "true love" with someone she just met, calling into question the formulaic belief in the power of love at first sight (Zipes, 2010). This introduces uncertainty to the hegemonic

belief that genuine love is a natural and automatic occurrence within heterosexual romance. That Kristoff doubts a facet of sexuality that is typically framed as infallible contributes to the film's larger challenge to the assumption of a ubiquitous predisposition to heterosexuality. In addition to this specific function, Kristoff's larger role in the film is also marked by divergence from heteronormative expectations. Although he is integral to helping Anna save Elsa, he is only that, a helper. This puts him in the typically feminine position of accessory, rather than the typically masculine position of actor further undermining the normative insistence on binary gender performance. Though Kristoff does serve a positive role in the story, his presence challenges normative assumptions of behavior in princess films that require men to be valiant and dominant.

True love's miss. Initially, *Frozen* seems to follow the traditional princess narrative with the pairing of Anna and Hans. From the moment Hans is introduced in the film he is polished and charismatic. Anna is instantly infatuated. The princess narrative reaches its peak embodiment in the film with the couple's first significant interaction at the coronation ball. In a duet they herald "love at first sight" by singing, "our mental synchronization can have but one explanation, you and I were just meant to be." The song ends with Anna accepting Hans' proposal for marriage. The film's framing of Anna and Hans' relationship, however, rejects the traditional princess narrative. The proposal itself acknowledges the outlandish standards of the genre with Hans saying, "Can I say something crazy? Will you marry me?" and Anna responding, "Can I say something even crazier? Yes!" This interchange frames the couple's relationship as unrealistic by openly designating it as "crazy." This communicates a shift from the traditional formulaic framing of marriage as the essential purpose of a princess' life that is reinforced in the

way other characters respond to Anna and Hans' relationship. As the film progresses, Anna's infatuation is framed as immature and subject to ridicule.

The framing and progression of Anna and Hans' relationship throughout the film challenges the dominant heteronormative ideology typically communicated and reinforced through princess stories. In typical fairy tales, prince charming is the solution to the princess' problem and the means of her happiness which centers men as the primary component of a woman's fulfillment (Lieberman, 1986). Rather than serve as a solution to Anna's initial problem, her relationship with Hans is the catalyst for the peril that develops. Elsa refuses to give her blessing to their marriage which prompts the subsequent turmoil in the film. When Anna faces mortal peril after her heart is frozen, the film reverts back to the expected princess story with the focus on seeking prince charming to miraculously save her. Anna's reliance on fairy tale tropes, however, turns out to be her Achilles heel as the culmination of her quest for true love's kiss reveals that Hans was the film's villain rather than its hero. Far from the typical fairy tale standards that position marriage after "love at first sight" as the supreme calling of a princess' life, the film portrays Anna's experience with Hans as naïve and foolish. Ultimately, the movie minimizes the significance and power of heterosexual romantic love and codes it as at best a non-essential addition and at worst a potential site for disaster.

The relationship between Anna and her eventual love interest, Kristoff, also subverts genre expected gender roles. In a reversal of traditional relational dynamics, Anna exhibits power over Kristoff in every stage of their relationship. She initiates the relationship then tells him what to do during their journey. In what may be the most obvious manifestation of her agency, Kristoff asks for her consent before they kiss for the

first time. This shifts the position of sexual subject to Anna and allows her autonomous control over her desires (Yep, 2003). Romance stories, including Disney princess films, have traditionally been mechanisms of patriarchal oppression “which works to keep women in their socially and sexually subordinate place” (Light, 1999, p. 372). In the past, Disney princesses have rarely had full control over their own sexual actions and were kisses at the romantic whim of their male counterparts. Snow White and Aurora both such passive participants that they were literally unconscious. Kristoff subverts this formulaic standard by asking Anna for permission to kiss her. This gives her autonomy over her sexual actions thus allowing the interaction to reflect empowerment rather than oppression.

Even more challenging to hegemonic heteronormativity than the relationships that are represented is the absence of a heterosexual relationship for Elsa. At no point in the entire film is Elsa romantically linked to anyone, challenging the traditional heteronormative ideology that requires a princess to be inextricably linked to a prince. The outright rejection of heterosexual courtship is shared only by one other Disney princess, Merida in *Brave*. Merida and Elsa have one incredibly significant difference to consider in this capacity. Merida is portrayed as a girl rather than a woman and lacks the traditional Disney princess feminization that allows audience to view other princesses, even some of the same age, as adult women (Lacroix, 2004). Because society does not view sexuality as an appropriate component of children’s identities (Schieble, 2012), Merida's lack of romantic interest is to be expected. Elsa, on the other hand, outwardly presents as a typically feminized and sexualized princess (Lacroix, 2004). Elsa’s depiction as a sexualized woman with no romantic interest in men challenges the

compulsory nature of hegemonic heterosexuality. Her lack of a heterosexual relationship defies the gendered standards that are expected of her both formulaically as a Disney princess (Lieberman, 1986) and socioculturally as a woman (Butler, 1990).

Along with being the first Disney princess without a romantic connection, Elsa's lack of heterosexual love interest defies an additional standard princess movie trope. A common driving force for princess narratives is a conflict involving father and daughter (Do Rozario, 2004). The relationship between Elsa and her father, the king, begins in this typical confrontational fashion. In the first minutes of the movie we see the king discourage and condemn Elsa's power as being a source for negativity that must be minimized and concealed. The resulting struggle between concealment and acceptance provides the foundation for the rest of the narrative. The resolution of this conflict, however, is profoundly unique. In a traditional princess narrative, the conflict resolves through the princess' investment in a heterosexual relationship. This resolution process is exemplified in *The Little Mermaid* in which Ariel restores her relationship with her father by successfully joining with Prince Eric. In *Frozen*, Elsa accomplishes resolution through her autonomous merit. Rather than seek fulfillment in a romantic relationship, Elsa finds fulfillment in personal self-acceptance further distancing herself from heteronormative expectations.

Though gender and sexuality operate as separate systems of power and dominance within society (Weber, 2001), gender has historically been heterosexualized by means of patriarchal hegemony (Doty, 1993). Gender division is the basis of heterosexuality and is essential for maintaining the power structures that marginalize queerness (Yep, 2003). As a result, queerness is introduced when acceptable gender

performances are destabilized. Gender and the notions associated with it are far more complex than traditional fairy tale or Disney formula would suggest. *Frozen* complicates gendered expectations by rejecting the binary of submissive women and dominant men. It also discredits the conventional fairy tale notion that heterosexual romance is somehow inherently transformative or magical (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). Because *Frozen* rejects traditional gendered behavior and relational norms, it in turn challenges hegemonic heteronormativity.

Queer Points of Identification

The magic puppet becomes a real boy, the cursed princess wakes up, the outlaw saves the day, the mermaid is given legs, the mouse becomes a chef, and the waitress opens a restaurant. Since the beginning, Disney movies have been shaped by outcast protagonists who find happiness. This recurring focus on inclusion has long attracted queer audiences (Truesdell, 2000). This attraction gained another dimension when Disney revived the princess during their renaissance. Though the princesses were all depicted with a heterosexually romantic ending, they each challenged and rejected traditional marriage arrangements. Ariel left her home to woo a human, Belle rejected Gaston and fell for a beast, Jasmine turned down all the sultan's suitors in favor of a street rat, Pocahontas wouldn't marry Kocoum and chose a white man, and Mulan didn't go through with matchmaking but instead formed a connection with an army captain while she pretended to be a male soldier. Instead of relying on traditional romantic defaults, each of these princesses chose to be with someone based on a connection formed with that person. The renaissance introduced a mindset that it was okay to love who you love whether or not it fit with conventions. Though each of these princesses was heterosexual,

they paved the way for a queer princess story by rejecting the necessity of traditional romance. Elsa takes this rejection a step further as the first feminine-coded princess without a love interest at all.

The progression of Elsa's story coupled with the rejection of traditional patriarchal norms during the course of the film provides a readily accessible queer subtext. Viewing Elsa's power to control ice and snow as a metaphor for non-heterosexual sexuality allows a queer reading to follow. The themes of repression and fear related to Elsa's powers shape the narrative's development. This is indicative of the shared experience of homophobia that forms the basis of queer sensibility itself (Bronski, 1984). Combining these themes with textual motifs throughout the film reveals the queerness of the story. Queer audience relatability and the narrative's outcome communicate a stark challenge to the heteronormative hegemony by allowing a queer-coded character to have a happy ending. To further explain the challenge communicated in the film, I articulate the queerness of the narrative arch, individual characters, and textual themes.

Coming out of the castle. The challenges Elsa faces through the film based on her identity are relatable to many queer individuals. "Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know." If there was ever a motto for closeted queer individuals, Elsa's mantra would be it. The story of a young girl who is taught to hate a part of herself and conceal it based on the dominant societal ideology plays out for countless queer individuals in their lifetimes. Elsa literally is locked away in the castle to prevent anyone from learning that she is different. The automatic repression of Elsa's powers based on the fear of something that

is different is mirrored in society's compulsory closeting of queer sexualities (Sedgwick, 1993; Warner, 2000).

Elsa is an archetype of internalized homophobia. The troll king warns her in the beginning of the film, "fear will be your enemy." The danger of fear does not just come from outside forces, but also from Elsa herself. The external fear surrounding Elsa's powers manifests internally as she becomes completely preoccupied with avoiding accidental disclosure (Almeida et al., 2009). At her parent's insistence, she commits her entire life to keeping her powers a secret in order to maintain her assumed "normal" identity. Elsa's obsession over maintaining her secret is mirrored by queer adolescents who are isolated and become "hyper-vigilant about self-monitoring behavior, clothing, and body image" (Harrison, 2003, p. 108). The secrecy prevents her from developing a healthy relationship with her identity and she loses control of her powers at the hands of her own fear. The death of Elsa's parents provides a clear illustration of the mechanism that perpetuates hegemonic oppression. Three years pass between their death and Elsa's coronation yet she still remains locked in her room, quarantined from human connection. The source of the oppression is gone but the ideology has been internalized.

That Elsa finds resentment and rejection once her secret is revealed unfortunately is all too relatable for queer individuals. The involuntary disclosure of Elsa's identity essentially is a representation of being outed from the closet (Ben-Ari, 1995). Society's reception of Elsa's powers results in a frozen state that is a manifestation of hatred and fear regarding her identity. The people of Arendelle assume that Elsa's difference makes her evil. They fear Elsa because her powers fall outside the realm of what society accepts as "normal." This closed-minded approach to identities that are different from those

considered “standard” is the driving force behind heterosexism and homophobia (Rich, 1980). Those at the coronation ball leapt to the conclusion that Elsa should be feared without ever trying to understand her identity. In the style all too typical of discrimination against queer individuals, fear of what makes Elsa different was externalized as hatred against her as a person (Grindstaff, 2008). This forces her to escape into isolation for her own safety.

Though she previously accepted the notion that her identity should be kept hidden, Elsa transforms her self-perception during her journey up the North Mountain. The heartfelt ballad, “Let it Go,” is an anthem for self-acceptance. The song paints a vivid example of the pressure that can be associated with maintaining a closeted identity and the relief that can follow coming out (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Though she put forth tremendous effort to pass as “normal” and maintain her position in society (Fuller et al., 2009), concealing the nature of her difference did not change the truth about her identity. Elsa addresses the struggle she faced to keep her identity a secret, “couldn’t keep it in; heaven knows I’ve tried,” then boldly releases herself from that prescribed obligation by asserting, “Let it go, let it go, turn away and slam the door. I don't care what they're going to say. Let the storm rage on, the cold never bothered me anyway.” This communicates a personal acceptance of both her identity and whatever backlash she may face based on an understanding that what makes her different is only problematic in so much as it is constructed to be. From this declaration forward we see a transformation in Elsa’s character. She evolves from being reserved and timid into a powerful and liberated individual who commands authority over her own identity. This transformation and the

personal satisfaction she finds from it provide closeted queer individuals with an image of possibility (Fuller et al., 2009).

Elsa's life changed once she overcame the internalized negativity related to her powers and embraced her own identity. For queer individuals, conquering internalized homophobia can be equally as liberating (Herek, 1996). Elsa resigned herself to the fact that her identity would not be accepted by society and vowed to adopt a life of isolation in which she could fully embrace her powers. As she continued to sing Elsa experimented with her powers and revealed that they are an integral part of her as a person. "My power flurries through the air into the ground. My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around." Her powers were not merely peripheral to her identity, they were an embodiment of her soul. In the next line Elsa asserted her resolute sovereignty by proclaiming, "And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast. I'm never going back; the past is in the past." Her solace is emphasized further in the extended version of the ballad when she declares, "I know I left a life behind, but I'm too relieved to grieve." This sense of relief emulates that of queer individuals who come out and are finally free of the pressures resulting from compulsory concealment of their stigmatized identity (Herek, 1996).

Unfortunately for Elsa, her sense of relief was short lived. When Elsa learned that Arendelle had been trapped in an eternal winter she was forced to confront the enduring repercussions from her identity being revealed. As with queer identity, self-acceptance alone was not enough to rectify the impact of fear in society (Herek, 2009). Elsa began to doubt whether being liberated from repression was even possible for her as she states in defeat, "I'm such a fool, I can't be free. No escape from the storm inside of me." In the scene that followed Elsa unintentionally freezes Anna's heart. Moments later Elsa was

knocked unconscious, captured by the search party, and taken back to the castle. Following the liberating experience in the prior scene, this drastic turn of events seems to reorient the narrative back to the typical requirement that requires queer characters not be allowed happy endings. Had the film ended here it would have been well within the standards for the traditional tragic queer trope (Gross, 2001; Thomas, 2016). This however, was not the end of the story. The expectation of tragedy was shattered when Anna stepped in front of Hans as he tried to kill Elsa, sacrificing herself to save her sister. This act of true love thawed Anna's heart and reframed Elsa's identity. That Elsa was not only allowed to be happy, but to be loved and accepted by society communicate a challenge to the heteronormative assumption of inherent tragedy for queer individuals.

Elsa had been so focused on the fear related to her powers that she had been unable to envision a solution to the problem. Seeing Anna recover after an act of love allowed Elsa to realize, "love will thaw, of course!" As the focus redirected from fear to love Arendelle was returned to summer. Just as with queer sexuality, what made Elsa different held no inherent value of being good or bad (Butler, 1993). Their impact on society directly related to the disposition constructed around them. Fear and intolerance, rather than merely the existence of Elsa's difference, were responsible for the negative environment surrounding her powers (Butler, 1993). Though Elsa had released the internalized fear of her powers earlier, the rejection of fear and the acceptance of individual differences must reach beyond the marginalized individuals themselves in order to create a place for their existence within society. The frozen state that materializes from fear and hatred cannot disappear without addressing the systematic oppression which enabled its inception (Yep, 2003).

The femme and the fearful. Beyond the narrative arch that could be could be relatable for anyone who has experienced the oppression of heteronormativity, Elsa provides an opportunity for specifically lesbian viewership. As with queer sexuality, Elsa's powers are linked to her gender performance (Dyer, 1983; Raymond, 2003). The first time she repeats the refrain of restraint over her powers she says, "be the good girl you always have to be, conceal, don't feel, put on a show." This indicates both that this aspect of her identity negatively impacts the quality of her identity as a woman and that her expression of gender is a performance. Later, after she embraces her identity and begins to experiment with her powers during the climb up the North Mountain, Elsa revisits her gender performance in saying, "that perfect girl is gone." As a product of heteronormative oppression, Elsa equates being a quality woman with not having powers. Socioculturally, this mirrors the belief that women's value exists only in so much as they are beneficial to men. Elsa's rejection of the dominant ideological behaviors expected of her regarding her powers represent a challenge to heteronormative standards for women's behavior regarding sexual subjectivity. Accepting her identity, and in turn rejecting a normative orientation, separates her from being a valuable woman within patriarchal society.

Elsa's bodily transformation during the "Let it Go" ballad is a powerful example of resistance to heteronormativity. During this process she rejects the closeting oppression forced upon her and embraces her sexuality. This can be observed in her bodily depiction as her dress and hair change to be less restrictive, reflecting her new internal disposition. Her posture changes from stiff to fluid as she as she first tests her powers. In the process, she removes the articles of clothing that signify her former self:

the glove that was used to hide her true nature and represents the oppression of her identity, the purple cape that indicates she is royalty and represents the commitment she felt to maintaining secrecy for her family, and finally the tiara that was given to her at coronation that represents the socially assigned role she was expected to fill. In removing these items, she expresses her choice to accept her identity and release the normative expectations placed on her by her family and society, reflective of the liberating possibility of internal acceptance related to queer sexuality (Herek, 1996). After Elsa frees herself from the symbolic restrictions of her past, she creates a look for herself that better reflects her new internal disposition. Her dress transforms from dark and restrictive that covers every inch of her body other than her head and hands to light, flowy, and revealing. It has a neckline that drapes off her shoulders, sheer sleeves, and a slit all the way up to mid-thigh. Her hairstyle mirrors this shift. Marking the final step in bodily depiction as resistance Elsa enacts a time-honored display of freedom and defiance (Weitz, 2001), she lets her hair down.

The initially traditionally obedient daughter transforms into a *femme fatale*-esque embodiment of liberation, sexuality, and agency (Bell, 1995). Elsa is unlike the typical *femme fatale* in one crucial way, she does not share their evil intent. This is reflected in her newly fashioned dress. Rather than black and sleek, indicative of the *femme fatale*'s dark soul and questionable intentions (Bell, 1995), Elsa's dress is blue and iridescent, symbolic of her desire for harmony and openness (Mehta & Zhu, 2009). So what do you call a woman who embraces her sexuality separate from men without evil intent? Not a *femme fatale*, but a femme. Much like many lesbians in society, Elsa's rejection of gender assignments is not a rejection of femininity. By acting as an active feminine

sexual subject, rather than object, femmes challenge the dominant connection between beauty and submissiveness which in turn challenges the heteronormative assumptions that support it. Elsa's transformation during "Let it Go" is indicative of femme lesbian aesthetics, demonstrated by her excessive performance of femininity that defies her previously imposed standards of modesty (Lowrey, 2009). Lesbian femme identity is often distinguished from feminine heterosexual identity by "unapologetic sexual agency" (Payne, 2002, p. 48).

Elsa's brazen and independent liberation embodies such agency. Furthering the understanding of Elsa's transformation as a display of femme identity, her sexual liberation is not created through an interaction with a man as required by heteronormativity (Bem, 1993). Elsa embraces her femme sexuality as a product of her own desires rather than in response to male prompting. When a female character is driven by a woman it deconstructs the binary of masculine subject, feminine object (Straayer, 1990). In this case, Elsa serves as both the object and the subject. Her depiction as active sexual subject rather than passive sexual object rejects the traditional heteronormative binary for sexual autonomy. Instead, she displays sexuality that is female initiated and female satisfied, completely separate from male objectification. Her autonomous sexual liberation sets the stage for female spectatorship by opening the door for feminine viewership pleasure. Her self-driven sexuality allows both narcissistic and voyeuristic positions of feminine viewership to come in to existence (Straayer, 1990). Creating space for the feminine voyeuristic gaze while allowing identification with a female sexual subject creates opportunity for lesbian positions of viewing (Stacey, 1987).

The way in which other characters related to Elsa and her powers further emphasizes the reading of her powers as her queer sexuality. Anna personified straight-identifying queer sensibility and acted as an ally for Anna. She was the only person who was individually impacted by Elsa's powers but she supported her sister the entire time. In the situations when Anna was struck by ice it was never deliberately her or Elsa's fault. Anna had to personally experience the consequences of normativity and as a result she was sympathetic to Elsa's oppression. This can be clearly seen when Anna accidentally revealed Elsa's powers. Elsa unintentionally sent an ice wall toward Anna. Everyone in the crowd had looks of horror except Anna. She looked heartbroken and worried. She loved her sister unconditionally and knew that people would respond negatively. Anna's instant concern for her sister also reinforces that there must be an existing social bias against magic within Arendelle's culture which communicates an additional parallel between Elsa's powers and queer sexuality.

Anna's condition is used as a narrative tool to articulate queer identification when she sought help from the leader of the trolls to thaw her frozen heart. After examining her, Pabbie asserted, "If it was her head that would be easy, but only an act of true love can thaw a frozen heart." This proclamation is significant beyond narrative progression when evaluated from a queer perspective, particularly when combined with Pabbie's statements during Anna's first visit to him. In this meeting he told Anna's parents, "you are lucky it wasn't her heart. The heart is not so easily changed, but the head can be persuaded." Here he was referencing the outcome an individual has regarding an internalization of the powers. Matters of the head can be easily changed, but matters of the heart are far more significant. This notion applies two-fold in its association with

queer identities. The first gives significance to the notion that being queer is not a choice but rather is an internal disposition of the heart. The second involves society's disposition toward being queer. Only love can change those whose hearts have been frozen by fear in order to allow acceptance.

Though antithetical to Anna's, the way the Duke of Weselton related to Elsa's powers also further emphasized the reading of her powers as emblematic of queer sexuality. Elsa's marginalized identity becomes a source of empowerment for her, but it is an outlet for paranoia for the film's other queer-coded character. The duke is a prime example of the Sissy Villain trope as he defies gender norms by having a small build, wearing heels, and loving to dance (Martinez, 2015). Through much of the film he acts as the obvious villain. In leading the charge against Elsa he dramatizes the longstanding, albeit outdated, mistrust between gay men and lesbians (Doty, 2000). Through the film, the duke operates as the epitome of homophobia. He actively persecutes Elsa but places the blame on her. When he is kicked out of Arendelle in the end he says, "this is unacceptable! I am a victim of fear! I have been traumatized!" This statement echoes the scapegoat mentality that christened hatred of queer sexuality as homophobia to begin with (Bem, 1993). The duke attempts to defend his hatred of Elsa's powers in the same way hatred of queer sexuality is rationalized in society. In contrast to the dominant ideology in society, however, the people of Arendelle do not accept this as justification for his actions and throw him out of the country. The duke's relation to Elsa and his eventual fate communicate both a validation of reading Elsa as queer and a challenge to the heteronormative acceptance of fear as justification for attacking queer individuals.

The left-handed queen. The homophobic relation to Elsa's powers is reiterated in textual elements and themes through the movie. When Elsa's powers are first introduced, Anna eagerly begs, "do the magic, do the magic!" Within moments, however, the framing shifts as Elsa accidentally strikes her sister with her powers. The pair is rushed to the trolls for help. When giving her advice about her powers, the troll king tells Elsa, "there is beauty in it, but also great danger. You must learn to control it. Fear will be your enemy." He then shows an image of Elsa being attacked for her powers. That her difference leads to violent attacks mirrors the lived experience of many queer individuals (Herek, 2009). Rather than address the cultural ideology driving the fear with his position as ruler of the kingdom, Elsa's father places the burden of protection on her. By seeking to protect Elsa by forcing her to hide her identity, he privatizes this social responsibility and mimics the social rhetoric that blames queer individuals for their own persecution (Herek, 1990). Such victim blaming is symptomatically produced by the cultural imperative of the closet (Sedgwick, 1993). The scene concludes with images of the doors and windows in the castle being closed and locked, thus beginning Elsa's repression.

The recurring image of the door, and its status as locked or unlocked, communicates the insistence on repression while alluding to the closet which queer individuals must come out of when disclosing their identity. Anna repetitively knocks on Elsa's locked door during, "Do You Want to Build a Snowman," as she tries to reconnect with Elsa. The princesses are each in pain on their respective sides showing the injurious nature of the closet and the damage being done to both sisters by Elsa's isolation. At Elsa's coronation the castle doors open for the first time since the king ordered them closed. Disaster followed, underlining the king's insistence that Elsa's repression was for

her own good. In contrast to the ostracism Elsa met based on open doors during the coronation, Anna found romance with the door motif as a focal point during “Love is an Open Door.” Anna sings about the endless possibilities that stem from her new romance. This emphasizes the disparity between her position of opportunity and Elsa’s position of oppression. Heterosexual romance is fully accepted in public while queer romance is expected to exist only behind closed doors (Schieble, 2012). Later Elsa references this dichotomy when Anna tries to bring her back from the North Mountain in saying, “go back home, your life awaits. Enjoy the sun and open up the gates. You mean well, but leave me be. Yes, I’m alone, but I’m alone and free.”

Elsa’s journey toward acceptance delivers several additional door motif examples. When Elsa finishes building the ice castle during her transformation in “Let it Go,” she slams the doors behind her. Because she believes she will never be accepted in society, she willingly shuts herself off from it in order to freely exist. Anna is surprised when the door is unlocked once she reaches the ice castle, “it opened, that’s a first.” In Elsa’s position of safety self-acceptance in her kingdom of isolation, there is no need for closeting herself behind locked doors. After her temporary asylum on the North Mountain, Elsa again is subjected to the persecution of the locked door after Hans takes her prisoner. In the following scene Anna falls victim to the locked door for the first time when Hans reveals his dastardly plan and leaves her to die. That the only time Anna is behind the locked door is intended to bring about her death communicates the inherent trauma of such repression, mirroring the “soul murder” that results from closeting queer individuals (Yep, 2003, p. 22). The final reference to doors comes in the last scene of the movie. Summer has returned to Arendelle and the people are ice skating in the courtyard

thanks to Elsa's powers. Anna comments, "I like the open gates," Elsa replies, "we are never closing them again." This final note reinforces the connection between locked doors and the closet. When society supports and accepts individuals regardless of what character traits they are born with, there is no need to lock these differences away.

An additional queer motif present in the film is that of Elsa as a monster. The Duke of Weselton explicitly asserted this notion following the accidental revelation of her powers, thus beginning the constructed identity of "monster" that haunted Elsa through her journey. This association is not only significant within the narrative progression, but also when considered within film representations of monsters as a whole. The depravity of monsters has long been accentuated by their connection to homosexuality (Benshoff, 2008). Monsters are queered in order to make them more monstrous. Consequently, a female character's portrayal as a monster necessitates the understanding of her as a lesbian (White, 1991). Elsa's depiction as monstrous reemerges when she attempts to salvage her independence by breaking free from her captors. Hans deceived Elsa into believing that she killed Anna. He claimed that Elsa was a monster and for the first time, she believed it. After being told for her entire life that her powers were evil, she finally resigned herself to the certainty that she really was inherently bad based on an aspect of her identity that was beyond her control. Elsa's construction as a monster by the people who fear her, and her eventual belief that they are correct, imitate the continued challenge queer individuals must face to avoid internalizing homophobia even after attaining self-acceptance (Dew et al., 2006).

The Duke of Weselton further sets off Elsa's queer connotation by connecting her to witchcraft in calling her a "wicked sorcerous." When she is outed, Elsa's powers are

no longer “magic” and “amazing” as they were innocently described in the beginning of the story, they are now “sorcery” and “evil.” Throughout history witchcraft, left-handedness, and queer sexuality have all been inextricably linked (Coren, 2002; Evans, 1978; Evans, 2007). Elsa’s connection to witchcraft is apparent in her powers.

Additionally, Elsa’s retreat to the North Mountain when she is outed links her to the femme persona of the Good Witch of the North, Glenda (Doty, 2000). Identifying left-handedness, however, requires closer examination. Elsa uses her left hand to cover her mouth when laughing, try to save Anna in the begging, create Olaf, throw her tiara, defend herself against the attackers in the castle, and give Anna ice skates at the end. Though she occasionally uses her right hand, she defaults to her left as an instinctive response. In addition to the historical connection, left-handedness also shares an inherent performative association with queer sexuality. An individual can learn to do individual tasks as a right-hander, but s/he will still be intrinsically left-handed (Binns, 2006). Their external performance will not change their internal predisposition. That Elsa is actively presented as a left-handed witch signals the final quality of the triad, queer sexuality.

Summary of Analysis

Frozen challenges the dominant cultural ideology regarding normative standards of sexuality. Through featuring a nontraditional narrative structure and rejecting traditional princess narrative roles, the film rejects the traditional norms perpetuated by heteronormative hegemony. The film focuses on a female driven narrative where both Elsa and Anna have genuine agency. The princesses reject traditional gender role performances by serving as ruler and savior rather than in subservient roles. The film further challenges patriarchal standards by rejecting the traditional princess story notions

of damsel in distress, prince charming, knight in shining armor, and love at first sight. *Frozen* negatively depicts powerful male characters while simultaneously supporting independent female characters and minimizing the significance of heterosexual romances. Finally, the narrative serves as an extended metaphor for queer identity expression and acceptance in society. By incorporating ideology that stands in opposition to traditional standards into the acceptable framework of the princess movie, *Frozen* can serve to normalize female empowerment and queer sexuality, in turn challenging hetero-patriarcal domination in society.

Elsa's narrative, relatable to many individuals who have struggled to find acceptance, is made uniquely queer by its specific progression as the magical powers she was born with were identified as different, forced to be hidden, and resulted in ostracism once revealed. The resolution of Elsa's struggle communicates a challenge to the dominant ideology regarding acceptability of queer sexuality. Through the darkness of heteronormativity and isolation, *Frozen's* climax provides a light at the end of the tunnel for queer audiences. Just as with homophobia, the solution to Arendelle's eternal winter was love and open-mindedness. When love overcame the negativity, every person was able to openly coexist without the need to conceal their identities. Based on this reading, the outcome of *Frozen's* narrative challenges hegemonic presumptions of tragedy that have been associated with queer identity. That Elsa overcomes her societally projected negative identity to become a hero in the film is therefore a dynamic example of defiance against heteronormative hegemony. Additionally, that she conquered the turmoil she was faced with based on her identity allows queer audiences to find an example of a positive outcome for a queer-coded character with whom they can identify. Even though this

positive queer narrative is dependent on subtext, it provides audiences with a compelling queer text of acceptance and possibility.

The deviation from gendered norms and relatability of Elsa's narrative provide the foundation for a queer reading that is further justified through textual elements of the film. The characters' responses following the revelation of her powers support understanding the powers as queer sexuality, beginning with Elsa herself. Her personal liberation and transition into femme sexual expression open the possibility for lesbian positions of viewership. The film further supports such reading by using Anna and the duke as narrative tools that champion acceptance and vilify homophobia. Understanding Elsa as queer is further justified through textual elements surrounding her. The juxtaposition between images of locked doors in repressing Elsa's secret and those of unlocked doors in situations of acceptance express the nature of heteronormativity that oppresses queer individuals. Additionally, Elsa's portrayal as a monstrous left-handed sorcerous recall historical associations with queer sexuality.

This analysis of *Frozen* sought to answer the foundational research questions of this study: what messages are being communicated regarding sexuality? By articulating a queer reading that acknowledges possible understanding of the film beyond heterocentric assumptions, I argue that queer meaning actively exists within and is communicated through the text. Queer sensibility is formed based on an understanding of the shared experience of repression faced by queer individuals in a heteronormative society. As such queer readership positions are equally indicative of the social codes produced under heteronormativity as are mainstream readings. This situates a text's queer meaning alongside any heteronormative meaning that may be identified, with both being

communicated through the text simultaneously. In light of this seemingly dualistic claim, it is essential to note the polysemic nature of all media texts. The interpretation of *Frozen* presented here is not intended to be a definitive analysis and other analyses of the film may yield different interpretations.

Be that as it may, *Frozen*'s character roles, narrative progression, and textual themes have combined to create a queer reading that is accessible to audiences far beyond the queer community. Accordingly, this allowed wide-spread reception of the film as queer and in turn wide-spread audience response. In the chapter that follows, I discuss the responses various audiences have had to queer readings of Elsa and *Frozen*. Additionally, I situate the significance of those responses within the cultural context and explain the potential impact of a canonically queer princess. Using this implication as justification, I express Disney's responsibility to act on audiences calls to #GiveElsaAGirlfriend.

Chapter 5: Proposing a Happily Ever Outing

Since the dawn of Disney, queer audiences have found points of identification within the films. From the male skunk who bashfully states, “he can call me flower if he wants to,” upon meeting Bambi, to the genie who claims he has developed an attachment to Aladdin, but not enough to “pick out curtains, or anything,” queer readings of Disney characters are not a new phenomenon. None, however, have taken hold in the mainstream conscience quite like that of Elsa. Queer readings of *Frozen* began circulating before it was even released (e.g., Faraci, 2013; Osenlund, 2013). This reception gained momentum following the film’s debut and became increasingly prevalent as it gained popularity (e.g., Diaz, 2014; Greydanus, 2014; Hoke, 2014; Shaw, 2013; Skaggs, 2014). Queer readings reached mainstream audiences two and a half years after the film’s release when the hashtag #GiveElsaAGirlfriend went viral. In the wake of the #LGBTFansDeserveBetter movement, queer-reading audiences demanded that Disney acknowledge fans’ receptions of Elsa’s sexuality and literally give her a girlfriend in the upcoming sequel (Hunt, 2016). The public’s response to these demands varied from full support to outspoken homophobia. Some feel that reading Elsa as gay valorizes an individual’s perverse sexual choices (Copeland, 2016). Others believe that if Disney were to confirm Elsa’s sexuality as queer it would be transformative for queer youths who are struggling to find acceptance (Siede, 2016).

Historically, media representations of queer identity have both sculpted and imitated the larger cultural understanding of queer sexuality (Gross, 2001). The audience response to a queer reading of Elsa is significant because it is indicative of society's view of queer sexuality. In better understanding the reception to this reading we can better understand the dominant ideology at play and how it may be changing. Ultimately, what it means to be Elsa matters far beyond the limits of the *Frozen* universe. It matters because the film can play a role in reinforcing or challenging the dominant ideology regarding queer sexuality. In this chapter I address why the film's reception and meaning are significant. Having already explained the narrative elements and themes that may contribute to a queer reading of Elsa and *Frozen* in the previous chapter, I examine different audience perspectives regarding this reception and how they reflect society at large. With the cultural significance established, I examine the potential impact of making Elsa canonically queer for both queer and mainstream audiences. I then address recent progress and controversy within Disney queer representation. Finally, I justify and articulate a call to action for the company.

Readership, Reflection, and Response

The arguments for and against giving Elsa a girlfriend both hinged on the same foundational concern, what impact a queer princess could have on young audiences. The oppositional petition, #CharmingPrinceforElsa, expresses this dualistic concern in stating, “[*Frozen*’s] influence reaches into the hearts and minds of children. Girls across the world grow up dreaming of the day they marry their Prince Charming and they want to be like their favorite Disney Princess” (Mertz, 2016, p. 8). For heteronormative audiences, this means that Elsa should be given a prince charming so that girls do not see an

example of a queer princess and decide to be like her when they grow up. For queer-reading audiences, however, the statement is equally true but yields the inverse conclusion. It is exactly because girls aspire to be Disney princesses that Elsa ought to be given a girlfriend. A lesbian Elsa would give queer youths a point of identification so they too can grow up wanting to be like their favorite princess without feeling pressure to compromise who they are in the process.

The debate surrounding the campaign was shaped by a dichotomy between two perspectives on the nature of queer identity development, the first suggesting that queer sexuality was a product of adult choices, and the second advocating that it was a component of the process of identity development in childhood. Those against giving Elsa a girlfriend argued that queer representation is an adult political agenda and therefore inappropriate for children's media (Moynihan, 2016). If Disney gave Elsa a girlfriend they would therefore be incorporating an immoral worldview, already being forced on to "normal" adults, that could corrupt and confuse innocent young viewers. Essentially, the call to acknowledge the queer subtext in the film was hailed by some heteronormative audiences as an attempt to force the queer agenda on the malleable psyche of unsuspecting children in an attempt to turn them queer (Mertz, 2016; Skaggs, 2014). This, of course, is not how sexual orientation is formed. If it were, considering the complete denotative heterosexualization of all Disney films until now, there would be no queer individuals.

Those who support giving Elsa a girlfriend, on the other hand, argue that doing so would not be politicizing or corrupting the message but rather acknowledging what was already inherently possible for children (Moncada, 2016). Feelings of heterosexual

attraction are no more innocent than those of queer attraction and both can occur at any age. Accordingly, that queer children exist is an undeniable certainty. The primary confusion young viewers feel regarding queer representation in children's media comes from its absence. Without positive points of identification within these texts, queer children are left wondering why they never quite feel like the heterosexual characters on the screen. Far from merely being a political concern, inclusion of queer characters thus becomes a highly personal issue that allows young queer individuals the opportunity to understand who they are. Supporters also argue that the audience reception of Elsa as queer is at least equally, if not more so, supported by denotative meaning within the text as is a heteronormative reading and is therefore equally deserving of connotative follow through in the sequel (Ramaswamy, 2016). Rather than having to "turn" or "make" Elsa queer as framed by the opposition, giving Elsa a girlfriend would be building on the implied queer sexuality already present.

The success of *Frozen* and the subsequent audience reception of its queer reading indicate both the relation of the film to heteronormative ideologies and the authority those ideologies hold among the audience. Media texts can function as tools to communicate expectations and beliefs within society and as a product of society they usually support the dominant ideology. These messages are communicated within the text and then decoded by the audiences. If a film supports the dominant ideology it is unlikely to receive much resistance from audiences. Equally, if the messages communicated by the text contradict these normative standards, audiences would be more likely to reject it. The avowal of *Frozen* as including queer meaning within the text that challenges the traditional dominant ideology regarding queer sexuality is therefore supported based on

the backlash it received from heteronormative audiences. Only a small percentage of the audience expressed an opposition to Elsa being queer, however, with a larger portion of the audience supporting the possibility. That the rejection of the film's queer reading was not universally or even predominantly embraced by the audience calls the supremacy and authority of these ideologies into question and communicates a shift in the social conscience regarding the acceptability of queer sexuality.

Despite the lack of queer relationships within the film, *Frozen* undoubtedly is a queer movie. Elsa provides a point of lesbian identification for both queer and heterocentrist audiences. In some ways, Elsa as a powerful lesbian character challenges hegemonic heteronormativity precisely because she does not have a romantic arch. This allows audiences who would otherwise instantly reject a queer narrative to unsuspectingly connect with a lesbian character. Society's negative view of queerness is challenged by forcing identification with queer point of view. In order for the subversive potential of Elsa's queer sexuality to be realized fully, Disney must follow through and acknowledge it. Doing so would appeal to the majority of the audience who supported a queer reading and could influence the overall acceptability of queer sexuality in society, particularly among heteronormative audiences (Ramasubramanian, 2010). With audience members from all walks of life already invested in the character, an openly lesbian Elsa could have substantial impact on both heteronormative and queer audiences.

For mainstream audiences, including relatable queer characters may reduce prejudice against queer sexuality (Schiappa et al., 2006). Similar to face-to-face interactions, when an audience member can relate to a character s/he may come to feel connected to them and possibly even form parasocial relationships with them. Forming

these relationships with positive minority characters can reduce prejudice toward that group in same way as interacting with people from the group face-to-face (Pettigrew, 1998). This allows individuals to connect with individuals they may not have in their daily lives. Connecting to a minority group member complicates prejudiced ideas about that group so that reductionist outlooks can no longer be applicable (Schiappa et al., 2006). For example, heteronormative audiences who connect with a queer Elsa may be less likely to believe that lesbians inherently are threatening or masculine. Media representation of positive queer characters is incredibly important because parasocial relationships only work to reduce prejudice if the viewer feels comfortable in the situation (Schiappa et al., 2006). Thus, incorporating a positive queer character into the familiar framework of a Disney princess movie would have potential to impact the audience's heteronormative beliefs regarding sexuality.

Such positive representation could directly impact queer audiences as well. Children exposed to media representations of negative stereotypes may develop prejudice before they have the value system to oppose it (Cox, Abramson, Devine, & Hollon, 2012). Continuing to include only negative representations of queerness within children's media texts may explicitly harm queer youth audiences in two major ways. The first is increased harassment from others who have internalized the stereotypes. The second is psychological harm from the queer individual personally internalizing the stereotypes themselves. Queer individuals can learn a negative view of queer sexuality before realizing their own queer identity. The individual then experiences self-hatred and depression when they come to realize their sexuality (Cox et al., 2012). This makes positive queer characters essential in children's media. Along with passively absorbing

representations as children, 90% of queer teens state they turned to media representations of queer characters as they were developing their queer identity to find individuals with whom to identify (Evans, 2006). Better representation for queer characters may mean a better life for queer individuals.

Critics often argue that issues of queer sexuality are too mature for young audiences and including queer characters in children's media, particularly with Elsa in *Frozen*, is unnecessarily pushing an adult issue into young minds (e.g., Mertz, 2016; Moynihan, 2016; Skaggs, 2014). Queer sexuality is not suddenly formed and forced into the closet when an individual hits puberty or turns 18. Repressing and closeting queer sexuality begins from the moment children begin consuming messages from their families, their friends, and the media texts they interact with and it is initiated by the omission of queer possibility (Sedgwick, 1993). As such, the absence of queer characters in children's media instills an imperative for queer youths to hide their identity (Lipton, 2008). Including queer characters in family-friendly media would normalize same-sex attraction thus desexualizing queer identity. Removing the stigma from queerness in children's media would allow all youths the opportunity to develop their identity without socially ascribed expectations for deviance or shame.

Visibility versus Representation: A Call for Change

Though Disney has been queer-coding its characters for decades, it has only begun taking baby steps to overtly include queer characters over the past few years. Disney's first queer couple was in the live-action series *Good Luck Charlie* (2014), followed by their first queer couple in an animated series in *Gravity Falls* (2016), then their first same-sex kiss in an animated series in *Star vs. the Forces of Evil* (2017), and

finally their first openly gay character in a movie in their live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) (Swantek, 2017). Counting every production since *Steamboat Willie* (1928) was released 90 years ago, these four examples provide a comprehensive list of the canonically queer Disney characters (Swantek, 2017). The latest addition, LeFou in *Beauty and the Beast*, has garnered a great deal of critical attention from both heteronormative and queer audiences. Plugged as having an “exclusively gay moment” (Furness, 2017), the film quickly met backlash from conservative groups who called for a boycott of the film before it was even released (Nathoo, 2017). Disney, however, should not let the vocal minority that was upset over LeFou’s moment shame them back into the closet. Even with the expressed outrage and calls for protest, *Beauty and the Beast* brought in \$350 million worldwide during its opening weekend [2017, March 17], setting the new record-high for a family film (Coyle, 2017).

Queer audiences were also unhappy with the highly publicized moment, though for vastly different reasons (i.e., Alexander, 2017; Martinelli, 2017; Summers, 2017). LeFou was announced as gay outside the film but diegetically his moment is so small that many would not have even noticed it had the character not been publicized. The director, Bill Condon, announced that LeFou’s gay role in the film marked inclusion for everyone and represents the translation of the story into a modern telling while the actor, Josh Gad, expressed that he was proud to bring Disney’s first openly queer character to the big screen (Petit, 2017). Contradictorily, both also later downplayed the character’s sexuality. Gad was careful to mention that LeFou’s queer sexuality was nowhere in the script, while Condon stated, “I think [LeFou’s sexuality] has been a little overstated” (Mallenbaum, 2017, p. 7). LeFou was announced as gay outside the film but diegetically his moment

was so small that many would not have even noticed it had they not been given a heads-up. The publicity hype led to a four-second same-sex dance scene with no denotative mention of sexuality (Alexander, 2017). The film followed the pattern of promoting a text as inclusive while avoiding denotative confirmation of queer sexuality then including the bare minimum of actual queerness in the text, a model of queerbaiting all too familiar for queer audiences (Lawler, 2017).

Though openly acknowledging a character's queer sexuality is a step in the right direction, LeFou's depiction incorporated several problematic heteronormative aspects of past queer representation. He falls perfectly in line with the classic "gay men are jokes" framing as the villain's comic-relief sidekick (Alexander, 2017). Additionally, his and Elsa's narrative arcs are parallel in that they both follow the heteronormative trope of queer characters being painted negatively throughout the story then being redeemed in the end upon realizing the err of their ways (Summers, 2017). Queer characters first must earn their acceptance before they are allowed to be positive members of society.

Summers (2017) argues that queer characters who follow this trope are written more so to commend heterocentrist audiences for allowing queer individuals permission to exist in their world than to allow queer audiences a point of identification with which to create their own. Since Elsa has already earned her place in Arendelle, Disney has a profound opportunity to shed this trope in *Frozen 2* by allowing a queer character to be good from the start.

Disney allowed queer subtext to become canon for the secondary character of LeFou but still maintained much of the negative association of past queer-coding (Alexander, 2017). They now have a profound opportunity with Elsa to canonize

subtextual queer sexuality for a positive main character. While LeFou's presence was indicative of tokenism where he was made queer for the sake of being able to say that he was, Elsa's recognition has the potential to be genuine queer representation that could benefit queer audiences (Kahn, 1994). Rather than an arbitrary inclusion for the sake of diversity, giving Elsa a girlfriend would canonize queer meaning already present in the film and naturally build on her existing narrative. Critics may argue that the inquiry into a character's sexuality when it is not directly included in the text reduces identity to one characteristic (Copeland, 2016). The logical progression of Elsa's sexuality from the original film and that she is an already established character, however, would allow her queer sexuality to be only another aspect of her complexity rather than the whole of her identity (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). This would allow queer youths the possibility of identifying with a positive and complex openly queer character within a text designed with them in mind. A feminine lesbian princess would be especially significant for young femme girls as they explore their queer identity.

Disney has been dipping its toes into the queer representation pool and it is high time they dive in. Mere visibility of queer characters is not sufficient for genuine representation when it either happens so quickly it is almost unnoticeable, plays into heteronormative stereotypes, or is used to bait queer audiences. There is no reason that children should have to read between the lines in order to find points of queer identification. Being coy about queer visibility may feel like an accomplishment for heteronormative spectators but it ultimately fails queer ones, especially children. If queer individuals make up roughly 10% of the audience (GLAAD, 2016), why should they be represented by only a handful of openly queer characters out of the thousands Disney has

created? Furthermore, why should having queer sexuality showcased in a few seconds-long interactions suffice when most films are entirely dedicated to heterosexual romance? The short answer is that they should not and it should not. Media depictions teach children what to expect life will be like for them. If we only show them images of queer individuals demonized, dying, or devastated, what do we expect them to learn? Queer youth deserve to see themselves in positive and complex characters just as much as their heterosexual peers. They deserve to see sidekicks and superheroes, beasts and beauties, and yes, even princes and princesses.

Disney's corporate ideology and *Frozen*'s narrative already support giving Elsa a girlfriend, the only primary concern remaining is monetary (Nikolas, 2014; Smith, 2017). Even considering the potential loss in revenue from individuals who would boycott a queer princess movie, *Frozen 2* undoubtedly will make hundreds of millions of dollars. If Disney chooses to avoid canonizing Elsa's queer sexuality they communicate that the potential monetary gain from appeasing homophobic criticism is more important than the queer viewers and creators who have helped make Disney what it is today. Based on the support Disney receives from queer audiences and the lack of accurate representation for queer characters, inclusion of queer characters is Disney's social responsibility (Frost, 2016). Disney has an infamous history of perpetuating negative stereotypes about minority groups (Sperb, 2012), particularly regarding queer individuals (Davidson, 2013; Lang, 2017). Giving Elsa a girlfriend in *Frozen 2* would be a powerful step toward rectifying the trauma of their past queer-coded representations. Regardless of Disney's choice, however, Elsa is indisputably queer for countless individuals already. She provides a powerful point of positive queer identification that defies conventional

stereotypes, showing young queer audiences that there is more than one way to be a queen.

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