

OPINION AND REVIEW PIECES

THE APPROACH TO SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY IN ANIMATIONS THROUGHOUT HISTORY: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

A ABORDAGEM DA DIVERSIDADE SEXUAL E DE GÊNERO NAS ANIMAÇÕES POR MEIO DA
HISTÓRIA: UMA REVISÃO NARRATIVA

EL ABORDAJE DE LA DIVERSIDAD SEXUAL Y DE GÉNERO EN LAS ANIMACIONES A LO LARGO
DE LA HISTORIA: UNA REVISIÓN NARRATIVA

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Abstract: Animation serves as an agent of socialization that influences the formation of social perceptions. However, the representation of sexual and gender diversity in this medium has historically been marked by erasure and censorship. This study aims to conduct a narrative review of the historical evolution of sexual and gender diversity in animation, drawing comparisons between Western and Eastern productions. The study combines a narrative literature review with a historical and documentary analysis of animated works. The findings identify three distinct phases: the consolidation of gender-binary stereotypes and negative *queer coding* (through 1970); the cautious introduction of gender fluidity and the emergence of cultural tensions (1980s–1990s); and the development of explicit and affirmative representation in the twenty-first century, driven by *streaming* platforms. The study concludes that, although the democratization of production has enabled more authentic and supportive narratives for identity development among children and adolescents, sexual and gender diversity in animation continues to face sociopolitical barriers, commercially driven self-censorship, and moral panics, requiring sustained resilience from creators and society.

Keywords: Gender diversity; LGBTQIAPN+ representation; Animation; Censorship; Streaming.

Resumo: As animações são agentes de socialização que influenciam a formação de percepções sociais, contudo, a representação da diversidade sexual e de gênero nesse meio enfrentou historicamente apagamentos e censuras. Este estudo tem como objetivo realizar uma pesquisa e revisão narrativa sobre a evolução histórica da diversidade sexual e de gênero nas animações, traçando um paralelo entre produções ocidentais e orientais. Trata-se de uma revisão narrativa da literatura com análise histórico-documental de obras animadas. Os resultados demonstram três fases distintas: a consolidação de estereótipos binaristas e codificação *queer* negativa (até 1970); a inserção cautelosa de fluidez de gênero e o choque cultural (anos 1980 e 1990); e a representação explícita e afirmativa no século XXI, impulsionada pelas plataformas de *streaming*. Conclui-se que, apesar da democratização dos meios de produção permitir narrativas mais autênticas e saudáveis para o desenvolvimento identitário do público infantojuvenil, a diversidade nas animações ainda enfrenta barreiras sociopolíticas, autocensura mercadológica e pânicos morais, exigindo resiliência de criadores e da sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Diversidade de Gênero; Representação LGBTQIAPN+; Animação; Censura; *Streaming*.

Resumen: Las animaciones son agentes de socialización que influyen en la formación de percepciones sociales; sin embargo, la representación de la diversidad sexual y de género en este medio ha enfrentado históricamente el silenciamiento y la censura. Este estudio tiene como objetivo llevar a cabo una investigación y una revisión narrativa sobre la evolución histórica de la diversidad sexual y de género en las animaciones, estableciendo un paralelismo entre las producciones occidentales y orientales. Se trata de una revisión narrativa de la literatura con análisis histórico-documental de obras animadas. Los resultados demuestran tres fases distintas: la consolidación de estereotipos binarios y la codificación *queer* negativa (hasta 1970); la incorporación cautelosa de la fluidez de género y el choque cultural (décadas de 1980 y 1990); y la representación explícita y afirmativa en el siglo XXI, impulsada por las plataformas de *streaming*. Se concluye que, si bien la democratización de los medios de producción permite narrativas más auténticas y saludables para el desarrollo identitario del público infantojuvenil, la diversidad en las animaciones sigue enfrentando barreras sociopolíticas, autocensura comercial y pánicos morales, lo que exige resiliencia por parte de los creadores y de la sociedad.



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Palabras clave: Diversidad de género; Representación LGBTQIAPN+; Animación; Censura; Streaming.

Introduction

Historically, animation has been an art form that transcends cultural barriers, serving as a powerful agent of socialization. It profoundly influences the collective imagination and shapes social perceptions of issues such as gender and sexuality (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). Since the emergence of animated productions in the early twentieth century, the animation industry has established itself as an influential medium for the dissemination of cultural values (Umer; Ali, 2025; Brown, 2025a), playing a crucial role in cognitive development and identity formation, particularly among young audiences (Brown, 2025a; Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005). However, the representation of sexual and gender diversity within this medium has undergone a gradual transformation marked by persistent challenges (Santoniccolo et al., 2023), reflecting broader social, political, and cultural changes in Western and Eastern societies (Carvalho; Souza, 2023; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022).

Throughout much of the history of animation, heteronormative conventions and gender stereotypes have dominated animated narratives (Umer; Ali, 2025). LGBTQIAPN+ characters were largely absent or portrayed as caricatures, frequently serving as comic relief or villainous figures (Li-Vollmer; Lapointe, 2003). This pattern reflected a predominantly conservative industry and society that rejected open discussions of diverse sexual identities (Amery; Mondon, 2025; Osborn, 2025; Toledo, 2025). Within the field of media and sexuality studies, this invisibility constitutes a form of symbolic annihilation (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022), reinforcing the notion that issues related to gender and sexuality were inappropriate for children and adolescents (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Consequently, stigmas were perpetuated, restricting the diversity of representations in mass media and negatively affecting the sense of belonging and identity formation of sexual and gender minority youth (Gomillion; Giuliano, 2011).

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s, the expansion of civil rights movements advocating for LGBTQIAPN+ rights, alongside the emergence of a new generation of content creators, contributed to a gradual but significant shift in how animated media addressed these issues (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022; Dennis, 2003). Western animated productions began to introduce characters who challenged traditional gender roles, although such representations often remained implicit or coded (Dennis, 2003). Meanwhile, in Japan, anime series such as *Sailor Moon* (1992) and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995) brought pioneering and more explicit representations of LGBTQIAPN+ characters and gender fluidity into public discourse (Carvalho; Souza, 2023). Nevertheless, cultural and commercial tensions became evident, as many of these Japanese representations were subjected to extensive censorship, modified dubbing, and edited scenes when distributed in Western markets (Hoskin, 2016).

In the twenty-first century, the consolidation of *streaming* platforms and the resulting decentralization of television distribution provided independent creators with greater creative autonomy (Austin, 2023; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). Animated series such as *Steven Universe* (2013) and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018) challenged established conventions by openly questioning gender and sexuality norms, portraying gender-fluid characters and same-sex relationships as ordinary aspects of their narratives while celebrating diversity (Austin, 2023; Dunn, 2016; Kennedy, 2021; Thomas, 2021). These developments, however, were met with resistance (Osborn, 2025). In various contexts worldwide, these productions have faced backlash, state censorship, and criticism from conservative sectors of society, which have frequently accused them of promoting an ideological agenda aimed at children, highlighting persistent tensions surrounding sex education and public morality (Amery; Mondon, 2025; Burgess; Brettschneider; Keating, 2018; Jans et al., 2026; Reinhard, 2025).

Despite growing scholarly interest in this subject, a gap remains in the academic literature regarding comprehensive analyses that integrate historical and commercial perspectives across Eastern and Western contexts (Carvalho; Souza, 2023; Di Santo; Borges, 2025; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). Accordingly, this article aims to conduct a narrative and historical review of the representation of sexual and gender diversity in animation, tracing the parallel evolution of Western and Eastern productions. The study seeks to examine the sociopolitical barriers encountered, the creative strategies employed to circumvent censorship,

and the advances achieved up to the *streaming* era.

Methodology

This study consists of a narrative literature review combined with a historical and documentary analysis of audiovisual media (Carvalho; Souza, 2023; Mongim; Menandro; Sant'anna, 2024), focusing on the representation of sexual and gender diversity in animation during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The literature search was conducted between June 2024 and May 2026 using SciELO and Google Scholar, employing the following search terms: LGBT representation, gender studies, history of animation, and media censorship, with priority given to publications from the preceding five years. Following the screening process, 50 publications were selected to provide the theoretical and methodological foundation for the study, encompassing works published in Portuguese, English, and Spanish.

For the qualitative analysis of the audiovisual *corpus*, Western and Eastern *mainstream* animated productions were selected based on their historical significance, either through the reinforcement of stereotypes or the subversion of normative roles. Experimental productions and works intended for narrowly defined niche audiences were excluded.

The data and audiovisual works were organized chronologically to highlight sociocultural transformations, the impact of censorship, and the evolution of creative strategies over the decades. As this study relied exclusively on published literature and publicly available audiovisual materials, without involving human participants, ethical review by a Research Ethics Committee was not required.

From the Origins to the Consolidation of Stereotypes (Through 1970)

During the 1930s, Betty Boop emerged as an icon of hypersexualized femininity. Despite her provocative visual presentation and relative independence, the character remained subject to the commodification of the female body. Reduced to an object of desire through the lens of the “male gaze,” her presence primarily served visual spectacle and comedic purposes, reinforcing the stereotype of the frivolous woman (Campos, 2026; Santoniccolo *et al.*, 2023). Although adopting a different approach, this pattern was reproduced in works such as *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943), directed by Tex Avery. The animated short satirized traditional fairy tales by portraying Little Red Riding Hood as a nightclub performer whose appearance provoked the Wolf's exaggerated displays of sexual desire (Abele, 2023; Carrasco Yelmo, 2024; Welsh-Burke, 2023). Within these narratives, female characters appeared visually empowered, yet their power was largely confined to their ability to arouse male desire, while they remained deprived of independent intellectual or narrative agency (Santoniccolo *et al.*, 2023).

Conversely, hegemonic masculinity was celebrated and remained largely unquestioned. Characters such as Popeye reinforced the ideal of the male provider and protector, whose social worth was closely associated with physical strength and virility (Ahmed; Wahab, 2014; Raju *et al.*, 2023). Violence, frequently directed against male rivals in attempts to compete for or rescue female characters, reflected the prevailing patriarchal ideals of the period (Carvalho Filho; Maknamara, 2019). Olive Oyl, in turn, embodied the damsel-in-distress archetype: fragile, dependent, and portrayed as a possession to be claimed, with little autonomy of her own (Umer; Ali, 2025).

Despite the rigidity of the gender binary, classical animated productions occasionally explored the subversion of traditional gender roles, albeit through strictly caricatural representations primarily intended as comic relief (Dennis, 2003; Santoniccolo *et al.*, 2023). Cross-dressing was a recurring comedic device across several animated franchises. During the 1940s, for instance, Bugs Bunny adopted feminine personas to deceive his adversaries, while similar dynamics appeared in *Tom and Jerry* and even in *Popeye* through humorous interactions (Dennis, 2003; Sadiq; Baghavandoss, 2024). However, such apparent fluidity in gender expression did not entail any meaningful recognition of gender identity. Rather, it functioned as a comedic device that elicited laughter precisely by portraying deviations from established gender norms as absurd or ridiculous, thereby paradoxically reinforcing the legitimacy of heteronormative conventions (Dennis, 2003; Santoniccolo *et al.*, 2023).

Representations of nonconforming masculinities were subjected to even more pronounced stigmatization. In the absence of openly homosexual characters, the animation industry developed representational practices commonly described in media studies as *queer coding*, frequently employing them in a negative or stigmatizing manner (Dennis, 2003). Effeminate mannerisms among male characters were systematically associated with villainy, manipulation, and moral deficiency (Li-Vollmer; Lapointe, 2003). In animated classics such as *Pinocchio* (1940), characters including Honest John and Gideon embodied antagonistic figures characterized by exaggerated mannerisms and stylized expressions of effeminacy, reflecting contemporary cultural anxieties surrounding nonconforming masculinities. The archetype of the effeminate villain or henchman became an influential means of signifying moral corruption, leaving a lasting legacy in Western animation and shaping character design for decades. This pattern persisted in later productions, as exemplified by LeFou in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) (Li-Vollmer; Lapointe, 2003).

The consolidation of these restrictive and prejudicial representations persisted into the 1970s and was profoundly influenced by the Hays Code, a set of stringent moral guidelines that governed American film production for decades (Brown, 2025b; Toledo, 2025). Through its prohibition of what it termed “sex perversion,” the Code imposed severe restrictions on representations of homosexuality and contributed to the marginalization of gender nonconformity, compelling the industry to conceal or erase such identities under the justification of maintaining acceptability for mainstream audiences (Toledo, 2025).

It is important to recognize that the normative framework reinforced by the Hays Code was strongly supported by the dominant scientific discourse of the period. Until 1973, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) classified homosexuality, then pathologized within psychiatric discourse, as a mental disorder (Drescher, 2015). This clinical endorsement influenced cultural attitudes, shaped prevailing standards of acceptable behavior, and provided an ostensibly “scientific” justification for state and industry-driven censorship, contributing to an institutionalized culture of invisibility surrounding LGBTQIAPN+ identities in animation (Dennis, 2003; Sadiq; Baghavandoss, 2024). It was only with the gradual weakening of these restrictive guidelines during the 1960s and the advances in depathologization throughout the following decade that barriers to representation began to erode, opening an initially tentative yet enduring path toward discussions of diversity that would gain prominence in subsequent decades (Dennis, 2003).

The Introduction of Gender-Fluid Characters and the Reversal of Gender Roles (1980s–1990s)

The 1980s and 1990s marked a fundamental transition in animation, driven by sexual liberation movements and debates surrounding gender equality (Dennis, 2003; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). Within this context, animated productions began to challenge the boundaries of the gender binary, albeit cautiously (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). Series such as *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983) and *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985) exemplify this initial shift toward greater flexibility in gender representation. Although *He-Man* embodied a hypermasculine physique, its aesthetic strongly evoked *camp*², sensibilities, subverting conventional militarized ideals of masculinity, whereas *She-Ra* challenged traditional expectations by positioning a woman as both a tactical leader and an action heroine (Austin, 2023; Thomas, 2021). The character occupied positions of power and physical strength historically associated with masculinity without relinquishing her femininity, thereby introducing greater complexity into the models of identification available to children and adolescents (Austin, 2023; Thomas, 2021).

In adult-oriented and serialized animation, the late 1980s marked the beginning of a more recurrent, albeit heavily coded, inclusion of LGBTQIAPN+ characters (Santonico et al., 2023). In *The Simpsons* (1989), the characterization of Waylon Smithers exemplifies the archetype of the closeted gay man. Portrayed through traits of subservience and an unmistakable, albeit platonic, romantic attachment to his employer, Mr. Burns, Smithers represented one of the earliest sustained portrayals of homosexuality in Western animated television (Dennis, 2003). The reluctance of mainstream media to address sexual diversity required such representations to remain implicit or concealed through comedy, reflecting the stigma that continued to surround the explicit

²Popularized by Susan Sontag (1964), *camp* aesthetics are characterized by exaggeration, artifice, theatricality, and irony. Subsequently, within Cultural Studies and Queer Theory, the concept became widely recognized as a form of LGBTQIAPN+ resistance that employs excess and humor to subvert and destabilize rigid hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality.

visibility of non-heteronormative sexual orientations (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022).

By contrast, the late 1990s witnessed a departure from these caricatured representations in more avant-garde productions. The series *Mission Hill* (1999) emerged as a significant historical milestone by introducing Gus and Wally, a middle-aged gay couple portrayed with remarkable humanity and naturalism (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). Rather than adhering to established conventions of hypersexualization or employing effeminacy as a source of humor, the characters were depicted engaging in the ordinary routines of domestic life. This realistic approach pioneered the destigmatization of same-sex relationships by presenting them within a framework of everyday normalcy and emotional validation (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022).

Meanwhile, Eastern animation presented considerably bolder approaches to sexual orientation and gender fluidity (Carvalho; Souza, 2023). The Japanese anime *Sailor Moon* (1992) was groundbreaking in its portrayal of the lesbian couple Haruka and Michiru (Hoskin, 2016). Haruka challenged traditional gender categories through an androgynous presentation and fluid movement between different gender performances (Sundaram, 2025). Similarly, in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), the ambiguous relationship between Shinji and Kaworu intertwined psychological vulnerability with profound homoerotic tension (Carvalho; Souza, 2023; Sundaram, 2025). However, the moral and cultural tensions surrounding these representations became particularly evident when the productions were exported to Western markets. To conform to prevailing conservative moral standards, their adaptations underwent extensive institutional censorship. The English-language dub released in the United States rewrote Haruka and Michiru's romantic relationship by portraying them as cousins, a strategy of erasure that exposed the Western market's resistance to sexual diversity (Hoskin, 2016).

Simultaneously, satirical animated series in the United States adopted a more aggressively transgressive approach. *South Park* (1997) introduced LGBTQIAPN+ characters as early as its initial seasons, including Big Gay Al and, subsequently, Mr. Slave (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). Although these portrayals were deliberately exaggerated and heavily reliant on stereotypes, their narrative purpose was frequently not to target the community directly, but rather to employ grotesque humor and hyperbole to expose and ridicule homophobia and the hypocrisy of conservative society (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). This provocative strategy created opportunities for previously taboo subjects to be discussed openly in mainstream entertainment, albeit in a controversial manner (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022).

In summary, the 1980s and 1990s served as a period of experimentation marked by tensions within the media landscape. Although the inclusion of LGBTQIAPN+ characters remained constrained by censorship, coded humor, and translation-mediated erasure, the increasing visibility of these identities laid the groundwork for subsequent developments (Dennis, 2003). The transition from coded subversion to more explicit representation established the foundations for the direct approaches that would reshape the landscape of animation in the following century (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022).

The Twenty-First Century: Explicit Representation and the Role of Streaming

The 2010s marked a paradigmatic shift in the representation of sexual and gender diversity in animation, driven by the emergence and expansion of *streaming* platforms (Alam et al., 2026; Austin, 2023). By reducing dependence on traditional television networks and advertisers reluctant to engage with controversial subjects, this new distribution model provided unprecedented creative freedom (Austin, 2023). Such decentralization enabled LGBTQIAPN+ creators to take ownership of their narratives, replacing the subtle coding of earlier decades with affirmative, explicit, and organically integrated representations (Alam et al., 2026).

In children's and adolescent animation, productions such as *Adventure Time*, *Steven Universe*, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, and *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* redefined the boundaries of what was considered acceptable for young audiences (Austin, 2023; Dunn, 2016; Thomas, 2021). These works moved beyond portraying *queer* characters merely as comic relief or tragic supporting figures, instead positioning them at the emotional and heroic center of their narratives.

In *Adventure Time*, the gradual development of the romantic relationship between Marceline and Princess Bubblegum culminated in an explicit acknowledgment of their affection, a portrayal that had previously been rare in children's animation (Alam et al., 2026; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). *Steven Universe* went even further by actively deconstructing conventional notions of the gender binary (Dunn, 2016; Kennedy, 2021) and achieving historical milestones, including the depiction of the first same-sex wedding in mainstream children's animation, between the characters Ruby and Sapphire (Kennedy, 2021). The series subverted traditional fairy-tale tropes³, replacing the heteronormative conventions of princes and princesses with an explicit celebration of *queer* love (Dunn, 2016; Kennedy, 2021).

These contemporary productions also distinguished themselves by normalizing LGBTQIAPN+ experiences. In *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*, the character Benson casually reveals that he is gay and is met with acceptance, without drama or conflict (Salazar et al., 2020; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). This affirmative approach is particularly significant from psychological and social perspectives, as it challenges the longstanding narrative that has invariably associated nonnormative identities with suffering, familial rejection, or trauma, offering young viewers positive and healthy models of identity development (Salazar et al., 2020; Gomillion; Giuliano, 2011).

This growing narrative sophistication also extended to adult animation, including productions that had previously relied on aggressive satire. The series *South Park*, renowned for its biting and transgressive humor, revisited its own narrative conventions through its portrayal of the relationship between the children Craig and Tweek. What initially emerged as a metatextual joke about fan culture evolved into a surprisingly tender relationship that was treated with narrative seriousness (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). Similarly, the trajectory of Mr. Garrison, who underwent gender transitions over several seasons, reflected, in a chaotic yet sustained manner, the complexities and contentious public debates surrounding transgender identities and gender fluidity in contemporary society (Dunn, 2016; Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

Another significant advance in representation occurred in the series *BoJack Horseman* (2014), through the inclusion of Todd Chavez, a character who gradually came to recognize and openly identify as asexual (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Asexuality has historically been rendered invisible in media or erroneously framed as a clinical or pathological deficit (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022; Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Todd's narrative arc was praised for its sensitive and accurate portrayal of the asexual spectrum, depicting his process of identity formation and search for community without reducing his experiences to jokes about a lack of sexual desire. The series affirmed asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation deserving of meaningful representation and narrative prominence (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022).

Animated productions intended primarily for educational purposes also adopted more inclusive approaches, generating direct social impacts (Salazar et al., 2020). A notable example occurred in the children's series *Arthur* (2019), which depicted the wedding of teacher Mr. Ratburn to his partner Patrick (Brown, 2025a; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). The inclusion of this event as an ordinary and celebratory occasion in a program with a strong educational emphasis represented an effort to normalize the presence of same-sex couples and families in children's social environments, fostering respect and citizenship (Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022).

However, this affirmative visibility provoked intense cultural backlash on a transnational scale, manifesting in distinct forms of moral panic across Western societies, particularly in the United States and Latin America (Amery; Mondon, 2025; Jones, 2025; Osborn, 2025; Bustamante; Cotrina; Jordán, 2022). The inclusion of LGBTQIAPN+ themes became the focal point of moral panics orchestrated by conservative and religious groups, which frequently accused these productions of promoting an inappropriate ideology and threatening the supposed innocence of childhood (Amery; Mondon, 2025; Marwick et al., 2024; Osborn, 2025; Reinhard, 2025). For example, the premiere episode of *Arthur's* twenty-second season, entitled "Mr. Ratburn and the Special Someone," released in May 2019, was subjected to government censorship and prevented from airing on public television stations in conservative U.S. states, including Alabama (Osborn, 2025; Reinhard, 2025). This reaction illustrates the belief that the mere existence of *queer* individuals is inherently associated with

³ In media criticism and literary studies, the term "trope" refers to recurring narrative conventions, themes, motifs, or clichés that audiences readily recognize (Moisés, 2004, p. 453). In the context of traditional fairy tales, the damsel in distress awaiting rescue by a prince constitutes a classic example of a narrative trope.

adult or sexual content, highlighting how children's television remains a site of ideological contestation (Osborn, 2025).

Brazil provided a clear example of how such resistance operates even beyond children's entertainment. The series *Super Drags* (2018), a Brazilian *Netflix* original production centered on superhero drag queens, generated an intense wave of moral outrage even before its premiere (Bustamante; Cotrina; Jordán, 2022). Despite being explicitly classified as suitable for adult audiences, conservative groups and political figures organized smear campaigns accusing the production of attempting to expose children to LGBTQIAPN+ culture (Marwick et al., 2024). Commercial pressure and public controversy were so substantial that the platform canceled the series after a single season (Bustamante; Cotrina; Jordán, 2022; Reinhard, 2025). The case of *Super Drags* is particularly illustrative, demonstrating that although *streaming* platforms provide an alternative to the constraints of traditional broadcast television, they remain vulnerable to censorship campaigns organized by conservative sectors of society (Reinhard, 2025).

In summary, the twenty-first century has established a fundamental duality in the history of animation. On the one hand, *streaming* platforms and generational shifts have facilitated a golden age of explicit, diverse, and affirmative representations of sexual and gender diversity. On the other hand, these productions continue to operate within a contested cultural landscape (Jans et al., 2026). Efforts to develop narratives that humanize the LGBTQIAPN+ community continue to encounter barriers rooted in institutionalized prejudice, requiring sustained resilience from creators and supportive audiences to ensure that diversity is no longer perceived as a form of subversion but instead recognized as a genuine reflection of human experience (Last et al., 2026; Phan, 2025).

Discussion

Despite the undeniable sociocultural advances in LGBTQIAPN+ representation in animation, achieving full visibility continues to face profound systemic barriers. The primary obstacle remains institutionalized censorship imposed by authoritarian governments and ultraconservative movements, which perceive gender diversity as a threat to cisheteronormative hegemony and traditional values (Amery; Mondon, 2025; Osborn, 2025). Globally, productions featuring explicit representations are banned or subjected to extensive cuts. Russia, for instance, has enacted laws against so-called “homosexual propaganda,” criminalizing nonnormative narratives intended for minors (Jones, 2025; Osborn, 2025). Such criminalization reflects an alarming landscape in which censorship functions as a sociopolitical instrument of erasure (Jones, 2025).

However, these challenges are not confined to authoritarian regimes. In Western democracies, cultural resistance and moral panic operate as powerful mechanisms of coercion (Garland, 2008; Goode; Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Walsh, 2020). Localized censorship efforts, such as boycotts of educational television series in conservative U.S. states (Jans et al., 2026; Reinhard, 2025), underscore the profound polarization surrounding debates about childhood (Jans et al., 2026). For reactionary sectors of society, these narratives do not reflect demographic realities but instead constitute a form of indoctrination (Marwick et al., 2024; Reinhard, 2025), creating persistent obstacles to reaching audiences who seek affirmation of their identities.

Compounding these challenges is the formidable influence of the globalized market. Studios remain reluctant to embrace diversity explicitly due to fears of financial repercussions, caught between state censorship in highly restrictive markets, such as China and the Middle East, and the threat of commercially motivated boycotts organized by conservative groups in the West (Anderson; Sussman; Song, 2024; Henry, 2024). In these authoritarian contexts, the inclusion of central LGBTQIAPN+ characters can result in outright bans, whereas in Western markets, explicit representation faces considerable economic pressure fueled by slogans such as the Brazilian expression “quem laca não lucra” (Alves; Romualdo, 2021) and its English-language counterpart, “get woke, go broke” (Henry, 2024). These campaigns mobilize online harassment and public shaming, alongside the reinforcement of conservative ideology, to associate diverse representation with the risk of financial losses (Meira; Antunes; Oliveira, 2023; Rezende; Reis, 2022). To mitigate these risks and accommodate both sets of pressures, many companies resort to self-censorship, employing subtle representations that can be easily removed during international editing or incorporating superficial instances of inclusion. This mar-

ket-driven logic subordinates representation to the interests of capital (Alam et al., 2026; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022).

Conversely, *streaming* platforms have emerged as a primary means of resisting these restrictive conditions (Austin, 2023). Their on-demand distribution model circumvents the limitations of traditional television and reduces dependence on advertisers reluctant to engage with controversial subjects, providing unprecedented creative freedom to explore nonnormative sexual orientations in greater depth (Austin, 2023; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022). Beyond functioning as content libraries, these platforms serve as global forums, enabling young people living in repressive environments to access narratives that affirm their identities and foster empathy (Salazar et al., 2020; Phan, 2025).

Future prospects are also driven by the democratization of production technologies. Declining technological costs have enabled creators from within the LGBTQIAPN+ community to assume greater control over their own narratives, placing increasing pressure on the dominant media industry (Alam et al., 2026; Brown, 2025a). Animated short films such as *In a Heartbeat* (2017), which went viral for depicting the emergence of romantic feelings between two adolescent boys, demonstrate the substantial demand for authentic representation (Salazar et al., 2020; Scharrer; Ramasubramanian; Banjo, 2022), illustrating that success no longer depends exclusively on traditional distribution channels.

Within this context, inclusion in animation remains an ongoing site of contestation (Jans et al., 2026). To prevent setbacks, it is imperative that studios and platforms maintain a sustained ethical commitment to diversity. Their ability to withstand pressures from intolerant markets will determine whether future entertainment reflects the genuine plurality of human experience or reverts to established patterns of invisibility (Amery; Mondon, 2025; Jones, 2025; Last et al., 2026).

Conclusion

The representation of sexual and gender diversity in animation has evolved from enforced invisibility and pervasive negative stereotypes toward affirmative, diverse, and increasingly prominent representations, particularly with the rise of *streaming* platforms. This study demonstrates that both Eastern and Western animated productions are not merely forms of entertainment but also sites of sociopolitical contestation that reflect the social progress and moral resistance characteristic of different historical periods.

The contribution of this analysis lies in highlighting the importance of animated media in the identity formation of children and adolescents. Far from being merely a form of passive entertainment, animation serves as a safe symbolic space in which children and adolescents explore their own subjectivities and develop an understanding of the world around them. For LGBTQIAPN+ youth, who frequently grow up experiencing feelings of inadequacy or isolation, encountering characters who positively reflect their lived experiences helps disrupt the cycle of historical invisibility, affirming their identities and emotional experiences. At the same time, exposure to diverse narratives among broader audiences challenges prejudicial assumptions, fosters empathy, and promotes the acceptance of diversity from an early age. It is therefore essential to recognize that the stories encountered during childhood and adolescence provide the emotional vocabulary necessary for developing a healthy self-image and envisioning a more inclusive and supportive social future.

In practical terms, this context requires psychologists, educators, and healthcare professionals to adopt a critical and attentive approach to media consumption, using animated productions as active tools to foster empathy, reduce stigma, and support sexual and gender minority youth. In educational settings, teachers can incorporate these narratives to facilitate discussions about respect for differences, bullying prevention, and media literacy, thereby challenging stereotypes in the classroom. In clinical practice, psychologists can use these animated productions as therapeutic resources to facilitate discussions about emotional distress and self-acceptance among adolescents, as well as supportive materials in psychoeducation to help families better understand and affirm their children. The challenge ahead lies not only in ensuring the continued creation of these narratives but also in safeguarding their unrestricted distribution against censorship and conservative backlash.

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