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Payton Creamer

An Intersectional Feminist Look at *Bridgerton*

Introduction

Television shows play a critical role in helping to either dismantle or uphold white supremacy and the patriarchy because the media has become intertwined with reality. TV representations impact the way we come to understand the worth and potential of groups of people. Through casting, there can be a conscious decision to broaden the narratives and stories told, but Hollywood consistently gets stuck on stereotypes that lead to the dehumanization and marginalization of people, particularly non-white and LGBTQ+ people. The Netflix show, *Bridgerton*, produced by Shondaland, was met with immense positive feedback. Viewership hit 82 million households, and it became the second most watched series on the platform (Rodriguez & Khal, 2022). *Bridgerton* marketed and praised itself for bringing a diverse cast to the Regency era and promised viewers to incorporate important conversations around race, gender, and sexuality into the plot. Chris Van Dusen is the creator and showrunner of *Bridgerton*. In an interview with Collider, Van Dusen says, "Color and race is a part of the show, and it is a part of the conversation and it is, you'll find it, written in the text or the scripts, just like class, and gender and sexuality are" (Mahato, 2022, para.12). This conversation highlights that *Bridgerton* was not only trying to take a fantasy, escapism route, but purposely wanted to include meaningful and impactful conversations.

In order to judge the representation in *Bridgerton*, I study the show by taking an intersectional feminist perspective. In this paper, I define intersectional feminism as the advocacy for equality across the gender spectrum with critical acknowledgement of social categorizations that lead to varying experiences for individuals. There must not only be an

absence of common tropes and stereotypes, but it must include positive and varying representation of marginalized groups. This definition is influenced by a general understanding of intersectionality and feminism as well as Oxford Dictionary's definition of intersectionality and DeFelice and Diller's definition of intersectional feminism. My key takeaway from the Oxford Dictionary's definition of intersectionality is that social categorizations overlap for individuals which can lead to potential disadvantages ("Intersectionality," n.d.). DeFelice's definition of intersectional feminism strengthened my understanding that when considering gender, it is critical to also examine other factors, such as race and sexuality (DeFelice & Diller, 2019). While the term intersectionality can be applied to many social categorizations, I focus my research on race, gender, and sexuality.

Literature Review

Prior research shows that casting and writing decisions that are rooted in racist, sexist, or homophobic ideology have serious consequences on the structure of society. Filmmaker Pratibha Parmar states, "Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 5). The narratives told on screen lead to society's common understanding of our constructions of race and gender (Sandman, 2021). Heteronormativity, an ideology that promotes gender conventionality, heterosexuality, and family traditionalism as the correct way for people to be, is heavily promoted in television. This is due to the fact that queer love stories are commonly outcasted or not included (Few-Demo, Humble & Curran, 2016). Diverse, positive, and varying representation is crucial because what we see in the media influences how we think.

I have focused my research on intersectional feminism because, “traditional feminism categorized men versus women, and it left no space for subcategories of white women and black women; white feminists failed to recognize the different experiences of black women” (DeFelice & Diller, 2019, p. 5). Hollywood has repeatedly excluded people of color, particularly women, from storylines. When they are included, they are often used as side characters who follow common stereotypes. A comprehensive study from USC’s Annenberg Inclusion Initiative found that Asian and Pacific Islanders accounted for less than 6 percent of speaking roles and less than 4 percent of leads and co-leads in Hollywood films. The API characters presented were likely to be reduced to stereotypes or tropes, these include being used as the sidekick, villain, or token character, who lacks family, friendships, and romantic relationships. Only 13% of the Asian characters in speaking roles had a full spectrum of human relationships (Yuen & Smith, 2021). In addition, a study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media examined the representations of Black women and girls in entertainment media in 2019. They found that Black girls and women are only 3.7% of leads/co-leads in the 100 top-grossing films of the last decade. Only 19% of the Black female leads were women with a darker skin tone. (McTaggart, Cox & Heldmen, 2021). Common tropes of Black women in media are: a sexual not romantic character, multiracial person with tragic story, a darker skinned character who acts as a motherly figure to children who are not her own, and welfare mother (Sandman, 2021). Based on previous studies, it is clear that many past representations of certain people in television have contained damaging stereotypes and tropes. Therefore, it is important to continue this type of research to determine if there has been an improvement in more recent representation.

Research Question

After research on the importance of representation and based on how *Bridgerton* was promoted, I use a content analysis approach to examine whether or not *Bridgerton* is an intersectional feminist show.

Method

After conducting this literature review and learning about previous representations in television, I completed a content analysis and looked for emergent themes in all eight episodes of season 1 of *Bridgerton*. While watching the show, I took thorough notes during each episode and paid particular attention to any mention of gender expectations, race, and sexuality. I focused on what types of characters I was seeing and what they were saying, while also focusing on what types of characters I was not seeing and what conversations were not being had. After finishing all eight episodes, I reviewed my notes while considering information from my literature review, and looked for themes that emerged around gender, race, and sexuality. I analyzed characters whose stories followed common tropes and paid attention to who was not represented.

Findings

Creator and showrunner, Van Dusen, said that gender, race, and sexuality will all be topics discussed in the show. While all three were discussed, the conversations around gender roles and expectations were spoken about at length, while the other two were reduced to short, vague, and ambiguous conversations.

Gender expectations and the desire to not conform to these standards is a main plot point of the show. While the lead heterosexual, white, female love interest, Daphne, takes the courting process seriously, she still defends herself, criticizes the system, and is not seen as the

traditionally submissive woman. In episode 1, Daphne says, “Unlike you, I cannot simply declare I do not wish to marry. I do not have such privilege.” In episode 2, Daphne says, “Despite what you and my brother may think, I am quite capable of speaking for myself” (Rhimes, 2020). These moments of feminist thought continue throughout the season. Defiance of gender expectations are also heavily discussed through Daphne’s younger sister, Eloise. Eloise is the most forward thinking, assertive, feminist character. Her storyline consists mainly of praising the female writer, Lady Whistledown, criticizing the patriarchal system, and rejecting the gender roles society tries to enforce on her. She makes it clear that she prioritizes learning and not finding a husband. In episode 2, Eloise says, “Having a nice face and pleasant hair is not an accomplishment. Do you know what is an accomplishment? Attending university! If I were a man I could do that!” (Rhimes, 2020).

Women are not the only characters who speak about gender. The men also speak about gender roles, but their thought process is not as feminist thinking as the female characters. However, *Bridgerton* also does not praise the men who are overtly sexist. Lord Berbooke has the most aggressively sexist quotes and is seen as an unattractive and undesirable spouse option. When Simon, the Black, heterosexual, lead male love interest, tells Berbooke, an older, white, heterosexual man, that who Daphne marries should be up to her, Berbrooke says, “When I am buying a horse, I do not negotiate with the horse.” When questioning Daphne’s sexual history, he says, “... if I had already known she was loose and damaged, not intact, I never would have” (Rhimes, 2020). Here, Berbooke was alluding to the fact that he would not court Daphne if she had a prior sexual experience. Simon becomes angry at these words and aggressively tells Berbrooke to stop talking. From this interaction, it is clear the show favors more feminist

thinking men, by making the most sexist character unlikeable and much less conventionally attractive than Simon, who defends Daphne.

While gender is discussed in every episode, the same cannot be said for the discussion of race. Race is discussed only one time, and the conversation remains vague and unclear. For the first 3 episodes, race is not spoken about at all. Then in episode 4, Lady Danbury, a widowed Black woman, says to Simon, “We were two separate societies, divided by color, until a king fell in love with one of us. Love, your grace, conquers all” (Rhimes, 2020). This conversation was had in private with only a few unaware servants shown wandering around. While gender was spoken of openly, this conversation about race was said off to the side, in a more hushed tone of voice. Instead of having race be actively part of the dialogue, *Bridgerton* tried to demonstrate that this was a racially equal society by having a Black queen (Charlotte), a Black duke who is the male love lead (Simon), a high class Black woman (Lady Danbury), a Black young woman who is the season's Incomparable (Marina), as well as many Black characters in the background at balls. There are very few Asian or Latinx characters, and the ones that exist are in the background with close to no lines. Throughout the whole season, race was not a main discussion topic; there were many races not featured, and those who were featured, did not have their race discussed.

In the world of *Bridgerton*, LGBTQ+ people do not exist until episode 5 when Benedict Bridgerton sees two white men having sexual intimacy in a private room of a party house. In this house, there are many heterosexual couples engaged in sexual acts in visible areas, but the only queer couple is hidden with the clear intention of hoping to not be seen. This shows the audience that being LGBTQ+ is shunned in all areas of society, and not only at the high class events. The next and final scene that involves queer sexuality is in episode 7. One of the gay men

seen at the party approaches Benedict Bridgerton to ensure that the secret will be kept. The man says,

We live under a constant threat of danger Mr. Bridgerton, I risk my life every day for love. You have no idea what it is like to be in a room with someone you cannot live without... and yet still feel as though you are oceans apart. Stealing your glances, disguising your touches. We cannot so much as smile at each other, without first ensuring no one else is watching. It takes courage to live outside the traditional expectations of society (Rhimes, 2020).

They are then interrupted and homosexuality does not get seen or spoken about again.

Discussion

While *Bridgerton* did incorporate conversations around gender, race, and sexuality into the Regency era, it needed to be taken steps further in order to make it an intersectional feminist show. Gender was spoken about with an undertone of appraisal for feminist thought and a disapproval of sexist ideology, however the conversation around gender and women's rights were largely done by the white, heterosexual characters, which adds to the exclusion of women of color, the persistence of white feminism, and continues to ignore intersectionality.

A short vague conversation about race in an eight episode series is not enough to support Van Dusen's claims that "Color and race ... is a part of the conversation" (Mahato, 2022, para.12). Since these statements were made while marketing *Bridgerton*, it is reasonable to assume these claims were made to lure people into the show, and the active care of making sure the follow through was present and detailed was not taken. The show's approach to race is convoluted. They could have done an escapism approach and had people of color in all different

kinds of roles and shown a pure, joyous, fantasy world where racism does not exist. Instead, they talked about it enough to make the audience aware that race was also a social construct in this world, but not enough to fully incorporate meaningful impact. It was left as a confusing subplot, and the underlying tone was that this conversation was taboo to talk about, which is not inline with the narrative of equality. The only non-white characters included in this world were mostly Black characters, and other women of color were hardly seen. The representation of Black people was poor, as most of the storylines fell into common television tropes. Marina, a biracial Black woman, has the most heartbreaking story of all and is seen as a cautionary tale to all the other young women. A common trope of biracial people, particularly women, is being someone with a tragic story (Sandman, 2021). Lady Danbury, who is the darkest skinned Black woman with speaking lines, also heavily follows a Hollywood trope. Dark skin women tend to be portrayed as an old and wise motherly figure to children who are not her own (Sandman, 2021). The audience never gets to fully understand who they are and they never have a romantic partner. It is typical for Lady Danbury to come into a scene, say something wise and then mysteriously leave. She took on a motherly role to Simon, and the rest of her life and relationships remain largely unclear. The show also used the trope of the abusive and absent Black father. Simon's father is by far the cruelest character of the show and he is also the darkest skinned character. The abuse and negligence from his father led to a lot of trauma for Simon, which became a major plot point of the story. While *Bridgerton* did have a diverse cast, the heavy use of tropes and the exclusion of women of color from conversations about feminism, makes it not an intersectional feminist show.

In addition to this, the show presents itself through a heteronormative lens where queer people are close to nonexistent and outcasted. Love stories that are focused on and glorified in

the show are the heterosexual relationships, and the single homosexual relationship shown is a secretive affair that happens in a closed off, private room of a lower class party house. This reinforces the idea that heteronormativity is the standard and queer people are unwanted and should be hidden from society. *Bridgerton* was not meant to be historically accurate, so the producers were not bound to any rules. The narrative could have been changed to allow queer characters to openly fall in love and thrive in society.

Gender, race, and sexuality never came together in the show to make it intersectional: the white women were the challengers of gender norms, the only gay people shown to exist were two white men, and race was essentially not addressed. *Bridgerton* would have had a more powerful impact if we got stereotype free representations of people we don't often get to see on our screens.

Conclusion

In comparison to other shows, *Bridgerton* can be seen as a step forward. They made an effort to bring more types of people into a world that is usually reserved for heterosexual, cisgender, white people. However, *Bridgerton* failed to realize that in order to be a successful intersectional feminist show, more steps need to be taken other than only having a diverse cast. The minimum was done to include people of color and queer people. They needed to incorporate more conversations about race and sexuality, as well as have positive representations of people whose storylines are not rooted in stereotypes. When stereotypes are shown on screen, society internalizes those messages and starts seeing those groups of people that way. A limitation of my research is as a white woman, I may have missed more subtle moments about race that I am naive to because of my privileged experiences. Race and sexuality should have been spoken

about at the forefront like gender was, but since it was not, there might have been subtle subplots that alluded to race I did not recognize. Therefore, this research could be further studied by having a diverse group of researchers analyze the episodes for intersectionality. I would also like to see this research furthered by studying if *Bridgerton* promotes white feminism. My research question and method could also be taken and applied to season two. What we see on our television screens matter and affect the world we live in. There is a need for intersectional feminist shows and while *Bridgerton* is a step in the right direction, there is still a long way to go.

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