

Teen Drama and Gender in the US

Two Moms, a Transgender Teen, and One Family on The Fosters

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Concepts of gender are socially constructed through a variety of influences, including the media. This chapter explores transgender experiences as depicted in Freeform's tv-drama *The Fosters* through both a textual analysis of the program with a particular focus on the 10 episodes in which Cole, a transgender teen, appears and an analysis of audience reviews of the program from youth and parents obtained online from Common Sense Media. Results suggest that the narrative can contribute to the construction of transgender identity and tell the stories of every day relationships experienced by transgender teens. Moreover, the audience response suggests that parents expressed more conflicted reactions to the show than kids, indicating more concerns about sexual content than youth. The youth viewers do comment that sex is a part of *The Fosters* but seem to indicate that lessons about acceptance, tolerance, love, and diversity outweigh the concerns about sexual content.

For most children, gender reflects societal expectations, and they find themselves comfortable with the label of girl or boy given to them based on their sex. For others, this label brings great discomfort. These children identify as transgender and experience a disconnect between their biological self and the set of gender norms expected of them. The term *transgender* “typically serves as an umbrella term for a range of identities that refuse the link between biological sex and a set of socially acceptable gender norms” (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, p. 12). Transgender individuals are often classified as male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM) (Garofalo et al., 2006) and often experience persistent discomfort and distress. The transgender community developed the term *cisgender* to refer to individuals whose biological sex aligns with their expressed gender (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Since media is a part of the social construction of gender, it is important to consider the implications of transgender media representations, particularly in media targeted at youth, and how these portrayals are received.

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Representation of transgender characters

Concepts of gender are socially constructed through a variety of influences, and the media often serve “as instrumental sites for regulating the boundaries of gender and sexual identities” (Moscowitz, 2010, p. 26). The visibility of identity within the media and the manner in which it is portrayed become key factors in shaping and constructing those boundaries. In the 1990s, US television media “experienced a surge in queer visibility on television that focused primarily on well-adjusted adults as our friends” (Sarkissian, 2014, p. 145). Queer teens started appearing in the mid-2000s, primarily within teen soaps (Jenner, 2014). The term “queer” has been used by younger activists who “see their identities as tied less to the sex-gender of the person to whom they are attracted and more tied to a racial rethinking of gender and sex relations” (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, p. 13). The teen soap uses similar narrative techniques of the soap including on-going narratives and cliffhangers but has “a thematic emphasis ... on identity construction, often in relation to issues of sexuality” (Jenner, 2014, p. 135). While the mid-2000s mark the rise of queer teens, the early 2010s denote an appearance and subsequent rise of transgender characters on television in the US. Until then, the only transgender youth that appeared on television in the US were on the news or reality television in individual segments – not as recurring characters in a scripted program (Kelso, 2015). Of the 271 regular and recurring LGBT characters on scripted broadcast, cable, and streaming programming in 2014-2015, only seven (2.6%) are counted as transgender (GLAAD, 2015). Of these 7 characters, 4 appeared in streaming programming, 3 on cable, and none on broadcast television. Moreover, on cable and broadcast television, transgender characters are more likely to be teens appearing in teen soaps. In the past 5 years, transgender teens have appeared first as Adam on TeenNick’s *Degrassi* (2010-2013), then Unique on FOX’s *Glee* (2012-2015), and finally on 2 shows on Freeform – Cole on *The Fosters* (2014-2015) and Charlotte on *Pretty Little Liars* (2015).

Beyond the limited number of transgender characters visible on television, how transgender lives are depicted on television is equally important. Concerns have arisen that representations of transgender individuals have been negative (GLAAD, 2015; Sandercook, 2015). In an analysis of 102 episodes with nonrecurring transgender narratives, GLAAD reports that the majority (54%) contained negative often defamatory representations of transgender characters, and only 12% were considered outstanding (Kane, 2012). Negative representations were found on every major broadcast network and seven cable networks suggesting a widespread pattern. Among these negative representations, GLAAD found that 40% of the time, transgender characters were cast as the victim, and were cast as villains or killers in 21% of the narratives (Kane, 2012). In addition, anti-transgender slurs, language and dialogue was found in at least 61% of the narratives. The 2013-2014 episodes marked an improvement in the type of portrayals of transgender characters compared to the previous 10 years with only one episode in which a transgender character was a victim and no episodes in which a transgender

character was a villain (Townsend, 2014). Moreover, only one transgender character was portrayed as a sex worker compared to the previous years in which the most common occupation for transgender characters was sex worker. While the 2013-2014 episodes contained less anti-transgender slurs and language (39%), popular or sympathetic characters often used problematic language (Townsend, 2014). It is in 2014 that Cole, a FTM teenager, makes his first appearance in Freeform's teen soap, *The Fosters*.

The Fosters

Created by Brad Bredeweg and Peter Paige, *The Fosters*, a Freeform (formerly ABC-Family) teen drama series, launched in 2013 “about a multi-ethnic family mix of foster and biological kids being raised by two moms” (About the Fosters, n.d.). This series focuses on the fictional family, parented by Stef Adams Foster (Teri Polo) and Lena Adams Foster (Sherri Saum), as they work through many different and often difficult issues of teen life. The family initially consists of 15-year-old adopted twins Mariana (Cierra Ramirez) and Jesus (Jake Austin/Noah Centineo), and 16-year-old Brandon (David Lambert), Stef's biological son from a previous marriage, until Lena, a vice principal of a local charter school, brings home two foster children, 16-year-old Callie Jacob (Maia Mitchell) and her 12-year-old brother Jude Jacob (Hayden Bryerly). Callie and Jude have both been in the foster system for some time which has hardened Callie and made her very protective of her brother, Jude. Ranked at TV's #1 telecast in Teens and Female Teens in 2013 (TV News Desk, 2013), the show has steadily decreased in viewership, but still ranks 4th among Freeform's 10 current/latest season's shows in 2016, reaching over 890,000 viewers (TV Series Finale, 2016). *The Fosters* has won the Teen Choice Award for Choice TV Breakout Show in 2013, the GLAAD Media Award for outstanding drama series (2014) and the Television Critics Association (TCA) Award for Outstanding Achievement in Youth Programming in 2014 and 2015 (The Fosters – Awards, n.d.).

Common Sense Media rates *The Fosters* as “very good” (4/5 stars) and age-appropriate for viewers aged 14 years and older (Slaton, n.d.). Slaton's review suggests that *The Fosters* contains several positive messages about family relationships, diversity, and helping others while providing positive parental role models and depictions of a blended family. Furthermore, Slaton adds that “*The Fosters* makes its points without saying a word. The viewers can see for themselves that Stef and Lena are in an interracial lesbian relationship and have adopted kids of other ethnicities; they don't need to say it. Instead, they concentrate on the realistic problems that might befall such a family.”

Cole is introduced in season one's “House and Home” episode at the first group session held to introduce Callie, a main character of the series, to her new housemates at a group home for girls where Cole and Callie have been placed. During this session, the counselor asks each housemate to introduce themselves. Cole, dressed in short-sleeved blue flannel shirt with arms crossed, introduced himself, “My name is Cole. I'm 15. I've

been here 3 weeks. I hate it.” When asked to describe why he is in the foster care system, he replies, “Stealing and prostitution.” In a later scene, when antagonized by another girl who refers to him as a girl and calls him the name on his birth certificate, Nicole, Cole responds by proclaiming that his name is Cole and “I’m a transgender male.” Another girl comes to Cole’s defense saying, “It’s not Cole’s fault he was born in the wrong body.” As such, it is clear that some of the girls are accepting of Cole and others are not, yet also that his status is openly discussed and clearly known by those living in the group home. In another group session in the same episode, Cole expresses that he belongs in an LGBT group home, and the counselor remarks that she is doing her best to relocate him into one. Later in the same episode, Callie accidentally walks into the bathroom where Cole is changing clothes. He has his shirt off and is binding his chest with a constrictive wrap. This interruption results in a fight in which Cole initially pushes Callie, yelling at her to “get out” to which Callie shoves him back, sending Cole into the shower door and shattering it with the force of her push. Within just a few short scenes, Cole’s identity is established, challenged, self-proclaimed, and observed as a FTM transgender teen.

Cole continues to appear in 10 episodes throughout the series. Not only does he transition in his appearance across episodes, but he also transitions from a place of anger and hostility to openness and acceptance, even organizing an LGBT prom. Similar to Unique of *Glee* and Adam from *Degrassi*, Cole is in need of “new and safer places to express their self-determined genders” (Sandercock, 2015, p. 441). When we first meet Cole, he is placed in a group home for girls based on his biological sex. Later, it is revealed that he is rejected by his biological parents who refuse to take him back into their home. Eventually, Cole is placed in an LGBT group home where he gets the medical and psychological care for a healthy gender transition. His voice has deepened, he has had a mastectomy, and he is on proper steroid doses for his transition from female to male. Moreover, his demeanor has changed completely since he was first introduced. The once angry, fierce, and volatile teen has become at peace with himself and offers guidance to Callie’s younger brother, Jude, who is struggling to admit his gay identity. In a conversation with Jude, Cole advises:

I understand not wanting to have to check a box or whatever. But there’s power in labels, too, you know. When I was at Girls United (the girls group home), most of the girls refused to call me “he.” And my label is what got me through. My label got me into an LGBT home where I can just be...you know...me. I’m not saying that labels are for everyone, but sometimes they can...I don’t know... make us feel not so alone (“More than Words”).

His whole situation had changed. He has finally found a safe place of acceptance, both internally and externally. He is in a better place, a safer place, a happier place.

Dating and the trans/romance on *The Fosters*

During adolescence, a complex set of physical and psychosocial changes occur including the physical changes of puberty, and the development of intimate relationships with peers. Romance and dating provide opportunities for teens to learn and test their own sexual desires and pleasures. However, Stryker (2006) submits that the transgender experience problematizes this, particularly for teens, when the “sexual object choice... loses coherence to the precise extent that the ‘sex’ of the ‘object’ is called into question, particularly in relation to the object’s ‘gender’” (p.7). Abbott (2013) posits that the “trans/romance” narrative is often altered in film narratives due to concerns that “the audience will read the trans character’s gender identity as inauthentic and the romance as transgressive”(p. 32). Yet teen soaps offer a safe space to experiment with sexual identity and relationships since the teens themselves are challenging these notions as well. Indeed, Abbott (2013) suggests that the small screen may be where more sensitive trans/romance narratives can be found. Such is the case of Cole. He is involved in two different relationships with two different girls and these relationships/romances depict very distinct notions of sex and love.

To reveal Cole’s first relationship on screen, Callie walks in on Cole and Devonee, a girl at the group home, sitting on his bed and embraced in a kiss. It is quite clear that Callie has interrupted an intimate moment, and both Cole and Devonee jump up from the bed. Later, Callie and Kiara, another girl from the group home, discuss Cole’s relationship with Devonee. Callie says, “Seems like Cole is kinda into her.” To which Kiara replies, “He’s into her in more ways than one, you know what I mean?” This establishes that Cole and Devonee are having sex at the home. With this revelation, Callie asks Kiara if Devonee is gay to which Kiara replies that Devonee is “gay for the stay, more like it,” suggesting that Devonee’s current choice may not reflect her regular sexual pursuits. Callie then begins to question Devonee’s sexual orientation saying, “But I guess since Cole identifies as a boy, that means Devonee is...” to which Kiara interrupts, saying, “Don’t ask me!” Immediately, the boundaries of hetero and homo sexual orientations are challenged based on the biological sex and gender identification of both partners. It seems uncertain how the girls interpret this relationship. Is it homosexual or heterosexual? Normal or transgressive? When Callie confronts Cole about his relationship with Devonee, Callie claims that Devonee is not gay to which Cole replies, “Neither am I!” So despite Callie’s previous acceptance of Cole’s declared identity, she still refers to this relationship as homosexual based on biological sex. Callie immediately apologizes and corrects herself. Cole then replies, “That’s why I have to get out of this place, because no one here treats me like a man.” However, Devonee and Cole have a fight and Devonee calls into question Cole’s intentions saying, “You are never going to be a boy. You’re never gonna be nothing but a freak.” With this, Devonee ends their relationship, claiming that she was simply using Cole until she could reunite with her current boyfriend outside of the group home. Heartbroken and with tears in his eyes, Cole asks, “Will anyone

ever love me? ... Will anyone ever love a freak?" Callie reassures Cole that he is "not a freak. You just know who you are. And you have the courage to go through with what you have to to make yourself the person you want to be. That's more than a lot of us can say." As such, Callie is reaffirming Cole's identity and choices; however, the question of relationships is left unanswered.

Interestingly, the second time a trans/romance is depicted, Callie is the object of Cole's affection. Cole has organized an LGBT prom and proclaimed that he is going by himself to the dance. Callie insists that he can't go alone and offers to be his date. While Callie sees this relationship as a friendship, Cole is hoping for more. At the prom during a slow dance, Cole leans in and kisses Callie as the lyrics of the song can be heard "caught up in the moment." She stops him, and he leaves her on the dance floor with the music playing and lyrics heard "If I can make you smile, then the world is spinning." She is not smiling and he is gone, but their world is truly spinning. Later, Cole confronts Callie saying, "Just say it, you won't date me because you don't see me as a guy." Callie replies, "I have always treated you like a guy...I won't date you because I see you as a friend! ... I don't need another boyfriend. I need a friend." At this point, Cole is no longer living in the group home and has been successfully transitioning. His physical appearance has more masculine characteristics and he is in a safer, less volatile place. While he is quick to jump to the conclusion that Callie's rejection is based on his transgender identity, he is convinced otherwise, believing in her declaration of her acceptance of his identity and recognizing her need for friendship at a time when she is struggling herself. She goes on to praise him for his work, both in terms of personal growth and for his efforts to work on the behalf of others to create a safe space for expression of sexual identity and sexual orientation among youth.

Audience reception of *The Fosters*

Interestingly, despite the number of negative portrayals of transgender identity and sexual orientation, research suggests that media both online and offline provides lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth a means to buffer discriminatory experiences in 4 ways: 1) coping through escapism, 2) feeling stronger, 3) fighting back, and 4) finding and fostering community (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). In particular, offline media such as television and film provided an escape from stressors in their daily lives and the "heteronormative...world that we live in" (Craig et al., 2015, p. 262), and provides a means to feel stronger by witnessing the resilience of characters experiencing the same daily discrimination they face.

Beyond television ratings, one way to explore viewer reception and reactions to *The Fosters* is through reviews of the series. Common Sense Media provides an opportunity for Parents/Adults and Youth to submit electronic reviews of media content. In the case of *The Fosters*, at the time of this writing, there were 84 total reviews from viewers

including 33 Parent reviews, 10 Kid reviews (ages 11-12 years), and 41 Teen reviews (ages 13-17 years). Reviewers rate the show on a star scale of 1-5 (5 being high) and can provide written reviews as well. Overall, parents rated *The Fosters* as 4 stars, and Youth rated the show as 5 stars. Interestingly, of all 84 reviews, there was only one specific use of the word “transgender” made by a Parent reviewer, and this reviewer simply indicated there was a presence of a transgender character in an episode without any commentary about the character. This particular reviewer rated the show as 4 stars with commentary indicating that *The Fosters* is “A relatable and accepting show.” Overall, “sex” was mentioned 29 times in the almost half (48.5%) of the Parent Reviews and 30 times in 37.3% of the Youth reviews. Parents who rated the show low (1 or 2 stars) and also mentioned “sex” in their review expressed concerns about teens having unprotected intercourse in the show and too much “sex talk” in the show. One parent writes, “It’s uncomfortable. It’s inappropriate. ... No matter the sexual preference, multiple scenes in this episode make me trust ABC Family no more.” However, other parents embrace the diversity and representation in the show. One parent writes, “It is rare for a show to play, in such a creative way, modern topics that push the envelope, yet present it in a package with great sentiment and love. ... Multi cultural family and homosexuality are shown, and it is done very well.” The youth, however, overwhelmingly liked the show. Only one Kid reviewer (12-years-old) gave it 1 star and indicated there was “sex a lot and had images not appropriate for kids.” A 14-year-old reviewer writes, “It has little violence and very tame language, but the sex is heavy. The moms are good role models, but even they kiss a little too passionately for comfort sometimes.” A 15-year-old remarks, “If a kid can understand a loving heterosexual relationship they can understand two mums who love each other.” Finally, a 14-year-old makes an observation about media portrayals, and writes, “There are so few shows that feature gay or lesbian couples, adoption, or interracial families, and *The Fosters* hits every mark.” The youth viewers do comment that sex is a part of *The Fosters* but seem to indicate that lessons about acceptance, tolerance, love, and diversity outweigh the concerns about sexual content. In fact, one teen disagrees with the Parents reviews commenting, “this show is in no way a negative influence like many of these so-called “parents” state.”

Conclusion

Many factors contribute to the social construction of gender and identity for contemporary youth. Teens and tweens face changes during adolescence that bring sexual identity and sexual orientation to the forefront of their consciousness. Media and peers help shape these concepts and therefore, it is particularly important to examine how sexuality is portrayed and received in television shows, particularly those directed to a teen audience such as teen soap operas. *The Fosters* examines heterosexual and homosexual relationships through cisgender and transgender characters. Through depictions of the

trans/romance, questions of identity and sexual orientation arise. However, *The Fosters* treats this sensitively resulting in an authentic representation of adolescent relationships and challenges, in particular with reference to the transgender experience. Cole's identity is reaffirmed through different trans/romance situations, primarily through the main protagonist, Callie. As such, *The Fosters* lives up to Abbott's (2013) prediction of being able to treat trans/romance in a more sophisticated manner. Teen soap operas have a particular advantage in this case since there is already much doubt, curiosity, questioning, and unknowns experienced by teens, making teen soaps a comfortable place to have uncomfortable discussions. Future research should explore more directly how teens are receiving these messages and what impact they have on teen understanding of sexuality. In the meantime, producers can explore how shows like *The Fosters* have incorporated transgender characters into storylines beyond just the narrative of their transition and victims or villains and open the opportunities for a wider discussion of diversity and acceptance though the small screen.

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