

“MY LESBIAN SPACE ROCK SHOW”: REPRESENTATIONS OF
INTERSECTING IDENTITIES IN *STEVEN UNIVERSE*

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ABSTRACT

“MY LESBIAN SPACE ROCK SHOW”: REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES IN *STEVEN UNIVERSE*

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This research is based on a content analysis of the meaning making in *Steven Universe* cartoon fandom forum threads, media message board comments, and online reviews posted between November 2013 (the show’s initial air date) and November 2016. My analysis examines the fan negotiations of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class from an intersectional feminist perspective. Unlike other qualitative analyses of cartoons that focus on researcher analysis of media messages, this research focuses on meaning making and identity formation among fans. I found that *Steven Universe* provides fans with opportunities for meaning making and validation, especially underrepresented populations. Fans negotiate identities and use representations of their own social identities to make meaning in their own lives.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For this research I explored the fandom, narrative, and images of the children's cartoon *Steven Universe*. More specifically, I analyzed the representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class from an intersectional feminist perspective through the current children's cartoon *Steven Universe*. I asked, "How do fans perceive the representations of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality in the children's cartoon *Steven Universe*?" Unlike other analyses of cartoons and media, I chose to use the interpretation and analysis of the fandom found in the *Steven Universe* subReddit, IMDb message boards, and CommonSenseMedia. Between May and November of 2016 I followed, sampled, and analyzed all posts, discussions, and reviews pertaining to *Steven Universe* on IMDb and CommonSenseMedia.

Not only is this project significant due to the media being an important agent of socialization for children, but the addition of fans' responses to certain aspects of the show contributes to understanding of socialization and self-socialization among older audiences as well. Thus, it is more than the potential for socialization that I am taking into account, but rather how the show is interpreted by viewers and the resulting impact of those interpretations.

Steven Universe: A Synopsis

Steven Universe is a children's cartoon created by Rebecca Sugar. It first aired on Cartoon Network in 2013. Please note that this synopsis incorporates episodes aired through November 2016 and may not reflect series events from beyond this date. In the

following section summarizing *Steven Universe*, as well as throughout this thesis, I will use gender neutral language. I want to avoid assumptions about the gender of online fans/users as well as the gender of the Gems. Gems will be referred to by name to avoid gendering, but occasionally will be referenced by feminine (she/her/hers) pronouns. Female pronouns were chosen in particular for these occasions because the Gems will use feminine pronouns to refer to one another when not using names, I will do the same.

The show's main protagonist is a young boy named Steven Universe who lives in Beach City along with a group of humanoid aliens known as the Crystal Gems. The Crystal Gems are members of an alien species known as the Gems. The Crystal Gems are a group of rebel Gems living on, and protecting, the Earth rather than residing on the Gem Homeworld. The Crystal Gems originally rebelled against Homeworld's plan to colonize the Earth, and now protect Earth from Gem monsters and a (seemingly) vengeful Homeworld.

Figure 1: Steven's character design.



Steven is an empathetic and optimistic half Human, half Gem (Figure 1). Other than Steven, the Gems Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and later Peridot are members of the

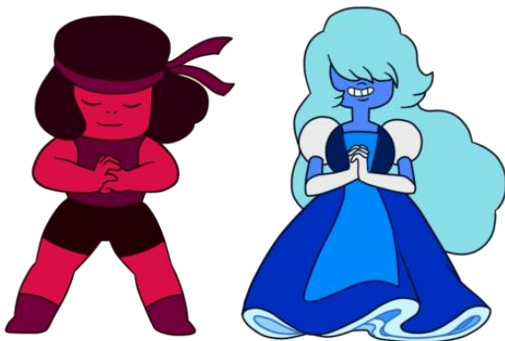
Crystal Gems. Garnet is the leader of the Crystal Gems (Figure 2). She is practical, stoic, and intuitive.

Figure 2: Garnet's character design.



She is also, as revealed in the finale of season one, a fusion of the Gems Ruby and Sapphire (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Character designs of Ruby (left) and Sapphire (right).



Fusion is a process by which two Gems combine to create a more powerful Gem. Garnet's fusion is special because Ruby and Sapphire fused into Garnet because of their love for one another rather than as a tactic or out of a desire to be more powerful.

Pearl was one of the first Gems to join Rose's rebellion (Figure 4). Created as a made-to-order servant, Pearl defied her initial purpose demonstrating intellect, passion, fierce loyalty, and proficiency with both spear and sword.

Figure 4: Pearl's character design.



Figure 5: Rose's character design.



Steven's mother, Rose Quartz (Figure 5), was the original leader of the Crystal Gems as well as the rebellion for Earth (also known as the Gem War). Rose Quartz gave up her physical form to create Steven. Rose is mysterious, beautiful, loving, and strong.

Figure 6: Amethyst's character design.



Amethyst was the youngest of the Gems before Peridot joined the team (Figure 6). While scrappy and playful, Amethyst is also sloppy and can be bitter at times. This is

due to various insecurities stemming from her creation as she was made with the intention to be a soldier for Homeworld during the rebellion. During the rebellion Homeworld created Gems on Earth to serve as soldiers using Earth's resources, but Amethyst did not emerge (from the Earth kindergarten where she and other such Gems were created) until after the rebellion had ended. Therefore, Amethyst often sees herself as a mistake that never asked to be made and the product of something the other Crystal Gems view as 'bad' (i.e., Homeworld's colonization of Earth and the Earth's kindergartens).

Steven's father, Greg (Figure 7), is a failed rock star and current carwash owner who fell in love with Rose Quartz. Connie is Steven's closest human friend and Pearl's sword pupil; she is brave, dedicated, and understanding (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Character designs of Greg (left) and Connie (right).



Supporting Gem characters include Lapis (Figure 8), who was cracked (wounded) and trapped in a mirror before being befriended and freed by Steven. Powerful and stubborn, Lapis is driven by emotion. Peridot is the newest official member of the

Crystal Gems; she is a former antagonist who is presented as naïve, arrogant, and determined (Figure 8). Jasper is an antagonist who fought for Homeworld during the rebellion and continues to serve it now after being trapped on Earth (Figure 8). Jasper is brash and formidable. These eight Gems, predominantly the core Crystal Gems (Steven, Garnet, Pearl, and Amethyst), as well as human allies Connie and Greg, make up the main cast of *Steven Universe* and the show revolves around their experiences.

Figure 8: Character designs (from left to right) of Lapis Lazuli, Peridot, and Jasper.



In this research, I found *Steven Universe* operating as a socializing agent for children through adults and I found that it provided opportunities for meaning making among the fandom, especially for underrepresented populations due to the diversity of identities. I also expect some backlash against the representations of underrepresented populations, either from members of those populations or those with bias towards those populations.

In Chapter Two, I review theories of identity formation, meaning making, and teen and adult socialization. I explore recent research on representation in and I explore the specific theoretical framework of the thesis. To do this, I draw on theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Gopaldas 2013). For the purposes of this research, intersectionality can be defined as, “The intersection [among] categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis 2008:68). Taking an intersectional perspective, this research not only explores social identities within *Steven Universe* and its fanbase, but the intersection and influence of different social identities on the characters in *Steven Universe* and those who watch the show as well.

Along with an intersectional approach, a social constructionist perspective, as well as the concepts of socialization (adolescent and adult) and meaning making within media and popular culture, will be at the forefront of my research. These theories will be explored in great depth in Chapter Two: Cartoons, Socialization, and Meaning Making. In Chapter Three I review my methods for studying online fandoms. In this chapter I

also provide details on my use of autoethnography and the ATLAS.ti software that I used for analysis.

I then present four chapters that explore my findings. In the first chapter (Chapter Four) “Hiding in Plain Sight: Using Identity Ambiguity for Representation vs. Broad Appeal,” I explore the diverse representation of gender and sexual orientation, or lack there-of, through ambiguity of the Gems in the show. While the Gems technically do not have a biological sex, there is debate in the fandom over whether they can have, or should represent, a gender. Therefore, depending whether or not a fan believes the Gems have a gender will influence a fan’s perceptions of the Gems’ sexual orientation. Not only do the Gems have ambiguous gender and, therefore, sexual orientation, but they also sport uncommon skin tones that create ambiguity around race and ethnicity such as blue, green, and purple. I then discuss Gem fusion and the representation of romantic and sexual relationships fusion presents throughout the series. It is unknown if the analogy of fusion and romance is intended by the creator of the series Rebecca Sugar, but a popular opinion among the fandom is that the analogy is at least, in part, intended. However, the extent to which fusion is intended to be seen as a relationship and the generalizability of the concept of fusion as to relationships throughout the show is unclear, as I will demonstrate in this chapter using specific characters and situations from the show.

The second findings section is Chapter Five, “Race and Ethnicity”. This chapter explores not only the ambiguity of race and ethnicity in the show, but also the racial and ethnic coding of the characters by the creators and fans. I then explore the racial analogies of discrimination within the show. However, I speculate that the parallels

perceived to be racial analogies are class analogies filtered through the lens of race and ethnicity due to the taboo of discussing class and socioeconomic status within the United States.

The third findings section is Chapter Six, “Disability.” In this section I explore the perceived representations of physical and mental disability in the show and fan reactions to the presentation of characters they perceive as embodying a particular disability. The episode “Mindful Education” (season 4, episode 4, 2016) is also explored in detail due to perceived mental health messages as interpreted by fans, including myself. While many of the perceptions of disability held by specific segments of the fandom are dismissed or glossed over by other members of the fandom, they offer opportunities for validation, identity formation, and socialization of others to those who may be struggling with various disabilities.

The final chapter (Chapter Seven), “Breaking Stereotypes and Norms?,” poses the question of whether or not the diverse representations in *Steven Universe* break stereotypes and norms or if they reinforce them. Gender norms and stereotypes are frequently discussed in the fandom through the character of Steven and the female presenting Gems. How fans claim that the show breaks and/or challenges racial and ethnic stereotypes is explored as well as the perceptions of potential racial and ethnic stereotypes as interpreted by fans.

CHAPTER 2: CARTOONS, SOCIALIZATION, AND MEANING MAKING

Why Study Television

Among mass media, television is a primary source of information in modern society. As a socializing agent, it has the potential to fulfill educational and entertainment purposes. By acting as a socialization agent, television media can influence and maintain societal and individual beliefs, values, and norms (Gillaspy and Huber 1998; Gross 1984). This socialization does not stop after childhood, but continues throughout adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett 1995). According to Miller et al. (as cited by Beaudoin 2014), as youth get older, the influence of family as a socializing agent diminishes while the influence of other socializing agents, such as media, increase. Among young adults, media socialization is often self-socialization due to the choice and variety available in media as opposed to socializing agents like family (Arnett 1995). Through television, individuals may see themselves or their lives represented in ways that validate their experiences. On the other hand, if these representations are not present, especially among minorities, individuals may feel shame or low self-esteem (Gair 1995). This research will explore the representations found in one specific type of television, children's television cartoons. Due to the viewership demographics of children's cartoons, the impact of children's cartoons as a socializing agent becomes particularly important as demonstrated through cultivation and social learning theory.

Cultivation and Social Learning Theory

As a show with an audience of younger viewers, as well as adults, it is important to examine cultivation and social learning theory. Due to the large number of female and female-coded characters in *Steven Universe*, these sociological concepts will be reviewed using gender and femininity as examples due to the prominence of gender discussions among the *Steven Universe* fandom (which will be discussed throughout this thesis). According to cultivation theory, which claims that the perceptions of social reality held by media viewers will be formed by the messages of media through cumulative exposure to media (Gerbner and Gross 1976), if television portrays female characters as weak, the more often someone watches television the more likely they are to apply these characteristics to females in general outside of television (Aubrey and Harrison 2004). If a child sees gendered behavior on television that is also reinforced by their environment, they will believe this is the appropriate way for their specific gender to behave (Witt 2000). In fact, a study by Kimball (1986) found that children raised without television were less likely to express stereotypical attitudes towards gender roles than those who did have access to television (Witt 2000). Therefore, stereotypical and unrealistic depictions of gender in cartoons may create misleading messages and expectations for children (Ahmed and Wahab 2014). For example, when children in the United States were asked to describe the male and female sex roles of characters from *Dragonball Z*, a very popular anime airing in the United States, it was found that males were more likely to find the characters to be good role models and liked the characters better than females due to the exposure of media images that reinforce male privilege as normative and masculine traits as more desirable (Bresnahan, Inoue, and Kagawa 2006). Also, while

both males and females enjoyed the male lead, forgiving his character flaws, they were unwilling to forgive the same flaws in the female character. The male traits in general were more desirable to the children (Bresnahan, Inoue, and Kagawa 2006). This demonstrates how viewing sexist media can often carry negative effects for viewers whether validating existing stereotypes or influencing behavioral expectations for males and females when living in a larger sexist culture.

In addition to cultivation theory, works utilizing social learning theory have previously shown a positive relationship between TV viewing, view of the world, and gender stereotypes on TV (Aubrey and Harrison 2004). Social learning theory states that learning is a result of experiences as well as the observation of other's behavior and the consequences of that behavior (Bandura 1971). Through witnessing positive versus negative sanctions being applied, certain behaviors are reinforced by a self-regulatory process (Bandura 1971). Following this theory, gendered behavior is a result of observing and imitating gendered texts on television (Aubrey and Harrison 2004). Researchers such as Myers (2012) hypothesize that television's messages form gendered scripts that inform children's interactions. Children may model what they see on television such as gender-role stereotypes, especially those of their assigned or identified gender because children are more likely to imitate characters of their same perceived gender (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995; Remafedi 1990). Essentially, depending on how characters portray gender-role stereotypes in cartoons, children may use the cartoon's portrayal of gender to inform their own behavior both for how to present themselves and how to react to others.

Applying the social learning theory to minority representations such as racial and ethnic minorities, Klein and Shiffman (2006) found that the depictions of racial minority characters from the 90's are less overtly racist than in the past. However, even when not overtly racist, depictions of racial minority characters and Caucasian characters are relatively similar in most aspects with the exception of entertainment-related activities. Meaning, other than skin-tone, racial and ethnic minority characters are portrayed with a white social identity and culture. Viewing unrealistic stereotypes (such as the athletic black, smart Asian, or uneducated Mexican) may negatively influence children while more realistic and diverse portrayals may lead to a healthier development of self for children (Remafedi 1990).

Even with children's cartoons that include diverse casts, other incarnations (remakes or re-imaginings) of that media may race-bend, similar to the concept of white-washing (in which a non-white character is made white or portrayed by a white actor/actress), the characters. Specifically, race-bending means to change a character's race or ethnicity to something different than the original source material's portrayal. Take the cartoon, *Avatar: the Last Airbender* and the film based on the series *The Last Airbender*. The main characters from the cartoon, who were depicted as Asian or Inuit among fans, were cast as white actors in the film while the antagonist characters, also portrayed as Asian in the cartoon, were cast as Indian actors (Lopez 2011). Through her research based on *Avatar: the Last Airbender*, Lopez (2011) found that fans of *Avatar: the Last Airbender* gave this casting situation and similar occurrences a name, "racebending." Lopez defined the fans' term racebending as "...more than simply

changing the race of the character: it is changing the race of characters of color to white for reasons of marketability” (p. 433). For the purposes of this research, the concept of race-bending is broader. I use race-bending to refer to changing the race or ethnicity of the character in general, while the act of making a character white specifically, to be more marketable or not, will be referred to as white-washing. Extending the idea further, changing a character’s social identities in general will be referred to as ‘bending’ as this concept is common among fans in relation to other aspects of a character’s identity. For example, to change a character’s gender or sex is known as gender-bending.

Understanding these terms and concepts will contribute to a greater understanding when discussing *Steven Universe* fanart and fandom. For both cultivation and social learning theory, the presentation of characters and their characteristics influence the values, norms, and behavior of the viewers due to what the characters represent (e.g., male, female, black, Asian, heterosexual, asexual, etc.)

Representation

In children’s television cartoons, the type of representations as well as the amount of representation for specific identities is not static. For instance, the extent of gendered characteristics found in children’s cartoons varies by genre along with the amount of representation as well as the type of representation (Leaper et al. 2002). There are patterns that persist around gendered representation such as that fact that in children’s television male characters outnumber female characters (Chu and McIntyre 1995; Aubrey and Harrison 2004; Baker and Raney 2007; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). During the

1990's characteristics such as male aggression were limited more to traditional adventure cartoons, which more often contained stereotypical gender roles (Leaper et al. 2002). Girls, on the other hand, had more representation in nontraditional adventures, such as *ReBoot* or *Gargoyles*, and education/family cartoons, such as *The Magic School Bus* or *Where on Earth is Carmen Sandiego*, than in other genres, even though they were still underrepresented overall (Leaper et al. 2002:1659).

As a whole, the ratio of male to female characters in children's television has been found to be between 2:1 and 4.8:1 (Chu and McIntyre 1995:216; Aubrey and Harrison 2004:124). A possible explanation for this is the assumption that females will watch male lead characters, but males will not watch female leads (Aubrey and Harrison 2004). Some assume females will watch male-dominated programs simply because they are what is available, but given the option girls would prefer more gender-neutral programs (Schneider 1987; Witt 2000). While I have seen *Steven Universe* categorized as a show aimed at a male demographic, it is considered by reviews and fans to be a gender neutral or family cartoon with a male protagonist and a large supporting cast of female and female-coded characters.

A contributing factor to the assumption that girls will watch shows aimed at a male demographic, but boys will not watch shows aimed at girls, and the continuing disproportionate ratio of male versus female characters, is that in the 1980's many cartoons became gender-polarized, and producers made separate cartoons to appeal to each gender (Dennis 2010). For example, *Transformers* (1984) and *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (1985) were marketed for boys. These cartoons used stereotypical male

traits seen in hegemonic masculinity while shows marketed towards girls such as *Jem* (1985) or *My Little Pony* (1984), emphasized femininity. These cartoons and marketing strategies reinforced the gender binary and stereotypical gender norms, something I witnessed in some cartoons in my youth and which are still emphasized at times today. One only has to watch the toy commercials shown during cartoons on television to discover to which gender the show is being marketed. In turn, these commercials reinforce gender norms, roles, and schemas. According to gender schema theory, through observing behaviors from those around them and the media, children can create schemas about gender (Bem 1981). Children ascertain the meaning of gender and will organize information according to this perception of male and female (Bem 1981, 1985, 1993). Consequently, as is argued in cultivation and social learning theory, the exposure to stereotypical gender portrayals can have lasting effects on children as the information they gather is used to determine what the acceptable behaviors are for particular genders (Bem 1981).

For instance, there is sufficient research to support the claim that women face depictions of ideal body types in media along with social stigmatization for being an fat-bodied individual more than men, although men still experience representations of ideal body types as well (Forbes et al. 2001). This current ideal body type of women is young and thin, think Twiggy in the 1960's, Cara Delevingne, or Natalia Castellar (Lamb et al.1993). Even women in their late teens or as young adults internalize this unrealistic body type, believing that men prefer thinner women due to the prevalence of social sanctions for fat-bodied women and cultural favoritism of slimmer women (Rozin and

Fallon 1988; Forbes et al. 2001). Furthermore, the depiction of sexualized characters and the presence of the male gaze are not uncommon in animated children's media. Take Esmerelda from Disney's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a dancer desired by multiple males in the film, sexualized by Frollo in particular, and the object of the audience's gaze. Also interesting to note among Disney's family animated films is the contrast between Disney's white heroines such as Belle and the sexualized Disney characters from animated films that are women of color including Pocahontas, Jasmine, and Kida (Lacroix 2004). Following gender schema theory and social learning theory, these sexualized representations have an impact on viewers. As a result of these portrayals, it is not surprising that girls identify with their sexualized media personas and choose sexualized dolls when asked about their ideal self over non-sexualized dolls (Starr and Ferguson 2012; Gordon 2008). Thus, exploring the body types of the characters in *Steven Universe* is crucial to an intersectional analysis due to the number of possible representations for women of color (WOC) in the show.

In addition to ideal body types, the belief portrayed in the media that physical appearance is of greater value than things such as academic achievements for women to gain acceptance and self-worth may impact a woman's achievements later in life. For example, gender stereotypes have been found to affect perceptions of science (Baker and Leary 1995). Following gender schema theory, exposure of girls and women to role models of female scientists is important to alleviating the commonality of the male science stereotype (Steinke 1998:147). Some argue, that portrayals of female characters specializing in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) related fields

may be significant in women's perceptions of the sciences (Steinke 1998). Therefore, overall, representations of ideal body types and gender roles in the media and cartoons can impact an individual's concept of what the expected body type is for their perceived gender as well as what they are capable of achieving.

Symbolic annihilation originally referred to ways in which representations in the media exclude, ignore, or marginalize women (Tuchman 1981), although this idea has now expanded to other minority groups as well such as racial and ethnic minorities, which is how this research will incorporate the term. Similar to the underrepresentation of females in children's cartoons in general and in representations of the sciences in particular, there is a distinct underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities, despite that fact overt racism has diminished. As a consequence of this underrepresentation, racial and ethnic minorities, along with other minorities such as women, have suffered from symbolic annihilation in children's cartoons.

U.S. Americans, especially children, often learn about people of other backgrounds and races through media's second-hand representations rather than through personal experiences. This is due in part to the history and continued practice of racial segregation in the United States which restricts that amount of in-person interactions between different groups. These media representations are often stereotypical and one-dimensional, yet can influence perceptions of other racial groups (Tatum 1997). Even the lack of representation can contribute to children's development of racial bias and stereotypes because children are unable to develop or show empathy for people of

different races when there are no well-written or realistic minority characters in their media as similarly stated in our similar discussion about gender (Welch 2016:388).

Along with this history of underrepresenting racial minorities, there is also a wide range of various socially undervalued “out groups” who also are under, and misrepresented in the media, including cartoons. These “out groups” include sexual, race, age, and gender minorities. When these marginalized populations are portrayed in children’s cartoons, they are not much different than the in-groups such as the racial minorities mentioned previously (Klein and Shiffman 2009). In a study by Klein and Shiffman (2009), racial minorities only made up 8.7% of the characters in animated cartoons. It was also found that only 0.3% of characters were something other than heterosexual (p. 68). In fact, in terms of sexual orientation, animation only began to incorporate nods to homosexual desire around the 1990’s in cartoons such as *Pinky and the Brain* (1993) or *Ren and Stimpy* (1991), but these cartoons lacked characters with a same-sex sexual identity. This same-sex sexual identity of the characters later came in the form of animated prime-time sitcoms such as *Family Guy* (1999) or *Home Movies* (1999), but the characters then lacked same-sex desire (Dennis 2010:135-138). Due to lack of full representation, viewers may perceive the homoerotic subtext of characters like Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street* while also acknowledging that the subtext was not the creator’s intention (Burke and Burke 1999:100-101). For example, there are some common assumptions or interpretations from *Scooby Doo* that are not the creator’s intention such as the stud boy (Fred) and cute girl (Daphnie) being in a heterosexual relationship, the brainy Velma being a lesbian, and Scooby and Shaggy being a

couple/lovers (p. 106). This underrepresentation of “out groups,” in turn, conveys a message to young viewers that these “out groups” are not important in society or, at least, less important than the more commonly represented younger, white, heterosexual males (Merskin 1998 as cited in Klein and Shiffman 2009:56).

Even without watching the cartoons themselves, children may recognize and associate with characters with various social identities from cartoons because fictional characters can become cultural icons as well. One does not need to watch *Pokemon* to know who Pikachu is or have seen *Scooby Doo* to be familiar with the Mystery Incorporated gang. Therefore, these characters are able to reflect and/or influence gender norms (Abel 1995). This furthers the idea of media as an important agent of socialization for more than children, but teens and adults as well. How a television show is interpreted is also important because if a show may be found to contain, or not contain, certain ideas does not mean that those watching will perceive those ideas, or lack thereof, the same. According to the fans of *Steven Universe*, the show presents a large variety of diverse representations which may intersect including race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexuality, and class.

Socialization and Stereotypes

Before exploring the intersectional analysis, identity formation, and meaning making of *Steven Universe* fans and their specific impact on identity formation, we must go into greater detail about the impact media and its representations have on various social identities. Studies from the 1970’s, 1980’s, and 1990’s have found stereotypical

gender roles in children's cartoons, as detailed previously, but over time cartoons have presented less stereotypical representations of gender roles (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). Over the years, female main characters have become more independent, intelligent, assertive, and stronger; these characters are less emotional, complain less, and are less helpless while male characters brag less and are willing to gossip (p. 669). Still, a study conducted by Ahmed and Wahab (2014) finds that representations of male and female characters in children's cartoons on Cartoon Network, the network that airs *Steven Universe*, are often associated with positive or negative stereotypes (e.g., males associated with traits such as of strength and bravery versus female characters associated with sexuality and attractiveness). In general, male characters are more masculine with higher rates of physical violence and anger than females who were more likely to be fearful, likely to ask questions, concerned with appearance, polite, supportive, emotional, and more interested in romance than male characters (Leaper et al. 2002; Baker and Raney 2007). Other characteristics such as verbal aggression, physical aggression, leadership, bravery, rescue, failing at a goal, affection, and primping have been found significantly different between genders in children's television (Aubrey and Harrison 2004). It has also been found that most of the main heroes were male. Even if accompanied by a strong female hero, the females were often working under, or second to, the male hero (Ahmed and Wahab 2014). It is important to note that despite the fact that some gendered characteristics are not as prominent as they once were the patterns of these gender role characteristics have been seen time and again in studies over the years, and are therefore still of concern.

One pattern is male characters' continued reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity, which consist of stereotypical male gender norms such as physical strength, violence/aggression, and hyper-sexuality (Messner 2002; Millington and Wilson 2010). A continued pattern for female characters is reinforcement of emphasized femininity, which encourages women to fulfill male desires through a set of traditional female gender norms such as, attractiveness, desire for a romantic relationship, emotionally committed, caring, passive, and compliant (Connell 1987; Korobov 2011)

Conversely, it has also been found that in children's television overall (not just cartoons) that the majority of male characters (88%) do not follow hegemonic masculinity. Steven from *Steven Universe* seemingly breaks some of the previously described characteristic patterns associated with males on Cartoon Network. Unfortunately, non-hegemonic masculinity is used as humor for jokes and as foils for hegemonic masculinity (Meyers 2012). Acts such as cross dressing and drag are a spectacle to those in the series and a punishment to the character in drag (Myers 2012). These acts, which can be viewed as not following hegemonic masculinity, are used to reinforce hegemonic masculinity rather than expanding male representations. On the other hand, in a study conducted by Analice Pillar (2011), elementary school children were able to discuss the unconventional way the cartoon *Spongebob Squarepants* presented masculinity. For a scene where one male character expressed fear, the children did not relate fear to weakness stating, "men can also be afraid," allowing for this expansion of male representation outside of hegemonic masculinity (Pillar 2011:76). So

while used for humorous purposes, depictions of males breaking hegemonic masculinity may both reinforce and call into question the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity. Similarly, in Collier et al.'s (2009) study, participants stated that the portrayals of lesbians on *Buffy* and *Xena*, even if negative, had positive impacts. In fact, any representation was preferable to invisibility (Collier et al. 2009:597-598). For the participants, having media images of lesbian feelings and experiences affirms, normalizes, and validates their feelings (Collier et al. 2009). As Steven is the male protagonist of the show *Steven Universe* and the Gems who support him are female coded, it is also necessary to keep in mind that to construct the ideals of masculinity within a culture, the ideals of femininity must be constructed so that they support the ideals of masculinity (Enloe 2004:106-107). Representations that viewers relate to, stereotypical or not, influence the viewers' identity formation and ability to draw meaning from the media and its text.

Meaning Making and Identity Formation

Texts of television media can be used for identity formation as developing one's identity is a learning process (Gergen 2000). Individuals identify with certain social categories, which are used by individuals to define themselves or be defined by others. Through this categorization, they develop their identity and relationship to the world (Gergen 2000; Troiden 1988). For example, in a study of lesbian fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena Warrior Princess*, participants reported often searching television while beginning to form their sexual identity. First they searched television to

“clarify confusion about (understand) sexual identity.” They also searched to “decrease isolation/develop community” because they needed contact with others while developing their identities and often found this community with fans on Internet fan sites (Collier et al. 2009:594, 598). Lastly, they searched to normalize “lesbian (their) feelings and experiences” (Collier et al. 2009:594). Most participants claimed that they found what they were looking for in these television representations and images (Collier et al. 2009:594).

As demonstrated through the previous study, during identity formation individuals actively develop their self by taking symbolic content and finding messages and meaning in media to incorporate into their lives. This is possible due to the dialogic relationship between the textual meaning and the individual’s interpretation (Thompson 1995). Media encodes texts with meaning and messages that the audience actively decodes, but these texts can be interpreted in various ways (Hall 1980). First, audiences can decode the preferred meaning, which is the intended meaning of the media’s text. Second, audiences can decode an oppositional reading which is a rejection or reinterpretation of the text. Lastly, audiences can decode a negotiated reading position, accepting some elements while rejecting others (Hall 1980).

This means, unlike what has been theorized in the past, theorists who crafted Cultural Studies and those who have taken cultural studies since its founding, argue that viewers are not passive. Rather, viewers are active consumers of media who are often critical of content (Gergen 2000:198). Fans interact in online forums, write fanfiction, draw fanart, and even participate in fan activism, which consists of politicized actions

beyond the scope of the media's original text (Lopez 2011:432). The relationship between viewer and media does not flow one way from media to individual— instead the relationship is more complex (Baehr 1981:148-149). Due to this, viewers make meaning of various messages presented in the media, appropriating and reconstructing them to construct personal and often oppositional meaning (Fiske 1987; Gergen 2000; Thompson 1995).

Fans and Fandom

One significant way viewers engage with a television show is being a fan or joining a fandom. First, to be a fan, one is considered to be outside the norm of casual media viewership. Fans may even be considered “rogue readers” who are able to ignore the intentions of those who create and produce the media of which they are fans and instead develop their own textual interpretations (Jenkins 1998:86). According to Jenkins (1998), there are three central aspects of fan reception and engagement of their chosen media. First, fans select media text grounded in their own lived experience. Two, fans reread these texts within fan culture. Third, fans share found information about the media during social interactions (Jenkins 1992:53). If individuals become fans because their chosen media aids them in their formation of identity and self (Thompson 1995:223), as theorized previously, being a fan can contribute to an individual's meaning making process. Fans are able to become active participants in their own chosen media, constructing and sharing meaning they have made as well as using text to construct their identity (Jenkins 1992:2, 23). Now with online fandoms, there are websites and forums

dedicated to television programs and media where fans are able to interact with each other and their chosen media (Costello and Moore 2007). Therefore, fans can make meaning together, through the fandom and interactions with other fans or individually.

An important element of analyzing fandoms is understanding that meaning making takes place during fan interactions and that meanings can be made, negotiated, and/or contested among fans, non-fans, and even anti-fans of the show. While fans may find meaning for identity formation in a television show, exploring the perceptions of non-fans, those who are viewers of the show but not deeply involved about the show's texts, and anti-fans, those who actively dislike the show, may also contribute to the understanding of the representations of characters in the show and their impact on viewers (Gray 2003). Fans along with non-fans and anti-fans are able to decode media text as a group, share those interpretations, and debate other interpretations that others present, all of which contribute to meaning making through a fan's chosen media. Methods for this research were designed and selected keeping the previous literature of fandoms, fans, and their online interactions in mind.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The data for this research consists of comments gathered from the *Steven Universe* Online fandom. I conducted content analysis of comments on the discussion boards of *Steven Universe* subReddit and the Internet movie database IMDb (imdb.com). Reviews of *Steven Universe* from the online review and ratings site CommonSenseMedia were also analyzed. I did not use any existing data sets for this research, and instead collected all of my own data. I first sampled discussion board topic threads that related to the topics of the research such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality.

The participants for this research are members of the online fandom of *Steven Universe*. As I am using online participants, the concerns of anonymity and confidentiality are unique as many platforms either attempt to grant this anonymity if the individual wants it or many of those who post on sites I am consulting do so for the view of others, willingly sharing information for the general public. Therefore, ethical concerns of anonymity and confidentiality are less applicable. Any demographics cited for the *Steven Universe* fanbase, specifically for the *Steven Universe* subReddit, were found through polls, surveys, and threads posted by members of the forum and responded to by other members willing to disclose that information. According to the 2016 *Steven Universe* subReddit survey of 1068 fans, user ages range from 13-45 with an average age of 21 and a median age of 17. The survey was especially helpful when determining the sexual orientation of the *Steven Universe* fandom. For instance, 51.5 percent of the *Steven Universe* subReddit users identify as something other than heterosexual, 16.7

percent as bisexual, 12.6 percent on the asexual spectrum, 8.6 percent identify as explicitly homosexual, 5.5 percent as pansexual, and 8.0 percent as aromantic, unsure, or “other.”

This research also contains some autoethnography and incorporates a feminist approach as I believe that in research it is important to inform the audience of one’s own position and location in relation to the subject being researched. In this particular case, due to my experience with the subject matter, I feel it is especially important. Not only is this to inform those who may be reading or evaluating the research of my social location, but also to solidify and remind myself of my subjectivity that may influence the research while collecting, presenting, and analyzing the data. I acknowledge and am up-front about the influence of my social location on my research and use my knowledge of the subject to help during the research process.

First, I have always been a fan of animation since I was a child and this passion continues to this day. I watched Saturday morning cartoons well past the age many would consider normal and was, for a time, and anime enthusiast. While still enjoying family animated films into my college years, I had stopped watching television cartoons until I discovered the new *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* cartoon while completing a content analysis of children’s media for an Introduction to Sociology class assignment. I distinctly remember being pleasantly surprised by the show compared to the episode from each of the other two cartoon series I watched for the project. Soon after, I found myself watching another episode, which evolved into a routine of watching an episode in mornings before college when I felt stressed. This is also when I learned of the older fan

base for cartoons and the online fan communities. After that experience, I re-watched cartoons from my youth and received recommendations for other cartoons from friends who were part of the cartoon fandom.

My experience specifically with *Steven Universe* started with a couple of friends introducing me to the pilot episode, which was one of multiple possible series pilots released to the public to gain their opinions and votes to determine which would become a new series. I was interested in the series after watching the pilot because of the humor, the music, racial diversity, and female presence I perceived at the time. I had forgotten about the pilot for a while until I saw an episode of the series on Youtube.

While the show was cute, I didn't start following it closely until I found out about the episodes "The Return" and "Jailbreak," which revealed one of the main characters, Garnet, to be a fusion, or combination, of two smaller, romantically involved, gems. This was especially incredible to me because I knew it could be perceived as a legitimate lesbian couple in a children's cartoon due to the fact the gems often take a female-coded appearance and use female pronouns. In fact, Steven is the only gem identified as male due to being half-human. From then on, I was hooked and even began to browse the online community.)

My knowledge of various children's cartoons, both current and from my youth, and my pleasure in watching *Steven Universe* is what eventually led me to the decision to examine *Steven Universe* for my Master's Thesis. As I had watched the cartoon and discussed it with friends, I was aware of the diverse representations fans claim the show presents. Due to this, I concluded that it would be a good candidate for this research

about representation in children's cartoons. Furthermore, given the large fandom, I could explore how fans interpret possible diverse representations, not just how I interpret them. This is especially crucial in this research as my social location, and therefore my experience viewing the show, may vary greatly from others who watch the show. As a Caucasian cis-gender female and demi-sexual, my perceptions of a character portrayed as a person of color, a possibly lesbian character, or sexless character may be different than those who identify with those identities. For instance, there are fans who relate to certain characters and their traits that I never considered until collecting my data for this research, such as autistic traits or positive or negative commenting on physical ableism. Neither are issues I encounter on a regular basis.

Given my investment in the show and participation in the fandom, I constantly feel the struggle between my personal connection to the series and the research I am conducting. I also stress over the shows that would not be represented in the study that may or may not present diverse representation when deciding to focus on just one show and its fandom. There are shows I watched as a child that had more explicit racial representation such as *Static Shock*, but there were also shows that had relatively none such as *Scooby Doo*. There are shows where the creators discuss their struggles with wanting to give more diverse representations, but were unable to do so. For instance, the character of Richie from *Static Shock* was never given a sexual orientation, despite being based off the character Rick from the comics who is gay.

Thus, making sure that my data collection methods are sound has been difficult due to the knowledge I already possess about cartoons, the show *Steven Universe*, and

about fandoms. I do not believe it is possible for any research within the social sciences to be purely objective. Therefore, I want to be reflexive and acknowledge the influence of my own social location on my research. Since the self cannot be separated completely from research, I used autoethnography to incorporate my own experiences while being forthright about the position from which I am writing (Richardson and St. Pierre 2008).

Data Collection Methods

As I mentioned above I collected data from multiple online sites. The three main sites chosen were Common Sense Media, the *Steven Universe* subReddit, and *Steven Universe* threads on the IMDb message boards. The *Steven Universe* subReddit and IMDb were chosen due to the relevant forums and discussions, and because I believe the participants from each site are not the same. For instance, Reddit was specifically chosen due to the access to fans of the show, the interactions between the fans, and their co-constructions of the show. IMDb was chosen because the message boards are not purely for fans of the show, but also the general public and critics (which may include non-fans or even anti-fans), allowing for a different, often critical, perspective. Lastly, Common Sense Media was chosen because the site contains a wider range of ages among users and perspectives than IMDb or Reddit. This is due to the site's purpose of reviewing and giving basic information about a show or movie so that others can make informed decisions about whether or not to watch the media. There are reviews from adults, parents, educators, and children along with a broad overview of the extent of sexual themes, violence, role-models, etc. that can be found in the show. Links posted on the

sampled pages from these sites were also analyzed when applicable, allowing for a broader spectrum of media to be utilized such as pictures, videos, blogs, etc. that may further add to the understanding of, and examples of, the meaning making in and among the fandom.

In the end, I gathered data from discussion topics on IMDb and the *Steven Universe* subReddit forums relating to race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality in the show. For the IMDb message board for *Steven Universe*, I was able to go through each page of threads, searching for relevant discussions because the IMDb message board was small enough to search each discussion topic for relevant discussion. The *Steven Universe* subReddit is large enough that a different method was used to collect a sample of threads. The keywords “race”, “ethnicity”, “gender”, “sexuality”, “class”, and “social status” were entered into the subReddit search engine for both title and included words within the thread. For each keyword search the results were organized by the most popular and every relevant topic thread found within the first ten pages was analyzed. The only exception was the keyword search for “gender” which yielded overabundant results within the first three pages and quickly reached the point of saturation.

After the initial research was gathered from the web forums, new relevant episodes of the show were released, episodes 104-112, and a second round of data collection followed the same process among threads created since the initial data collection. Lastly, exploring these message boards lead to multiple linked outside sources in both rounds of data collection, these links were also analyzed. Outside of the analysis of online fan content, given my decision to use autoethnography, I also re-

watched the entirety of the series that had been released by the end of the second data collection were viewed starting with episode 1 and continuing until episode 111/112 “Gem Harvest” on November 14th 2016.

I used the program ATLAS.ti to sort and code each of the comments on these threads. Every comment from the 125 threads chosen for the sampling was read and, when applicable, coded. Approximately 200 codes were created containing approximately 2,300 quotes ranging from only one quote for a code to over 80 quotes for one code. I then grouped these codes into different families to create a picture of the underlying themes found among the plethora of codes and quotes. Of the individual codes, I noted the most frequent. These frequent codes revolved mostly around gender including ‘gendering agender’ (91 quotes), ‘gendering female’ (81 quotes), ‘using gender pronouns’ (66 quotes), ‘gender norms’ (56 quotes), and ‘gender identifiers’ (51 quotes). In fact, approximately 65-70 percent of the quotes were gender related. Although other frequent codes also included ‘referencing LGBT’ (4th most frequent), ‘referencing other cartoons’ (a reference to other cartoons viewed by the users) (5th most frequent), ‘race’ (7th most frequent), ‘citing creator presence/thoughts’ (what users say the creator believes or intended) (9th most frequent), ‘seeing fusion as relationship’ and ‘lesbians’ (tied for 10th most frequent). Each of these frequent codes had at least 40 quotes. The various families created around the codes included ‘Episodes’, ‘Critiquing’, ‘Ethnicity’, ‘Family’, ‘Fandom’, ‘Gender’, ‘Sex’, ‘Sexual Orientation’, and ‘Sexuality’. These families and the frequent codes were used to uncover and develop the themes for this research.

To avoid confusion, please note that the use of the word “coded” in this research has two meanings. The first refers to the codes developed in ATLAS.ti while the second use of the word “coded” refers to how the *Steven Universe* fandom discusses how characters are presented and/or designed with identity specific characteristics (e.g., skin color for race or body figure for gender). For example, one member of the *Steven Universe* subReddit, prolygon wrote when discussing sexual orientation,

Fictional characters are coded with a certain language which exists outside the intentions of the authors (though in this case it certainly seems intended). That's how Wall-E and EVE can have genders while being robots. So it's both accurate and meaningful to admit that gem fusion is representation for the gay community.

Phrases such as “race-coded”, “heavily” or “clearly coded as...,” and “coded display” are commonly used among the fandom and will be used similarly in this thesis.

To analyze the data collected from these various sources, I performed content analysis. I analyzed the interpretations and discussions of those in the online community as well as used my own evaluation and interpretation of the source material. In this way, the work is also autoethnographic and I locate myself within the context of this research for both myself and my potential audience (Berger and Ellis 2002; Berg and Lune 2012).

During the analysis, it was beneficial to keep in mind the three-way model of the televisual text as presented by Gray (2003) so I could analyze the show not just through fans, but through nonfans and anti-fans as well. To be able to fully understand what it is to interact with media such as *Steven Universe*, it was important to include data from nonfans and anti-fans (Gray 2003) because, as Gray states,

Behind dislike, after all, there are always expectations – of what a text should be

like, of what is a waste of media time and space, of what morality or aesthetics texts should adopt, and of what we would like to see others watch or read. To study the anti-fan, then, is to study what expectations and what values structure media consumption (P. 73).

As context plays a role in how media is interpreted by different individuals, to understand the interpretations of a wide variety of individuals who have seen the show was very valuable to this research.

Using the codes and families created through ATLAS.ti, I identified specific themes. I based these themes on the codes with the most quotes, largest families, and the codes with quotes largely centered on the impact or influence of *Steven Universe* on fans. These themes included ambiguity and androgyny of the characters' sexual orientation and gender as well as race and ethnicity, fusion as a representation of relationships, mirroring and parallels within the show of real-world racial and ethnic discrimination, the representations found among fans for disabilities, and the ability of the show to break or reinforce stereotypes.

CHAPTER 4
HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT:
USING IDENTITY AMBIGUITY FOR REPRESENTATION VS. BROAD APPEAL

Within the show *Steven Universe*, the depictions of the Gems are such that the fans express a sense that the Gems' gender, sexual orientation, and race and/or ethnicity are ambiguous and open to interpretation. Given that the Gems are described by creator Rebecca Sugar as being "agender", yet are also referred to by female pronouns, the door is opened for multiple readings. Additionally, the colors used to represent the Gems are not colors associated with living humans – for example, the Gems are purple, green, blue, etc. Due to the Gems' representational style including uncommon skin color, androgynous appearance of some Gems, and lack of biological sex, there are many possible interpretations of the Gem characters and their social identities which are important to keep in mind while moving forward through my findings and analysis for *Steven Universe*. The representations of the social identities Gems perceived by fans, or lack thereof, are possible due to the ambiguity created through the Gem's representational style. For instance, Reocyx on subReddit states that, "...The messages are hidden and overt at the same time. That way, nobody feels excluded and those open to it can find the message easily" while majere616 claims that, "You don't even have to be looking for it if you're queer because then it just sorta jumps out at you like 'Oh hey that's an issue I'm intimately familiar with.'" Much of the representation fans perceive from the Gem characters in the show comes from the fans' ability to make meaning out of ambiguity. Therefore, ambiguity allows more fans to more easily see themselves or their

social identities in the characters, thus providing more opportunities for meaning making and identity formation, especially among minority viewers. We will start the discussion and analysis of ambiguity in *Steven Universe* through the gender ambiguity of the Gems.

Gender Ambiguity: Gender, or no Gender? That is the Question.

One of the biggest debates in the *Steven Universe* fan community is over the concept of gender and whether or not the Gems can have a gender. In fact, this is the most frequently discussed subject among the fandom. When I coded for gender, I found these two different sides of the debate about Gem gender among the fandom; 1. The Gems are agender, and 2. The Gems are female. The different sides of the debate emphasize the representations of different underrepresented minority groups in media, specifically, agender individuals and women. The largest code family in ATLAS.ti for this research was “Gender” with 40 different codes, twice as many as the next largest family “Sexual Orientation.” This indicates that identifying Gem gender, or lack thereof, is the most important subject amongst fans followed closely by sexual orientation which is highly intersectional with gender in the show. This intersection will be demonstrated with specific examples in this chapter.

While some fans hold that Gems cannot have a gender due to a lack of biological sex and no gender binary in Gem culture, others conclude that Gems can have a gender because the Crystal Gems, who live on Earth, use and respond to female pronouns. In later episodes (the end of season two and on), while rare, Homeworld Gems can also be heard using female pronouns. However, the creator of the series, Rebecca Sugar, has

stated that the Gems are gender-less, even answering a question about Gem gender and male Gems on Reddit stating, “Steven is the first and only male Gem, because he is half human! Technically, there are no female Gems! There are only Gems!”

The concept of gender-less Gems is interpreted differently depending on the viewer. Some fans believe the creator’s statement is true because Gems are created rather than born and, as mentioned previously, have no concept of a gender binary. Gems can also shapeshift, taking multiple forms or genders if desired. Amethyst shapeshifts into the male presenting (or “coded,” the term commonly used by fans, not to be confused with coding in ATLAS.ti) Purple Puma. This alter-ego Amethyst uses when wrestling responds to male pronouns. Additionally, Rose Quartz (Steven’s mother) used shapeshifting to create a womb to give birth to Steven. A couple fans on the *Steven Universe* subReddit argued that due to the Gems’ ability to shapeshift and because the Crystal Gems live on Earth, they adopted Earth customs and/or altered their appearances to better fit in. For instance, Gandalf_the_Gangsta commented on the forum that,

As it has been stated many times here [on Reddit], and once or twice officially, the Gems are not female. This would be in relation to their sex, or in a physiological sense. When read in this context, the statement that the Gems are not “female” is better understood; Gems are not human, do not possess human genitals (as far as can be assumed), and seem to have only one sex otherwise. So the fact that Gems look like human females is a coincidence, not a gender declaration.

This train of thought indicates that to perceive the Gems as female imposes our own socially/culturally constructed and learned categorizations onto an alien species. On the other hand, fans who believe the Gems can have a gender often cite the definition of gender as the sex of the mind and biological sex as the sex of the body. In this way, by

using and accepting female pronouns, the Gems are choosing a gender identity of female. The following post by potah is an example of this belief from the *Steven Universe* subReddit,

...Sex≠gender. Gender is cultural, unlike sex.
 gems are sexless as they don't need to reproduce (they're *essentially* asexual).
 They all use female pronouns though; they all display various forms of *femininity* in regards to gender. For example, Jasper is quite butch; Rose Quartz is arguably about as feminine as you can get and encompasses very motherly traits.
 Either way, I will forever refer to this show as my lesbian space rock show. Lmao.

Both sides of the debate may, at times, cite the trope referred to as the “one-gender race,” (alternatively called the “one-gender species”) which has been seen in species from other cartoons such as the Namekians from *Dragon Ball Z*, who have a male appearance and produce asexually, or Smurfs from *The Smurfs* before the creation of Smurfette. Throughout the series, the Gems have consistently either used female, gender-neutral, or no pronouns and have appeared female or androgynous in appearance (with the exception of Amethyst’s Purple Puma). For some fans, this one-gender race/species is interpreted as the gems having no notion of a gender bi-nary and therefore no gender. Similar to Gandalf_the_Gangsta, the user Renegade_Pearl has stated that,

No, they don't have genders.
 And no, I'm not conflating them [gender and sex]. They neither have sex or genders. Their culture doesn't define gender roles.
 If anything roles are based on gem type, and nothing else.
 They just happen to look like human females, and keep in mind that this for[m] was chosen before discovering humans.

Fans from the other side of the argument, those who believe Gems are female, use the one-gender species trope as support for their belief that the one-gender Gems present is

female.

Still, many of the fans from both sides of the argument agree that whether the Gems technically have a gender or not, they represent, and are meant to be perceived as having, a certain gender to the audience. According to the subReddit user [methodandred](#),

To the average viewer, i.e. a kid, there are two women. They are in love. We know, technically, that they are genderless. WE know that. Kids are not going online and obsessing over this show enough to see that, the average viewer likely isn't either.

SO. For all intents and purposes, they are two women in love. *Technically this is not true.* That is fair. Arguably, with them having a single gender, its [sic] a homosexual relationship, but even then, I'm not arguing that and I don't give a shit about that argument right now.

Contrariwise, even though Gems as a whole are determined to be female-coded (whether believed to be female not not) by most fans, there are also Gems that have more masculine characteristics such as Jasper, a broad shouldered and muscular Gem, and Ruby, who has a more square build and lacks distinctly feminine features. Due to these characteristics, some viewers (including fans and casual viewers) mistake these particular Gems as male or struggle remembering to apply female pronouns. For example, some viewers perceive Ruby to be a male. In fact, the voice actress for Ruby, Charlyne Yi, has had the same problem in her life (e.g., being mistaken as male). A few fans from the *Steven Universe* subReddit even commented that they initially thought Jasper was male and one even continues to have trouble when it comes to using female pronouns rather than male pronouns, such as DrocT18 and chinalilies,

DrocT18: I understand how you might think that [Jasper] is male. I catch myself slipping up on that some times [sic] too. Also all my friends who don't watch the show refer to Jasper as he, because she is a little man-ish and doesn't appear to have much of a chest (besides her peccs).

Chinalilies: I'm a little ashamed to say it, but at first I thought [Jasper] might be male because of how muscular she is. But after a minute I was certain she was female.

Along similar lines, when discussing Gem gender, fans often use the idea of gender-bending. One can find many pieces of *Steven Universe* fanart online changing the Gems, and other characters, from female presenting to male presenting. In a couple threads from the *Steven Universe* subReddit, fans shared fanart of gender-bent characters (Figure 9). Interestingly, while there are those who hold that the characters are clearly female-coded, a few fans during one of these particular threads noted how they had not realized how ambiguous and androgynous many of the Gems' designs were until noticing the lack of adjustments needed to change a Gems' gender coding as demonstrated by three fans below,

LadyRavenEye: These [genderbent fanarts] are neat. I like how it highlights how little the Gems are gendered in the first place.

Ghostlupe: This was my first thought. Ruby doesn't even look remotely different from their "female" version. Sapphire and Pearl are probably the most clearly gendered Gems and even then Pearl looks fairly androgynous. It's a nice little detail that puts an extra feeling of effort into their character designs.

AslandusTheLaster: Wow, they [the characters] look... almost the same actually... Apart from Rose and the humans, most of them look like they just got a haircut... Guess I never thought about how androgynous they look normally...Still cool though.

Figure 9: Referenced fanart, “SU Genderbend 1” by AllforCartoons



So while there is an ongoing debate about Gem gender due to the ambiguity of the Gem characters, this allows for more interpretations from the fandom and, therefore, more opportunities to make meaning for and validate one’s identity. As the gems do not have a biological sex or a gender binary in their species, and sport an androgynous appearance at

times, the Gems can represent those who identify as agender. For example, Amethyst can even be seen as a representation of a genderfluid being due to her Purple Puma alter-ego. Due to being perceived as female-coded and their use of female pronouns, the Gems can also be seen as female (as will be discussed later in this chapter). This debate about Gem gender in *Steven Universe* leads directly to another sticky topic that appears among, yet can split, the fandom. This topic is same-sex relationships and sexual orientation within the show.

Sexual Ambiguity

Whether or not certain couples can be considered gay or lesbian within *Steven Universe* depends on how one interprets Gem gender, or lack thereof (as discussed in the previous section). For instance, if a fan does not believe Gems have, represent, or should represent a specific gender, then there are arguably no same-sex couples in the series (with the exception of a possible lesbian-headed family among the background characters). If one believes the Gems can have, can represent, or should represent a specific gender, then there are same-sex relationships amongst the main and supporting cast. If two Gems are in a romantic relationship and a fan considers the Gems female, or a representation of a female, then that relationship can be seen as a lesbian relationship. The obvious example of ambiguity in Gem romantic relationships is the character Garnet. As a permanent fusion of two Gems in love, Garnet stays fused so that Ruby and Sapphire never have to be apart. If Ruby and Sapphire are considered female, then they could also be considered a lesbian couple and provide positive

representation. Similarly, Pearl's orientation is considered by many in the fandom to be a lesbian due to her perceived romantic love and devotion for Rose Quartz, both prior to and after Rose's death. Additionally, in the episode "Last One Out of Beach City" (season 4, episode 6, 2016), Pearl becomes interested in a human 'Mystery Girl' with pink hair. Their interactions are coded by viewers as flirting and Mystery Girl even gives Pearl her phone number at the end of the episode. This episode brings an even clearer representation of lesbians to the show by depicting a female human as interested in the female-presenting Pearl. This interaction also strengthened the claim that Pearl is lesbian as she was interested in a female human. For younger audiences socialized through cartoons aimed at their demographic, and who may simply view the Gems as female due to their coding as indicated by the subReddit user methodandred, female presenting characters such as Pearl and their relationships with other female, or female-presenting, characters brings positive exposure of non-heteronormative individuals and couples.

According to the *Steven Universe* subReddit survey discussed previously in Chapter Three "Methods," 51.5 percent of the *Steven Universe* subReddit users identify as something other than heterosexual. Therefore, the debate over Gem gender and sexual orientation is important to viewers of the show, including older audiences, as demonstrated by many fans on the *Steven Universe* subReddit who have cited the ability to see themselves and their struggles with their sexuality in the show's characters.

The impact that perceived portrayals of sexual orientation have had on *Steven Universe* fans is captured in the subReddit's discussion of the episode "Mr. Greg" (season 3, episode 8, 2016). Started by LunaOona, the episode has a thread specifically

dedicated to discussing how the episode impacted fans. In the episode “Mr. Greg,” Steven, Pearl, and Greg travel to Empire City (*Steven Universe*’s version of New York City), allowing Pearl and Greg to address the tension between them over Rose choosing Greg as a romantic partner (rather than Pearl) as well as Rose’s death. Please note, LunaOona’s post has been greatly edited down due to the substantial length of the post.

...I've known I was bisexual since my single digits, but growing up, all of the family/kids shows I watched only seemed to take heterosexual relationships seriously[...]

[...]I was attracted to another girl who was attracted to me in my early teens, but I ran away from that because I didn't want to acknowledge that I was queer. In my late teens, I became involved in an odd love triangle between myself, another woman, and a man, and I had feelings for both people[...]

[...]And then this week, “Mr. Greg” aired and, for the first time in my life, on a piece of media meant for a young audience, I saw a queer woman whose feelings were not played for laughs. Who was free to love, to grieve, to hurt, to understand why things happened the way they did, to be taken seriously by the other characters AND the audience. And for the first time in my life, I felt like my feelings could be taken seriously as well. I'm coming to terms with a lot of what's happened in my life now. I feel like I've been given permission to have emotions thanks to 11 minutes of a family cartoon. Nothing else in twenty-some years of life has come close to the validation I felt watching this episode as a queer woman.

Multiple other bisexual individuals commented to share their stories, similarly remarking how the episode, or the show overall, helped them learn to accept themselves. They also noted how they would have been positively influenced if they had a show like *Steven Universe* when they were growing up. Through the episode “Mr. Greg,” and the songs within the episode in particular, some fans were able to relate to the characters through their own experiences such as DoritoPowarr who connected through Pearl’s song “It’s Over Isn’t It?” which is about Pearl’s feelings of losing Rose Quartz to Greg and still being unable to move on,

...I kept crying when Pearl sang cause it reminded me of all the rejections I've had as a bisexual. I relate so frekkin much and I'm so happy how this show can tell everyone watching it that those feelings are real, it's not a joke!

These bisexual fans found meaning and validation through the perceived depiction of a queer woman and her feelings being shown in a serious and normative light. However, it was not only bisexual individuals who found meaning in the episode, multiple polyromantic individuals found representation of themselves as well.

Polyromantic representation can be found in the song “It’s Over Isn’t It?” but even more so in the song “Both of You” where Pearl and Greg talk about what happened in the past with Rose. Pearl and Greg have “got a lot in common,” that commonality being that they need someone else who understands the pain of their loss and that “you [Pearl and Greg] both love me [Steven] and I love both of you.” As Steven has his mother’s gemstone (a rose quartz gem), and Rose is considered to be literally half of him (because she gave up her life to give him life through her gemstone), it is not uncommon for fans to interpret this song not only as Steven singing to Pearl and Greg, but as Rose Quartz singing to the two individuals she loved.

Kraide: But I believe the song “Both of You” said exactly that: They both loved her. She loved both of them.

xiphoniii: I'm currently in a triangular relationship with two partners, and this episode helped validate that you can love two very different people

Moreover, bisexual and panromantic individuals were not the only individuals who found meaning in this episode; a transsexual individual and a lesbian individual shared their stories as well. Zechrom’s story is presented below,

zechrom: [...]while I watched this episode it reminded me about my unrequited

feelings for another woman, but it also reminded [me] that it's okay to feel this way, even if the other person does not reciprocate said feelings.

She was actually the one that got me into *Steven Universe* while at the time I wasn't really comfortable about voicing the fact that I was a lesbian, but over the course of this show, honestly the fact that the cast is so inclusive made me feel like I was a part of something and accepted.

All of these fans from the *Steven Universe* subReddit were able to find representation through the episode “Mr. Greg” and the ambiguity of its characters’ sexual orientations, allowing the fans to feel validation and acceptance.

On the other hand, and although they are a much smaller portion of the fandom sampled in this research, there are also those that use *Steven Universe*’s gender ambiguity to prevent LGBTQIAP+ readings of the show and/or its characters. Note that when I say “prevent,” I am not referring to fans that do not find LGBTQIAP+ representation in the show’s ambiguity, but rather those who actively work to inhibit LGBTQIAP+ interpretations for others. For instance, the subReddit user DeJtheGamer watches *Steven Universe*, enjoying the uniqueness of the show and the cute characters. But DeJtheGamer also notes how when watching the show with their toddler sisters, DeJtheGamer tells the toddlers that Ruby and Sapphire are genderless “for the sake of them [the toddler sisters] not being exposed and falling victim to the LGBTQ themes on the show” because DeJtheGamer personally believes that queer themes are not something kids should be exposed to. By preventing the perception of LGBTQIAP+ individuals in the show, DeJtheGamer prevents potential exposure to and normification of underrepresented populations.

Interestingly, tying into the discussion of the appropriateness of LGBTQIAP+

depictions above, there are threads and discussions among the *Steven Universe* fandom about what would happen, what the show would look like, and would the show have aired if the cast of characters were presenting as the opposite gender? While providing interesting and insightful responses, a relevant discussion from one of these threads stood out: What if the Gems were male-coded instead? This discussion predominately revolved around how the change in gender presentation would change the perception of Gem sexual orientation. There are certain fans on the *Steven Universe* subReddit who would like to see gay representation in *Steven Universe* and feel such representation might even be more progressive than lesbian representations. Then again, there are also a minority of fans who state that reversing the presenting gender of characters, specifically the Gems to male, would be weird or disturb them, as demonstrated in this section of one of these gender-bending subReddit discussions,

MouldySoap: To be honest if the genders were swapped it would make the show uncomfortable to watch. Especially with all the fanfiction.

Evillisa#NotBack: So you accept a show with lesbians but not with gay men? That's a little fetishistic of you "mate".

MouldySoap finds the idea of male same-sex relationships, rather than female, difficult to watch and is concerned about the stories that may be written by the fans, due to what I perceive to be an assumption that the fanfiction will be more sexually explicit, when the relationships are gay rather than lesbian. The concept of sexually explicit material by fans will be revisited later in the section "Forced Diversity?" from Chapter Seven "Breaking Stereotypes and Norms?." casting a bit more light as well as skepticism on this

assumption.

Overall, when it comes to the ambiguity of gender and sexuality within *Steven Universe*, there are two important views taken among fans. The first, as stated by the Youtuber Tayo Talks, is that it is good to debate and clarify the gender and/or sexuality of the Gems because having diverse representations is important. Tayo Talks states that, “*Steven Universe* does an awesome job at destroying the idea that white, straight, and male equals normality.” The representation provided in *Steven Universe* gives those outside the ideal and/or the norm the chance to see themselves in the characters. It also provides the opportunity for viewers to create meaning from the coded characters designed by the creators, such as the Gems being perceived as female and therefore lesbian or Garnet being black-coded. For instance, Tayo Talks discusses a personal relation to this concept through their sister stating, “I don’t know where my sister would be if she didn’t realize she could be Barbie, but she would much rather be Garnet.” Instead of being the white heterosexual female with an ideal body type, Tayo Talks’ sister can be, and would rather be, a strong and curvy black-coded woman (Tayo Talks 2015).

On the other hand, from the same video, the Youtuber ItsMeCollen takes the other approach, stating that discussion and clarification are not important because no one interpretation of the characters is right or wrong. While the more unpopular of the two views, it contains valid arguments. The problem with a definitive claim about, or clarification of, a character’s identity is that it gives meaning to some, but consequently takes representation and meaning away from others. ItsMeCollen states that having

ambiguous depictions is about, “allowing viewers to freely find their own meaning in it” (Tayo Talks 2015).

Some fans prefer more overt depictions within the show which allow for collective meaning making and more validation of their specific social identities along with the acknowledgement of that validity by others. On the other hand, the use of ambiguity by the show’s creators allows for a wider variety of interpretations that allow a broader audience to make meaning among the fandom and find validity for more social identities.

The Curious Case of Fusion

After the initial ambiguity of Gem gender, and therefore sexuality, the fandom dived even deeper into their analysis of Gem gender and sexual orientation when the show introduced fusion, the usually temporary combining of two or more Gems to create a new Gem. In the episode “Alone Together” (season 1, episode 37, 2015), there is a character named Stevonnie, which is the fusion of Steven and his female human friend Connie (Figure 10). Both Steven and Connie appear as cis-gender, using the pronouns corresponding to their sex; therefore their fusion is a combination of both male and female. This gives viewers the opportunity to interpret Stevonnie as a representation of a transgender character (Dunn 2016:4), intersex character, agender character, non-binary character, and/or a genderfluid character. The ability to interpret this fusion in multiple ways demonstrates how fans engage in meaning making, identity formation, and feel their identities validated, including the 4.9 percent of the *Steven Universe* subReddit who

identify as genderqueer, agender, or non-binary, as well as the 0.6 percent that identify as transgender.

Figure 10: Stevonnie (left) and Smokey Quartz (right) character designs.



Similarly, Smokey Quartz is a fusion of Steven and Amethyst (Figure 10). Steven is a cis-gender male while Amethyst is a Gem with ambiguous gender. Once combined, the fusion appears feminine, but what would one consider Smokey Quartz's gender? Is Smokey Quartz female, male, agender, transgender, intersex? Do fusions like Smokey Quartz provide representation for gender fluid and genderqueer individuals? As is the common thread throughout this chapter, the answer depends on the individual fan's interpretation. On one hand, this plethora of representational possibilities allows for socialization and learning experiences for younger viewers and an introduction to genderqueer and/or non-binary characters. For instance, thebewilderedhuman from the *Steven Universe* subReddit describes an experience watching the episode "Alone Together" when Stevonnie first appears, and how this spurred a conversation with their

ten year old brother about what it means to be genderqueer and/or non-binary,

Brother: Wait, so is Steveonnie [sic] a boy or girl?

Me: I don't know- [Garnet] said they weren't two people and they weren't one person, so maybe both? Neither?

Brother: Oh, so they're girl and boy then.

Me: Yeah.

Brother: She looks like a girl, though.

Me: Well, maybe they're both but they've fused and chosen to look like a girl.

Brother: Yeah, okay, I get it.

On the other hand, rather than a plethora of possible perceptions, there are a few fans who see the more feminine features of these fusions to be a crutch to the possibility of fans finding genderqueer representations, claiming that the Gems and their fusions instead present as female and, therefore, will not be interpreted by children as outside of the gender binary. This view was specifically expressed by the *Steven Universe* subReddit user hanhage,

I think you need to rethink what you're saying about the fact they might be nonbinary meaning anything important. [...]this is not amazing in the least because they appear to be female and any child that it will help with their gender identity will just see Stevonnie as female. Long hair, big lips, girlish long eyelashes, a feminine name like 'Stevonnie'(very close to stephanie), etc... Kids won't think 'but Steven has a penis!' They'll think 'Stevonnie is a pretty girl.' It does nothing for "nonbinary" characters. You can argue 'nonbinary people can look female!' and that's true, but for representation, to have a character's sex and gender identity up on the air and have them look very, very, very female, it doesn't do much. Especially with a kid's show. The kid won't be thinking about 'oh, this person is not male or female.'

While hanhage makes valid arguments, the conversation between thebewilderedhuman and thebewilderedhuman's brother also calls hanhage's final statements about kids not thinking about the gender of the fusion into question. So even if a fan has their own idea about Gem gender, fusion between characters who have different gender presentations

brings another level of complication to the discussion of Gem gender.

Analogy: The Art of Fusion

While there is a strong intersection between gender and fusion, a large amount of discussion about sexuality among fans of the show revolves around fusion as well. In the episode “Jail Break” (season 1, episode 52, 2015), the character Garnet is revealed to be a fusion. As previously discussed, the gems that combine to create Garnet (Ruby and Sapphire) are portrayed as a romantic couple, concerned for each other’s welfare and kissing away their partners’ tears. Since the Gems use female pronouns, many interpret this relationship between Ruby and Sapphire as a lesbian relationship and see Garnet as a physical embodiment of a lesbian relationship.

Fusion had been shown on *Steven Universe* before in episodes such as “Giant Woman” (season 1, episode 12, 2014), “Coach Steven” (season 1, episode 20, 2014), and “Alone Together” (season 1, episode 37, 2015). In “Giant Woman” and “Coach Steven,” fusion was shown as a temporary technique in which two gems combine to become more powerful when needed for a task and the Gems unfuse when the task is complete. That is, fusing is a strategic move. However, the act of fusion in the show can be viewed as an analogy for intimate relationships and, at times, specifically romantic and/or sexual relationships. As illustrated in the episode “Giant Woman,” when Pearl and Amethyst attempt to fuse they are unable to achieve the fusion because they cannot synchronize. Gems must be able to ‘sync’ to be able to fuse, which typically consists of dancing to synchronize the gems’ physical, mental, and emotional states. These dances can

sometimes have sexualized movements as seen in the fusion dance between Garnet and Amethyst (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Fusion dance between Garnet and Amethyst.



Still, the fusions of Stevonnie (the fusion between Steven and Connie) and Garnet are the two that stand out as romantic and possibly sexual relationships. After Stevonnie is formed during “Alone Together,” Pearl comments that, “It’s impossible! Or at the very least inappropriate.” While Pearl is referring to Stevonnie being a fusion with a human, rather than another Gem, this can also be interpreted to mean that fusion is considered a personally intimate, or even a sexual relationship, among the Crystal Gems. Therefore, a fusion between underage children could be seen as inappropriate. However, this particular reading of the scene for fans likely came in hindsight after the episode “Jail Break” (season 1, episode 52, 2015) because up until the episode “Jail Break,” fusion was related simply to connections between the characters and some suggestive dance movements. “Jail Break” was the episode that revealed that Garnet is a Gem fusion made of love, not simply fused for strategic reasons. Thus, another layer of romantic and/or

sexual connotation was added to the concept of fusion. Not only could some of the dances be interpreted as sexual due to dance moves and style, as they were before, fusion could then be interpreted as an analogy for different types of relationships. The concept of fusion as a relationship was quite popular among the fandom, although not quite as popular as debates and discussions over Gem gender and sexual orientation.

For the fans who see fusion as an analogy for sex and relationships, it is simple to understand why. First, the more in sync the fusion is, the more stable it is, meaning the fusion can stay together longer and be more sound of mind. This is comparable to the notion that the more a romantic relationship's members are 'in sync', the more stable and healthy the relationship is. Second, despite the fact that fusions were originally used to make Gems temporarily stronger, Garnet remains fused because Ruby and Sapphire's love for each other. Third, due to the ability to see fusion as a romantic and/or sexual relationship, fusion presents possible situational representations of sexual consent and representations of healthy versus unhealthy relationships. Therefore, fusion also conveys values, norms, and beliefs about what is acceptable in romantic relationships, presents meaning making opportunities among the fandom, and exposes viewers to the concept of consent: What is or is not appropriate? What is consensual and what is not?

On Homeworld, a fusion between different types of Gems is seen as disgusting, resulting in severe punishment, while fusion between the same types of Gems is normal as a tactic for fighting. A couple of fans on the *Steven Universe* subReddit suggested that Homeworld's repugnance to fusion between two different Gems types could be a representation of prejudice against bi-racial couples. It can also be seen as switching the

perspective, meaning that instead of having same-sex couples labeled abnormal or wrong, straight couples are labeled as abnormal or wrong. I would also add that fusion between different Gems could be seen as inappropriately engaging someone who is outside of your station or caste. However, the Crystal Gems do not hold, nor follow, the same values, norms, and beliefs about fusion as Homeworld. The fusions of the Crystal Gems are more intimate and personal, providing the audience with the possibility of romantic undertones and the Crystal Gems with different rules for what is appropriate for fusions. Non-consensual and dubiously (as phrased by online fandoms) consensual fusions are perceived as inappropriate and disturbing. This is especially true in the case of “forced fusion” (when two or more Gems are forced to fuse against their will) because, as Garnet states in the episode “Keeping it Together” (season 2, episode 8, 2015), “Those Gems weren’t asked permission. Fusion is a choice. Those Gems weren’t given a choice! It isn’t right! It isn’t fusion!”

Garnet is a consensual fusion between two willing partners in a loving relationship, but there are other fusions that are quite the opposite. The fusion Malachite, which is a fusion of Lapis and Jasper, while conceivably consensual, is anything but stable as its two Gems fight for dominance over the form (Figure 12). Garnet even states, “Yikes, they are really bad for each other” (“Jail Break” 2015).

Figure 12: Malachite's Initial Appearance.



The following are posts from fans on the *Steven Universe* subReddit discussing the fusion of Malachite and how they perceive the fusion as a relationship. Both TheRealSlimSaiyan and LadyRavenEye see Malachite as a representation of an abusive relationship and contemplate if it can be perceived as domestic abuse.

TheRealSlimSaiyan: I planned to talk about Malachite representing an abusive relationship. Lapis and Jasper are stuck together (Jasper being Lapis' 'prisoner') and they're both in pain. Could it be related to domestic abuse?

LadyRavenEye: I think so, definitely. Lapis taking the abuse upon herself to save others is a big part of that.

As illustrated above, Malachite is not only unstable, but is often seen as an analogy for abusive relationships. While Jasper is Lapis's prisoner in the fusion, many fans, such as those above, see Lapis as the victim of the abuse due to Jasper's villain status, aggressive personality, and the fact that Lapis was previously held like a prisoner on Jasper's ship throughout the events of "The Return" and "Jail Break." However, some of the fandom, including myself, see this as an inaccurate interpretation of the situation and instead see

Malachite as a mutually abusive relationship. For instance, although Jasper was the villain at the time and was the one who coerced Lapis into the fusion at the end of “Jail Break” in order to fight the Crystal Gems, Lapis had her own motives for agreeing to the fusion, which were to protect Steven by trapping Jasper in the fusion. So, after fusing, Lapis’s consciousness took control of the fusion and effectively kept Jasper prisoner within the fusion where they battled for control. The mutually abusive nature of the relationship and the representation of Malachite as an abusive relationship in general, are most clearly demonstrated in the episode “Alone at Sea.”

After Malachite is split and defused in “Super Watermelon Island” (season 3, episode 1, 2016), Lapis ends up with the Crystal Gems while Jasper disappears. In “Alone at Sea” (season 3, episode 15, 2016), it is revealed that Jasper has been searching for Lapis. When Jasper finds Lapis, the lines of dialogue between Jasper and Lapis contains parallels with abusive and mutually abusive relationships. Take the following exchange from when Jasper first finds Lapis,

Jasper: You can’t lie to *me*. I’ve seen what you’re capable of. I thought I was a brute, but you, you’re a monster.

Lapis: I...

this exchange where Jasper falls to her knees, takes Lapis’s hand, and begs Lapis to form Malachite again (Figure 13),

Jasper: Let’s be Malachite again.

Lapis: Why...would you want that?

Jasper: I was wrong about fusion. You made me understand. Malachite was bigger and stronger than both of us. We could fly!

Figure 13: Jasper begging Lapis to form Malachite again.



and this exchange after Jasper further insists they should form Malachite,

Lapis: I was terrible to you. I liked taking everything out on you. I needed to. I-I *hated* you. It was *bad*!

Jasper: It'll be better this time. I've changed. You've changed me. I'm the only one who can handle your kind of power.

While Lapis explicitly admits the abusive nature of the relationship and her part in that abuse, Jasper exclaims a standard line from the abuse trope about how they have changed and that next time it will be better. At the end of this exchange, Lapis rejects Jasper stating that what they had was not healthy and Lapis never wants to feel that way again. Fans on the *Steven Universe* subReddit not only perceived the interactions between Jasper and Lapis as an abusive relationship, one even was willing to share their personal story about being in a similar relationship and participating as an abuser. I specifically chose not to include any quote from the fan's post or the fan's username given the personal nature of their story. Still, the existence of the story is noteworthy as it demonstrates how fans can relate to the content of the show to construct meaning among

the fandom and construct identities. The user identified themselves as an abuser due to the commonalities between Malachite and the user's own previous relationship.

Then there is Sardonyx, which is a stable fusion between Garnet and Pearl, stable meaning that the Gems making up the fusion have an easier time staying fused and not losing their selves in the fusion. Unfortunately, within the episode "Cry for Help," (season 2, episode 11, 2015) later fusions of Sardonyx are seen by fans to be questionably consensual or considered "dub-con", the online fandom's word for dubious consent. In my experience in the fandom, there are also those who specifically consider it rape. In the episode, it is revealed that Pearl had been manipulating the situation by creating circumstances where fusion is necessary, so that she could fuse with Garnet. Another of Pearl's fusions, Rainbow Quartz, was a consensual fusion between Pearl and Rose, but Pearl still had an ulterior motive and used manipulation to gain what she wanted as seen in the episode "We Need to Talk" (season2, episode 9, 2015). Pearl told Rose Quartz that the fusion would look cool for the music video being made by Rose's boyfriend Greg (Steven's father), but in reality Pearl wanted to flaunt her closeness to Rose in front of him to discourage his advances due to Pearl's own interest in Rose. The subReddit user fennric summarizes these three fusions and the idea of consent,

Between Rainbow Quartz and Sardonyx, Pearl's a repeat offender on misguiding people with consent. Though that aspect of it is pretty much glossed over when it comes to Rainbow Quartz, it is sent *slamming* home with the Sardonyx arc. And though I'm wary of calling it rape (although I've seen a lot of others who aren't), it's definitely a grave misdeed.... There are also issues of dubious consent, with Sardonyx of course but also with Malachite. Lapis *did* consent to the fusion, but realistically, was she given much of a choice?

Let us return to the discussion about the fusion Stevonnie. In Stevonnie's particular case in "Alone Together" (season 1, episode 37, 2015), compared to other instances of fusion and consent in the series, the concept of consent does not stem from the act of fusion itself between Steven and Connie, rather, it stems more from how Stevonnie is approached by another character named Kevin while fused. In the episode, Stevonnie represents a consensual relationship, much like Garnet does throughout the series as cited by the *Steven Universe* subReddit user AdrianBrony, "...When Stevani [sic] was on the bench, one got vibes from the other that they might not wanna stay fused, and asked the other, basically, 'do you want to stop?' before getting a genuine reaffirmation of consent 'no this is fine.'" Kevin on the other hand is insistent, pressuring Stevonnie to dance despite Stevonnie's obvious disinterest and current emotional distress. As AdrianBrony comments, Kevin's approach "...was portrayed as creepy and threatening and not really a valid form of consent by comparison." The consent to stay fused and the consent to dance are both possible representations of sexual consent expressed through Stevonnie.

Through the act of fusion, the show may be able to introduce children to consent, its importance and its consequences, in a way that younger viewers can understand, but it also appeals to the experiences of older audiences. There are those who have struggled with similar situations in their lives and they find meaning from seeing their experiences expressed and represented in the show as well as discussed by the fandom. Having the characters from the show dealing with similar issues and working through them is beneficial and validating to viewers of many ages, not just children and pre-teens. Also,

due to the female coding of the Gems, the act of fusion as a sexual relationship and the concept of consent expressed in the show may allow for a more direct connection and representation for the LGBTQIAP+ community and their experiences.

CHAPTER 5: RACE AND ETHNICITY

While not quite as popular as gender and sexuality, the subject of race and ethnicity is also quite common within *Steven Universe* fandom discussions. These discussions include what race or ethnicity certain characters, such as the Gems, are, or represent. However, discussions of Gem race and ethnicity are not quite as common as discussions of gender or sexual orientation. In the show, the human residents of Beach City have a wide variety of realistic skin colors, such as Connie and her family who have mocha brown skin and Steven who has light beige or peach colored skin. The variety of skin colors and other physical features indicates a variety of races and ethnicities in the city. Also, due to the physical appearance of the Gem characters, it is not unreasonable for viewers to read the main Gems as racially or ethnically coded, despite the fact that Gems have never been specified to have any race or ethnicity. Of course, due to the ambiguity created by the Gems' uncommon skin-tones (such as purple, green, and blue), not all fans read the same character as having the same race or ethnicity, or as having any race or ethnicity at all. Nonetheless, a large portion of fans perceive or assign a race or ethnicity to certain Gems, as demonstrated by the popularity of threads on the *Steven Universe* subReddit about what fans believe the race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation of the Gems are. In fact, there was a thread sampled asking why threads discussing the race and ethnicity (along with gender and sexuality) were so popular.

Gem characters can be perceived as racially or ethnically coded in different ways depending on who is watching the show. On the subReddit forum, the user Galgalgoat

sees the main Gems as, “Garnet - African-British, Amethyst - Brazilian, Pearl - British, Peridot - Russian, Jasper - German, Blue Diamond - Indian, Yellow Diamond - American (New York), Lapis - Hawaiian, Rose - French.” Similarly, *atomic_cake* believes that Pearl’s nose and facial features make her appear white, including her pastel 80’s dancewear clothing. *Cracklin'_Rosie* on the other hand sees the character of Pearl as East-Asian based on her voice actress and clothing, and has never seen Pearl as being white. *Crystal_Clods* explains the concept of racial coding to a fellow fan by using the character of Garnet, often interpreted as African American or black, as an example,

[...] none of the Gems *literally* have African ancestry. Obviously. They're not human. They don't come from Earth. They *can't* literally have African ancestry. Hell, they can't even have *ancestry*, period, because they don't have genes. But some of them *are* black-coded. Which is to say that, as characters, they draw on imagery and ideas and history clearly associated with blackness and black people.

Various characteristics such as Garnet’s dark red/brown or magenta purple skin tone, large square afro, and black voice actress Estelle, the British R&B/hip-hop singer, are coded cues the audience can use to interpret Garnet’s race or ethnicity despite the fact that, as a Gem, Garnet does not technically have race or ethnicity within the show. So while Garnet is not black, viewers can see Garnet as a representation of a black woman. The meaning and impact of this representation will be further discussed in Chapter Seven.

Additionally, as noted by fans when discussing fanart of the series, fans such as *gumptiousguillotine* have noticed trends in how fanart depicts the race of the Gems, possibly further contributing to the racial and ethnic coding among the fandom, with changes to the cannon skin tones of the Gems,

Many people believe the CGs [Crystal Gems] are meant to be read as a specific race; Garnet being black, Pearl being white (I think? They never mention Pearl's race), and Amethyst is supposed to be latina I think. I've been noticing that fanart involving all three of them often take some artistic liberties (which I support!) with the skintone of the Garnet and Pearl. On the show Pearl is, like, *white*. Not the skintone of a white human, but the literal color of a white pearl. In fanart I usually see her with human-white skin, that pinky/peachy beige color. Garnet's color changes sometimes; I've seen her purple, fuschia, and puce (which is like a brownish/reddish purple). In fanart she's often depicted with dark brown skin.

So even though the main three Gems sport socially recognized racial markers through their appearance and voice actresses, they may also be racially ambiguous due to the non-natural skin tones so that the identities and experiences of those who watch the show influence their interpretations of the characters. Fanarts, such as those described above, chip away at the ambiguity of the characters and more heavily codes the characters as the artist's personal interpretation, creating and contributing to a clearer depiction of Garnet as a black character amongst fans.

Due to physical characteristics and racial markers, I have also found myself assigning race or ethnicity to the Gem characters as I watch the show. In fact, this ability to view the three main Gems as people of color (POC), and even more specifically women of color (WOC), is one of the most compelling aspects of the show and one of the reasons I continued watching the show after viewing the initial pilot. Being a sociology undergraduate student at the time I began watching the show, I was excited about the diverse characters I perceived because I understood the benefits of having racial diversity in a children's television cartoon series to help deter symbolic annihilation. Further examples of these potential benefits of diverse representation can be seen in stories from fans such as xaerielle,

My little sister (7) is a huge fan of the show, and her favorite character is Garnet. I am so happy that she can identify with a character that is coded as a person of color. The same is true with Connie. She sees herself in these characters and that's so great. Also, when she heard Amethyst say "Mi Torta!" in *Monster Buddies*, she immediately decided Amethyst is Latinx and she now is noticeably more comfortable speaking Spanish.

Amethyst is an example of a Gem character whose race and/or ethnicity is more frequently interpreted differently by each fan because her race and/or ethnicity is more ambiguous than other Gems such as Garnet. Most commonly, fans see Amethyst as Latinx, but others also see Amethyst as mixed race, black, or Asian. In the particular case above, Amethyst's use of the phrase "Mi Torta!" provided a coded cue which led the young girl to interpret Amethyst as Latinx and gain a more positive perspective of elements of her Latina identity such as speaking Spanish.

Never the less, even if some Gems are commonly perceived as representing a specific race, [FieryCreator](#) reminds fans on Reddit that the creator of the series herself, Rebecca Sugar, stated that there is a grey area when it comes to race for Gems.

[...] Sugar herself has said the gems "are gems," and that it was a grey area, meaning anyone can draw them however they want; do you want to draw Garnet black? Great, I do too, Garnet is great drawn as black! Do you want to draw Garnet as Native American or Asian or Mediterranean or Indian or white or martian green? Perfect, go for it...

The ambiguity of the Gems allows for potential depictions of many different ethnicities as well as opportunities for meaning making among otherwise marginalized populations. At the same time, other fans, myself included, are perturbed by fanart depicting Garnet as white due to concerns of white-washing.

When discussing ambiguity, representation, and ethnicity within the show *Steven*

Universe, I discovered that certain fans find the character of Steven represents a potentially multi-racial and mixed-culture individual. In fact, Reddit user gunnervi went so far as to recommend the idea as a topic for a paper about *Steven Universe* to a fellow fan. As gunnervi states, “Steven is both a Gem and a human child and, at times, he feels like neither, struggles to balance the two sides, or feels left out of one.” Not only does gunnervi recommend the concept for a paper, but gunnervi personally finds meaning and representation through the character of Steven as well,

As a bi-racial person myself, this type of struggle really speaks to me, and I think that the Crewniverse [crew of the show *Steven Universe*] does a good job of capturing the subtleties of it without being heavy-handed with the racial metaphors.

Other multi-racial and/or multi-cultural fans such as Evio identify with Steven’s frustrations when they are unable to “bridge the culture gap.”

In a video review of the episodes “The Return” (season 1, episode 51, 2015) and “Jail Break” (season 1, episode 52, 2015), Youtube user Froborr touches on this concept as well. Froborr notes how Steven is of mixed-heritage, “being raised by people from one side, but in a community that’s the other side...” and therefore Steven knows more about the human side than the Gem side, but he also lacks understanding of common human societal concepts such as school (Froborr 2015).

So, like the ambiguity and coding of gender and sexuality from Chapter Four, the Gems’ racial and ethnic ambiguity as perceived by fans and the Gems’ racial or ethnic coding from both creators and fans allows for meaning making and identity formation among fans. Still, there is more to the discussion of race and ethnicity in the *Steven*

Universe fandom including discussions of parallels to discriminatory situations of class and race in real life as well as possible racist character depictions in the show.

Racial and Class Discrimination

Steven Universe contains portrayals of class through both social economic status among the residents of Beach City and the caste system of the Gem Homeworld. One example of the diversity of class among Beach City residents is the comparison of Steven's social class to his friend Connie's social class. In addition to their ethnic differences, Connie being of Indian decent and Steven presumably being a white American, Steven and Connie are from different backgrounds not just in wealth or status, but also the ways in which they have been raised. Connie's parents raised her with a strict schedule, while Steven was seemingly raised quite differently. Steven was instead raised by Greg, a failed fat-bodied and poor musician, along with three aliens (the Crystal Gems). Although these parental depictions could be interpreted as negative stereotypes of the poor or working class ("lazy" or "overweight") and the upper or middle class (strict or inflexible), the show does not make fun of any of these aspects of the characters and even, at times, subverts them.

Due to the ambiguity in the show (as discussed in Chapter Four), there are opportunities the show's creators take to discuss racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination through situations that can be perceived as portrayals of racism and/or discrimination between characters and/or even institutional racism. This is an important take-away found among the fandom when discussing class in *Steven Universe*. There is a

lack of discussion of meaning making through class among fans, yet there are discussions of implied intersections with, and parallels to, race. These intersections and parallels of class and race are created by fans through the hierarchical class structure of the Gems in the show. This may be due to the difficulty those in the United States have talking about class and socioeconomic status. Discussions about class are taboo in the U.S. which prevents the development of language and discourse to discuss class. Instead, class discussions are replaced with discussions of race, conflating race-based and class-based issues (Sanders and Mahalingam 2012).

In contrast to Beach City, Homeworld has a caste system. A great illustration of the caste system of Homeworld as compared to the class system in Beach City is the character of Pearl. Over the course of the show, the audience learns that the Gems come from a society operating on a caste system and that each Gem is purpose built. The Diamonds are at the top of the hierarchy and believed by other Gems to be, as Peridot states, “completely flawless beings” (“Message Received” 2016). Blue Diamond is seen to have an elite court (“The Answer” 2016), Jaspers and Amethysts are created to be soldiers (“Too Far” 2016), and Pearls are servants (“Back to the Barn” 2015). Also, because there certain types of gems that are mass produced, common Gems are often referred to by a numerical designation such as Peridot who is Facet-2F5L Cut-5XG.

Overall, while there are discussions about class and social economic status (SES) among fans of *Steven Universe*, they do not usually involve the same amount of meaning making as other topics such as gender, race, sexuality, etc. Representations of class, such as the Homeworld’s caste system, are analyzed by fans through race. Nevertheless, the

ability to create discussion about racism and discrimination through class and the caste system of the Gems is still valuable. The racist behaviors and a caste system in *Steven Universe* are perceived as negative by the main characters of the show and the main characters interact positively with those seen as lesser, wrong, or an “other.” Thus, the show can provide a model for values, norms, beliefs, and thus behavior for children and its viewers.

Some of the most prominent examples and representations of discriminatory and race-coded dialogue in the show come through the introduction of the Homeworld Gems, Peridot and Jasper. Within minutes of when the viewers are first introduced to Jasper in the series, Jasper begins to point out the supposed defects and inappropriate nature of the main three Crystal Gems: Garnet as a “shameless display” due to the permanent fusion between two different types of Gems, Amethyst as a “puny overcooked runt,” and Pearl as “lost” and “defective.”

The racially discriminatory coded dialogue later intensifies once the character Peridot begins to work with the Crystal Gems. Peridot, despite the truce she made to work with the Gems, still holds onto the Homeworld values and norms she was taught. During Peridot’s arc in the show, Jasper’s initial comments can be more clearly interpreted as coded references to race and ethnicity by viewers as they are elaborated on by Peridot. For instance, the Pearl of the Crystal Gems was, as Peridot states, a “made-to-order servant just like the hundreds of other Pearls being flaunted around back on Homeworld” (“Back to the Barn” 2015), but Pearl does not follow this intended purpose on Earth. Therefore, Pearl is “lost” and “defective” because she does not belong to

anyone and she is overstepping her position by not playing the role she was created for, to be a servant. The episode “Back to the Barn” (season 2, episode 20, 2015) is specifically centered on the conflict between Peridot’s beliefs and Pearl as a threat to those beliefs. In the episode, Peridot and the Crystal Gems are designing a drill, but Peridot refuses to acknowledge Pearl’s skills as an engineer/technician and work with her on creating the drill because, to Peridot, Pearl is, “just a Pearl.” So Steven holds a giant robot creation contest to decide who will be in charge of the drill’s creation. After tying in the contest with Pearl, Peridot still refuses to concede that Pearl is more than a servant, stating, “You are a Pearl. You are beneath me! And nothing I’ve seen today will ever change that!” Of course, there are many other instances of coded references to race and/or ethnicity, with different characters in different episodes, such as Garnet being called “disgusting” by Blue Diamond’s (a ruler/matriarch of Gems) court due to being a fusion of two different types of Gems, or the Crystal Gems, often coded as women of color (WOC), being referred to as “illegal aliens” by Greg’s human cousin.

CHAPTER 6: DISABILITY

Beyond gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and class, is a less often discussed, but still relevant, topic about representation in *Steven Universe*, disability. Among the fandom, disability encompasses both physical and mental aspects. One of the most common characters to become a representation for disability, specifically intellectual and mental disability, is Pearl. Some fans interpret and make meaning from the disorders, such as anxiety disorder (GAD) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), they see represented in Pearl's character. For instance, on CommonSenseMedia the reviewer emilylynng, who grew up with a learning disability and social anxiety, stated that they enjoy Pearl's character a lot because "[s]he displays some social anxiety and tr[a]its of OC[D] that, instead of hindering her or making her unlikeable, actually make her achievements and contributions to her team all the more impressive" (2015). A few fans have also found characters such as Pearl to be representative of autism, although there are also fans who heatedly disagree and actively dislike this reading of the character.

The subReddit user CleverestPony70 specifically states hating when in human-bent fanfiction (fan written stories where Gems imagined as human beings), "they [fans] give [Pearl's] human counterpart all kinds of absurd stereotypical autistic traits she does not have and never will have." On the other hand, there is also a thread on the subReddit by user Obversa thanking the creator Rebecca Sugar for creating characters that someone with autism, such as themselves, can identify with. Obversa specifically cites instances from both Pearl and Amethyst, such as when they are called or perceived as 'defective' or

‘an embarrassment’, relating them directly to an experience the user lived through after being diagnosed. Obversa even created a headcannon (real in a fan’s mind, but not in the show) of Pearl having autistic-like symptoms and related the Crystal Gems to ‘Earthbound aliens’, a term sometimes used for those with autism.

The character Peridot is also found by select fans to be a representation of autism spectrum disorder, Asperger’s syndrome, and/or physical disability. Peridot, like Pearl and Amethyst, has many symptoms of autism. Peridot’s particular symptoms include, first, trouble expressing feelings and understanding the feelings of others. In fact, Peridot is seen in multiple episodes using a tape recorder to express her thoughts and share them with others through recordings. Peridot’s repetition of phrases heard from others is perceived as echolalia (repetition of others’ words). She also often takes words at face value resulting in miscommunication. For instance, in the episode “Too Far” (season 2, episode 21, 2015), Steven tells Peridot, “Oh man Peridot, you’re killing me,” because he is laughing so hard at a comment made by Peridot. In response, because Peridot takes the words literally, she becomes offended stating, “I am not! That would violate our truce agreement.” Lastly, Peridot hyper-focuses on particular obsessions, including an episode of the in-series television show *Camp Pining Hearts* (“Log Date 7 15 2”, 2016). Having individuals, especially children, connect with a character with autistic traits helps to normalize autistic behavior and demonstrates healthy reactions to autistic traits through the characters in the series that viewers can model. Also, for someone with a disability such as asperger’s syndrome or autism, seeing yourself represented in media is especially important due to the processes of socialization and identity formation. As the subReddit

user disneywizard explains,

...a lot of my personality came from children's TV in the 90's because TV was one of the few things that my asperger's syndrome would gravitate too so I learned everything about socializing from TV. And that's why I love Steven Universe because it has many of the messages I saw growing up- importance of family, empathy, optimism, don't give up, you're never alone- in a time where not only is children's TV is going to route of just laughs and very skewed messages to youth but it's also going to be a source of strength and a guide for other children with asperger's syndrome or any other cognitive differences and build their character and it's a beautiful thing.

So not only does the show have the ability to present characters that individuals can find representation in, the show itself is an opportunity for accessible and positive socialization and identity formation for those with disabilities such as Asperger's syndrome.

As for disability and mental health issues, the episode "Mindful Education" (season 4, episode 4, 2016) presents a representation of mental health struggles in general. In the episode "Mindful Education", the song "Here Comes a Thought" is thought of by certain fans, myself included, as a metaphor for working through mental health issues such as anxiety and/or depression. When watching the episode, without the knowledge of the fandom's perception, this is how I first perceived the song. As someone who has struggled with mental health issues, some lyrics of the song stood out. For instance, lyrics such as "Here comes a thought that might alarm me," or "I'm losing sight. I'm losing touch. All these little things seem to matter so much. That they confuse me. That I might lose me," reflect anxiety, capturing the situational feelings and emotions one might have when struggling with anxiety. These lyrics reminded me

directly of times during my life when I was struggling, the thoughts running through my mind, and how I perceived those thoughts. Other lyrics, such as “Take a moment. Remind yourself to take a moment and find yourself,” or “It’s okay. I’ve got nothing [...] to fear. I’m here” reflect coping strategies. In fact, not only does the song remind me of my own cognitive-behavioral therapy, but even the name of the episode, “Mindful Education,” unconsciously produces a connection to therapy, reminding me of the concept of mindfulness and the practice of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT).

Other characters that certain fans find to be representations of disability, including physical disability, are Amethyst and Peridot. In fact, according to *loui_b452*, one of their first thoughts watching the show was that, “Amethyst represents people with disabilities.” Amethyst is revealed in the show to be formed incorrectly, leading Amethyst to be self-conscious. Various characters remark how Amethyst is an “overcooked runt” or “defective” due to her short height. Amethyst has even been compared by *scrawledfilefish* to Toph, a blind earth-bender from *Avatar: the Last Airbender*, because they are both disabled, or found to be a representation of such, yet are still great fighters.

According to the *Steven Universe* subReddit user *Duskren*, “A simple line from Steven Universe can make your whole world spin on its head.” One such line from Amethyst herself that stands out, as cited by *Duskren*, is from the episode “Steven vs. Amethyst” (season 3, episode 19, 2016) where Amethyst exclaims, “I’m too small, and everyone’s always acting like there’s no problem. ‘You can be anything you want to be!’ No I can’t. I can’t even be the one thing I’m supposed to be, you know?” This line was

especially powerful for Duskren,

That... That whole FUCKING line right there. I've struggled with that my whole life. From growing up in the South with a Christian background...to not being like most girls... AND liking girls. I swear, you can develop some pretty big self-loathing if you can't understand why things are the way they are.

Duskren recalls being a tomboy growing up, despite being encouraged by family members to be more feminine. Later, Duskren was diagnosed with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) in which women can develop certain male characteristics due to their testosterone levels. Duskren expressed having difficulties with this condition not just due to the condition itself, but the reaction of others and how it made Duskren feel.

Elders wanting you to be more in touch with your feminine side, be all pretty...not listening to what you want to do or wear. Fear of disappointing everyone for your views and wants... Oh the list is endless!

Honestly, I felt like a failure. There was nothing I could do right to fix who I was. It all just left me exposed... People didn't take the time to see who I was underneath the layer that is *waves to herself* all of this. They just saw some gender confused reject and didn't hesitate to jump on that bandwagon to ridicule and torment. I was never given a chance to understand myself...to understand the vulnerability. I still battle this everyday [sic]. PTSD IS FUN!

As a character, Amethyst struggles with these same fears of being a failure or disappointing others, experiencing a similar vulnerability. Lastly, Duskren discusses how *Steven Universe* has helped her and praises the positive influence it has had on her life due to the relatable representations presented,

...but I'm taking the time to sort out my emotions and my body issues... one day at a time. Steven Universe has helped me in more ways than I can ever imagine in relation to interpersonal relationships and myself. So thank god this show is on TV for not only me but for everyone else going through life and everything else.

Steven Universe and the character of Amethyst helped Duskren by providing opportunities for meaning making and Duskren believes that *Steven Universe* will help others do the same.

There have been other perceived depictions of physical disability in the fandom revolving around Peridot, who has also been seen as a representation for physical disability due to her limb enhancers (Figure 14), but this representation originated more from fan theory and headcanon (i.e., a fan's personal canon, belief, or interpretation about an element of a show despite the belief not being included in the universe of the show).

Figure 14: Peridot with limb enhancers (left) versus without limb enhancers (right).



When first introduced in the show, fans theorized that the reason Peridot seemed to have mechanical limbs and fingers was that these were attachments to Peridot's body rather than part of her original physical form. From this stemmed the idea that the attachments were high tech prosthetics. Therefore, Peridot was an amputee or had missing limbs. It was later confirmed that the technological limbs were not part of her body, but, rather

than missing limbs, Peridot was particularly small and supposedly powerless. Despite the fact that the enhancers were not prosthetics for missing limbs, certain fans have loosely associated the character of Peridot with having physical disabilities.

While I was not expecting representations of disability to be a focus in my research, and while discussions of disability did not account for nearly as many discussions as gender, sexuality, or race, I felt the discussion of disability was significant to include. I will admit a personal bias in the inclusion of this section due to my personal experience with discussions of diversity and representation. In such discussions, disability is not nearly as popular a topic as gender, sexuality, or race just as it was not one of the most popular in the *Steven Universe* fandom. Then, among discussions of disability, invisible disabilities such as mental health are regularly forgotten. This is why, although not the most frequently discussed representation in the fandom, I felt disability was significant to this research, especially due to the amount of discussion about mental health. Also, the data I collected that centered on disability tied directly into collaborative meaning making through various headcannons. These interpretations also provided validation through representation for select fans. However, these interpretations were not without backlash as others felt that talking about disability was not appropriate due to the assumed lack of creator intent.

CHAPTER 7: BREAKING STEREOTYPES AND NORMS?

The positive female and male characters of all shapes, sizes, and colors is encouraging and I think there's much to be learned about tolerance and acceptance from Steven and his unusual family. (GamerMedic)

With the variety of possible representations perceived by fans, one of the things *Steven Universe* is known for its progressive themes and ability to play with common stereotypes. However, there are a minority of the fandom who disagree and claim that *Steven Universe* is not progressive in this way. A portion of those who do not feel that *Steven Universe* is progressive in this way, further claim that it reinforces stereotypes rather than challenging them. Some of these stereotypes, whether challenged or reinforced, include gender roles, racial stereotypes, and their intersection with body type. Whether or not *Steven Universe* breaks stereotypes and norms, or further reinforces them, is significant because what the themes in the show present to the viewer, and how viewer perceives those presentations, impacts the viewer's values and beliefs through the socialization process. For this chapter, we will start with a discussion of the fandom's perceptions of gender norms and roles.

Gender Norms

In many cartoons and other children's television, male characters perpetuate hegemonic masculinity even when they are not embodying it (Meyers 2012:140), meaning that even if a male character is not hyper masculine, they can still contribute to hegemonic masculinity through their portrayal of, and other characters' reactions to, their lack of masculinity. In contrast, in my interpretation, and that of most the fandom

discussing the topic, Steven from *Steven Universe* challenges hegemonic masculinity. He is associated with many stereotypical feminine elements such as the color pink and his wielding of a defensive weapon, Rose's shield, rather than an offensive weapon. Rose's sword, an offensive weapon, is instead wielded by his cis-gender female friend Connie. In the thread "I love how this show ignores gender norms" by bb411114, bb41111 states that "[ignoring gender norms] happens all the time...Connie being cast as a fighter a knight [...and] Steven the medic and protector."

Stefan_Universe from the *Steven Universe* subReddit notes similar elements when comparing Steven to the magical girl trope. Popular in anime, 'Magical Girls' are young girls with magical powers who wear feminine outfits and transform to save the world from various creatures. The show *Card Captor Sakura*, also known as *Card Captors* when it was aired in the United States, is a great example of this trope (Figure 15).

Figure 15: The magical girl protagonist from Card Captor Sakura.



Stefan_Universe demonstrates how *Steven Universe* flips the trope because “...this time around the main boy is a magical girl, wears pink all the time, and part of him is his own mother. And he fuses with a girl to create a pretty ambiguous fusion.”

Steven is also compassionate, empathetic, and emotional, all traits more commonly associated with female characters or femininity (Connell 1987; Korobov 2011:52-53). Most importantly, these traits and this trope are not used to reflect negatively upon Steven nor do they detract from his bravery and other such heroic traits. Thus, Steven’s character provides viewers with exposure to a male with stereotypically feminine traits being taken seriously. This sentiment about the positive portrayal of Steven’s feminine traits is demonstrated by the posts from *Steven Universe* subReddit users treading-waters and PearlDidNothingWrong. No negative critiques were found in

the data analysis in reference to Steven's feminine traits or statements denying their existence.

treading-waters: I really love how much Steven Universe breaks all these stereotypes, by having the main character be a boy who loves robots and spaceships and junk food and toilet humour, but is still defined by very stereotypically feminine qualities such as compassion, healing, love, wanting to make people happy, gentleness, tenderness, kindness...

PearlDidNothingWrong: In an ideal world, everyone would be as comfortable with defying gender stereotypes as Steven is.

While Steven is not the only male character in children's media that challenges hegemonic masculinity, he does stand in contrast to other male characters from children's television shows that end up dressed as women in their series. In children's media, male characters can dress up as a female, though this activity is commonly used as a comedic tactic. Unfortunately, because these acts are used for a comedic effect, they serve to re-enforce the gender binary and norms rather than truly countering hegemonic masculinity.

While cross dressing and drag are more often used as a spectacle to those in various series, such as *The Suite Life on Deck*, and a punishment to the character in drag (Myers 2012) it has been found that, even if not great representation, a deviation from the norm of hegemonic masculinity or heteronormativity can have positive benefits from simply presenting the representation at all. The children who watched *Spongebob Squarepants* in Pillar's (2011) study did not look down upon the character when he expressed non-masculine traits such as fear. Although other counter-hegemonic and non-masculine depictions of masculinity in cartoons such as crossdressing and/or drag have been found to re-enforce hegemonic masculinity (Myers 2012), it could conceivably be

used to expand representation for males outside of the hegemonic ideal. The *Steven Universe* episode “Sadie’s Song” (season 2, episode 17, 2015) has Steven dress in drag for a performance with make-up, heels, dress, and all (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Steven performing in “Sadie’s Song”.



Unlike some instances from other children’s programming, Steven not only voluntarily and happily dresses in the outfit, but the crowd cheers for him while he is performing onstage. The event is not used to embarrass, emasculate, or punish the character, rather, the crowd supports him, not because the drag is funny, but because they genuinely enjoy the performance. ItsJustJoss from the *Steven Universe* subReddit expresses this sentiment during a discussion of the ‘Steven is transgender’ headcannon,

...I think the idea of a young boy having no problem dressing up like that and singing and dancing was not a bad thing to air to the Trans community. I think it was awesome that not a single “Boo!” or “Hahahahahaha” came from the audience. Nothing but applause and cheers.

The fans of *Steven Universe* as sampled for this research agree that the main character of Steven breaks and challenges gender role and gender norm stereotypes through the feminine aspects of his character. His association with the color pink, his

emotional and compassionate personality, and his appearance in drag are rarely seen as a flaw, but rather as neutral or positive within both the fandom and the show itself. By breaking gender roles and norms, Steven exposes viewers to a male character that does not reinforce hegemonic masculinity. This creates opportunities for viewers to witness a positive behavioral response to males who do not present as hegemonically masculine and offers opportunities for alternative identity formation among males.

STEM

Another great example of breaking gender stereotypes in *Steven Universe*, as discussed among fans, is the inclusion of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields. Some of these depictions of female coded characters proficient in STEM fields in *Steven Universe* are Mrs. Maheswaran, Pearl, and Peridot. Mrs. Maheswaran, Connie's mother, is a doctor working at a hospital. Pearl taught herself mechanical engineering, how to "build things" as Steven phrases it, and is skilled with technology. Peridot is a "certified kindergartener" (i.e., Gem creator) and is adept in mechanics, technology, and engineering. A user from the *Steven Universe* subReddit even created a thread about this topic titled "Women in STEM and Steven Universe."

The following are quotes from that particular thread.

Gandalf_the_Gangsta: ...I'm sure there are those of you out there who understand the difficulty of being a woman in these fields, which are often heavily dominated by men due to previous discrimination. More and more, however, young women are going into these fields and becoming professionals in industry, but are still met with the same discrimination in the workplace.

It's good to see a show promoting women going into these fields without portraying them as shy bookish types in high school. These are individuals who

are confident in their abilities and display a level of professionalism expected of them without any sort of bias based on gender.

uiop60: But the lack of interest in STEM fields by women isn't just because women inherently find those fields less interesting than men do -- boys are encouraged from a very early age to be fond of science and engineering (think toy trucks, play tools, etc.) and girls are more often not...there's a de facto inequality built into our culture that raises girls not to do science. The first step out of that problem (past awareness) is precisely stuff like SU: showing children stories where girls do science.

Through this thread, the fandom argues that the portrayals of female coded characters specializing in STEM related areas in *Steven Universe* are significant. Exposing girls to STEM role models is important to alleviating the male science stereotype (Steinke 1998:147-148) and presents an opportunity for girls to see themselves in these STEM roles. Viewers, of all genders, are able to see that it is normal for women to be in these roles.

Body Image

Women face depictions of ideal body types in media along with the social stigmatization for being a fat-bodied individual (Forbes et al. 2001:482), and this ideal is extended into children's media as well. While men face stigmatization for weight and body type, it is often not to the same extent, or in the same way, as women. This current ideal body type for women (to be young and thin) is unrealistic (Rozin and Fallon 1988; Forbes et al. 2001:479).

Within *Steven Universe*, there are a variety of body types for female and female presenting (or "coded" in the terminology used by the fandom) characters. From the first episode, the viewers are introduced to the female presenting, or female-coded, Crystal

Gems. Each of the Gems has a unique body type. Garnet is tall, strong, broad shouldered, yet extremely curvaceous. Amethyst is also curvy, but the shortest of the three and stout. Pearl has more of an ideal model or ballet figure: average height, thin, and without curves. While some of the fandom praises these body types for their variety, others shame them for being racist, stereotypical depictions. The often black-coded Garnet is bigger and curvy, the often Latina-coded (black-coded or more ambiguously coded) Amethyst is short and chubby, and the often white-coded (sometimes Asian-coded) Pearl, is the closest to the thin ideal body type.

There tends to be more consensus over the character Rose Quartz and the stereotype breaking representation of larger body types. Rose is depicted as fat-bodied, yet is perceived by those in the cartoon as strikingly beautiful. Rose is a love interest for multiple characters; she is nurturing, and a capable fighter. In fact, Greg, Steven's father, is instantly attracted to her.

There is also a variety of body types presented for the men in the series. Characters such as Sour Cream and Lars are thinner and possibly lanky while characters such as Mr. Fryman and Mr. Smiley are bigger and broader. Most notable are the Universes, fat-bodied and balding Greg and his tubby son Steven. Some viewers believe that Steven's design and eating habits promote unhealthy food choices and unhealthy weight for children, such as a reviewer who expressed this claim on CommonSenseMedia. The reviewer fears that the character of Steven would have a negative impact on children through their exposure to Steven's character and the other characters' acceptance of Steven's body type and eating habits, leading children to act

similarly in regards to their own health. Conversely, other reviewers on the same site found the claim to be a hasty accusation. The reviewers instead claim Steven's body type and food choices help some children to see themselves in the character and call stereotypes into question, seeing Steven as a positive role model. While Steven enjoys pizza, ice cream sandwiches, and donuts, he is an active child and his weight is not used as a source of humor within the show. Therefore, Steven presents a character who is not bullied or insecure about their weight, providing a behavioral model for children about acceptance and positive body image.

There are also a variety of body types among the characters of various perceived ethnicities and races in the show. One intersection that came up as specifically important among fans on the *Steven Universe* subReddit and the reviewers on CommonSenseMedia is the body types for women of color (WOC) in the show. Some find the body types to be problematic and stereotypical while others praise them for the variety they bring.

The best example of this intersection is Garnet. Garnet, as discussed previously, is seen by viewers as Black-coded and Garnet's body is extremely curvaceous with a large chest, rear, hips, and lips. She is also presented with a large afro – another coding for black in multiple forms of visual media. Some see this figure as an image of old racist phenotypes while others see it as embracing a more realistic and/or non-ideal body type. Therefore, there is a bit of a debate whether Garnet's figure is racist or progressive. Garnet's character design is sometimes praised for its contribution to the natural hair movement and its depiction of a large curvy WOC as attractive as the users [explosivewasabi \(2014\)](#) and [emilylynng \(2015\)](#) from CommonSenseMedia express,

explosivewasabi: It is no coincidence that Garnet's gem is in her fist because she is strong and meant to represent the silent strength and beauty.

emilylynng: There is nothing WRONG with curvaceous women. I applaud this show for having female-bodied people with varying shapes and so should you. Amethyst and Garnet both present themselves as people of color (POC)...and have bodies you don't see often in cartoons (or in the media, for that matter) ...Garnet is voiced by a British POC and, despite appearing as a black woman, is arguably the strongest and most level-headed of the Gems. Her body is never sexualized and, though stoic, has had whole episodes dedicated to her power to love. She has been called the leader of the group...

However, a minority of fans see the design as a racist caricature. Her body is perceived by some as stereotyped with her curves, retaining the notion of the sexual Negro with enlarged sexual attributes.

Of these attributes, there is one that was specifically discussed on both CommonSenseMedia and the *Steven Universe* subReddit: Garnet's afro. While for some it is a stereotype, more often than not it is seen as a positive depiction because it represents natural hair. [kitsovereign](#) from the subReddit articulates why the afro is part of a positive depiction,

...in addition to being coded black, I'm glad she has an afro. There's often a lot of pressure on black people to emulate "white" beauty, or to look "less ethnic" - straight hair being a big part of that. Garnet has "natural" hair, and it still doesn't stop her from being powerful, being loved, and being the hottest thing Jamie's ever laid eyes on.

and explosivewasabi (2014) on CommonSenseMedia also stated that,

Garnet's afro is not meant to be a stereotype, and this coming from a POC who lacks natural hair, it is meant to represent those women in this new day in age who are proud of their natural hair.

While the idea of racist and/or stereotypical depictions of women of color rarely came up in only one thread on the *Steven Universe* subReddit, there were a couple

instances mentioned in CommonSenseMedia referencing a specific review, no longer available so I assume it was deleted or rewritten due to the backlash it received from other reviewers, that expressed concerns about stereotypes in the characters of *Steven Universe*. Through my own experience viewing the show, I found myself at times questioning if some of the character designs were progressive or possible stereotypically racist depictions. For instance, Garnet's character design changed the most between the pilot and the first episode of the show. Her hair, once straight, became an afro and her long, tall frame became curvaceous. I struggled for a bit with whether this depiction of a black-coded character was empowering or stereotypical. I personally came to find Garnet's design to be more positively representative than stereotypical after taking the time to look up what other fans of the series thought about the representation.

Along the way, I discovered discussions concerning other character designs such as the fusion Sugilite, Sugilite's depiction in her introductory episode "Coach Steven" (season 1 episode 20, 2014), and the controversy that spread among the fandom as a result (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Sugilite's first appearance.



In fact, the thread that was about racist portrayals and designs of the Gem characters specifically focused on Sugilite and Bismuth (a re-discovered Crystal Gem from a half-hour special in season 3 episode 20) (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Bisbuth's character design.



The following is part of the initial post by helloalohhey expressing concern over racist character portrayals in *Steven Universe*,

Is anybody else uncomfortable with how the show's recently portrayed/ handled African-american coded women, specifically Sugilite and Bismuth? The

portrayals of both Sugilite and Bismuth (the two most strongly coded black female characters in my mind) are revenge-seeking women who can't control their anger, pose a danger to those around them, and need to be stopped.

Sugilite is the fusion between Garnet and Amethyst, two Gems coded as women of color, voiced by the black female rapper Nicki Minaj. Sugilite's design consists of a ripped outfit some perceive as "ghetto", a large towering body, a defined brow, five eyes, and sharp teeth which, fans claimed, give her a more "monstrous" or "ape-like" appearance than the previous fusion, Opal, which was a fusion between Amethyst and the white (or Asian) coded Pearl (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Fusions Sugilite (left) and Opal (right).



Beyond the design, the treatment of Sugilite's character in the episode also raises concerns. Sugilite becomes angry, irrational, and even out-of-control to the point where Pearl (again white or Asian coded) has to take Sugilite down. This can be perceived as a feminine white woman beating down an angry and monstrous black woman. While the argument that, rather than racist, Sugilite is truly the combination of Garnet and Amethyst's personalities and designs, or that there are other great explicitly black characters in the show, is compelling, it does not change harmful depictions and/or

portrayals as perceived by certain fans who are, in my experience, often self-identified women of color.

Despite most fans disagreeing that characters such as Sugilite are racist, and the backlash against most who perceive certain characters as racist portrayals, the fact that there are women of color who perceive characters in a show they watch to be racist depictions is real and can have real consequences. Regardless of a creator's intent for a character, the outcomes, such as the representations perceived and emotions felt by others, are valid. Whether I, or any other fan of *Steven Universe*, personally perceives a character to be a stereotypical or racist depiction or not, does not negate the interpretation, validation, or hurt of others. It should also be noted that this brief exploration of racist perception of characters in *Steven Universe* simply tackles a portion of that which a few in-depth analysis of potentially racist depictions in the show cover online. Unfortunately, the discussion of racist depictions in the show is minimal in the *Steven Universe* subReddit, IMDb message boards, and CommonSenseMedia. From my time in the fandom, I found the in-depth analysis of racist depictions to be located in blogs rather than forums, making the subject of racist depictions perceived among the fans difficult to explore in this research.

Fans openly discuss and debate the variety of body images in the show and, although some fans perceive some of these depictions as stereotypical or problematic, there are fans that appreciate the diversity of representation they present. The data collected for this research revealed no disagreement with the fact that the show contains a diverse range of body types and body image, whether or not fans believe the diverse body

types in *Steven Universe* are positive or negative portrayals, although the belief that the diverse body types are negative portrayals is the minority while the majority took a positive or neutral stance. If the majority perceive these portrayals as positive, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of viewers are being socialized into more positive portrayals of diverse body types, challenging the norm and providing validation of identity for those with similar body types. However, it must be noted that the race and/or ethnicity of fans could not be determined unless they self-identified as a certain race and/or ethnicity on the subReddit, the IMDb message board, or CommonSenseMedia. Further, I was unable to determine if the positive perceptions of the Gems as WOC with diverse body types were expressed by women of color or not. Therefore, the belief that there are positive body depictions of women of color in the series is not generalizable for fans of all racial and ethnic identities in the fandom.

Variety of Family

Another way *Steven Universe* is seen as breaking stereotypes is through its use of a wide variety of family types and structures. Due to the alternate family structures in the show, gender roles and norms that are often emphasized in depictions of the nuclear family are at times broken in *Steven Universe*. The protagonist, Steven, is currently being raised by the Gems and, therefore, fans relate this to having three mothers. In fact, fans have even given the Gems designations as “Bird Mom” (Pearl), “Square mom” (Garnet), and “Fun Mom” or “Sister Mom” (Amethyst). Steven’s father, Greg, is also a single father. So while Steven can be seen as living with and being raised by three

women currently in the show, the reasons why are yet to be directly addressed, it is also implied that Greg was responsible for raising Steven a great deal when he was younger and Greg is still a large part of his life even after Steven moves in with the Gems.

Among the other families in the show, there is a previously single mother named Vidalia. The father of her child left her to raise her son, Sour Cream, on her own. She later married the character Yellowtail and had another son named Onion. Through Vidalia's family, there are depictions of an unmarried mother, a single mother, and a step-family. One episode named "Drop Beat Dad" (season 3, episode 7, 2016) even takes the time to explore Sour Cream's struggle with wanting the attention of his birth father, Marty, and his strained relationship with his step-father, Yellowtail.

The Crystal Gems, Greg, and Steven are considered by multiple fans on CommonSenseMedia as a non-traditional family as the Gems are not necessarily bonded by blood or marriage to Steven or Greg. In fact, one review on CommonSenseMedia cites this as a favorite trope at the heart of the show, the "people from diverse and sometimes conflicting backgrounds become family" trope. Many reviewers on CommonSenseMedia who comment on the idea of family in the show have a similar view of Steven's family. They find it to be a positive message for kids along with the variety of other families portrayed in the show. One such review claims that Steven's family is one of the best written families they had seen on television due to the diversity of the characters in the family and how individuals can learn tolerance and acceptance from Steven's alternative family. Still, there are depictions of nuclear families on the show as well, such as Connie's family, which consists of Connie as the daughter, her

mother, and her father. The following is an extract from a different CommonSenseMedia review by emilylynng (2015), reflecting the same appreciation of diverse family representation on the show, but with specific examples,

I think it[']s great that we are given a unique family perspective in a kid[']s show. Not all families are nuclear and this doesn't have to make them bad; not all children live with their fathers, but this does not have to keep them from having a healthy relationship with them. Hell, I wish my Dad was as approachable as Greg, who seems to be the progenitor of Steven's "never give up" attitude. Stevens never shows anything but pride in his Gem family or his father. In the episode where he meets Connie's parents for the first time, two married well-to-do people, he brings his whole family and expresses anger at the idea that anyone would be "ashamed" of them.

In the episode alluded to in the review above, "Fusion Cuisine" (season 1, episode 32, 2014), the concept of the nuclear family is even literally defined. Connie's family structure is that of a nuclear family and, because they are protective of her, she assumed it was safer to tell her parents that Steven has a nuclear family so that she is allowed to hang out with him.

Connie: I told my parents you have a nuclear family.

Steven: Nuclear?! Sure they make things blow up sometimes, but that's because their magic, not radio-active!

Connie: Steven, 'nuclear' means two adults and their child, and/or children. My parents think you live with your mother and father.

In the end of the episode, Connie's parents realize that Steven's family, although not nuclear, are caring, protective, and responsible. This episode portrays the message that a family does not need to be nuclear to be a family or to be a healthy, loving, functional family. This message challenges the social norm and value of the nuclear family for viewers just as it did for Connie's family. In fact, *Steven Universe* carries this

idea of different types of family into multi-ethnic families, providing representation to members of those families as well as multi-ethnic individuals.

The fan HongKongX from the *Steven Universe* subReddit talks about the representation of multi-ethnic families they find in the show, specifically due to their own experience as a child of German-Chinese parents. Unfortunately, HongKongX also expresses disappointment about the lack of discussion of this topic in the fandom. In the episode “Gem Drill” (season 3 episode 2, 2016), when asked what being born on Homeworld was like, Peridot responds by stating, “I didn’t exist. Then I did. I don’t have memories of it, just feelings. I know I can never go back to Homeworld, but it’s hard not to have some feelings for where you came from.” Since HongKongX was “born in the east and raised in the west”, HongKongX connected directly with the scene and explained that, “Compared to Peridot, I do have some memories of my ‘homeworld’ but they are pretty hazy. Not concrete at all. More like *feelings*.”

Another specific moment cited as subtle representation of multi-ethnic families is a scene from “We Need to Talk” (season 2, episode 9, 2015) in which Steven, sometimes perceived as a multi-cultural character due to his human/Gem heritage, grabs his gemstone (symbolizing his Gem half) despondently while his best friend and father bond together as human beings. HongKongX interprets this moment as Steven struggling with his insecurity of not being fully human or fully Gem, despite his efforts to embrace his culture and heritage. Similarly SydSwag, an adopted individual in a multi-racial family, relates to these instances as well,

...when you're adopted really young (like my sis & I were) you don't really remember much about your birth family. You just have feelings towards them. I still can't help but feel inferior to others due to the situation my birth family was from, even though I have very few memories of them.

The presentation of various types of family structures in *Steven Universe* not only provide viewers with a diverse depictions of non-nuclear family structures, but also opportunities for those from non-nuclear families to see their own family or experiences in the characters and/or that character's family. Greg, the Crystal Gems, and Steven are part of a non-nuclear family structure, but this structure also creates a multi-cultural family and a multi-cultural child, Steven.

Is the Diversity Forced?

While the diverse representation and the breaking of stereotypes perceived in the cartoon are often loved by fans, there are those that find, for many reasons, these representations to be forced. In multiple fandom posts it is proposed that diverse representation is considered trendy and is therefore included to bring in a certain audience, although these posts made up less than ten percent of the thread such as "I hear many people say that the LGBT themes in the show are forced. I don't think so" from the *Steven Universe* subReddit. This percentage was found through sampling two separate threads about the issue of diversity in *Steven Universe* on the subReddit, counting the total users who posted to the thread and the number of users holding the position of forced representation or diversity.

One fan from the IMDb message boards, Hemorrhage911, finds the couple Ruby and Sapphire, often perceived as a lesbian couple, to be shoehorned into the show. In

addition, scifi1980 claims that many fans of *Steven Universe* did not become fans, or even start watching the show, until finding out about the relationship between Ruby and Sapphire at the end of season one. scifi1980 explains that the show adds trendy topics, such as gay relationships and characters, because they attract an audience of SJWs, or Social Justice Warriors (a derogatory term for those who express socially progressive views). Lastly, the poster vortexrider, voices concern over progressive additions stating that cartoons should not be “vehicles for social agenda.” vortexrider also claims that the show has elements “suggestive of gay love,” which is forced into the show because a segment of the audience “drool over” it. vortexrider also brings up the idea of Ho Yay. Ho Yay, which is short for “homoeroticism yay!”, is a trope that describes moments in media that viewers can interpret as homoerotic and gain satisfaction and joy from doing so, such as moments of close same-sex friendships.

I have personally experienced the reveal of Garnet as a fusion between Ruby and Sapphire being the reason people began watching *Steven Universe*. In fact, it was the moment that hooked me, even though I had already been watching the show. Thus, I see how the relationship of Ruby and Sapphire is a tactic to bring in a specific audience, but this tactic does not have to contain the negative connotations provided by vortexrider. Introducing characters from underrepresented groups to appeal to viewers who are either part of these groups, are allies of the groups, or enjoy media with representations of these groups does not simply target an audience. It appeals to an audience that lacks representation to begin with and is looking for positive depictions of specific issues. Many fans, including myself, find the representations of same-sex relationships in the

show to be a progressive step in representation. The show takes a step beyond Ho Yay, which provides opportunities for interpretation without any true representation, and avoids queerbating, a more recently defined concept when media creators use homoerotic subtext and hint at representation to attract a queer audience but then never follow through. To provide images (and representation) for an underrepresented group, even if there is marketability involved, does not necessarily detract from the positive impact and opportunities such diverse representation creates. Still, I can also attest to there being a segment of the audience that may “drool over” same-sex relationships as demonstrated by fans of the anime and manga genres of shonen-ai (“boy love”), yaoi (gay relationships, often explicit), shoujo-ai (“girl love”), or yuri (lesbian relationships, often explicit) often written and consumed by and for straight individuals and their pleasure. But again, this does not necessarily detract from the positive benefits that the presence of diverse representation creates. The ideas expressed by vortexrider about “suggestive gay love” and “drooling over” that love suggest that fans such as vortexrider see the diverse representation not as a way to give representation to underrepresented individuals, or socialize youth into a more progressive culture, but rather a way to create profit by providing sexual pleasure and/or excitement for straight audiences or simply for audiences that like to see diversity, but draw no personal meaning from it. However, in the case of *Steven Universe* I, and the majority of the fandom who wrote about these issues, disagree with vortexrider’s dismissal of the importance of possible interpretations of characters as queer. Instead, the majority of the comments in the fandom indicate that

fans use the representation in the formation of their identities, engage in complex meaning making, and/or support the normalization of progressive themes in media.

Many fans of *Steven Universe* also argue that these themes are not forced, some fans even insisting that the inclusion of progressive themes is subtle. This view is well illustrated in the forum thread from the *Steven Universe* subReddit titled “I hear many people say that the LGBT themes in the show are forced. I don't think so.” The following are a few posts from this thread.

nukilik: ...I actually think [*Steven Universe*] does representation really well.

Ruby and Sapphire never felt forced to me, especially after they got some more characterization. And the great thing about Pearl and her relationship with Rose is that it's complicated rather than shallow or sexualized - it's core to Pearl's character and to the general story, not there just for the hell of it.

tsarnickolas: A lot of people who understand rationally that homophobia is wrong but still instinctively feel uncomfortable with LGBT themes will often rationalize their feelings by saying that said themes are “forced” or “gratuitous” when they see them. See also, “I don't have a problem with gay people, but it's wrong for them to act so flamboyantly in public.” I see it as, hopefully, a transitional phase on the way to realizing that modern society is diverse and they need to learn to deal with it.

These posters argue that the diversity of sexual representation, such as Ruby and Sapphire, is not forced. User nukilik further supports this idea by arguing how relationships like Pearl and Rose are not sexualized or shallow, but rather complex. Other users such as tsarnickolas claim that those who consider diversity, such as LGBT representation, to be forced or excessive are uncomfortable with LGBT themes, even though they may deny being homophobic.

There are also those whose opinion takes a middle ground, appreciating the overall diverse representation, but also finding it a bit excessive or forced such as the post below by user DannyBandicoot,

It's a good show and it's nice that it's got some representation for everyone but it falls into that typical tumblr-esque trap where every single character becomes either gay, black or weirdly shaped in some way. In a normal american town there'd probably be a fair few for lack of a better word 'normal' shaped straight people. The show is awesome and it's a refreshing change from what people usually do by making everyone appropriately proportioned white people but it definitely does feel a little forced.

I'm sure as we grow as a society we'll be able to be a little more subtle about things like this but as it stands it's just the way these things always go, people don't really know how to strike a balance so it still feels realistic but with a diverse character list.

So whether the representation is forced or subtle, it is rare for fans to deny that there is diversity in *Steven Universe*. Rather, it is a matter of how effective the diverse representation is, how appropriate it is considered, and how well it is handled. The diversity in *Steven Universe* is readily recognized, but whether that diversity is stereotypical, progressive, forced, or subtle is perceived differently among different individuals.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

In this research I found that *Steven Universe* operates as a socializing agent for viewers across ages. It provides opportunities for meaning making among the fandom and validation for underrepresented populations. I also found perceived depictions of underrepresented populations that I did not expect to find such as disability, especially around mental disability and mental health. Representations of the LGBTQIAP+ were more varied than expected. So, while I was not surprised to find discussions of representation and meaning making for LGBT individuals, I was pleased to find discussions from other members of the queer community as well such as pansexuals. Although present, backlash based on the diverse identities presented in the show was less than I expected from my own experience as a fan of *Steven Universe*. I expected to find more backlash centered on the Gems coded as women of color, such as perceived racist character depictions like Sugilite, but instead found more critique and debate about the gender, and therefore sexuality, of the Gems.

Thus, this research demonstrates that fans use media to negotiate identities such as gender and sexual orientation. Likewise, this research demonstrates how viewers take the images and/or narratives of their own identities and experiences to make meaning in their lives. Thus, this analysis of *Steven Universe* also supports the concept of media as an agent of socialization and a space where people engage in identity formation. Then, by being able to use the representations, images, and/or narratives of their own social identities from the show to make meaning in their own lives, the show and the fandom

become sites of resistance. Not only can viewers find validation by seeing themselves and having others recognize their experiences, but they find a way to resist the dominant narratives that are oppressive to them.

I urge creators of children's media, and media in general, to heed these findings. Media can challenge oppressive dominant narratives and bring validation to underrepresented populations. For the creators of children's programming and cartoons, push the Network, see how much you can get away with and how far you can go in challenging the status quo. Also, be aware of the impact your show has and that, despite your intent, your creations are not fully your own. While a creator may intend to present two close friends, viewers may find depictions of same-sex desire. If a creator intends to bring representation to an underrepresented population, the resulting character depictions could have a negative impact on viewers and be seen as stereotypical or racist. However, be brave and create with the knowledge of the spaces of resistance and validating situations your work has the potential to create.

This research contributes to the study of popular culture, to socialization theories, and to meaning making analyses by drawing from a wide range of fans rather than just analysis from the researcher(s). As a white cis-gender female and demi-sexual, my analysis and the instances of representation I perceive will be different than those with other social identities as my analysis is affected by my own social location. Therefore, using the thoughts and analysis of the fandom provided insight into representations of social identities I did not think of and was able to provide measurements about how important or widely discussed those social identities are among fans rather than how

much it appears in the show. My perception of stereotypical portrayals will vary from other fans in the fandom which, in turn, vary from one another. As I noted previously during my analysis in Chapter Seven “Breaking Stereotypes and Norms?,” I was originally unsure if characters such as Garnet were stereotypical or appositive depiction of a woman of color. I looked into the fandom and critiques of the show to gauge how other people perceived the characters. Then, by using autoethnography I believe I have been able lay bare my own social location while also contributing to the research through my own knowledge and experience with *Steven Universe*.

Although using the online fandom of *Steven Universe* opened many opportunities with the research I would not have had otherwise, there were certainly limitations to this method as well. While the online fandom provided a wide range of ages and diversity overall among fans of the show, it also drew from a specific audience. Using members of online fandoms and online responses in general eliminates fans that do not participate in online discussion such as those who may be more casual fans. While there was a wide range of ages among those in the fandom, the average age of those on the *Steven Universe* subReddit was 21 years old and the most common age was 17 years old. Meaning this research may be lacking fans from within the target demographic of the show (8-12 years old). It would be interesting to compare this research to research using the target demographic of the show and how the results change. Additionally, being able to later conduct research with participants from the now younger generation and target age demographic that grew up watching *Steven Universe* to explore the possible impact it had on the younger generation. Since information on the racial and ethnic demographics

of the online fan sample was unavailable, further research into the fandom and viewership for *Steven Universe* to attain racial and ethnic demographics would aid in further analysis of this current research as well as future research.

If similar research is conducted in the future, I recommended that extra care be taken to select at least one online space that contains a sufficient portion of non-fans or anti-fans of the media. While I chose CommonSenseMedia and IMDb to include non-fans and anti-fans, the sites did not provide as many of these fans' responses as anticipated. Having more data from non-fans and anti-fans could have further expanded the data collected and results, providing a deeper insight into viewers' relationships with the media they consume, and, more specifically, the media they chose not to consume. Also, the IMDb message boards are no longer an option for future research because the boards were unfortunately taken down in February of 2017 and will no longer be available for future data collection. This research is also about fans' responses to only one of many current children's cartoons currently on television. It would be beneficial for future research to look into other children's cartoons to explore the change of representation in children's cartoons over time and the influence the rise of the Internet and online fandoms. Similarly analyzing other modern television children's cartoons or media in general would allow for comparison and contrast between different types of children's media, the types of representation they provide, and the meanings viewers make. This would further allow for exploration into meaning making and identity formation through media for different target demographics and different genres of shows. Also, contrasting this research with research on a show without ambiguity would provide

further insight into viewers' opportunities for meaning making, identity formation, and socialization through media. For example, would there be the same amount and/or type of opportunities for meaning making with more versus less ambiguity in the show?

Similarly, comparing *Steven Universe* to a more traditionally gendered show would be beneficial. Would there be the same amount and/or type of opportunities in more traditionally gendered shows? Lastly, I recommend more exploration into identity through ambiguity in television media as it was the largest theme that rose from this research, yet there was little scholarly literature that explores this topic. Generally, I would encourage sociologists to continue to follow the lead of cultural studies theorists and expand research to explore the spaces of validation and resistance created through shows and/or media and the creation of those spaces. Also, take the next step into content analysis beyond analyzing the media itself, beyond how progressive or problematic us as the researcher finds it, and beyond the impact of the initial viewing or analysis. Ask how others perceive the media they view. Ask not just how the media potentially impacts the messages viewers receive and the possible influence viewing the media has on the socialization of the viewer, but how the viewer *uses* and *plays* with the media they view. Then, expand these ideas beyond cartoons and media, into other sociological topics and schools of thought.

Overall, *Steven Universe* had a substantial impact on the socialization of viewers and their identity formation. It also provided many opportunities for meaning making through the online fandom. It can be argued that the representations presented of various social identities, especially underrepresented minorities, within *Steven Universe* may

expose younger viewers to inappropriate or negative portrayals of certain identities and/or issues. There were fans that found Steven's weight and eating habits to be problematic, those who found the possibility of same-sex relationships in the show concerning, and those who were disturbed by the racist depictions they perceived. These fans ask us to consider, what sort of values, norms, and beliefs viewers will learn if these portrayals are stereotypical, racist, unhealthy, or inappropriate. On the other hand, the majority of the fandom finds most of the portrayals of various identities and issues to be progressive and positive, believing that the values, norms, and beliefs viewers gain from the show will have a positive impact on the viewers and those around them. For certain fans of certain social identities, the validation of a positive and serious portrayal of a character who shares, or who they can perceive shares, their identity is validating. *Steven Universe* is not just a part of the media as an agent of socialization for younger viewers. Instead, the fandom brings into focus the active and reflexive audience of both children and older viewers. Individually and collectively, meanings are made and identities are formed within the show's diverse audience.

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