

(DE)CONSTRUCTED GENDER AND ROMANCE IN *STEVEN UNIVERSE*: A QUEER  
ANALYSIS

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**Title**

(DE)CONSTRUCTED GENDER AND ROMANCE IN *STEVEN*  
*UNIVERSE: A QUEER ANALYSIS*

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**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

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## ABSTRACT

As LGBTQ issues come to the forefront of discussion, the acceptance of queer television is becoming more common. However, research has shown that seemingly progressive shows often reinforce dominant ideologies, despite the presence of queer characters or themes. This analysis seeks to understand whether the children's animated series, *Steven Universe*, is as progressive as reviews would make it seem. Two open-ended research questions are used to explore the constructions of gender and romance in the series. Through the use of queer analysis, this study reveals that the series is indeed queer. The series narrative subverts gender through the deconstruction of societal binaries. Likewise, love is treated inclusively, and is not limited to heterosexual romances. *Steven Universe*, though not perfect, is an amicable example of how children's cartoons can educate upcoming generations in what it means to defy expectations and go beyond labels.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since its invention in 1927, television has been studied as a powerful tool of communication and socialization (Eschner, 2017; Stephens, n. d.). Its ability to reach audiences of all demographics for decades has made television a medium of particular interest for authors whose focus may be on audiences, creators, or messages, in fields such as advertising, psychology, sociology, and communication (Newcomb, 2005; Philpott & Kattukaran, 2015). For the layperson, television provides comfort, information, entertainment, and a way of socializing (Rubin, 1983). It is not surprising, then, that television has proven itself both a documenter and an influencer when it comes to societal change (Dines, 1995; Fairclough, 1995; Freeman, 2005).

Ample research has subjected television and movies to questions of creator intent, representational messages, and stereotype perpetuation, among other themes (Herek, 1990; Padva, 2008; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Silverman, 2002; Zornado, 2008). When it comes to children in the audience, researchers have been asking questions since the 1950s, as television programs aimed specifically towards children became common. Concerns over messages in television centered on violent depictions, advertising, and promoting unhealthy lifestyles (Beckerman, 2003; Wulf & Bloch, 1995). Even through modern research, these topics hold the attention of television viewers and researchers, wondering how children are actually affected by the messages shown on television; cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) are two important players in discussions of audience effects, as they explain the ease through which attitudes and actions can be influenced by repeated viewing of mediated messages (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978). When focusing on children as the audience, though, it is important to note their unique interpretation of messages as well.

Children are affected by mediated messages depending on a variety of factors, including their home life, their gender, and type of television being watched (Dennis, 2009; Duvall, 2010; Oliver, 2001; Peters Bierwirth & Blumberg, 2010; Stevens Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). The age of children, as well as the type of program being watched, has a strong effect on their interpretation of messages as real or not. Analyses of live-action children programs have shown that older children are more likely to differentiate between the reality of human actors versus animated characters (Downs, 1990), but for children, this does not mean animation has no effect on them. Often the first kind of television directed at babies and toddlers, animation serves as an agent of socialization from which children learn cultural values (Dines, 1995; Greenberg, 1982; Silverman, 2002; Steemers, 2013; Thompspon & Zerbinos, 1997; Zornado, 2008). Whether discussing animated films or animated series, the more children are exposed to a mediated message, the more likely they are to perceive that message as reflective of reality (Baker & Raney, 2007; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Raley & Lucas, 2006). This analysis seeks to document the societal messages being communicated to young audiences, who have been proven particularly impressionable to mediated messages.

As a socializing agent, television is the educator of the masses (Herek, 1990; Luther & Legg Jr., 2010). 119.9 million American households have televisions (Lynch, 2018), and according to the 2016 Nielsen report, American adults watch television an average of six hours a day (Koblin, 2016). Compared to film, which is viewed in public occasionally, television is more of a daily constant. Throughout their earliest years, children become acquainted with the normalcy of an active television. According to a 2015 Connected Kids report, children spend over five hours in front of screens (including television, smartphones, and other devices, per day

(Wakefield, 2015), a point that solidifies the position of television (and similar programming found online) as a major presence in the life of children.

Whether on cable, satellite, or streaming services, children's screen time is a large piece of their day. The past tradition of watching Saturday morning cartoons is modernized now to the tradition of staying updated on favorite shows daily via sites like Hulu, Netflix, and YouTube. Yet, popular children's television channels Disney, Nickelodeon, and Cartoon Network are still received in over 80 percent of American households (Baron, 2015). These channels are known for their aptitude in creating animated series, and these programs create a first look at the outside world, through which young children learn about things they cannot see or hear in their own home (Steemers, 2013). These programs can teach specific lessons about themes such as colors, shapes, and vocabulary, but animated series can also teach less obvious things like the normalization of gender roles, violence, romantic attraction, racial symbolism, and hegemonic power imbalance (Keys, 2016).

Impressions of society made on child audiences reflect the beliefs of the culture in which they were created (Birthisel, 2014; Dennis, 2009; Dines, 1995; Duvall, 2010; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009; Pulos, 2013). Researchers have shown time and again that cartoons are more likely to uphold cultural norms rather than challenge them (Herek, 1990; Klein & Shiffman, 2009; Silverman, 2002). Capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and homophobia have been uncovered in animated programs meant for children, proving that despite the young age of audiences, they are never too young to learn how power is allotted in society (Keys, 2016; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009; Silverman, 2002). However, media can still serve as a tool of social change (Bond & Compton, 2015; Dhaenens, 2013a; Fairclough, 1992; Jane, 2015; Leff, 2017). It has been shown that television allows creators to disseminate messages contrary to

oppressive norms, which can spread positive messages of equality, compassion, and open-mindedness (Meyer & Wood, 2013).

The recent societal shift towards acceptance of queer identities has likewise been shifting the messages shown on television; on both live and animated television programs, queer characters are becoming more commonplace (GLAAD, 2018). It has been argued that television played a role of social progress in the push towards acceptance for LGBTQ people, as it showed viewers positive portrayals of queer people through programs such as *Will & Grace* and *Glee* (Dhaenens, 2013a; Meyer & Wood, 2013; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). Not only are these progressive media creators including positive portrayals of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters, but they are also providing normalized examples of gender transgressions (Jane, 2015; Keys, 2016; Leslie, 2015; Puglise, 2016).

Given creators' past predispositions of villainizing or erasing LGBT characters, it seems apparent that progress is being made now, however slowly (Dennis, 2003; Dennis, 2009; Dhaenens, 2013b; Klein & Shiffman, 2009). While it is true that the presence of queer attitudes on television is almost always accompanied by pushback, it remains that creators continuously move towards attitudes of equality on the screen, and through them, in real life (Meyer & Wood, 2013; Puglise, 2016). This progress comes at a crucial time when political conversations about the rights of queer people and their lives is at the center of national attention. It is now common that children may see or hear discussion about same-sex marriage, transgender rights, and defining gender or sexuality. Now, more than ever, the public needs to be familiarized with queer culture.

This study seeks to analyze the discourses used in Cartoon Network's ongoing animated series, *Steven Universe* (2013-present), through the lens of queer theory, to determine how

representations of gender and attraction may be transmitted to the audience of the program.

While researchers have conducted ample studies on specific programs and movies targeted at children, there is always the potential to study newer programs that have yet to be analyzed. The series, rated TV-PG for its common depictions of action, battle, and romance, follows the titular Steven as he faces the trials of growing up as a half-alien, half-human boy in the fictional town of Beach City. His otherworldly guardians—which serve as mother-aunt-sister figures—are a trio of aliens known as the Crystal Gems, whose sworn mission is to protect humans from evil extraterrestrial monsters while raising Steven on earth.

The historical timeline in-fiction starts thousands of years earlier, when gems lived on their own planet (Homeworld) and humans lived on Earth. However, as a race focused on progress, gems invaded the Earth hundreds of years before modern human civilization was established. From there, Rose Quartz rose up against the gem rulers, insisting that humans had a right to live their life peacefully, free from invasion. She and her team of rebels (the Crystal Gems) managed to chase the other aliens away, leaving Rose Quartz and her team as defenders of humankind. Eventually, Rose Quartz fell in love with a human named Greg Universe, an optimistic musician with dreams of fame. Their inter-species romance came to an end when Rose Quartz gave her life to create Steven. Steven is a creation of his mother's sacrificial life force combined with the physical matter of a human. His life is a mystical one-of-a-kind combination between human and gem life, a fact that commonly creates tension and uncertainty in the story.

When the audience begins the series, Steven is a 14-year-old boy, and the remaining Crystal Gems have taken guardianship of him to assist his learning of gem culture, power, and history. The members of the Gems (Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl) learn to raise Steven, while Steven, in turn, learns to control his alien powers. Garnet is essentially the leader of the team, a

tall, strong, and stoic character who is demystified as the series progresses. Amethyst is the youngest of the Crystal Gems, a short and seemingly laid-back character who loves cracking jokes, sleeping, and eating. Pearl is the most stereotypically mother-like of the Gems, a tall and slender character who is doting, precise, and anxious.

The plot follows Steven and the Gems as they protect the earth from invaders while learning lessons of love, empathy, and self-confidence (Cartoon Network, 2018). A majority of the series takes place on Earth, in Beach City, but the setting of space is also explored as a way to introduce viewers to the gems' home planet, Homeworld. Thus, the audience meets a wide variety of side characters along the way, ranging from Steven's human best friend, Connie, to the impossibly tall and powerful matriarchs of Homeworld, known simply as "the Diamonds." The Diamonds serve as the ultimate enemies in the sense that their identities and powers are built up over the seasons, and when the Diamonds are revealed, they are the most formidable opponents that the Gems face. Despite the seemingly complicated premise, the show targets younger viewers, as indicated by its TV-PG rating. In fact, complex themes aside, it can certainly be watched as a simple, cyclical cartoon: the team solves a problem, they learn lessons, and then the team faces a bigger problem, and so on. It seems that some audiences do still see the complex themes, though, since it is popular among older viewers as well (Thurm, 2017), and has gained large Internet followings on sites such as Reddit and Tumblr, where fans discuss the show, its plot, characters, and theories. The series has done particularly well with children aged 6-11 (TV By The Numbers, 2013).

The reason for selecting this show as a site of analysis comes in the overt progressive messages presented through the series. It was the recipient of a GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Kids & Family Programming in 2019 for its LGBTQ representation (Harvey, 2019).

Positive critiques of the series laud its messages of friendship, communication, and acceptance, along with its habit of challenging gender roles (Adams, 2013; Rude, 2015; Pulliam-Moore, 2018); negative critiques accuse the writers of pushing political agendas, or promoting homosexuality, which they see as harmful or wrong (Anyango, 2017; Duffy, 2016; Johnson, 2016). These divisive opinions show that the program is a social force of some kind, for better or for worse, like many other television programs before it. Reaching 2.46 million viewers midway through its first season, the numbers support the fact that this program ought to be of research interest (Bibel, 2014). By studying the representations in this series, it is the hope of the author that conclusions may be drawn about the gendered messages being taught to the audience of *Steven Universe*. As demonstrated by Jane (2015) in her analysis of *Adventure Time* (a series which Rebecca Sugar worked on as a storyboard artist before her work on *Steven Universe*), popular mainstream cartoons have the potential to exemplify and demonstrate subversive depictions of gender.

The species of alien that the Gems belong to (a species simply called “gems”) is populated entirely by female-presenting beings, and because of this, they hold the unique position of having a nonbinary gender identification. In fact, the gems’ bodies are mere creations of their consciousness, as each gem’s essence is located in a gemstone located somewhere on their form. When harmed, gems are “poofed,” and they retreat into their stones to recharge, later reemerging as a humanoid being once more. The characters are allowed to explore their identities with both gender and humanness throughout the series, showing children that they may do the same (Romano, 2018a). The characters and plot challenge more than gender norms, though. Because all gems are female-presenting, many of the romantic themes revolve around same-gender romance: One of the Crystal Gems, Pearl, was infatuated with Steven’s mother,

Rose Quartz. Another Gem, Garnet, is the walking expression of a queer relationship, since she is a “fused” composite being made of two gems so deeply in love that they cannot bear to be separated. Initial viewing seems to show these themes are not merely spectacle (Manuel, 2009), but integral pieces to the plot that go being pandering to appeal to the more progressive audience members. For example, one major side-arc of the series revolves around Garnet’s component gems, Ruby and Sapphire, growing as a romantic couple. This arc ultimately culminated in the first same-sex marriage proposal and first same-sex wedding on a cartoon, airing in 2018 (Romano, 2018a; Rude, 2018).

Creator Rebecca Sugar explains that she purposely made the Gems queer female characters as a way to “tell them [young viewers] while they’re still children that they deserve love and that they deserve support and that people will be excited to hear their story” (Sugar, as quoted by Romano, 2018a). The purposeful inclusion of queer themes by Sugar poses a potentially fruitful avenue of research: Avila-Saavedra (2009) points out that there is a need for media scholars to look closely at the possibility of queer characters who challenge the male/female binary. In doing so, researchers can provide exemplars of progressive entertainment that is accessible to a variety of viewers (Jane, 2015). Furthermore, creators may then have examples to reference when attempting to teach important lessons of acceptance to young audiences (Leslie, 2015). In the case of *Steven Universe*, cartoon characters may be a place to start analyzing representation beyond the binary. In order to accomplish this analysis, this thesis will first present a review of literature in which background information and justification for the study is presented alongside theoretical considerations. The second chapter will present the methodological reasoning and procedure used to answer the research questions. The third chapter will present the results of the analysis accompanied by supporting examples from the text.

Finally, the fourth chapter will present a discussion of implications, limitations, and possibilities for future research.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Chapter Overview**

The institution of media is a key player in the perpetuation, maintenance, and change of social attitudes (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1974; Kidd, 2014). Television, in particular, holds the unique position of a medium that has steadily been rising in commonality since its inception in 1927 (Eschner, 2017; Stephens, n. d.). It is an entity that has taken its place as a narrator, entertainer, and teacher throughout our lives (Freeman, 2005). The separation between creator and audience allows television to show us messages without the burden of considering who wrote them, created them, or sent them. However, despite this distance, televised messages carry context beyond the face value of their images and sounds (Hall, 1974). They are infused with discourses, languages of symbolism that relay the attitudes of the society in which they were created. These discourses carry power which shape our worldview, language, and behavior (Fairclough, 1992; Greenberg, 1982), as well as teaching us social norms from a young age (Dines, 1995; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009; Luther & Legg Jr., 2010).

Through representations of others, viewers learn what to expect from certain types of people depending on such categories as race, gender, and sexuality (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Götz & Lemish, 2012; Hentges & Case, 2013; Keys, 2016). Through considerations of queer theory, this chapter aims to highlight the significance of analyzing children's television programs as a way to understand the discourses of gender and sexuality present in messages aimed at a particularly vulnerable subset of the television audience. Cartoons and animation will first be defined in ways conducive to this analysis. The role of representation on television will be established, followed by an overview of queer theory, then by a discussion of the place of gender

and sex on children's television. Finally, the final section presents the proposed research questions through which this study will be guided.

## **2.2. Cartoons and Animation**

This analysis of *Steven Universe* operates in a genre that may, at a glance, be regarded as frivolous or meaningless: television cartoons. The popularity and success of cartoons, however, demonstrates their potency as a source of cultural power and society shaping (Jane, 2015; Keys, 2016). After the first animated film, shown in 1908 (Beckerman, 2003), the medium has only expanded. The longest running cartoon still on television, *The Simpsons*, has been providing humorous social commentary since its first episode in 1989 (IMDb, 2019). As a show geared more towards adults, *The Simpsons* reaches a wide variety of households. Other adult-oriented cartoons such as *Family Guy*, *South Park*, and *Bob's Burgers* have also appealed to large numbers of TV viewers across demographic lines (USA Today, 2018). However, the popularity of adult animation does not mean animated series meant for younger audiences should be disregarded as legitimate sites for research.

Children's animated series have the potential to appeal to those beyond their intended audience, as has been the case with *Adventure Times*, a show considered by some to be the program that paved the way to *Steven Universe* (Adams, 2013; Jane, 2015; Leslie, 2015). Due to their wide reach and potential to impact impressionable minds (Klein & Shiffman, 2009), children's series should be confronted with just as much scrutiny as other media texts. Consider also the early and midday airtime of children's cartoons versus that of cartoons meant for mature audiences, which are often sequestered to later time slots in order to discourage viewing by the wrong audience. Cartoons meant for children are more accessible, and possibly, more impactful than cartoons meant for adults (Dines, 1995; Freeman, 2005; Greenberg, 1982; Lugo-Lugo &

Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009; Silverman, 2002). Children's cartoons shape the worldview of upcoming generations, and therefore, children's cartoons shape the future of our culture.

Despite what audience they are targeted at, it remains that "cartoons" as a concept needs defining for the sake of this study. Originally, cartoons were two-dimensional, static drawings done in a style that made its subjects appear bold, simplified, and "cartoony" in the sense that we understand it today. The cartoons of this study, though, do not fit this definition. Rather, these cartoons are stories that are presented in an animated medium, where static cartoons are put into motion through sequential images or computer assistance (Beckerman, 2003). What began as stop-motion pictures in the early seventeenth century are now the fluid, expressive images viewers are accustomed to seeing on the likes of Disney and Cartoon Network, done in a variety of mediums such as drawn animation, stop-motion animation, and computer animation. Through these media, viewers are exposed to creator's artistic representations of reality, which are read differently depending on the context.

### **2.3. Representation**

Fiction is created from the minds of those who participate in reality, who then transfer their interpretations into the content they produce through representation (Hall, 1974).

Representation may have a seemingly simple meaning, but it is a complex "process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture," (Hall, 1997, p. 15).

Representation is the act of turning ideas into understandable words, images, and messages, but it goes beyond simply speaking or acting. Media are representations put into the world by creators.

Despite the fictional nature of the fantasy worlds of television programs, movies, and video games, real-world values are present. This is because creators (authors, writers, directors,

and the like) have their own system of beliefs and values that transfer to their work, whether intentional or not (Pulos, 2013; Silverman, 2002; Thorfinnsdottir & Strandgaard Jensen, 2017; Zornado, 2008). It is common that the beliefs of the creators are taken from the society and culture in which they participate, meaning that their beliefs often echo those of the dominant discourse (Adorno, 1991; Hall, 1974). Research has shown the relationship between media and society to be a strong, if not causal, one (Fairclough, 1992; Hall, 1974). Televised messages, in some capacity, are influenced by the context in which they are created; this relationship of influence means that the messages being received by audiences are interactive with cultural norms and beliefs, regardless of whether they enforce or challenge norms (Pulos, 2013; Silverman, 2002; Zornado, 2008).

The social norms depicted on television have effects on the audience, and audiences exposed to recurrent themes of cultural norms learn implicit laws and rules. Societal attitudes are perpetuated through television, as asserted by the theory of media cultivation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976): the more we are exposed to the same messages, the more likely we are to accept these messages as truth, and to believe that the messages are an unquestionable part of life. While this has the potential to teach important life lessons like manners and healthy communication, it also has the potential to perpetuate negative messages. Young viewers learn what behaviors are normal, acceptable and appropriate for them depending on their age, gender, and race (Perloff, Brown, & Miller, 1982; Smith & Cook, 2008; Stevens Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Likewise, they learn what is abnormal, unacceptable, and inappropriate (Martin & Kazyak, 2009; Thorfinnsdottir & Strandgaard Jensen, 2017; White, 2002). One notable way that television programs symbolically perpetuate societal expectations is through the deployment of stereotypical representations.

Stereotypes, attributes assumed to be present in others depending on their sex, gender, race, or other characteristics, are more often than not harmful to those they are based on (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2014; Kidd, 2014). The misconceptions they produce can alienate minorities such as LGBTQ people, those who perform gender differently, people of color, and disabled people, allowing dominant discourse to dismiss these groups as homogenous and inherently unfitting to participate in the dominant American culture of white, heterosexual, cisgender people (Kidd, 2014).

Children absorb stereotyped messages through watching television and may reenact stereotypes they deem appropriate to their identity in order to feel accepted by society (Oliver, 2001). The developing minds of children are more susceptible to learning from stereotypical media messages portrayed by actors or animation (Bandura, 1977). Stereotypes concerning gender create particularly impactful messages when shown through children's programming, as they affect the way children think and behave in relation to an integral part of their identity (Baker & Raney, 2007; Stevens Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). Young boys learn that they ought to be tough, brave, and outgoing (Duvall, 2010; Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Hentges & Case, 2013; Luther & Legg Jr., 2010), while young girls learn that they ought to be social, romantic, and physically attractive (Baker & Raney, 2007; Birthisel, 2014; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Oliver, 2001; Smith & Cook, 2008), and any child outside of the gender binary (transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, or otherwise) learns that they are oddities or unimportant (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Herek, 1990; Klein & Shiffman, 2009).

By studying stereotypes and representations in animated programs, it is possible to see the social messages at play in the symbolic teaching of discourse to audiences (Dines, 1995). Due to the impactful nature of these messages, it is important to understand what children are

learning through their time watching television through broadcast or streaming channels (Duvall, 2010). Even though animated texts meant for children are inherently less complex or serious than programs for adult audiences, the fact remains that animated series carry adult ideologies and messages informed by societal attitudes (Zornado, 2008). By revealing these ideologies, it is possible to make recommendations to creators and parents in order to improve the type of media that children are consuming (Jane, 2015; Lemish, 2010; Padva, 2008). To help reach the point of making recommendations, the queer theoretical perspective will be used as a framework through which an analysis of a children's cartoon can reveal underlying messages of gender and sexuality through discourse.

#### **2.4. Queer Analysis**

This study will be informed by queer theory with attention to Foucault's concept of discourse (1972), as using the established lens of critical discourse analysis ensures relevance to the field of communication and is a valid existing perspective from which to start the process of analysis. Queer theory focuses on issues of dominant ideologies; this perspective is not only concerned with identifying representations of power, but also concerned with challenging dominant messages in order to provide a critical perspective from which to study texts (Stein & Plummer, 1994). The perspective of queer theory, in particular, allows a space from which researchers can discuss the subversion of norms, including gender and sexuality norms.

Queer theory goes deeper than feminism in its treatment of gender inequality. In this way, Butler (1990) describes the system of fighting oppression as essentially rigged: "minorities" are fighting for a liberation that is "produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (p. 2). It does not simply call for women to be equal to men. Rather, it calls for questioning of the power effects of forcing identities onto people. A queer

perspective demands the questioning of binaries that led us to believe that sex is a naturally divided category, and that gender can be divided into two (man and woman) or three (man, woman, and other) categories (Butler 1990). Through queer theory, analysis can consider the power forces through which gender and sex are ascribed to a body through discourses.

Queer theory situates itself as a multidisciplinary approach that often intersects with psychology, sociology, communication, and English (Halberstam, 2003). This makes it an approach that can be used in tandem with analyses that lend themselves to concerns of power and representation. Critical discourse analyses, which involve discussions of power (Rose, 2012), are useful when considering issues of media representation, which provide visuals of dominant discourse through depictions of minority characters (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1974, 1997; Kidd, 2014). One dominant institution that asserts its discourse over others is the expectation of straight and cisgender identities in Western society, as demonstrated in television programming by both the quality and quantity of heterosexual characters versus LGBTQ characters (Birthisel, 2014; Dennis, 2003; GLAAD, 2018; Herek, 1990; Martin & Kazyak, 2009; Thorfinnsdottir & Strandgaard Jensen, 2017).

In this instance, queer theory and critical discourse analysis can be used as lenses through which researchers can reveal the cultural circumstances that which caused this discrepancy; namely, heteronormativity, transphobia, and hegemonic patriarchy, among other intersecting beliefs (Dines, 1995). Even more deeply, this combination of approaches allows for detailed deconstruction of the very ideas of homosexuality and heterosexuality as points on a binary of Western power structure (Butler, 1990). Beyond simply counting or describing the occurrence of gay or female characters, queer discourse analysis allows for understanding of

richer meanings behind the categories of identities assigned to characters (Avila-Saavedra, 2009).

By connecting analyses to deeper cultural ideology, queer analysis gives a point of connection between the media and real life (Manuel, 2009). These readings provide insight into instances where media may seem subversive while still maintaining binary structures of male/female, and homo/heterosexual (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Bradley, 2013; Manuel, 2009). For example, Avila-Saavedra's (2009) analysis of three popular "progressive" programs revealed that the narratives and behaviors of characters reinforced the heterosexual/homosexual binary as well as reinforcing gendered stereotypes. Manuel's (2009) analysis of *Queer as Folk*, a series considered revolutionary for its focus on gay and lesbian characters, revealed that the program still had stereotypical messages that reflected negatively on its LGBTQ characters. Papacharissi & Fernback (2008) note in their study of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* that this "homonormativity" allows show creators to market gay characters as apolitical and aesthetic entities, rather than subversive ones (p. 354).

Queer theory was chosen as a standpoint for this study specifically due to the subversive nature of modern animated series, Cartoon Network as a channel, and *Steven Universe* itself. Animated children's programs have been changing alongside society over the years, and it shows in the way content has changed, as more cartoons attempt to break norms of gender, sexuality, and race (GLAAD, 2018; Hopkins, 2002; Jane, 2015; Keys, 2016). In fact, the fictional and fantastical nature of animated texts may make them more able to challenge heteronormativity (Dennis, 2009; Dhaenens, 2013b). This change means that modern children's television will be teaching younger generations that they have the potential to explore their identities more freely

(Halberstam, 2016; Leslie, 2015; Lesnik-Oberstein & Thomson, 2002), something that queer theory aims to encourage.

Cartoon Network itself has been noticed in the past for its willingness to lend roles of leadership and strength to female characters where other channels would not (Ahmed & Wahab, 2014; Hentges & Case, 2013). Although this may be due to Cartoon Network's aim towards male audiences (Schmuckler, 2006)—considering its very white/heterosexual/cisgender/male-dominated audience for its evening subset of programs under the brand of Adult Swim (Elkins, 2014)—it still provides a different perspective from which young girls could see themselves as the heroes for a change (Hopkins, 2002; Leslie, 2015). Creator Rebecca Sugar has also defended her series as one meant for all children, despite many claiming it appeals to one gender over another: “I think it’s a really absurd idea that there would be something radically different about a show for little girls versus a show for little boys” (as quoted by Howe-Smith, 2015).

It is relevant to note that popular reviews of *Steven Universe* also seem to back the use of queer theory as a way of analyzing its texts, with reviewers pointing out “[the series has] lots of strong female characters,” (Ashby, 2018), “insistent queerness,” (Thurm, 2017), and “many queer characters and stories,” (GLAAD, 2018, p. 31). The queerness of *Steven Universe* has said to be present particularly in the series’ questioning of gender and romantic norms (Rude, 2015), a challenge that disrupts preconceived reliance on gender binaries (Butler, 1990), and a theme that queer media studies is seeking to explore (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). This study hopes to explore particular instances of the series in which gendered and sexual discourses are disrupted.

## **2.5. Gender and Sex in Children’s Media**

The topics of gender and sex have been given attention in children’s media in a multitude of disciplines. Scholars in sociology, psychology, communication, gender studies, and film

studies, among others, have all studied these concepts from a variety of angles. Researchers have studied representations of gender in children's animated series (Baker & Raney, 2007; Dennis, 2009; Dines, 1995; Jane, 2015; Keys, 2016; Klein & Shiffman, 2009; Lemish, 2010; Leslie, 2015), live-action series (Fouts & Inch, 2005; Netzley, 2010; Raley & Lucas, 2006), and films (Birthisel, 2014; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Freeman, 2005; Martin & Kazyak, 2009; Smith & Cook, 2008). Studies have also looked into the effect of viewing these representations on children (Downs, 1990; Gerbner et. al, 1978; Götz & Lemish, 2012; Greenberg, 1982; Oliver, 2001; Perloff, Brown, & Miller, 1982; Peters Bierwith & Blumberg, 2010; Stevens Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997) and teenagers (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Padya, 2008). This wide array of research demonstrates the interest in portrayals of gender and sex in popular children's media, which further shows the appropriateness of using queer studies in the context of media research (Halberstam, 2003).

In the subgenre of fantasy cartoons, queer studies perspectives are given a space to flourish. Fantasy has long been understood as a genre where media can explore cultural issues in a way that is abstract and entertaining (Dhaenens, 2013b; Duvall, 2010; Leslie, 2015). Racism can be presented as a disagreement between androids and humans, homophobia can be addressed through the lens of magic, and gender can be explored in a way that leaves room for the imagination. As a series that falls in this genre, *Steven Universe* has the potential to explore sensitive topics from which other cartoons may shy away from. As with *Adventure Time*, the series is fantastical and silly in a way that invites the inclusion of queer themes (Jane, 2015). As such, the analysis will take place in a framework that acknowledges the cartoon's position as an animated fantasy series, which could encourage subversive depictions of gender where other genres may not.

## 2.6. Research Questions

Due to the reviews of *Steven Universe* and the chosen theoretical lenses, this study will use two research questions to guide analysis. First, the study seeks to understand how the discourses in *Steven Universe* present characterizations, narratives, and situations that depict gender either through dominant ideologies or subversions of societal norms. Framing, language, imagery, and power relations will be of particular interest to this analysis (McGregor, 2004). Since this is an exploratory study into a program that has received little scholarly attention, questioning its depictions of gender will be done in an open-ended manner. This strategy is to assure that the program is analyzed not just for subversive messages that disrupt power structures, but for the possibility that it may enforce dominant discourses, as well. Thus, the first research question guiding the study is as follows:

**RQ1:** How is gender ascribed to characters in *Steven Universe*?

Along with questioning the gendered messages present in the series, this analysis will also consider the depictions of romance, attraction, and sexuality in the program; this choice is due to the complicated and inherent relationship between gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990). However, it must be taken into consideration that the program in question is rated TV-PG, meaning that while it may be appropriate for children, it may also be inappropriate for *young* children (TV Parental Guidelines, 2018). This means that while *Steven Universe* may have suggestive language or allusions to sex, it may also shy away from overtly sexual themes. As such, the second research question will encompass the possibility that romantic themes may or may not include the facet of sexuality. This question, then, is:

**RQ2:** How are sexuality and romantic desire ascribed to characters and relationships in *Steven Universe*?

Due to reviews and summaries read in the preliminary stages of research, it is expected that *Steven Universe* will present themes that both challenge and reinforce dominant discourse. As a program still airing after five seasons, the question remains to what extent creators can challenge gender and sexuality norms without risking a loss of ratings at best, or cancellation at worst. It is the hope of the author that through the two guiding research questions, it will be better understood how exactly this program relates to modern discourses of gender and sexuality.

### **3. METHODS**

The methodology for this study involves a critical discourse analysis undertaken from the perspective of queer theory, due to the concern of both methodologies with the meanings and creation of power (Butler, 1990; Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2004), and the interdisciplinary nature of queer theory which makes it conducive to studies that utilize methods of the English discipline, such as discourse analysis. This analysis of *Steven Universe* will involve analyzing a theoretical sample of the show in which 10 episodes were randomly selected from each of the five seasons, totaling 50 episodes overall. This ensures a view of the show over time without creating an overly cumbersome sample that overreaches the goals of this study. Each episode was watched and analyzed by the author to see how gender and romance were depicted through the images and words of the program (Rose, 2012) and subjected to analysis with the goal of seeing how the show's creators construct a fictional reality within the context of existing cultural discourse (Luker, 2008).

#### **3.1. Sampling**

In order to cover all seasons of *Steven Universe* in the data collection and analysis of this study, the research conducted analysis of 50 episodes total, as selected by a random number generator (see Appendix A for a list of these episodes, their titles, number in the series, and information regarding their release date). These episodes were selected randomly not as a statistical consideration, but as a way of aiming to achieve a thorough analysis without analyzing every episode in the series' entirety (Fairclough, 1995). The reasoning behind choosing to analyze through a random sample of episodes rather than through the entire body of work was to ensure the appropriate allocation of time and resources to each episode by the sole researcher, whose analysis might otherwise be insufficient if applied to all 28 hours of the program. The size

of this sample was sufficient due to the unifying plot and characters of the program from which it was taken (Rose, 2012), assuming that episodes from the same program are interrelated enough that they are representative of the overall text as a whole (Papacharissi & Fernback, 2008) without analyzing all 152 episodes of the series. The sample size was wide enough to account for developments in the series over time. The run time for each episode was 11 minutes on average (IMDb, 2019), which means the total amount of the series analyzed was roughly nine hours.

### **3.2. Data Collection**

The data collection took place between January and March of 2019 to allow time for the researcher to watch each episode multiple times as necessary to achieve an appropriately close reading of the text (Gibbs, 2007; Luker, 2008). The author viewed the episodes through a personal Hulu account, which allowed for access of the entirety of the series without the inclusion of commercials that may interrupt viewing through other mediums. Each episode was watched through the first time to gather initial impressions, with subsequent viewings as necessary to take sufficient notes and identify themes of gender, romance, and sexuality. On average, each episode was viewed twice, with more complex episodes being viewed three times.

Through the process, the researcher compared existing notes to new notes to uncover any discursive themes made prominent by repetition or intensity (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Gibbs, 2007). Once all episodes had been sufficiently investigated for discursive representations of gender and sexuality, the process of analysis continued to uncover the presence of queer themes (McKee, 2002). These themes were analyzed for their discursive meanings not only within the series, but also for their discursive meanings in the larger context of society (Avila-Saavedra, 2009, p. 9). The resulting analytical notes totaled 47 pages. Findings, presented below, reveal a variety of recurring themes that subvert gender and sexuality boundaries.

### 3.3. Analysis

Taking a post-structuralist viewpoint, this analysis was done under the assumption that the author's interpretation of the text is not inarguable truth, but that different people will interpret the same text differently (McKee, 2002). The conclusions drawn from this study may only be applicable interpretations for those viewing the program in a Western context, and in fact, may not apply to everyone even within that context. For example, queer viewers are probably more likely to notice queer themes than heterosexual or cisgender viewers (Dennis, 2003; Halberstam, 1998).

Unlike quantitative content analysis which concerns itself with generalizability through large sample studies, queer discourse analysis allows for close reading of the texts and deep analysis of details in order to reveal "most likely interpretations" of meanings of gender and sexuality (Gibbs, 2007; Luker, 2008; McKee, 2002; Rose, 2012). This ability was exemplified by Jane's (2015) analysis of *Adventure Time*, as her analysis considered the fictional nature of cartoon discourses as fantastical, exaggerated representations of the society in which the cartoon was produced. It is through this analysis that the relationship between the fictional discourse and societal discourses was made visible, including whether this relationship was subversive or not (Butler, 1990; Gibbs, 2007). The purposeful inclusion and exclusion of queer themes was deeply inspected to understand the discursive representations ascribed to characters and situations (McGregor, 2004). As in Avila-Saavedra's (2009) queer reading of "progressive" LGBTQ-themed television programming (p. 5), the author went deeper than simply recounting occurrences of queer themes. The themes were analyzed through a queer discourse perspective in a way that revealed their societal implications and relationship with existing discourses of power.

By comparing representations to existing social norms and stereotypes, the research uncovered the nature of *Steven Universe*'s representations of gender and sexuality; existing queer analyses and discourse studies of media are used to compare and contrast queer perspectives of LGBTQ characters and gendered characters including their appearance, mannerisms, and narratives (Stein & Plummer, 1994). From there, the analysis looks more closely at the series' strategies of portraying power through language and visuals in the text that may signify power relations (McGregor, 2004). Through comparison to existing analyses, it can be seen that the program is continuing with the trend of challenging stereotypes in a way that is similar to other children's animated programs, and in fact, the series subverts normative expectations of gender and sexuality. What follows below is an overview of prominent discursive themes of gender and sexuality in *Steven Universe*.

## 4. RESULTS

The following section details the results of the author's analysis of the children's animated series, *Steven Universe*, as read through a lens of queer theory. This analysis is organized in a way that addresses the two central research questions while also providing thorough accounts of themes and discourses related to the focus of the study. The first major section discusses the ways queer discourses of gender are constructed in the sample episodes. The ways gender is constructed are through the visual depictions of gendered bodies, the narrative themes of freedom to construct one's own identity, and the comparative idea of the cultural relativity of gender. The second major category discusses the ways the series constructs queer discourses of romance and sexuality. These themes are portrayed in the series through the ongoing narrative surrounding the process of "fusion," the presence of genderless visual demarcations of beauty, and the depictions of selfless love free of gender.

### 4.1. Constructions of Gender

*Steven Universe* presents its audience with queer constructions of gender that challenge dominant discourses. Bodies are presented as entities not free of gender, but defiant of gender, in their diversity and unpredictability. Although characters may be readily gendered by viewers, they defy gender roles in a complex way that acknowledges the importance of personality over body shape. As if cognizant of the fact that gender role reversal is not queer on its own (Halberstam, 1998; Jane, 2015), the series creators also included blatant narrative themes of choosing one's own destiny and identity. This theme comes entangled with the final major theme of gender in the series, which is cultural relativity: The Crystal Gems serve as a conversation point between what is normal to humans and what is normal to gems, providing the viewers a relational perspective on societal norms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

#### 4.1.1. Gendered Bodies

The gendered bodies presented in *Steven Universe* can be read as either reflective or subversive of dominant discourses of gender in Western society. Audiences watching the show may be quick to identify gendered signifiers in characters through their voices, clothing, and bodies. However, representations of gender in media often have to be inferred (Dennis, 2009), as it is rare that characters explicitly announce their gender unless it is relevant to the narrative. *Steven Universe* creator Rebecca Sugar has identified all gems as nonbinary women (Rude, 2018), and as such, it is clear that the series is rife with instances of “gender trouble” (Butler, 1990) during which the audience may be confronted with the possibility of gender discourses beyond the dominant binary.

Even if audiences cannot infer that the gems are nonbinary, they will likely understand that the gems are queer in some way. Aside from the gems, the series also plays with gender in human characters, and prefers to avoid categorizing beings through any labels beyond species (human or gem). Notably, the breaking of stereotypes in the series is not treated as a spectacle or pandering, but simply as facts of life. Upon viewing these images, audiences may subsequently question their understanding of what it is to be gendered based on appearance and behavior (Halberstam, 1998).

The fact that gems are aliens is a notable piece of the queerness in the series. As a species made entirely of nonbinary women, they challenge what it means to be female when one’s species is not divided in a gender or sex binary. Earlier episodes make it obvious that gems are feminine: Pearl’s movements are ballerina-esque, Garnet has a distinct hourglass figure, and Amethyst’s long, wavy hair literally goes down to her heels. All three of the main character gems are voiced by women. Pearl and Amethyst even have “feminine” color palettes: Pearl’s skin,

hair, and clothes are depicted in colors of pale off-white, turquoise, and pink, while Amethyst's skin and clothes are varying shades of purple. However, all three of the Crystal Gems are shown to embody traditionally unfeminine traits over the course of the first season. They each have their own unique array of attributes that defy what it means to be a female character, and they display these traits in ways that normalize female masculinity as a trait beyond binary expectations. As explained by Halberstam (1998), female masculinity is women's demonstration of traits that would traditionally be considered masculine and can be shown through both appearance and behavior.

Beyond that, the Crystal Gems provide examples of complex female characters that are not valued solely for appearance or romance (Jane, 2015; Smith & Cook, 2008). Pearl is tall, thin, and virtually curve-free, her form more reminiscent of a long rectangle than an hourglass, and her hair is cropped short. She is shown to have a passion for history, science, and technology ("Frybo," "Serious Steven," "Jail Break"). Her expertise on these subjects is never brought into question, and the only criticism she receives for her knowledge is from Amethyst, who enjoys mimicking Pearl in the way a younger sibling may mimic their older sibling ("Reformed").

Along with her penchant for being obnoxious, Amethyst also opts to provide "gross-out" style humor to entertain both herself and Steven, who behaves like a younger brother to the Crystal Gems. In "Steven vs Amethyst," she spends a portion of the day sitting by the kitchen sink and throwing whole eggs into the garbage disposal. When Steven asks what she is doing, she deadpans that she is "busy making egg salad." The audience can assume that she intends to eat the "egg salad," as she is shown to enjoy eating odd things like motor oil ("Reformed"), whole cans of beans ("Are You My Dad?"), and cooking grease ("Gem Harvest"). She is somewhat of a glutton, despite gems not needing to eat food in order to survive. Blurring the

constraints of the physical body, Amethyst also shows a strong enjoyment of transforming her body into different shapes, objects, and animals. In “Friendship,” she transforms herself into a helicopter, and in “Keep Beach City Weird,” she and Garnet both transform into Steven. The supernatural abilities of gems mark them as beings beyond rules of humanness, and through this, beyond gender lines (Halberstam, 1998).

All gems have inherent supernatural abilities like transformation, super strength, and immortality. Gems are regularly shown lifting massive objects like cars (“Onion Gang”) and boulders (“Steven vs Amethyst”). All gems have weapons that they store in their gemstone (“Frybo”), and these weapons further demonstrate the physical and tactical prowess of the gems as a species. Their longevity makes them even more otherworldly. In “Historical Friction” Pearl recounts a meeting with Beach City’s founder hundreds of years in the past, and in “Now We’re Only Falling Apart,” she tells Steven of how she met Rose “just a few thousand years” before gems first visited earth. In “Keep Beach City Weird,” the local conspiracy blogger, Ronaldo, cackles madly about how “polymorphic sentient rocks” are the root of the town’s weirdness. The irony of this is that nobody believes Ronaldo’s conspiracy, but in this case, he is right about the gems being aliens. While it may be seen as problematic to present nonbinary characters as aliens, queer audiences may empathize with the otherness of such characters in the fantasy genre, especially when the otherness is not villainized (Dhaenens, 2013b; Halberstam, 1998). The gems are aliens, but there many gem characters who are both protagonists and antagonists.

While all gems push gender lines with their abilities and bodies, it is Garnet who presents the clearest queer readings of gems. From the second episode of the series, “Laser Light Cannon,” and onward, she is shown to be an embodiment of both masculine and feminine traits. Despite her womanly silhouette, she has the deepest voice of the main characters, including

Steven. She is confident, mysterious, and stoic, with strength and height beyond those of all other main characters. In “Onion Gang” she is shown to singlehandedly throw cars out of her way. In “Serious Steven,” she stops two massive stone slabs from crushing her and Steven. Her strong form is the center of attention in the beginning of “Love Letters,” when the local mailman is mesmerized by Garnet’s height, build, and presence.

It may be problematic for Garnet to be the most masculine of the Crystal Gems, though, considering she is strongly racialized as Black (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009). Her skin shade varies from medium brown to deep maroon, dependent on the episode and color palette used therein. Her large, Black hairdo is reminiscent of an afro, and she has obvious wide lips and nostrils. To solidify this reading, she is voiced by Black singer-songwriter Estelle (IMDb, 2019). As Halberstam (1998) notes, aspects of gendering in media are further complicated when the component of (nonwhite) race is introduced, as this often becomes another of layer of separation between the character and society. In this case, Garnet is a character who is not only queer, but also Black. On the other hand, she is not put in a position of negativity that would be read as a disparagement of Black people. Actually, she is shown over the seasons to be a character who is not just strong and silent: she is also kind, funny, wise, and empathetic, offering comforting words to her friends, and advice as needed (“Friend Ship,” “Log Date 7 15 2,” “Steven’s Dream.”). Not only does Garnet forces viewers to reconsider their conceptions of femininity, but she also forces them to confront their conceptions of race.

Garnet, Pearl, and Amethyst are not the only characters that subvert dominant discourses of femininity, though. The Crystal Gems are just a sample of a larger species of gems, all of which are nonbinary women. All gems, Crystal or otherwise, are consistently voiced by women. As the series progresses, the audience is introduced to a wider of variety of gems. With this

variety comes a multitude of bodies that cannot always be easily read as female. “Jail Break,” the final episode of season one, introduced Garnet’s component gems, Ruby and Sapphire. It is revealed that Garnet is a “fusion,” a gem made from other gems meshing their bodies together into one larger form. Sapphire, like many gems shown before her, is obviously female: She has long, wavy hair, a round chest, and wears a fluffy blue gown.

Ruby, though, is androgynous to the point that she can easily be mistaken for male. Her voice is low and gravelly. She has a boxy form, with thick limbs and large hands, and her face has none of the traditional markings of a female cartoon: she has no makeup, eyelashes, or long hair (Götz & Lemish, 2012). Her outfit consists of boots, knee-length shorts, and a sleeveless shirt. In “Hit the Diamond,” she demonstrates her aptitude for sports, opting to wear a helmet and umpire’s gear. Ruby serves as a butch that can be compared to the dainty Sapphire in order to show the realness of diversity amongst queer bodies (Halberstam, 1998). Her very image alerts audiences that they cannot know the gender of someone by sight alone (Avila-Saavedra, 2009).

As audiences follow the series, they meet more androgynous gems who break down expectations of female characters. Bismuth, in an episode named for her, impresses the Crystal Gems with her large muscles and impressive array of hand-crafted weapons. Jasper, one of the main antagonists of seasons two and three, is a bloodthirsty soldier with long white hair, piercing yellow eyes, and physique to rival a bodybuilder (“Jailbreak”). Topaz, a soldier and guard for the smaller gem, Aquamarine, has a cropped haircut and brick-shaped body (“Stuck Together”). Homeworld, the origin planet of gems, presents a variety of humanoid bodies in all shapes, colors, and sizes, bodies that cannot be judged solely based on their masculine or feminine

attributes. Just as gemstones can be any shape or color, gems as a species can be any shape or color.

Aside from the gendered bodies of gems, the humans of Beach City are shown to be equally complex and varied. While some LGBTQ viewers may be quick to identify with the queer alien gems (Halberstam, 1998), other viewers may be more comfortable identifying with the human characters. In all actuality, the gendered constructions of both gems and humans in the series encourage audience members to consider the relevance of such constructions. Although there are characters that can readily be gendered by sight, the series creators are operating within the larger cultural context to present a show with queer messages.

For example, the characters tend to fall into the gender binary as referenced by their pronouns but subvert the binary in their refusal to categorize people based on sex (Jane, 2015). Like the body diversity of gems, the bodies of humans in the show also come in all shapes and sizes. So, while characters with a defined bosom may be read as female, not all female characters have prominent chests, and not all characters with prominent chests are female.

Even within families, there is a clear variance in body shape. While the local pizza waitress, Kiki, has clearly feminine curves, her grandmother, Nanafua, has a body almost identical to Steven's ("Ocean Gem"). Mr. Fryman, the owner of Beach Citywalk Fries (the boardwalks deep-fried food joint), has a clear male body shape with a wide chest and narrow hips. However, his teenage son Ronaldo has wide hips, a round belly, and a soft chest ("Frybo"). Nudity is rare in *Steven Universe*, making it nearly impossible to try and categorize the humans of Beach City by biological sex identifiers often seen in cartoons where men are overly muscular, and women are overly sexualized (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Steven is the only character depicted naked on several occasions. In "Frybo," Steven's clothing becomes

sentient, and he strips naked to create an army of living clothes. In “The Zoo,” Steven goes through a body-sterilization process before he is allowed to enter the controlled ecosystem of a zoo. For this process, the sterilization robot strips him down before spraying him with a sanitizing agent. Steven’s nakedness becomes interesting when considering his gendered character.

As the sole character who is half-human, half-gem, Steven is a uniquely gendered individual. This is due to the choice of his mother, Rose Quartz, to give her life to Steven because of her love for both Earth, and for Steven’s father, Greg. Due to the unique makeup of gems’ forms, she gave her life to create Steven, using her gem as Steven’s center. In “Greg the Babysitter,” Rose becomes infatuated with human babies, and in “A Single Pale Rose,” Pearl reflects on her distress at learning Rose was going to become Steven: “She can’t have a baby! What am I going to do when she disappears? I’m going to lose her.” The audience sees Rose “pregnant” with Steven in “Straight to Video.” On a home video, Rose and Greg stand on the beach, and Greg lovingly places his hands on Rose’s swollen belly. It is implied that, when she “gave birth”, she transformed herself into Steven, never to emerge as Rose again.

By becoming Steven, Rose created an ongoing conflict in the series of negotiating old and new identities, Steven embodying both trans-species and transgender ideas. A regular theme of the show is the queer concept of being in-between identities (Halberstam, 1998). Steven is half-human, and half-gem. He is literally half female, as his gem lifeforce comes from the same gem that was the center of Rose’s being. Though he appears to have the body of a typical chubby pre-teen boy (with the exception of the pink gem embedded in his belly), the series places heavy emphasis on his choice to be Steven, not Rose—something that defies preconceived categories of what it means to be born into a biological sex category (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). Rose’s choice to

become Steven results in him being regularly mis-gendered by gems who do not understand the transformational process of his birth, with Homeworld gems labelling Steven as “Rose,” “Rose Quartz,” and she/her pronouns (“Jail Break,” “Crack the Whip,” “A Single Pale Rose”). “I’m not my mom,” Steven asserts multiple times, asserting that he is his own individual, the result of a queer woman becoming another gender (“Bismuth,” “Bubbled”).

Any transgender or genderqueer viewer would be quick to recognize the frustration and confusion that accompanies the process of breaking gender and sex expectations in a binary society (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998). The use of incorrect pronouns and the use of deadnames can be decoded from the constant use of Rose’s titles when Steven is addressed. This conflict is often validated in the narrative, though, as the Crystal Gems affirm Steven’s identity and realness: “You are different [from Rose]. That’s what’s so exciting. You don’t have to be like Rose Quartz. You can be someone even better...you can be *you*,” Bismuth explains empathetically to Steven after he expresses that he fears he cannot be as incredible as Rose was (“Bismuth”). The ongoing narrative of choice and freedom of identity is distinctly a queer theme (Halberstam, 1998), and shows audiences that it is alright to define yourself outside of the expectations of others.

#### **4.1.2. Choice of Identity**

Although characters in *Steven Universe* often define themselves in terms of abilities, interests, and personality, gems literally have the ability to define their physical identities due to their alien bodies. As briefly mentioned above, each gem is composed of a stone at the core of an inorganic body; when harmed, a gems’ body “poofs” away, leaving behind only their gemstone, which holds their entire consciousness (“Jail Break”). After being poofed, gems take varying amounts of time to reemerge from their gem, reformed however they choose. Consider the

following scene from “Reformed,” in which Steven becomes alarmed at Amethyst being poofed by a monster, which explains part of gem biology through the narrative:

*Steven:* Amethyst got poofed!

*[he whimpers as he presents Amethyst’s gem to Garnet]*

*Steven:* Garnet?

*Garnet:* Steven, remember, our bodies are only an illusion. Amethyst will be fine.

*Steven:* But Pearl took two whole weeks to come back [after being poofed], and I already miss Amethyst so much.

*Garnet:* Don’t worry, she’ll be back before you know it.

*[Amethyst’s gem floats out of Steven’s hands, and an amorphous light surrounds it, undulating in shape until it becomes Amethyst’s body]*

The total freedom to define your form outside of constraints is a consistent theme in queer theory (Butler, 1990). *Steven Universe* makes this ability especially queer when gems demonstrate their supernatural ability to transform at their will, without regard to gender. In “Tiger Millionaire,” Amethyst is shown to enjoy transforming herself into an underground wrestling persona, The Purple Puma, whom other characters refer to with he/him pronouns. The Purple Puma has huge muscles on his arms and chest, small hips and legs, and ample body hair. He has a black mask, black wrestling leotard, and long white hair. This form is notable because of its reappearance throughout the series whenever Amethyst chooses to fight in a hand-to-hand manner (“Tiger Philanthropist,” “Ocean Gem,” “Log Date 7 15 2,” “Steven vs Amethyst,” “Bismuth.”). On “Back to the Moon,” Amethyst transforms into the muscular gem soldier, Jasper, seamlessly adapting a gruff voice and personality. Like Steven, Amethyst is frequently shown to embody both “masculine” and “feminine” traits alongside both human and gem behaviors. She is a

symbolic presentation of the queer space between (or perhaps beyond) labels (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998). The ability to fuse is another way that gem abilities cross lines of identity expectation.

The ongoing narrative of fusion between characters challenges dominant discourses of gender. As mentioned above, fusion is the act of two or more gems melding their forms together to create one being that is a mixture of the component gems. A fusion is built of a combination of its component gems' bodies, personalities, and abilities. However, this combination is not like Frankenstein's monster; it is more like a new being that embodies more than the sum of its parts. For example, Ruby has red skin, black hair, and mostly masculine traits. Sapphire has blue skin, white hair, and feminine traits. When they fuse into Garnet, they have purplish-maroon skin, with Ruby's afro and jawline, Sapphire's facial features, and a taller body than either component gems.

As described by Garnet herself in "Jailbreak," during one of the show's regular musical scenes: "I am even more than the two of them, everything they care about is who I am. I am their fury, I am their patience, I am a conversation." Any combination of same-gender fusing between Pearl, Amethyst, and Garnet (who is, again, a fusion of Ruby and Sapphire), results in fusions of astonishing height and abilities, of which Steven is consistently in awe ("Jail Break," "Log Date 7 15 2").

If the fusing of nonbinary women was not already queer enough, the fusing of Steven with other gems certainly is. In "Beach City Drift," "Crack the Whip," and "Jungle Moon," Steven fuses with his female best friend, Connie, to form a part-human, part-gem character named "Stevonnie." A genderless teenaged person with Connie's dark complexion and Steven's curly hair, Stevonnie represents an obvious point of "gender trouble" in the series (Butler, 1990).

Being able to fuse with humans is an ability unique to Steven, and it builds on his ongoing narrative of identity fluidity: he is already a character of mixed identity (human and gem, man and woman), but when fused with Connie, becomes even more explicitly a point of gender nonconformity. Stevonnie has a body that is neither clearly male nor female, and other characters refer to Stevonnie as “they” without questioning their identity. They have a voice that could be read as either a deep female voice or a high-pitched male voice.

Kevin, a recurring human bully, does not mis-gender Stevonnie, opting instead to antagonize them for their empathy and childishness (“Beach City Drift,” “Kevin Party”). During a race between Kevin and Stevonnie, Kevin pretends to admit that he is a “jerk all the time” because he has a sick brother, and that by hiding behind anger, he might “take [his brother’s] pain away.” When Stevonnie offers sympathy, Kevin cackles, saying “Dude, I don’t even have a brother. I’m like this because I think it’s funny!” This choice by creators to not bully Stevonnie based on their identity battles dominant discourses which have normalized humor that makes fun of gender transgressions (Avila-Saavedra, 2009), and instead normalizes gender transgressions as a normal part of discovering one’s self (Leslie, 2015; Lesnik-Oberstein & Thomson, 2002). The theme of fusion is one of many aspects of the series that uses comparisons between gem norms and human norms to highlight dominant discourses. This fictional cultural relativity is a narrative tool that subtly brings societal problems to the forefront of themes in a way that is both understandable and interesting to young viewers (Jane, 2015).

#### **4.1.3. Cultural Relativity**

The most prominent way that *Steven Universe* challenges dominant gender discourses is through providing cultural comparisons that illuminate viewers’ own cultural assumptions. The differences between humans and gems are commonly highlighted for a variety of reasons. In the

episode “Gem Harvest,” the gems’ misunderstanding of human celebrations is used for humorous effect. When Steven’s uncle Andy meets the gems, they decide that having a large celebration feast similar to Thanksgiving might help warm him up to his newfound “family.” However, when the gems reveal their decorations for the party, Steven is stunned to see that they have included a tombstone among their props. Pearl proudly explains that, since death is so human, it should be included in their human celebration. In terms of gender, the comparison between gem-kind and human-kind is drawn as a part of the narrative, as well.

Through the series, audiences of *Steven Universe* see the conflict between Earth and Homeworld as a point of cultural comparison. By demonstrating Homeworld as a female-only, matriarchal society, the series brings the reality of relational gender to light: gems are a successful species with no need for gender categories or male rulers. This realization, in turn, can alert audiences to the fact that existing gendered discourses may not be necessary for society to thrive (Birthisel, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The Homeworld society is not based on gender hierarchy (Avila-Saavedra, 2009), but instead, a fictional gem hierarchy. In fact, they do not go by names, but numbers similar to prisoner identification numbers. As seen on “Message Received,” the gem known as Peridot on Earth is known as “Peridot Facet 2F5L, Cut 5XG” on Homeworld. In that same episode, Peridot contacts Yellow Diamond, one of Homeworld’s matriarchs, revealing that Yellow Diamond is in a position where gems’ identities are not important to her; she does not recognize Peridot, and she actively ignores Peridot’s words, seemingly busy with other tasks. On their home planet, gems fit into strictly assigned roles: quartzes are soldiers, sapphires are nobles, rubies are bodyguards, diamonds are rulers, and so on. In “A Single Pale Rose,” Rose visits the site where amethysts are being created. It is shown that gems emerge from the earth fully grown, in uniform, and ready to work. Less than

five minutes after their birth, the quartz soldiers receive their first order, and move out in formation. In “Gem Heist,” the Crystal Gems attempt to infiltrate a Homeworld space station by playing “the roles [they] were made for,” as planned by Sapphire. The roles they go on to play in the episode are belittling and stiff, roles that the characters are visibly uncomfortable with. Ruby pretends to be Sapphire’s bodyguard, Amethyst plays a quartz soldier who is escorting a human prisoner (Steven), and Pearl acts as Sapphire’s servant.

Pearl, in particular, shows audiences how this role hierarchy is neither kind nor logical: during the aforementioned space station infiltration, she is criticized by a gem commander for the self-respect she clearly possesses. “Does your pearl always walk *next* to you?” Holly Blue Agate asks Sapphire with an expression of clear disgust. Pearls are serfs on Homeworld, servants of higher-ranking gems, and expected to be subservient. Pearls are treated like objects, not beings with consciousness or free-will. In “Bubbled,” an enemy ruby attempts to kill Steven, intending to bring back his gem to the Diamonds, proving that the rebel leader Rose Quartz was dead. She laughs menacingly, and adds with glee, “they’ll give me my own pearl!” In “Log Date 7 15 2,” Peridot is shown cleaning up the barn she has made her home, and muses to herself: “Like I’m a pearl.” On Earth, however, gems are allowed—and encouraged—to choose their own identities and roles. Upon being reunited with the Crystal Gems, the blacksmith Bismuth teases an excited Pearl: “Hey, did somebody lose a pearl?” She mocks looking around for Pearl’s “owner,” before continuing, “who do you belong to?” Pearl crosses her arms and defiantly answers: “Nobody!” The difference between strict gem roles and the choice of identity on Earth is repeatedly emphasized. It is shown throughout the series that Rose fell in love with Earth due to the freedoms and choices allotted to the humans there (“Bubbled,” “Steven’s Dream,” “Gem

Heist,” “Stuck Together,” “A Single Pale Rose”). Consider this monologue that Rose has as she and Greg admire their friend’s baby in “Greg the Babysitter”:

When a gem is made, it’s for a reason. They burst out of the ground already knowing what they’re supposed to be, and then, that’s what they are. Forever. But you, you’re supposed to change. You’re never the same, even moment to moment. You’re allowed—and expected—to *invent* who you are! What an incredible power, the ability to grow up.

In this ongoing narrative, The Crystal Gems are rebellions against oppressive dominant discourses of categorization. This repeated insistence against labels combats media discourses of patriarchy versus matriarchy (Halberstam, 1998), and pure good versus pure evil (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodworth-Lugo, 2009). Although Homeworld is a powerful matriarchy, it is shown to be a miserable place to live, due to its strict reliance on role assignment. Gems and humans in *Steven Universe* are consistently shown to be happier when they are free to behave as their true selves. “Don’t worry about labels or conforming to a standard,” Steven hears a gentle, wise voice saying during a dream sequence, “just be true to yourself, and people will appreciate your honesty,” (“Straight to Video”).

Even in a seemingly goofy children’s show, deeper themes of self-acceptance are consistently present. As the series progresses, these themes become more complex, as Steven learns darker parts of his mother’s past as a rebel against Homeworld. He learns that Rose was actually Pink Diamond, one of Homeworld’s matriarchs, and that she faked her death to escape the draining politics of being a ruler (“A Single Pale Rose”). This revelation tears the team apart for several episodes, as they must reconcile their identities as Crystal Gems, their relationships with Rose, and their relationships with one another (“A Single Pale Rose,” “Now We’re Only Falling Apart,” “The Question,” “Made of Honor”). They learn to accept the hard truths of their

past as soldiers, and to continue loving and supporting one another. As they move on from tragedy, Steven musically insists that they focus on what is most important: “There’s an awful lot of awful things we could be thinking of...but for just one day, let’s only think about love.”

## **4.2. Constructions of Sexuality and Romance**

In *Steven Universe*, the construction of sexuality and romance are undertaken in the context of a show meant for a young audience. As such, there is no overt depictions or discussions of sexuality, limiting the themes of this portion of analysis to those of romance and love. However, this does not exclude sexuality as a theme, since characters still display attraction to one another. As such, the sexuality of characters can be inferred from their preferences of attraction (Dennis, 2003). In fact, as pointed out by Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo (2009), analyses of children’s series usually reveal that *heterosexuality* is the default identity ascribed to characters, and as such, audiences are likely to infer that characters are straight. Dominant cultural discourses have taught members of society that heterosexuality is the norm and that any other orientation is odd, both in real life and in media representations. Queer theory calls for the renunciation of assumed sexuality, insisting that neither gender nor orientation are labels that should hold power over people (Butler, 1990; Stein & Plummer, 1994). The following sections detail the ways in which *Steven Universe* ascribes sexuality and romantic orientation to its characters through the themes of fusion, genderless beauty, and genderless love, in ways that challenge heteronormativity.

### **4.2.1. Fusion**

Although fusion was previously discussed, it is worth analyzing from the angle of romance, as well. In every instance of fusion, the fused gem embodies a relationship between characters. This relationship is shown to depend on the characters specific to the fusion and is

not inherently romantic, and the type of relationship often determines traits of the fusion. In “Keeping it Together,” Garnet tells Steven about what fusion feels like to her:

*Steven:* What’s it like, being a fusion?

*Garnet:* You fused [with Connie].

*Steven:* I mean, like, all the time. Do you forget who you used to be?

*Garnet:* You forget you were ever alone. You know, when you fuse, you don’t feel like two people, you feel like one being. And your old names might as well be names for your left arm and your right.

*Steven:* When you split up, is it like you disappear?

*Garnet:* I embody my—I mean, Ruby and Sapphire’s love. I’ll always exist in them, even if I split apart, but the strength of that love keeps me together. So, I can stay Garnet for a very long time.

In “Jail Break,” the audience is made aware that Garnet is a permanent fusion of Ruby and Sapphire, two gems in a committed queer relationship who “are so close, they can’t stand to be apart,” as Steven later explains to his best friend, Connie (“Love Letters”). Platonic fusions are more common than romantic ones, as demonstrated by Stevonnie. They are a fusion made of Steven and Connie’s love, which begins platonically (“Ocean Gem”), but develops over time into something stronger (“Reunited”), resulting in their fusion becoming stronger physically and mentally. In “Beach City Drift,” Stevonnie unfuses when Steven and Connie are faced with a difficult task. In “Crack the Whip,” only seven episodes later, Stevonnie is able to stay fused for a long, intense fight sequence. In “Jungle Moon,” two seasons later, Stevonnie stays fused for several days, as Steven and Connie rely on each other to survive while stranded on a forested alien planet. On one occasion, the audience is shown a fusion made from an abusive relationship.

In the end of “Jail Break,” the evil Jasper coerces Lapis Lazuli, an antagonist-turned-ally, into fusing:

*Jasper:* Lapis, listen, fuse with me!

*Lapis:* What?

*Jasper:* How long did [the Crystal Gems] keep you trapped here on this miserable hunk of rock? These gems, they’re traitors to their Homeworld. They kept you prisoner. They used you. This is your chance to take revenge! Come on...just say yes.

Ultimately, Lapis agrees to fuse, and they become the monstrous Malachite, a fusion with six arms, four eyes, and sharp teeth. But, before Jasper can control their new body to harm the Crystal Gems, Lapis uses her power to manipulate water. Using waves from the nearby ocean, Lapis/Malachite drags themselves into the depths, as Jasper tries and fails to escape from the fusion. “Let’s stay on this miserable planet *together!*” Malachite screams as she disappears beneath the waves. “Yikes,” Garnet says after a pause of silence, “they are *really* bad for each other.”

In another example of using a metaphor of cultural relativism, the series shows differences in cultural norms of fusion. It is also shown that on Homeworld, gems only fuse for strategic purposes, and only with gems of their own kind. In “Log Date 7 15 2,” Peridot confronts Garnet about her fusion outside of Homeworld norms: “Explain it to me, fusion! I can at least make sense of your existence if it’s for a functional purpose. But you? You’re not using your combined size and strength to do anything!” It is shown that, on Homeworld, rubies only fuse with other rubies to defeat larger foes or accomplish great feats of strength. These same-gem fusions simply resemble larger versions of the components, with the same face, hair, and coloring.

On the other hand, gems on Earth regularly fuse with gems *not* of their own kind. Garnet defies class hierarchy as a fusion of a soldier pawn (Ruby) and an esteemed noble (Sapphire). This contrast of societal expectations for staying in classes of sameness present an interesting component to the theme of cultural relativity: The metaphors of race or class come to mind (Dhaenens, 2013b), as gems are, in a sense, segregated to homogeneous relationships dependent on their gemstone. Common gems like quartzes are allowed to fuse together but would never be allowed to fuse with rare and prestigious gems like sapphires. Diamonds, following this theme, never fuse with anyone, and are seemingly “perfect” on their own as the most unique and powerful of gems (“Log Date 7 15 2”).

On Earth, however, heterogeneous fusion is repeatedly shown to be exciting, interesting, and perfectly acceptable. Steven consistently shows enthusiasm towards new fusions, and the musical and artistic embellishments on fusions show them as fantastical revelations that the audience should be excited about. For example, Pearl and Garnet fuse to form Sardonyx, a loud and boisterous gem fusion who symbolizes the mature companionship of two characters who have known each other for centuries (“Friend Ship”). Sardonyx has her own voice actor, theme music, and set of skills that make her a valuable part of the Crystal Gems. Likewise, Pearl and Amethyst fuse to form Opal, a point of compromise and teamwork between two gems who frequently butt heads (“Log Date 7 15 2”). Rose and Pearl are shown to fuse in the past to form Rainbow Quartz, a symbolic testing of their newfound sense of romantic freedom on Earth (“A Single Pale Rose”). Rainbow Quartz, specifically, is noteworthy because of her name’s allusion to rainbow symbolism, which members of the queer community associate with strength, pride, and comradery. Finally, the largest fusion shown in this episode sample is a combination of Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, who form Alexandrite (“Reunited”). Alexandrite is shown to be

massive and powerful, a fusion symbolic of the unbreakable bond the characters have as Crystal Gems, as friends, and as Steven's family. In fact, Alexandrite is revealed in "Reunited" as she catches Steven, who has been knocked back by an attack from Blue Diamond. She is a formidable protector, someone who represents the Gem's combined will to keep Steven safe from harm.

There is one fusion in the series larger and more complex than Alexandrite, but she does not actually appear in this sample. Obsidian is the largest fusion present in the entire series, and appears in the season five finale, "Change Your Mind," which aired after the episode sample was selected (Cartoon Network, 2019). She is present in the series sample, however, as a massive stone statue that serves as the basic structure for the Crystal Gem's home. Her likeness' incredible height, eight arms, two faces, cloud of hair, and blank eyes make her appear almost godlike. She seems to symbolize the harmony and togetherness of the Crystal Gems, as a fusion of Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and Rose (or, in "Change Your Mind," Steven), a fusion that literally holds their home together.

These depictions of varied relationships outside of dominant heterosexual discourses provide audiences with proof that love does not need to be between one man and one woman; relationships are complicated. Showing this, along with queer women relating to each other in complex ways, is another way that *Steven Universe* redefines love in a queerer way (Halberstam, 1998; Jane, 2015). Fusion is also used in the series as a way to reach depictions of genderless beauty, something that animated series like *Adventure Time* have already begun to normalize (Jane, 2015; Leslie, 2015).

#### 4.2.2. Genderless Beauty

In *Steven Universe*, characters are shown to have beautiful features (both physically and personality-wise) independent of their gender. As a continuation of earlier themes of bodily constructions of gender, this theme highlights the *attractiveness* of these bodies, as demonstrated through attraction between characters. In Jane's (2015) analysis of *Adventure Time*, she demonstrated that all characters were susceptible to being depicted with stereotypically attractive features, regardless of gender: Any character could be drawn with long eyelashes and pouty lips as readily as they could be drawn with chiseled faces and large muscles. This shows physical beauty as something genderless, as any character can be depicted as "attractive" by societal standards (Dennis, 2009).

In the episodes sampled for this study, Steven's middle-aged father, Greg, was shown in romantic ways similar to the way young women may be shown in other media. For example, in "Laser Light Cannon," he uncovers some of his old records from back when he was trying to become a rock star. One album cover shows a young Greg posing seductively on his van, which seems to be a parody of Western cultures' obsession with placing sexualized images of women on vehicles, as can be seen in a multitude of advertisements (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). In another episode, Greg harkens back to his days of youthful beauty, telling Steven that he has not "broken this many hearts since I had all my hair" ("The Zoo"), suggesting that he was a popular romantic interest in the past due to his long beautiful hair. In "Greg the Babysitter," he is shown during his younger days with a full head of long, flowing hair. During this same episode, he is shown in positions where Rose seems to fill the normative masculine role of size and dominance: he lays on her as they read books (she is much larger than he is, and thus, her laying on him

would not make as much sense), Rose tosses him in the air and catches him playfully, and Rose leans over to give him a kiss.

On other occasions, women are shown in positions of superior physical power that make them attractive to other characters, flipping the usual “boy chases girl and wins her over” plotline. In “Love Letters,” the local mailperson, Jamie, becomes obsessively infatuated with Garnet after seeing her emerge from the ocean. This scene flips expectations of romantic scenes around (Birthisel, 2014; Dennis, 2009), as Garnet stands tall over Jamie, stern-faced and silent. He stutters and blushes, wide-eyed at her impressive form. Additionally, there is an ongoing theme of a power dynamic between gems being the root of attraction. Pearl is repeatedly shown as attracted to large, strong women. One main cause of romantic tension in the series is due to Pearl’s history of romance with Rose, and Pearl’s jealousy at Greg winning Rose’s attention (“Steven’s Dream,” “A Single Pale Rose,” “Now We’re Only Falling Apart”). From this, the audience may infer that Pearl has an attraction to large women due to Rose’s large stature. In “Bismuth,” Pearl blushes several times at compliments and affection shown to her by the taller and more muscular Bismuth. In “Last One Out of Beach City,” she attempts to flirt numerous times with a tall and mysterious human girl, who has curly pink hair similar to Rose’s. Pearl is not the only gem shown in positions of attraction to beings with power over her. In “Hit the Diamond” and “Back to the Moon,” a squadron of Homeworld rubies show their admiration and infatuation for Jasper, who is twice the size of a ruby in both height and muscle. One of the rubies even blushes brightly at being allowed to sit on Jasper’s lap in the spaceship, an act which causes another ruby to shed a single tear of jealous rage. These scenes provide queer discourses that are subversive to the dominant theme of muscular men and dainty women in media (Avila-Saavedra, 2009), including fantasy media targeted at children (Baker & Raney, 2007; Götz &

Lemish, 2012), and highlight the possibility of female masculinity without heteronormativity (Halberstam, 1998). These images assert that women can be strong, men can be gentle, and anyone can love anyone.

The fusion Stevonnie clearly demonstrates a break from standards of romantic narratives common in children's media (Birthisel, 2014). In "Kevin Party," and "Beach City Drift," the teenaged side character, Kevin, expresses that Stevonnie is considered an attractive person. He calls Stevonnie "two kids in a beautiful trench coat," and spends one entire episode trying to convince Steven and Connie to fuse together in order to make his house party cooler by having Stevonnie in attendance. He explains to Steven: "Look, Stevonnie is better than me, okay? Better dancer, better driver. Stevonnie truly does not care what anyone thinks. That's why they're the *coolest*. If I can't *be* the coolest, I've at least got to be seen *hanging* with the coolest." While this narrative serves the dual purpose of making Kevin seem like a despicable character who only cares about using people to achieve a higher social status, it also normalizes nonbinary people as attractive both socially and romantically. As discussed by Halberstam (1998), this normalization is another route that can be taken to bring queer discourses into popular media.

#### **4.2.3. Genderless Love**

*Steven Universe* challenges heteronormative discourses through the narrative of love in many forms, ranging from romantic love to the love of found families (Dhaenens, 2013b). First and foremost, as most notable in reviews (positive and negative) of the series, is the fact that there are many relationships outside of heterosexual expectations. Following the aim of queer theory to create the possibility of love without adhering to categories (Butler, 1990; Stein & Plummer, 1994), gems are shown demonstrating same-gender attraction during the series, and Rose Quartz demonstrates the fluidity of romantic attraction. Without relying on the common

media discourse of default heterosexuality (Dennis, 2003), Rose is shown to love both gem and human, man and woman.

Viewers are first introduced to Rose as someone who loved Greg (“Laser Light Cannon”), but by later episodes, it is clear that she is not heterosexual (“A Single Pale Rose”). Rose first loved Pearl, and after coming to Earth, fell in love with Greg. In “Greg the Babysitter,” it is shown that Pearl clearly disliked Greg back when he first met the Crystal Gems. She turns her nose up, pretending to not notice when he tries to greet her. In “Sworn to the Sword,” Pearl retells of her past devotion to Rose in song: “On the battlefield...you have nothing but the way you feel, your strategy, and a sword. You just think about the life you’ll have together after the war, and then you [fight] for her.” Even after Rose is gone, it is clear that she meant everything to Pearl.

Since Greg interfered with Rose and Pearl’s relationship, he may be considered a heterosexual foil simply meant to disprove Rose’s queerness (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009). However, this reading seems unlikely for two reasons. First, it ignores the possibility that Rose’s love is not given conditionally based on gender, and she is shown to be romantic with both Pearl and Greg. Second, the show’s creators seem quite aware of the heterosexual foil trope in media and act to subvert it a few times in the series. In “Historical Friction,” the mayor of Beach City, known simply as “Mayor Dewey,” tries to flirt with Pearl. He sits near her at an outdoor play and tries to impress her by saying “You know, I wrote this play.” In response, she ignores him, promptly standing up and moving back three rows of seats. At the end of the episode, he thanks Pearl for her help in getting the play organized, blushing profusely as he attempts to flatter her. She maternally pats his head, telling him that she was happy to help a friend, extinguishing any possibility of a romance between them.

In “Love Letters,” Jamie is introduced as a potential foil to Sapphire and Ruby’s romantic fusion. However, Garnet clearly and firmly rejects him, replying to his initial love letter with a letter of her own. On her letter, she writes: “NO. The end, forever, and even after that.” When a miscommunication brings Jamie to her doorstep later, he waxes poetic about his love for her, to which she answers loudly, “I am not, nor will I ever be, interested!” Both episodes demonstrate the creators’ awareness of dominant media discourses of compulsory heterosexuality (Birthisel, 2014; Dennis, 2003; Fouts & Inch, 2005) and actively combat these norms, while simultaneously satirizing series that fall victim to the trope.

Gems redefine heterosexuality completely, as this orientation is an impossibility on Homeworld. Since Homeworld has no binary gender system, and no need for sexual dimorphism (gems are born from the ground, asexually), gem love is based solely on choosing another being regardless of their gender. The asexual production of gems also highlights the fact that biological sex does not play into gems’ constructions of gender in any way. When sex does not create binary categories, binary categories of gender have no relevance (Butler, 1990). On Homeworld, gems who seek romance do so through same-gender relationships. Rose Quartz provides a point in the plot for the series to explore the differences of romance on Homeworld versus romance on Earth. Rose’s first ideas of romance come from seeing Sapphire and Ruby fuse on Homeworld, a social faux pas that broke cultural norms of gems fusing (“Now We’re Only Falling Apart”). This alerted Rose to the possibility of relationships beyond roles and led her to her romance with Pearl. The shedding of roles echoes queer media discourses of equality in romance without one partner being the dominant member of the relationship (Halberstam, 1998; Avila-Saavedra, 2009). Because of their different culture, and because they are aliens, it does not make sense to

apply human ideas like “straight” or “lesbian” to them. In fact, labels of orientation, romantic or sexual, are never discussed in the series.

Other children’s media heterosexualize nonhuman characters implicitly through relationships and making jokes of queerness only for the sake of enforcing norms (Dennis, 2003; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009). *Steven Universe*, on the other hand, presents queer relationships as they are: simply another form of love between beings, regardless of identity (Halberstam, 1998). Gem relationships are shown to be balanced and healthy (excluding the imbalance of power in Lapis and Jaspers abusive fusion, Malachite), with involved parties depicted as having both masculine and feminine traits. All same-gender relationships in the sample episodes of *Steven Universe* are shown positively and simply, without spectacle or pandering, a clear push against the traditional symbolic annihilation of queer discourses in the past century (Fouts & Inch, 2005; Klein & Shiffman, 2009).

As with other queer themes in the series, Garnet plays a key part in the establishment of multifaceted same-gender romance. In “Jailbreak,” Ruby and Sapphire are separated, and the two are worried that the other will be harmed by Jasper. Upon finding one another, they kiss and embrace, fusing back into Garnet. In “Hit the Diamond,” Ruby acts like a Homeworld gem among a squadron of other rubies. The Crystal Gems try to distract the enemy rubies by convincing them to play a game of baseball. However, their plot is almost foiled as Ruby and Sapphire cannot resist being near each other. Breaking character, Ruby grins at Sapphire, asking “Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?” Sapphire giggles, responding “I don’t know...I don’t get off the planet much.” This exchange of pick-up lines is noticed by the Crystal Gems. “What are they doing?” Steven asks in a panic, seeing Ruby distract Sapphire from their plan. “Flirting,” Lapis says flatly, annoyed that the couple might ruin their plan.

In “The Question,” “Made of Honor,” and “Reunited,” the plot turns for a while from battling enemies to battling emotions. Ruby and Sapphire spend three episodes discussing their personal insecurities and reconciling their relationship. Ruby reveals that she is insecure about her intelligence, since she is a gem who was created to be a soldier, showing the softer side of the butch impression audiences saw in “Jail Break.” Such discussions of emotion are common in the series and take an alternative path to showing strength. Likewise, Sapphire expresses her anger about the tumultuous lives the Crystal Gems lived as a result of Rose’s rebellion from Homeworld, expressing a desire to live a peaceful and simple life.

Sapphire’s expressions of frustration add a new layer to her usually prim characterization, showing audiences that she is not just a princess-esque woman, but that she is also complex (Jane, 2015). Normally a composed and feminine gem, she unleashes her supernatural abilities to manipulate ice in a moment catharsis. With a shout of rage and a tense posture, she releases large and sharp icicles from the ground. There is no flourish or seductive posing in this demonstration of power. The expression of female rebellion (alongside the ever-present undercurrent of Crystal Gem rebellion against Homeworld), echoes true to Halberstam’s (1998) discussion of the queerness of women’s rebellions against oppressive norms. The series makes a habit of showing emotion as strength, contrary to Cartoon Network’s reflection of discursive media norms which usually glorify violence and logic (Hentges & Case, 2013). Characters are given room to contemplate and express their emotions.

The possibility for a better society is communicated in “The Zoo,” an episode which takes the ongoing theme of cultural relativity even further. In this episode, Steven and Greg are trying to escape from a human “zoo,” a large enclosure set up by gems to keep humans in captivity. In this zoo, all of the humans besides Steven and Greg have been raised in captivity.

They all wear identical outfits: a sleeveless blue and white tunic, loincloth, and purple earrings which double as speakers. These speakers transmit instructions for the captive humans daily, throughout their entire life. The “little voice” that speaks through the speakers tells the humans when to wake, eat, sleep, exercise, and relax. Notably, these humans do not have gender identities. Their names are simply a string of letters and numbers used to identify them, and throughout the episode, none of them use gendered pronouns to refer to themselves or one another. Although this sounds like the ideally ungendered society, in which no labels of gender are assigned (Butler, 1990), it is shown that this zoo has a major downside. The speakers in the earrings also have the captive humans participate in a “choosening,” in which the mature humans are paired into romantic couples. This can be read as a demonstration of the dangers of a society with no freedom, or alternatively, show that perfect societies are unrealistic. However, when Greg objects to the choosening, the humans seem happy to learn that they could have a choice of who to be romantically involved with:

*Greg:* Look, back on Earth, there was no voice to tell you who to be with. It was your own decision.

*Steven:* My mom and dad didn't get together because someone told them to. They spent time getting to know one another and fell in love. They choosened each other 'cause that's what they choosed [*sic*].

*Y6:* Hmm, I see. If that is how it is done on Earth, then...I choose Greg.

*J10:* And I also choose Greg.

*All captive humans:* I also choose Greg!

*Greg:* Wait! I get a say in this, too. You're all very nice, and I'm flattered, and yes, you get to choose whoever you want, but I also get to say that I choose, um...none of you.

Instead of the entire episode becoming a lesson in the futility of aiming for a utopia, it becomes a lesson for the importance of freedom to choose one's own destiny. It invokes themes of consent, healthy relationships, and healthy rejection.

“The Zoo” also established the reality that no relationship is perfect, as is also seen in Ruby and Sapphire's arc of rekindling their relationship and getting married. Lapis Lazuli becomes a character of focus when it comes to the series' demonstrations of romantic complications. Despite the many positive same-gender relationships, Lapis and Jasper create a toxic dynamic which shows any type of relationship can result in harm if the parties involved do not get along. Their fusion, Malachite, embodies the cruelty and corruption that drew them together in the first place. The two met when Jasper kidnapped Lapis as she tried to return to Homeworld from Earth. After being held hostage, Jasper coerced Lapis into the fusion (but not without consent), an abusive tie that held the two together (according to this sample) for two seasons. After un-fusing, the relationship's effects are not ignored, and Lapis is shown in a sort of depression. Her speech is unemotional, her facial expression rarely changes from bored, and her hair is visibly messy.

Beyond Lapis' clear emotional exhaustion, she is shown to have grown stronger from the trauma. In “Reunited,” the Crystal Gems face off against Blue Diamond, one of Homeworld's matriarchs, who has the emotional power to make gems incapacitated with sadness. As Garnet, Pearl, Amethyst, Peridot, Bismuth, and Steven collapse, weeping uncontrollably, Lapis stays standing upright. “What?” Blue Diamond shrieks in dismay, unable to believe that a gem could resist her powers. “I've felt worse,” Lapis says firmly, wiping a single tear from the corner of her eye. Lapis' storyline is a sad one, but ultimately, the love her friends have for her helps her find her strength again. Yes, this arc shows an abusive same-gender relationship. However, as this

abusive relationship is not the only same-gender romance in the series, and is never glorified, it should be viewed as a valuable example for audiences learning about the positives and negatives of romance (Halberstam, 1998).

Finally, as seen in other subversively queer television media, this series offers a positive message about the value of found families (Dennis, 2003). As far as depictions of affection in the series, depictions of platonic and familial bonds abound as the most commonly shown dimension of affection. This emphasis makes it clear that, again, freedom is a valuable part of life, and this freedom should include the option to surround oneself with people they care about. “With all our strength together, we can take [Blue Diamond] down,” Garnet yells mid-battle in “Reunited.” “That’s right,” Steven replies, “This is our home, our planet, our friends and family. We are the Crystal Gems!” Despite the mixing of species, despite the fact that none of them are “blood” related, the Crystal Gems consider each other family.

Regularly, enemies in the series become friends, as bonds of love are shown to be stronger than divides of hatred. Lapis, Peridot, and several monsters, all enter the series as antagonists, but Steven always seems to befriend them. “I don’t want to fight,” Steven tells an angry Lapis early in the series. He manages to speak to her, help her heal, and befriends her. In “Message Received,” Peridot denounces her allegiance to Homeworld, and immediately doubts whether this was the right choice. “You’re a Crystal Gem!” Steven yells, hugging his newfound ally and friend. Most notably, at the end of the sample, the episode “Reunited” culminates with a large battle between the Crystal Gems and two of the Diamonds.

However, the battle does not end with death or defeat. Instead, it ends when Steven convinces the everyone to lay down their weapons and talk about their differences. Both sides seem reluctant, but in the end, the Diamonds take Steven in their hands. He stands in a position

of vulnerability then, given that the Diamonds are each at least 20 feet tall, if not taller. Looking up at the pair of Diamonds, he earnestly insists “Please, the fighting has to stop. We aren’t enemies. We’re family!” He is willing to extend peace and love to even his biggest (literally and metaphorically) enemies. These ideas of acceptance in found family resonate with queer theory due to the possibility of queer people needing to seek out those who can understand them (Dhaenens, 2013b), especially considering the fact that young queer people may be especially susceptible to rejection by their birth families, a common point of knowledge among members of the queer community. These themes demonstrate a self-awareness in those who create *Steven Universe*, which will hopefully start a trend of thoughtful and inclusive themes in the creation of children’s media.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Contrary to past trends, this series is providing a prime example of queer discourses in a popular media format. It neither follows heteronormative nor homonormative trends: It shows visibility of gender and romantic divergence from expectations without simply reversing gender roles or putting two people into standard relationship roles. Although audience members may infer that characters are cisgender or heterosexual (Dennis, 2009), there is little to suggest the creators intended the series to be read in such normative ways. If anything, Sugar and the other members of the *Steven Universe* team demonstrate a level of self-awareness that suggests they actively try to avoid falling into tropes of gendered media: they show the absurdity of the heterosexual foil (Dennis, 2003), show complex and healthy same-gender relationships without mockery (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Netzley, 2010; White, 2002), and show the value in giving people the freedom to define themselves (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998). While there is an ongoing narrative of good versus evil, violence only becomes the solution when used as a form of defense. Rather, it is shown that battles should be won with the brain and the heart when possible, a theme which disrupts dominant discourses of masculine entities physically fighting out their differences (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009).

When many cartoons in the US rely on narratives of male power and female emotion (Birthisel, 2014; Luther & Legg Jr., 2010), it seems as though cartoons like *Steven Universe* are challenging that norm. The fact stands that *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe* relate to one another in more than their genre and channel of broadcast. As Jane (2015) and Leslie (2015) discuss in their considerations of *Adventure Time*'s educational power, media taking the stance of passion and empathy over logic and competition can be a radical thing. In certain cases, these series are both shown to satirize norms in a way that is both entertaining and educational to

audiences. Instead of mocking the queer groups in the series (Raley & Lucas, 2006), they mock oppressive dominant standards. Since Padva (2008) identified jokes satirizing heteronormativity in *The Simpsons*, it is clearly not a new idea to challenge dominant discourses using humor as subversion. Nevertheless, it is an idea that could continue to be utilized in future media to produce alternative discourses. Research has shown the value of making alternative discourses visible in media and has also shown that audiences that see more queer content are more open to queer ideas (Dennis, 2009; Manuel, 2009; Meyer & Wood, 2013; Netzley, 2010).

One of the most inherently queer themes is the choice to define (or not to define) oneself in terms of gender, orientation, and identity (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998; Stein & Plummer, 1994). And while this idea is generally thought to apply to people who cause “gender trouble” or break standards of heteronormativity, it should also be offered to anyone who is interested in having more freedom. Sugar herself stated that her team aimed to make a show that educated all child viewers about queer ideas: “Kids not only get [themes of gender and sexuality], many of them are experiencing it themselves,” (as quoted in Kickham, 2016). The child audiences of *Steven Universe* are receiving lessons in being oneself, being kind, and having empathy. In the most formative years of their lives, these young audience members are learning valuable queer lessons (Lesnik-Oberstein & Thomson, 2002), even if they do not know it.

*Steven Universe* is not a monolith of positive queer representation. There are imperfections in the series, but we cannot expect these to overshadow or negate the positive force this series has become. As Jane (2015) discussed in her analysis of *Adventure Time*, it is impossible for creators to actively avoid any sort of gendered message. On the contrary, it is often for the better that series utilize gendered constructions in complex, unexpected ways that challenge the audience to reconsider their preconceived notions about gender (Halberstam,

1998). As Dhaenens (2013b) notes, the fantasy genre provides an excellent space for stories to explore queer themes in tandem with fictional narratives, and these themes can take on challenging topics in unique ways. So, depictions of unsavory queer topics should not be seen simply as negative because they are present. In the instances where problematic queer portrayals occur in *Steven Universe*, they are presented with clear framing of their importance. For example, the abusive same-gender relationship between Lapis Lazuli and Jasper shows that unhealthy relationships *exist* without those abuses being glorified or excused. Another case of problematic representation could be claimed in Garnet's racialized characterization, since she is shown to be violent and angry on several occasions and could perpetuate the well-known "angry Black woman" stereotype. But, as discussed above, Garnet also presents a wide variety of queer messages which paint her as a complex character that would overall be a positive representation of (queer) Black women.

### **5.1. Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research**

The following sections outline additional considerations of this study. First, implications for this study will be discussed. Then, limitations of the research design will be explained, along with how these limitations could be reduced. Finally, the discussion will turn to possible directions for future research on queer theory in children's media.

#### **5.1.1. Implications**

The research above shows that children's animated series can potentially do more than entertain. Cartoons are indeed "portable professors," as previously mentioned (Freeman, 2005, p. 85) and are capable of teaching complex lessons. The queer themes in *Steven Universe* are rich and varied, providing detailed narrative tapestries of gender and romance constructions, both of which challenge dominant discursive norms. By presenting alternative discourses plainly and

without pandering, the creators of the series are working to normalize queer themes in media (Jane, 2015). Through varied presentations of bodies, roles, narratives, and relationships, audience members can see themes of female masculinity, empathy, diversity, and freedom to choose ones' own identity.

As the series progresses, queer themes become more complex and more blatant, which may be the creators' way of scaffolding information for audiences to build upon or may reflect the audience becoming older throughout the series' release time. It is possible that younger audiences enjoyed the simplicity and silliness of earlier episodes, and as a more varied audience consumed the show, more complex messages were included to entertain more of the audience. Considering the fact that the show began in 2013, six-year-old viewers (which is the lower side of the age range with which the series was originally popular) would be twelve years old as of the latest episode's release in 2019. Likewise, eleven-year-old children (the upper side of the age range) who began watching the show in 2013 would now be seventeen years old, and thus, able to understand more complicated stories. This is not to ignore the fact that young viewers may very well have started viewing the series at any point in time, simply watching from the first season.

As far as progressive message delivery, this complexity may also be due to creators "testing the waters," so to speak. While the end of season one revealed Ruby and Sapphire's relationship, it was barely dwelt upon. This is not to downplay its importance, but to say that missing one episode early on would have obscured this queer relationship completely. In later episodes, though, their relationship is revisited frequently, and their romance is given special attention during their side-arc of separating, coming back together, and getting married. So, while the show always had queer themes, they became gradually more explicit through the

series, which seemed to parallel a society coming to terms with the validity and acceptance of queer people.

It seems that these findings reflect media's trend of becoming more progressive in accordance with cultural evolution, but also shows creators putting forth media that reflects their lived experience (Zornado, 2008). In this case, the diversity of *Steven Universe* is likely a result of Sugar and her creative team, who are, in her own words, "not straight and not white," (Kickham, 2016). This implies that, when given the chance, creators from minority communities can help create representation for minorities in media (Pulos, 2013). Because of this, it makes sense that audiences of programs with positive minority representation will have positive attitudes about the minorities depicted (Netzley, 2010). Methodologically, this can mean that audience acceptance of queer themes can lead to more queer analyses with positive outcomes.

Seemingly progressive series can quietly enforce dominant discourses while appearing to disrupt norms (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Silverman, 2002). Perhaps with the revolutionary queerness of upcoming animated series like *Adventure Time* (Jane, 2015) and *Steven Universe*, media creators will feel more able to challenge expectations. Several animated series on Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and Disney are already toeing the line of queerness (Romano, 2018b): Cartoon Network's *Clarence* features secondary characters in gay relationships, similar to Disney's *Gravity Falls*, which confirmed a gay relationship between secondary characters in its finale. Nickelodeon's *Loud House* features another background gay relationship, but also features a bisexual main character. *Star vs. the Forces of Evil* seems closest in line with *Steven Universe*, as a fantasy cartoon that featured Disney's first televised gay kiss. This series also seems to feature a powerful female lead with a male sidekick who is not afraid to be seen as

feminine. Queer theorists should continue to analyze children's television shows in order to investigate this implication further.

Theoretically speaking, this shift in media could have new meaning for queer theory as an area of academic focus. With increases in mediated queerness, there may be a cultural shift (eventually) towards human queerness as totally acceptable, with people embracing the choice to live beyond binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality. This is certainly a goal worth working for, and the hope of many queer theorists (Butler, 1990). It is not so much a challenge, then, but an area of potential, to consider what could come next for queer theory when (and if) society lets go of its incessant need to divide people into categories.

### **5.1.2. Limitations**

The main limitations of this research come in the form of resource constraints. A more thorough analysis may take more time or teamwork, given that this study was undertaken by a lone researcher analyzing only a sample of existing episodes of *Steven Universe*. Were there more time and resources, this study may have also extended interpretations to audience members of the show in hopes of understanding whether queer themes translate through leisurely viewing.

This study was done from a perspective of queer theory and looked only at aspects of gender and romance/sexuality. As Avila-Saavedra (2009) notes, however, queer analysis should also make room to understand the “intersection of issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality that are part of our everyday lives,” (p. 19). So, while this analysis presents favorable conclusions of *Steven Universe* for its discourses of gender and romance, others might find the show lacking in dimensions of race, age, class, or another aspect of human identity. In fact, this exact same study of gender and romance could be undertaken by another researcher, who might arrive at different conclusions than the current researcher. As a queer researcher, the inference of queer themes

may come more easily (Dennis, 2009), so these findings might not be so apparent to someone of another gender or orientation. Insofar as this study reflects the understanding of one (young, middle-class, able-bodied) individual, the findings are limited.

### **5.1.3. Directions for Future Research**

As with any study of media texts, there is always room for growth. Media are constantly evolving, and television is no exception. Even when programming is lauded as progressive by audience members, it cannot always be taken at face value (Netzley, 2010). Researchers must be willing to apply a variety of critical lenses to media in order to uncover larger themes of dominant discourses that may be perpetuated through media that appear progressive on the surface (Silverman, 2002). In the findings of this study, *Steven Universe* seems to be a case of progressive television that is truly providing alternative discourses. Due to the ongoing broadcast of *Steven Universe*, it is worth considering whether further research can include newer episodes in its sample. Additionally, there are more forms of media included in the franchise, such as mini-episodes, a podcast, and an upcoming movie, along with music albums, and episode soundtracks. The more audio-oriented components of the series' universe may give way to analyses of the role music and voices play in constructing themes of gender, romance, and beyond. Future studies of the series might choose to analyze the entirety of available episodes and should also consider digging deeper into other areas of critical study such as depictions of race, age, religion, class, and ability (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). The venues of race and class seem particularly salient in the series.

In this analysis, race and class could be seen metaphorically through the “rules” of fusion on Homeworld versus the freedom to fuse on Earth. More specifically, the racial implications of characterization in the series could be analyzed, since initial viewing shows that even the

nonhuman gems have racial traits such as raced voices and raced bodies (Birthisel, 2014). As discussed above, Garnet is distinctly Black, with a Black voice actor, afro, and facial features that could be read as Black. Bismuth, although introduced later in the series, is another major character that could be racialized as Black: she also has a Black voice actor, along with a hairstyle that resembles rainbow-colored dreadlocks.

Beyond racial readings, the show could have potentially religious readings, as well. Steven's birth from Rose could be read as reincarnation (there are multiple scenes in which Steven has flashbacks of her memory). The rule of the Diamonds on Homeworld puts them in a place of almost godly status, a reflection of rulers' historical tendencies to liken themselves to divinity. Some of the fusions (Obsidian in particular, with her flowing hair, eight arms, and flaming eyes) have incredible and unreal appearances that are not unlike some cultures' depictions of gods and goddesses. The gems' existences as bodies of light call forth images of angels, and Crystal Gem's position as Earth's saviors solidifies this reading. There is also something to be said about these same beings having the capability to bend reality, control the elements, and transform their appearance at will.

Finally, like many researchers before me, I ask whether these analytical themes truly register to those who watch the series purely for entertainment. While queer discourses in cartoons can be located, analyzed, and debated by academics, it remains that the audience's perceptions of these discourses are the determining factor in whether these powerful messages stay on screen or extend into daily life. Focus groups, interviews, and further research might be done on different viewers to see if queer themes are truly as obvious as the current analysis finds them to be. Perhaps this will uncover that older audiences understand some of the more complicated messages, while younger audiences are more attentive to simpler lessons of the

series. Likewise, queer viewers will likely be quick to notice themes of transgender and homosexual ideas, while cisgender and heterosexual viewers may not even notice that these ideas are present. If audiences are not decoding these messages as the creator intended (Hall, 1974), then it must be determined how creators can actually perpetuate alternative discourses in a way that makes a larger impact (Lemish, 2010).

## 5.2. Conclusion

*Steven Universe* is a children's cartoon that can quite aptly be described as a program of "insistent queerness," (Thurm, 2017). As with Jane's (2015) analysis of *Adventure Time*, this study revealed that the silly fantasy series meant for children carries heavier themes than one might expect. Episodes are just as likely to show puns and burp jokes as they are to show deep messages of self-development, freedom, and empathy. The stories told in the series carry narratives familiar to viewers while simultaneously challenging those same viewers to consider their taken for granted perceptions of the world. A classic coming of age tale with heart (and, one could argue, guts), the show pushes boundaries to the edge of the possible. Yes, it mocks and highlights the futility of gender roles. Even more than that, though, it can make a person question what the point of gender even is in the larger scheme of things.

Instead of plain role reversal (Halberstam, 1998), it calls for role *removal*. It has heroes and villains and battles, but never at the expense of its characters. Villains are defeated, then immediately offered friendship. Relationships are made and grown. Love is celebrated as not a weakness, but a powerful force and catalyst which can spark change for the better. Queerness is constructed and normalized in a way that is not spectacle or pandering, but in a genuine and complex way that children can understand. While the series is certainly not the first of its kind,

and hopefully not the last of its kind, one can only hope that the series becomes a point of reference for future creators hoping to contribute to progressive cultural change.

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## **APPENDIX. LIST OF EPISODES SAMPLED**

### **Season 1 (2013-2015)**

Episode 2, Number in Series (NS) 2: “Laser Light Cannon”

Episode 5, NS 5: “Frybo”

Episode 8, NS 8: “Serious Steven”

Episode 9, NS 9: “Tiger Millionaire”

Episode 15, NS 15: “Onion Trade”

Episode 19, NS 19: “Rose’s Room”

Episode 26, NS 26: “Ocean Gem (Part 2)”

Episode 31, NS 31: “Keep Beach City Weird”

Episode 35, NS 35: “Lion 3: Straight to Video”

Episode 52, NS 52: “Jail Break (Part 2)”

### **Season 2 (2015-2016)**

Episode 2, NS 54: “Joy Ride”

Episode 4, NS 56: “Love Letters”

Episode 5, NS 57: “Reformed”

Episode 6, NS 58: “Sworn to the Sword”

Episode 8, NS 60: “Keeping it Together”

Episode 14, NS 66: “Historical Friction”

Episode 15, NS 67: “Friend Ship”

Episode 23, NS 75: “Steven’s Birthday”

Episode 25, NS 77: “Message Received”

Episode 26, NS 78: “Log Date 7 15 2”

### **Season 3 (2016)**

Episode 5, NS 83: “Hit the Diamond”

Episode 7, NS 85: “Drop Beat Dad”

Episode 10, NS 88: “The New Lars”

Episode 11, NS 89: “Beach City Drift”

Episode 16, NS 94: “Greg the Babysitter”

Episode 18, NS 96: “Crack the Whip”

Episode 19, NS 97: “Steven vs. Amethyst”

Episode 21, NS 99: “Bismuth”

Episode 24, NS 102: “Back to the Moon”

Episode 25, NS 103: “Bubbled”

### **Season 4 (2016-2017)**

Episode 6, NS 109: “Last One Out of Beach City”

Episode 7, NS 110: “Onion Gang”

Episode 8, NS 111: “Gem Harvest”

Episode 11, NS 114: “Steven’s Dream”

Episode 13, NS 116: “Gem Heist”

Episode 14, NS 117: “The Zoo”

Episode 16, NS 119: “The New Crystal Gems”

Episode 18, NS 121: “Rocknaldo”

Episode 19, NS 122: “Tiger Philanthropist”

Episode 24, NS 127: “Are You My Dad?”

### **Season 5 (2017-2018)**

Episode 1, NS 129: “Stuck Together”

Episode 10, NS 138: “Kevin Party”

Episode 11, NS 139: “Lars of the Stars”

Episode 12, NS 140: “Jungle Moon”

Episode 15, NS 143: “Pool Hopping”

Episode 18, NS 146: “A Single Pale Rose”

Episode 19, NS 147: “Now We’re Only Falling Apart”

Episode 21, NS 149: “The Question”

Episode 22, NS 150: “Made of Honor”

Episode 23, NS 151: “Reunited”

(IMDb, 2019)