Always Gay, Never Queer: An analysis of Will & Grace's strategy for mainstream success

Bethany Keupp
Bethany.Keupp@Colorado.EDU

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses

Part of the Broadcast and Video Studies Commons, Critical and Cultural Studies Commons, Gender and Sexuality Commons, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons, Other Film and Media Studies Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, Social Influence and Political Communication Commons, Sociology of Culture Commons, and the Television Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses/1557

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Honors Program at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
Always Gay, Never Queer:
An analysis of Will & Grace’s strategy for mainstream success
Bethany Keupp
Defense Date: April 9, 2018

Advisor: Dr. Mary Klages—English Department
Honors Council Representative: Dr. Emily Harrington—English Department
Defense Committee: Dr. Zachary Owens—Honors Department
Abstract:

This paper explores the context in which *Will & Grace* aired and why it was successful. Through investigating the types of LGBT+ representation of the time, I discovered and important distinction between shows with LGBT+ characters and those containing queer content—the latter of which was all but completely kept from mainstream television. This also allowed an exploration of tropes which made LGBT+ characters acceptable or successful on this platform. An in-depth examination into the sitcom *Ellen*’s failure revealed just how much the featuring of LGBT+ characters in lead roles could ruin a show’s chances at mainstream success. However, it also revealed important differences in the way *Ellen* approached having a gay lead character and the way *Will & Grace* did. This highlights how NBC was able learn from *Ellen* and use its failure to propel *Will & Grace*’s success. One of the most important lessons *Will & Grace* implemented was the utilizing the sitcom genre and its common or familiar tropes and elements to firmly situate the show within the sitcom and mainstream culture in general. Ultimately, *Will & Grace* succeeded in mainstream television where other representations hadn’t because of a very intentional and specific strategy informed by the context of the era and mainstream culture. This topic was important and relevant to explore today because of the immense cultural impact of the show and its contribution to the proliferation of increasingly progressive representations of LGBT+ individuals in media which is still occurring. This topic is also especially relevant because the show is once again a successful member of NBC’s primetime line-up.
Table of Contents

Introduction: A different world

Queer Keep Out: Exploring the limited ways LGBT+ could succeed

Short-Lived: Exploring the fallout of ABC’s Ellen

Ladies First: How Ellen’s mistakes informed NBC’s strategy

The More the Merrier: How Will & Grace used sitcom elements to succeed

Conclusion: How Will & Grace’s changed everything just by succeeding

Bibliography
Introduction:  
A different world

On November 22, 2016, president Barrack Obama presented Ellen DeGeneres with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, saying about the ground-breaking way she came out:

It’s easy to forget now, when we’ve come so far, where now, marriage is equal under the law, just how much courage was required for Ellen to come out on the most public of stages almost 20 years ago....What an incredible burden that was to bear. To risk your career like that. People don’t do that very often....And she did pay a price. We don’t remember this. I hadn’t remembered this. She did. For a pretty long stretch of time. Even in Hollywood. (ABC News 18:25-19:30)

Considering DeGeneres’ current success and status as a universally loved member of television, it certainly is hard to believe the amount of criticism and fallout she experienced just two decades ago for how she came out.

On April 30, 1997 Ellen DeGeneres and the lead character of her sitcom Ellen came out as gay, making Ellen Morgan the first gay lead character on a primetime network sitcom and the episode itself saw unexpected levels of success. But it didn’t last for long. When DeGeneres appeared on a recent episode of actor Dax Shepard's podcast Armchair Expert, Dax asked his guest “Your show ended, and it ended why?” to which she responded simply “Because I came out.” She continued, “They really didn't want me to come out. I wanted to come out. I said, ‘It's my life. I want to come out. I want the character to come out. It's the time.’ I said, ‘I'm going to lose the career. Like, you can just put another show on. It's my show to lose’” (Shepard 18:20-20:10). Her predictions came true. Despite the initial positive reaction to DeGeneres’s character coming out, the episodes after the two-part coming out special saw sharp declines in numbers,
with the show—which had experienced immense popularity before the episode—eventually being cancelled by ABC in 1998. DeGeneres personally faced immense backlash and after the cancellation of her show her career suffered greatly. Many wondered the if the fallout and negative impact DeGeneres and her character being gay had meant “the death of gay characters in leading television roles” or at least that television wasn’t ready for gay leading men and women quite yet (Sullivan, quoted in Battles and Hilton-Morrow 88). No one expected what would happen next: NBC, a rival network, premiered a sitcom featuring not one, but two homosexual men in leading roles just months after the cancellation of Ellen. This show was Will & Grace.

When Will & Grace premiered on September 21, 1998 it became the first primetime sitcom featuring two gay, male characters in lead roles. The decades, years, and even months in television prior to this premiere gave every indication that such a show would be a failure. The only significant representations of LGBT+ individuals which were accepted and succeeded in on mainstream television were those of secondary characters whose contributions to the storylines were rarely integral to or even made a plot difference and the only time a gay main character had ever had a leading role in a sitcom had just ended in disaster two months before. In spite of this, Will & Grace was able to find lasting mainstream success by avoiding the mistakes which contributed to the failure of Ellen and exploring LGBT+ content without challenging mainstream culture by structuring itself around components and tropes from the sitcom genre and past successful\(^1\) representations of LGBT+\(^2\) characters in mainstream media.

---
\(^1\) Successful here—and in other mentions of successful representation throughout the essay—describes only the level to which the representations were accepted and consumed by mainstream culture. It does not in any way describe how accurate or nuanced the representations were, as they most commonly were neither of those things.
\(^2\) Stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. The plus represents many more identities which are represented in the full acronym, but due to space and presentation this essay will be using this colloquially common version.
Queer Keep Out: 
Exploring the limited ways LGBT+ could succeed

By the mid to late nineties, LGBT+ individuals in many progressive states were celebrating victories such as more visibility and rights than ever before. However, as legislation, rights, and respect grew for these individuals in the progressive pockets of America, on a national scale, widespread acceptance and equal rights seemed to be a distant future. When these progressive regions of the country passed laws protecting, supporting, and accepting LGBT+ individuals, the parts of the country which felt threatened by the new status and rights of LGBT+ communities clung to their traditions and passed laws intended to further exclude and alienate said communities. According to Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow in their article “Gay characters in conventional spaces: Will and Grace and the situation comedy genre” for the journal Critical Studies in Media Communication published in 2002, at the time they were writing, “34 states ha[d] enacted laws denying recognition of same-sex marriages” and the Supreme Court had “rule[d] in a split 5-to-4 decision that the boy scouts did not have to accept gays or lesbians as employees or leaders” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 88). The passage of laws in 34 states denying same-sex spouses recognition was in direct response to the legalization of gay marriage in other parts of the country. A win for equal rights in one state ensured somewhere in the rest of the country, a stricter law would be passed. Both the examples given by Battles and Hilton-Morrow also demonstrate the ways in which ‘victory’ for the individuals fighting against equal rights for LGBT+ individuals didn’t just mean stopping them from attaining more rights. These ‘victories’ kept LGBT+ communities pushed to the fringes of society and excluded from mainstream culture. The Supreme Court ruling accomplished this specifically by excluding LGBT+ individuals from organizations and their unique cultures, whether or not they
participated as children, effectively preventing the mixing and acceptance of LGBT+ culture into the mainstream. In states where same-sex marriage was not legal, passing a law delegitimizing LGBT+ marriages only served to keep LGBT+ communities excluded wherever possible. It made the state a much less likely choice to live for married LGBT+ couples looking to move from parts of the country where their marriage was legal. It also discouraged permanent LGBT+ residents of the state from crossing over into a state to marry where it was legal and returning to live. Passing these laws said that not only were same-sex marriages unwelcome there, same-sex individuals we not welcome either—they did not want to have to interact with LGBT+ individuals within their communities. Just as the fights for and against LGBT+ rights and recognition were reaching their boiling points, a similar battle was being waged on and over television screens across the country.

What television programming looked like and what was allowed to be truly successful on television was largely determined by the average nuclear American family—and it had a large impact on the status of queer content within media in general. As Gary Needham explains in his essay “Scheduling Normativity” for the book Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics, despite the many technological, political, and cultural changes which have affected “television, mass medium, and commercial entity” since its invention, “the family audience is the ideological glue that holds it together” and “the family in front of and on television has been the anchor of this imagined continuity.” The safe harbor in the United States—a strict cut off at 10pm which divides “supposedly safe and unsafe viewing for the family” on television—puts the family “as the locus in determining what all viewers are allowed to see at any given time during broadcast.” As such “queer content…is still resolutely an evening affair that exists on the margins of the television schedule” (Davis et. al. 145-6). In an era before DVR and streaming sites made their
way into every home, if something aired after the safe harbor, for it to be seen by the family unit it had to be watched live. This is why the safe harbor was so effective—parents had to make the active decision to let their kids stay up late to watch a show if it aired after ten o’clock, and doing so came with the connotation of letting kids watch something they shouldn’t be, something ‘adult.’ The creation of the safe harbor carried with it a benefit for parents—they could be sure their children would be watching something family-friendly. Since everything had to be watched live, there was no room for parents to preview the episode or rely on fellow parents or public response to determine how safe it might be (all common practices today). Ending family TV time at the cut-off networks so helpfully supplied was an easy way to participate in primetime culture without worrying about what their children might be exposed to. Therefore, the safe harbor became an important and steadfast boundary for network television. The average American family was given all the power in determining what television looked like before and after this safe harbor. They were the demographic television shows pandered to and as such they were the demographic advertisers advertised to. As soon as a topic or type of content was labeled as having to appear after this safe harbor, it instantly became less marketable because once one of the largest—and perhaps most influential—economic forces in the American market was now denied easy access. Delegating queer content to the “not safe” side of the divide sent a clear

3 Despite a history of the use of the word queer as a slur against LBGT+ individuals this paper will use the word frequently. It is a word whose definition has evolved—especially within and regarding LBGT+ communities—to represent a complex yet complete culture made up of the communities represented by LBGT+ individuals. Because part of my argument rests on the distinction between media containing LBGT+ characters and media which exists at least partially outside of or challenges straight culture, it would be difficult to effectively make my argument without using this word. Although I will exclusively be using this definition in this paper, it is important to note the controversy surrounding this word which exists within the community itself. LBGT+ individuals have been reclaiming the slur for decades and in current times many consider it to be a useful and powerful word to unite the communities and serve in different contexts as a more inclusive label. However, queer is still used as a slur in many places within the United States and beyond where being vocal about being queer is dangerous and sometimes life-threatening. As such, a large portion of the community feels this word is still very much a slur. Because of the political context, this essay does not use the word to refer to any individuals unless they are hypothetical or fictional or as a descriptor for media or content.
message to networks: queer content was not profitable. Due to the state of the debate over queer existence, networks could already expect to face vocal backlash and consequences for airing queer content; a move which could be interpreted as choosing a side of the debate. As Amy Villarejo explains in her chapter “Ethereal Queer” for the book *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics*, after a cartoon named *Postcards from Buster*, a children’s television program created to showcase and explore diversity, produced an episode containing a family with two mothers, then education secretary Margaret Spellings wrote a letter stating “many parents would not want their young children exposed to the lifestyles portrayed in this episode” which resulted in PBS pulling its funding from the series (Davis et. al. 59-60). Even though the show was specifically designed to showcase diversity in educational and respectful ways, the entire series lost its funding and received criticism from a high-up government official for daring to portray a gay “lifestyle” (or existence)—which is diverse from much of mainstream culture—on a program meant for children. Networks could already expect negative reactions and a loss of viewership for choosing to air queer content at all. Knowing queer storylines would have to occur after the safe harbor was just an additional reason to not write such storylines the networks didn’t really need.

This is not to say there weren’t programs airing after the safe harbor that were successful. However, many of these programs regularly dealt with very dark themes—putting queer storylines in the same group as these topics and therefore putting them on par with these themes. In turn this perpetuated the belief that being queer was to live a life in line with these topics. Depictions as mundane as a queer family or couple living everyday life were grouped with topics such as drugs, murder, and rape when it came to suitability for public consumption. Mainstream culture was doing its best keep LGBT+ communities to the edges of society and ensuring queer storylines were not available to audiences during primetime was a key part of this. Restricting
queer content to after the safe harbor did not create the idea that queer love and life were unfit for mainstream families or America, but aligning all aspects of queer life as on par with the themes listed above gave queer culture and content a connotation of being dirty, disgusting, and dangerous: a threat to American core values.

However, LGBT+ characters were not completely absent from pre-safe harbor programming. On the contrary: LGBT+ characters (the vast majority of which were gay men and lesbians) were seen with increasing frequency in secondary and background roles. But, as Helene Shugart points out in her article “Reinventing Privilege: The New (Gay) Man in Contemporary Popular Media” for the journal *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, this increase in LGBT+ character in mainstream roles was complicated by “the constitution of the audience, which is by definition mainstream and presumed heterosexual, not least by virtue of the fact that its ‘acceptance’ of said representations is consistently featured as at stake” (Shugart 68). Not only was this acceptance of the representations of LGBT+ individuals “featured as at stake” in storylines, there was a real-life need for the “mainstream and presumed heterosexual” audience to accept the representations. As a result, for storylines with LGBT+ characters in “mainstream popular culture” to have a chance at success, they could not be not queer in nature. For a character or storyline to be queer, it must be connected to queer culture. Queer culture is an ever-evolving culture made up of and formed from the communities included in the LGBT+ umbrella. For the purposes of this essay, queer culture will be more specifically defined as a culture which is an equal counterpart to mainstream or heteronormative culture—it is defined by its rejection of all or part of what is expected within heteronormativity. This is including, but not limited to, assumptions of what a normal life looks like (i.e. the husband, wife, and kids of a ‘nuclear family’), ideas that cis and straight are the default or ‘correct’ ways of existing, and the
preconceived notions mainstream, heteronormative culture have about LGBT+ individuals and how they should or should not live their lives. For content to be queer, it must either exist within this culture or challenge and/or exist at least partially outside of heteronormative culture. Just because a TV show has a character who identifies as LGBT+ does not mean that character or their storyline is queer. This can occur when the character does not question, challenge, or in any way pose a viable threat to heteronormative culture and ideals. Shugart notes a “common theme” in popular media in which “gay characters are presented devoid of gay social and political contexts, thus capable of being wholly grafted onto established heterosexual communities and contexts” (Shugart 69). When LGBT+ characters are so frequently represented in this way, it allows them to fit perfectly into mainstream television. The character doesn’t have any ties to their own community or culture, they simply abide by the large, more dominant culture of heteronormativity. Because the character doesn’t challenge the mainstream culture and allows themselves to be placed within it, neither their existence nor their storyline could be considered as queer.

Even when a character is queer, their storyline still may not be. This happens frequently when an LGBT+ character does exist outside of or directly challenge heteronormative ideals and culture, but they are branded a joke because of their radicalism and challenges to heteronormativity. They are meant to be ridiculous, which allows any potential threat they might pose to heteronormative culture—or the way said culture views LGBT+ individuals—to be negated by the absurdity of the character themselves in the eyes of the audience. As a result, heteronormative ideals are reinforced and preconceptions of LGBT+ individuals are upheld as valid just as much as when a completely non-queer LGBT+ character directly upholds or participates in them. The queerness of the character is compromised in order to accomplish these
things and their storyline is no longer queer. These are the storylines which were visible at the
time in primetime television. LGBT+ characters could exist in mainstream television, as long as
they upheld heteronormative culture and its view of LGBT+ communities. As soon as their
characters or storylines seriously questioned or existed outside of this culture, they crossed the
line into queer content and were no longer welcome in mainstream television. Any viable
threat—no matter how small—to the more dominant and powerful heteronormative culture had
no place within primetime television, whose audience was mainly the exact demographic
heteronormative culture deemed as ‘normal.’ Therefore, accurate and nuanced representations of
LGBT+ or queer characters which did not conform they preconceived ideas of mainstream
culture were seen as threats and the only LGBT+ representation which was accessible to the
largest and most influential of television audiences existed only to uphold and reinforce the ways
this audience already perceived these individuals and communities.

Another way in which the storylines of characters who were queer were made not so was
through making them and/or their queerness antagonistic. According to Shugart, until the mid-
nineties, when gay characters did appear in mainstream television they “were almost exclusively
portrayed negatively, as either villains or victims” and “in both capacities, they were rendered as
problems to be solved and almost always reflected gendered stereotypes that characterize men as
effeminate and lesbians as masculine” (Shugart 68). When they were victims, they were victims
of their own queerness; this set them apart from heteronormative society and denied them that
which was considered the true path to happiness (heterosexual marriage and children). When
they were villains, they were “problems to be solved” for the main characters; a threat to straight
people’s happiness. Either way the result was the same: the queer characters critiquing or
existing outside of heteronormative culture and happiness was a threat which needed to be
“solved.” This negated any critique which might otherwise have invited the audience to question their accepted ideas of happiness and the ‘right’ way to exist. Queer characters and existence were labeled a problem society must solve while mainstream families laughed at their eccentricities from the comfort of their living rooms every night. LGBT+ characters may have been present in mainstream television, but they were second-class citizens. However, a look at primetime television in and after the mid-nineties demonstrates a gradual, and hesitant, divergence from these practices.

This divergence can be seen in the progression of the main LGBT+ storyline within the popular NBC sitcom *Friends*. For ten years, *Friends* inhabited the coveted 8:00pm Thursday slot; 8:00pm was the peak of primetime, and Thursday nights were by and large the night networks aired their best and most successful shows. *Friends* became such a paragon of mainstream television that even 14 years after its cancellation it still enjoys large-scale popularity and relevance. This sitcom followed six friends and their lives in New York City, and featured in small, but recurring roles a lesbian couple. It is made clear from the first few minutes of the pilot episode that Carol, the soon to be ex-wife of Ross, is gay. Her inclusion in the show is mostly limited to short appearances and, more often, causal mention of her in relation to her marriage to Ross. This makes sense because Ross is one of the central characters, while she was always intended to be periphery. In the beginning seasons, Carol (and her lesbianism) can be read as the villains of her storyline; she is the reason Ross is losing a marriage which is supposedly otherwise perfect. It is also the reason their unborn son is destined to grow up with divorced parents. In the second episode, “The One with the Sonogram at the End,” Rachel is stressing out about having to confront Barry—the man she left at the altar—and asks Ross for advice “as someone who’s recently been dumped.” Ross responds that “chances are he’ll be this
broken shell of a man” (13:10-13:40). He is supposedly referring to Barry, but because Rachel opened the topic with a comparison between him and Ross, the answer reflects how he himself is feeling. He just lost his wife and feels like a “broken shell of a man” so he assumes Barry would feel the same way. This honest and raw admission from Ross makes the loss of his marriage so much more real. For all the jokes the gang has made at his expense for having married a lesbian (and there are many), he is losing his wife, the woman he pledged to love forever, and the life he thought he had achieved. Just as Barry is the mirror of Ross, Rachel is the mirror of Carol. Although the audience does sympathize with Rachel’s decision to call off the wedding because she didn’t love Barry, she is still the one who caused the pain. Just as Carol is the one who is causing Ross’ pain. The audience doesn’t care about Barry’s pain because he is a minor character, but they care about Ross’. Here Carol and her lesbianism are the villains—because she is gay, Carol is denying Ross the life he thought he would have. As Rachel puts it, the life where you “just...meet someone, fall in love- and that'[s] it” (13:53-14:02). This is the life that heteronormative culture says one should strive for to achieve ultimate happiness, and Ross thought he was at the “that'[s] it” stage, but it was taken away from him.

The full weight of what has been taken from him only dawns on Ross during the sonogram. While they are waiting for the doctor to come in, Ross asks how the parenting situation “is gonna work” for important decisions such as “the baby’s name.” Carol and Susan reply with the two names they have decided on, but Ross counters with Julia, which Carol seems to consider. Susan interjects to say, “we agreed on Minnie” to which Ross responds “we agreed we'd spend the rest of our lives together. Things change, roll with the punches” (16:41-17:15). Ross is trying to figure out how the three of them will co-parent, only to discover Carol and Susan have already made one of the most important decisions without even asking for his input.
He is trying to “roll with the punches,” but it seems as if he is being forced out of his own life. This becomes clearer when they cut back to the scene and Ross is protesting the name Hellen because his last name is Geller. Carol informs him the child’s last name won’t be Geller, it’ll be Willick-Bunch, her and Susan’s last names. Ross suggests Geller-Willick-Bunch and Susan says, “he knows no-one's gonna say all those names, so they'll wind up calling her Geller, then he gets his way.” To this he emotionally replies, “of all the ways I ever imagined this moment in my life being, this is not my way” (19:52-21:15). This scene demonstrates how Ross’ imagined, ‘perfect’ future of a wife and kids has been stolen. And Susan is the easiest person to name as the ‘thief.’ Ross has “imagined this moment” of Carol and him going to their first sonogram, but never did that imagined future involve a Susan. It is clear—from their not including him in decision making processes and completely omitting his last name—that they would be fine if he left them alone to enjoy the future he imagined and believed he was close to achieving; they don’t need him. Carol can still have the future Ross envisioned, but with someone else. Despite doing everything he was supposed to in order to realize his imagined future, he is having this future ripped away from him. His place in this future was taken from him by a woman who came in and already has claim to everything she earned because she is a lesbian and so is Carol. Because Carol and Susan want nothing more than to have the ‘perfect’ family prescribed by heteronormative culture, they do not function in this scene as queer as they do not exist outside of said culture (even if the family itself is not heteronormative).

However, they do pose a threat to Ross and his ability to ever gain that life. He is losing out on his entire future because of Carol, Susan, and their sexualities. In this situation, their sexualities function as separate characters because of the amount of blame placed on their lesbianism for the whole situation and the illusion of agency this creates—as if Carol’s
homosexuality awoke within her when called upon by Susan’s and together they murdered a marriage. When Rachel also chose her own happiness over a promise she had made and ran away from her wedding she did initially face some backlash, but eventually everyone comes to realize it was the right choice. The audience even gets to see just how little damage Rachel actually did to Barry when she visits him in this episode. The scenes of her reunion with Barry are alternated with the tense situation at the OB/GYN with Carol, Susan, and Ross. One moment the audience sees a woman who chose her own happiness at the consequence of others being forced to confront that choice, but instead she is told she made the right decision and it worked out fine for everyone. In the next moment the audience sees two women who also chose their own happiness by choosing each other—one of whom broke a very similar promise—and the man whose life has been completely derailed because of it. Carol and Susan did not know about the pregnancy or that their choice would affect the life of child. They made a similar choice to Rachel’s and had similar motivations, but while she is admired—or at least not looked down upon—for making her choice and living her truth, Carol and Susan are demonized for doing the same. Rachel’s lack of love for Barry and her choice to admit it are portrayed as initially sad yet ultimately fruitful. This is juxtaposed with Carol’s homosexuality and her choice to admit it; an act portrayed as the destruction of the imagined future of an innocent man and resulting in the theft of the family he was so close to having. Not only are they seen as “problems to be solved” because of the issues their choice of happiness creates for those around them who did nothing wrong, but their sexualities themselves are also portrayed as “problems to be solved” both as a part of who they are and independent of them. This demonstrates how early treatment of the Carol and Susan storyline fell into tropes of villainizing LGBT+ characters and their sexualities as well as reducing them to nothing more than problems for the main characters to solve.
As Ben grows up, his and his mothers’ roles in Ross’s life become steadily more cemented and less tumultuous. This means Carol, Susan, and their lesbianism are treated less and less like “problems to be solved” for the main characters. They are not necessarily portrayed as positive forces in the main characters’ lives, however they are no longer negative ones either—they become benign. Once Ross has been married and divorced twice more, the failure of his first marriage becomes nothing more than a portion of a running gag about his inability to stop getting married (or to make one stick). In the season six episode “The One Where Ross Hugs Rachel,” Ross is terrified at the prospect of a third failed marriage after drunkenly marrying Rachel in Vegas and doesn’t want to get an annulment (even though he assured Rachel he had already took care of it). Phoebe enlists three patrons of the coffee shop to reassure him that being divorced three times wouldn’t affect his ability to get dates. He explains to them the circumstances of each marriage and why they failed; married a lesbian, “said the wrong name at the altar,” and got married while very drunk. They are “not [his] fault,” “a little [his] fault,” and “Nevada’s fault,” respectively (9:37-10:01). Although he absolves himself of the blame for his divorce from Carol—thereby placing the blame on Carol and her lesbianism—the inclusion of it in this list suggests otherwise to the audience. Saying the wrong name at the wedding makes his divorce from Emily more than “a little [his] fault.” He also refuses to accept any blame for going to a chapel and getting married because he was drunk. Even if “Nevada” or the chapel are responsible for letting him make such a big decision while drunk he, and only him, is to blame for still being married to Rachel. Altogether, this highlights a character flaw of Ross’s which is explored throughout the course of the series; he continually refuses to take responsibility for the negative things which happen to him, even when it is clear he is the common denominator. As Ross is casting the blame elsewhere, the audience is meant to understand that much of the blame
lies within him and his actions. This does not mean that Carol being a lesbian is something Ross caused or should be blamed for. However, its inclusion in a joke which calls on him to take responsibility does transform Carol being a lesbian and the end of their marriage from something which was done to him into something that happened. Carol and Susan’s sexualities were no longer actors which plotted the end of a marriage, but were simply fact—part of their identities neither of them chose but which existed and could not be ignored or “solved.” The portrayal of the end of their marriage as neither of their faults really rather than a problem borne of homosexuality doesn’t seem very radical, but when contrasted with how the mainstream sitcom portrayed their sexualities and existences at the beginning of their tenure on the show, it demonstrates the ways in which over time the show began to shift away from using common and negative tropes for portraying LGBT+ characters—such as painting them as the villains of the straight characters’ lives or as problems the straight characters must solve.

This small amount of progress did not, however, signal a readiness of mainstream television for accurate and nuanced representations of LGBT+ individuals and communities, especially in any non-secondary roles, as was demonstrated by the fallout after Ellen’s coming out episode.
Short-Lived: 
Exploring the fallout of ABC’s Ellen

“I’m gay,” Ellen Morgan says for the first time, leaning into the range of a live mic and broadcasting her personal revelation to an entire airport terminal which falls silent. “That felt so great. And it felt so loud,” she says to Susan, the woman whose presence made her realize she was gay. When Susan asks if she wants to go get some coffee, Ellen says yes as if it is no big deal, but when Susan turns away, she can’t help a huge grin—much to the delight of the studio audience, and they walk away surrounded by cheers (20:50:21:40).

Today, DeGeneres stands by her decision for her character to come out alongside her, saying in a piece she wrote for Time magazine’s “Firsts” series “it was everything that I wanted it to be, as far as the way the show turned out” (DeGeneres). Her character’s assessment of the coming out moment as “so loud” was right—the moment received unexpected success with 42 million viewers across the country (as compared with the average 16 million viewers the show was getting at the end of the third season) and a large outpouring of support in general (Rorke). Now infamously known as “The Puppy Episode,” the coming out one-hour-special “won an Emmy and a Peabody Award” (Bendix). The episode is still widely praised for its groundbreaking nature and is regarded as one of the greatest episodes of television of all time.

However, reactions to the rest of the series and those that came after the initial wave of support were not ones singing her praise. DeGeneres admits the fallout from “The Puppy Episode” was also “everything that [she] feared that it would be, which is that [she] would lose [her] show and [her] career” (DeGeneres). The show itself suffered greatly after the initial support for the coming out episode. Despite having been ranked as the thirteenth most-watched show just three years earlier, Ellen dropped to number 42 in its final season ("How Did Your Favorite Show Rate?"). One season after the “The Puppy Episode” saw the cancellation of the
sitcom after a sharp decline in viewership. DeGeneres also did lose her career for a period of time, once saying, “I wasn’t sure if I was going to work again….I was at rock bottom and out of money, with no work in sight” which lasted until 2003 when she landed the contract for her current talk show (Bendix). And she wasn’t the only one who faced the backlash. According to Trish Bendix in her article “Backlash: What Happened To Ellen DeGeneres AFTER She Came Out?” for LOGO news, Oprah, who played Ellen’s therapist in “The Puppy Episode,” received vicious, racist hate mail and Laura Dern “says she didn’t get work for a year after playing Susan” (Bendix). This was the television and larger culture of the time; a two-episode guest star stint on a popular sitcom could halt one’s career and affect their hireability for an entire year—if their character happened to be gay and part of one of the most celebrated moments in television history. The consequences for being the lesbian behind it all, daring to write her own stories exploring the reality of being a gay woman in America? The cancellation of her sitcom one season later and the loss of her career for half of a decade.

After “The Puppy Episode” ABC “placed viewer discretion warnings before each episode, cautioning watchers of ‘adult content,’ despite Ellen’s tameness compared to hetero sitcoms like Seinfeld and The Drew Carey Show” (Bendix). Giving a show, which is “tame” compared to its hetero counterparts, an adult content warning simply because it had a gay main character was similar in effect and motivation to delegating queer content to after the safe harbor. This action insinuated that just existing as a queer person was wrong; it didn’t matter how a queer person lived—no matter what their lives and their stories were unfit for the mainstream public. Images and stories featuring queer individuals were inherently so shocking that people had to be warned and given the chance to prepare themselves—either to watch the content or change the channel. In response to the content warning DeGeneres said “It just felt so degrading.
It’s my life. It’s how I live my life. I love someone, and because of who I choose to love, I get a warning label” (Bendix).

Robert Rorke describes in his article “Inside the episode of Ellen that changed television forever” for The New York Post, how “on April 14, 1997, DeGeneres made the cover of Time, with the famous line ‘Yep, I’m gay’ accompanying her picture,” 16 days before the airing of “The Puppy Episode.” The writers of the show also “teased viewers” by “telegraphing what was about to happen” such as when a male character got frustrated with how long she was taking in the bathroom and told her to “come out already” (Rorke). Because of this, many people could predict what was about to happen (this didn’t lessen its impact, however). Although most of the fallout from “The Puppy Episode” materialized in the days, weeks, and even years after it aired, as a result of the straight-forward publicity for the episode and the hints within the show itself leading up to the moment, it wasn’t exactly a secret what was going to happen on the episode. As such, there were immediate negative consequences for airing the coming out story of the title character of a popular and mainstream sitcom. As Lynne Joyrich writes in her chapter “Epistemology of the console” for the book Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics:

Several of the [program’s] regular sponsors pulled their ads from ‘The [Puppy] Episode,’ including Chrysler...General Motors, J.C. Penney, Johnson and Johnson, and Wendy’s. Despite this ad soundbite-flight, ABC still refused some commercials offered in their place: a thirty second anti-discrimination appeal from the Human Rights Campaign, and an ad for Olivia Cruise Lines, a business owned by and geared toward lesbians….ABC

---

4 This does mean Ellen DeGeneres and her character Ellen Morgan came out 16 days apart rather than simultaneously. However, the two events of DeGeneres coming out followed by having her title character on a primetime sitcom come out occurred so close together that it is the combination of these two impactful events which had one large impact on culture, and as such the two events are nearly always discussed as if they are the exact same event and this essay does the same. In addition, the appearance on the cover of Time also served to raise excitement about and advertise for “The Puppy Episode.”
stated that “discussion about same-sex lifestyles is more appropriate in the programming.” (Davis et. al. 36)

By declaring that the scheduled programming was the “more appropriate” place for “discussion about same-sex lifestyles,” ABC really meant LGBT+ characters and issues could only be explored on their channel within the medium over which they can exert the greatest control—

their own programming and shows. Within their own programs, ABC had much more control over what topics could and couldn’t be discussed and how deeply they could do so. The discussion had to remain safely encapsulated within the boundaries of the show the network had agency over. If they allowed it to escape those boundaries they could no longer determine the content or potential radicalism of the discussion. When LGBT+ existence was explored safely within a primetime sitcom such as Ellen, it is packaged for mainstream demographics. This means the network could keep a watch on the depth of the content being explored and make sure it was securely contained within heteronormative culture so it can continue to occupy its mainstream space. By not selling advertising space to pro-LGBT+ businesses ABC was also avoiding doing something which could be seen as coming down in support of one side of the very polarizing issue. Even though it would be a business transaction, same as any other company they sell advertising to, at the core of it they would be receiving money from companies with clear and strong stances on the issues. Also, because the Human Rights Campaign’s ad was a “thirty second anti-discrimination appeal” accepting this advertisement during such a big event could possibly be interpreted as allowing a politically motivated organization capitalize on their programming. The specific rejection of Oliva Cruise Lines’ request for advertisement demonstrates a lot about who they believe and want their audience to be—not LGBT+ communities. This was the night of a very publicized event which had the
potential to be groundbreaking for LGBT+ communities and open the doors for even more positive, nuanced, and accurate representations within mainstream media—with storylines written and driven by actual members of the LGBT+ community—just like DeGeneres with Ellen Morgan. This meant that a large portion of the viewers was likely made up of members of the LGBT+ community. Therefore, airing an ad “geared toward lesbians” during this episode would be a great way to attempt to hold on to a portion of the new demographic of viewers tuning in just for “The Puppy Episode.” However, despite the fact it would fill a slot left vacant by the regular sponsors in addition to giving them the chance to convert one-night viewers into members of their regular audience, ABC did not air the ad. This demonstrates that even though they were airing a show with a LGBT+ main character, they had no interest in interacting with or attracting actual members of the community. Even when the content was trying to do a better job of representing LGBT+ individuals, the network cared more about catering to and preserving the mainstream family—with all its influence—as the largest and most (or only) important and influential segment of their audience. Because most advertising was directed at the mainstream family, allowing advertisements directed at a community which tended to reject the mainstream family—and sometimes was perceived as a threat to it—to take the spot of the normal sponsors (even when they chose not to participate) could be seen by the mainstream family as giving to legitimacy to the LGBT+ community and allowing it challenge and raise threats against heteronormative culture in more dangerous ways. Regardless, ABC’s rejection of these ads and their statement made it clear that although they were making history by debuting the first gay sitcom main character on primetime television, they still intended to cater to mainstream audiences and ignore LGBT+ ones. The message was obvious all primetime, mainstream content
is made for mainstream, heteronormative culture—even when portraying LGBT+ characters and making groundbreaking strides in their representation.

The era of television during which *Will & Grace* premiered was preceded by slight progression in the ways in which LGBT+ characters were represented in mainstream television. However, these representations remained delegated to the status of secondary or minor character, as those were the only archetypes within which LGBT+ characters could find success within mainstream television. The cancellation of *Ellen* only reinforced this delegation, serving as definitive proof for some that mainstream television was not ready to see LGBT+ characters in anything more important or influential than the roles to which they were assigned.
Ladies First:
How Ellen’s mistakes informed NBC’s strategy

Will & Grace—along with their friends Jack and Karen—made their debut on September 21, 1998 to the world of mainstream television—a world they would remain a part of for eight seasons in the original run, despite the failed attempts of past shows with gay main characters to draw this same demographic. According to Battles and Hilton-Morrow, by the fourth episode “it ranked number one in its time slot in the highly lucrative 18-49 demographic,” in its second season was ranked in the top 20 of all series, and when it “went head-to-head with ABC’s Dharma & Greg, a sitcom about a quirky heterosexual couple, the two networks found themselves competing” for audience and advertisers (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 88). Not only did Will & Grace succeed in attracting a large and loyal audience, the audience was as mainstream as those for television shows in similar timeslots without gay main characters. Will & Grace was not just successful for a show with two gay main characters, it was successful for a sitcom in general, especially compared to the shows (which did not feature gay main characters) other networks pitted against it during Thursday night primetime.

This was certainly a different story from the reception of Ellen Morgan and her show as a gay character. And the success of a show with two gay men so soon after was something no one predicted. The cancellation of Ellen was generally accepted as a sign that mainstream television was still not ready to see a gay character in such a major role—let alone multiple—and find success. But Will & Grace arrived two months later, proving them all wrong.

So how did a show with two gay main characters succeed where Ellen and other shows had failed? Will & Grace and NBC examined the reasons for Ellen’s failure and learned from the mistakes made by ABC to avoid falling into the same pitfalls. Indeed, the existence of a precedent for a leading gay character was an advantage Will & Grace had over Ellen, and even if
said precedent didn’t look positive, it allowed them to anticipate and take steps to prevent challenges to their likelihood of success—it was a crash course on what not to do.

One of the mistakes NBC made sure to avoid from the way ABC handled *Ellen* was the lack of support the network provided for the show after “The Puppy Episode.” According to Joyrich, “DeGeneres claimed that it was ABC that failed to sell the show” after the “The Puppy Episode” and “they misplaced it in the network lineup and refused to advertise it with the same vig[or] as their other program[s]” (Davis et. al. 37). She largely credits this as the reason the show failed so quickly. As discussed earlier, ABC hadn’t wanted DeGeneres to come out on the show and they warned her of the potential consequences of it. The fact that they stopped promoting the show and “misplaced it” so soon after the episode shows they were already anticipating it to turn into a failure episode, putting no effort into stopping it from becoming one. Since the network didn’t believe an LGBT+ main character could be profitable for them in an audience comprised mostly of mainstream families, they neglected to invest anything into making sure the show reached said audience. On the other hand, NBC put a lot of effort into promoting *Will & Grace* and the two gay, main characters from the beginning. As Shugart wrote in 2002, *Will & Grace* premiered (and at that time continued to air) during: “the prime-time, 9:00p.m.(ET) slot on Thursday night, which [had] been NBC’s strongest night for several years; this suggests that the network anticipated a positive reception by its targeted mainstream audience.” She goes on to explain that the network was correct as the show “consistently [drew] the highest ratings in its time slot since its inception” (Shugart 71). This demonstrates one of the ways in which NBC learned from the mistakes made by ABC and turned them into success. Whereas ABC prepared themselves for *Ellen* to become less marketable after it became centered around a lesbian and stopped investing in it, NBC invested everything into *Will & Grace* a show
could have to best propel it toward success: including their best time slot. While simply believing a show is going to be successful is not a self-fulfilling prophecy, giving it the best platform and resources to do so definitely makes it a lot more likely than when a network refuses to promote or invest in it—something NBC picked up on as *Ellen* failed.

According to many of *Ellen’s* critics, the main reason the show failed was because by the end of its run it was too gay. Even “Elton John and Chaz Bono criticized *Ellen* for being ‘too gay’” (Bendix). The labelling of the content as “too gay” by so many critics (and even two prominent members of the LGBT+ community) can be interpreted at its core as a critique of the content crossing over into queer content too often. As DeGeneres said, the show stuck to topics and storylines found in most sitcoms. However, even these storylines became a window into a queer existence and therefore queer content. This was a natural consequence of the main character of a popular television show coming to such an important and life-altering realization four seasons in. In coming out, Ellen Morgan entered a whole new existence and world-view. To think that such a big change in her life path wouldn’t color every episode after that point and completely alter the direction of the show was unrealistic. All the changes the character would go through and the world she was entering could not be contained in the one hour special dedicated to the event. As Joyrich writes, the challenge “for viewers may have then been found in learning how to accept a change in a well-known character” (Davis et. al. 34). Because the show was called *Ellen* and she was the character it revolved around, a fundamental change in her and her life path meant a fundamental change in what the show was—it became queer. Not necessarily because it tried to challenge heteronormative culture, but because the show had been redefined into something which revolved around a gay woman and her experiences entering queer culture—such content matter would almost always result in queer content. However, in this
instance that status was solidified by the abrupt jump into this content in the middle of an already otherwise developed show. Other than a few gay supporting characters, up until “The Puppy Episode” the show never had a reason to exist very far outside of heteronormative culture—so it didn’t. When the show was yanked so abruptly out of the culture it had settled into, it didn’t matter how far outside the culture it did exists. Viewers and the characters were given no chance to acclimate and as a result, they perceived the show as existing entirely within a separate culture—queer culture. For many, the transition from mainstream show to queer show was too large a leap to make permanently while others as though they had been tricked into watching and being complacent in the existence of a secretly gay woman.

When creating Will & Grace, NBC learned from the mistake made in so completely altering the content and characters of a show so far into the course of their journey. The two gay, main characters—Will and Jack—are introduced as gay from the very first episode and even in the promotional material before the pilot aired. Because Will, the title character, was always gay and NBC was always clear about that aspect of him, Joyrich writes, “the network didn’t have to imagine how to have him (and us) come to this knowledge” (Davis et. al. 39). This meant, unlike with Ellen, the audience knew they were watching a television show with a gay main character when they started. There would be no shocking reveal to leave audiences feeling betrayed and Will & Grace would not become a show completely different from the one they started watching. Also unlike Ellen, the show was not forced to explore and discover what it means to be gay. Will has been living with the knowledge for over a decade, and is comfortable with who he is in relation to his sexuality and the rest of the gay community. He no longer needs to explore what being gay means for him or his life path, therefore the show was free to explore other storylines both within and outside of the queer community. Because the network decided if, when, and how
the show would explore LGBT+ issues, it could do so without jumping the boundary into queer content unless that it was intentional.

Because Ellen Morgan’s story was the first time the realities of same-sex dating had been portrayed on such a far-reaching platform in the form of a main character, the storyline was treated more seriously than in most sitcoms. As Joyrich writes “eschewing the comedy typically found in sitcom pairings, Ellen’s search for a mate was presented in more serious terms, pushing at the limits of the show’s genre in order to show how gender need not be a limit to TV’s vision of romance” (Davis et. al. 38). This is one of the ways in which the content of Ellen became queer after the coming out episode. The show was queer not only in questioning mainstream or heteronormative culture “TV’s vision of romance,” but also in rejecting the way in which political or controversial issues are normally explored within sitcoms. Needham explains the typical boundaries sitcoms tend to abide by when dealing with complex or controversial issues:

comedy itself is often the primary generic form of television fiction that has the onus for airing conflicting political positions only for them to be contained by laughter; there is a dialectic in operation here. The All in the Family spin-off Maude is perhaps the most explicitly political of [Norman] Lear’s sitcoms....The characters of Maude and her daughter vocalized important feminist topics on a weekly basis in well over 100 episodes, most controversially in the two-part abortion episode “Maude’s Dilemma” (14 and 21 November 1972), yet the brevity of such discussions were routinely limited and impeded by Maude’s one-liners, as audiences were cued to respond to weighty political issues like abortion through the interpolating effect of the laughter track. (Davis et. al. 148)

Sitcoms have a long history of tackling issues in this way; by framing them within the already quick, upbeat, and witty flow in order to soften the edges of controversial topics. They did so in
the same way the characters deal with everything—they turn the issues into one-liners and laugh them off. Even the sitcom *Maude* which is “explicitly political” and “vocalize[s] important feminist topics…in well over 100 episodes” uses these techniques to remove the sting from polarizing, complex, and/or controversial topic. This is because the boundaries are still necessary even when a specific sitcom is political in the way it is set up: the use of these boundaries prevents the tone or topic from becoming too dark or convoluted to be able to exist within the “situation comedy” genre. Sitcom audiences are not trained to engage with difficult topics too deeply within the media, at least not within 22-minute segments. As a result, failing to use these boundaries can leave the audience feeling annoyed and preached to. The lack of seriousness or depth within political conversations created by proper use of the boundaries is compounded by the timeclock for each episode. The plots of most sitcoms are designed to be resolved by the end of the 22 minutes, a tactic which has been effectively carried over to controversial and/or political issues. Occasionally a political topic is covered in enough depth to warrant an hour-long special episode; however, even in these instances the conversation is usually tied up in a neat little bow before tries to intrude on future episodes. This is very effective in allowing sitcoms to cover these topics without having to meaningfully contribute to the conversation and/or risk being perceived as coming down in support of one side over the other; ostracizing part of their audience as a result. However, in “pushing at the limits” of the sitcom genre and instead choosing to showcase the search for love in more serious tones over the course of multiple episodes, *Ellen* chose to critique and challenge the ways in which heteronormative culture perceives the search for same-sex love. The show not only challenged heteronormative culture by taking this stand on gender and love, but also through bypassing the ways in which sitcoms are meant to deal with difficult topics—by extension ignoring the protocol of
mainstream television. As a result, Ellen further ostracized itself from the demographic it once appealed to. When the show began to criticize the culture it originally existed within, upheld, and owed its initial success to, the audience felt threatened and preached to. In using an integral component of mainstream culture (the sitcom genre) to overtly critique said culture, Ellen sabotaged its own status within that culture.

NBC also learned from and avoided ABC’s and Ellen’s mistakes in pushing the limits and not taking advantage of the sitcom genre and its tools. Based on the failure of Ellen—and the successes of shows such as Maude—in discussing controversial issues without suffering as a result, NBC knew that following precedent and playing into the strengths of the genre would mean a better chance of success. With two gay main characters, Will & Grace was already in danger of being perceived as threatening or rejecting heteronormative culture just for existing. To successfully counteract this preconception, the show needed to avoid rejecting or questioning heteronormative culture in any serious way. With two main characters whose existences didn’t conform to the expectations of heteronormative culture, it would have been difficult to do this without the boundaries built into the sitcom genre. Because of these boundaries, characters could discuss difficult issues and express controversial opinions as long as their statements were sandwiched in laughter to tell audience not to take the characters too seriously. And within 22 minutes or less the discussion would reach enough of a conclusion (without ever taking a strong stance) they could move on, content to never talk about it again. By utilizing these conventions of the genre, not only did Will & Grace avoid questioning or challenging mainstream culture, the show also actively upheld the traditional protocol of the sitcom genre—an integral part of mainstream culture—furthering its effectiveness at not being perceived as a threat. This is just
one of the many ways *Will & Grace* used popular and established sitcom elements to find success with mainstream audiences.

Another lesson which NBC learned from the ABC’s *Ellen* was the importance of keeping homosocial and homosexual content separate. Joyrich discusses an interview with Diane Sawyers in which DeGeneres points out the hypocrisy of ABC’s treatment of same-sex kisses because they had publicized episodes of other sitcoms with same-sex kisses—specifically, those in which the protagonists got their kisses as ploys in sexual masquerades (as occurred, for instance, on *The Drew Carey Show* and *Spin City*, both of which aired stories in which their leads pretended to be gay). Only *Ellen*, with an ‘actual gay’ protagonist, not only received no promotion for its ‘kiss episodes’ (even one in which the kiss is ‘fake’ even if Ellen’s sexuality is ‘real’), but garnered a parental advisory warning as well. (Davis et. al. 37)

This is a symptom of the allowance for a dynamic in mainstream culture to be either homosexual or homosocial, not both. Homosocial describes interactions and relationships between two individuals of the same sex. If an interaction is homosocial and homosexual, it is an interaction between two people of the same gender who are also attracted to that gender. However, content which was simultaneously homosocial and homosocial was not common on mainstream television because it was less marketable. For example, in the cases of the same sex kisses on *The Drew Carey Show* and *Spin City*, even though the kisses came as the results of affecting stereotypically gay mannerisms and behavior, ABC promoted these episodes because they were homosocial, but not homosexual. Two people of the same sex kissing or interacting affectionately is hilarious and perfectly acceptable unless they enjoy it—then it becomes something perverse and requires a parental advisory warning. When a kiss is homosexual in
addition to being homosocial, such as with the episodes of *Ellen* that were not promoted, it is no longer marketable. The point at which same-sex kisses stop being for the entertainment of heteronormative culture and start representing same-sex desire is the same point at which they are no longer welcome in mainstream media. This is one of the lessons NBC took away from ABC without turning it on its head, deciding in this case to follow ABC’s precedent to some extent. This is because the normative practice had a long history of success within mainstream television, but there was not a history of successful interactions that were both homosocial and homosexual.

Despite being one of the first primetime shows to highlight gay individuals, let alone have two as main characters, *Will & Grace* is a very heterosocial show. The four main characters are almost always split into opposite sex pairings. As Battles and Hilton-Morrow discuss in their essay all four of the main characters do spend time together in each possible pairing through the course of the show; however, they are clearly split in heterosocial pairings defined by preference and frequency: Will and Grace; Karen and Jack. They point out the show “continually privileges heterosociality, while homosociality...constantly fails or is safeguarded within the parameters of ‘male bonding’ rather than same-sex desire” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 92). On an aesthetic level, the show appears heterosocial to an extreme, with homosociality all but hidden completely from audiences. This is illustrated well in the photo chosen for the front cover of the season one DVD case (left). On it Will and Grace are central, with Will’s arm appearing to be wrapped around Grace as he leans into her slightly. Jack is

(“Will & Grace Season One Collection.”)
seated next to Will, however his body is turned away from him, showing no physical connection between the two of them. This image is representative of many photos used in promoting the show. For example, in a promotional photo for season two (below), the only true physical intimacy is heterosocial. Will’s hand is in contact with Jack’s neck, however that is merely a consequence of them both embracing Grace. It certainly seems an odd choice for a groundbreaking show with two gay main characters to avoid even the appearance of homosociality in any promotional materials. However, to be visibly and unapologetically both homosexual and homosocial at the same time would have been a challenge to heteronormative culture: a challenge they could not afford to make without jeopardizing their ability to find success in mainstream culture.

The excessive heterosociality of the show also allowed for the introduction of another important element of sitcoms. By making the show heterosocial, space is left open for a romcom-type dynamic between Will and Grace. According to Battle and Hilton-Morrow, “the search for romance” is “a staple of the situation comedy” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 92). The dynamic had to be between a man and a woman to find success in primetime—such a dynamic between two men would never have been viable long-term. By having Will & Grace participate in the common subgenre of romantic sitcom and framing the romantic component exclusively between a male-female pairing, the show will feel safe and familiar to most sitcom viewers—they don’t
feel threatened by Will’s homosexuality as long as he is joined to a woman in the intimate and loving way he is to Grace. Therefore, Will and Jack, despite being quite close friends in the show, are never interacting in promotional photos. There cannot be even the appearance of connection or intimacy in their relationship because all the intimacy and connection must exist between the two title characters.

Even in the earliest stages of development, the show was intended to fit within this subgenre. “Our directive was to write a romantic comedy,” said Will & Grace co-creator David Kohan, told the Washington Post. “A traditional rom-com needs an obstacle to keep the man and woman apart. The more insurmountable the obstacle, the longer the show can go” (Borden). In the case of Will & Grace, the obstacle is Will’s homosexuality—certainly no small obstacle to overcome. As Battles and Hilton-Morrow write “Will & Grace offers the ‘ultimate twist’ on the delayed consummation trope, separating potential lovers by sexual orientation” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 92). The delayed consummation trope is a common tactic used in romantic sitcoms in which there is clear sexual tension between two characters and the audience is always waiting to see when they will finally give in. It is the reason people keep tuning in: to get eventually find the answer to the traditional ‘will they won’t they’ question as well as the newer “how will they?” question (response to more and more consummation moments being shared on screens). However, this time it comes with a clear answer: they won’t. Will’s sexuality is one of the most insurmountable obstacles imaginable, making it clear from the outset that a romantic relationship between the two title characters is not going to happen. However, this is exactly the reason why the trope was made such an integral part of the show. As Battles and Hilton-Morrow explain, “many working in the television industry argue that consummation often equals the death of the series as the dominant narrative tension that keeps viewers tuning in week after
week disappears” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow92). Therefore, the dynamic of Will and Grace’s relationship and what stands between them really is the “ultimate twist.” The tension which exists between them will exist for as long as they do not consummate the relationship. Because they never will, the show can continue until the writers stop thinking of situations to put them in.

Framing the first sitcom to feature two gay, male main characters around heterosocial pairing allowed *Will & Grace* to avoid being seen as a threat to the heteronormative, mainstream culture the show needed to be successful in. This left room for the introduction of the delayed consummation trope, which in turn branded the show as more than just a standard sitcom—it became a romantic comedy sitcom. By including this common trope, which mainstream audiences were so well versed in through experience with any number of other successful romantic sitcoms, *Will & Grace* felt a little more normal and a little less threatening. Although the main history of the delayed consummation trope is heterosexual, its use in *Will & Grace* is entirely heterosocial. But because the relationship and bond between Will and Grace is so strong that the audience views Will’s homosexuality as a benign fact rather than a threat to heteronormative culture—after all, how can he be a threat to heteronormative culture when his most intimate, important relationship is entirely heterosocial?
The More the Merrier:  How *Will & Grace* used sitcom elements to succeed

Aligning the show within the subgenre of romantic sitcom in a heterosocial way and taking full advantage of the boundaries built in were not the only ways in which *Will & Grace* utilized the sitcom genre to appeal to mainstream audiences; the show incorporated many more well-established and common elements and tropes of the sitcom genre to appeal to their mainstream audience while also occasionally including some of the ways in which LGBT+ characters have successfully appeared in mainstream television in the past.

As each of these additional tropes and elements were incorporated into the show, *Will & Grace* became more and more securely situated within the tradition of the sitcom genre—and by extension within the tradition of mainstream culture itself. Even on its own, the introduction of just one common and established trope that was easily recognizable by a mainstream audience and evoked in them a feeling of familiarity with and connection to that specific element of the show. Therefore, the incorporation of multiple familiar sitcom elements into *Will & Grace* increased the likelihood that most of the mainstream audience members would find this sense of familiarity in at least one aspect of the show. Because these tropes were so common within the sitcom genre—a genre produced for and by mainstream audiences and culture—some mainstream audience members could easily recognize and resonate with multiple aspects of the show. The featuring of two gay, male main characters was so foreign to mainstream television that the ability to evoke a sense of recognition and familiarity within mainstream audiences was crucial for *Will & Grace* to be perceived as existing within, let alone upholding, mainstream culture. Without evoking this familiar feeling within mainstream audiences, it is unlikely they would have attracted them at all.
The demographic which has been most frequently represented in sitcoms is the exact same demographic which the sitcom genre is marketed to: the family. Many sitcoms feature typical families with each character fulfilling a role commonly associated with heteronormative expectations of what a family should be. More modern (at the time of *Will & Grace’s* premiere) sitcom tradition was characterized by fewer representations of these ideal families and an increase in the representations of alternative families. As Battles and Hilton-Morrow put it, “sitcoms rely on a set of domestic and familial-like relationships to structure the narrative slots available to characters in the program” and therefore “even when programs do not take place within a family or home, the setting still functions as a surrogate home and the characters relate to each other as part of a family” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 96-97). The friend group became a valid and common replacement for the ideal family in sitcoms—as long as the members of the friend group were still placed within the “narrative slots” the characters of traditional family sitcoms had invented. This allowed sitcoms which participated in this trope to be a part of a new ideology about what constitutes a family while still upholding traditional representations of the archetypes present in the ideal sitcom family. Therefore, sitcoms could use the “narrative slots” of traditional family sitcoms to recreate familiar approximations of this traditional family in just about any circumstances, or with any people, they wanted to, where traditional family sitcoms were fairly limited in setting. The preservation of the traditional familial roles allowed these alternative families to feel familiar to mainstream audiences no matter how foreign their setting or situation—providing a solid foundation for success in mainstream television. Alternative families could be seen as resisting or existing outside of mainstream culture; however, because it still included the well-developed “narrative slots”—a core-component of the most mainstream of sitcom subgenres—the familial dynamic was nearly unchanged and therefore was seen as
upholding traditional mainstream elements while meeting demand for innovative and original content. The then recent development of the alternative family sitcom was an opportunity for *Will & Grace* to find mainstream success while upholding and participating in a contemporary take on the most traditional of sitcom subgenres—the family sitcom—and still being allowed to explore situations and realities which would have had no place in the original family sitcom.

One of the integral “narrative slots” in family sitcoms is populated by the central marriage—usually that between the parental figures of the family. The parents also inhabit their own “narrative slots,” but the heterosexual marriages within family sitcoms tend to be a focal point for the show, and came with tried-and-true storylines highlighting the positivity of their heteronormativity. The heterosexual marriages as a grounding element of family sitcoms is evidenced by the sheer number of mainstream sitcoms in which the married couple is front and center. Examples include: *Roseanne, Married with Children, I Love Lucy, Everybody Loves Raymond* and many others. In these sitcoms, the heterosexual marriage is given such emphasis and screen time because it is the ending which heteronormative culture posits as the life to strive for. In the family dynamic of *Will & Grace*, it is Will and Grace themselves who fill this narrative slot. As mentioned earlier, even though Will is gay, the most meaningful, intimate, and important relationship in his life is the one he has with Grace. This relationship is framed as a heterosexual marriage throughout the entire series and is the center of many storylines within episodes, just like the ‘real’ marriages depicted in many family sitcoms.

The status of Will and Grace’s relationship as a heterosexual marriage is introduced and established in the pilot episode. In the episode Will and Grace host a game night with their friends Rob and Ellen who are in an actual heterosexual marriage. The partnerships are pitted against each other in a round of $25,000 pyramid and Will and Grace offer to go first. It becomes
apparent immediately that they are very good at this game. They get clue after clue, and just when they appear to be stuck, Will grabs Grace’s hand, looks straight in her eyes and says “each other” while gesturing between the two of them, to which Grace yells out “things that you lean on,” jumping into his arms and wrapping her legs around him (10:30-10:46). Here the audience is given a glimpse of how well and how deeply they know each other. Will and Grace will never truly have a legal heterosexual marriage because of Will’s sexuality. The only aspect of marriage that his sexuality prevents them from participating in is sex. However, this scene is reveals the immense intimacy they have with one another. The ease and speed with which they are able to come up with just the right clues or answers for the other person shows that they know and understand each other so well it is second nature for each of them to put themselves in the shoes of the other. In addition, allusions to events in each of their lives within the clues demonstrates that they spend huge amounts of time together and in each other’s lives. They are each the person the other “leans on” which is clearly demonstrated to be something special to them in the way Will steps closer and looks directly in her eyes. He feels connected with her and know she does too. When he grabs her hand, it is a physical reminder of this connection. All of these demonstrate immense emotional intimacy, but also show they are not bothered by physical intimacy. When they are done with the round, Grace doesn’t hesitate before running into his arms and wrapping her legs around him. To them, this is a normal reaction, neither one of them reacts as though it is too physically intimate. This is a pretty extreme level of physical comfort shared by two friends, insinuating their bond is deeper than a normal friendship. After the round, Ellen says to Grace “you and Danny never do this well when we play” (10:48-10:53). Danny is Grace’s boyfriend of multiple years and this comment insinuates that Will and Grace’s relationship is more valid and intimate (in the ways that matter to them) than the relationship
between her and the man she shares a bed with. Will and Grace’s intimacy extends to important decisions about their lives—they trust each other implicitly and above anyone else. After Grace tells Will that Danny has proposed to her, Jack tells Will at dinner he should just tell Grace he doesn’t like Danny. Will explains that he doesn’t talk to his brother anymore, not since he told his brother what he really thought about his fiancé. He says he “couldn’t handle losing Grace like that” (11:16-11:30). She is an integral presence in his life, losing her is even worse than losing his brother in some ways. However, they are so honest and open with each other that can’t help but tell her the truth. At first, he gives his blessing, but when Grace is about to leave Will finally gives in and says “don’t.” He follows it up with a speech about how amazing she is any deserves someone better while Grace just stares before saying “go to Hell, Will” (13:46-15:32). Even though Will declared that he couldn’t handle losing Grace, he sees the possibility of Grace ending up with a man who is less than she deserves and it being his fault is somehow worse. In addition, Will giving his blessing would not have been honest, a trait which is strong and valued in their dynamic. They are so intimate because they don’t hide things from each other. Ultimately, Will could not let himself betray this intimacy, especially because he truly does believe Grace deserves better than Danny. This interaction is further proof of their intimacy with one another and how the integrity of their relationship isn’t sacrificed just to avoid upsetting them. These aspects are part of the foundation for their relationship as a heterosexual marriage. The strength of this foundation is demonstrated again when they eventually make up. Grace ends up attempting to get the wedding over with, but has to call it off when she realizes “it wasn’t right….Why wasn’t it right?” Will consoles her by insisting Danny was just a “plot point” on the way to the love her story will eventually lead her to (19:47-21:02). This further reinforces the strength and depth of their intimacy. Grace was going to marry someone that Will just knew
wasn’t right for her and once he revealed that, she realized she knew it too. They are so connected that they know each other better than themselves sometimes, and they know when the other person needs to hear something they don’t want to. These are clichés, but they are clichés of people who are traditionally meant for each other in media. The final scene of the episode provides strong confirmation of the status of their relationship as a heterosexual marriage. It opens on Will and Grace, still in her wedding dress, in a busy bar, when one of the patrons yells “What about a toast to your lovely new bride?” which receives cheers from the rest of the crowd. Rather than correct him, Will goes with it, keeping his toast short, sweet—and straight, just like the other patrons assume him to be: “Here’s to the ball and chain. If she makes it through the night, b-a-b-i-n-g! I think I’ll keep her.” Grace then takes her turn with a much more honest and touching toast: “To my Will. You are my hero and my soulmate and I’m a better woman for loving you,” she says, staring him right in the eyes to convey the truth of her words. The patrons then yell for them to kiss and they do, after which Grace searches his face for a sign that he was affected at all, but to no avail (20:14-22:49). On a visual level, this scene is obvious in its portrayal of Will and Grace’s relationship as a heterosexual marriage; Grace is in a wedding dress, Will a suit, Grace declares her love for him in a speech which could easily be vows, and the final image this episode leave the audience is Will and Grace kissing, looking like they just came from their own wedding. The dialogue all supports this, even the bar patrons are completely fooled. For the rest of the series, their relationship fulfills this “narrative slot” of a heterosexual marriage within their version of the family sitcom. This reassured the mainstream audience of the show that even though the show would feature on two main gay characters, there would still be the familiar elements of the family sitcom and the Will’s character fulfills and upholds half the most heteronormative of them all: the heterosexual marriage. Ultimately, the
show made sure the audience saw Will as someone who exists within the mainstream culture rather than outside of or in opposition to it. They didn’t need to feel threatened by his sexuality because he exists within mainstream culture, therefore threatening said culture would affect him negatively as well. However, this scene does play into the trope discussed earlier in which gay characters and their sexualities tend to be portrayed as problems in need of solving. Here, Grace tells Will he is her soulmate, but when she kisses him only she is affected. Their ease and intimacy, which has been demonstrated throughout the episode, lets the audience imagine how perfect a real romantic relationship between the two would be, but Will’s sexuality means it can never come true. It may not be something that can be solved, but it is certainly portrayed as a problem, especially for Grace. She has found the love of her life and her soulmate, and although her love is not unrequited—he does genuinely love her—but no matter how long she waits, she can never be with him in a heterosexual and heteroromantic way solely because of his sexual preference.

Another “narrative slot” of family sitcoms represented in this alternative family formed by the characters of Will & Grace, was that of the parents. Will and Grace are constantly acting as parents to Jack and Karen—who fulfill the final narrative slots: the children. This family, which resembled no other family in mainstream television at the time, still felt safe and familiar to mainstream audiences, as it was embedded with elements seen in representations of traditional families across television. Both Will and Grace are seen at different points throughout the show cleaning up the messes and solving the problems left behind by Karen and Jack. Both Will and Grace fulfill the role of parent due their responsibility and its juxtaposition with the much more impulsive and, of course, childishness natures of Karen and Jack. Family sitcoms, both traditional and alternative, tend to portray a ‘fun parent’ and a ‘strict parent.’ In their
dynamic, Will falls into the category of the ‘strict parent’ because of his higher levels of personal responsibility. This is also seen in moments when Grace occasionally behaves childishly and creates a mess for Will to deal with as he fulfills his role as her husband. However, it also adds credibility towards his position in the show as a heteronormative man who just happens to be gay. This is a common technique used in representations of gay male characters in order to highlight the category of gay men who fit perfectly within mainstream culture and were completely ‘ordinary’ men aside from their sexuality. As Andy Medhurst explains in his chapter “One queen and his screen” for the book *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, and Politics*, the trope of the ordinary man who happened to be gay “restrict[ed] homosexuality to a discourse of the bedroom….nothing more than an occasionally deployed configuration of genitalia” (Davis et. al. 83). Will’s existence on the show very much played into this idea of the ‘happens to be gay’ character. He lived a normal life; worked a standard job, came home to a standard apartment, and didn’t need much to be happy. This allows him to completely blend into and exist within mainstream culture, never risking becoming a threat to it. Being assigned the ‘strict parent’ stereotype helped to reinforce this while also defining him within yet another role familiar and safe to mainstream television and the sitcom genre. It also reinforced his ‘happens to be gay’ status by tying him to a more masculine and fierce side of the parenting spectrum. His ‘parenting’ techniques are never harsh or violent but, because he is given the ‘strict’ label, his masculine energy is slightly enhanced. If he had been assigned the ‘fun’ label, it would have played up the stereotypical and feminine aspects of gay representations in mainstream media. His everyday life is not defined by his sexuality. This is unlike the character of Jack, whose every mannerism was derived from some sort of stereotype about the gay existence. In a way, they embody to two extremes of gay representation. However, for both men their existence is used to
uphold and reinforce mainstream culture even though their respective relationships to said culture are very different. Will’s existence can fit neatly within the culture and is framed as existing primarily within it many ways—he labelling as a normal man who ‘happens to be gay’ to being defined as half of a heterosexual marriage. Therefore, it is clear why his existence could be used to justify mainstream culture. However, in the case of Jack—a man who has never fit in mainstream culture and tried to keep it out of his life—the ways in which he upholds mainstream culture are a little bit more complex.

Karen and Jack are placed in the “narrative slot” of Will and Grace’s children. According to Battles and Hilton-Morrow “as ‘children’ or ‘buffoons,’ Jack and Karen can say and do as they please because their positioning within the narrative structure indicates that they are not to be taken seriously” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 99). This is why even though Jack and Karen are the queerest characters on the show, they are used to reinforce and uphold the mainstream culture they want nothing to do with.

Jack’s queerness stems from his more stereotypical character traits such as his rejection of monogamy, his frequent comments making fun of straight culture, and his unique way of taking the negative or offensive ways in which mainstream culture regularly talks about queer culture/individuals and flipping it around into a criticism of mainstream culture. He is defined within the child role as a result of his reliance on the other characters for money and to fix his problems, his inability to keep a job, and his impulsivity, to name a few. He is also an extreme representation of a gay man pushed to the point of ridiculousness, which furthers to the idea that he is only around for comic relief.

Karen’s queerness, on the other hand, stems from the fact that she rejects what mainstream culture determines as important to achieving happiness, even when it comes to
permanent parts of her life. For example, she has stepchildren, but she never takes any interest in being a mother to them, even while mainstream culture promotes the idea that women are happier as mothers. Her childishness stems from her immoral actions and failure to take responsibility for mistakes. The laughability factor is compounded by her traits which position her as a buffoon (a narrative slot whose relation to the family is not defined, any character used in the same manner as the child without having to actually be the child). Her buffoonish traits include a complete lack of motivation in her job and her excessive drinking and drug use. Because her drinking and drug use do not negatively impact her life—they are simply played off as quirky character traits—the possibility for her character to open a meaningful discussion on addiction is side-stepped in favor of keeping her character framed within the narrative spot of the child.

As such, they both reject and exist outside of mainstream culture and its prescribed ideas of happiness; however, because of their delegation to the child role, any potential challenge or criticism either of them raise against the mainstream culture—no matter how valid—is negated by their status as comic relief. The value of children characters within the sitcom genre lies in their ability to produce humor from nearly any situation—a good strength to have in at least one character for a situational comedy. However, it also makes them the characters who could most easily be portrayed as queer without compromising the efforts taken to frame the show as non-threatening to mainstream culture. Their portrayal upheld mainstream culture by lending comparative validity to the tamer and traditionally happier lives of characters like Will and Grace, both of whom had already been successfully framed as existing within and upholding mainstream culture.
The main reason *Will & Grace* experienced so much success at a time marked by the recent failure of the only other primetime show to feature a gay main character was by framing the show in such a way which made it clear it would not pose a threat to mainstream culture. It accomplished this by incorporating many familiar and common tropes and elements of sitcoms into the show as permanently as possible.
Conclusion:
How *Will & Grace* changed everything just by succeeding

*Will & Grace*’s surprising success wasn’t just luck—everything which contributed to the success of the show was a part of a strategy for success. This strategy included noting and learning from the mistakes which contributed to the failure of *Ellen* as well integrating as many common and recognizable elements and tropes from sitcoms as possible into the show. This prevented mainstream audiences from perceiving the show as a threat or challenge to mainstream culture. Because of the context of the time, just featuring a gay man in a leading role was enough to be seen as a threat or trying to change the culture. Therefore, the show incorporated itself into and tried to uphold mainstream culture as visibly as possible in order to continue to reach mainstream audiences. As the show progressed it did occasionally break from this, but as strong and ever-recurring theme throughout the original run was the absence of real challenges to mainstream culture in favor of upholding or participating in it.

But in a 2012 interview with *Meet the Press* discussing his views on marriage equality, Vice President Joe Biden said, “When things really begin to change is when the social culture changes. I think *Will & Grace* probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody has done so far,” (Abramovitch).

The fact that the *Will & Grace* so strongly and frequently upheld mainstream culture and yet still managed to push it in a progressive direction begs the question: how? By experiencing success with the mainstream culture.

In the 2008 study “Can One TV Show Make a Difference?” Edward Schiappa PhD, Peter B. Gregg and Dean E. Hewes PhD evaluated the response of 245 university students to the show. They found that “increased viewing frequency and parasocial interaction were found to correlate with lower levels of sexual prejudice—a relationship that was most pronounced for those
with the least amount of social contact with lesbians and gay men.” According to their findings, watching *Will & Grace* was as effective at increasing positivity towards gay people in individuals as direct interaction with friends who were gay (Schrippa 15, 21).

*Will & Grace* didn’t need to try to change viewers opinions to do it. Simply exposing their audience to gay men in leading roles was enough to change their minds. It was the equivalent of introducing millions of families in America to a gay man when they had never truly met one before. It humanized the gay man, putting a relatable and friendly face on the community and issues.

If this shifting of culture had been intentional, *Will & Grace* never would have shifted the culture at all. Co-creator Max Mutchnik told the *Washington Post* “If we had been trying to make social commentary, we definitely wouldn’t have lasted” (Borden).

With a revival of the series currently airing on NBC, this topic is more relevant than ever, raising the issue of whether the modern *Will & Grace* will have any of the same impact on culture: probably not. Despite the ways television representation have progressed because of and in the year since the original run of *Will & Grace*, it continues to use the same tropes and stereotypes which situate in a mainstream culture which no longer is the mainstream. However, this time they are doing this to keep the original audience by keeping it familiar to them. Therefore, the characters of Will and Jack are no longer radical just for existing; they are old news. Considering the fracturing of television viewership into many different markets and the intense polarization of public opinion in America, the chances of the revival having even a portion of the same impact are slim. *Will & Grace* has fulfilled its potential to impact culture directly, but because it allowed the progression of LBGT+ content on television which still continues today, it will be indirectly responsible for impacting culture for a long time to come.
Bibliography


"The One with the Sonogram at the End." Friends, written by Marta Kauffman and David Crane, directed by James Burrows, NBC, 1994.


“Will & Grace Season Two Promo” NBC.com