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Love, Identity, and Acceptance: The Representation of Teenage Queer Experiences in Netflix's *Heartstopper*

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A mis padres Andrés y Mari Carmen, y a mi hermana Leticia,
por permitirme expresar mi identidad de manera libre desde la niñez

ABSTRACT

Based on Alice Oseman's graphic novels, Netflix's show *Heartstopper* (2022-) has attracted the attention of critics and queer individuals for its genuine representation of the wide spectrum of gender identities and sexualities that forms the LGBTQ+ community. Representation is a key factor in the fight for acceptance and normalization. For many young people, media functions as a mirror reflecting their own personal experiences and, being able to access an honest and accurate representation of queer identities can validate personal experiences and help individuals understand their "non-canonical" identity. This dissertation discusses the difficulties queer teenagers face in their high-school years and how this is depicted in *Heartstopper*. It uses queer theory and identity status theory to analyse the series' representation of the the difficulties that queer individuals face by simply living their authentic selves, how teenage years are crucial in the development of a healthy and proper identity, and how vital it is to create supportive and positive environments for queer teenagers both at school and at home in order to assure their overall well-being.

RESUMEN

Basada en las novelas gráficas de Alice Oseman, la serie de Netflix *Heartstopper* (2022-) ha captado la atención de críticos y personas *queer* debido a su imagen genuina del amplio espectro de identidades de género y orientaciones sexuales que forman la comunidad LGBTQ+. La representación es un factor clave en la lucha por la aceptación y la normalización. Para mucha gente joven, los medios de comunicación funcionan como un espejo que refleja su propia experiencia y, por tanto, tener acceso a una representación honesta y precisa de las identidades *queer* puede validar dichas experiencias personales y ayudarles a entender sus identidades "no canónicas". Este trabajo trata las dificultades que las personas *queer* enfrentan en su adolescencia y cómo estas se muestran en *Heartstopper*. Utilizando la teoría queer y la teoría del desarrollo de la identidad se analiza cómo la serie presenta las dificultades que las personas *queer* afrontan por simplemente vivir de manera

auténtica, cómo la adolescencia es una etapa crucial en el desarrollo de una identidad plena y sana y lo vital que es la creación de espacios positivos y de apoyo para adolescentes *queer* tanto en la escuela como en casa para asegurar su bienestar total.

INTRODUCTION

WIth the passing of time, and evolving towards a more open-minded society, the media's depiction of LGBTQ+ characters has developed from marginalization and unfortunate stereotypes to more hopeful and authentic portrayals. An example of this evolution is Netflix's TV show *Heartstopper* created and written by Alice Oseaman, directed by Euros Lyn and produced by Zorana Piggott. The series is an adaptation from British author Alice Oseman's graphic novels about life, love and everything that happens in between (Oseman, 2018). The first volume was released in 2019 and, since then, the love story of the protagonists has obtained the high regard and admiration of young adults all over the world. Acclaimed for its sincere and realistic portrayal of queer high school experiences, *Heartstopper* follows the lives of teenagers Charlie Spring - played by actor Joe Locke - and Nick Nelson - played by actor Kit Connor - as they sail through the complexities of love, identity, self-discovery and social acceptance in a contemporary academic environment.

Media representation and visibility is a key factor in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance. For many young people, media functions both as a mirror reflecting their own personal experiences and as a window offering knowledge about others' ways of living. An honest and accurate representation of queer identities can validate personal experiences and help individuals understand their "non-canonical" identity. Gross (2001) explains that media plays a crucial role in shaping social identities, and accurate representation can significantly boost the self-esteem and social acceptance of marginalized groups (Gross, 2001). On the contrary, negative or stereotypical representation can reinforce harmful and unfortunate myths and contribute to the discrimination and marginalization of already vulnerable groups.

Heartstopper attracts the attention of critics and young audiences for the fact that it represents a variety of queer identities and experiences through a realistic and deep approach. Charlie and Nick, the show's main characters, depict a small part of the spectrum of realities

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that form the queer community. Charlie, who is an openly gay teenager, deals with the troubles of being one of the few openly LGBTQ+ students at his school, leading him to face bullying, discrimination, insults and isolation from a predominantly male group. Charlie defies the norm that rules their school and, as an extrapolation, the entire western society. According to Andrea Smith (2005): ""Heteropatriarchy is the building block of the U.S. empire. It is the logic that makes social hierarchy seem natural. As such, it is intimately tied to the logics of white supremacy and capitalism." (Smith, 2005, p. 10). Meaning that cis-white heterosexual males are the ones in the position of power. Therefore, anyone differing from the norm is a threat to their social-political status of privilege and comfort. Their response to this potential danger is to humiliate and use their self-imposed situation of power to crush LGBTQ+ identities. For this reason, Charlie has to face this power dynamics where he is seen as an inferior for the fact of not adhering to the heterosexual part of "the norm", which points to isolation and a negative development of his personality. Research by Kosciw et al. (2018) shows that LGBTQ+ students often experience harassment and victimization, which can lead to increased anxiety and depression (Kosciw et al., 2008). Nick, on the other hand, in the first part of the series unconsciously enjoys his position of privilege because he fits all the categories of the said social-norm that rules even the most negligible of social relationships. As the episodes go by, he starts questioning his sexuality and, as a consequence, commences to struggle with his fears and insecurities of not belonging to "the norm" anymore and the consequences that can thrive from losing his position of popularity. Nick, struggling to understand his sexual orientation that points towards the bisexual part of the spectrum instead of the normative heterosexuality, suffers a mental breakdown as a result of not being able to fit in any part of the binarism of homosexuality-heterosexuality. Rosario et al. (2014), note that bisexual individuals often face unique challenges in identity formation and acceptance compared to their gay and lesbian peers.

In order to understand the fictional experiences presented in Netflix's "Heartstopper", it is essential to understand the real-life challenges faced by queer students in today's society.

Research indicates that LGBTQ+ youth are at a higher risk of bullying, mental health issues, and social exclusion compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. According to the 2019 National School Climate Survey by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), around 60% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 43% because of their gender identity. These negative experiences can profoundly affect academic performance, mental health, and the ability to form meaningful connections with other students (Kosciw et al., 2008)

Moreover, the series also highlights the supportive environments that can positively affect young queer individuals. Thus, creating a safe and secure space for them where they can fully express and experience their queer identity without the pressure and fear of being discriminated against (Kosciw et al., 2018). As a result, this study aims to explain: the diverse realities of growing up as a queer individual, give visibility to the difficulties that queer teenagers face in their high-school years for not belonging and/or defying the cis-heteronormative patriarchal society and analyze how the fictional characters of Netflix's *Heartstopper* align with or differ from the real-life experiences of young queer students.

CONTEXT

In order to provide an accurate and successful analysis, a series of terms and theories must be explained and taken into account when examining the main characters and queer identities portrayed in *Heartstopper*.

Bullying

Bullying is defined as repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm or intimidate another person, usually someone perceived as weaker (Olweus, 1993). It can take the form of physical violence, verbal abuse, social exclusion, and cyberbullying. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2021) states that bullying involves a power imbalance where the bully dominates the victim, making it difficult for the victim to defend themselves. The effects of bullying are severe, leading to psychological distress, poor academic performance, and long-term mental health issues (Swearer et al., 2010). For queer individuals, bullying frequently focuses on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Known as homophobic or transphobic bullying, this can include derogatory comments, physical assaults, or social exclusion (Kosciw et al., 2018). Such victimization results in higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts among LGBTQ+ youth compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Russell et al., 2011). In *Hearstopper*, characters such as Charlie and Elle face bullying and non-acceptance from their classmates due to their sexual orientation or gender identity which can lead to isolation and a decline of their mental health and sense of safety.

Queer

The term "queer" has undergone an evolution over the course of the decades. Originally a derogatory term, "queer" has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community to proudly describe a wide range of non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities. Halperin (1995) describes "queer" as a term that resists conventional categories of gender and sexuality (Halperin, 1995). A queer person, therefore, is someone whose gender identity, sexual orientation, or gender expression does not conform to societal expectations of heterosexuality

and binary gender roles (Jagose, 1996). The term "queer" includes identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex. By reclaiming "queer," individuals challenge and disrupt heteronormativity and binary thinking in traditional gender and sexual categorizations (Butler, 1990). This allows individuals to assert their right to self-identify beyond societal constraints, emphasizing the diversity and fluidity of human sexuality and gender (Sedgwick, 1990). A broad representation of different "queer" identities can be found in Netflix's *Heartstopper*. Charlie being gay, Nick exploring his bisexuality, Darcy (Kizzy Edgell) and Tara (Corinna Brown) - representing a lesbian couple and Elle (Yasmin Finney) belonging to the so-discriminated and persecuted trans community are examples of how the series help give visibility to the different realities that exist when growing up as a "queer" individual.

Queer Theory

A theory that emerged in the early 1990s, 'Queer Theory' is an interdisciplinary field that analyzes and contests the social constructions of gender identities and sexualities. Entrenched in post-structuralist thought, 'Queer Theory' critiques binary categorization of identities and seeks to deconstruct power relations that maintain heteronormativity (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). In addition, Judith Butler, a notable scholar in queer theory, argues in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender is performative, meaning it is a set of socially constructed and repeated behaviors rather than a fixed identity. Queer theory is political, aiming to dismantle societal norms and power structures that marginalize non-heteronormative identities (Warner, 1993). It emphasizes the fluidity and variability of gender and sexuality, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of human identity. By questioning societal norms, queer theory creates space for a multiplicity of identities and expressions (Jagose, 1996). In *Heartstopper*, Kit Connor's character can be analyzed through 'Queer Theory' as it experiences a journey of self-discovery of his sexual orientation. Him coming out as a bisexual male and understanding and accepting his true-authentic-self challenges the traditional binary way of thinking and gives voice to the fluidity that queer theory defends.

<u>Identity Status Theory</u>

This theory analyzes how people develop their sense of individuality, taking into account personal, social and sexual identities. Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, a key framework in this field, explains that identity formation occurs through a series of stages, each characterized by a specific psychosocial conflict (Erikson, 1968). Erikson's theory displays eight stages of psychosocial development. However, in each one of these stages a specific conflict that must be resolved is presented. The stages relevant to identity formation are: Stage 1) Trust versus Mistrust (Infancy [Birth-1year]); Stage 2) Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt (Early Childhood [1-3 years]); Stage 3) Initiative versus Guilt (Preschool [3-6 years]); Stage 4) Industry versus Inferiority (School Age [6-12 years]); Stage 5) Identity versus Role Confusion (Adolescence [12-18 years]); Stage 6) Intimacy versus Isolation (Young Adulthood [18-40 years]); Stage 7) Generative versus Stagnation (Middle Age [40-65 years]); Stage 8) Integrity versus Despair (Older Adulthood [65-Death]). *Heartstopper*'s main characters belong in the fifth stage of Erikson's 'Psychosocial Development Theory' In the teenage period, the main conflict is the one of identity versus confusion. Individuals try exploring and experimenting with different roles and identities in order to create a coherent sense of self with which they feel represented (Erikson, 1968).

James Marcia (1980) expanded on Erikson's work by identifying four identity statuses based on the presence or absence of exploration and commitment: identity diffusion (individuals have not yet explored nor committed to any identity), identity foreclosure (individuals have committed to an identity without exploring other different options), identity moratorium (individuals are actively exploring different identities but have not made a commitment yet), and identity achievement (individuals have explored different options and have made a commitment to a firm identity). For queer individuals, this process is particularly complex due to societal stigma and discrimination (Rosario et al., 2014). In *Heartstopper*, Charlie and Nick are both in the fifth stage of Erikson's Theory. However, they represent different approaches and stages of Marcia's 'Identity Formation Theory'. The former is an

openly gay teenager that has reached a level of self-identity but still faces social challenges and discrimination. Nick, the latter, is the clear representation of the 'identity moratorium' stage because he is in the middle of a journey of exploration of his sexuality where he travels through his feelings and sexual desires and the fear of social coercion and discrimination.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies refers to an interdisciplinary approach that inspects how culture, power relationships and society intersect. Originated in the mid-20th century, it applies different theoretical frameworks such as Marxism and feminism, it analyzes cultural artifacts and practices (Hall, 2018). This field examines how cultural practices are produced, disseminated and consumed. Its key themes are: ideology, identity, race, gender, class and ethnicity and it aims to explain how these terms intersect within cultural texts.. As a result, cultural studies examines how cultural representations and social norms shape and are shaped by members of the LGBTQ+ community in Queer Studies. For this reason, integrating different perspectives from sociology, anthropology, and history, cultural studies provide a comprehensive framework for the understanding of cultural complexities in contemporary society (Hall, 2018).

School Climates

School climate refers to the overall quality and character of school life, encompassing relationships, teaching practices, and organizational structures (Thapa et al., 2013). A negative climate is a hostile one where individuals are discriminated against and made fun of whereas a positive climate is created by a safe, supportive and inclusive environment. For queer teenagers, school climate significantly affects their academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being (Kosciw et al., 2018). Further research by Kosciw et al. (2018) highlights that LGBTQ+ students who face harassment and victimization at school are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Kosciw et al. (2018). These negative experiences also impede academic performance and increase dropout rates (Russell et al., 2011). Positive climates in high-schools are essential for the well-being of the students. For this reason, it is important to motivate supportive climates in schools with anti-bullying

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policies and the education of teachers that support the LGBTQ+ community. According to Kosciw et al. (2018): "Supportive teachers and staff, along with LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula, can enhance the school experience for queer students, contributing to their academic success and emotional well-being". In *Hearstopper*, art teacher Mr. Ajayi - portrayed by Fisayo Akinade - plays an important role in creating a positive climate and safe space for Charlie. He is the one that shelters Charlie from their bullies, giving him a spot where he can be himself without feeling judged and discriminated against.

As a conclusion, this theoretical framework has provided an understanding of key concepts and theories that may be helpful in the study of queer individuals and their experiences within school environments. Terms such as "queer" and "bullying" often go hand-in-hand as the vast majority of queer teenagers suffer a torment experience in their youth caused by their classmates that do follow "the norm". When taking into account these diverse theoretical perspectives, the importance of raising awareness and protecting queer children is accentuated.

ANALYSIS

"*ART CLASS*" (1x01 [00:09:15" - 00:10:50"])

In this scene of the first episode of *Heartstopper*'s first season Charlie is sitting on the floor in the art class [*Figure 1.1*]. Hiding from his bullies, he pretends everything is fine [*Figure 1.2*] when it definitely is not the case. In the room with him is Mr. Ajayi, his art teacher, who represents a safe space for Charlie. From their conversation, the audience can deduce that it is not the first time that Charlie resorts to the art class during his lunch break when he is undergoing a stressful or difficult phase. After this recurrent habit, the scene indirectly explains that Mr. Ajayi is aware of the reasons why Charlie decides to hide in the art class instead of enjoying his lunch in the school's cafeteria with the rest of his mates. As a consequence, Mr. Ajayi becomes an essential pillar for Charlie's mental health and reinforces Kosciw's idea that supportive teachers can contribute to the emotional well-being of queer students (Kosciw, 2018). As the conversation progresses, Mr. Ajayi states firmly that Charlie has been a victim of bullying in the past [*Figure 1.3*] and is worried that the situation might be repeating again and that this is the reason why Charlie is once again hiding in the art room. However, Charlie insists that 'everything is fine' and that his teacher should not worry about why he is sitting there on the floor with him. Even though bullying may not be the primary reason why, this time, Charlie is spending his lunch break isolated surrounded by art pieces but, as the episodes go by, it is shown how being bullied is still part of his academic experience.

This scene can be analyzed using the theoretical framework proposed for the investigation of how queer individuals face the disdain and discrimination of society for not following "the norm". The 'queer' element that is struggling with blending in with the normative society in this scene is Charlie. He is an openly gay teenager that fits all categories of what a cis-heterosexual white normative male is except for his sexual orientation. Homosexuality has been historically persecuted and even categorized as a mental illness for years. For this reason, homosexuals are still suffering in contemporary days from this stigmatization and

disgust that some people present towards those that are attracted to individuals of their same gender. This hatred that homophobic teenagers hold towards their queer peers is displayed in variant forms of 'bullying' such as physical violence, verbal abuse, social exclusion, and cyberbullying. Indirectly in their speech, Charlie admits to have been a victim of harassment and mistreatment from other students of the school. As Kosciw (2018) stated, such experience can lead to the creation of a negative climate that "significantly affects their academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being" (Kosciw, 2018). For this reason, *Hearstopper* shows, through the character of Mr. Ajayi, the importance of creating a supportive environment to counteract the negative climate created by bullying. In this case, Mr. Ajayi shows his support to Charlie and makes him feel secure and allowed to be his authentic self when he is in the art room. In addition, and according to 'Queer Theory', Charlie presents a threat "to dismantle societal norms and power structures" (Warner, 1993) just by being a homosexual teenager and living his non-normative life openly.

Based on Erikson's (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development, high-school students are in the fifth stage of psychosocial development. In this phase called the 'Identity vs. Role Confusion' one, adolescents are developing a sense of competence and achievement while feeling inferior and incompetent (Erikson, 1968). Charlie can be analyzed in this scene as someone that is confident and secure about his sexual orientation but is forced to hide from a society that treats him as an inferior male for not being attracted to women. With a further examination of Charlie's behavior, Marcia (1980) would classify him in the fourth identity status of the expanded Identity Status Theory. Locke's character is an example of a queer individual that is committed to an identity - expressing his homosexuality openly -, therefore he is in the Identity Achievement stage (Marcia, 1980). For his part, Mr. Ajayi, being an openly gay adult, can be interpreted as an older counterpart for Charlie. In him, Charlie can see a brighter future where being a queer person does not equal living in a constant fear of being bullied for showing his true identity. Knowing the oppression Charlie is suffering from, Mr. Ajayi's presence

becomes a comfort zone for Charlie. For this reason, he plays an essential role of support that creates a positive climate where Charlie can feel safe and express his *queerness* freely.

"*HARASSMENT*" (1x07 [00:05:16" - 00:06:12"])

In this scene of the seventh episode of Heartstopper's first season Charlie joins Nick and his group of friends to go to the movies. After the movie is finished, Harry (Cormac Hyde-Corrin), leader of the group and recurrent bully of Charlie, approaches him and starts teasing him [*Figure 2.1*]. As a result, a hostile atmosphere is created and it can be seen through the facial expressions of Charlie how uncomfortable and uneasy he is feeling. Harry's questions come from a frivolous place and are uttered with a level of sarcasm that can be classified as almost offensive and aggressive. WIth his dominant attitude, Harry establishes a relation of power between him and Charlie. In this scenario, Harry is the embodiment of the white cis-heteropatriarchal norm that rules with harshness over those discriminated minorities. For this reason, and from his privileged position, Harry feels entitled to invade Charlie's personal space and mock him as he views Charlie as an inferior, as a weak individual that he can ridicule for his sexual orientation. Following the scene, Harry sets the stage for another round of humiliating remarks. He starts by saying something apparently positive but with a very nasty connotation [*Figure 2.2*]. By telling Charlie that he 'does not seem that gay' Harry is stating his opinion towards gay people. He views them as inferior, as a repulsive minority and, therefore, he discriminates against them. With such an affirmation, he is supposedly trying to comfort Charlie and not make him feel harassed by saying 'you do not seem that gay'. Therefore, in Harry's mind, it is a compliment. He perceives being, looking and seeming gay as repugnant. His physical expression and sarcasm indicates that he dislikes queer individuals but since 'Charlie does not seem that gay' he might give him some kind of pass and will not bother him. However, Harry's next statement about Charlie's way of talking [*Figure 2.3*], his sarcastic tone and the laughs it generates, dismantles the 'positive' compliment that Harry was trying to fake

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upon Charlie. As a result, it completes the verbal aggression that makes Charlie run away from them in a state of embarrassment and discomfort.

This scene can be analyzed using the theoretical framework proposed for the investigation of how queer individuals face the disdain and discrimination of society for not following "the norm". Throughout the beginning of the episode, Charlie is seen as somewhat hesitant about whether or not it would be a good idea to join Nick's straight and brute group of friends considering he does not fit with their way of expressing their masculinity. This feeling of doubt and inferiority is reinforced by Harry's attack. Focusing exclusively on Charlie and Harry's interaction, the former's sexual orientation is the queer element being threatened by the latter's commentaries. By being a queer teenager, Charlie is defying the social norm and, therefore, heterosexuals feel threatened by it. In fact, according to 'Queer Theory', Charlie presents a threat "to dismantle societal norms and power structures" (Warner, 1993) just by being a homosexual teenager and living his non-normative life openly. For this reason, Harry decides to face this 'threat' and fight it by humiliating the individual with a different sexuality. Consequently, this event is a summarized visual representation of the bullying, torment, and harassment that queer individuals face in their high-school years. According to Kosciw (2018), bullying can lead to the creation of a negative climate that "significantly affects mental health, and overall well-being" (Kosciw, 2018). Previous to this scene, Charlie finds in Nick the support and encouragement he needs to feel comfortable around Nick's group, thus, creating a positive climate for Charlie. However, said positive atmosphere is broken and turned into a nightmare when Harry decides to provoke Joe Locke's character.

Based on Erikson's (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development, teenagers are in the fifth stage of psychosocial development. In this phase called the 'Identity vs. Role Confusion' one, adolescents are developing a sense of competence and achievement while feeling inferior and incompetent (Erikson, 1968). In this scene, Charlie can be analyzed as someone that is confident about his sexual orientation but is harassed by a male group that treats him

as an inferior male for not being, looking as seeming heterosexual enough. According to Marcia (1980), and as explained in the analysis of Scene 1, Charlie would be classified in the fourth identity status of the expanded Identity Status Theory - the Identity Achievement stage (Marcia,1980). For his part, Harry would also be classified as a teenager in Erikson's (1968) fifth stage of psychosocial development. However, according to Marcia (1980), he would belong to the Identity Foreclosure stage of the expanded Identity Formation Theory (Marcia, 1980). Meaning that Harry is a teenager that has committed to an identity - being a cis-heterosexual male - without having the need of exploring other identity options.

"*I'M HONESTLY USED TO IT BY NOW*" (1X06 [00:06:13" - 00:06:53"])

This next scene is set following the previous scene (Scene 2). In this part of the seventh episode of *Heartstopper*'s first season, Nick follows Charlie after the incident with Harry. Charlie leaves the cinema in a hurry trying to escape from the hostile environment that Harry has created with his homophobic commentaries. For this reason, Nick, worried about Charlie's well-being, races after his friend to apologize for not being able to find the courage to defend him from his bully [*Figure 3.1*]. Outside in the car park, the tension calms and the lighting is dimmed. Nick finds Charlie who does not seem to be affected by the unfriendly situation. However, as it was displayed in the first analyzed scene, Charlie's defense mechanism consists of pretending 'everything is fine' [*Figures 1.2* & *3.2*] in order not to show weakness or vulnerability. Partly, because he does not desire to cause his loved ones concern and, partly, because he is not strong enough to deal with all the damage and suffering that his schoolmates have inflicted over his mental health. However, Nick has built a connection strong enough to feel that, indeed, 'everything is not fine'. Suddenly, Charlie explains that Harry's comments mean very little to him. These kinds of bullying episodes have been so recurrent in his high-school experience - almost on a daily basis - that he is accustomed to them [*Figure 3.3*] and the only way to cope with the discomfort is to build a wall of indifference and coldness. With

this heart-breaking declaration, *Heartstopper* aims to make the audience aware of how difficult and torturing it can be to not be able to live one's authentic self freely. Queer individuals have been discriminated against for decades and, even though changes towards a bigger normalization and acceptance have been acquired, the situation continues to be harsh for non-cis-heterosexual children. For this reason, growing up not fitting into what the conventions of gender and sexual orientation dictate is related to experiencing situations of discrimination, bullying and harassment in those environments ruled by the cis-heteronormativity. As a consequence, around 60% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 43% because of their gender identity according to the 2019 National School Climate Survey by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN).

This scene can be analyzed using the theoretical framework proposed for the investigation of how queer individuals face the disdain and discrimination of society for not following "the norm". As stated in Scene 2's analysis, Charlie, according to 'Queer Theory', presents a threat "to dismantle societal norms and power structures" (Warner, 1993). On the contrary, Nick, who presents himself as a heterosexual male, does not disrupt said societal norms and power structures. Therefore, he is not aware of the tormentous journey that high-school years can be for a discriminated minority. For this reason, he freezes and is unable to say anything nor defend Charlie from Harry's teasing because he is beholding, for the first time, how one of his loved ones is being discriminated against for his sexual orientation and appearance. One could interpret this paralysation that Nick suffers as an unconscious reaction because he is afraid that the same would happen to him if he reveals his true sexual orientation and goes to present himself as a queer male instead of a cis-heterosexual one. When Nick is released from his immobility and rushes after Charlie, he expects him to be defeated and miserable after the incident. However, Charlie shocks Nick when he seems to be indifferent about the situation. In that moment, Nick realizes the importance and seriousness of bullying and how it can affect the well-being of the victims (Kosciw, 2018).

<u>"*COMING OUT*"</u> (1x08 [00:25:55" - 00:28:18"])

In this scene of the last episode of *Heartstopper*'s first season Nick gets home after spending the day with Charlie and formalizing their love relationship. The scene is set in Nick's family kitchen table. After fixing himself a cup of tea, he sits down beside her mother. At that moment, Kit Connor's character pluckes up the courage to tell his mother about his situation with Charlie. They are no longer just great friends, they are, in fact, in a relationship [*Figure 4.1*]. Nick's home and the good relation he has with his family creates the perfect positive climate and safe space for him to feel comfortable enough to come out as a proud bisexual boy. At first, Nick is afraid of his mother's reaction, wondering if she will react well to the - for him - good news. In order to build a happy ending for the season, Nick's mother, Sarah Nelson - played by actress Olivia Colman -, hugs his son and expresses how delighted she is to know that her son is living his authentic self and has found a loving partner [*Figure 4.2*]. The scene makes the audience fathom that queer identities and realities have probably never been a topic in the family conversations. Remaining neutral about the topic, Sarah has probably never expressed neither support nor hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community in the household. For this reason, not knowing what his mother's opinion could be, presented a sense of anxiety and discomfort in Nick that made him hesitant on whether to communicate her mother about his new relationship with another boy. Sarah's supportive reaction forges the positive climate that will allow Nick develop his queer identity freely. As an addition, when Nick tells his mother: "it's called bisexuality" [*Figure 4.3*] it is a statement with a hidden implication. With this utterance, Nick is not only trying to educate his mother about what his new self-discovered sexuality is, it is the representation that he finally knows and accepts what his true identity is and he is confident enough in his evolution that is now able to express with words what was tormenting his journey of identity achievement (Marcia, 1980).

This scene can be analyzed using the theoretical framework proposed for the investigation of how queer individuals face the disdain and discrimination of society for not

following "the norm". Accepting his bisexuality and love for Charlie, Nick is breaking "the norm" of heteronormativity and, therefore, becoming a queer individual. However, Nick's teenage school years have been different from those of Charlie. As he has presented himself as a white cis-heterosexual man up until now he has never had to face any type of bullying or harassment for his sexual orientation or gender identity. While Charlie was being picked on by the other students for being a queer person, Nick has been enjoying his privilege of popularity and power that comes with the position of following the hetero-patriarchal norm. For his part, Nick experiences a journey of doubt and confusion for various reasons: not understanding why his sexual orientation is altering; having to reflect and discover what his true identity is; being afraid of how his social life would change if his peers discovered about his bisexuality; being afraid of losing his popularity and it leading to the decay of his friendships with the popular group; not knowing whether his family's reaction would be positive or negative and being afraid that the positive climate created in his home would be destroyed by him coming out. However, in this scene is shown how two of these struggles are resolved in a positive note. Nick sits down beside his mother seeking acceptance, encouragement and support from her. Sarah, immediately hugging her son and telling him she loves him, creates a supportive environment around the queerness of his son which will affect Nick's maturing and identity achievement in a positive way.

From the point of view of 'Queer Theory', Nick's evolution from presenting himself as a heterosexual male in the start of the season to a self-reflecting journey and discovery of his bisexuality towards the end of the season challenges traditional norms of sexuality and shows how identity is on a constant stage of fluidity and development. Once again, based on Erikson's (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development, high-school students are in the fifth stage of this theory. In this phase called the 'Identity vs. Role Confusion' one, adolescents are developing a sense of competence (Erikson, 1968). With a further examination of Nick's state, Marcia (1980) would classify him between the third and fourth identity status of the expanded Identity Formation Theory. Up until this last episode, Nick has been actively exploring and

developing his identity but has not yet made a commitment. This status has led him to an identity crisis and a period of questioning and experimentation that fits the third identity status of the expanded Identity Formation Theory (Marcia, 1980). Moreover, the commitment to come out to his mother and finally being able to understand and be confident in his true-self identity makes Nick progress into the fourth identity status as he is now a queer individual that has explored his identity and possesses a strong sense of self and direction (Marcia, 1980). From a Cultural Studies' position, the creation of a positive climate and supportive environment is key to the development of one's identity and personality. Obtaining the support and affection of his mother will affect directly in the maturing process of Connor's character in a favorable and beneficial manner (Kosciw, 2018).

CONCLUSION

In the last decades, representation of LGBTQ+ identities in the media has improved exponentially. From being marginalized minorities and greatly stereotyped to more inclusive and authentic representations. Netflix's *Heartstopper* epitomizes this evolution with its sincere and realistic depictions of queer individuals. Based on Alice Oseman's graphic novels of the same title, the series portrays the high-school experiences of an openly gay student, Charlie Spring and his 'apparently straight' classmate Nick Nelson as they navigate friendship, love, identity and acceptance. Moreover, these fictional characters' rendering contributes to the establishment of how important media representation is.

The theoretical framework used in this dissertation combines key concepts and theories to help understand queer identities and their experiences within academic environments. Definitions such as 'queer' and 'bullying' are core notions for the topic whereas 'Queer Theory' and 'Identity Status Theory' offer understanding of the complexities of gender and sexual identities development. For their part, 'Cultural Studies' and 'School climates' highlight broader societal and institutional factors that may have a direct impact in the maturation process of queer teenagers. For this reason, this approach emphasizes the intersectional nature of queer experiences and the necessity of supportive and loving environments for the well-being and growth of LGBTQ+ adolescents.

'Bullying', defined as repeated aggressive behavior, is particularly harmful when targeting sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. Queer individuals often face bullying in their teenage years, which can lead to severe psychological distress and poor academic performance. In *Heartstopper*, Charlie experiences bullying due to his sexual orientation.

The term 'queer' has evolved from a derogatory label to an inclusive title, challenging heteronormativity and binary thinking. In *Heartstopper*, characters like Charlie (openly gay)

and Nick (discovering his bisexuality) showcase the diversity and fluidity of queer identities, highlighting the importance of self-identification beyond societal constraints.

'Queer Theory', emerging in the early 1990s, critiques binary identity categorization and deconstructs power relations maintaining heteronormativity. It emphasizes gender and sexuality fluidity, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of identity. Nick's bisexuality journey in *Heartstopper* challenges traditional norms and exemplifies this fluidity.

'Identity Status Theory' explores how individuals develop their sense of self, including personal, social, and sexual identities. For queer individuals, this process can be quite complex due to societal stigma and discrimination. *Heartstopper* depicts Charlie and Nick navigating various stages of identity formation.

'Cultural studies' examine how culture, power, and society intersect, analyzing cultural artifacts and practices. In queer studies, it investigates how cultural representations and societal norms shape LGBTQ+ identities.

'School climates' can significantly affect queer teenagers' development. Negative school climates lead to lower academic achievement, and increased mental health issues among queer students. Whereas supportive school climates contribute to the reduction of said negative outcomes. *Heartstopper* illustrates the importance of supportive relationships and positive school climates through characters like Nick's mother and Mr. Ajayi, who provide security and acceptance, crucial for the well-being of queer students.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework provides an understanding of key concepts and theories relevant in the study of young queer experiences. It helps in the comprehension of how complex and multifaceted LGBTQ+ lives are and the importance of creating safe spaces and supportive environments for their development. For this reason, analyzing Netflix's *Heartstopper* through this lens highlights the significant role of accurate media representation

in validating personal experiences, fostering understanding, and challenging prejudices created by the white cis-heteropatriarchal society by which contemporary society is ruled.
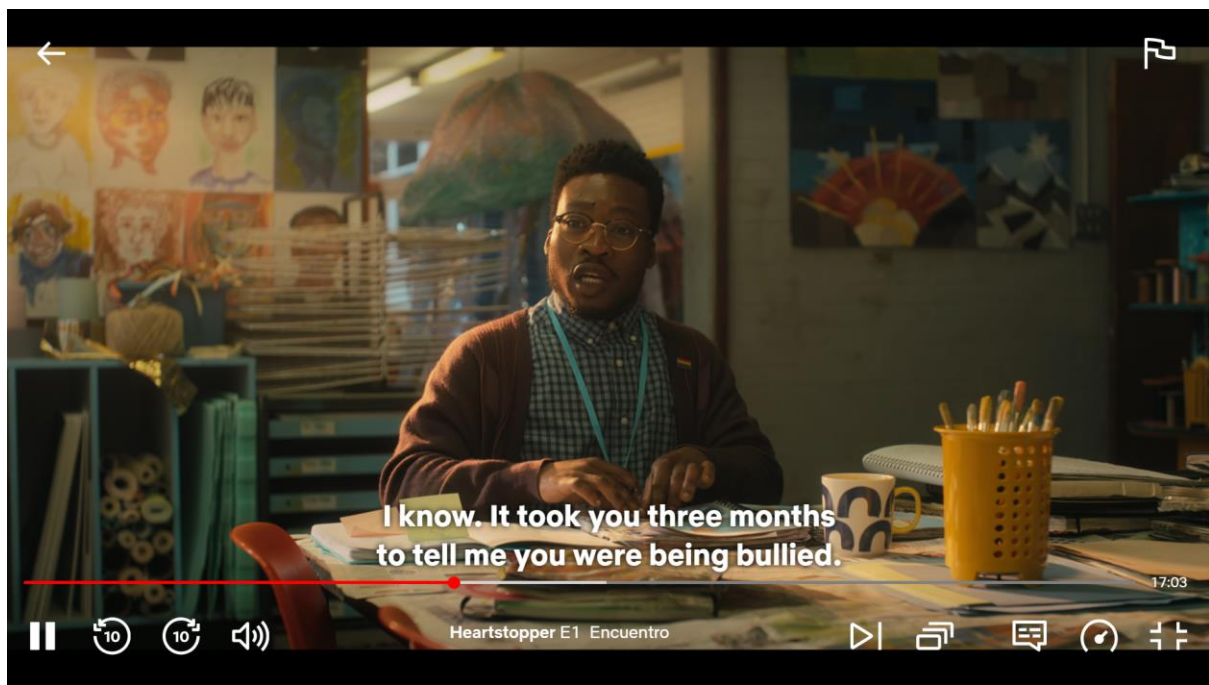
ANNEX

"*ART CLASS*" (1x01 [00:09:15" - 00:10:50"])

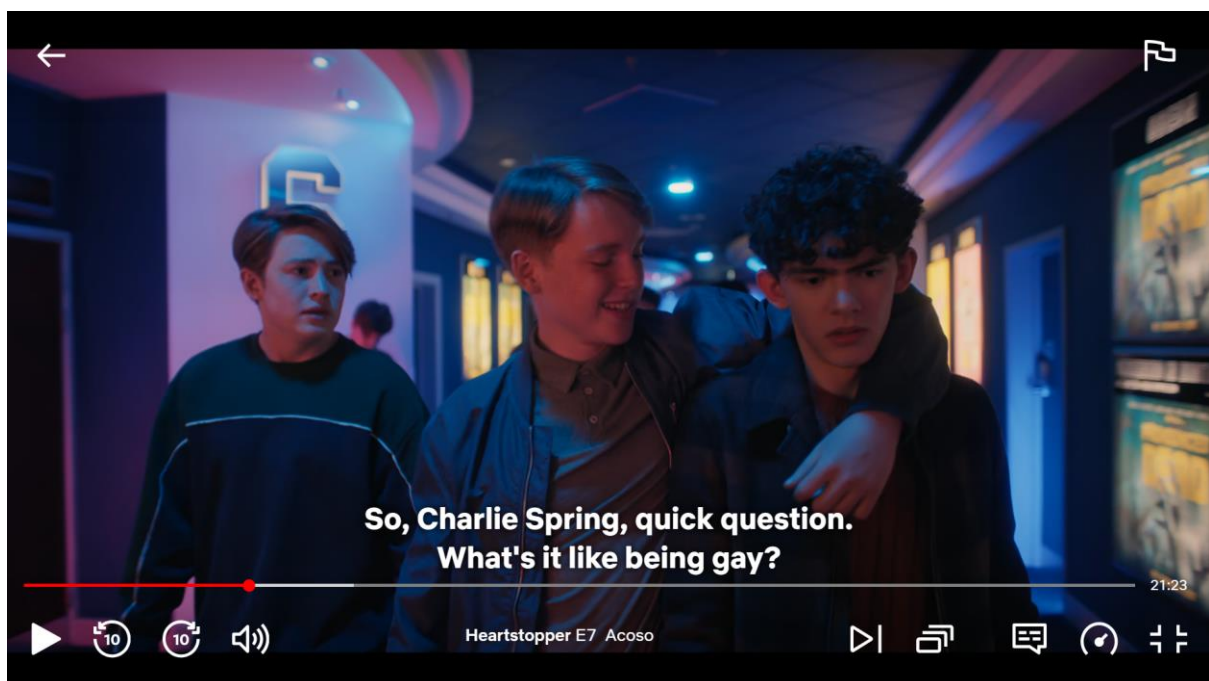[*Figure 1.1*]: Charlie sits on the floor in the art class on his lunch break.

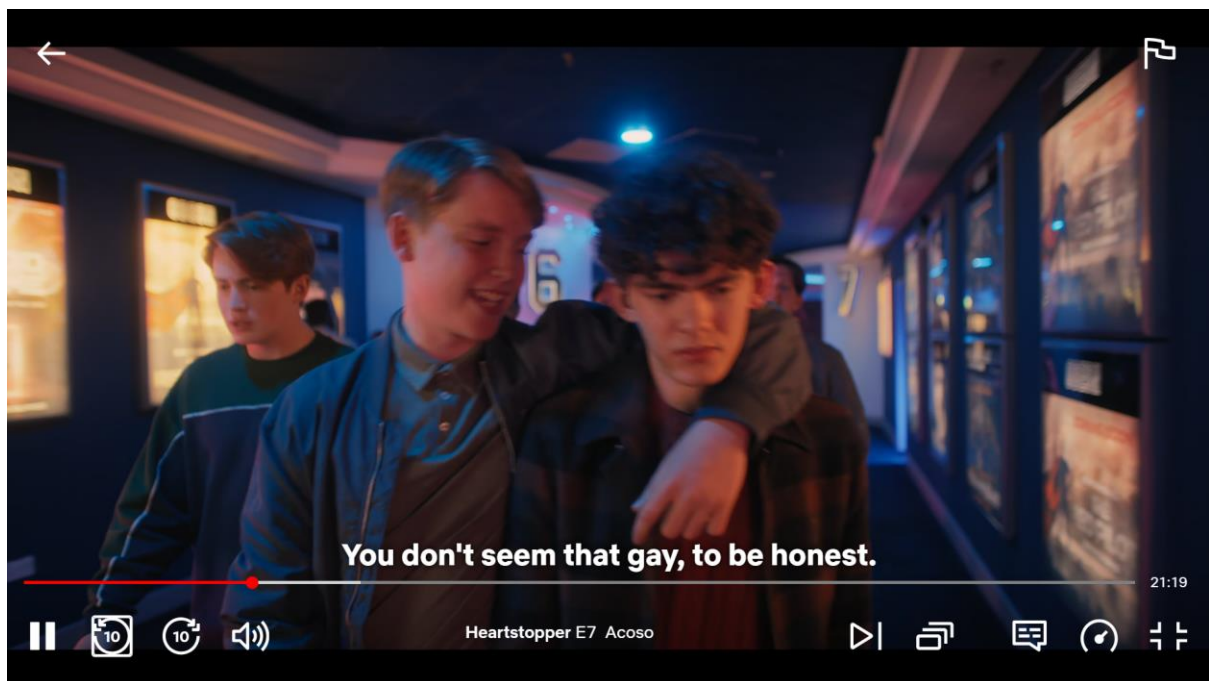[*Figure 1.2*]: Charlie tells Mr. Ajayi that he does not need to be worried about Charlie's situation.

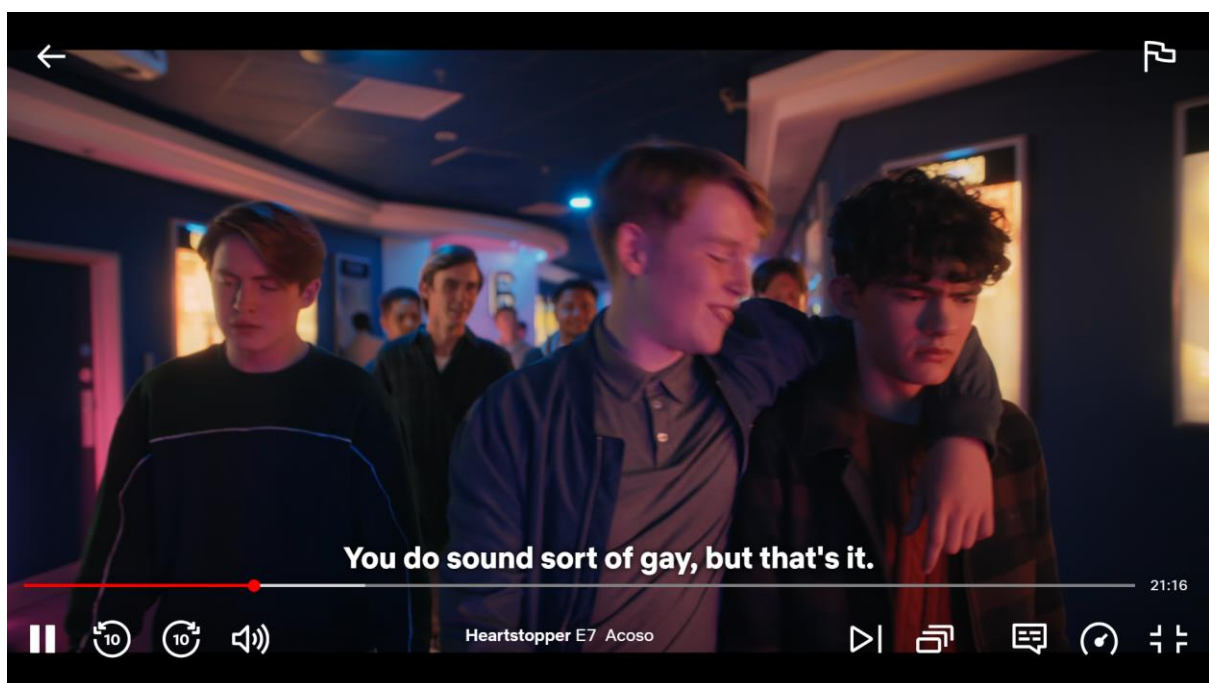[*Figure 1.3*]: Mr. Ajayi reveals that Charlie has been a victim of bullying in the past.

"*HARASSMENT*" (1x07 [00:05:16" - 00:06:12"])

[*Figure 2.1*]: Harry approaches Charlie and intimidates him.

[*Figure 2.2*]: Harry mocks Charlie's appearance.

[*Figure 2.3*]: Harry criticizes Charlie's way of speaking in an attempt to ridicule him.

[*Figure 3.1*]: Nick apologizes for not being able to defend Charlie when Harry was harassing him.
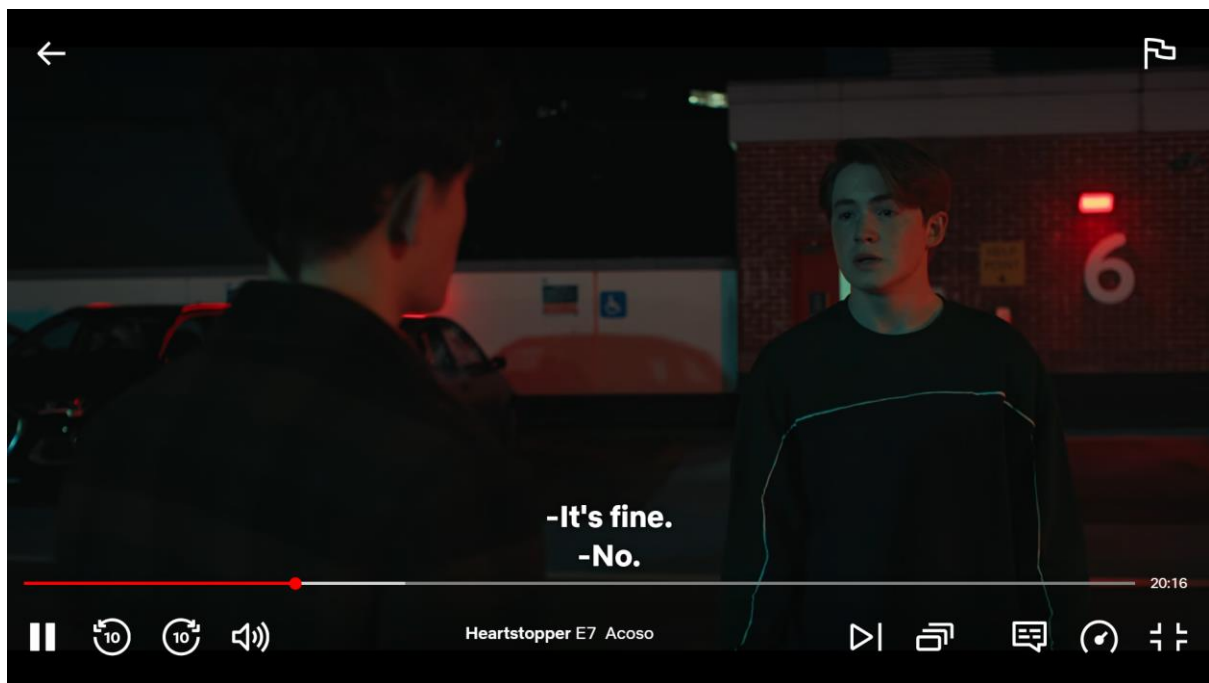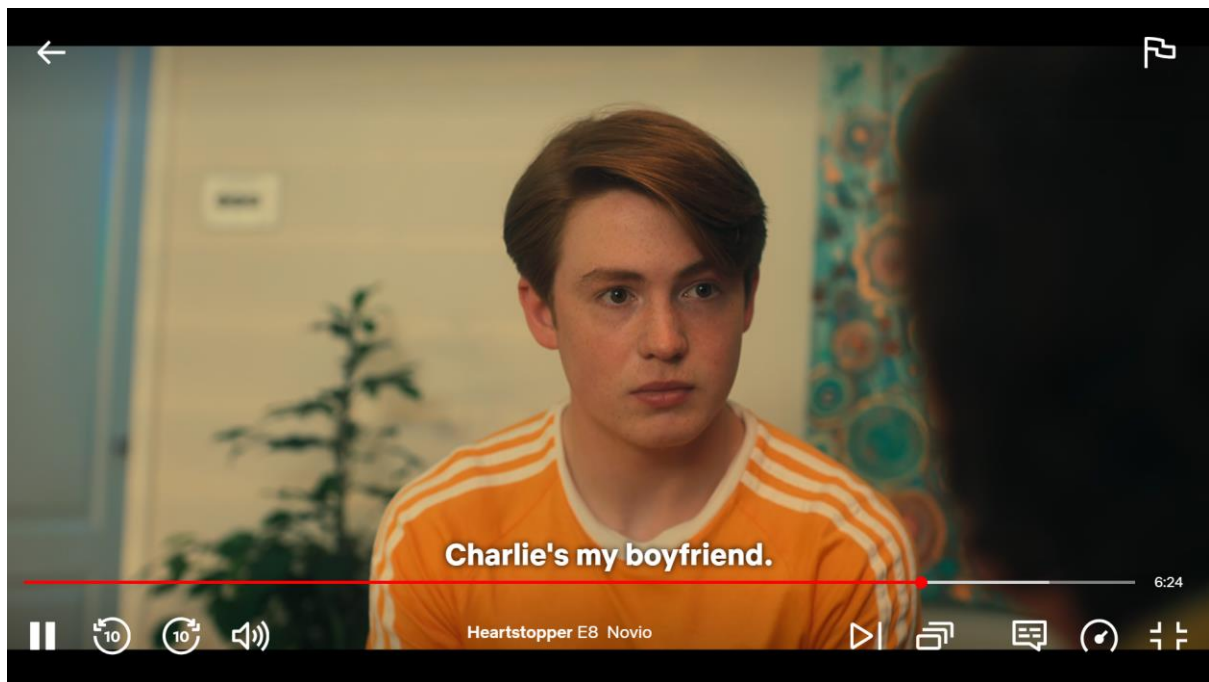

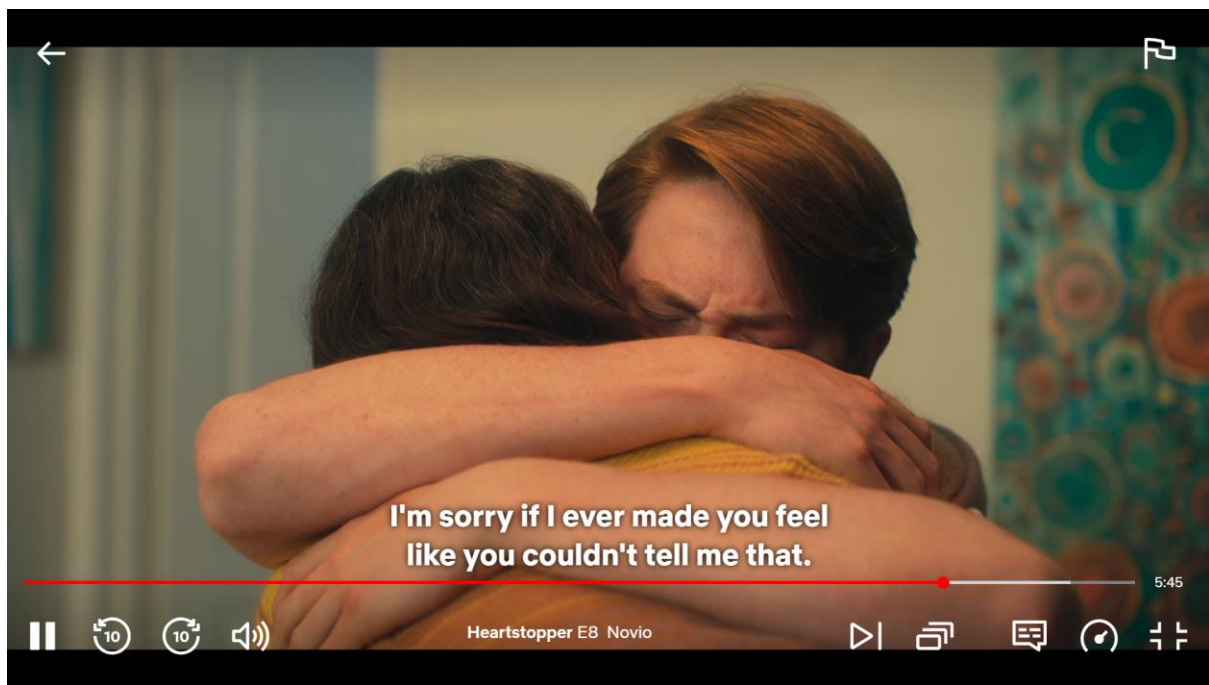[*Figure 3.2*]: Charlie tells Nick he does not need to worry about what happened with Harry.
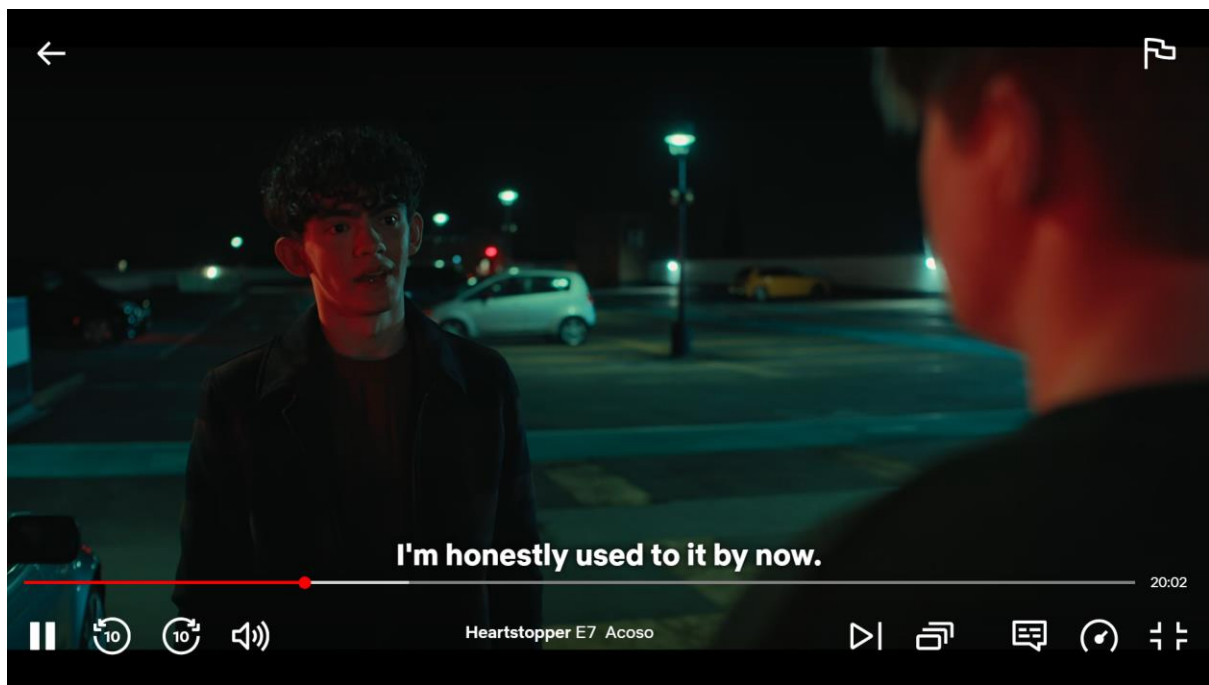
[*Figure 3.3*]: Charlie makes a heartbreaking statement about being a victim of bullying.
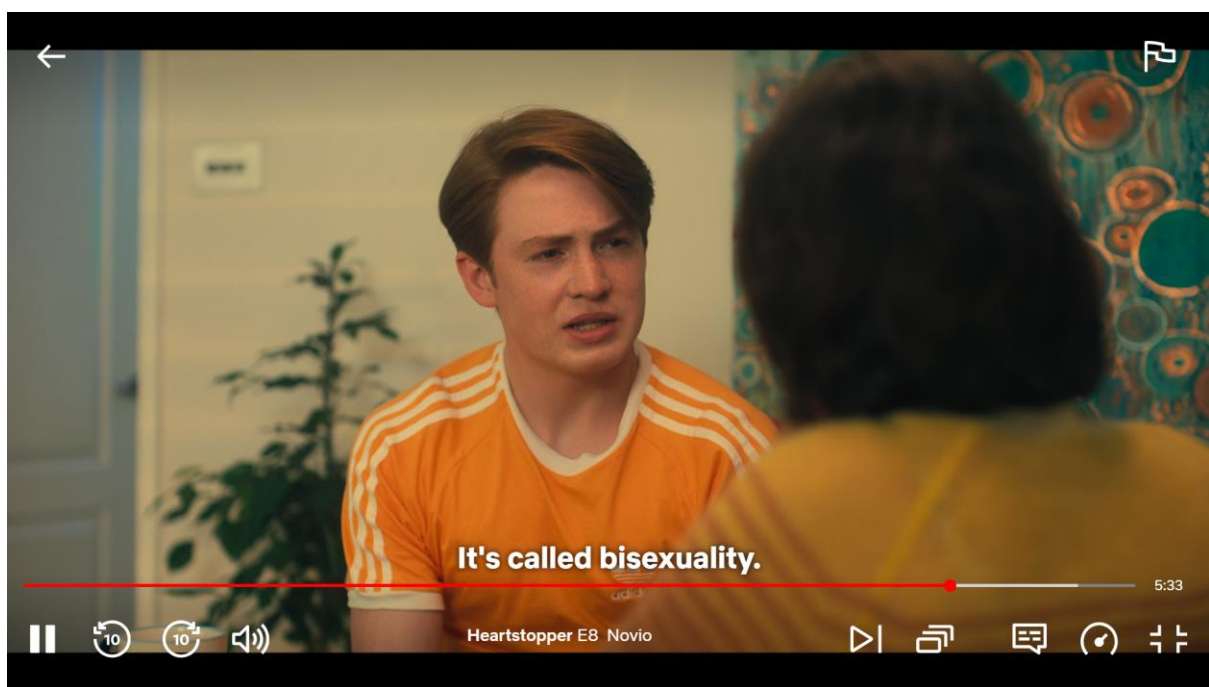
"*COMING OUT*"(1x08 [00:25:55" - 00:28:18"])

[*Figure 4.1*]: Nick expresses he is in a relationship with Charlie and, therefore, confesses his bisexuality.

[*Figure 4.2*]: Nick's mother, Sarah, forges the positive climate and safe space for Nick.

[*Figure 4.3*]: Nick feels comfortable and secure enough to reveal his true identity.

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