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Intersectional Representation of “The Owl House”: Luz Noceda, a Bisexual Afro-Latina with ADHD

Abstract: This article delves into Luz Noceda’s intersectional identity as a bisexual, Afro-Latina individual with ADHD within the narrative framework of the animated series “The Owl House”, a television series created by Disney Channel in 2020. By critically analyzing Luz’s portrayal, this research investigates how intersectionality enhances our comprehension of her lived experiences and challenges within the enchanted setting. Luz’s depiction as a multidimensional character not only mirrors diverse identities but also serves as a vital representation for audiences, particularly adolescents. Through Luz’s narrative trajectory, viewers can empathize with her struggles if they share similar identities or gain insight into minority experiences, thereby fostering empathy and broader understanding. This study posits that media representations, exemplified by Luz’s character, exert significant influence in shaping societal attitudes and advancing inclusivity. By foregrounding Luz’s intersectional identity, this study contributes to scholarly discourse on media diversity and its profound implications for societal perceptions and individual identity development.

Keywords: neurodiversity, queer, POC, intersectionality, animation, representation of minorities in pop culture

INTRODUCTION

Each year, Polish society is observed to rank low in acceptance and tolerance towards minorities, encompassing sexual, ethnic, or racial groups. In 2022, Poland was positioned 42nd in the *Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex People in Europe and Central Asia*, marking it as the lowest-ranked country within the European Union (Annual Review, 2023). Scholars focusing on children’s and young adult literature, as well as cultural texts aimed at these demographics, have consistently emphasized the significance of representing diverse characters. The subject has been extensively explored by Mateusz Świetlicki and Sabina Światała, who delved into motifs present in queer literature aimed at children and young adults (Świetlicki & Światała, 2022). In addition, the themes were thoroughly

addressed by Katarzyna Reszczyńska-Urban, who conducted an analysis of the theme of initiation in the works of writer Natalia Osińska (Reszczyńska-Urban, 2019). My own research delves into the transgender identity of Daniel, the protagonist in Osińska's *Fanfik* (2016) and *Slash* (2017) (Jankowska, 2023). Increasingly, characters within this literary domain are portrayed not only as queer but also as members of other minority groups. For instance, Wika from Osińska's *Fluff* (2019) is characterized as a lesbian on the autism spectrum.

This article aims to introduce another character exemplifying such diversity, Luz Noceda from the *Owl House* TV series. The discussion is excerpted from my thesis, which investigates intersectional discourses of minority and identity in 21st-century American animation, particularly within educational contexts.

The objective of the dissertation was to showcase non-normative characters from various minorities and identities through an intersectional lens. It further aimed to demonstrate how school curricula could be enriched with audiovisual cultural texts (in this case, animations) that represent characters in a respectful and comprehensible manner. Such representations can facilitate identification for non-normative individuals and foster empathy and acceptance among normative audiences.

One of the animations highlighted in my research is "The Owl House", featuring protagonist Luz Noceda, an Afro-Dominican adolescent girl from Connecticut who struggles to fit in with her peers and is labeled a 'freak'. En route to a summer camp intended to 'normalize' her, Luz inadvertently enters a portal to another world. There, despite of absence of magical abilities – witches possess the appropriate organ and are biologically predisposed to using magic and Luz lacks this organ – she still finds her own path to understanding and utilizing magic. The protagonist becomes an apprentice to the Eda at the Owl House, pursues her dream of becoming a witch, and ultimately finds a new family.

Produced by Disney Television Animation and created by Dana Terrace, "The Owl House" premiered globally on January 10, 2020, on the Disney Channel, and in Poland on January 4, 2021, on Disney XD. While it may appear to be a typical narrative about teenage witches, the series exemplifies the phenomenon of intersectionality, portraying Luz as a bisexual Afro-Latina who also has ADHD. This analysis will examine how these identities are represented in the animation and discuss how such content can contribute to the cultivation of understanding and tolerance among young viewers in the context of intersectionality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given that "The Owl House" is a relatively new series, having concluded on April 8, 2023, it has not yet been extensively analyzed in academic literature.

However, its queer themes have been addressed by scholars such as Erika G. Abad (Abad, 2020) and Kleinke (Kleinke, 2023), as well as the group of researchers behind the article "Animating queer figured worlds: How young adult animation is cultivating queer spaces and narratives" (Dennin, Black, Alexander, 2024), which discusses inclusive storytelling in the series. Luz's psychosexual orientation has received the most attention, while her ethnicity is usually only briefly mentioned. The context related to her ADHD is often overlooked, despite her neurodiversity being confirmed as early as April 2021 (Rose, 2021).

This oversight is significant, given that the topic has been important among fans of the series, who have created articles such as "'The Owl House,' Luz Noceda, and Neurodivergent Coding" (Screen Queens, 2020) and "Luz has ADHD and her being a human trying to be a witch is a metaphor for her being neurodivergent, here's why" (n.d., 2020). Therefore, I aim to fill this gap through an intersectional approach. By exploring Luz's character through the lens of intersectionality, we can gain a deeper understanding of how her multiple identities – bisexual, Afro-Latina, and neurodivergent – interact and influence her experiences. This approach not only enriches the academic discourse surrounding "The Owl House" but also highlights the importance of comprehensive representation in media.

The concept of intersectionality, as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, posits that biological and social categories such as gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and worldview are not isolated phenomena. Rather, they comprise intersecting systems that often lead to compound and multifaceted forms of discrimination, and occasionally, to an aggregation of privileges. Intersectionality thus underscores the intricate interplay and perpetuation of inequalities, exemplified by the heightened discrimination faced by women of color from ethnic minorities. These women encounter additional challenges, including restricted access to education and reproductive rights (Kolářová, 2008). In stark contrast, white, educated men from affluent backgrounds often begin at an advantaged position due to their gender, race, and class. While these examples may appear pronounced, it is crucial to acknowledge that intersectionality can also manifest in subtler forms. The interconnected nature of oppressive mechanisms, encompassing racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and classism, necessitates a holistic examination. This approach is particularly vital for comprehending the social perception of individuals with non-normative identities, where multiple intersecting identities coalesce to form unique personal identities divergent from societal norms.

The multifaceted nature of these phenomena presents challenges in elucidation, particularly to younger audiences with emerging conceptual frameworks. However, it is argued that through diligent effort and innovative pedagogical strategies, educators can clarify the complex interrelations inherent in diversity and difference, fostering an environment of understanding and acceptance.

In her analysis, Lindsey Pelucacci outlines that the character Luz desires to study a bit of everything rather than choosing a specific track in school. While some might interpret this as indecision, in this context, it represents a full spectrum of possibilities and an openness to multiple life paths. Pelucacci notes that the scene where the protagonist is granted permission to pursue this course is set against a background with the colors of the bisexual flag, highlighting a deeper meaning (Pelucacci, 2022).

Although Pelucacci does not explicitly use the term „intersectionality” (she refers to the concept of „coenaesthesia”), her observations align with this framework, much like the character herself. Additionally, the challenges Luz faces can resonate with both neurodiverse individuals struggling with learning and queer individuals. The quote, “I still can’t choose. Maybe it’s crazy, but I wish I could study a little bit of everything,” also reflects a journey of self-exploration, identity, and personal approach to life.

The significance of Luz and „The Owl House” is not lost on Gray E. Takahashi, who states, “The Owl House is unique because of its willingness to break and queer a multitude of social conventions” (Takahashi, 2023).

As „The Owl House” is a relatively new animated series, having concluded in 2023, scholarly research on it is still in its infancy. The series awaits extensive analysis, particularly within the contexts of queer studies, gender studies, POC studies, and neurodiversity research.

LUZ NOCEDA:

A CASE STUDY IN INTERSECTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Luz Noceda, the protagonist of the animated series “The Owl House,” is portrayed as a dynamic and optimistic teenager who inadvertently finds herself transported to a magical realm. This unexpected journey provides her with a unique opportunity to embrace and celebrate her individuality. As previously discussed, Luz struggles to integrate into her community, often facing ostracism due to her unconventional humor and interests. Despite lacking the inherent abilities to become a witch, she remains resolute in her aspiration to achieve this goal. Together with her mentor and friends, Luz embarks on a quest to discover alternative ways to harness magic. Her journey, however, is not solely self-centered; Luz develops profound connections with other characters and empathetically aids them with their challenges. Notably, she assists her mentor in managing a curse that, within this world, symbolizes disability (Rattray & Ellis, 2023). Luz’s benevolence fosters transformation in her environment, epitomizing her mentor’s philosophy: “Us Weirdos Have to Stick Together.”

From a scholarly perspective, Luz’s narrative arc in “The Owl House” provides a rich text for analysis. As viewers, we observe Luz’s persistent struggle

against various adversities. One of the most significant narrative threads is her quest to become a witch, which serves as a compelling allegory for self-acceptance and the pursuit of acceptance from others. Initially, Luz is unable to pursue conventional studies in magic, compelling her to seek alternative methods to learn and utilize magic. These adaptations can be likened to the accommodations required by students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Vrasmas & Vrasmas, 2012). Luz's journey culminates in the profound realization that her ultimate desire is to be understood and accepted. This acceptance, when received from her mother, mentor, friends, and most importantly, from herself, enables Luz to fully actualize her potential and truly become a witch.

The character of Luz Noceda introduces themes of self-discovery and acceptance across multiple dimensions, including sexual orientation, neurodiversity, and ethnic background. Luz, as a bisexual Afro-Latina with ADHD, represents a significant and unprecedented level of representation in a Disney animated series. This multifaceted representation suggests that Disney may not have been fully prepared for such progressive inclusivity, yet it also highlights the evolving nature of animated media in addressing contemporary social issues. Luz's characterization challenges traditional norms and encourages a broader dialogue about the importance of diverse representation in media.

Furthermore, Luz's experiences and interactions within "The Owl House" resonate deeply with various marginalized communities. Her struggles and triumphs offer a narrative that is both relatable and inspirational, particularly for individuals who may feel alienated or misunderstood in their own lives. Luz's journey underscores the importance of empathy, resilience, and the pursuit of one's true identity, making her an exemplary figure for discussions within the realms of queer studies, gender studies, People of Color studies, and neurodiversity research.

As a Disney production, *The Owl House* faced considerable resistance from the studio in incorporating LGBT+ representation within its character roster. Despite such challenges, the show triumphed in delivering a series that not only features Luz as Disney's inaugural bisexual protagonist but also crafts her relationship with Amity, who identifies as a lesbian (Weeks, 2021). Their dynamic evolves from rivalry to friendship and blossoms into a romance, offering viewers a progressive depiction of a relationship that serves as an example not just for queer individuals but for heteronormative audiences as well. The portrayal of their bond, characterized by open communication, mutual trust, and mature problem-solving, sets a standard for relationships founded on honesty, respect for personal boundaries, and assertiveness.

Luz's identity is further enriched by her ethnic background and bilingualism. The lead character of *The Owl House* is an Afro-Latin bilingual, adeptly navigating between English and Spanish: a trait thoughtfully intended by the creators and realized through the casting of Sarah-Nicole Robles, who mirrors

Luz's linguistic fluency. While the series situates Luz primarily in a fantastical realm, her cultural heritage subtly permeates through her occasional use of Spanish, enriching her interactions and cultural exchange with her friends. From an intersectional perspective, Luz's mixed heritage and bilingualism further contribute to her experiences of exclusion and alienation. These aspects of her identity may influence her perception of reality and intensify her need for understanding and validation. Moreover, bilingualism, while not uncommon – with research suggesting that up to 66 % of children worldwide are bilingual (Konishi et al., 2014) – places Luz within another atypical category. In this context, these factors can serve as additional barriers to acceptance and fitting in. However, considering these attributes from an alternative viewpoint, Luz's bilingualism and diverse background might actually equip her with a unique adaptability, potentially facilitating her integration into the unfamiliar magical world and its distinct culture.

Additionally, it is through Luz that the series addresses neurodiversity, as she exhibits characteristics associated with ADHD from the beginning. Her tendencies toward hyper-fixation, difficulty with concentrating, and impulsive behavior are evident, culminating in her being directed to a 'Reality Check Summer Camp'. Yet, in the magical Boiling Islands, Luz confronts similar perceptions of indiscipline and incapability, underscoring her struggles within environments that fail to accommodate her unique learning needs. Luz's journey to discover alternative magic forms not only highlights her resilience but also her exceptional ability when provided with the right support and resources.

Luz's battle with emotional dysphoria, particularly Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD), is portrayed with sensitivity, showcasing her intense fear of disappointing others and her tendency to internalize blame. Through episodes like 'The Agony of the Witch' and 'The Mirror Graveyard', the series delves into Luz's emotional turmoil, emphasizing the importance of a supportive network in navigating feelings of guilt and fear of rejection. This theme of neurodiversity and the significance of understanding and support is further underscored by Dana Terrace's confirmation of her character design, that she is afraid of being abandoned. "The Owl House" advocates for the diverse needs and learning styles of individuals with neurodiversity, with characters like Eda offering Luz a nurturing environment that fosters her curiosity and love for learning.

This narrative thread is developed and emphasized further in the third season, particularly through the lens of Luz's mother, Camila. Initially perceived as critical, Camila's own experiences with bullying and societal pressure to conform reveal a deep empathy for Luz's challenges, illuminating the complex dynamics of parental support and societal expectations. It is her acceptance and support that allow Luz to understand who she truly is.

It is imperative to acknowledge that parents frequently encounter societal exclusion alongside their neurodiverse offspring, stemming from a deviation from the neurotypical standards. In Poland, this reality is poignantly captured in Jacek Hołub's investigative piece, "Niegrzeczne. Historie dzieci z ADHD, autyzmem i zespołem Aspergera" [Stories of Children with ADHD, Autism, and Asperger's Syndrome] (Hołub, 2022). This work sheds light on the systemic failures of societal, educational, and institutional frameworks to effectively support neurodiverse children and their families. It is crucial, however, to criticise the use of the term 'Asperger's syndrome' within the title. The contemporary understanding of autism as a spectrum, as delineated by the DSM-5 and the forthcoming ICD-11 in 2022, categorizes Asperger's syndrome under the broader classification of 'autism spectrum disorder'. Given Hans Asperger's affiliation with Nazi ideologies and his condemnable actions towards 'mal-adjusted' children, the autistic community vehemently rejects the association with his name.

The Owl House adeptly mirrors the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals with neurodiversity and their immediate circles. The animation's final season notably shifts the narrative focus, highlighting that the issue lies not within Luz but within a society that remains inflexible and intolerant of diversity. Through overcoming her fears, Camila exemplifies the societal transition required to embrace and support differences.

Luz's journey, marked by her unwavering pursuit of self-acceptance and understanding, offers a rich tapestry of themes for scholarly examination. As the series continues to garner attention and analysis, it is poised to contribute significantly to academic discussions surrounding representation, inclusivity, and the complexities of navigating multiple intersecting identities in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

Luz, as a protagonist, embodies a confluence of minority identities: from her bisexuality and Afro-Latin heritage to her neurodiversity and ADHD. *The Owl House* not only navigates the nuances of these identity discourses but also critically examines societal reception and the often-detrimental impact of external judgments on the individual. Luz's character serves as a tangible illustration of intersectionality, offering a relatable figure for young viewers across the spectrum of normativity. Through Luz, the series extends an opportunity for normative audiences to gain insight and empathy towards non-normative individuals, for whom Luz emerges as a beacon of representation and empowerment. Furthermore, for atypical individuals, she serves as a role model and a point of identification, providing meaningful representation that can support adolescents through the challenging phases of development.

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