Literature for LGBTQ+ Visibility:
Heartstopper *in the Classroom*

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Living is, in itself, a constant celebration of love
and where there is love, we will live on;
where there is not love, we must provide it.
Josh M. Kiszka

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the potential role of literature in fostering LGBTQ+ acceptance and representation in educational contexts, using the graphic novel *Heartstopper* (2016-) as a key example and didactic proposal. The study opens by exploring the historical milestones and contemporary challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ communities in the United Kingdom and Italy, emphasising the UK's legal advancements and the ongoing struggles in Italy due to religious and political opposition. The discussion then transitions to the literary medium of graphic storytelling, outlining the appeal of graphic novels and webcomics to young readers. *Heartstopper*'s evolution from webcomic to book to TV series serves as a case study to illustrate the role of online communities and fan culture in its widespread popularity. Finally, this dissertation discusses the pedagogical advantages of incorporating LGBTQ+-themed graphic storytelling into educational curricula. Through a comparative analysis of Scottish and Italian schools, it argues that the use of LGBTQ+-themed graphic novels not only enhances student engagement but also plays a pivotal role in fostering acceptance and visibility. *Heartstopper* is ultimately presented as an effective tool for encouraging empathy, inclusion, and diversity in the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

Education shapes the world, yet for LGBTQ+ students, the classroom is often a place where they feel invisible and discriminated against. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of inclusivity in educational settings, where representation in learning materials and support on the part of teachers and school staff play a fundamental role in the lives of young people, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting diversity. Despite this, LGBTQ+ students are "much less frequently targeted by policies and measures aiming to promote diversity and inclusion in schools".[1] This lack of LGBTQ+ visibility and representation in school curricula can exacerbate feelings of isolation, misunderstanding, and exclusion, which, in turn, impact queer students' mental health and academic outcomes. Literature, as a tool for storytelling and fostering moral values, has the power to bridge this gap by offering LGBTQ+ youth a chance to see themselves represented in the stories they read. This thesis examines the integration of LGBTQ+-themed literature into the classroom, focusing on the graphic novel as a powerful, multimodal medium that attracts young readers and fosters inclusivity. By examining Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* (2016-), a widely celebrated graphic novel series known for its positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ love and identities, this study underscores how such literature can be a vital resource for promoting empathy, acceptance, and queer visibility in schools.

Literature is a true pedagogical gem. Not only does it enhance students' language skills, but also tends to be far more engaging than traditional textbooks. Additionally, literary texts help develop emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and empathy and offer an effective way to explore different cultures. Literature creates opportunities for engaging with themes of identity, creating windows and mirrors that allow students to recognise themselves in characters and explore diverse identities. Despite these benefits, literature is often undervalued by teachers, who may worry that its language is too complex for students, whether they are native speakers or L2 learners. As a result, literature is still frequently taught in a highly memorisation-based way.

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[1] European Commission: European Education and Culture Executive Agency, *Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Schools in Europe*, 2023. Retrieved on 25 October 2024 from data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/443509.

One of the goals of this thesis is to show how literature can be used in educational contexts through a queer approach – such as by incorporating texts outside the literary canon of classics. These texts can serve as a strong starting point for class discussions on contemporary issues as well as specific school or classroom dynamics, such as bullying and discrimination. Among these are graphic novels, which can bring an additional dimension to the role of literature in education. Their multimodal combination of visual and textual storytelling allows for immersive, accessible narratives that can make complex themes more approachable, bridging gaps in comprehension and engaging reluctant readers or those who struggle with traditional text-heavy literature. By juxtaposing words and images, graphic novels encourage readers to interpret visual cues alongside narrative elements, helping to build emotional intelligence and critical thinking. Additionally, their visual format enhances emotional engagement, as readers can interpret characters' facial expressions and body language. Furthermore, graphic novels often handle challenging topics that resonate with adolescent readers, such as LGBTQ+ experiences of self-discovery, love, but also discrimination. By including graphic novels in their lessons, teachers can use this accessible and engaging format to promote empathy, foster inclusivity, and encourage constructive discussions, nurturing a more compassionate and well-rounded classroom environment.

The role of literature becomes even more powerful when it features diverse and often underrepresented voices, such as those of LGBTQ+ individuals, who may be marginalised or lack support in their immediate environments. Inclusive literature provides a crucial space where students can see both their own identities and those of others validated and respected. For LGBTQ+ students, encountering characters and narratives that reflect their experience, navigating similar struggles, joys, and identities, promotes a sense of belonging and influences their self-image and self-worth positively, thus fostering emotional well-being. This validation can be particularly empowering, offering a counter-narrative to the isolation or misrepresentation they might experience elsewhere. By showcasing LGBTQ+ individuals in relatable and realistic ways, literature has the power to reinforce that queer lives and relationships are an integral part of the human experience. Historically, however, queer characters and narratives have been banned, marginalised or portrayed negatively, often reinforcing harmful stereotypes rather than celebrating diverse identities. In recent years, nevertheless, there has been a

significant shift toward more positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals, reflecting broader social movements for equality and acceptance. This shift is critical not only in terms of individual identity formation but also in fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance within society. When literary works provide this kind of representation, they do more than simply tell a story – they provide queer youth with relatable characters who experience love, friendship, and self-acceptance. This type of literature normalises diverse identities, helping LGBTQ+ students feel less isolated while educating their peers on the importance of inclusivity and respect. Incorporating LGBTQ+ literary works into educational settings, in particular graphic novels, does, in fact, benefit both LGBTQ+ and cis-heterosexual students, encouraging them to reflect on the importance of acceptance and allyship within their peer groups.

As anticipated, Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* serves as a compelling example of the effective impact of LGBTQ+ representation in literature. The story follows the relationship between Charlie Spring, an openly gay teenager, and Nick Nelson, his classmate and boyfriend, as they navigate their relationship and encounter self-discovery challenges, while surrounded by a group of supportive queer friends. *Heartstopper* centres on a positive representation of LGBTQ+ relationships and mental health issues, addressing these topics delicately yet consciously, contributing to making the series exceptionally popular among readers of various ages, fostering a devoted fandom and achieving widespread success through its digital, print, and cinematic formats.

Adolescence is a critical time for identity formation, a process that can be even more complex for LGBTQ+ youth, who often face challenges such as feelings of isolation, identity struggles, and a heightened risk of bullying. Research consistently shows that queer students are at a higher risk for depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. For queer students, seeing positive representations and discussions around LGBTQ+ identities provides crucial support during this formative period, allowing them to feel more comfortable exploring and embracing their identities. This inclusion fosters a school culture where queer students feel supported, accepted, and valued, creating a sense of community where they are not pressured to hide or suppress their true selves. By promoting an atmosphere of openness and acceptance, schools can help all students grow into confident, self-assured individuals. Therefore, addressing LGBTQ+ topics in schools is not only about supporting LGBTQ+ students but also about creating a well-rounded,

empathetic student body. Inclusive education benefits everyone, as it cultivates understanding, reduces harmful biases, and prepares students to thrive in a diverse society.

Consequently, schools are key sites of social development, where young people learn not only academic subjects but also moral values, respect, and empathy. Integrating LGBTQ+ themes into the curriculum and school culture contributes to building a generation of informed, empathetic individuals who are well-equipped to live in diverse communities, learning to view all identities as natural and equal. Normalising such discussions helps dispel myths and counter stereotypes, encouraging students to approach differences with understanding rather than judgement. Educating students on LGBTQ+ issues helps prevent ignorance-based bullying, as students are less likely to mock or harass others over identities they understand and respect. A proactive approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity also equips teachers with the knowledge needed to intervene effectively when homotransphobic bullying occurs, creating a safe space for all students. Moreover, learning about LGBTQ+ topics in a supportive environment encourages students to ask questions and challenge their own biases, cultivating open-mindedness and critical thinking skills. By integrating LGBTQ+ themes into the curriculum, schools send a clear message that discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity are unacceptable. In a nutshell, discussing LGBTQ+ topics in educational environments helps create a future generation that is more tolerant, respectful, and skilled in navigating diverse social dynamics.

To recap, this thesis argues that by openly and accurately discussing LGBTQ+ issues and themes, schools can contribute to a safer, more accepting environment where all students feel validated and protected. To support this view, I will examine the contrasting educational approaches to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in Scotland and Italy, two countries with markedly different cultural, political, and social stances on LGBTQ+ issues. I selected these countries due to both personal and academic motivations. Italy is where I was born and raised and, therefore, where I experienced school as a queer teenager. On the other hand, Scotland is the first in the world to embed inclusive LGBTQ+ education into its official school curriculum. This comparison highlights how varying levels of institutional support for inclusivity in education impact LGBTQ+ students' experiences and mental health, shedding light on both the benefits of proactive policies and the challenges posed by conservative opposition.

Scotland has made significant progress in integrating LGBTQ+ themes into its educational framework, demonstrating a strong commitment to inclusivity and student well-being. In recent years, the Scottish government has introduced policies proposing an inclusive LGBTQ+ approach as part of the national curriculum, with the aim of creating a safer school environment and addressing issues like homotransphobic bullying and discrimination. Scottish teachers receive training on LGBTQ+ inclusivity and topics and are thus equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to support queer students and address any anti-LGBTQ+ behaviour. Studies show that Scotland's inclusive policies contribute to a positive school climate, with LGBTQ+ students reporting higher levels of happiness, illustrating how institutional support for inclusivity can lead to a more empathetic and respectful student body.

In contrast, Italy's approach to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in education is far more conservative, shaped by cultural, political, and religious factors that often resist the integration of such themes in schools. Italian education policies do not mandate nor suggest the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics, leaving such decisions to the discretion of individual schools or teachers. Consequently, LGBTQ+ issues are rarely, if ever, addressed in educational settings. This lack of institutional support is influenced by Italy's strong ties to traditional Catholic values, with opposition from political and religious groups who argue that LGBTQ+ topics are inappropriate for the classroom and conflict with their beliefs. Without formal inclusion or teacher training, there are thus fewer resources to address homotransphobic bullying, leaving LGBTQ+ students vulnerable and unsupported. Studies suggest that Italian queer students experience higher rates of bullying, mental health challenges, and a sense of exclusion, reflecting the broader social stigmatization of LGBTQ+ identities within Italian society.

The comparison between Scotland and Italy is particularly relevant, as it highlights the impact of educational policy on students' experiences and well-being. Scotland's example demonstrates the positive effects of institutional support, where inclusive policies foster a safer, more welcoming environment for all students. Italy, on the other hand, illustrates the consequences of neglecting LGBTQ+ inclusivity, highlighting the cultural and systemic barriers that hinder queer students' sense of belonging and safety. By exploring both countries' approaches, this thesis aims to reveal

the broader implications of inclusive education and advocate for the adoption of policies that support LGBTQ+ students and contribute to a more equitable learning environment.

There are several reasons why I have chosen *Heartstopper* as a case study for this dissertation. First, it demonstrates how graphic novels can effectively discuss real-life experiences in an accessible, visually engaging style, appealing especially to an adolescent audience. As a young adult graphic novel, *Heartstopper* aligns perfectly with the genre preferences of many teenagers, making it a particularly appropriate and engaging choice. Furthermore, the series stands out for its healthy and positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities and dynamics, offering a refreshing counter-narrative to the common queer tragedy trope[2] and avoiding tokenistic portrayals, instead presenting a narrative that emphasises resilience, friendship, and the importance of a supportive community – all values that align with inclusive educational goals. This positive, inclusive representation provides LGBTQ+ youth with the affirmation and support they need to accept and embrace their identities and helps to mitigate a sense of isolation that can lead to mental health struggles, including suicide attempts. Through the experiences of Nick and Charlie, the series promotes themes of self-acceptance and inclusion. Finally, *Heartstopper* features multiple queer characters, celebrating the diversity of LGBTQ+ identities and dispelling the myth that being gay means being alone. In sum, *Heartstopper* is an ideal case study for this thesis because it embodies the transformative potential of LGBTQ+ literature in educational settings. Its engaging format, relatable characters, and themes of love and acceptance make it a valuable resource for fostering empathy, inclusivity, and open-mindedness among students.

This dissertation is organised into four chapters, each of which is further divided into sub-chapters. Chapter 1 provides a brief historical overview of LGBTQ+ rights in Western countries, focusing on developments from the 1950s to the present day. This chapter establishes the social and legal context within which LGBTQ+ communities have struggled for visibility and equality, highlighting both the progress made and persistent challenges. The chapter's specific focus on the United Kingdom and Italy offers a comparative perspective that underlines the influence of social, political, and religious factors on LGBTQ+ rights. While the UK has generally advanced protections and support

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[2] The queer tragedy trope is a recurring narrative device in media where LGBTQ+ characters face tragedy, often involving suffering and death, and are not allowed to have a happy ending.

for LGBTQ+ individuals, Italy's reluctance – shaped by a more conservative sociopolitical landscape – has limited progress, affecting the everyday lives of queer individuals. This chapter emphasises the ongoing need for systemic change to protect LGBTQ+ individuals and promote equality and acceptance, especially in educational settings where formative experiences often shape self-perception and future well-being.

Chapter 2 explores the unique potential of graphic novels as a medium for storytelling, particularly in their ability to merge visual and textual elements to create a rich, multimodal experience. This chapter delves into the appeal of graphic novels for young readers, who find in these texts both simplicity and depth that facilitate engagement and identification with characters and themes. The analysis further extends to the role of webcomics, which transform graphic storytelling through digital platforms and foster dynamic, participatory communities around the narratives they present. Webcomics provide creators with direct feedback and support from readers, often forming inclusive communities where LGBTQ+ themes are discussed openly and empathetically. By focusing on the accessibility and cultural impact of graphic storytelling, Chapter 2 illustrates how this literary format encourages empathy and understanding, making it a valuable tool to use in schools for inclusive education.

Chapter 3 offers an in-depth examination of *Heartstopper* as a case study, analysing the narrative's key themes of identity, love, resilience, and mental health. This chapter highlights how the graphic novel series' portrayal of LGBTQ+ experiences departs from traditional narratives by centring on acceptance and growth rather than tragedy or conflict. The chapter also considers how *Heartstopper* gained popularity through social media thanks to its dedicated online fandom, underscoring the role of digital communities in amplifying positive queer representation. The series exemplifies how graphic novels can reach and resonate with broad audiences, fostering inclusive spaces where diverse identities are celebrated. Its successful journey highlights the potential of graphic storytelling as a medium for LGBTQ+-themed literature in educational contexts, emphasising the ways in which such works can encourage acceptance and empathy among students.

Chapter 4 examines the educational benefits of including LGBTQ+-themed literature in school curricula, comparing Scotland's proactive inclusion of LGBTQ+ content with Italy's more conservative stance. Scotland's policies have cultivated a school

environment where students report higher levels of well-being and acceptance. Italy, conversely, lacks comprehensive support for LGBTQ+ topics in schools, which contributes to a less inclusive environment and higher instances of bullying and mental health struggles among LGBTQ+ youth. This comparative analysis highlights that inclusive curricula benefit not only queer students but also foster empathy and respect among all students. The chapter underscores the importance of graphic novels like *Heartstopper* in helping teachers address real-life issues such as bullying, self-identity, and acceptance, making it an effective resource for queer pedagogy.

The idea for this thesis took shape in September 2022, just weeks before starting my Master's degree. I was in London with my partner to attend Daniel Howell's *We're All Doomed*, a comedy show that genuinely changed the trajectory of life and reshaped my perspective on most things. Toward the end of the show, Daniel delivered a heartfelt monologue, recalling his experience of being bullied in school for 'looking' gay and having no one standing up for him – this led to him developing internalised homophobia, which persisted until he was 27. He shared how, during this difficult time when he was even contemplating suicide, a single supportive person could have made all the difference, at a time in which he was considering suicide. "We have no choice but to keep using our voices",[3] he said, acknowledging how each small act can have a purpose and impact, despite the tendency to believe otherwise. His words resonated deeply with me, as I thought about my own experience as a queer person navigating both school and university. Especially during early adolescence, I felt trapped in my sexuality, without any accurate representation or anyone to talk to about it. By the end of high school, I had come to accept my bisexuality, yet I still felt isolated and misrepresented, and the classroom was not a nice environment for me to be in. I remember one particular day in class when the teacher divided us into two groups to debate LGBTQ+ rights, specifically marriage and adoption. One group was assigned to argue in favour, and the other against. Hearing my classmates say overtly homophobic views, fully aware I was there, was profoundly hurtful. Therefore, LGBTQ+ topics were technically addressed in class, but I could not help but wonder if this was the best way to approach them. To make things worse, when I was 17 I was outed on Instagram by my school's 'gossip and rumours'

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[3] Daniel Howell, *Daniel Howell: WE'RE ALL DOOMED! (Full Comedy Show)* [Video], YouTube, 28 April 2024. Retrieved on 6 November 2024 from youtube.com/watch?v=bGSOk1Vj5vY.

account – this had a huge toll on my mental health, leading to a severe anxiety disorder I still struggle with. In university, the feelings of loneliness persisted, especially during my undergraduate studies. LGBTQ+ themes were occasionally mentioned, but never with the depth they deserved. Towards the closing of my Bachelor's degree, my partner introduced me to *Heartstopper*. At first, as a 22-year-old, I thought the story was too childish and cheesy for me, but as soon as Charlie's mental health was discussed, I started seeing myself in him, as we shared similar stories of being outed and bullied. Reflecting on these experiences, I knew I had to write this thesis. While I am aware that my work alone may not incite sweeping changes, staying silent and passively accepting the limitations within the educational system felt wrong. Literature – the very subject that led me to this degree – has long been recognised as a vital means of identity formation, allowing readers to engage with diverse perspectives, challenge prevailing social norms, and foster self-awareness. Consequently, I felt compelled to explore a queer approach to the study and teaching of literature, not only as a contribution to academic discourse but also as a way of healing my younger self and opening doors for (future) LGBTQ+ students who may feel the same way I did.

This thesis holds significance beyond the specific contexts of LGBTQ+ literature or the graphic novel genre, addressing the broader educational and societal benefits of inclusive education. By demonstrating how LGBTQ+ representation in literature can shape a more compassionate and empathetic student body, this research advocates for a shift in how schools approach diversity, inclusivity, and student well-being. The study's findings highlight the transformative role of literature as a tool for social change, offering students both validation and the chance to understand identities different from their own. This thesis emphasizes that inclusive education is not merely about adding diverse voices to the curriculum; it's about building a foundation of empathy, respect, and acceptance that prepares students to be thoughtful, engaged members of society. By integrating LGBTQ+ literature into school settings, educators can help shape a future where diversity is celebrated, discrimination is challenged, and all students have the opportunity to feel seen, valued, and understood.

This is a work that deals with giving visibility to oppressed minorities who are finally being acknowledged for what they really are and given a voice in modern media. It is essential, especially nowadays, to speak about subjects that are considered taboo by far too many people.

We are here, we are queer and we will not disappear.

CHAPTER 1. Historical landmarks and modern challenges: LGBTQ+ rights and realities in the United Kingdom and Italy

This chapter provides a concise overview of the recent cultural events that have affected the Western LGBTQ+ communities, covering the period from the circumstances leading to the Stonewall riots of 1969 to the present year, 2024. I will explore the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in gaining their rights, by focusing, for instance, on the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the ongoing struggle for equality. The decision to prioritise a particularly limited timeframe and geographic region stems from the extensive and culturally diverse nature of LGBTQ+ history. Moreover, since this dissertation is dedicated to LGBTQ+ youth in the United Kingdom and Italy, I will devote two subchapters to the specific contexts of these two countries, examining how their social, political, and religious landscapes shape the experiences and rights of the respective LGBTQ+ communities.

1.1. Milestones and struggles from Stonewall to global activism(s)

To better understand the evolution of the Western[4] LGBTQ+ rights movement, it is essential to start from the events of the 1950s and 1960s that led to the Stonewall riots of 1969. The main sources I used for this subchapter are De Leo's *Queer. Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+* (2021)[5] and Belmonte's *The International LGBT Rights Movement: A History* (2021).[6]

In the 1950s, the main LGBTQ+ movement was the so-called 'homophile' which sought to distance itself from what the queer subculture used to be deemed as, that is illicit and lacking morals, often linked with male prostitution. In order to disassociate themselves from the imagery of the promiscuous and unlawful homosexual, this new group of gay men used the term 'homophile' to describe themselves, emphasising the idea of love rather than sex. This linguistic strategy conveys a sense of discretion characteristic of the movement. André Baudry, a French philosophy professor and founder of the homophile journal *Arcadie* (1954), argued that by showing dignity and respectability and

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[4] By Western, I refer to the LGBTQ+ communities of 'Westernised' countries, characterised by liberal democratic values and historical roots in European culture. In this case, I am specifically focusing on the US and European countries.

[5] M. De Leo, *Queer. Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+*, Turin, Einaudi, 2021.

[6] L. Belmonte, *The International LGBT Rights Movement: A History*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021.

limiting one's expression of their homosexuality to private settings, gay men could gain acceptance from political and intellectual elites. Although not inclusive nor devoted to gaining visibility within a conservative and hostile society, it cannot be denied that the success of *Arcadie* was an important international driving force for the conquest of rights and spaces for the homosexual community. By 1965, however, homophiles started to be confronted by a new wave of more radical gay and lesbian activism which, inspired by the rising civil rights movement, called for political change and social acceptance. In stark contrast to homophiles, they rejected the latter's philosophy of accommodating a heterosexist world and instead advocated for visibility and freedom.

During the 1960s, lesbian and gay activists often gathered in bars like the Stonewall Inn in New York. Clients were usually working-class gays and lesbians, queer people of colour, drag queens, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, and sex workers. Many gay bars operated clandestinely, with patrons risking arrest and public exposure if caught. Police regularly raided these bars, checking personal documents and arresting people for "unnatural attire or facial alteration".[7] Episodes of violence were common, and transgender women, in particular, were systematically abused by the officers. On 28 June 1969, the umpteenth NYPD raid took place at the Stonewall Inn. Unlike earlier raids, the patrons resisted, and a riot started, with people insulting the police and throwing cobblestones and bottles. In the following days, hundreds joined the protest. Though not the first act of queer resistance, Stonewall was undoubtedly the most significant for the LGBTQ+ community, sparking rallies across the United States and Europe. It can be argued that "Stonewall was a visible act of protest from a community that was no longer prepared to be silenced".[8] About a month after the riots, on 24 July, gay activists formed the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), which combined antiwar radicalism with assertive LGBTQ+ activism and quickly expanded to other countries, such as the United Kingdom and Italy. On 28 June 1970, Stonewall commemorative rallies took place in New York and Los Angeles, establishing June as LGBTQ+ Pride Month. Despite the apparent unity within the LGBTQ+ community, it was clear that its main protagonists were white, gay men. Lesbian women strived for a separate space, leading to the founding

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[7] L. Faderman, *The Gay Revolution. The Story of the Struggle*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2005, p. 161, quoted by M. De Leo, *Queer. Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+*, p. 222.
[8] D. K., *The LGBTQ+ History Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained*, London, Dorling Kindersley, 2023, p. 436.

of the feminist 'Radicalesbian' organisation in 1970. Simultaneously, transgender individuals faced discrimination from both gay men and lesbians, and people of colour were also excluded. In response to this situation, the GLF organised the 'Third World Gay Revolution' in 1970, creating a space for queer people of colour and critiquing the limits of gay activism as well as the homolesbobitransphobia and misogyny within the Afro-American activist community.

During the 1970s, the echo of the protests and rallies ensured the LGBTQ+ community to finally gain visibility within public discourse and politics. These marches were the power force behind the proliferation of gay rights bills, such as the 1973 removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).[9] The new wave of LGBTQ+ activism of the 1970s emphasised rising consciousness about the self, a process of understanding the political and revolutionary implications of being queer, as Altman argued: "Our homosexuality is a central part of our identity, not because there is anything intrinsic in it, but because social oppression has made it so."[10] However, most LGBTQ+ individuals were not directly involved in the activist movement, either due to more conservative views or because they lived in rural areas that limited their ability to participate in protests and rallies. Nonetheless, the need to include queer identities in public discourse, and thereby remove them from the confines of the private sphere, was strong. To achieve this, the focus LGBTQ+ activism shifted to specific goals aimed at minimising internal conflicts and advocating for a common strategy to affirm homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation.

Despite the progress achieved by the LGBTQ+ community during the 1970s, by the end of the decade the situation had not significantly improved compared to the early 1960s. In December 1975, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued *Persona Humana*, a document on sexual ethics which explicitly condemned homosexuality, although at the same time acknowledging it as an innate and immutable characteristic of the individual. Arguably influenced by the Church, 73% of Italians thought that homosexuality was an illness to be cured, while 19% of them thought of it as a vice, as a 1977 survey shows.[11] Simultaneously, in the United States, public opinion became

[9] J. Drescher, "Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality", *Behavioral Sciences* 5(4), 2015, pp. 565-575, p. 565.
[10] D. Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, New York, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971, p. 25.
[11] P. Giori, *Omosessualità e cinema italiano*, Rome, Bulzoni Editore, 2002, p. 301, quoted by M. De Leo, *Queer. Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+*, p. 241.

increasingly polarised. Conservative groups, known as the 'New Right', channelled the anger and frustration of American citizens into attacks on the rights of minorities, including the LGBTQ+ community. It can be argued that the visibility gained during the 1970s often resulted in the loss of rights and increased discrimination, causing many queer individuals to live in fear.

The situation for the transgender community between the late 1970s and the early 1980s was not pleasant either. During this period, they organised their own activism, which especially focused on securing access to hormonal and surgical treatments and the correction of personal data on official documents. The discrepancy between the gender recorded on documents and the individual's expression of their gender identity not only created practical challenges in daily life but also led to exclusion from the job market. Transgender and gender non-conforming people could be identified by law enforcement as threats to public safety, which resulted in the revocation of their documents and voting rights. The systematisation of the process for legal gender correction was facilitated by the introduction of gender identity disorder in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III). In Italy, the 1982 legislation permitting legal gender correction resolved many of these issues, but the process could only be implemented if it adhered to the gender binary framework and was contingent upon a specific medical process. As previously noted, transgender individuals, especially transgender women, faced transphobia even within the LGBTQ+ community itself. Feminists viewed the claims of transgender women as an attempt to undermine the rights of cisgender women and sought to exclude them from women's spaces. Margo Schulter, a transgender lesbian woman, addressed this issue in two articles from 1975 published in the American newspaper *Gay Community News*. She warned lesbofeminists against a binary gender perspective, arguing that it was ultimately sexist and excluded intersex and transgender individuals and urged them to move beyond the gender binary:

> First of all, *not* everyone is so clearly male or female, even on a purely physical level. […] Given these realities of the existence of various forms of intersexuality], it is truly sad that a feminist recognises as a goal of the movement to include "women who have lived their entire lives as women in female bodies". What is a female body, firstly? Where are its boundaries drawn? And why should they be drawn at all, if not by patriarchs who want to uphold gender binarism?[12]

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[12] M. Schulter, "The Transsexual/Lesbian Misunderstanding. Part II", *Gay Community News*, 15 March 1975, quoted by M. De Leo, *Queer. Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+*, pp. 267-8. [Italics in the

Not only did feminists critique transgender women but they also extended their condemnation to butch lesbians and transgender men, who were both accused of internalised misogyny.

If the 1970s might be considered a stagnant moment for the LGBTQ+ community, despite notable achievements and progress, the 1980s mark a phase of increased visibility and popularisation. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, the queer urban subculture restructured itself, primarily within the glamorous nightclubs central to the nightlife of major cities. The proliferation of gay bars was accompanied by the integration of queer elements into disco music and dance, which then began to influence mainstream pop culture. It was within these new urban settings that cultural initiatives such as queer seminars, publications, and radio programmes emerged. Similarly, the film industry experienced not only the organisation of queer film festivals but also the incorporation of queer cultural elements into mainstream cinema, exemplified by the success of the 1975 film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In the meantime, in the academy, American and European universities saw a rise in the number of Gay and Lesbian Studies courses. This heightened visibility naturally led to a more prominent role in institutional political debates, with the protection of civil rights becoming a central issue. In this context, various progressive parties faced attacks for their support of minority rights from conservative factions which, from the 1980s onward, gained popularity, partly due to the effective rhetorical occasion provided by the HIV epidemic. Although HIV was not inherently connected to homosexuality, having been identified in heterosexual individuals as well, the media created a narrative linking the virus to male homosexuality, which was immediately branded as a risk factor. This portrayal surrounding HIV, and then AIDS, contributed to exacerbating public alarm regarding male homosexuality, which was depicted as frenzied[13] and predatory. British historian and activist Simon Watney referred

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original.] Original cit.: "Innanzitutto, *non* tutti sono così chiaramente maschi o femmine, anche a livello puramente fisico. […] Date queste realtà [dell'esistenza di diverse forme di intersessualità] è davvero triste che una femminista riconosca come obiettivo del movimento 'includere donne che hanno vissuto tutta la loro vita come donne in corpi di donne'. Cos'è un corpo di donna innanzitutto? Dove si traccia il confine? E poi perché dovrebbe essere tracciato, se non dai patriarchi che vogliono difendere il binarismo di genere?".

[13] This can be considered partly true: safe sex was not practiced in the homosexual community at the time, given that condoms were strictly intended as a contraceptive and not as a way to prevent STIs. After the AIDS epidemic, information about practicing safe sex grew considerably.

to this phenomenon as the "AIDS spectacle",[14] describing it as a communication strategy that reinforced the idea of the inherent social danger posed by queer sexualities. Misinformation and the focus on reaffirming monogamous heterosexual norms were reflected in the policies of opposition, prevention, and the information implemented by governments such as that of Margaret Thatcher, who believed that

> Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay. All of these children are being cheated of sound start in life. Yes, cheated.[15]

In the United Kingdom, the Conservative government was pursuing a harshly antigay agenda, alarmed by the increasing visibility and impact of the British LGBTQ+ movement. After the Tories won re-election in 1987, they "put forward Section 28, an amendment to the Local Government Act that prohibited local governments and schools in England and Wales from 'promoting' homosexuality."[16] Following the new legislation, many schools and councils had to close LGBTQ+ youth support groups. British public opinion shared the government's stance, as shown by the 1986 survey run by the newspapers *The Spectator* and *The Independent*. The reports showed that more than half of the British population supported the recriminalization of homosexuality and endorsed the castration and sterilisation of HIV-positive individuals. Additionally, a 1987 survey indicated that 74% of respondents disapproved of homosexual relationships, which was a notable increase from 62% in 1983. Similarly, 93% of interviewees opposed same-sex adoption, up significantly from 63% in 1979.[17] In the United States, Pat Buchanan referred to HIV as a punishment from nature, and the Church also condemned the situation, reiterating the positions already expressed in the *Persona Humana* document, namely that homosexuality is a sin.

Within the LGBTQ+ community, the HIV epidemic created a profound collective grief that highlighted the impact of discrimination, from facing forced coming out following the diagnosis, to providing care for an HIV-positive partner and organising their

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[14] S. Watney, "The Spectacle of AIDS", *October*, vol. XLIII "AIDS. Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism", winter 1987, pp. 71-86, quoted by M. De Leo, *Queer. Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+*, p. 277.
[15] L. Belmonte, *The International LGBT Rights Movement: A History*, p. 149.
[16] *Ibidem.*
[17] S. Watney, *Policing Desire, Pornography, AIDS, and the Media*, London, Cassell, 1997, p. 111, quoted by M. De Leo, *Queer. Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+*, p. 279.

funeral, and eventually losing any right to their properties. On the other hand, the general population did not mourn, but was actually quite indifferent to the tragedy:

> A whole part of the gay community was decimated. We found ourselves led to undignified burials, graves without names; we watched our networks of relationships collapse around us.[18]

> Many people died in their own apartments. It had become normal to learn that someone we knew had died and that their belongings had been thrown out on the street.[19]

Although the hostile political climate of the late 1980s, LGBTQ+ activists successfully pushed governments to respond to the global health crisis, enraged by the latter's inaction. Furthermore, the epidemic added urgency for the legalisation of homosexuality and for protecting individuals from homophobic discrimination. Activist groups managed to score significant victories in a number of nations: in 1989, Denmark became the first country in the world to legalise civil unions, followed by Norway, Sweden and Iceland during the 1990s. On 8th February 1994, the European Parliament adopted a resolution "calling for member nations to grant their gay and lesbian citizens equal rights in relationship recognition, adoption, social security, housing, and inheritance and to adopt a common age of consent for heterosexual and homosexual sexual activities".[20] On the very same day, the Vatican published a letter condemning same-sex unions as "a serious threat to the future of the family and the society".[21]

By the end of the beginning of the new millennium, the international LGBTQ+ community was ready to defend its fragile gains and fight for full rights. As Belmonte observes, "over the last two decades, the international LGBT rights movement has broadened its geographic scope, won critical legal victories, and gained support from key supranational institutions. But this increased visibility and success often met intense resistance".[22] In 2000, Great Britain finally lifted the ban on openly gay and lesbian citizens serving in the military and agreed on setting sixteen as the age of consent for homosexual relations, like heterosexual ones, which was previously set at eighteen. One year later, the Netherlands became the first country to legalise same-sex marriage,

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[18] P. Broqua, *A History of AIDS* cit., p. 167, quoted by M. De Leo, *Queer. Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+*, p. 285.
[19] S. Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a lost imagination*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2012, p. 34, quoted by M. De Leo, *Queer. Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+*, p. 285.
[20] L. Belmonte, *The International LGBT Rights Movement: A History*, p. 164-5.
[21] *Ivi*, p. 165.
[22] *Ivi*, p. 171.

followed by Belgium in 2003, Spain and Canada in 2005. The latter also legalised adoption by same-sex couples. In the same period, a number of countries all over the world decriminalised homosexuality and/or outlawed discrimination. It is clear that these achievements coexisted with an effort to increase awareness of anti-LGBTQ+ violence and unfair treatment. In December 2008, sixty-six European and Latin American countries supported a UN declaration calling for the universal decriminalisation of homosexuality but faced opposition from religious organisations, such as the Roman Catholic Church, and a few countries, among which the United States. Nevertheless, in November 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the USA "would not tolerate the criminalization of homosexuality in nations receiving US aid aimed at combatting HIV/AIDS".[23] During the celebrations of Pride Month in 2010, she declared that "human rights are gay rights and gay rights are human rights".[24] Two years prior, President Barack Obama also aligned himself with the LGBTQ+ cause, asserting that "no country should deny people their rights because of who they love, which is why we must stand up for the rights of gays and lesbians everywhere".[25] In June 2015, same-sex marriage was legalised in the States. The stance of the USA influenced a series of events signalling significant advances in several countries all over the world, which in turn sustained pro-LGBTQ+ advocacy at the United Nations. Although many nations have made striking progress, others have intensified anti-LGBTQ+ laws, for instance Russia, where President Putin encouraged the adoption of a law criminalising the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights. Similarly, the Polish leader of the right-wing party denounced LGBTQ+ "ideology" as a threat to the nation, creating "LGBT-free zones". Something similar might happen in the United States as a consequence of Donald Trump's victory in the elections (6 November 2024), whose presidency will probably erase protection and a number of rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Being influential as it is, as I have been arguing, what will happen in the US will inevitably influence other countries, European ones especially, given the current political situation and the rise of far-right parties and governments.

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[23] *Ivi*, p. 180.
[24] Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at an Event Celebrating Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Month", 22 June 2010, quoted by L. Belmonte, *The International LGBT Rights Movement: A History*, p. 180.
[25] The Advocate, *Obama Addresses Global Gay Rights in UN Speech*, 21 September 2011, advocate.com/news/daily-news/2011/09/21/obama-addresses-global-gay-rights-un-speech, quoted by L. Belmonte, *The International LGBT Rights Movement: A History*, p. 181.

All things considered, I would argue that despite the progress made in various countries, the journey towards equality and acceptance abounds with difficulties. Throughout the last six decades, the LGBTQ+ community has faced countless challenges, from social stigmatisation to legal discrimination, which persisted across time and space, reflecting violence, biases and marginalisation. The United States, in particular, has played a crucial role in the advancements for the LGBTQ+ community, such as the recognition of rights like marriage. However, ongoing debates illustrate that the path to equality is not straightforward. Another salient influence has been the Church, which has been shaping negative attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community for decades. In the next subchapters, I will explore LGBTQ+ rights in the United Kingdom and Italy, examining the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals living in these countries and how external forces, such as the Church in the case of Italy, influence societal attitudes and legal framework.

1.2. Legal progress and lingering prejudice: the UK's LGBTQ+ journey

The legal framework for LGBTQ+ rights in the United Kingdom has undergone significant evolution over the past decades, marked by several key milestones. One of the earliest and most critical reforms was the *Sexual Offences Act* of 1967, which decriminalised private homosexual acts between men over the age of 21 in England and Wales. This amendment was later extended to Scotland in 1981, following the *Criminal Justice Act (Scotland)* of 1980. In Northern Ireland, on the other hand, homosexuality was not legalised until 1982. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the age of consent for heterosexual relations was set at sixteen and at twenty-one for homosexual ones, instead. Equalisation of the age of consent was achieved only in 2000.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the United Kingdom took further steps to protect the LGBTQ+ community from discrimination. In 2003, regulations were introduced to prevent discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and training, which were later incorporated into the comprehensive *Equality Act* of 2010. The Act provided broad legal protections against discrimination in the workplace and in wider society.[26] Another significant legislative turning point was the *Civil Partnership Act* of 2004, which allowed same-sex couples to legally form civil partnerships, granting them

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[26] Government of the United Kingdom, *Equality Act 2010: Guidance*. (n.d.). Retrieved on 17 August 2024 from gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance.

the same legal status, rights, and responsibilities of heterosexual couples, including those related to "life insurance, pensions, inheritance and the care of a partner's children."[27] However, "there were legal and social objections to calling a same sex relationship a marriage. The view was that marriage could only be between a man and a woman".[28] Full marriage equality was not achieved until the *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act* of 2013, which allowed homosexual couples to marry in England and Wales. Scotland followed in 2014, and Northern Ireland in 2020. Couples registered in a civil partnership were granted the right to convert it into a marriage. Moreover, the *Adoption and Children Act* of 2002 made it possible for same-sex couples to adopt children, provided they meet the same requirements as any other prospective adopters. This legislation applied only to England and Wales, although Scotland followed in 2007 and Northern Ireland in 2011.[29] Gay and lesbian couples can access artificial insemination and surrogacy. Nevertheless, these options are heavily regulated for both heterosexual and homosexual couples, who must meet rigid criteria to access them.[30]

Regarding transgender rights, the *Gender Recognition Act* of 2004 was a landmark piece of legislation that enabled transgender individuals who had already undergone medical gender reassignment procedures to legally change their gender and obtain a new birth certificate and other documents. Although this represented a significant advancement, it was notably delayed compared to other European countries. Nonetheless, on 29 May 2024, Rishi Sunak's Conservative government introduced regulations restricting the prescribing and supply of puberty-blocking hormones to those under 18 years of age. The ban was lifted on 3 September 2024.[31]

Overall, these legislative changes reflect the ongoing journey towards greater equality and protection for LGBTQ+ individuals in the UK, while also highlighting areas where further progress is needed, such as the harmful practice of conversion therapy. The

[27] University and College Union (UCU), *LGBT+ Legal Milestones*. (n.d.). Retrieved on 17 August 2024 from ucu.org.uk/media/11041/LGBT-legislation/pdf/LGBT__legal_milestones_FINAL.pdf

[28] *Ibidem.*

[29] Legislation.gov.uk, *Adoption and Children Act 2002*. (n.d.). Retrieved on 18 August 2024 from legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/38/contents.

[30] NHS, *Having a Baby if You Are LGBT+*. (n.d.). Retrieved on 18 August 2024 from nhs.uk/pregnancy/having-a-baby-if-you-are-lgbt-plus/ways-to-become-a-parent-if-you-are-lgbt-plus/#:~:text=In%20the%20UK%20either%20sperm,having%20a%20child%20through%20surrogacy.

[31] Government of the United Kingdom, *New Restrictions on Puberty Blockers*, 29 May 2024. Retrieved on 17 August 2024 from gov.uk/government/news/new-restrictions-on-puberty-blockers#:~:text=The%20government%20has%20today%20introduced,June%20to%203%20September%202024.

Government of the United Kingdom itself has described it as abhorrent and has committed to introducing legislation to ban it. Although certain conversion practises are already illegal, such as those involving violence, the UK Government has acknowledged that existing laws do not prohibit all of them, such coercive talking therapies. A consultation on banning conversion therapy started in 2021, but no draft bill has been published at the moment of writing this dissertation.[32]

In July 2017, the UK Government launched the 'National LGBT Survey' to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in the areas of safety, health, education and workplace. To analyse what it is like to be living in the UK as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I will primarily reference this survey. While I acknowledge that said study may be somewhat outdated, it remains the only comprehensive official document currently available. Nonetheless, I will also incorporate insights from the more recent 'Life as a Young LGBT+ Person Living in England 2021-2022'[33] research project, conducted by Barnardo's Positive Identities[34] and Sheffield Hallam University. The latter study, although more current, is limited to a specific demographic, namely individuals aged 13 to 19 residing exclusively in England.

The 'National LGBT Survey' was hosted online for 12 weeks[35] and received more than 108,000 valid responses from LGBTQ+ individuals who at the time were at least sixteen years old and resided in the United Kingdom.[36] Of all respondents, 61% identified as homosexual, 24% as bisexual, while a small number as pansexual (4%), asexual (2%) or queer (1%). As the survey reports, these responses varied by age, showing that bisexuality was more common in younger generations. In terms of gender identity, 13% of the respondents were transgender or trans*[37], with nearly 7% identifying as non-binary. As in the case of bisexuality, non-binary individuals were more commonly younger

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[32] UK Parliament, *Prohibiting Conversion Therapy*, 22 February 2024. Retrieved on 17 August 2024 from commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9972/.

[33] Barnardo's Positive Identities, *Life as a Young LGBT+ Person Living in England 2021-2022*, 8 June 2023. Retrieved on 17 August 2024 from cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Life%20as%20a%20Young%20LGBT%2B%20Person.pdf.

[34] Barnardo's Positive Identities Service works with young people and families and provides support with gender identity and sexuality.

[35] Government of the United Kingdom, *LGBT Survey Report*, July 2018, p. 7. Retrieved on 17 August 2024 from assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b3cb6b6ed915d39fd5f14df/GEO-LGBT-Survey-Report.pdf.

[36] *Ivi*, p. 8.

[37] In this case, *trans** is used as an umbrella term to describe individuals whose gender identity does not align with their gender assigned at birth.

participants. Moreover, younger transgender interviewees were more likely to be trans men than trans women. Over two thirds of 'National LGBT Survey' respondents were aged between sixteen and thirty-four, therefore younger, on average, than the general UK population as a whole. This discloses that younger people are more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ – some of the reasons behind this might be increased societal acceptance and legal protections, better representation in media, and loosened traditional norms. Geographically, the survey revealed that England has the highest population of LGBTQ+ individuals in the United Kingdom, followed by Scotland (9%), Wales (4%) and Northern Ireland (2%). A high percentage of interviewees resided in big centres, such as London.

The ministerial foreword to the summary report of the 'National LGBT Survey' states that the UK Government[38] was "committed to making the UK a country that works for everyone"[39] and described UK society as diverse and tolerant, while at the same time admitting that LGBTQ+ people frequently face significant obstacles to participation in public everyday life. Accordingly, the study results reveal that a significant number of LGBTQ+ individuals, especially trans* people, report lower levels of life satisfaction compared to the general population. For instance, almost a quarter of the interviewees declared they had accessed mental health services in the twelve months preceding the survey. These data indicate a higher prevalence of mental health issues within the LGBTQ+ community, whose members are evidently at greater risk of being victims of crime compared to the general population. Over two thirds of respondents admitted avoiding holding hands with a same-sex partner out of fear of verbal or physical violence, experienced by at least two in five participants. Moreover, fewer than one in ten of the most serious episodes went unreported because "it happens all the time"[40] and out of fear of homolesbobitransphobic responses from official help services. A lesbian cisgender woman from Wales stated

> We do not report it as we are so used to homophobic behaviour that we keep our mouths shut. We are afraid of the police laughing at us. We are afraid of the humiliation of having to say we were raped by another woman. We are afraid that no-one will take us seriously.[41]

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[38] It is worth to remind that, at the time, Theresa May's Conservative Party was governing the country.
[39] Government of the United Kingdom. *LGBT Survey Report*, p. 2.
[40] *Ivi*, p. 3.
[41] *Ivi*, p. 13.

When incidents were actually reported, nearly half of the interviewees admitted not being satisfied with how the police handled the situation. For this reason, 70% of respondents declared of avoiding being open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, both in public setting, such as the workplace or school, and at home. Almost half of the interviewees had experienced homotransphobic incidents within the twelve months preceding the survey, including verbal harassment (26%), outing[42] (14%), threats of physical and sexual harassment (6%), and actual physical (2%) and sexual (2%) violence, the latter sometimes being used to 'correct' the victim's sexual orientation. 5% of respondents had been offered conversion therapy by faith groups and healthcare providers. Consequently, LGBTQ+ people are generally dissatisfied with health services because of the lack of knowledge among medical professionals about their mental and physical health needs. A high proportion of trans* respondents reported negative experiences because of their gender identity, asserting that their specific necessities were often ignored. Additionally, access to gender identity services, including psychological support, diagnosis of gender dysphoria, hormonal therapy, and gender-affirming surgery, was described as difficult due both to long waiting lists and insufficient expertise among medical professionals on the issue.

The workplace is similarly challenging for LGBTQ+ individuals. The survey reveals that openly queer and trans* people have fewer employment opportunities than the general population. Moreover, those who do find a job often experience outing, bullying, and verbal violence by colleagues, supervisors, and clients. Again, many incidents remain unreported. A similar situation is observed in educational settings, with the persistence of homotransphobic bullying in school, despite an apparent raise in awareness and acceptance. An interviewee declared that "schools do not take it seriously and although they hang posters about LGBT awareness and society, teachers still do not understand calling someone a 'f*ggot' is hate".[43] A third of respondents reported having experienced negative reactions due to their LGBTQ+ identity, including outing (21%), verbal harassment (19%), exclusion from events or activities (6%), and sexual and physical harassment (2% each). As a consequence, younger LGBTQ+ people are twice as likely to be bullied in secondary school compared to their cisgender, heterosexual

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[42] Outing refers to the act of revealing someone's sexual orientation and/or gender identity without their consent.
[43] Government of the United Kingdom. *LGBT Survey Report*, p. 15.

peers. The most severe incidents were mostly perpetrated by other students, although approximately 9% involved teaching staff. In this case as well, a high proportion of violent episodes remained unreported because "it happens all the time, nothing would happen or change and it wouldn't be taken seriously".[44] Fortunately, such incidents are generally less frequent in higher education settings.

At school, LGBTQ+ students often feel that their needs are inadequately addressed, particularly when it comes to sex education, which typically only addresses heterosexual and cisgender relationships. Only 3% of respondents reported having engaged in debates and dialogues about sexual orientation and gender identity at school, while 77% indicated that these topics were not covered at all. Of all those who did encounter these themes, only 9% felt adequately prepared for their future life as LGBTQ+ individuals. Regarding gender identity, only 36% of trans* individuals transitioning while in education reported that their schools were supportive, and only 13% felt that the teachers were understanding of the difficulties experienced by trans* students. The more recent 'Life as a Young LGBT+ Person Living in England 2021-2022' survey suggests that not much changed between 2017 and 2021/2022. Accordingly, young people still face a number of issues regarding openness about their identity, including bullying and outing not only to peers, but also to their parents. Moreover, interviewees voiced the invisibility and tokenistic inappropriateness of LGBTQ+ themes in school, suggesting that a more inclusive sex and relationships education should be integrated into official school curricula.

To sum up, the comprehensive data from 'National LGBT Survey' and 'Life as a Young LGBT+ Person Living in England 2021-2022' studies illustrate the disparities between legislative progress and the everyday experiences of LGBTQ+ people. While legal protections have been established and expanded, their practical impact remains inconsistent, with considerable room for improvement. Undeniably, persistent discrimination, inadequate support structures, harassment, and violence reveal significant gaps. Such distressing occurrences are particularly common among younger individuals, who report frequent episodes of bullying, exclusion, faulty representation and protection in schools. The high incidence of these issues in public settings, including health services and workplaces, indicates the urgent need for reforms. In conclusion, robust policy

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[44] *Ivi*, p. 16.

interventions and the revision of school curricula are crucial in bridging the gaps between legal rights and actual everyday life, ensuring the possibility for LGBTQ+ individuals to fully participate in a more inclusive and tolerant society.

1.3. Holy resistance and right-wing oppression: the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights in Italy

In contrast to the United Kingdom, the Italian legal framework for LGBTQ+ rights is notably inadequate and delayed, especially when compared to other Western European countries. Namely, Italy remains the sole western European nation where same-sex marriage is not legally recognised, and same-sex adoption is similarly unpermitted. This situation can be partly attributed to the significant influence exerted by the Catholic Church on both politics and public opinion in Italy.

Surprisingly, legal acceptance of homosexuality in Italy appeared very early. As a matter of fact, it dates back to 1890, when the first Italian Penal Code decriminalised private consensual same-sex acts between adults.[45] Since then, Italy has seen limited legislative advancements regarding LGBTQ+ rights. The first major landmark occurred with the introduction of the *Civil Unions Act* (*Legge Cirinnà* 76/2016) of 2016, which established civil partnership for same-sex couples. This legislation granted homosexual couples rights and responsibilities comparable to those of marriage, though it notably excluded joint adoption rights, which were removed last minute.[46] Some municipalities, however, independently allow both parents' names on their children's birth certificate. In January 2023, the Ministry of the Interior sent a letter to said municipalities to order them to recognise only the biological parent. For example, the Prosecutor in Padua revoked all birth certificates that listed same-sex parents. Since then, 33 homogenitorial families received letters saying that the non-birthing parent had been removed from their children's document. Moreover, in July 2023, the Government approved a law to ban

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[45] International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), *State-sponsored Homophobia: Global Legislation Overview – Update December 2020*, December 2020, p. 106. Retrieved on 19 August 2024 from ilga.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ILGA_World_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_report_global_legislation_overview_update_December_2020.pdf.

[46] The Guardian, *Italian Senate Passes Watered-Down Bill Recognising Same-Sex Civil Unions*, 25 February 2016. Retrieved on 19 August 2024 from theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/25/italy-passes-watered-down-bill-recognising-same-sex-civil-unions.

surrogacy also to those couples who go abroad to access it. Although the European Court of Human Rights declared such actions inadmissible, finding legal violations on the part of Italy,[47] the law was passed by the Italian Senate on 16 October 2024.[48]

Regarding gender affirmation, as already mentioned, transgender individuals have been legally permitted to change their sex on documents from 1982.[49] Initially, this process required medical interventions, including sterilisation, hormonal therapy, and gender-confirming surgery. It was only in 2015 that the obligations for sterilisation and surgery were eliminated.[50] Additionally, since 2020, hormone treatments have been made available free of charge to all individuals diagnosed with gender dysphoria or incongruence.[51]

Despite these few advancements, the journey towards full equality remains abundant in obstacles. In 2018, Alessandro Zan, a member of the Democratic Party, proposed the 'DDL Zan' bill which aimed to combat discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The goal of the document was to extend protections against hate crimes, introducing specific punishments for homotransphobic violence, and support mechanisms for its victims, including legal and psychological assistance. Furthermore, it included measures to promote LGBTQ+-inclusive education in schools to fight prejudice and promote understanding. The 'DDL Zan' was passed by the Chamber of Deputies in 2020, but was later blocked in the Senate, which argued that such a law would have limited freedom of speech and of religious expression. As Gusmeroli (2021) argues in his article, the influence of the Catholic Church and the openly homophobic language used by its exponents reinforce an anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric that is particularly prevalent within the right-wing political majority that is governing Italy at the moment.[52] For example, in June 2024, Pope Francis used a derogatory Italian term to refer to

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[47] ILGA-Europe, *Rainbow Europe Map and Index: Italy*, 2024, pp. 1-2. Retrieved on 21 August 2024 from rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/countries/italy/.

[48] E. De Crescenzo, *In Italia la Gestazione Per Altri Diventa Reato Universale*, ANSA, 17 October 2024. Retrieved on 31 October 2024 from https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2024/10/16/in-italia-la-gestazione-per-altri-diventa-reato-universale_6d406328-a9c3-4c88-994a-18642761e6be.html.

[49] Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, *Legge 14 aprile 1982, n. 164 – Norme in materia di rettificazione di attribuzione di sesso*. Retrieved on 19 August 2024 from gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1982/04/19/082U0164/sg.

[50] Corte Costituzionale, *Sentenza n. 221 del 2015*, 2015. Retrieved on 19 August 2024 from cortecostituzionale.it/actionSchedaPronuncia.do?param_ecli=ECLI:IT:COST:2015:221#.

[51] Il Post, *Da oggi i farmaci ormonali per le transizioni di genere sono gratuiti in tutta Italia*, 1 October 2020. Retrieved on 19 August 2024 from ilpost.it/2020/10/01/terapia-ormonale-transgender-gratuiti/.

[52] P. Gusmeroli, "Inversione dello stigma e aggiornamento delle retoriche anti-Lgbt: l'omofobia 'contesa' nel discorso mediatico italiano", *AG AboutGender* 10(19), 2021, p. 274.

homosexual seminarists, but later issued an apology to those who felt offended by the epithet.[53] Nevertheless, the Vatican has recently showed an apparent progressive openness which emerged, for instance, in the occasional desire for dialogue with LGBTQ+ individuals. Despite this new attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community, the Church still plays a significant role in the so-called anti-gender crusade, a politically-influenced movement that defends the 'natural' heteronormative family and fights against a possible introduction of LGBTQ+ themes in schools.[54] In January 2023, the Minister for Family, Birth and Equal Opportunities argued that all children have the right to have a mother and a father, and not two mothers or two fathers, while in March, MP Mollicone declared that "same-sex parenthood was not 'normal' and that surrogacy was a crime worse than 'paedophilia'".[55] Therefore, it is possible to conclude that homotransphobic hate speech is reinforced and openly perpetuated by Meloni's government. Likewise, anti-LGBTQ+ violence is a major issue, which, in 2023 only, has led to three murders and three suicides, among which that of a 13-year-old boy who ended his life after being bullied for his sexual orientation. The situation for LGBTQ+ students is drastic, indeed. A 23-year-old pansexual, trans man reported that "after the school experience, I no longer communicated my LGBT identity to anyone, unless there is a close friendship."[56] As a matter of fact, anti-LGBTQ+ bullying is unfortunately quite common in schools, as revealed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)'s 'LGBTI Survey 2024'[57]. Almost 70% percent of interviewees declared having suffered humiliation, insults or threats. Only 27% of them found support and protection. To avoid such episodes, half of students reported having hidden their LGBTQ+ identity while in school. As for the case of the United Kingdom, a large majority of respondents said their school never addressed LGBTQ+ issues. Although some Italian schools propose

[53] ANSA, *Pope Used Derogatory Term for Gays Again – sources*, 12 June 2024. Retrieved on 20 August 2024 from ansa.it/english/news/vatican/2024/06/12/pope-used-derogatory-term-for-gays-again-sources_d848d862-c9c8-4731-b0d0-eb644a38ee65.html.

[54] P. Gusmeroli & L. Trappolin, "Narratives of Catholic Women Against 'Gender ideology' in Italian Schools: Defending Childhood, Struggling with Pluralism", *European Societies* 23(4), 2021, p. 2.

[55] ILGA-Europe, *Rainbow Europe Map and Index: Italy*, 2024, p. 1. Retrieved on 21 August 2024 from rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/countries/italy/.

[56] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *LGBTIQ Survey 2024 Country Sheet: Italy*, p. 2. Retrieved on 21 August 2024 from fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/lgbtiq_survey-2024-country_sheet-italy.pdf.

[57] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *LGBTIQ Survey 2024 Country Sheet: Italy*.

initiatives aimed at improving inclusivity, such as gender-neutral bathrooms and "alias careers"[58], a significant gap remains.

Concerning other areas of life, the situation for Italian LGBTQ+ individuals is quite similar to that of the United Kingdom. For instance, FRA's survey reports that more than a half of the interviewees refrains from holding hands with their same-sex partner and a quarter avoids certain locations for fear of being assaulted. The reason for such anxiety is not unfounded. Anti-LGBTQ+ violence and harassment are quite common, especially because there are no laws that punish homotransphobic acts – half of the respondents admitted having been harassed in the year before the survey. In Italy, as well as the UK, more than 9 out of 10 hate crimes goes unreported.

In light of what has been discussed in this subchapter, it can be confidently asserted that, despite little progress, the quality of life for the Italian LGBTQ+ community is not satisfactory. Accordingly, only 4% of LGBTQ+ individuals believe that the government is actively combating prejudice and intolerance.[59] Anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments are entrenched in Italian public opinion and politics, making episodes of homotransphobic discrimination, harassment, and violence quite common. The lack of legislations aimed at protecting the psychological and physical well-being of the LGBTQ+ community can be linked to the strong influence of the Vatican in constraining the advancement of pro-LGBTQ+ legislations. In addition, the Italian Government's indifference to LGBTQ+ matters is strikingly evident in the absence of official surveys dedicated to documenting and analysing LGBTQ+ experiences. Consequently, it may be posited that, in contrast to the United Kingdom particularly, the Italian ruling class demonstrates a notably insufficient commitment to fostering a tolerant and inclusive society that sees all citizens as equal.

This chapter has established the essential groundwork for contextualising the central argument of this thesis: the pedagogical advantages of integrating LGBTQ+-themed literature into school curricula. In the final chapter, I will present a comparative analysis of Scottish and Italian schools, demonstrating that the use of LGBTQ+-themed graphic novels, such as Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper*, within educational setting not only

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[58] The alias career is designed to create an alternative identity by replacing personal data with the "chosen" name selected by a person undergoing gender transition.
[59] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *LGBTIQ Survey 2024 Country Sheet: Italy*, p. 2.

enhances student engagement but also plays a critical role in fostering acceptance and promoting representation. Before delving into this discussion, I will explore graphic novels and webcomics as literary media particularly popular among young readers, and thus, potentially the most effective and immediate vehicles for engaging them with the discussion of such important topics.

CHAPTER 2. From paper to screen: multimodality in graphic storytelling

One of the greatest phenomena in contemporary visual storytelling is undoubtedly the graphic novel, a literary medium that has managed to break through the conventions of comic books in terms of dimensions, form, and content. Not only has it elevated the cultural status of traditional comics, but it is also one of the most popular media today – according to Calabrese (2020), graphic novels account for around 11% of the entire production of fiction in Italy. [60] Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that we live in an extremely digitalised world in which the internet significantly influences everything we engage with, including reading habits.

This chapter will begin by exploring the graphic novel in relation to comic books, investigating its status as a multimodal semiotic system that merges words and images, inviting readers to actively navigate a complex web of interrelated sequences. I will then address the intricate relationship between graphic novels and contemporary societal issues, uncovering how this medium serves as a powerful tool for exploring identity, especially in the context of adolescence. Moving on to the next subchapter, devoted to webcomics, I will start by examining the concept of remediation, discussing how the internet has changed the narrative techniques of graphic storytelling while also altering the relationship between creators and their audiences. I will continue exploring the characteristics that define webcomics, highlighting the impact of digital accessibility. By examining the interplay between author and readership, this chapter will conclude by reflecting on the crucial importance of webcomics in fostering representation of minorities and building communities. This exploration will set the stage for my subsequent analysis of the role of online communities and fandoms in the success of Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper*.

2.1. The graphic novel and its appeal to young readers

As Baetens et. al (2018) explain, "the graphic novel is a specific medium of the comic form, which displays a number of prototypical features that can be read, compared, and analysed".[61] It is vital to stress that the graphic novel is not a distinct literary genre but

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[60] S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, Rome, Carocci Editore, 2017, p. 7.
[61] J. Baetens, H. Frey, & S. Tabachnick (eds.), Introduction, in *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 1.

rather a format that can encompass many different genres. Graphic novels can thus be described as "visual books that tell either long or short stories in a serialised or self-contained format, adhering to comics conventions or exploring autobiographical, historical, or journalistic themes".[62] Nevertheless, establishing a definitive set of characteristics for the graphic novel is challenging, given its constant evolution and the influence of cultural variations shaped by location, audience, and possible online dissemination. However, it is useful to compare and distinguish it from the comic book, as the two are often conflated and mistakenly regarded as synonymous forms of the same medium. While comic books are typically associated with short, simplistic narratives aimed at a younger audience, graphic novels are interpreted as a more sophisticated literary medium for adult readers. Although comic books and graphic novels share a similar layout, the former adhere to traditional formal rules, while the latter often experiment with innovative narrative styles that challenge conventions, such as by expanding the role of the narrator. In terms of thematic content, graphic novels tend to present narratives that are more mature, complex, and realistic compared to those traditionally associated with comic books. From an editorial standpoint, the graphic novel is typically regarded as a complete literary work – autonomous and self-contained. Furthermore, its format closely mirrors that of the conventional novel, particularly in matters of size, cover design, material quality, and page count.

In semiotic terms, both comic books and graphic novels exemplify an instance of double coding, whereby two distinct signifying systems[63] are interwoven through hierarchical configurations, often marked by internal tensions. While graphic novels retain certain features of traditional comics, such as panels and captions, they diverge significantly from the latter in their adoption of formal, thematic, and sequential strategies more closely aligned with the conventions of literary and cinematic narration. The hybrid nature of the graphic novel is thus situated at an intersection of multiple media forms, sharing affinities with each while employing them in a highly individualised manner. As with comics, one would expect a graphic novel to adhere to familiar visual storytelling

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[62] V. Spinazzola, *Graphic novel. L'età adulta del fumetto*, in Id. (edited by), *Tirature '12*, Milan, Il Saggiatore, pp. 15-21, quoted by S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, p. 8. Original cit.: "[…] libro figurativo che racconta una storia lunga o molte storie brevi, in modo seriale o auto concluso, rispettando le convenzioni tipiche del fumetto o veicolando istanze autobiografiche, storiche, giornalistiche".

[63] In this case, verbal narrative and non-linguistic imagery.

models, such as "sequential narratives, the division into panels, direct speech represented in speech bubbles, and additional conventions, such as lines to suggest movement and thought bubbles".[64] However, the narratological scrutiny of the graphic novel must necessarily engage with its symbolic complexities, which sets it apart from both purely visual and purely verbal forms of narrative. At its core, the graphic novel constitutes a multimodal semiotic system, characterised by the fusion of words and images and a unique simultaneity, wherein temporal progression is transported into spatial configurations.[65] This priority of spatial relations over temporal linearity distinguishes the medium from more traditional forms of literary narrative which typically unfold diachronically, following the steady pulse of chronological time. In contrast, the graphic novel organises time patiently, through the arrangement of speech bubbles, panels, frames, strips, and interstitial spaces between illustrations. These gaps and ellipses, often overlooked in other media, are integral to the narrative structure of the graphic novel and are employed with deliberate precision. This spatialisation of time lends graphic novels a narrative quality that is at once linear and simultaneous, compelling the reader to actively reconstruct the temporal order of events. Of particular interest is the technique of braiding, which ensures that each graphic sequence is related to other panels within the narrative, fostering a densification of details and enhancing a more complex socio-cognitive engagement. Thus, the graphic novel not only borrows from other media forms but also presents a distinct interpretative challenge, inviting readers to navigate its unique semiotic terrain with heightened awareness.

Historically, the origins of the graphic novel can be found in those of comic books, whose emergence can be traced to around 1830, when Rodolphe Töpffer[66] developed an innovative model of sequential art that would later influence American newspaper cartoonists in the period between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. By the 1930s, comic books began to be seen as significant consumer products, marking

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[64] S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, p. 38. Original cit.: "una narrazione sequenziale la separazione riquadri, il discorso diretto rappresentato nei *balloons*, convenzioni aggiuntive come le linee per dare l'idea della cinesi e le cosiddette bolle di pensiero.".

[65] T. Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée,* Paris, PUF, 1999, p. 26 (Eng. trans. *The Systems of Comics*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2007), quoted by S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, p. 39.

[66] Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846) was a Swiss writer, educator, illustrator, and cartoonist. Often regarded as the father of comic strips, he is also credited as the first comics artist in history. His illustrated books, referred to as *literature en estampes* ('graphic literature'), are considered some of the earliest examples of European comics.

their emergence as a distinct genre. During the 1930s and 1940s, comic books grew in prominence and became emblematic of the rising cultural power of the United States. Publishers recognised that these works could be marketed as merchandise, particularly if they featured superheroes such as *Superman and Batman* (1939) and *Wonder Woman* (1941).[67] However, this golden age ended in the 1950s with the advent of the Cold War, a period marked by significant global political paralysis. It was during this decade that comic books began to be condemned as tools of moral corruption, reflecting broader concerns about their cultural worth. This critique had its origins as early as the 1930s, when pedagogy scholars and journalists started to consider comic books detrimental to children's literacy and cognitive development. In response to such criticism, the Comics Code was established in 1954 as a formal censorship mechanism, banning depictions of violence, blood, alcohol, tobacco, and sexuality, and stipulating that virtuous characters must always prevail. From the mid-1960s, however, there was a notable revival of superhero comics, which began to transition from niche adolescent cultures to prominent international museums and esteemed art galleries, aided by the success of Pop Art. The 1970s witnessed the breaking of the Comics Code's constraints, exemplified by Marvel's 1971 issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* which addressed drug abuse. This period saw the emergence of innovative, sexually explicit, and satirical strips, marked by high levels of political engagement and autobiographical content. It was also during this decade that the 'one-shot' format, characteristic of the graphic novel, began to gain traction. This phenomenon can be identified as a consequence of the success of Will Eisner's work *A Contract with God: A Graphic Novel* (1978), thanks to which the term 'graphic novel' gained popularity, providing stabilisation of the previously more fluid 'picture novel' or 'picture story', and 'sequential art'.[68] Later on, cosmopolitanism of the 1980s contributed to the affirmation of the graphic novel by creating a fertile environment for the emergence of a new narrative style, facilitating the exchange of aesthetic ideas. During this period, British authors and illustrators took a leading role. Under the influence of the 'British Invasion', comic books began to move beyond the subcultural origins and asserted their capacity for social critique through the synergy of verbal and visual storytelling. By the 1990s, these new narratives, departing from adolescence seriality, featured complex

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[67] During war times, both civilians and soldiers needed something to lift the morale, hence the success of superheroes.

[68] J. Baetens et al., Introduction, in *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel,* p. 2.

characters similar to those found in novels. While the comic genre was originally culturally specific and predominantly Anglo-American, the graphic novel proved to be more inclusive, embracing different forms, media, and sub-genres, and integrating global narrative traditions, creating a culturally hybrid medium. Although the American model continues to dominate contemporary graphic storytelling, it is important to acknowledge the influence that *manga* have had on the Western world, impacting graphic artists outside Japan.

To summarise, one may reasonably assert that the term 'graphic novel' emerged with the deliberate intent of distinguishing between traditional comic books and a relatively novel form. Yet, the precise characteristics these newer comics were presumed to embody are neither definitive nor universally agreed upon, as previously anticipated. The invention of the graphic novel sought to achieve goals that were both necessary and laudable, such as securing recognition for comics as a literary genre within contemporary cultural discourse, and giving a prominent role to authors, who had previously been largely marginalised. While the term was explicitly coined to draw a parallel with the literary novel, its most evident inspiration can be traced back to traditional European comics, frequently labelled as 'intellectual' or 'adult' due to their thematic engagement with subjects such as pornography, substance abuse, and violence. The graphic novel, therefore, was conceived as a medium that required content complexity and narrative nuances[69] traditionally associated with the novel in order to transcend the perceived limitations of comics, which had often been criticised for their narrative simplicity. Aside from thematic contents, it is predominantly the format in which graphic novels are presented that distinguishes them as a product of ostensibly superior quality. Nevertheless, the popularisation of the graphic novel has also occasioned a contemporary commercial phenomenon, whereby the once elitist label has devolved into a mere marketing tool for any comic book product. Consequently, it may be concluded that the term graphic novel, as it is understood today, has been largely emptied of its original meaning. The definition now appears vague, if not entirely redundant, as it increasingly converges with the broader notion of the comic book. This shift, as previously mentioned, can be attributed primarily to commercial factors, though other motivations may include

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[69] Narrative nuances refer to the often intricate and subtle details in storytelling that offer deeper layers of meaning and emotional resonance. They can include tone and mood, character development, symbolism, shifts in perspective, and narrative voice.

the desire of authors to be regarded as serious and legitimate creators within the literary and cultural spheres.

The rise in popularity of the graphic novel has had a notable positive effect on literacy, particularly among younger readers. It is largely due to this medium that many children and adolescents have been introduced to the world of reading and literature. Owing to their visual nature, graphic novels may appear less intimidating than traditional prose works, encouraging a level of curiosity and engagement that might not be as readily inspired by traditional novels. Lingiardi and Giovanardi (2018) assert that, according to data from ISTAT, the most prolific readers in Italy are adolescents aged between 11 and 14 years. Notably, 72% of young individuals who have read at least one book in the past year have parents who are avid readers.[70] This observation underscores the importance of children adopting the reading habits of their parents. However, it is also evident that there are adolescents who do not engage in reading at all, even in households filled with bookshelves. It is quite likely that, as they enter puberty, many young people prioritise their mobile phones and social media over reading books. This trend can be linked to the fact that Generation Z[71] and the older part of Generation Alpha[72] were born during the rise and dominance of digital technologies; thus, it would be unreasonable to blame them for their preference for modern forms of leisure and relaxation. Furthermore, it cannot be conclusively stated that the current cohort of adolescents, approximately those born between 2005 and 2012, will not develop reading habits as they mature. Nevertheless, it remains crucial for both parents and educational institutions to encourage young people to develop an interest in reading and literature, avoiding the imposition of such engagement as a chore. Instead, they should seek to inspire curiosity and enthusiasm. Ultimately, fostering a love for reading is a gradual process that should be nurtured rather than enforced.

As previously mentioned, graphic novels may represent the most effective medium for fostering young people's engagement with reading. Calabrese and Zagaglia

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[70] V. Lingiardi & G. Giovanardi, *Perché non leggi un po'?: Classici, maghetti e graphic novel*, Rome, GEDI, 2018, p. 114.

[71] People born approximately between 1997 and 2012.

[72] People born roughly between 2010 and 2024 belong to Generation Alpha. Since this study focuses primarily on adolescents and young adults, the only portion of Gen Alpha I take into account are those born between 2010 and 2012, as they are generally middle school students and thus considered part of the adolescent age group.

(2017) delineate a distinctive profile for the reader of graphic novels: whereas the average consumer of traditional novels tends to be female and aged between 30 and 50, the typical graphic novel reader is predominantly male and belongs to a notably younger age bracket, approximately between the ages of 14 and 24, comprising adolescents and young adults.[73] The graphic novel reader can be defined as "an individual engaged in lifelong learning, who enriches their *Bildung* through substantial doses of visual storytelling".[74] In alignment with the insights of Sandra Beckett, a distinguished scholar of children's literature, it can be asserted that "visual narratives are now functional for a metamorphic and liquid audience in a Baumanian sense, composed of 'kidults'".[75] In addition, as Falconer (2009) suggests, one could argue that "the success of intergenerational graphic novels has heightened individuals' awareness of the challenges in maintaining traditional distinctions between childhood and adulthood".[76] Adolescence, and early adulthood later on, are uniquely complex developmental stages, recognised for their multifaceted nature. These periods are marked by a host of transformations – physical, cognitive, and emotional – that collectively contribute to the formation of identity and a sense of the self as an independent and responsible individual. It can be argued that this is an inherently complex phase that demands the presence of supportive and stable foundations, nowadays frequently destabilised by the frenetic pace of modern life, characterised by relentless schedules and the incessant need to keep up with swiftly changing trends. While generational conflict has been a perennial feature of the human experience, it is crucial to acknowledge that contemporary adolescents and young adults navigate an exceptionally intricate landscape, where the web of familial, social, and peer relationships appears to have become increasingly fragmented.[77] Furthermore, the pervasive influence of the internet and social media significantly shapes the lives of today's youth. Lingiardi and Giovanardi (2018) eloquently articulate that this phase of one's life is:

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[73] S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, p. 92-3.

[74] *Ivi*, p. 93. [Italics in the original.] Original cit.: "[…] un soggetto in fase di formazione permanente, che alimenta la propria *Bildung* attraverso porzioni massicce di *visual storytelling*".

[75] P. Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, p. 338-42, quoted by S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, p. 93. [Italics in the original.] Original cit.: "le narrazioni visive sono oggi funzionali a un'utenza metamorfica e liquida in senso baumaniano, fatta di *kidults*."

[76] R. Falconer, *The Crossover Novel: Contemporary Children's Fiction and Its Adult Readership*, New York-London, Routledge, 2009, p. 3, quoted by S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, p. 93. Original cit.: "il successo del romanzo grafico intergenerazionale ha reso gli individui acutamente consapevoli della difficoltà di mantenere le distinzioni tradizionali tra l'infanzia e l'età adulta".

[77] V. Lingiardi & G. Giovanardi, *Perché non leggi un po'?: Classici, maghetti e graphic novel*, p. 122.

a universe filled with opportunities for new creative relationships, yet it simultaneously constitutes a vortex wherein adolescents, already beset by considerable physical and psychological upheavals, require secure and stable bases for their explorations. In the absence of such support, they risk feeling fragile and vulnerable, particularly when confronted with adverse circumstances, including conflictual or violent separations, bullying in both physical and online spaces, maltreatment, abuse, and grief…[78]

Psychologist Erik Erikson[79] posits that adolescents, in particular, may experience profound and potentially dangerous suffering in the face of these developmental challenges, as such distress can call into question their very sense of identity and integrity.[80] During this critical phase, adolescents encounter the imperative of becoming their authentic selves, a process that inherently exposes them to considerable vulnerability. If they find themselves surrounded by indifference, lack of empathetic listening, or, more severely, maltreatment, the result can be a profound sense of failure, leading to a disheartening loss of meaning in their existence. This sense of feeling lost and like a failure may persist into the early years of adulthood. In a world where climate change, wars, and injustice dominate the headlines, the future may appear bleak for many, and the conclusion of university studies can become a daunting abyss, prompting the question: "What now?". While psychotherapy remains the primary recourse for addressing psychological distress, various supplementary factors can provide meaningful support during this formative period. Among these, literature plays a particularly significant role. Although reading books cannot replicate the effects of targeted therapeutic interventions, it offers a vital means of self-discovery, allowing young readers to identify with characters and narratives that convey the reassuring message of shared human experience. Contemporary narrative forms, such as the graphic novel, can indeed

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[78] S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, p. 123. Original cit.: "[…] un universo pieno di occasioni per nuove relazioni creative ma anche un vortice in cui gli adolescenti, presi già dai loro sconvolgimenti fisici e psichici, avendo bisogno di basi sicure e stabili per le loro esplorazioni temerarie, corrono il rischio di sentirsi fragili e vulnerabili, soprattutto quando le cose vanno male (separazioni conflittuali o violente, bullismo scolastico è online, maltrattamenti, abusi, lutti…)".
[79] Erik Erikson (1902-1994) was a German-born American psychoanalyst, best known for his theory of psychosocial development, which outlines stages from childhood through adulthood. His ideas significantly expanded Freudian thought by highlighting the social and psychosocial struggles at each life stage. His work emphasised that human development occurs within a social context, with children shaped not only by biology but also by societal expectations.
[80] S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, p. 123.

facilitate adolescents exploring nuanced aspects of identity, including gender and sexual orientation.[81]

Overall, it can be argued that graphic novels reveal the needs and anticipatory anxieties of 'kidults' regarding an increasingly uncertain future, constrained solely by temporary projects. The adventures experienced by the protagonists serve as a parable, a moment of transition that leads to transformation, where the extraordinary events of the narrative become the catalyst for the emergence of a new identity. Indeed, the archetypal protagonists of the graphic novel is in a state of constant evolution, seeking to establish their place within a transient world, in which crisis constitutes the central driving force of existence.[82] Consequently, the medium evolves into a form of graphic testimony of self-awareness, wherein the narrative structure assumes significance for contemporary audiences. We may thus conclude that graphic novels attract a younger audience not solely due to their apparent simplicity derived from the interplay of text and illustrations, but also as a result of a process of identification with the characters and their narratives, which are convincingly relevant to real-life experiences.

2.2. Remediating graphic narratives: webcomics

The internet has profoundly reshaped societal dynamics, extending its reach far beyond its original purpose of facilitating communication. Today, it permeates daily activities across the globe, with entire industries built around maintaining organisations' continuous connectivity. Sectors like banking, education, retail, and entertainment have undergone transformations that render them almost unrecognisable compared to just a few decades ago. Consequently, it's unsurprising that the medium of comics has experienced a radical evolution as well. This subchapter will open by discussing the concept of remediation, exploring the distinctive characteristics of webcomics and their recent emergence and evolution. In doing so, I will dedicate particular attention to audience engagement and communities, as the interplay between creators and their readership shapes the narratives and themes that emerge. The aim of this subchapter is to provide a comprehensive

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[81] It is noteworthy that such parts of one's identity begin to develop well before the onset of adolescence. For instance, gender identity typically emerges around two to three years of age. Identities and orientations that exist beyond the confines of the gender binary and heterosexual norms often encounter challenging paths. This subject will be explored in greater detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis.
[82] N. Andreani, *Il graphic novel. Il fumetto spiegato a mio padre*, Eboli, NPE, 2014, p. 37, quoted by S. Calabrese & E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, p. 93.

understanding of webcomics not only as a remediation of traditional storytelling but also as a new medium for expression and connection in the contemporary digital world.

In *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), J. D. Bolter and R. Grusin define remediation, borrowing from Paul Levinson's[83] description of it as an "'anthropotropic'[84] process by which new media technologies improve upon or remedy prior technologies". However, they clarify that they interpret "the term differently, using it to mean the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms".[85] According to Bolter and Grusin, remediation manifests through immediacy and hypermediacy, two opposing styles of visual representation. While the former's "goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium […] and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation",[86] the latter seeks "to remind the viewer of the medium".[87] Remediation is particularly evident in the realm of storytelling, where comics have adapted and evolved their narrative techniques to harness the full potential of online technologies. As previously discussed, graphic storytelling is a powerful medium that blends visual art and textual elements to explore complex themes and emotions. Traditionally, such narratives have found expression through printed media, specifically comic books and graphic novels, both of which are limited by the physical constraints of production and distribution. The advent of the internet, however, introduced a novel and dynamic approach to storytelling, exemplified by webcomics, a quintessential case of remediation.

Before discussing the definition of webcomics, it is important first to reflect on what constitutes a comic in general. In his seminal work, *Understanding Comics*, (1993) Scott McCloud delves into the definition of comics, stating that sequential art is a hallmark of the medium. While McCloud welcomes diverse definitions, he emphasises that the delivery mechanism should not be considered part of a comic's essence. Although a comic's form of delivery can indeed impact its content, in his view the two are not

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[83] Paul Levinson (b. 1947) is a Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University in New York City. In addition to his academic career, he is an accomplished novelist and short story writer, specialising in science fiction that often explores philosophical themes.
[84] Levinson used the term 'anthropotropic' to describe something designed or modified specifically to be more suited for human use or interaction.
[85] J. D. Bolter & R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2000, p. 273.
[86] *Ivi*, pp. 272-3.
[87] *Ivi*, p. 272.

necessarily intertwined.[88] Consequently, differentiating traditional comics and webcomics can be challenging. As Kleefeld (2020) suggests, webcomics primarily differ in two aspects, namely authorial intent[89] and the software used in the readers' viewing.[90] While the former highlights the creator's perspective on their work, the latter emphasises the technical aspects that facilitate or hinder reader engagement. Nevertheless, there are several considerations must be addressed. A significant number of webcomic creators recognise the potential for generating substantial revenue from the print editions of their works, suggesting that traditional print distribution may serve as the ultimate objective of their creations. Consequently, it would not be sufficient to merely define webcomics merely as comics initially disseminated on the internet. However, it is imperative to ascertain whether the author's intent was primarily to share their work online or to generate financial gaining. That said, creators may initially prioritise the webcomic format during the initial phases of their projects, subsequently regarding print editions as secondary phenomenon that arises from the success of their digital creations. Conversely, there are instances in which comics published in traditional print formats are uploaded to the internet without the authors knowledge, as exemplified by Chris Ware's *The Last Saturday*, which was serialised online through *The Guardian* in 2014 and 2015. Although *The Guardian* intended for the comic to be viewed online, Ware himself did not classify it as a web comic due to his lack of awareness regarding its online publication – he believed his work would be printed. Such cases elucidate that authorial intent cannot serve as the sole criterion for defining web comics, particularly in instances where creators and publishers may not align their definitions. Furthermore, the software used for viewing web comics warrants discussion, as well. In contrast to digital comics, which necessitate specialised software such as Adobe Acrobat for viewing, web comics can be readily accessed within web browsers using open-source code in languages such as HTML. Some of the most popular platforms are Deviantart, Webtoon, and Tapas. Nonetheless, webcomic files can also be easily saved in formats such as JPEG or PDF, thereby enabling readers to revisit them at their convenience, even offline, and sharing them with others. Thus, styling a final definition of webcomic is challenging. Considering the preceding

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[88] S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, Northampton, Kitchen Sink Press, 1993, p. 23, quoted by S. Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, London, Bloomsbury, 2020, p. 1.
[89] S. Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, p. 2.
[90] *Ivi*, p. 3.

discussion, we can describe webcomics as a distinct form of comic primarily intended to be disseminated and accessed through the internet.

Formally, webcomics tend to adhere to one of two primary layout setups, that is either the dimensions of a newspaper strip or those of a printed comic book page. These formats, derived from traditional print media, provide a visual shorthand that allows readers to quickly recognise the genre of webcomic they are encountering. However, these conventional formats are by no means exhaustive and, sometimes, can impede the reading experience on certain devices. Interestingly, while the vertical comic book format lends itself more readily to eventual print publication, the horizontal layout, resembling newspaper strips, proves more optimal for digital consumption. Most screens, being wider than they are tall, especially on smaller devices, allow an entire instalment of a horizontally oriented webcomic to be viewed in full without requiring the reader to scroll. In contrast, webcomics designed in the traditional comic book format often necessitate scrolling, a process that disrupts engagement by frequently shifting the reader's point of focus, thereby undermining narrative cohesion. Kleefeld (2020) notes that the advent of tablet devices, particularly following the release of the iPad in 2010, provided a more suitable medium for vertically formatted web comics, allowing readers to hold their screens in portrait orientation, better aligning with the comic book layout.[91] Although smartphones offer similar functionality, their smaller screens often render webcomic text illegibly small. Despite this limitation, smartphones generally approximate the dimensions of newspaper-style webcomics, enhancing the reading experience for this format and enabling readers to access these strips with greater ease and flexibility, regardless of location. In light of these developments, several webcomic creators have adopted innovative approaches to layout, crafting instalments approximately half the size of a standard comic book page. This hybrid format, oriented horizontally, aligns more comfortably with most digital screens while allowing the instalments to be vertically stacked into a complete comic book page when necessary. This solution requires only modest additional layout work and serves as an effective compromise, balancing the distinct demands of digital readability and print publication without significantly increasing the creator's workload.

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[91] *Ivi*, p. 93.

As previously discussed, the concept of remediation is crucial in understanding the evolution of graphic storytelling in the digital age, particularly in relation to webcomics. Comics and graphic novels have existed long before the advent of web technology, rooted in print and traditional media forms. However, the internet has facilitated dramatic changes in how comics are produced, distributed, and consumed. It also enables a quick delivery model for virtually every aspect of the comic production process, streamlining operations in way that were previously unimaginable. For instance, creators can now share their art files with publishers almost instantaneously, eliminating the need for physical shipping artwork across the country. This shift to digital communication allows multiple contributors – such as inkers, letterers, and colourists – to collaborate on the same comic simultaneously, enhancing efficiency. Once completed, digital files can be sent directly to printers, allowing for last-minute change. Separating the concept of comics from their traditional delivery mechanism signifies a fundamental shift in how they are perceived, enabling the success of webcomics. Emerging towards the close of the 1990s and gaining considerable success in the early 21st century, webcomics distinguish themselves from their predecessors by enabling independent creators to share their work with a global audience, free from the strictures of conventional publishing frameworks. Unlike traditional comics and graphic novels, webcomics are created for and distributed through digital platforms, whether on dedicated website or on social media. They encompass a variety of formats, from classic comic strips to longer narrative forms, and span many different genres. The digital framework allows them to transcend conventional boundaries, integrating multimedia elements such as animations, sounds, and interactive features.

Initially, webcomics were simple in both design and narrative, reflecting the technological limitations and the experimental nature of early online content. Their prevalence increased considerably throughout the 2000s, facilitated in part by their success within gaming communities, which served as an important early audience that spent considerable time online. As Kleefeld (2020) notes, "whether the audience drove the content, or the content was driven by the type of people coming online, gaming became the focus of a number of webcomics, like *PvP* by Scott Kurtz, *8-Bit Theater* by Brian Clevinger, and *Ctrl+Alt+Del* by Tim Buckley".[92] The rise of social media in the

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[92] *Ivi*, p. 26.

2010s further accelerated this evolution, allowing creators to build communities around their work and directly engage with their readers. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the power of communities and fandoms is a key driving force behind the success of various media forms, including graphic storytelling. Prior to the advent of high-speed internet and the proliferation of social media, readers who wished to correspond with comic creators were constrained by the slow process of writing to their publishing house, a practice that often took weeks or months. Despite these delays, publishers like Marvel's Stan Lee recognised the importance of engaging with readers. Such interaction, when positive, fostered a sense of loyalty and emotional investment, thereby cultivating a devoted audience. These relationships encourage readers to revisit the material regularly and spend more on comics. In stark contrast to the limitations of traditional print comics, webcomics possess a distinct advantage of enabling instantaneous communication between creators and audiences. Webcomic creators can easily share their contact information – whether e-mail, social media, or online forums – through their websites or directly embedded into the webcomic itself. This enhanced accessibility strengthens the relationship between creators and readers. Additionally, ancillary content such as blog and social media posts and comments enhances the reader's perception of the creator and the webcomic as a unified artistic identity. Readers frequently follow creators on social media not only for updates but also for additional content, further solidifying this bond.

Engagement and accessibility are not the only two reasons behind the success of webcomics. Similar to graphic novels, webcomics often explore more mature content and feature stories and character with which readers can easily identify. Webcomic creators frequently have a profound desire to share unique narrative that remain unrepresented in mainstream media. Moreover, a significant number of them engages in social commentary, employing their work as a medium to critique prevailing cultural narratives, either directly or through nuanced layers of metaphor. Some choose the webcomic format for its intrinsic nature which combines words and pictures in a way that facilitates comprehension of a complex message. Will Eisner (1985) aptly described such works as "attitudinal instruction comics", arguing that "the relationship or the identification evoked by the acting out or dramatization in a sequence of pictures is in itself instructional. People learn by imitation and the reader in this instance can easily supply the intermediate or

connecting action from his or her own experience".[93] Some creators, sharing Eisner's perspective, use webcomics to express their thoughts and experiences in hopes of providing some insights into lives similar to their own. When addressing potentially sensitive topics, people may hesitate to pose uncomfortable or personal questions to those they know. In contrast, (web)comics offer a unique avenue for readers to gain insights into various perspectives while maintaining a level of anonymity that foster exploration. If crafted thoughtfully, webcomics can gradually provide the information and answers that readers seek. For instance, Carlisle Robinson' webcomic *caro doodles* (2012-) addresses the practical challenges encountered by them as a deaf, trans masculine, genderqueer individual, aiming to educate audiences about the complexities of navigating an ableist and heteronormative society. In a 2015 YouTube video, they argue that:

> There's a lot of oppression in the binary system, recognizing only male, only female. But really there's fluidity within that spectrum and there are people that don't fit . . . comics can also educate people. When there's oppression within the system, comics can talk about it.[94]

While the traditional publishing industry is disproportionately influenced by able-bodied, white, heterosexual, cisgender male perspectives, which may inadvertently exclude narratives that do not align with such experiences, webcomics showcase a richer diversity of voices that might otherwise be marginalised within print media. This is particularly salient for underrepresented groups, as webcomics provide a crucial platform for readers to affirm their identities and cultivate a sense of community that is challenging to replicate in traditional formats. The communal aspect of webcomics serves as a form of validation, reassuring readers that they are not alone in their struggles and thereby enhancing their confidence and self-esteem. However, the augmented visibility afforded by online platforms also renders such communities susceptible to backlash, including hate speech and censorship. This duality of exposure encapsulates thus both opportunities for empowerment and further marginalisation. Notwithstanding these challenges, webcomics endure as a vital medium for storytelling, education, and community building, offering essential platforms for underrepresented voices and fostering cross-cultural understanding among diverse audiences.

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[93] W. Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art*, Tamarac, Poorhouse Press, 1985, p. 141, quoted by S. Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, p. 77.
[94] Carlisle Robinson, *Beyoutiful* [Video], YouTube, 28 June 2015, quoted by S. Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, p. 78.

As anticipated, communities naturally form around webcomics, with readers sharing their enthusiasm in online spaces such as comment sections, forums, and social media platforms. These communities, often reflective of both the aesthetic of the webcomic and its creator, become vital spaces for readers to exchange thoughts and critiques. For creators, engaging with such communities offers numerous benefits. These interactions not only influence the audience's perception of the comic but also serve as a means of deepening their emotional and intellectual investment. Building a solid relationship with fans can help creators sustain their work economically, too. Kleefeld (2020) identifies various techniques employed by webcomic creators to monetise their work.[95] Despite the initial lack of significant financial expectations among early webcomic creators, they nevertheless aspired to be able to generate revenue from their art. Their online audience primarily comprised individuals in their twenties, a demographic that engaged extensively with web content. Consequently, one of the earliest monetisation strategies for webcomics was advertising, which had previously proven successful in other media, such as radio and television. However, the heterogeneous nature of webcomics, which encompass a variety of literary genres, made it challenging to create perfectly tailored advertisements for specific audiences. Moreover, with the advent of ad blockers, this method has become largely ineffective. Current income generation tactics include sponsorship and the creation of merchandise. While sponsorship tends to be less efficient – requiring continuous production of dedicated material – merchandise creation has the potential to generate higher revenue, although heavily dependent on the creator's ability to produce merchandise and the preferences of their audience. Some creators, in fact, supplement the sale of merchandise with that of original artwork and commissions, both online and in person, for instance, at comic conventions. The most commonly employed methods for generating income, however, are crowdfunding and platforms such as Patreon or Ko-fi. Crowdfunding, in particular, has emerged as a viable financial strategy for webcomic creators, allowing them to secure funding for specific projects without incurring significant upfront costs. The launch of Kickstarter in 2009 was particularly fortuitous for webcomic creators, as its assurance contract model, where funds are collected only upon reaching as specified funding goal,

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[95] S. Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, p. 102-113.

provided a safety net for both creators and their audiences.[96] Additionally, ongoing support platforms such like Patreon, allow creators to solicit regular contributions from readers, often framed as a monthly subscription service that offers exclusive content. This last model was fundamental to the success of Alice Osman's *Heartstopper*, as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Overall, it can be stated that webcomics exemplify a dynamic interplay between creators and their audiences, transforming the landscape of graphic storytelling. By fostering active community engagement, webcomics not only validate diverse voices but also cultivate connections that challenge conventional narratives. As readers become integral to the creative process, their shared experiences and insights enhance the richness of the medium. Furthermore, the economic relationship between creators and their fans, illustrated through crowdfunding and platforms like Patreon, underscores a collaborative spirit that drives innovation. In conclusion, it can be posited that webcomics serve as a vital vehicle for exploration, expression, and representation, shaping cultural discourses in an increasingly interconnected world. This chapter lays the groundwork for what I will be discussing next, that is the role of online communities and fandoms in determining the success of *Heartstopper*, namely the case study of this thesis.

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[96] *Ivi*, p. 110.

CHAPTER 3. Resonance and representation: the impact of *Heartstopper* and its fandom

With its positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ love and identities, Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* has transcended its kidult series label and redefined queer narratives across multiple media formats. This chapter will illustrate how *Heartstopper* not only tells a story of empathy, acceptance and love, but also redefines the portrayal of LGBTQ+ experiences in mainstream media. First, I will provide a brief overview of the plot, focusing on the two main characters' narrative, whose relationship illustrates how love can foster personal growth and resilience. Next, I will analyse how *Heartstopper*'s transition across different media formats – from webcomic to graphic novel, to television series – has amplified its impact. I will then examine the crucial role social media and fans have had in turning the series into a cultural phenomenon, focusing on how dedicated online communities have enhanced its visibility and created a supportive, cross-generational fandom that reinforces the idea that *Heartstopper* is not merely a piece of media but a community that provides validation and support to its audience. This phenomenon is largely due to the fact that the series definitely departs from the queer tragedy trope and from queercoding, as it instead presents complex characters whose personalities are not entirely based on their LGBTQ+ identities. This refreshing perspective is particularly significant in a cultural landscape that has historically marginalised and misrepresented queer voices. By incorporating reflections from British YouTubers Daniel Howell and Phil Lester on both *Heartstopper* and their own experiences as gay men growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s, I will further demonstrate the significance of LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusion in mass media, reinforcing *Heartstopper*'s role as a beacon of positive queer representation that fosters empathy, connection, and community among its diverse audience.

3.1. A once-in-a-generation phenomenon: understanding *Heartstopper*

Heartstopper (2016-) is an ongoing webcomic and graphic novel series created, written, and illustrated by British author Alice Oseman.[97] Her official website proposes a very succinct overview of the series:

> *Heartstopper* follows two teenage boys, Nick and Charlie, as they meet at a British grammar school, quickly become friends and fall in love. Each volume navigates the ups and downs of first love, friendships, coming out, and mental health, beautifully framed by a warm cast of supporting characters.[98]

Acclaimed for its handling of themes such as homobitransphobia, toxic relationships, mental health issues, and discovering identities, the series has resonated with a mainly youthful audience, allowing readers to see themselves reflected in its characters. *Heartstopper* originated from the popularity of Charlie Spring, the younger brother of Tori, the protagonist of Oseman's novel *Solitaire* (2014). In an interview for the website *The Pink News*, she confessed that she "fell in love with" Nick and Charlie while writing the novel and knew that "they had a bigger story than what we see in *Solitaire*".[99] Initially, she wanted to write another novel completely dedicated to them, but later realised that a webcomic would have been better suited for their episodic story.

To elucidate my choice of *Heartstopper* as a case study for my thesis, it is essential to first examine its plot and the themes it addresses. This exploration will facilitate a deeper analysis of the series', crucial for appreciating its relevance in discussions surrounding youth identity and identification, mental health, and positive LGBTQ+ representation.

Heartstopper tells the story of the relationship between Charlie Spring, an openly gay student attending an all-boys school, and his crush and future boyfriend Nick Nelson, the popular rugby captain of the school's team. After Charlie was forcibly outed the previous year, he endured severe bullying, which left him isolated and struggling with anxiety and depression. As the narrative unfolds, Nick and Charlie develop an unexpected friendship when they are seated together in class, a connection that deepens when Nick

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[97] Alice Oseman's pronouns are she/they. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, in this thesis I am going to refer to her using feminine pronouns only.

[98] Alice Oseman, *The History of* Heartstopper. (n. d.). Retrieved on 8 October 2024 from aliceoseman.com/heartstopper/the-history/.

[99] P. Kelleher, *Heartstopper Creator Wanted to Show Queer Teens that the Future Is Bright*, The Pink News, 22 April 2022. Retrieved on 8 October 2024 from thepinknews.com/2022/04/22/heartstopper-netflix-alice-oseman-interview/.

invites Charlie to join the rugby team, allowing him to earn acceptance within the group despite initial uncertainties. Charlie's romantic life is complicated by his involvement in a toxic relationship with Ben, who manipulates him into secrecy. A turning point in Charlie's life occurs when Ben attempts to kiss him without his consent, prompting Nick to intervene and signalling his protective instinct towards Charlie. As their relationship evolves, Nick begins to realise that his feelings for Charlie transcend friendship. His journey toward understanding and accepting his bisexuality is permeated with doubts and fears, particularly around expressing affection for Charlie in public settings. A significant event is prom night, where they share a kiss, marking a turning point in their relationship and solidifying their connection. As Nick comes to terms with his identity, he faces the challenges of coming out to his mother, who is particularly supportive, and his friends, who, on the contrary, start making homophobic remarks. Meanwhile, Charlie's friends – many of whom are themselves member of the LGBTQ+ community – provide him and Nick with a safe and accepting environment. The narrative introduces Tara and Darcy, a lesbian couple, Aled, who identifies as gay and demisexual,[100] and Elle, a transgender girl whom Tao, the 'token straight friend'[101], is in love with. This highlights a broader spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities within *Heartstopper*. As Nick and Charlie's relationship deepens, they embark on a school trip to Paris, where they navigate moments of intimacy and vulnerability, further strengthening their emotional bond. Throughout this period, Nick struggles with the decision to come out more publicly, fearing potential fallout with his friends and his father and brother. The Paris trip is characterised by ongoing challenges related to their identities, mental health, and the pressure of external perceptions. While Nick continues to navigate the challenges of coming out, Charlie deals with past trauma, anorexia and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD),[102] which will force him to seek help from professionals. The narrative captures the complexities of adolescence, mental health struggles, and the importance of a supportive environment. Through their journey, Nick and Charlie confront the realities of their relationship, including challenges in regard to

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[100] A person who identifies as demisexual feels sexual attraction only to people with whom they have an emotional bond.

[101] The 'token straight friend' is a queer slang expression that refers to the only straight-cis person in an LGBTQ+ friend group.

[102] OCD is a mental and behavioural disorder which features a pattern of intrusive thoughts and fears known as obsessions, which lead an individual to do repetitive behaviours. These obsessions and compulsions get in the way of daily activities and can cause a lot of distress.

future transitions, such as college and adulthood. They exemplify the transformative power of love and communication, as they learn to navigate the pressure of personal growth and public perceptions.

Central to the themes explored in *Heartstopper* are love and relationships, particularly the romantic bonds between Nick and Charlie, Tara and Darcy, and Tao and Elle, which illustrate how love fosters both support and personal growth despite societal pressures. Equally important are the topics of friendship and community, which reinforce the concepts of acceptance and belonging. Additionally, self-discovery and mental health are prominent, with Charlie's struggles with OCD, eating disorders, and past trauma highlighting the importance of emotional well-being and self-care. The narrative's exploration of these themes directly engages with the troubles faced by its young readers, fostering a strong emotional connection that enhances its relevance and appeal to younger audiences. By addressing themes that resonate profoundly with teenagers and young adults – who navigate a particularly challenging period in their lives where obstacles seem pervasive – it is unsurprising that *Heartstopper* has achieved significant popularity among such demographic. This strong connection to its audience is reflected in its remarkable commercial success.

Initially launched as a webcomic on Tumblr and Tapas in 2016, *Heartstopper* later became available on Webtoon in 2019, where Alice Oseman still posts new illustrated panels three times a month. The physical edition of the series was made possible through a successful Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign to help with the publication of a limited run of graphic novels covering the first two chapters. The series was later acquired by the British publisher Hachette Children's Group, which, between 2019 and 2020, published the entire series in four volumes. The fifth volume was released only in December 2023. In March 2023, Alice Oseman announced that the sixth volume would be the last of the series,[103] and confirmed that the eighth chapter and an epilogue will close *Heartstopper*.[104] In addition to the six volumes dedicated to Nick and Charlie, six complementary novels and novellas further enrich the understanding of the series' narrative. Of these, only two – *This Winter* (2020) and *Nick and Charlie* (2020) – are

[103] Alice Oseman [@aliceoseman], *SOME NEWS!* [Video], Instagram, 23 March 2023. Retrieved on 8 October 2024 from instagram.com/aliceoseman/reel/CqphhB9sPIK/.

[104] Alice Oseman [@aliceoseman], *The* Heartstopper *Webcomic Returns to Tumblr, Tapas and Webtoon* [Photograph], Instagram, 6 September 2024. Retrieved on 8 October 2024 from instagram.com/aliceoseman/p/C_lEWfBpiZz/?img_index=1.

closely connected to the two boys' storyline. *This Winter* takes place between *Heartstopper* Volume 4 and the start of Volume 5. It is set during Christmas and focuses on Charlie's struggles with his mental health and anorexia and how it affects his family and Nick. *Nick and Charlie*, on the other hand, takes place right after Volume 5, as Nick prepares to leave for university. The novella explores the emotional toll of transitioning to a long-distance relationship, with both characters confronting their fears and anxieties surrounding their impending separation. Their conversations about the future underscore both the depth of their love and the challenges posed by significant life changes.

The success of *Heartstopper* is further evidenced by the recognition it has received from salient figures from the publishing industry and media. Hilary Murray Hill, chief executive of Hachette Children's Group, called Alice Oseman a "once-in-a-generation" writer and illustrator, recognising "how important it is for teenagers to see themselves and their lives reflected in the stories they read" and that "*Heartstopper* is now a truly global phenomenon, selling over eight million copies to date in 37 languages and counting", adding that the graphic novel series is very popular among older readers, too.[105] Similarly, *The Guardian*, which described *Heartstopper* as a "cultural powerhouse",[106] reports that the cumulative sales of the five volumes in the UK have now exceeded 1.1 million copies, underscoring the series' impact and relevance in contemporary literature.[107] Notably, Volume 5, in particular, became the fastest-selling graphic novel in the United Kingdom, selling over 60.012 copies within the first three days of its release and ranking as best-seller of the week.[108] The previous volumes had similar sales figures, consistently placing in the top positions of charts. However, the success of *Heartstopper* is not solely attributable to its sales figures. Since 2019, the series has garnered numerous prestigious

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[105] The Guardian, *Alice Oseman's* Heartstopper *Becomes the UK's Fastest-Selling Graphic Novel Ever*, 13 December 2023. Retrieved on 8 October from theguardian.com/books/2023/dec/13/alice-oseman-heartstopper-uk-fastest-selling-graphic-novel-ever?CMP=share_btn_url.
[106] The Guardian, *The Guardian View on* Heartstopper*: a Phenomenon that Defines a Generation*, 3 August 2023. Retrieved on 8 October from theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/03/the-guardian-view-on-heartstopper-a-phenomenon-that-defines-a-generation.
[107] The Guardian, *Alice Oseman's* Heartstopper *Becomes the UK's Fastest-Selling Graphic Novel Ever*.
[108] *Ibidem.*

awards, including the British Book Awards,[109] the TikTok Book Awards,[110] and the Goodreads Choice Awards.[111]

In recognition of its remarkable success, *Heartstopper* was adapted into a television series by Netflix, beginning production in 2021 and premiering on 22 April 2022. Alice Oseman serves as writer and executive producer, ensuring the adaptation remains faithful to the source material. Her involvement has been pivotal in maintaining the authenticity of the graphic novels, preserving much of the original dialogue and storyline while introducing new characters and elements to enhance the narrative for a cinematic format. The first season adapts the first and second volumes of the graphic novels, corresponding to the initial three chapters of the webcomic, while the third volume, aligned with the fourth chapter, is included in the second season. The third season, released on 3 October 2024, covers the fourth and fifth volumes, encompassing chapters five to seven. The series features a diverse cast, with Kit Connor portraying Nick Nelson and Joe Locke as Charlie Spring – notably, both actors identify with the same sexual orientation as their characters. Critically, the TV series has received widespread acclaim, with reviewers praising its ability to capture the essence of the graphic novels while also appealing to a broader audience. The adaptation's success is further evidenced by several awards nominations, including winning five Children's & Family Emmys in 2022.[112] This underscores the series' cultural significance and its positive representation of LGBTQ+ experiences within contemporary media.

Through the lens of *Heartstopper*, it becomes evident that literature and media not only reflect societal changes but also inspire and empower individuals, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive understanding of identity and belonging. By harnessing the strengths of webcomic, print and cinematic formats, *Heartstopper* exemplifies the vital role that positive queer narratives play in fostering empathy and connection among readers, encouraging them to embrace their true selves. Looking ahead, the next

[109] RCW Literary Agency, *Alice Oseman, Katherine Rundell and Richard E. Grant Triumph at the British Book Awards 2023*, (n. d.). Retrieved on 8 October 2024 from rcwlitagency.com/news/alice-oseman-katherine-rundell-and-richard-e-grant-triumph-at-the-british-book-awards-2023/.

[110] S. McIntosh, *BookTok:* Heartstopper *and Bolu Babalola Win TikTok Book Awards*, BBC, 18 August 2023. Retrieved on 8 October from bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-66537372.

[111] Goodreads, *Goodreads Choice Awards 2022: Best Graphic Novels & Comics*, (n. d.). Retrieved on 8 October 2024 on goodreads.com/choiceawards/best-graphic-novels-comics-2022.

[112] Netflix [@netflix], Heartstopper *Won Big at the Children's & Family Emmy Awards* [Post], X, 12 December 2022. Retrieved on 8 October 2024 from x.com/netflix/status/1602151677477257218.

subchapter will delve into the role of social media and fandoms in shaping *Heartstopper*'s cultural significance, illustrating how fan engagement and online discourse have contributed, and still contribute, to the series' enduring popularity. By examining these dynamics, we can better understand the ways in which the *Heartstopper* community serves as a supportive and inclusive safe space for its audience.

3.2. Digital engagement and fandom dynamics

As previously mentioned, a key factor contributing to *Heartstopper*'s success is the fandom that developed initially around the webcomic, then expanded to the graphic novels, and eventually to the television series. A fandom is a fan-driven subculture that emerges around a literary or cinematic work, a video game, or a celebrity, wherein fans engage with one another to share their enthusiasm for such products or figures. This engagement can occur in physical spaces, such as conventions or festivals, or in digital ones. Online platforms and social media, in particular, offer fans the opportunity to create and share opinions, theories, and critiques. It can indeed be argued that without such a solid and active fandom on platforms like Tumblr, Tapas, and Webtoon, as well as on social media, *Heartstopper* would not have achieved the widespread attention it has received.

Online communities centred around books have existed since the popularisation of the internet. Nevertheless, one of the first social media platforms to make literature more viral and marketable was YouTube. Just one year after its launch (February 2005), Steve Chen, one of its co-founders, acknowledged that its success was largely due to the community that had formed around it, which led to the introduction of the 'Partner Program'.[113] This programme allows creators to monetise their videos, thus incentivising the production of more content. As a result, YouTubers began gaining notoriety and subscribers, transforming their hobby into professional careers. By around 2010, the YouTube community dedicated to books, later known as 'BookTube', began to emerge and steadily grew throughout the decade. Initially, BookTube channels focused on reviewing books through video content and early BookTubers were pioneers in discovering new ways to discuss literature and, more importantly, in uncovering new

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[113] YouTube, *A Message From Chad and Steve* [Video], YouTube, 10 October 2006. Retrieved on 9 October 2024 from https://youtube.com/watch?v=QCVxQ_3Ejkg.

books of interest. The community that flourished on YouTube soon expanded to other platforms, including Instagram, launched in 2010. Just as YouTube gave rise to BookTube, Instagram saw the emergence of 'Bookstagram', which was originally just a hashtag, that is "a keyword or a string of words, denoted by a hash (#) to make it a hyperlink".[114] Hashtags primarily serve a search, grouping, or tracking function – users can click on an hashtag to see any content that has been posted in connection with it. Hashtags have lately become a seemingly permanent and powerful feature that allow a post on Instagram to increase its reach by more than 12% on average.[115] Just like Instagram, TikTok makes widespread use of hashtags. First introduced in 2016 as Musical.ly, TikTok has since evolved into a widely dominant platform in the realm of video-sharing, which has now "solidified itself as the *de facto* space to keep up with popular trends, find new music, watch 'hot takes' on any number of topics, and, of course, laugh".[116] The exponential growth of TikTok is largely attributable to the succinct nature of its videos and its sophisticated recommendation algorithm, which enhances the platform's capacity to hold user attention. A noteworthy cultural phenomenon emerging from TikTok is the 'BookTok' community, wherein literature is discussed, critiqued, and disseminated through brief videos. Creators engage with their followers by reviewing books, exploring thematic elements, and organising virtual reading groups. For many, TikTok serves as an essential space to reflect on their reading experience and connect with fellow readers, often providing an escape from the pressures of reality. Particularly, BookTok's proliferation accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which many young people turned to literature as a refuge from the socio-political and psychological challenges posed by the lockdown. The ability of BookTokers to cultivate meaningful relationships with their followers, rooted in shared literary interest, has been instrumental in promoting engagement with literature among young readers. In addition, BookTok has played a crucial role in promoting more inclusive works. The increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ characters, individuals with disabilities, and POC protagonists is

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[114] A. Erz, B. Marder, & E. Osadchaya, "Hashtags: Motivational Drivers, Their Use, and Differences Between Influencers and Followers", *Computers in Human Behaviour* 89, 2018, p. 50.

[115] M. Osman, *18 Instagram Stats Every Marketer Should Know for 2018*, Sproutsocial, 2018, quoted by A. Erz, B. Marder, E. Osadchaya, "Hashtags: Motivational drivers, their use, and differences between influencers and followers", p. 48.

[116] S. Jerasa & T. Boffone, "BookTok 101: TikTok, Digital Literacies, and Out-of-School Reading Practices", *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 65(3), 2021, pp. 219.

indicative of a broader cultural shift toward inclusivity. BookTok has therefore become a community for minority groups, where readers feel both acknowledged and actively represented in the literature they consume; it creates a space for identities that are often underrepresented in the traditional literary canon, enabling younger audiences to discover books that may not align with the rigid standards of conventional academic curricula.[117]

TikTok's influence on the publishing industry surpasses that of YouTube and Instagram. Notably, the platform has provided emerging authors with an unprecedented avenue to share their creative processes in real-time, chronicling their journey to publication and cultivating a fandom prior to the release of their work. This development underscores the extent to which content creators have become pivotal actors within the literary marketplace, functioning as both intermediaries and distributors of cultural content, while also serving as strategic consultants and brand ambassadors for various enterprises. Thus, it would be correct to argue that the dual entrepreneurial and creative nature of content creation on TikTok has fundamentally altered the dynamics of literary consumption and marketing. For instance, many bookstores now often dedicate entire sections to works that have garnered significant attention on social media, with *Heartstopper* being among them. As reported by *The Guardian*,[118] *Heartstopper* was indeed popularised through social media, casting a revealing light on rapidly changing relationships in the interlinked media industries that represent the real world. At the time of the article's publication, the #heartstopper hashtag on TikTok was nearing 11 billion views, underscoring the profound impact of digital engagement on the series' virality.

Therefore, it may be posited that *Heartstopper*'s success can be attributed to a combination of factors, with social media playing a pivotal role in increasing its visibility and fostering widespread engagement. The emergence of dedicated online communities, particularly BookTok, has further propelled its popularity by fostering peer-to-peer recommendations and discussions. Nevertheless, what played an even more crucial role was the vibrant and devoted fandom that emerged around the series, which transformed *Heartstopper* from a niche webcomic into a cultural phenomenon, highlighting the profound impact of fan engagement on media success. Among the various dynamics of the *Heartstopper* fandom – though these are common across most fandoms – I would like

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[117] *Ivi*, p. 222.
[118] The Guardian, *The Guardian View on Heartstopper: a Phenomenon that Defines a Generation*, 3 August 2023.

to focus on two elements that, in my opinion, are crucial to understanding the series' media impact. The first element to examine is the interaction between fans and the content creator, as well as between fans and the content itself. Particularly early in her career, Alice Oseman actively engaged with her fans, seeking a human connection with them, for instance through Q&A sessions both in person and on Tumblr or by liking fan-generated content, which I will discuss later. Unfortunately, as *Heartstopper* gained more success, this interaction became increasingly sporadic, both because it became virtually difficult for her to respond to all the fans and also because some of them often crossed personal boundaries that protect her private life. Nonetheless, she continues, to the extent possible, to engage with the fandom through Q&A sessions mediated by her collaborators, who choose the questions beforehand, or by participating in public events such as book signings. Successful interaction between content creator and fans serves not only as a tool to build a following, but it often translates into financial backing, as well. For example, the Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign to independently publish the first volume of *Heartstopper* succeeded precisely because of the trust and parasocial relationship Oseman was able to create between her and her fans. Currently, while she does not need financial help to publish her work anymore, her Patreon[119] remains active. Thus, it can be concluded that interaction between the creator and fans is a fundamental element for the success of any product. Interaction generates excitement, which in turn leads to financial support and, ultimately, greater visibility.

The second element of that has contributed to *Heartstopper*'s success and that generally contributes to a product's visibility, which is closely related to fan enthusiasm, is fan-generated content such as fan art and fan fiction. With the rise of the internet, dedicated forums and blogs were created as spaces where fans could exchange their fan works. Over the past decade, social media has further amplified the visibility and reach of fan creations. Specifically, John Fiske (1990) examined the reception of popular culture and demonstrated that audiences are not passive consumers but rather resistant

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[119] Patreon is an online platform where fans can financially support both emerging and established artists. Fans pay a small monthly subscription fee, set by the creator, in exchange for exclusive content. On Alice Oseman's Patreon, for as little as $1 to $5 a month, these exclusive benefits include access to the *Heartstopper*-dedicated Discord server, where she is also present, exclusive illustrations and sketches of future vignettes, behind-the-scenes content, such as the design process for upcoming book covers, and early access to new *Heartstopper* releases on Webtoon, Tumblr, and Tapas.

participants who adapt culture to their own interpretations.[120] It can be argued that the phenomenon of fandom is "intimately connected to the development of a mainstream participatory culture in which industries increasingly share spaces with their audiences and spurs them to become cocreators".[121] In a sense, the popularity of a product is not measured solely by sales, views, followers, or likes, but also by the quantity of fan work produced around it. In the case of *Heartstopper*, there is a vast amount of fan fiction pieces available online. At the time of writing this thesis, the number of *Heartstopper*-tagged fan fictions on Ao3 (Archive of Our Own), one of the most popular platforms for fan fictions, amounts to 7,375 for those based on the television series and 6,927 for those based on the webcomic. Similarly, the volume of fan art being produced and posted, particularly on Instagram, is significant. These creations are sometimes liked, commented or reposted by Alice Oseman herself – again, reinforcing the idea that interaction between creator and fans is fundamental. Both types of fan work naturally bring in new audiences, generating curiosity about the original product among people who may not be familiar with it. Moreover, the creator's interaction with fan work can offer fans a sense of gratification, making them even more enthusiastic and loyal, eager to create even more content and therefore popularising the product. When a media product extends beyond its original platform and obtains recognition on social media, it can be considered to have embarked on the trajectory towards widespread popularity. In the case of *Heartstopper*, one of the critical factors that facilitated the series' diffusion and viral success across social media, TikTok in particular, was the strategic use of the hashtag #heartstopper, as discussed before.

In conclusion, the success of *Heartstopper* can be attributed to the intricate dynamics between fan engagement, social media, and online communities. Alice Oseman's early interactions with her fans helped cement a strong parasocial relationship, which bolstered financial backing and fan loyalty. The fandom itself played a pivotal role in increasing the series' visibility and reach, transforming it into a cultural phenomenon. Thus, it can be asserted that *Heartstopper*'s widespread success can be attributed not only

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[120] J. Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., London-New York, Routledge, 1990, quoted by N. Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam Press, 2018, p. 15.
[121] H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, New York University Press, 2006, quoted by N. Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, p. 16.

to its resonance among social media but largely also to the formation of a deeply connected and supportive fandom, which in turn highlights the transformative power of online communities in shaping and amplifying media that resonates with audiences on a profound level. The community that surrounds the series is a powerful force for connection, particularly among LGBTQ+ individuals who find comfort, validation, and a sense of belonging through Alice Oseman's characters and stories. As I will discuss in the following subchapter, *Heartstopper* not only offers healthy LGBTQ+ representation but has also created a cross-generational fan community that serves as a safe space and vital support network for many of its members.

3.3. "We're here and we're queer": *Heartstopper* and positive LGBTQ+ representation

Before exploring *Heartstopper*'s positive representation of LGBTQ+ identities and dynamics, it is useful to understand what representation is. To do so, I will refer to Stuart Hall[122]'s seminal work *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997). Here, he states that:

> Representation is the production of meaning through language. […] We use signs, organised into languages of different kinds, to communicate meaningfully with others. […] There is no simple relationship or reflection, imitation or one-to-one correspondence between language and the real world. The world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language. […] Meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems. […] meaning is constructed by the practice, the 'work', of representation.[123]

Therefore, representation stems from an intersection between language and culture. Language, in particular, is a meaning-making system which produces and conveys a specific vision of the world. Representation articulates itself in two systems, namely mental representation, a shared conceptual map, and linguistic representation, i.e. what enables members of a given community to share ideas. Culture stems from the linguistic sharing of the same conceptual map. Language thus plays a pivotal role in terms of representation and culture. Linguistic signs are characterised by arbitrariness, hence facts of reality are arbitrarily and culturally defined. Before Hall, a number of theorists had

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[122] Stuart Hall (1932-2014) was a Jamaican-born British postcolonial sociologist, known as the 'godfather of multiculturalism'.
[123] S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London, Sage, 1997, p. 28.

already studied the ways in which representation works, among them Michel Foucault,[124] who connected representation, discourse and power. He interpreted the notion of discourse as a way in which representation is used as a tool for power in order to intervene in the actual world on a social level. In sum, what they both argued is that the words we use, or do not use, to represent and refer to things and concepts have a direct influence on whether we perceive them as valid, and positive or negative. Nevertheless, language is not the only cultural representational system. Mainstream media play a pivotal role, as well, in constructing and shaping meaning. Despite censorship and misrepresentation, mass media have often featured queer characters and narratives. Undeniably, LGBTQ+ identities and stories have existed in literature since its early days, although they have often, but not always, been marginalised, depending on the era in which they were first told or published. For example, in ancient Greece, male homosexual relationships, such as that of Patroclus and Achilles in Aeschylus's *The Myrmidons* (5th century), were socially accepted, albeit through a lens of pederasty,[125] which raises moral concerns today. However, many queer stories from antiquity have been lost, and modern academia has often overlooked such narratives, particularly during periods dominated by heteronormative perspectives. The sexuality of the ancient Greek poet Sappho (c. 630 – c. 570 BC), for instance, remains debated, with scholars arguing that early mistranslations might have obscured her queerness for centuries. Similarly, literature from the medieval period contained references to queer relationships, such as a recently resurfaced tale from 12th-century Ireland in which two lesbian lovers are featured – this narrative was largely forgotten until a new translation in 2008 restored its visibility.[126] Another medieval example of queer literature might be Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* (c. 1220), which features an overtly queer character, Loki, a shape-shifting genderfluid semi-god. During the Renaissance, works like Shakespeare's, particularly Sonnets 18, 20, and 121, included references to homosexuality. However, the social climate shifted with the advent of the

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[124] Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a French historian and structuralist and post-structuralist philosopher. He has had strong influence not only in philosophy but also in a wide range of humanistic and socio-scientific disciplines.

[125] Pederast: from the Greek *paiderastēs*, literally "lover of boys". A pederast is a man who desires or engages in sexual activities with a younger boy. (From *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pederast).

[126] P. Kelleher, *Resurfaced Medieval Tale Has the Most Incredible Queer Plot Twist – and Historians Say There Are Many More Where It Came From*, The Pink News, 30 August 2020. Retrieved on 13 October 2024 from thepinknews.com/2020/08/30/medieval-tale-gay-lgbt-love-story-twelfth-century-ireland-lesbian-lover-baby-king/

Age of Enlightenment, which fostered legal and social scrutiny of queerness. As a consequence, writers began using mythological references and subtexts to conceal queer themes – for example, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) featured homoerotic connections between characters.[127] In the 19th century, authors like Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker boldly incorporated queer themes into their work. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) is recognised as the first lesbian vampire story, while Stoker's Dracula (*Dracula*, 1897) overtly desires to metaphorically penetrate Jonathan Harker. Oscar Wilde and his *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) are obviously another instance of queerness in literature. The 20th century saw a significant flourishing in LGBTQ+ literature. Notable examples are Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), regarded as an early transgender novel which explores gender fluidity, and *Giovanni's Room* (1956) by James Baldwin, who sparked outrage at the time as a black author writing about white gay men.

Cinema, as well, has influenced mainstream media and pop culture in the reception and representation of LGBTQ+ identities. Unlike in the case of literature, queer characters have started to appear on the big screen only in the last decades, insomuch as homosexuality was considered a form of sexual deviance and taboo. In particular, in the 1930s, The Motion Picture and Distributors Association (MPDA) approved the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, after Will H. Hays, the head of the company and devout Presbyterian. This code censored everything that was deviant from standard morality and thus not 'appropriate' for films, homosexuality included. Only in the 1960s, the Code was revised in order to be more consistent with the values of that time, which were more inclusive than 30 years prior. Since then, queer characters started to appear in cinematic productions, although many of them tended to display harmful stereotypical homosexual behaviours, most of the time without actually being part of the LGBTQ+ community. This phenomenon is called 'queercoding'. It is interesting to notice that the great majority of queercoded characters are villains, such as Hades from *Hercules* (1997) and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Moreover, LGBTQ+ narratives often centre around tragedy or drama, casting queerness in a negative light and stemming from the assumption that being queer is inherently tragic. This phenomenon is referred to as

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[127] The homoerotic undertones emerge through the relationship between Ambrosio, a monk, and Rosario, later revealed to be a woman in disguise. Ambrosio is deeply drawn to Rosario, whom he perceives as a male novice, with admiration that verges on physical attraction. The monastic setting makes homoeroticism even more transgressive and intense.

the 'queer tragedy trope', which maintains the idea that LGBTQ+ love is destined to be characterised by suffering and hate. In addition, mass media depictions of queer relationships are often hypersexualised (as in the case of the 2013 film *Blue Is the Warmest Colour*) or involve grooming or sexual predation (for example, André Aciman's 2007 novel, *Call Me by Your Name*, which was made into a film ten years later by Luca Guadagnino). When popular media featuring queer identities and narratives exist just as tragedies, queer youth and those still in the closet[128] may believe queerness is incompatible with a joyful life and acceptance. Underrepresentation and misrepresentation can, in fact, lead to internalised homophobia, a higher risk of depression and anxiety, and even suicide. Psychotherapist Alessio Rizzo argues that "LGBTQ+ representation is key to convey to the wider public that it is okay and respectable to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community".[129] According to The Trevor Project's 2022 survey, 89% of interviewees reported that seeing LGBTQ+ representation in television and films made them feel good about being queer.[130] Amit Paley, CEO & Executive Director of The Trevor Project commented:

> The fact that very simple things – like […] seeing LGBTQ representation in media […] – can have such a positive impact on the mental health of an LGBTQ young person is inspiring, and it should command more attention in conversations around suicide prevention and public debates around LGBTQ inclusion.[131]

Therefore, in light of this, it is possible to come to the conclusion that LGBTQ+ characters and narratives have existed in mainstream media since the early days of literature and, in the case of cinema, since the 1960s. Nevertheless, such identities and stories have often been silenced, willingly mistranslated, or villainised. Fortunately, in the last decades, positive representations of queerness are consistently more frequent and popular, *Heartstopper* being an example of this trend. Notably, the main characters in *Heartstopper* are part of the LGBTQ+ community or are in queer relationships, which is a refreshing departure from the common tokenistic and stereotyped trope of queer

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[128] 'Being in the closet' is an expression used to described an LGBTQ+ person who has not told anyone of their sexual orientation, transgender identity, and/or romantic relationship.
[129] UK Council for Psychotherapy, *The Importance of LGBTQ+ Representation*. (n. d.). Retrieved on 13 October 2024 from psychotherapy.org.uk/news/the-importance-of-lgbtq-representation/#:~:text=From%20films%20and%20television%20to,combat%20discrimination%20and%20promote%20acceptance.
[130] The Trevor Project, *2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health*. (n. d.). Retrieved on 14 October 2024 from thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/#support-youth.
[131] *Ibidem*.

characters relegated to being villains, side roles, or objects of ridicule, reduced to their sexuality and stripped of depth and complexity. In contrast, *Heartstopper* offers well-rounded characters whose stories extend beyond their queerness, making the series a significant cultural phenomenon that captivates a diverse audience through its heartfelt explorations of love, friendship and self-discovery. Despite addressing issues such as mental health struggles, bullying, and the challenges of understanding and accepting one's own LGBTQ+ identity, queerness is not portrayed tragically. For this reason, *Heartstopper* often functions as a comfort series, promoting values of respect and inclusion, which are strongly reflected in its fans. Furthermore, through Nick and Charlie's story, readers learn to embrace and love their queer identities. The *Heartstopper* fandom functions as a cross-generational support community that includes not only teenagers but also individuals in their twenties and older adults. Although its target is primarily adolescents, the series has garnered significant popularity among older demographics, too. As discussed, older people lacked access to queer representation in media during their youth, and when such representation did exist, it often adhered to the queer tragedy trope. For many adults, myself included, *Heartstopper* represents the kind of literary and television product we would have needed during our adolescence. A notable example of such sentiment comes from British gay YouTubers Daniel Howell (born 1991) and Phil Lester (born 1987), who both think of *Heartstopper* as bittersweet. While in an X post from 2022, Daniel asks "real question will watching heartstopper make me feel good or just bad that my gay school years were harrowing",[132] Phil more eloquently argues:

> Heartstopper makes me feel two things. Firstly, it makes me feel a bit sad on the inside because me growing up would never even imagine holding another boy's hand, walking through the school corridors and stuff like that. So I'm just kind of sad for myself at that age, not having things like this to watch and realise that it could be normal, and everything would be okay. But I'm really happy that it's out there and on TV now and so popular, and everyone is getting exposed to the fact that queer relationships are normal. […] Well done, Alice Oseman.*[133]*

Both Daniel and Phil have often described their high school experience as horrible and isolating. In particular, Daniel was the target of homophobic bullying, which included not

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[132] Daniel Howell [@danielhowell], *Real Question Will Watching* Heartstopper *Make Me Feel Good or Just Bad that My Gay School Years Were Harrowing* [Post], X, 8 May 2022. Retrieved on 14 October 2024 from x.com/danielhowell/status/1523382984459489282.

[133] AmazingPhil, *Judging Your Faves With No Context* [Video], YouTube, 23 July 2023. Retrieved on 14 October 2024 from youtube.com/watch?v=NX1zU6UEuy0&t=324s.

only verbal harassment – such as people singing songs about him being gay on the bus and shouting slurs during GCSE exams – but also physical, with Daniel recalling that "the lowkey pushing became punches".[134] He also mentions that his teachers did nothing to protect him and prevent further bullying, but rather "laughed, 'cause you know, boys will be boys, especially the gay ones that get killed by other ones, am I right?".[135] Daniel remembers thinking that if he ever wanted to be accepted or merely survive, he could not be gay, and therefore pretended to be heterosexual, at least in public, until his coming out in 2019 at the age of 27. This is an example of internalised homophobia, an unfortunately common occurrence among queer individuals, which can lead, as in the case of Daniel, to attempting suicide. He admits being glad he failed and knows that telling his story "will mean something to someone, as every time someone speaks openly about sexuality, it saves lives".[136] He also mentions that he had never met a gay person until he was 18, but if he had, or even just seen better representation in the media, he would not have felt as alone. Daniel and Phil's stories are common instances of shared experiences among older LGBTQ+ individuals, who often spent the most crucial years of their lives being bullied, with no real support networks, and under- or misrepresented, showing the incredible importance of having positive LGBTQ+ depictions in mainstream media.

To sum up, *Heartstopper* stands out for its healthy and positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities and dynamics, offering a refreshing counter-narrative to the common queer tragedy trope. Through the experiences of Nick and Charlie, the series promotes self-acceptance and inclusion, values that resonate strongly within its fandom, which functions as a cross-generational support network. This community provides a safe space for both young and older fans. For many adults, in particular, *Heartstopper* fills a void left by the gap of positive LGBTQ+ representation in mass media during their teenage years, as exemplified by Daniel Howell and Phil Lester. Therefore, it is possible to come to the conclusion that *Heartstopper* is a cultural touchstone that addresses the evolving needs of queer representation across generations.

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[134] Daniel Howell, *Basically I'm Gay* [Video], YouTube, 13 June 2019. Retrieved on 14 October 2024 from youtube.com/watch?v=lrwMja_VoM0&t=360s

[135] *Ibidem*.

[136] *Ibidem.*

This chapter has set ground for the next, which will be the last one but central to this thesis. The present section has provided a deeper insight into the reasons for choosing Alice Oseman's graphic novel *Heartstopper* as a case study. Firstly, it demonstrates how literature can actively inspire and empower individuals, fostering a more inclusive understanding of identity and belonging. Furthermore, it underscores the critical role queer narratives play in fostering empathy and connection, encouraging readers to embrace their identities. A key element of the series' success lies in the active engagement of its online fandom and resonance within social media, which have played a crucial role in establishing the series as a cultural phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the cross-generational fan community of *Heartstopper* has become a source of support, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals seeking validation and support. For older fans, the series provides the kind of positive queer representation that was often lacking during their adolescence, providing them with the uplifting LGBTQ+ narratives that they needed while growing up. As a result, *Heartstopper* has not only created a safe and supportive space for its audience but also exemplifies the power of queer narrative to save LGBTQ+ lives.

In the following chapter, I will explore the importance of literature in education, not only as a cultural tool to enhance students' general knowledge, but also as a powerful way to create a safe space, fostering values such as inclusion, empathy, and acceptance. Literature, in particular in the form of graphic storytelling, offers unique benefits in the classroom, combining visual and textual elements to enhance student engagement and understanding. A key focus of the next chapter's discussion is the teaching of LGBTQ+ topics. By comparing the approach of Scottish and Italian schools to such themes, or shall I say, a lack of it on the part of the latter, I will highlight the vital role inclusive education plays in improving the well-being and happiness of LGBTQ+ students. As already hinted at, introducing LGBTQ+ topics in schools is crucial for reducing homophobic-driven bullying and helping queer students thrive. Inclusive representation can indeed offer LGBTQ+ youth the affirmation and support they need to accept their identity and avoid the isolation that can lead to mental health struggles, including suicide attempts. Using excerpts from *Heartstopper*, I will demonstrate how integrating LGBTQ+-themed literature into educational settings can foster acceptance and inclusivity, ultimately creating a safer and more supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students.

CHAPTER 4. "Don't let anyone make you disappear": LGBTQ+ visibility in education

As educational institutions strive to foster inclusive environments, the integration of LGBTQ+ themes into curricula has become increasingly vital. Literature plays an essential role in this process by enhancing student engagement and encouraging the development of skills such as emotional intelligence and critical thinking, deepening students' understanding of fundamental human values, including empathy, respect, and the shared experiences that unite us.

This chapter delves into the multifaceted benefits of using graphic novels in teaching, specifically focusing on how they can effectively engage students with LGBTQ+ themes. A comparative analysis of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in education between Scotland and Italy will illuminate significant differences in policies, societal attitudes, and educational practices, underscoring the importance of introducing LGBTQ+ themes into the classroom. I selected these countries for comparison based on both personal and academic reasons. Italy, where I was born and raised, is where I experienced school as a queer teenager and encountered firsthand the challenges and limitations of an education system that largely, if not entirely, omits LGBTQ+ topics. This personal experience allows me to analyse Italy's educational situation for queer students from an insider's perspective, reflecting on the impact such negligence and conservative standpoints have on the identity formation and well-being of queer students. Scotland, on the other hand, provides a contrasting academic case, in 2017, it became the first country in the world to integrate LGBTQ+ education into its official curriculum. This historic step clearly represents a significant move toward recognising and supporting LGBTQ+ individuals. By examining Scotland's pioneering approach, I aim to highlight the potential benefits of a LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum and the broader social impact of a supportive educational environment for queer students.

My discussion will focus on Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper*, which is a vital educational resource for exploring identity and developing a deeper understanding of diverse experiences. By engaging with the graphic novel series, students are encouraged to learn acceptance and respect while grappling with issues of representation and the importance of a supportive community. Drawing direct examples from *Heartstopper* to

illustrate how these discussions can be facilitated in the classroom, I will explore four key themes, namely stereotypes, self-discovery, homotransphobia, and the role of a supportive community. This approach not only enhances students' critical thinking skills but also empowers them to reflect on their own identities and the significance of empathy towards others. By incorporating LGBTQ+ literature into the curriculum, teachers provide students with the tools to value diversity and create an inclusive culture, laying the foundation for a more compassionate society. Ultimately, talking about LGBTQ+ matters increases the visibility of queer identities, allowing LGBTQ+ students to be represented in a way that does not villainise them but that makes their experience and identity valid.

4.1. The benefits of using graphic novels in teaching

Contemporary classrooms are frenetic environments where teachers must maximise every available moment. To achieve this, didactic materials must be appropriately concise and efficient. Consequently, textbooks have become an institutional necessity. A primary reason for their enduring presence lies in their well-organised content. As Apple and Christian-Smith (1991) argue, textbooks provide readers with a curated body of knowledge that aligns with educational standards.[137] Nevertheless, textbooks should not be the sole sources on which teachers must rely, as they are often insufficiently engaging for students, who require constant motivation. It is, therefore, crucial to introduce activities and materials that can capture students' interest. In particular, authentic materials are pivotal in achieving this goal. Authentic materials are defined as "all materials designed for a real audience, not created for educational purposes, but produced for a variety of everyday life-related purposes"[138]. An example of authentic materials is literary texts, which offer "real language in context, to which we can respond directly",[139] and provide abundant examples of "conversations, expressions of feelings, functional

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[137] M. Apple & L. Christian-Smith (eds.), *The Politics of the Textbook*, New York, Routledge, 1991, quoted by J. O. Barbre III, J. Carroll, & J. Tolbert, "Comic Literature and Graphic Novel Uses in History, Literature, Math, and Science", *SANE Journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education* 2(7), 2022, p. 2.

[138] A. Novello, *La classe di lingue inclusiva. Gli studenti con altissime abilità*, Milan, Mondadori Università, 2022, pp. 82-83. Original cit.: "[…] tutti i materiali pensati per un pubblico reale, non sono costruiti a scopo didattico, ma sono diffusi per scopi molteplici legati alla vita quotidiana […]".

[139] C. J. Brumfit & R. A. Carter, *Literature and Language Teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, quoted by F. D. Floris, "The Power of Literature in EFL Classrooms", *K@ ta* 6(1), 2004, p. 3.

phrases, and contextualised expressions".[140] Beyond their substantial positive effects on engagement and language learning, literary texts display additional, intrinsic didactic qualities. For instance, reading literature fosters emotional intelligence, an ability closely related to the management of emotions and feelings in stressful situations. Literature also enhances critical thinking, allowing students to reflect on their lives, pose questions, and thus promoting personal growth. Furthermore, literature serves as a gateway to other cultures, embodying themes and atmospheres characteristic of the cultural group that produced it. As Floris (2004)[141] asserts, literature enables students to deepen their cultural understanding by becoming more aware of the social, historical, and political contexts of a given society. Nevertheless, literature remains dreadfully underestimated in educational contexts, where it has yet to carve a niche for itself among mainstream teaching materials.[142] By this, I am not implying that literature lacks a place in education; it is, of course, taught. However, the methods and purposes behind literary studies often remain entrenched in outdated approaches – for example, texts outside the classic literary canon are rarely considered. Literature is often taught and studied through rote-learning methods, and literary texts are seldom regarded as tools for imparting values that can aid students' personal growth. Instead, they are primarily used to familiarise students with major authors and works, broadening their general knowledge and cultivating a deeper understanding of national culture. I do not wish to undermine the importance of studying literature as a means of understanding and appreciating one's cultural roots. On the contrary, this thesis seeks to underscore that literature is far more than an exercise in rote learning. First and foremost, reading should be perceived as a personal pleasure rather than an obligation. Furthermore, from a pedagogical standpoint, it is essential to recognise that literary texts serve as repositories of human values and universal experiences that deserve exploration and appreciation. Literature elucidates our identities and should therefore not be confined to mere factual knowledge or memorisation. Consequently, literary works can and should be utilised to foster self-awareness and impart values such as empathy and respect.

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[140] M. Khatib, S. Rezaei, & A. Derakhshan, "Literature in EFL/ESL Classroom", *English Language Teaching* 4(1), 2011, p. 202.
[141] F. D. Floris, "The Power of Literature in EFL Classrooms", p. 2.
[142] C. Lima, "Is the Rest Silence…?", *IATEFL* 186, 2005, quoted by J. Bobkina & E. Dominguez, "The Use of Literature and Literary Texts in the EFL Classroom; Between Consensus and Controversy", *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* 3(2), 2014, p. 248.

Despite all the advantages literature offers, teachers often remain reluctant to adopt this approach, frequently due to the belief that literary language is too complex for their students, assuming that a certain linguistic level is required to understand and engage with the text. This view is supported by scholars like Pieper (2011),[143] who suggests that students need to possess a particular degree of linguistic competence to effectively read literature, although she does not specify the exact level. Conversely, Balboni (2018) argues that "it is not the students' language level that allows teachers to start using some literary texts",[144] but rather "the way teachers use them such as the reading sheets they hand out, the texts they choose, and the activities they propose",[145] framing of such reluctance as a methodological issue.

As anticipated, this thesis focuses on the benefits of incorporating LGBTQ+-themed literature in schools, with a particular focus on both the Scottish and Italian high school situations. Given that this is a thesis in "Critical and Didactic Approaches: English Literature", my proposal centres on incorporating LGBTQ+-themed literature in English also within the Italian educational framework, as suggesting the use of such literature in Italian would not align with the degree requirements. Consequently, it is essential to briefly examine the differences in using literature as an educational tool in contexts where English is the students' first language, as opposed to EFL (English as a foreign language) settings, where reading literature in a foreign language might be more challenging. Balboni offers a useful distinction between two categories: native and almost native language teaching, and non-native language teaching.[146] In the first case, comprehension struggles typically arise when students are confronted with older texts that exhibit diachronic variations of the English language. In the latter, it is important to remember that students are still in the process of learning the language, meaning they may struggle to fully grasp certain terms and expressions, even in contemporary texts. Floris (2004)[147]

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[143] I. Pieper, *Eléments pour une Description des Compétences Linguistiques en Langue de Scolarisation Nécessaires a L'apprentissage/Enseignement de la Littérature (Fin de la Scolarité Obligatoire). Une Démarche et des Points de Référence* [*Issues in the Description of the Competences in the Language of Instruction Necessary to the Teaching/Learning of Literature at the End of Schooling. Perspectives and Reference Points*], Strasbourg, Conseil de l'Europe, 2011, quoted by P. Balboni, *A Theoretical Framework for Language Education and Teaching*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, p. 121.
[144] P. Balboni, *A Theoretical Framework for Language Education and Teaching*, p. 121.
[145] *Ibidem.*
[146] *Ibidem.*
[147] F. D. Floris, "The Power of Literature in EFL Classrooms", p. 5.

emphasises the importance of selecting literary texts suited to students' language proficiency, as overly complex texts can lead to demotivation. However, it is equally important to recognise that learning requires challenges, and texts that are too simple may bore students. Therefore, teachers must carefully consider the main objective of using a given text in the classroom. They must reflect on whether the goal is solely to enhance students' language proficiency or to convey a message or set of values. If the primary aim is to teach values, it is essential to ensure that the text's linguistic level aligns with the class overall proficiency. This approach will enable students to comprehend the material without needing frequent interruptions to ask for an explanation of terms or expressions. Nevertheless, as Floris (2004) notes, "when EFL learners enjoy reading literature and have motivation to interact with a text, they will develop their reading proficiency"[148]. Additionally, Carter and Long (1991)[149] argue that selecting a text that addresses familiar events and experiences is crucial to maintaining students' interest and enjoyment in working with literature.

When selecting a text for this thesis's case study, I considered these factors carefully. *Heartstopper*, as a contemporary literary work featuring simple, predominantly conversational language, is an appropriate choice that addresses these concerns for both English L1 Scottish students and EFL Italian students.[150] Additionally, the multimodal graphic novel format further facilitates ease of comprehension and enhances curiosity and engagement by providing "clues that shed light on the meaning of an unfamiliar word or grammatical structure".[151] As mentioned in Chapter 2, graphic novels "are an invaluable tool for motivating reluctant readers",[152] as the substantial presence of illustrations makes them far less intimidating than traditional prose novels. Moreover, the interplay of images and words makes the text visually stimulating, thereby enhancing its appeal and resulting in increased attention from students. In the same chapter, I also argued that graphic novels

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[148] *Ivi*, p. 3.

[149] R. A. Carter & M. N. Long, *Teaching Literature*, London, Longman, 1991, quoted by F. D. Floris, "The Power of Literature in EFL Classrooms", p. 5.

[150] Italian students enter their first year of high school with an English proficiency level of A2, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). In my view, *Heartstopper* is accessible to readers with an A2 to B1 CEFR level of English proficiency.

[151] S. Krashen, "Language Teaching Technology: A Low-Tech View", in J. E. Alatis (ed.), *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics,* Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, quoted by C. W. Chun, "Critical Literacies and Graphic Novels for English-Language Learners: Teaching *Maus*", *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 53(2), 2009, p. 146.

[152] P. Crawford, "A Novel Approach: Using Graphic Novels to Attract Reluctant Readers", *Library Media Connection* 22(5), 2004, p. 26.

often present narratives that profoundly resonate with the experiences of adolescents, who are in a life stage in which they are trying to figure out who they really are, *Heartstopper* being an example of such thematic depth. Additionally, graphic novels have an interdisciplinary potential to cover thematic units or introduce specific topics, as argued by Bucher and Manning (2004).[153] For instance, they can serve as a springboard for interactive activities like debates and research projects. Furthermore, by using graphic novels that tackle topics such as human rights, immigration, social injustices, or climate change, teachers can stimulate meaningful discussions among students, allowing them to gain a better understanding of current issues. Likewise, as I will discuss later on, graphic novels can be particularly effective in addressing ongoing issues within the school or classroom environment, such as bullying, racism, ableism, homotransphobia, and other forms of discrimination. By depicting diverse characters and experiences, these narratives foster inclusivity and provide representation for minorities who are often marginalised or invisible in traditional school curricula. Essentially, not only do graphic novels enrich the teaching of literature, but they also offer a dynamic platform for exploring and reflecting on relevant contemporary issues, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic school environment.

In conclusion, although textbooks play a vital role in education, their limitations in engaging students highlight the need for a broader array of activities and materials that spark interest. Authentic materials, particularly literary texts, emerge as invaluable resources, offering real language in context, and fostering a deeper connection with the content. Such texts enhance student engagement and language acquisition while, at the same time, encourage the development of emotional intelligence and critical thinking, deepening the understanding empathy and respect. However, literature is often undervalued in educational contexts, with teaching methods frequently rooted in outdated practices. The reliance on rote learning and the neglect of non-canonical texts hinder students' ability to engage meaningfully with literature. Among such forgotten texts are graphic novels, which could be particularly useful for attracting reluctant readers and maintaining students' interest. Not only do they enrich the study of literature, but they also serve as powerful tools for reflecting on relevant societal themes as well as ongoing

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[153] K. T. Bucher & M. L. Manning, "Bringing Graphic Novels into a School's Curriculum", *The Clearing House* 78(2), pp. 67-72, quoted by J. O. Barbre III, J. Carroll, & J. Tolbert, "Comic Literature and Graphic Novel Uses in History, Literature, Math, and Science", p. 5.

issues within the school, such as bullying and discrimination. By embracing these narratives, teachers can create a more inclusive school environment that supports students.

4.2. Why teach LGBTQ+ topics and themes? A comparison between Scottish and Italian schools

Schools play a critical role in adolescents' identity development. In Chapter 2, I emphasised that adolescence is a complex developmental stage during which individuals are expected to form academic and professional aspirations while simultaneously constructing a sense of self and envisioning their future. Research indicates that developing a stable identity enhances resilience, autonomy, competence, and self-reflection.[154] Considering that teenagers spend a significant proportion of their time in the classroom, it is no surprise that schools play a pivotal role in shaping the identities of students, both directly and indirectly. Verhoeven et al. (2019) identify three different ways in which scholastic environments can impact adolescents' identity:

> First, […] at school, messages may unintentionally be communicated to adolescents concerning who they should or can be through differentiation and selection, teaching strategies, teacher expectations, and peer norms. Second, studies on how schools and teachers can intentionally support adolescents' identity development showed that different types of explorative learning experiences can be organized to support adolescents' identity development […]. The third group suggests that explorative learning experiences must be meaningful and situated in a supportive classroom climate in order to foster adolescents' identity development. Together, the existing studies suggest that schools and teachers are often unaware of the many different ways in which they may significantly impact adolescents' identity development.[155]

In other words, while educators may not always be aware of their own influence, the classroom environment – including teaching methods, expectations, and peer interactions – plays a key role in shaping who students become. Given that adolescents represent the future of society, it is essential for them to grow into empathetic and respectful individuals who contribute positively and avoid harmful behaviour. To achieve this, schools can implement various strategies that encourage self-exploration, facilitating open dialogue about identity and diversity, and providing counselling services. An inclusive curriculum and a supportive environment are vital, as well.

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[154] M. Verhoeven, A. M. G. Poorthuis, & M. Volman, "The Role of School in Adolescents' Identity Development. A Literature Review", *Educational Psychology Review* 31, 2019, p. 36.
[155] *Ivi*, pp. 35-36.

Inclusive curricula integrate diverse perspectives, helping students see themselves reflected in the learning material, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and promoting an understanding of different identities. As highlighted by the '2023 Eurydice Report' published by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency,[156] the fundamental principle of inclusion has become a key theme in the educational science discourse and a policy priority across Europe. The report investigates what education authorities "do to address discrimination and to promote diversity and inclusion in schools, with a special focus on targeted initiatives to support those learners who are most likely to experience disadvantage and/or discrimination",[157] commenting that the main disadvantaged groups are students with special needs or disabilities and migrant and refugee students, followed by ethnic minority students. In addition, religious minority and LGBTQ+ students are "much less frequently targeted by policies and measures aiming to promote diversity and inclusion in schools".[158] Nonetheless, the report asserts that these groups should be given greater attention in order to ensure that all students are supported in their learning and development. Since this thesis centres on LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusivity in educational settings, my focus will be solely on this minority group. That said, other marginalised groups also merit detailed exploration, which future research could address.

It is important, first of all, to start from the idea that schools are inherently heteronormative institutions. Heteronormativity, as Blackburn and Smith (2010) define it, is a societal norm that "relies on the belief that heterosexuality is normal, which implicitly positions homosexuality and bisexuality as abnormal and thus inferior".[159] Social practices and institutions "privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and 'natural'"[160], reinforcing gender roles by expecting people to conform to the gender assigned to them at birth. Essentially, heteronormativity "keeps people in

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[156] European Commission: European Education and Culture Executive Agency, *Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Schools in Europe*, 2023. Retrieved on 25 October 2024 from data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/443509.

[157] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, *Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Schools in Europe. Eurydice Report*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, p. 9.

[158] *Ibidem*.

[159] M. V. Blackburn & J. M. Smith¸ "Moving Beyond the Inclusion of LGBT-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms: Interrogating Heteronormativity and Exploring Intersectionality", *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 53(8), 2010, p. 625.

[160] C. J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?", in E. P. Johnson & M. G. Henderson (Eds.), *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, pp. 21-51, quoted by M. V. Blackburn & J. M. Smith¸ "Moving Beyond the Inclusion of LGBT-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms: Interrogating Heteronormativity and Exploring Intersectionality", p. 626.

their places".[161] Schools introduce such gendered expectations from a young age, embedding them within the curriculum, classroom management, and school culture. Moreover, they are entangled with heteronormative power dynamics. If we analyse school hierarchies we can quickly decode a framework that mirrors traditional patriarchy: men usually hold positions of authority (i.e. headteachers, administrators), while women are more often secretaries or school caretakers. Interestingly, the enforcement of heteronormative ideals and the rigidity of gender roles within educational environments, which translate into gender segregation (e.g. bathrooms, one-gender schools), often escape notice, leading to the naturalisation of the gender dichotomy as an indisputable truth. Bourdieu (1991) argues that schools hold "a monopoly of the *official naming*, of the right classification, of the right order" [162] of gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality. Influenced by this indoctrination, students are led to think that gender identity and romantic and sexual orientation are "both denoted and inescapably determined by one's genitalia".[163] Therefore, it is possible to argue that school as an institution does not actively protect LGBTQ+ students but silently gives way to homotransphobic bullying and violence.

Before moving on, I think it is important to differentiate general bullying and anti-LGBTQ+ bullying. To better understand homotransphobic bullying, it is essential to first analyse the concept of homophobia. Composed of *omo-* (from the Ancient Greek ὁμός, meaning 'equal, similar') and *-phobia* (from φοβέομαι, 'to fear), homophobia literally means 'fear of the equal, of the similar'.[164] Nevertheless, since *omo-* is a contraction of homosexual, the term more precisely expresses a 'fear of sexuality among similar individuals'. Burgio (2020)[165] traces this connection to George Weinberg,[166] who coined

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[161] M. V. Blackburn & J. M. Smith¸ "Moving Beyond the Inclusion of LGBT-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms: Interrogating Heteronormativity and Exploring Intersectionality", p. 626.
[162] P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, (J. B. Thompson, Ed., G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1991, quoted by M. V. Blackburn & J. M. Smith¸ "Moving Beyond the Inclusion of LGBT-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms: Interrogating Heteronormativity and Exploring Intersectionality", p. 627. [Italics in the original].
[163] M. V. Blackburn & J. M. Smith¸ "Moving Beyond the Inclusion of LGBT-Themed Literature in English Language Arts Classrooms: Interrogating Heteronormativity and Exploring Intersectionality", p. 627.
[164] G. Burgio, "Le omofobie a scuola. Un inquadramento teorico problematizzante", *Ricerche di pedagogia e didattica – Journal of Theories and Research in Education* 15(1), 2020, pp. 155-168, p. 156.
[165] *Ibidem.*
[166] George Weinberg (1929-2017) was an American psychotherapist, famous for coining the term homophobia in the mid-1960s. He was a leader in the campaign for homosexuality to be removed from the list of mental illnesses in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of*

the term to describe the irrational fear of engaging with homosexual individuals and of being perceived as one. However, homophobia – and by extension, transphobia – should not be understood solely within a clinical context; rather, it should be examined within a broader cultural framework. Phobias typically create a mechanism of avoidance toward the object that incites fear. In contrast, homotransphobic individuals may actively seek out a homosexual or trans person "to express their disgust, thereby evoking a form of hatred rather than fear".[167] Such individuals do not exhibit a pathology, instead, they reinforce the social construct of cis-heterosexism, "a systemic ideology that denies, denigrates and stigmatises all forms of non-heterosexual" and non-cisgender "identities, behaviours, and communities"[168]. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a form of "cultural imperialism",[169] particularly manifesting within educational settings through the erasure of LGBTQ+ topics. Reiterating insights from the previous chapter, this absence is compounded by the media's tokenistic and derogatory portrayal of queer individuals, which is subsequently assimilated and reproduced among adolescents. During this developmental stage, there is a perceived obligation to conform to prevailing gender and sexual stereotypes to attain social acceptance and a strong inclination to exclude those deemed 'different' for failing to adhere to these norms.[170] As Burgio asserts, this dynamic results in the phenomenon whereby LGBTQ+ individuals "are not discussed (in a serious, respectful, and informed manner), and at the same time, they are talked about excessively (through jokes and insults)".[171] At the core of anti-LGBTQ+ violence, be it symbolic, verbal, or physical, lies thus cis-heteronormative compulsion. Within the school environment, violence is predominantly manifested as bullying, which can be defined as a behaviour that is "repeated, intended to hurt someone either physically or emotionally" and "often aimed at certain groups, for example because of race, religion, gender or sexual

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Mental Disorders. [Patricia Bauer, *George Weinberg*, Britannica, (n. d.). Retrieved on 26 October 2024 from britannica.com/biography/George-Weinberg].

[167] G. Burgio, "Le omofobie a scuola. Un inquadramento teorico problematizzante", p. 156. Original cit.: "[…] per mostrare loro il proprio disgusto, evocando quindi una forma di odio più che di paura".

[168] V. Lingiardi, *Citizen gay. Famiglie, diritti negati e salute mentale*, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 2007, quoted by G. Burgio, cit., p. 157. Original cit.: "un sistema ideologico che nega, denigra e stigmatizza ogni forma di comportamento, identità, relazione o comunità non eterosessuale".

[169] G. Burgio, op. cit. , p. 163.

[170] *Ibidem.*

[171] *Ibidem.* Original cit.: "[…] non si parli (in modo serio, rispettoso, informato) e, al contempo, si parli troppo (attraverso le battute e gli insulti".

orientation."[172] Lingiardi (2007) identifies three dynamics that are intrinsic to homotransphobic bullying:

> a) *abuses invoke a specifically sexual dimension*: the individual is not merely attacked as a person […] but rather, and predominantly, in relation to their sexuality and gender identity; b) *victims often face significant struggles in seeking assistance from adults*: […] requesting help due to being a victim of homophobic bullying effectively brings attention to their own sexuality, bringing with it feelings of anxiety and shame […]; c) […] *victims may encounter challenges in identifying supportive figures among their peers*: the already limited number of 'defenders of the victim' diminishes further in instances of homophobic bullying, as 'defending a f*ggot' poeses the risk of being labelled as homosexual oneself.[173]

Consequently, these homotransphobic phenomena can lead queer students to experience school as an environment marked by discomfort and a pervasive sense of insecurity, which may result in academic failure, sporadic attendance or complete dropout from education. Additionally, this can have enduring negative effects that influence the trajectory of the victim's life. Therefore, the scholastic system must implement programmes specifically designed to combat homotransphobia. The educational needs of LGBTQ+ students – i.e. the recognition of their existence and the enhancement of peer relational dynamics – should be prioritised by schools. The imperative to combat homotransphobia constitutes a critical educational objective, given that bullying represents a significant psychological and academic risk for affected students. Moreover, it is particularly crucial to address the urgent need for professional development for teachers and school staff, equipping them with the necessary competencies to effectively confront and mitigate homotransphobia among students – competencies that have often not been addressed neither in academic nor in ongoing professional training.

In summary, I have argued how schools influence adolescents and, by extension, the future of society. If the goal is to build a more inclusive and respectful future – in the case of this thesis, toward LGBTQ+ individuals – then schools, as primary spaces for identity formation, must foster empathy, acceptance, and respect. Including LGBTQ+

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[172] Government of the United Kingdom, *Bullying at School*. (n. d.). Retrieved on 26 October 2024 from gov.uk/bullying-at-school/bullying-a-definition.

[173] V. Lingiardi, *Citizen Gay. Famiglie, Diritti Negati e Salute Mentale*, quoted by G. Burgio, "Le omofobie a scuola. Un inquadramento teorico problematizzante", p. 164. [Italics in the original]. Original cit.: "a) *le prepotenze chiamano sempre in causa una dimensione specificamente sessuale*: non è attaccato solamente il soggetto in quanto tale, […] ma anche e soprattutto la sua sessualità e identità di genere; b*) la vittima può incontrare particolari difficoltà a chiedere aiuto agli adulti*: […] chiedere aiuto perché si è vittima di bullismo omofobico equivale a richiamare l'attenzione sulla propria sessualità, con i relativi vissuti di ansia e vergogna […]; c) […] *[La] vittima può incontrare particolari difficoltà a individuare figure di sostegno e protezione fra i suoi pari*: il numero di «difensori della vittima», di per sé esiguo, si abbassa ulteriormente nel bullismo omofobico: «difendere un f*nocchio» comporta il rischio di essere considerati omosessuali".

topics in the classroom encourages inclusivity, helps to curb homotransphobic bullying and violence, and also validates the experiences of queer students, offering them visibility and representation. Previous chapters have shown that the social invisibility of queer identities is a significant issue and that a positive representation is essential for the mental well-being of LGBQ+ individuals. This calls, therefore, for the need for a queer pedagogical approach that dismantles these entrenched cis-heteronormative patterns by advocating for inclusive curricula that integrate LGBTQ+ topics and discussions into the classroom. The term 'queer' in queer pedagogy is to be interpreted both as a noun, meaning LGBTQ+, and as a verb, meaning "interrogating boundaries of normality".[174] Queer pedagogy, therefore, encourage educators to go beyond mere inclusion and instead analyse heteronormative, oppressive structures. As Airton (2013) perfectly describes it, "making space for *queerness* in education is not the same as making space for queers",[175] who should not just be 'tolerated' but actively celebrated.

The Scottish government has recognised the importance of queer pedagogy, making Scotland the first country in the world to embed inclusive LGBTQ+ education into its official school curriculum. This progressive step reflects an understanding of how crucial representation and visibility are within educational contexts, setting an example for how schools can contribute to a more supportive environment for all students. As reported by the website of the Scottish Government, an LGBTQ+ "Inclusive Education Working Group was established in 2017 to improve LGBT young people's learning experience and to address bullying and discrimination".[176] Two years later, in 2019, the Government published a comprehensive set of resources and materials aimed at promoting equality and decreasing homotransphobic bullying. Among these resources were teaching materials designed to integrate LGBTQ+ identities, issues and history across various subjects and adapted to age groups, as well as training programmes for teachers and school staff to approach these topics confidently and knowledgeably. Following a visit to Castleton Primary School in Glasgow, the first to fully embed

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[174] S. M. Pennell, "Training Secondary Teachers to Support LGBTQ+ Students: Practical Applications from Theory and Research", *The High School Journal* 101(1), 2017, p. 64.
[175] L. Airton, "Leave 'Those Kids' Alone: On the Conflation of School Homophobia and Suffering Queers", *Curriculum Inquiry* 43(5), 2013, p. 533.
[176] The Scottish Government, *Milestone for Equality in Schools *UPDATED RELEASE**, Scottish Government: Riaghaltas na h-Alba, 23 September 2021. Retrieved on 25 October 2024 from gov.scot/news/milestone-for-equality-in-schools/.

LGBTQ+ inclusive education across their curriculum, Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth commented she was very happy about the positive steps taken to educate about LGBTQ+ themes and assured that the Government would have continued "to help young people to reach their full potential in a diverse and inclusive society".[177] She also added that this approach was known to have improved LGBTQ+ young people school life, with students reporting fewer instances of anti-LGBTQ+ behaviour, both in school and in the community. Scotland is in fact committed to promoting, protecting and ensuring rights and equality for all its LGBTQ+ citizens. On the official website of the Scottish Government,[178] it is stated that their current work is to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ through a variety of initiatives. Key efforts include reforming the *Gender Recognition Act*[179] and allocating over £3 million in funding to organisations promoting LGBTQ+ equality. Additionally, the government is committed to ending conversion practices and has implemented an action plan focused on improving equality and well-being for non-binary people, alongside supporting improvements in NHS gender identity services. Moreover, the government has established an organisation dedicated to preventing LGBTQ+-related bullying and violence and published a *Hate Crime Strategy* in March 2023, setting out priorities for tackling hate crimes and prejudice and outlining a vision for an inclusive and safe society. It can thus be asserted that Scotland is a country that genuinely prioritises the well-being of its LGBTQ+ citizens. This is evident in the government's commitment to fostering an inclusive society and establishing a legal framework that safeguards the lives and welfare of LGBTQ+ individuals. Interestingly, these advancements have all happened over the past few decades. As discussed in Chapter 1, Scotland has historically lagged behind England, Northern Ireland, and Wales in enacting legislation supportive of and protecting the LGBTQ+ community. This situation underscores that the dedication to ensuring citizens lead fulfilling lives can evolve independently of historical and cultural legacies. Nevertheless, there is still much room for improvement. According to the 2022 *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People* survey

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[177] *Ibidem*.

[178] The Scottish Government, *LGBTQI+*, Scottish Government: Riaghaltas na h-Alba, (n. d.). Retrieved on 25 October 2024 from gov.scot/policies/lgbti/.

[179] For more information on the *Gender Recognition Act*, see Chapter 1. The Reform Bill changes the process of getting a gender recognition certificate by removing the current medical requirements and reducing the waiting time from two years to three months. The Bill is now at Stage 3, where MSPs can propose further amendments and vote on them. If the Bill is passed, it becomes Law.

report,[180] Scotland is rated as a good place to be LGBTQ+ only by 65% of LGBTQ+ interviewees, with homotransphobia still being a great issue, despite the Scottish Government's commitment to contain it.

If a progressive country like Scotland still struggles with ensuring LGBTQ+ well-being, the situation for queer individuals living in Italy is not satisfactory at all. As explored in Chapter 1, Italy's cultural and political landscapes are heavily influenced by the Church, with significant resistance to pro-LGBTQ+ legislation or even discussions on LGBTQ+ issues in schools. The 'anti-gender' movement exerts a powerful influence, making legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals non-existent and any educational reform around these topics highly unlikely. Nevertheless, Italian schools seem to be placing significant emphasis on inclusivity, guided by the fundamental principle of "ensuring equal educational opportunities for all students while providing tools for cultural, psychological, and social development".[181] Over the past twenty years, the Italian education system has made considerable strides in fostering inclusivity, prioritising the needs of all students, viewing diversity as a strength, and actively working to counter prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination. Despite these advancements, incidents of racism, ableism, and homotransphobia remain widespread. In 2021, Massimo Prearo, a Political Sciences researcher specialising in LGBTQ+ movements and politics at the University of Verona, submitted a letter to the Senate Justice Committee regarding the 'DDL Zan' bill.[182] In it, he analysed statistical data on "violence based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability",[183] underscoring that discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+ individuals are persistent and tangible issues. Prearo noted that LGBTQ+ youth, in particular, frequently face such hostility to the point of contemplating and sometimes attempting suicide. As discussed in Chapter 1, the outlook for Italian LGBTQ+ students is far from positive: many report experiencing homophobic

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[180] LGBT Youth Scotland, *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People*, 2022. Retrieved on 25 October 2024 from lgbtyouth.org.uk/life-in-scotland-for-lgbt-young-people-in-2022/.

[181] D. Alì, *Didattica queer: Perché è necessario queerizzare la scuola italiana*, Kabul Magazine, 2021. Retrieved on 25 October 2024 from kabulmagazine.com/didattica-queer/?mobile. Original cit.: "[…] garantire le medesime opportunità educative a tutti gli alunni, fornendo adeguati strumenti di crescita culturale, psicologica e sociale".

[182] The bill aimed to extend protection against ableist and anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes.

[183] M. Prearo, *Il fenomeno dell'odio omolesbobitransfobico come problema pubblico: un'analisi dei dati e delle statistiche*, Senato.it, 2021. Retrieved on 25 October 2024 from senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg18/attachments/documento_evento_procedura_commissione/files/000/388/701/Massimo_PREARO.pdf. Original cit.: "[…] violenza per motivi fondati sul sesso, sul genere, sull'orientamento sessuale, sull'identità di genere e sulla disabilità".

or transphobic bullying, with only minimal support or intervention from school staff or family. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ topics are very seldom addressed within Italian schools, and numerous individuals and organisations are actively working to ban them altogether. In 2023, for example, Rome's school department launched the 'Ti presento Andrea' project, an initiative aimed at introducing LGBTQ+ themes in middle and high schools. The programme included workshops and visits to LGBTQ+ association spaces, with the goal of fostering an understanding of queer identities and preventing homotransphobic discrimination and bullying. The project quickly faced intense backlash from the conservative non-profit organisation *Pro Vita & Famiglia*, which argued it introduced 'gender ideology' to young children without parental consent and promoted a "fluid"[184] concept of sexuality. Consequently, *Pro Vita & Famiglia* launched a petition to prohibit all LGBTQ+-related discussions in schools, claiming that children are being subjected to an "extensive mass brainwashing […] funded by taxpayer money"[185] and that sex education programmes are deeply embedded with 'gender ideology', which they argue confuses children about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Additionally, *Pro Vita & Famiglia* criticises the involvement of LGBTQ+ activist groups in schools, alleging that they promote deviant views on family, sexuality, and surrogacy. As of 29 October 2024, this petition has gathered 104.197 of the 105.000 signatures required to prompt government action toward passing legislation that bans "gender indoctrination in schools".[186] Unfortunately, this conservative, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment is not uncommon among parents in Italy. Recently, an episode of such mindset made the headlines: "Treviso, parents oppose showing the film *Il ragazzo dai pantaloni rosa* in schools".[187] The film, based on the true story of Andrea Spezzacatena, a fifteen-year-old who took his life in November 2012 after enduring homophobic bullying, was scheduled to be shown

[184] A. Arzilli, *Campidoglio, corsi LGBT nelle scuole «per favorire l'inclusione». L'opposizione attacca: «Famiglie non informate»*, Corriere Roma, 18 October 2023. Retrieved on 29 October 2024 from roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/23_ottobre_18/campidoglio-corsi-lgbt-nelle-scuole-per-favorire-l-inclusione-l-opposizione-attacca-famiglie-non-informate-ef832372-2868-4549-99e4-c58fe49c5xlk_amp.shtml.

[185] Pro Vita & Famiglia, *Stop gender nelle scuole!*. (n. d.). Retrieved on 29 October 2024 from https://www.provitaefamiglia.it/petizione/stop-gender-nelle-scuole. Original cit.: "[…] enorme lavaggio del cervello di massa […] finanziato con i soldi pubblici di tutti i contribuenti".

[186] *Ibidem*. Original cit.: "[…] l'indottrinamento gender nelle scuole".

[187] Redazione Cronaca Nazionale, *Treviso, genitori contro il film "Il ragazzo dai pantaloni rosa" a scuola. Il sindaco: "Lo proiettiamo noi"*, La Repubblica, 27 October 2024. Retrieved on 28 October 2024 from https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2024/10/27/news/treviso_genitori_contro_film_il_ragazzo_dai_pantaloni_rosa_a_scuola-423580798/. Original cit.: "Treviso, genitori contro il film "Il ragazzo dai pantaloni rosa" a scuola".

to students at a school in Treviso on 4 November 2024. While the mayor of Treviso emphasised the film's educational significance and the "need for a community-wide reflection on current social issues",[188] some parents objected to this screening. This incident is unfortunately not isolated; a preview screening for schools in Rome was similarly met with jeers and insults. This underscores the deep-rooted homotransphobia affecting Italian society and the urgency of educational interventions to counteract such entrenched and harmful beliefs in younger generations.

Therefore, a comparative analysis of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in education between Scotland and Italy highlights significant differences in policy, societal attitudes, and educational practices. While both countries recognise the importance of inclusivity in the classroom, Scotland has taken more extensive measures to integrate LGBTQ+ topics into its academic framework, whereas Italy remains constrained by cultural and political barriers that limit LGBTQ+ representation and visibility in schools. In particular, the lack of legal protections and the unfortunately persistent influence of the 'anti-gender ideology' underscore the need for systemic change. On the other hand, the Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring the welfare of its queer citizens is guided by an understanding that schools are formative spaces that can support the mental well-being of all students, including LGBTQ+ individuals. However, while Scotland leads policy support, it is clear that societal challenges remain. In a few words, both countries' trajectories suggest that societal and governmental efforts in education are essential to achieving meaningful inclusion and reducing homotransphobic bullying.

This subchapter has explored the pivotal role that schools and teachers play in identity development, emphasising how a supportive and inclusive educational environment can foster empathy and self-awareness and counteract bullying and homotransphobia. Scotland's strides in implementing LGBTQ+-inclusive education offer a model of the positive impact such efforts can have, contrasting the ongoing challenges faced in Italy, where cultural bigotry and a lack of supportive policies leave queer students vulnerable. A comparative analysis of these two contexts illustrates the need for schools to contribute to the well-being and inclusion of all students actively. Moreover, teaching

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[188] Redazione Orizzonte Scuola Notizie, *"Il ragazzo dai pantaloni rosa", genitori di una scuola di Treviso si oppongono alla proiezione del film*, Orizzonte Scuola, 27 October 2024. Retrieved on 28 October 2024 from orizzontescuola.it/il-ragazzo-dai-pantaloni-rosa-genitori-di-una-scuola-di-treviso-si-oppongono-alla-proiezione-del-film/. Original cit.: "[…] necessità di una riflessione comunitaria su problematiche sociali attuali".

LGBTQ+ topics is not just an educational aim but also a societal imperative, setting a foundation for future generations to grow with empathy, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

4.3. Using *Heartstopper* in the classroom: fostering empathy and representation

Having examined *why* teaching LGBTQ+ topics is critical both to queer students' personal growth and societal development, it becomes clear that effective teaching methods are essential to make these concepts accessible and engaging. Therefore, this subchapter will be devoted to exploring didactic methods and theories on *how* to teach LGBTQ+ themes, using *Heartstopper* as a case study and practical tool to foster inclusivity and representation in the classroom. By integrating Alice Oseman's graphic novel into educational settings, teachers can offer students a relatable narrative that models empathy, respect, and the acceptance of diverse identities.

As discussed above, integrating LGBTQ+-themed literature into the curriculum has been shown to create opportunities for critical engagement with themes of identity. This method promotes diverse perspectives, creating what Bishop (1991) defines as "windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors"[189] for students to explore their identities and those of others: windows engage teachers and students in exploring differences, mirrors allow them to view the reflections of the self through characters, while sliding glass doors enable students to "walk through in imagination"[190] and become part of the story, "experiencing characters and settings on an emotional and intellectual level".[191] Therefore, by incorporating LGBTQ+-themed literature into classroom discussions, teachers provide students the opportunity to critically engage with complex issues surrounding sexuality, gender, and identity. This practice empowers students to reflect on their own experiences and fosters an understanding of diverse perspectives.

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[189] R. S. Bishop, "Mirror, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors", *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6(3), 1990, quoted by E. G. Dinkins & P. Englert, "LGBTQ Literature in Middle School Classrooms: Possibilities for Challenging Heteronormative Environments", *Sex Education* 15(4), 2015, p. 394.
[190] *Ibidem.*
[191] E. G. Dinkins & P. Englert, "LGBTQ Literature in Middle School Classrooms: Possibilities for Challenging Heteronormative Environments", p. 394.

Choosing the right text can obviously be challenging. Firstly, it is crucial to consider readers' pleasure in general. Clark and Blackburn (2009) note that using texts mainly "for didactic purposes can destroy the pleasure of reading even the most enjoyable work"[192], adding that YA literature is usually the most appreciated by students. *Heartstopper*, as a work of YA literature, captivates its audience with relatable characters and its engaging interplay of text and illustrations while also providing a platform for discussing complex issues surrounding LGBTQ+ identities. Secondly, when choosing a text, it is absolutely imperative to examine how it represents LGBTQ+ individuals. Cart and Jenkins (2006)[193] identify three dominant ways LGBTQ+ characters are portrayed in literature: 'homosexual visibility' (HV), 'gay assimilation' (GA), and 'queer consciousness/community' (QC). HV narratives generally focus on a single character who, initially assumed to be straight and/or cisgender, eventually comes out or is outed as LGBTQ+. These stories centre on the reactions of other characters, making homosexuality visible within a largely homophobic context. On the other hand, GA stories depict LGBTQ+ characters as fundamentally similar to cis-hetero characters, differing only in terms of sexual orientation and/or transgender identity, which are treated as a non-defining personal attribute. The final category, QC, emphasises the idea of community over individual identity. QC stories feature multiple LGBTQ+ characters within supportive communities and chosen families, celebrating the diversity within queer identities and dispelling the "myth that being gay means being alone".[194] According to Clark and Blackburn, QC books are the most popular among queer youth, therefore they are the fittest to be used in class. *Heartstopper* exemplifies the QC category, featuring multiple LGBTQ+ characters who navigate their identities within a supportive community, showcasing the importance of friendship, love and acceptance.

To effectively engage students with LGBTQ+ themes and foster an inclusive classroom environment, it is essential to delve into specific topics that resonate with young readers, whether they are part of the LGBTQ+ community or not. *Heartstopper*,

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[192] C. T. Clark & M. V. Blackburn, "Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People: What's Possible?", *The English Journal* 98(4), 2009, p. 30.

[193] M. Cart & C. A. Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, Lanham, Scarecrow, 2006, quoted by C. T. Clark & M. V. Blackburn, "Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People: What's Possible?", p. 29.

[194] C. T. Clark & M. V. Blackburn, "Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People: What's Possible?", p. 29.

with its relatable characters and rich narratives, serves as an invaluable tool for exploring such topics. By examining some of the experiences of the characters, educators can facilitate discussions that not only challenge societal norms but also address dynamics occurring within the school environment, while simultaneously raising awareness and visibility of LGBTQ+ identities. In this section, I will highlight four key themes – stereotypes, self-discovery, homotransphobia, and the role of a supportive community – each of which plays a vital role in shaping LGBTQ+ identities and experiences. For each theme, I will provide direct examples from *Heartstopper* and explain why and how that scene could be used in class – however, I will not lay out entire teaching units, but only briefly discuss possible activities. This approach not only enhances students' critical thinking skills but also empowers them to reflect on their own identities and the importance of being empathetic towards others.

4.3.1. Stereotypes

In the opening scenes of *Heartstopper: Vol. 1,*[195] there is a striking example of how assumptions about sexual orientation are often based on stereotypes rather than factual knowledge. Charlie's friend Tao assumes that Nick is straight solely because of his outward appearance and interests – he plays rugby and looks like a 'chav', that is to say particularly masculine.[196] Throughout the series, Nick frequently faces this kind of stereotyping, as others believe he cannot possibly be bisexual because he does not fit the stereotypical portrayal of queer men. Similarly, assumptions about Charlie's interests and abilities are made based on his sexuality. For instance, people presume he is interested in musicals and incapable of excelling in sports. This type of stereotyping reflects broader issues of homophobia. By addressing Nick and Charlie's teammates' speculation about their possible relationship and Nick's sexual orientation, Coach Singh's intervention models an important message in respecting others' privacy and avoiding assumptions, reminding students and readers that it is inappropriate to speculate about or assign labels based on stereotypes.

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[195] A. Oseman, *Heartstopper: Vol. 1*, London, Hachette Children's Group, 2019, pp. 22-25.
[196] 'Chav' (UK informal) is a derogative word that describes a person, usually young, "whose way of dressing, speaking, and behaving is thought to show their lack of education and low social class". (From *Cambridge Dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/chav).

Figure 1. A. Oseman, Heartstopper: Vol. 1*, pp. 203-4.*

Using this passage in the classroom offers an excellent opportunity to discuss with students the harm of stereotypes and assumptions regarding sexuality. Through group discussions and brainstorming activities, students could explore the consequences of enforcing stereotypes and how these can limit understanding and perpetuate discrimination. By challenging these generalisations, students learn the importance of seeing individuals as multi-dimensional, rather than reducing them to simplified or tokenistic representations based on their identities.

4.3.2. Self-discovery

As Nick spends more time with Charlie, he begins to question his feelings for him, realising that his affection goes beyond platonic friendship. Knowing that Charlie is openly gay, Nick begins to wonder if he might also be attracted to boys. This leads him down a path of self-exploration, starting by taking 'Am I gay?' quizzes online and searching what it might mean to be attracted to both girls and boys. These searches are Nick's first steps in acknowledging a part of himself that he had not previously considered, and they mark a turning point in his journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. Nick's realisation that he is not straight is initially overwhelming, making him break down in tears. His emotional response highlights the weight self-discovery can carry for LGBTQ+ individuals, as they confront deeply ingrained societal expectations and internalised norms about sexuality. For Nick, accepting that he might be bisexual is both liberating and

daunting, as it challenges his previous sense of self and compels him to reconcile who he thought he was with who he is now discovering himself to be. Despite these challenges, Nick gradually begins to embrace his bisexuality, even though it takes a lot of time for him to come out publicly. Throughout this process, Charlie plays a pivotal role in supporting Nick, providing him with a safe space to explore his feelings and reassuring him that it is okay to take his time, emphasising that self-discovery is a strictly personal journey that does not need to conform to anyone else's expectations. Charlie's support helps Nick build confidence in his identity, highlighting the importance of having understanding and empathetic partners and/or friends during such transformative moments.

Figure 2. A. Oseman, Heartstopper: Vol. 2*, Hachette Children's Group, 2019, p. 321.*

By discussing Nick's experience with self-discovery, educators can encourage students to consider the complexities of identity and the courage it takes to embrace one's true self, especially in the face of societal pressures. A class activity might involve reflective journaling, where students can write about a time they discovered something new about themselves and then discuss it with their classmates.

4.3.3. Homotransphobia

Early in *Heartstopper*, readers learn that Charlie was forcibly outed as gay during the previous school year. This traumatic experience was followed by intense bullying, which took a severe toll on his mental health. In *Heartstopper: Vol. 3*, Charlie opens up to Nick about what it was like for him to be outed and relentlessly bullied. He explains how this led him to a dark place, where he began to internalise homophobic insults, leading to deep self-hatred and self-harm.

Figure 3. A. Oseman, Heartstopper: Vol 3*, Hachette Children's Group, 2020, pp. 633-4.*

Charlie's experience of outing and bullying leaves deep scars that extend beyond his immediate suffering. Later in the series, we see that this trauma has manifested in more severe mental health challenges, including anorexia, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). *Heartstopper: Vol. 4* reveals that Charlie's mental health struggles are so heavy that he is eventually hospitalised to receive treatment for his eating disorder. His therapist, Geoff, validates the weight of his experiences, explaining that being outed, bullied and sexually assaulted by his ex-boyfriend Ben has indeed traumatised him. This helps Charlie, and readers, understand that the harm caused by homophobia and outing is real and far-reaching, often requiring professional support to heal.

Charlie's journey further illustrates the relationship between identity and mental health, helping students understand the added mental strain that discrimination and homotransphobic hate can cause. In the classroom, this storyline provides a powerful entry point for discussing how bullying of all kinds affect mental health. Teachers could use this example to discuss why outing someone is a violation of personal boundaries, as well as the long-term mental health effects such actions can have. An activity could involve researching the effects of bullying on mental health and brainstorming supportive actions students can take for those around them who may be struggling, for example by creating classroom norms that promote respect and inclusion. This activity can foster empathy and a commitment to creating safe, supportive environments for all.

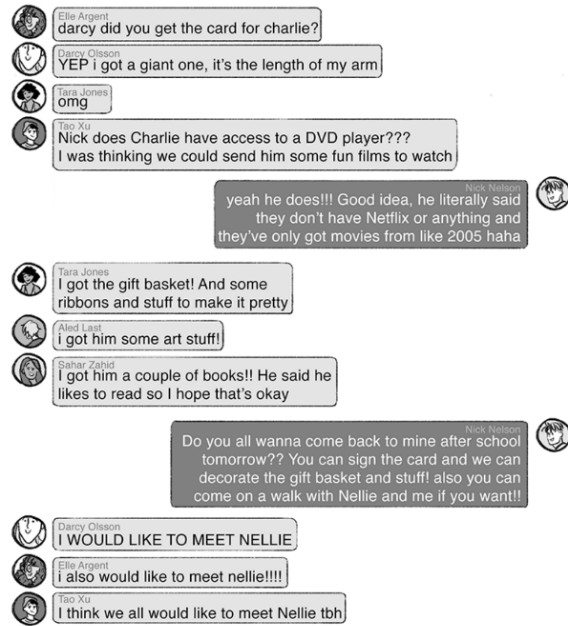### 4.3.4. The role of a supportive community

In *Heartstopper*, the theme of supportive relationships plays a crucial role. When dealing with challenges such as bullying or mental health issues struggles, having people who offer acceptance rather than judgement is invaluable. For instance, this support can come from one's family, as seen with Nick's mother, who is loving, accepting and fully supportive of Nick's bisexuality and his relationship with Charlie. Her reaction offers a model of positive family support, showing that

a parent's acceptance can provide strong foundations of emotional security, especially for LGBTQ+ youth who may face external prejudice.

Figure 5. A. Oseman, Heartstopper: Vol. 2*, pp. 548, 551, 556.*

Nevertheless, parents are not always as supportive as Nick's mother. Contrarily, some may be homophobic and entirely unaccepting of their children's sexual orientation or gender identity, to the extent that evicting queer children from the household is, unfortunately, a common occurrence. For this reason, LGBTQ+ individuals need to be surrounded by supportive friends, who understand and respond to each others' needs. In *Heartstopper: Vol. 4*, Charlie is hospitalised due to his mental health and he finds it too overwhelming to have friends visit him. Rather than feeling offended, Charlie's friends respect his boundaries and find creative ways to show him their love, such as organising small surprises to cheer him up from afar. They also rally around Nick, who is worried about Charlie and, at times, feels pressured to 'save' him. This model of friendship emphasises the importance of respecting personal boundaries while at the same time offering presence, compassion, and support, a lesson relevant for students who may encounter friends dealing with similar issues.

Elle Argent
darcy did you get the card for charlie?

Darcy Olsson
YEP i got a giant one, it's the length of my arm

Tara Jones
omg

Tao Xu
Nick does Charlie have access to a DVD player???
I was thinking we could send him some fun films to watch

Nick Nelson
yeah he does!!! Good idea, he literally said
they don't have Netflix or anything and
they've only got movies from like 2005 haha

Tara Jones
I got the gift basket! And some
ribbons and stuff to make it pretty

Aled Last
i got him some art stuff!

Sahar Zahid
I got him a couple of books!! He said he
likes to read so I hope that's okay

Nick Nelson
Do you all wanna come back to mine after school
tomorrow?? You can sign the card and we can
decorate the gift basket and stuff! also you can
come on a walk with Nellie and me if you want!!

Darcy Olsson
I WOULD LIKE TO MEET NELLIE

Elle Argent
i also would like to meet nellie!!!!

Tao Xu
I think we all would like to meet Nellie tbh

He didn't want them all visiting — I think
it would have been too overwhelming.
But they still found ways to help.
1159

Figure 6. A Oseman, Heartstopper: Vol. 4*, p. 1159.*

Within the school environment, students should also have supportive staff they can turn to. Teachers, in particular, can play an essential role by creating safe, inclusive spaces where students feel seen and valued. *Heartstopper* provides a great example of this through Coach Singh, a teacher who cares deeply for her students' well-being. When she catches Nick and Charlie sharing a kiss in the sports equipment room, she does not react with reprimand or judgement. Instead, she asks Nick to meet with her privately. Nick is initially worried, fearing punishment or a negative reaction. But in her office, Coach Singh confesses that, as a lesbian herself, she understands the difficulties LGBTQ+ students face, from bullying to name-calling. She uses this moment to offer reassurance and support, making it clear that her priority is Nick and Charlie's safety and well-being, instructing Nick to come to her if he and Charlie ever encounter harassment.

Figure 7. A. Oseman, Heartstopper: Vol. 3*, pp. 598-9.*

In the classroom, these scenes can be powerful tools to discuss the importance of support systems for LGBTQ+ students and all those dealing with mental health issues. Teachers could use Nick and Charlie's experiences to help students recognise that seeking support is not a sign of weakness but a way to build resilience and well-being. Activities could include role-playing scenarios where students practise offering non-judgmental support, or discussions on setting and respecting boundaries when friends are going through difficult times.

In summary, *Heartstopper* stands out as a powerful educational tool for fostering inclusivity, empathy, visibility, and understanding within the classroom. By offering an authentic representation of adolescent challenges, especially those of LGBTQ+ youth, this graphic novel series provides students with an engaging medium to explore complex issues. Through the experiences of Nick and Charlie, students are encouraged to reflect critically on the challenges associated with coming of age in a diverse world, learning about the values of acceptance, both of others and themselves, and empathy. Furthermore, *Heartstopper* exemplifies the significance of positive portrayals of queerness, especially in its portrayal of identity, community, and friendship. Thoughtfully chosen LGBTQ+-themed literature can, therefore, maximise engagement, enjoyment, and learning, transforming classroom discussions into safe spaces for students to navigate their own identities while respecting those of others.

In conclusion, integrating LGBTQ+ themes into educational curricula is essential for cultivating inclusivity and visibility. This chapter has illustrated how literary works, particularly graphic novels, play a crucial role in education by enhancing student engagement and fostering critical thinking and emotional intelligence. Graphic novels, though often overlooked in traditional educational contexts, hold significant potential for enriching literature studies and reflecting on relevant social themes and school issues, such as bullying and discrimination. Embracing these narratives enables teachers to create a more inclusive school environment that supports all students.

Through a comparative analysis of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in education between Scotland and Italy, this chapter has demonstrated that governmental efforts and policies are essential for achieving meaningful visibility and reducing homotransphobic bullying., As primary spaces for identity formation, schools play a crucial role in fostering empathy, acceptance, and respect. Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper*, with its engaging narrative and relatable characters, serves as a vital educational resource, enabling students to explore their identities while providing a safe space to navigate sensitive themes.

I recognise that the idea of introducing LGBTQ+ topics into Italian schools, in particular, seems overly optimistic, especially given the current political climate and prevailing public opinion. At present, the likelihood of implementing such changes appears minimal, as conservatism and homotransphobic ideologies pose substantial barriers to educational reforms that would integrate LGBTQ+ themes in educational settings. However, I have sought to illustrate that adopting an approach similar to Scotland's could profoundly benefit all schools and, by extension, society as a whole. Thus, this thesis argues that, despite the obstacles, there is tremendous potential for positive change if Italian school policies were to take similar steps toward an LGBTQ+-inclusive education. By presenting Scotland as a model, this work envisions a future where educational institutions actively contribute to building a more accepting and equitable society, demonstrating that what may now seem impossible can, in fact, be achieved over time.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has explored the critical role of using LGBTQ+-themed literature in educational settings to counteract homotransphobic bullying and foster visibility and inclusivity. A comparison of the social and legal landscapes of Scotland and Italy has revealed the contrasting approaches these countries take toward LGBTQ+ inclusivity in schools, illustrating the significant influence of educational policies and societal attitudes on LGBTQ+ students' experiences and well-being. Nevertheless, inclusive curricula not only benefit queer students but also enrich the educational experience for all students by fostering empathy, acceptance, and respect among peers. Through the lens of *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman, I have demonstrated how positive LGBTQ+ representation in media can serve as a powerful tool for cultivating empathetic, safer, and inclusive school environments. As a matter of fact, adopting a queer pedagogical approach that dismantles entrenched cis-heteronormative patterns allows teachers to address real-life issues, such as bullying and identity formation, that are otherwise often marginalised in traditional curricula. This approach empowers students to think critically and compassionately about identity and allyship.

In the final episode of the first season of the *Heartstopper* TV series, Charlie's teacher, Mr. Ajayi, tells him: "Don't let anyone make you disappear, Charlie".[197] Integrating LGBTQ+ themes in education provides similar affirmation, enabling queer students to feel validated in their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and reinforcing that there is nothing wrong with who they are. This validation is essential to ensuring that all students in educational spaces are visible, valued, and encouraged to embrace their identities without fear.

While *Heartstopper* is one example of how literature can promote inclusivity and visibility, it represents a broader call for educational institutions to embrace diverse narratives that reflect the realities of their students. Looking forward, the findings of this thesis suggest the urgent need for systemic educational reform, particularly in Italy, to foster environments where queer students are supported and respected. Normalising discussions of diverse identities and addressing homotransphobia in schools can transform them into spaces where respect and empathy are central, reducing instances of

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[197] *Heartstopper*, S01:E08, *Boyfriend*, created by A. Oseman. Netflix, 2022-. TV series.

discrimination and creating a more supportive school culture. Policy changes mandating LGBTQ+ inclusivity in curricula could address this gap, ensuring that all students see themselves reflected in what they study.

In conclusion, this thesis has argued that LGBTQ+ inclusive education – especially through the use of literature and graphic storytelling – benefits all students by promoting empathy, resilience, and respect for others. As educators and policymakers work toward building inclusive schools, LGBTQ+-themed literature like *Heartstopper* offers a roadmap for building a more equitable and compassionate society. By embracing diverse stories and representations, education can play a transformative role in shaping a future where LGBTQ+ identities are not only visible but celebrated, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive and feel valued for who they are.

I am aware that this work may seem utterly idealistic and utopic, especially given today's political climate. Yet, I remain hopeful for the future. In her concession speech on 6 November 2024, Kamala Harris said:

> When we fight, we win. But here's the thing: sometimes the fight takes a while. That doesn't mean we won't win! […] The important thing is don't ever give up, don't ever give up! Don't ever stop trying to make the world a better place. You have power! You have power! And don't you ever listen when anyone tells you something is impossible because it has never been done before.[198]

I wholeheartedly believe in her words and share the same stance. Change is inevitable, and perseverance is crucial.

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[198] Associated Press, *Kamala Harris Addresses Young People After Election Defeat* [Video], YouTube, 6 November 2024. Accessed on 7 November 2024 from youtube.com/watch?v=D26B3NceW8o.

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RIASSUNTO IN ITALIANO

Negli ultimi decenni c'è stata una crescita di consapevolezza verso l'importanza dell'inclusività nelle scuole. Tuttavia, viene rivolta meno attenzione nei confronti degli studenti appartenenti alla comunità LGBTQ+. Come dimostrato in questa tesi, l'assenza di visibilità e rappresentazione LGBTQ+ nei programmi scolastici è una delle matrici del bullismo omotransfobico, che può portare le sue vittime a sviluppare importanti problematiche legate alla salute mentale, come ansia e depressione. Questa tesi si pone come obiettivo quello di dimostrare come l'integrazione di letteratura a tema LGBTQ+ nel piano di studi possa portare benefici non solo agli studenti LGBTQ+, riempiendo questo vuoto rappresentativo, e quindi dando loro l'opportunità di rispecchiarsi nei personaggi delle storie che leggono, ma a tutta la comunità studentesca, che viene incoraggiata a confrontarsi con temi talvolta ritenuti tabù, imparando ad essere empatici e limitando, quindi, una diffusa ignoranza riguardo alle tematiche queer. La letteratura, infatti, è un vero e proprio gioiellino pedagogico e didattico. Come viene spiegato nel capitolo 2, i testi letterari sono un ottimo mezzo per migliorare le competenze linguistiche degli studenti, ma anche per stimolare lo sviluppo dell'intelligenza emotiva e del pensiero critico, accompagnandoli nella riflessione sulla propria identità e su quella dei compagni. Nonostante ciò, la letteratura viene molte volte sottovalutata dagli insegnanti, spesso per timore che il linguaggio letterario risulti troppo complesso agli occhi degli studenti, siano essi madrelingua o apprendenti L2. Con questo, non si vuole intendere che la letteratura non venga affatto insegnata, ma si criticano i metodi con cui ciò viene fatto: il suo insegnamento e studio sono prettamente mnemonici e nozionistici. Questa tesi propone un approccio queer che si spinga oltre, che consideri i valori morali che i testi letterari portano con sé, e che usi questi per spingere i discenti a porsi e a porre domande, anche scomode, a riflettere sulle proprie esperienze e a renderli individui più empatici e rispettosi di chi li circonda. Per esemplificare in maniera pratica questo metodo, si è deciso di basarsi su *Heartstopper* (2016-), una serie di graphic novel scritta da Alice Oseman e famosa per la sua rappresentazione positiva dell'amore e delle identità LGBTQ+.

Questo lavoro si sviluppa in quattro capitoli, ognuno dei quali è a sua volta suddiviso in sottocapitoli. Nel primo capitolo verrà fatto un breve riassunto della storia

della comunità LGBTQ+ 'occidentale'[199] a partire dagli eventi che portarono ai moti di Stonewall (1969) fino ai giorni nostri, per poi concentrarsi sulla situazione socio-politica del Regno Unito e dell'Italia.

Negli anni '50 del Novecento, il movimento LGBTQ+ più influente era quello omofilo, un gruppo di uomini omosessuali che si basava su un ideale di discrezione, dignità e rispettabilità e che cercava di distanziarsi dalla precedente sottocultura queer, spesso associata a comportamenti illeciti e promiscui. Tuttavia, a partire dal 1965, il movimento omofilo dovette iniziare a fare i conti con una nuova ondata di attivismo LGBTQ+ decisamente più radicale, che non accettava di dover nascondere la propria identità e che lottava per ottenere visibilità. Questi gruppi di attivisti gay e lesbiche si radunavano spesso in locali che operavano in modo clandestino ed erano spesso soggetti a raid da parte delle forze dell'ordine, come quello del 28 giugno 1969 allo Stonewall Inn di New York. Questa data segna un cambiamento nella storia LGBTQ+ contemporanea: dalla ribellione da parte delle proprietarie del bar e dei suoi frequentatori, si scatenò una vera e propria rivolta, che ebbe un'eco talmente significativa da portare a proteste in tutti gli Stati Uniti e oltreoceano. Da allora in avanti giugno viene celebrato come mese del Pride LGBTQ+.

Durante gli anni '70 la visibilità della comunità LGBTQ+ crebbe decisamente e di conseguenza iniziò a cambiare, seppur molto lentamente, anche l'opinione pubblica. Un evento importante fu la rimozione dell'omosessualità dal *Manuale diagnostico e statistico dei disturbi mentali* (DSM) nel 1973. Gli anni '80 videro, invece, un'ascesa della sottocultura queer urbana e una graduale influenza di elementi culturali queer sulla cultura popolare e nell'accademia. Con l'epidemia di AIDS, tuttavia, la discriminazione nei confronti degli uomini gay si aggravò ulteriormente a causa dei media e figure politiche come Margaret Thatcher e Pat Buchanan che ritraevano l'HIV come una malattia esclusivamente legata al comportamento omosessuale. In risposta, gli attivisti LGBTQ+ furono determinati a spingere i governi a rispondere alla crisi dell'AIDS, sottolineando la necessità urgente di protezioni legali per le persone queer. Fu solo con il chiudersi del decennio che si videro i primi progressi, come la legalizzazione delle unioni civili omosessuali in Danimarca nel 1989. Nel 1994, inoltre, il Parlamento Europeo

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[199] Per comunità 'occidentale' intendo i Paesi occidentalizzati, caratterizzati da valori democratici e da radici culturali europee: in particolar modo, vengono presi in considerazione gli Stati Uniti e i Paesi europei.

richiamò i Pesi dell'UE a garantire a cittadini e coppie gay e lesbiche gli stessi diritti degli eterosessuali. Con l'inizio del nuovo millennio vennero ottenuti importanti successi, tra cui la legalizzazione del matrimonio omosessuale nei Paesi Bassi nel 2001, in Belgio nel 2003, e in Spagna e Canada nel 2005, la decriminalizzazione dell'omosessualità in varie nazioni di tutto il mondo e l'introduzione di leggi contro le discriminazioni omotransfobiche.

Tuttavia, la strada per l'uguaglianza e la piena accettazione delle identità e dell'amore LGBTQ+ è ancora lunga e piena di ostacoli. Basti pensare ai diversi Paesi in cui l'omosessualità viene ancora punita dalla legge o all'Italia, l'unico Paese dell'Europa occidentale che non ha ancora legalizzato il matrimonio tra persone dello stesso sesso e non alcuna legge che protegga dalle discriminazioni omotransfobiche. Al contrario, il Regno Unito negli ultimi decenni ha compiuto notevoli progressi, a partire dalla depenalizzazione degli atti omosessuali privati nel 1967. Nel 2004 il *Civil Partnership Act* ha legalizzato le unioni civili e dal 2010, grazie all'*Equality Act*, le discriminazioni omotransfobiche vengono punite legalmente. Dal 2013 in Inghilterra e in Galles, dal 2014 in Scozia, e solo dal 2020 in Irlanda del Nord il matrimonio tra persone dello stesso sesso è legale. Il Regno Unito permette, inoltre, le adozioni omogenitoriali. Infine, dal 2004, le persone possono cambiare i propri documenti solo dopo aver completato un percorso psicologico e medico-chirurgico di affermazione di genere. Le esperienze nel sistema sanitario nazionale sono, però, tutt'altro che positive: molti pazienti trans* riportano lunghi tempi di attesa per i servizi di affermazione di genere e incompetenza da parte di un personale medico poco informato riguardo alle questioni transgender.

Nonostante il progresso in materia legale, le esperienze quotidiane delle persone LGBTQ+, come riportato dal *National LGBT Survey* (2017) e *Life as a Young LGBT+ Person Living in England* (2021/22), non sono del tutto soddisfacenti. Infatti, molti individui queer sono soliti subire discriminazioni e violenza omotransfobica. A fronte di ciò, quasi il 70% di loro hanno dichiarato di nascondere la propria identità per paura di venire aggrediti e poi non creduti dalle autorità (per questo motivo, la maggior parte degli episodi violenti non vengono denunciati). Nemmeno la scuola è un posto sicuro per le persone LGBTQ+, dove la classe è in molti casi teatro di bullismo omotransfobico. Gli studenti LGBTQ+ non solo sono vittime di violenza verbale, fisica e sessuale, ma spesso vengono anche emarginati e ignorati da insegnanti e personale scolastico. Il caso del

Regno Unito sottolinea che le attuali leggi sono insufficienti a garantire un effettivo benessere per i suoi cittadini queer.

La situazione per le persone LGBTQ+ in Italia è ancora più drammatica. Infatti, a differenza del Regno Unito, il quadro giuridico per i diritti LGBTQ+ è decisamente inadeguato e arretrato. Questa situazione può essere in parte attribuita alla significativa influenza esercitata dalla Chiesa Cattolica sulla politica e sull'opinione pubblica italiane. Difatti, nonostante l'Italia abbia decriminalizzato l'omosessualità già nel 1890, i progressi legislativi successivi sono stati scarsi. Il primo passo importante è avvenuto solo nel 2016 con la *Legge Cirinnà 76/2016*, che ha con introdotto le unioni civili per le coppie dello stesso sesso, seppur escludendo all'ultimo l'adozione omogenitoriale. Per quanto riguarda l'iter per l'affermazione di genere, l'Italia si dimostra sorprendentemente più luminaria del Regno Unito: dal 1982 le persone transgender possono cambiare il proprio sesso e nome sui documenti, dal 2015 senza obbligo di sterilizzazione e interventi chirurgici per l'affermazione di genere. Dal 2020, inoltre, le terapie ormonali sono disponibili gratuitamente per tutte le persone a cui è stata diagnosticata l'incongruenza di genere.

Ulteriori tentativi di progresso, come il *DDL Zan* (2018) contro la discriminazione omotransfobica, sono stati bloccati in nome della libertà religiosa e di parola. Come evidenzia Gusmeroli (2021), la Chiesa Cattolica e la politica conservatrice della destra italiana, attualmente alla guida del Paese, spesso adottano una retorica omotransfobica. Basti pensare che lo stesso Papa Francesco abbia usato termini dispregiativi per riferirsi ai seminaristi omosessuali e che esponenti del governo abbiano affermato che l'omosessualità è contro natura. Questo clima omotransfobico, chiaramente, non fa altro che alimentare odio e violenza nei confronti delle persone LGBTQ+, che tendono ad evitare di mostrare la propria identità in pubblico per paura di aggressioni. Analizzando la situazione nelle scuole, in particolare, gli studi riportano dati simili a quelli del Regno Unito: il 70% dei giovani LGBTQ+ ha subito almeno un episodio violento. Per giunta, il supporto e la protezione da parte degli insegnanti e del personale scolastico sono minimi. Alla luce di quanto analizzato, questo capitolo apre alla discussione principale della tesi, che esplora i possibili benefici dell'inclusione di letteratura a tema LGBTQ+ nelle scuole per promuovere l'accettazione e ridurre il bullismo, offrendo agli studenti LGBTQ+ una

rappresentazione sana della propria identità e agli studenti eterosessuali e cisgender un'opportunità di riflessione e crescita.

Il capitolo 2 si concentra sulla multimodalità dello storytelling grafico e, tramite un'analisi di graphic novel e *webcomic*, serve per capire la scelta di utilizzare *Heartstopper* come case study.

Il graphic novel, o romanzo grafico, è una forma narrativa appartenente al mondo fumettistico. Non è, tuttavia, un genere letterario a sé, ma rappresenta un formato flessibile che abbraccia diversi generi. La terminologia 'graphic novel' fu introdotta per distinguere questa nuova variante dai fumetti standard. Infatti, a differenza di quest'ultimi, generalmente destinati a un pubblico particolarmente giovane e caratterizzati da storie semplici e brevi, i romanzi grafici sono indirizzati a lettori adulti, viste soprattutto le tematiche che affrontano, tendenzialmente più complesse e mature. Dal punto di vista semiotico, il graphic novel e i fumetti condividono una doppia codificazione, in gergo tecnico *double coding*, che combina due sistemi significativi (in questo caso parole e immagini) per creare una narrazione. Sebbene i romanzi grafici conservino le convenzioni classiche del fumetto, come le vignette, le didascalie e i *balloon*, essi adottano tecniche narrative ibride che prendono spunto dalla tradizione letteraria e cinematografica, offrendo un'esperienza narrativa più complessa e, allo stesso tempo, più accattivante. I graphic novel hanno, infatti, contribuito positivamente all'alfabetizzazione, specialmente tra gli adolescenti, rendendo la letteratura più accessibile attraverso le immagini. Studi dimostrano, oltretutto, che i giovani lettori spesso trovano nella narrazione visiva un mezzo per esplorare la propria identità, interpretando queste opere come modelli per sopravvivere nella società contemporanea. Grazie al loro stile narrativo unico e al linguaggio visivo accessibile, i graphic novel offrono, quindi, un mezzo di supporto per gli adolescenti, promuovendo la crescita personale e fornendo uno spazio per la scoperta di sé che altri media non riescono ad offrire. Il romanzo grafico può, dunque, essere uno strumento prezioso al quale educatori e genitori dovrebbero ricorrere per aiutare i giovani nella crescita personale e contribuire a coltivare in loro un interesse duraturo per la lettura.

Il sottocapitolo successivo esplora la rimediazione (*remediation*) del fumetto nel *webcomic*. Nati all'interno delle comunità di gamer, i *webcomic* hanno raggiunto la popolarità negli anni 2010, in particolare grazie ai social media, che, tra le varie cose,

permettono un'interazione diretta tra creatori e lettori, favorendo la creazione di fan community e un forte legame tra autore e pubblico. L'impatto della rimediazione digitale sullo storytelling grafico è notevole: non solo ne ha semplificato la produzione, permettendo a diversi autori di collaborare contemporaneamente, senza necessitare del supporto economico e pubblicitario delle case editrici, ma ha anche reso i loro lavori decisamente più accessibili. Inoltre, i *webcomic* affrontano spesso prospettive marginalizzate e temi socialmente rilevanti, al contrario dell'industria editoriale tradizionale che storicamente ha privilegiato voci maschili, bianche, eterosessuali e cisgender. I *webcomic*, quindi, offrono una piattaforma di espressione per identità tendenzialmente silenziate, creando una comunità online dove i lettori possono fare amicizia grazie a interessi e valori condivisi.

Il terzo capitolo va a discutere la trama e le tematiche più salienti di *Heartstopper*, analizzando il percorso che ha portato la serie a passare da *webcomic* a graphic novel, fino a diventare una produzione Netflix. Questa popolarità è dovuta principalmente al tipo di rappresentazione LGBTQ+ proposto dalla serie, particolarmente rilevante in un contesto culturale che ha, nel corso della storia, marginalizzato e distorto le voci queer.

La serie di *Heartstopper*, creata ed illustrata dall'autrice britannica Alice Oseman, affronta temi come il coming out, l'esplorazione dell'identità, la salute mentale e l'importanza di circondarsi di persone che siano in grado di offrire sostegno e affetto. La storia si concentra su Charlie Spring, uno studente dichiaratamente gay, ex-vittima di outing e di bullismo omofobo, e Nick Nelson, il popolare capitano della squadra di rugby della scuola. L'amicizia tra i due si trasforma velocemente in amore nel momento in cui Nick realizza che i suoi sentimenti per Charlie vanno oltre l'affetto platonico, capendo quindi di essere bisessuale. Man mano che la loro relazione progredisce, i due affrontano problemi legati alla salute mentale, il timore del coming out il e il superamento delle pressioni sociali, trovando spesso conforto l'uno nell'altro e nel loro gruppo di amici, composto Tara e Darcy (una coppia lesbica), Tao ed Elle (una ragazza transgender, della quale Tao è innamorato) e Aled (un ragazzo gay e demisessuale). Quindi, tra i temi principali di *Heartstopper* troviamo l'amore, le identità LGBTQ+ e il importanza dell'amicizia. Altrettanto rilevanti sono la scoperta di sé, raccontata dal percorso di Nick, e la salute mentale, evidenziata dalle difficoltà di Charlie legate ai disturbi alimentari, al disturbo ossessivo-compulsivo e ai traumi passati.

Nato come *webcomic* su Tumblr, Tapas e Webtoon, *Heartstopper* ha conquistato velocemente una vasta *fanbase* alla quale deve la sua pubblicazione in forma di graphic novel. Il suo successo è riflesso non solo dai numeri delle vendite e dai numerosi premi vinti, ma anche da diversi elogi da parte di figure di spicco del settore editoriale, che descrivono la serie come un vero e proprio fenomeno culturale. L'adattamento Netflix, uscito sulla piattaforma nell'aprile 2022, cattura fedelmente l'essenza della sua versione originale, grazie alla sceneggiatura e produzione esecutiva di Alice Oseman stessa. La serie televisiva è stata infatti celebrata per aver mantenuto l'autenticità dei graphic novel e per il suo cast composto principalmente da attori queer: per esempio, i protagonisti Kit Connor e Joe Locke (rispettivamente Nick e Charlie) si identificano con lo stesso orientamento sessuale del proprio personaggio. Come accennato in precedenza, la popolarità di *Heartstopper* è dovuta in gran parte al suo vivace fandom e ai social media, in particolare YouTube, Instagram e TikTok. Inoltre, i contenuti generati dai fan, come *fanart* e fanfiction, e l'interazione di Alice Oseman con questi, sono stati decisivi nell'affermare il successo della serie.

Il sottocapitolo che chiude il capitolo 3 tratta il tema della rappresentazione positiva delle identità e delle relazioni LGBTQ+. Questa sezione inizia definendo il concetto di 'rappresentazione', fondamentale nel contesto degli studi culturali. Secondo Stuart Hall (1997), la rappresentazione è la produzione di significato attraverso il linguaggio. Hall sostiene che il linguaggio sia un sistema di costruzione di significati che crea una particolare visione del mondo e che la rappresentazione operi sia attraverso sistemi mentali che linguistici. Inoltre, secondo Michel Foucault, il linguaggio e la rappresentazione non sono neutrali, ma sono strumenti di influenza sociale che determinano ciò che viene percepito come socialmente accettabile e valido *tout court*. Insieme, queste teorie evidenziano come le parole e le immagini utilizzate dalla società abbiano un impatto profondo sulla nostra comprensione e accettazione di diverse identità. Questo concetto si applica anche ai media, che hanno una notevole influenza sulla percezione pubblica della comunità LGBTQ+. Storicamente, nonostante la censura e la frequente rappresentazione distorta, personaggi e storie queer sono apparsi occasionalmente nella letteratura fin dai tempi antichi. Lo vediamo, per esempio, nella storia di Patroclo e Achille (VIII secolo a.C.), nelle poesie di Saffo (VII-VI secolo a.C.) , in racconti irlandesi e islandesi del XII e XIII secolo, nei sonetti di Shakespeare (1609),

ne *Il monaco* (1796), nei vampiri di Le Fanu (1872) e Stoker (1897), ne *Il ritratto di Dorian Gray* (1890), in *Orlando* (1928) e ne *La stanza di Giovanni* (1956).

Anche il cinema ha giocato un ruolo fondamentale nella rappresentazione LGBTQ+. La presenza di personaggi queer sullo schermo risale solamente agli anni '60. Tuttavia, questi erano spesso stereotipati o relegati a ruoli minori o da supercattivi. Questa tendenza portò al *queercoding*, una strategia cinematografica che associava atteggiamenti queer a personaggi malvagi, senza, però, identificarli esplicitamente come LGBTQ+; lo vediamo, per esempio, in Ade (*Hercules*, 1997) e Ursula (*La Sirenetta*, 1989). In tempi più recenti, i media mainstream hanno spesso raffigurato le relazioni queer come tragiche o caratterizzate dalla sofferenza, un modello noto come '*queer tragedy trope*', che, dipingendo le vite LGBTQ+ come intrinsecamente tragiche, rafforza percezioni negative dell'essere queer. Tali rappresentazioni possono contribuire all'omotransfobia interiorizzata, alla depressione e al suicidio, facendo credere alle persone LGBTQ+, in particolar modo ai giovani, i giovani LGBTQ+, che la felicità e l'accettazione sia da parte di se stessi e che degli altri siano irraggiungibili. *Heartstopper*, grazie alla sua rappresentazione positiva della comunità LGBTQ+ che enfatizza amore, gioia, accettazione e amicizia, anziché il dramma, segnala un grande cambiamento. Inoltre i suoi personaggi non sono confinati a stereotipi o ruoli secondari; al contrario, sono personaggi ben sviluppati le cui identità vanno oltre la loro *queerness*. Attraverso le loro storie, la serie presenta le relazioni queer come sane e felici, sfidando il *queer tragedy trope* e promuovendo, invece, un messaggio di auto-accettazione e inclusione. Questa rappresentazione positiva reso *Heartstopper* un punto di riferimento sia per spettatori adolescenti che per fan adulti, che si sono affezionati a questa proprio perché offre il tipo di prodotto culturale di cui avrebbero avuto bisogno durante il loro anni da teenager. Ad esempio, gli YouTuber britannici Daniel Howell e Phil Lester hanno entrambi espresso sentimenti positivi verso la serie, pur ricordando le loro dolorose esperienze di isolamento e bullismo che hanno vissuto a causa della mancanza di rappresentazioni LGBTQ+ positive nei media durante la loro gioventù. Daniel, in particolare ha parlato apertamente di come queste avrebbero potuto aiutarlo a sentirsi meno solo nel periodo in cui bullismo omofobico e pensieri suicidi erano all'ordine del giorno. La sua storia evidenzia l'impatto potenzialmente salvifico della rappresentazione queer positiva.

In sintesi, *Heartstopper* emerge come un'opera trasformativa che non solo rappresenta autenticamente le esperienze LGBTQ+, ma che contribuisce anche a un cambiamento culturale verso una maggiore accettazione e visibilità per le persone queer. Questa discussione fornisce le basi per il quarto ed ultimo capitolo, che si pone come obiettivo quello di illustrare come la letteratura a tema LGBTQ+ possa essere utilizzata in contesti scolastici attraverso un approccio queer, ad esempio incorporando testi al di fuori del canone letterario dei classici. Questi possono fungere da pretesto per discutere in classe di questioni contemporanee così come di dinamiche specifiche interne alla scuola o alla classe, come il bullismo e la discriminazione. Tra questi testi 'dimenticati' vi sono proprio i graphic novel, la cui combinazione multimodale di narrazione visiva e testuale, come già discusso, permette di creare narrazioni immersive e accessibili che rendono temi complessi più avvicinabili, coinvolgendo anche coloro che hanno difficoltà a leggere romanzi tradizionali. Il formato visivo in particolare aumenta il coinvolgimento emotivo, poiché i lettori possono interpretare le espressioni facciali e linguaggio del corpo dei personaggi.

Il ruolo educativo della letteratura diventa ancora più potente quando questa dà spazio a voci Altre spesso sottorappresentate, come quelle delle persone LGBTQ+. Includere opere letterarie LGBTQ+ nei curriculum scolastici può portare benefici sia agli studenti queer che a quelli cis-eterosessuali, incoraggiando quest'ultimi guardare alle empatia con comprensione piuttosto che giudizio. Per gli studenti LGBTQ+, invece, incontrare personaggi e storie che riflettono le loro esperienze ha un impatto positivo sull'immagine di sé e sull'autostima. Questa validazione è particolarmente potente nell'offrire una contro-narrativa all'ignoranza e all'esclusione che possono sperimentare altrove.

Per sommi capi, questa tesi sostiene che affrontando apertamente e in modo accurato tematiche LGBTQ+, le scuole contribuiscono a creare un ambiente più sicuro e accogliente, in cui tutti gli studenti si sentono valorizzati e protetti. A supporto di questa affermazione, sono state esaminate le diverse politiche scolastiche sull'inclusività LGBTQ+ in Scozia e in Italia, due Paesi con situazioni politiche, culturali e sociali molto diverse tra loro. Questo confronto sottolinea come il supporto istituzionale all'inclusività LGBTQ+ influisca sul benessere degli studenti queer.

Negli ultimi anni il governo scozzese ha introdotto diverse politiche che propongono un l'inclusione di temi LGBTQ+ nel curriculum scolastico nazionale, con l'obiettivo di creare un ambiente scolastico più sicuro e combattere il bullismo omotransfobico. Su base volontaria, gli insegnanti scozzesi possono seguire corsi di formazione e informazione su varie tematiche LGBTQ+, e sono quindi preparati a sostenere gli studenti queer e a contrastare comportamenti omotransfobici, contribuendo a creare un clima scolastico più positivo e sicuro. In netta opposizione alla Scozia, l'approccio da parte dell'Italia all'inclusività LGBTQ+ nell'istruzione è decisamente conservatore: a livello legislativo, non c'è alcuna legge che preveda o promuova l'inclusione di argomenti LGBTQ+ nei curriculum scolastici. Questa mancanza di supporto istituzionale è in larga misura determinata dai forti legami dell'Italia con i valori cattolici tradizionali, evidenziati da gruppi politici e religiosi che ritengono che i temi LGBTQ+ siano inadatti all'ambiente scolastico e che vadano contro il proprio Credo. Diversi studi indicano che gli studenti queer in Italia subiscono tassi di bullismo più elevati rispetto agli studenti etero-cis e spesso soffrono di problemi legati alla salute mentale. Questa situazione riflette la stigmatizzazione sociale più ampia dell'identità LGBTQ+ nella società italiana.

Il confronto tra Scozia e Italia evidenzia l'impatto positivo del supporto istituzionale. Il caso della Scozia dimostra come queste politiche che portano la normalizzazione di discussioni a tema LGBTQ+ servano non solo a sostenere gli studenti queer, ma anche a creare un corpo studentesco empatico, inclusivo e lontano da stereotipi e pregiudizi. La situazione italiana, invece, sottolinea un contesto sociopolitico prettamente omotransfobico, che si traduce, di conseguenza, in un ambiente scolastico in cui gli studenti queer non si sentono al sicuro.

Questo lavoro di tesi conclude ribadendo l'importanza di integrare la letteratura LGBTQ+ nei curriculum scolastici come mezzo per esplorare temi come l'identità e il bullismo, aiutando tutti gli studenti a riflettere sulle proprie esperienze e a sviluppare empatia per gli altri e offrendo agli studenti queer visibilità e rappresentazione. Si sottolinea, tuttavia, l'importanza di selezionare il testo corretto a tale scopo. *Heartstopper*, in quanto appartenente al genere del Young Adult, attira gli studenti grazie alla sua storia coinvolgente e ai suoi personaggi, in cui è davvero facile riconoscersi. Inoltre, come analizzato in precedenza, essendo un graphic novel, questo risulta, agli

occhi degli studenti, decisamente più facile interessante di un classico romanzo. Infine, secondo il modello di Cart e Jenkins (2006), *Heartstopper* appartiene alla categoria '*queer consciousness/community*' (QC) poiché mette in evidenza l'importanza di appartenere ad una comunità queer che funga da supporto: per gli studiosi, questa è la categoria più apprezzata dai giovani.

Il capitolo si concentra poi su quattro temi centrali nella narrazione di *Heartstopper*, ovvero gli stereotipi, la scoperta di sé, l'omotransfobia e l'importanza di trovare una propria comunità queer, offrendo offrono spunti per discussioni e attività da svolgere.

Innanzitutto, gli stereotipi, in particolare quelli legati all'orientamento sessuale, sono introdotti attraverso le supposizioni fatte da Tao nei confronti di Nick, credendolo eterosessuale per via del suo aspetto fisico e dei suoi interessi. Attraverso discussioni e attività di gruppo, gli insegnanti possono far riflettere gli studenti sull'impatto negativo di stereotipi e pregiudizi, imparando a riconoscerli ed evitarli.

Il percorso di scoperta di sé di Nick può invece essere utilizzato per incoraggiare gli studenti riflettere su se stessi, magari attraverso attività di scrittura che permettano loro di esplorare la propria identità in evoluzione e promuovono sia autoconsapevolezza che empatia verso chi affronta sfide simili.

Il tema dell'omotransfobia si manifesta nel libro attraverso le esperienze traumatiche di Charlie, come l'outing e il bullismo, sottolineando gli effetti devastanti a lungo termine che questi possono avere sulla salute mentale della vittima. Questo tema può essere utilizzato per discutere le conseguenze della discriminazione e della violenza, offrendo agli insegnanti un'ottima occasione per guidare gli studenti in attività di brainstorming su come supportare le vittime di bullismo, sottolineando l'importanza del rispetto.

Infine, l'ultimo tema che viene preso in considerazione è quello dell'importanza di trovare sostegno negli amici così come nella famiglia, dove possibile, e negli insegnanti stessi. Questo tema può essere utilizzato per avviare discussioni sull'importanza di costruire una rete di supporto solida tra amici e compagni di classe, evidenziando come la creazione di ambienti inclusivi e solidali all'interno della comunità studentesca sia indispensabile per garantire a tutti di vivere la scuola senza la paura di venir discriminati o bullizzati.

In conclusione, questa tesi sostiene la necessità di un cambiamento nell'approccio delle scuole alla diversità, all'inclusività e al benessere degli studenti. La letteratura, in quanto strumento di cambiamento sociale, è in grado di offrire agli studenti queer una forma di validazione e agli studenti cis-etero l'opportunità di comprendere identità diverse dalla propria, e quindi diventare individui più empatici e compassionevoli. Integrare testi LGBTQ+ nel curriculum e affrontarli in maniera consapevole e informata dona visibilità e rappresentazione agli studenti queer, contribuisce a ridurre episodi di bullismo omotransfobico e promuove un ambiente scolastico inclusivo, dove ogni individuo può sentirsi accettato per ciò che è.

Questo lavoro contribuisce a dare visibilità a una minoranza oppressa che si sta piano piano facendo spazio nei media mainstream, venendo vista, finalmente, per quello che è veramente. È importantissimo, soprattutto data la situazione politica attuale, dare voce a identità Altre, spesso confinante ad essere un argomento tabù o di mera speculazione. In ogni caso, sono pienamente consapevole che questo lavoro possa sembrare totalmente utopico, soprattutto. Eppure, credo che prima o poi qualcosa cambierà. Spero che questa tesi possa diventare un piccolo granello di sabbia che si lascia trasportare dal vento del cambiamento, contribuendo, nel suo piccolo, a trasformare il mondo in un posto più giusto e accogliente per tutti.