

## **“This is not easy”: Unveiling the nuances of discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ teenagers in *Heartstopper Season 1* (2022)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A majority of LGBTQ+ students experience harassment or assault based on sexual orientation and gender identity. It is as depicted in the Netflix Series entitled *Heartstopper* released in 2022. While the show centers on the budding romance between Nick and Charlie, it also delves into the experiences of a wider LGBTQ+ friend group. Thus, the aim of this current study is to examine the portrayal of discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ teenagers in *Heartstopper Season 1* and identify its causes, including the characters of color and those identifying as lesbian and gay. The qualitative approach is used using dialogues and pictures as the main data. Besides, gender theory is also employed to analyze the data features LGBTQ+ characters and the discrimination they experience. The result shows that the discrimination comes from both racial background and general people's expectation. Also, the discrimination against gay characters arguably happens due to the rejection of the community, in this case the same-sex school community. Machoism and masculinity may become the main reasons for rejecting, and thus discriminating against gay students as they are seen as weak and thin. By revealing the causes of such discrimination, we hope that the current research may shed light on how to prevent any discrimination against each other, including people with different sexual orientation.



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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Discrimination has persisted in society throughout history, causing those subjected to it to hesitate in making decisions for themselves. Consequently, it is plausible that they may experience trauma, although it is important to note that trauma does not inherently render individuals more susceptible to discrimination (Matheson et al., 2019). Furthermore, discrimination can be defined as the unequal treatment of individuals who share similarities and find themselves in identical circumstances, differing only in one or more aspects, such as race, ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, or other categorical classifications. Discrimination can manifest through explicit acts of bias, exclusion based on these characteristics, or it can arise from ostensibly impartial rules and procedures that disproportionately disadvantage specific individuals or groups (Fibbi, Midtbøen, Simon, 2021).

Discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals or those with non-normative sexual orientations is a prevalent societal issue. This form of discrimination is relatively common, and it arises from biases against people based on their sexual orientation. Such discrimination stems from the desire of individuals with non-conforming sexual orientations to attain freedom and equality, a pursuit that often clashes with societal norms and values (O'Flaherty, M. 2020). As a result, many individuals with non-conforming sexual orientations face significant challenges in living a peaceful life due to the discrimination they encounter.

In addition, homosexuality often emerges as a salient aspect of adolescent identity exploration (Brescia, 2021). It is important to acknowledge that every individual has the potential for developing a homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual sexual orientation from birth. This sexual orientation is intricately influenced by environmental aspects, with a particular emphasis on the formative experiences within one's childhood, notably in relation to their parents (Freud, 2007; Fausto-Sterling, 2019). The confusion experienced by teenagers during this phase of development can impede their comprehension of gender roles and the ability to categorize these roles as masculine or feminine within the context of their relationships. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among boys, who often encounter challenges in accessing consistent male role models. Consequently, the transmission of societal messages by adults regarding the role of men is frequently inconsistent (Brescia, 2021). These multifaceted issues find vivid representation in the narrative of "Heartstopper 2022," rendering them pivotal considerations for the current study's exploration.

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Heartstopper Series is based on the graphic novels by Alice Oseman. Set in a British school, the series navigates themes of friendship, sexual identity, self-discovery, and love amidst the challenges of adolescence. In season 1, which released in April 2022, it mainly follows the relationship between two high school students, Charlie and Nick. Charlie, a shy and introverted boy, develop a secret crush on Nick, the popular rugby star who is still coming to terms with his own sexuality. Despite their contrasting personalities, they find themselves drawn together after joining the same study group. As their friendship deepens, Charlie's feelings intensify, but fear of rejection keeps him from confessing. They also confront personal struggles, finding solace and understanding in each other's company. Charlie struggles with his sexuality, navigating a world that does not always understand him. Nick, on the other hand, embarks on a journey of self-exploration as he questions his own feelings for Charlie. Their bond is threatened by external pressures, including school bullies and societal expectations. Although Nick and Charlie are the central couple of the series, there are also side characters that support the portrayals of experiences of a wider LGBTQ+ community. Heartstopper does not shy away from the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth. It portrays the struggles of coming out, discrimination, dealing with prejudice, and finding acceptance experienced by LGBTQ+ teenagers.

Furthermore, there are some previous studies featured LGBTQ+ issue and Heartstopper series. First, there is a previous study examining discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals in Europe. It has highlighted the prevalence of stigmatization based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. This pervasive stigma has far-reaching consequences, impeding the full exercise of their universal human rights. Some individuals within this community fall victim to hate crimes and may find themselves without adequate protection when assaulted by fellow citizens in public spaces. Simultaneously, certain LGBTQ+ organizations encounter obstacles, such as denied registration or prohibitions on hosting peaceful gatherings and demonstrations (Hammarberg, 2011; Buyantueva & Shevtsova, 2020). There is also another study investigating "Heartstopper" that has focused on its graphic novel rendition, where depictions of bisexuality are portrayed in a positive way (Allen, 2022). This research has centered on the journey of a character coming to terms with their bisexuality, underscoring its significance within that context.

Compared to these previous studies, the present study focuses on the distinct facets of Heartstopper, specifically the version presented in the Netflix series. By scrutinizing the experiences of all LGBTQ+ characters experiencing discrimination in educational settings, this research introduces a novel perspective. It is anticipated that this approach

will contribute to scholarly discourse surrounding *Heartstopper*, shedding light on the value of examining both its graphic novel and Netflix series versions for a comprehensive understanding of the narrative. Additionally, with a high school setting portrayed in the series, this present study directs its attention to the issue of discrimination against LGBTQ+ adolescents. It is crucial to recognize that LGBTQ+ teenagers are particularly susceptible to discrimination, an issue that cannot be disregarded. Consequently, the uniqueness of this present study lies in its explicit focus on the discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ teenagers within the first season of Netflix's *Heartstopper* in 2022.

To identify the LGBTQ+ characters in *Heartstopper* Season 1 (2022), a gender theory framework is employed. Gender Studies, as a discipline, seeks to analyze cultural practices through a lens that challenges traditional notions concerning gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. It endeavors to comprehend how gender functions as a potent and multifaceted factor influencing people's lives from various perspectives, encompassing the social, political, literary, and economic realms (García-Bullé, 2020). Furthermore, this analytical approach centers on LGBTQ+ characters, utilizing Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory as a lens to discern their characteristics. Sedgwick posits that LGBTQ+ identities are often gendered, aligning with either masculine or feminine attributes (Sedgwick, 1990), as expounded in her work titled "Epistemology of the Closet". This theory proves instrumental in identifying the aspects of LGBTQ+ characters that may be deemed as deviant or taboo, forming the basis for discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. The primary objective of the present study is to disclose the underlying causes of discrimination directed towards LGBTQ+ characters in *Heartstopper* Season 1 (2022). Accordingly, the analysis will explore various contextual factors contributing to the existence of discrimination within the high school society depicted in the series. The research question that guides this current study is centered on understanding why LGBTQ+ teenagers in the series become targets of discrimination.

## **II. METHOD**

This study is qualitative research with an analytical focus on a Netflix series. Qualitative research is a multi-method approach that places a strong emphasis on interpretation and a naturalistic exploration of the subject matter (Aspers & Corte, 2019). In our analysis of literary elements within the series, qualitative method is particularly well-suited for the examination of movies or series that are considered as literary works (Palmer & Bolderstone, 2006; Hollstein & Kumkar, 2021). This approach aligns with our aim of elucidating the multifaceted aspects of an event or work from diverse perspectives, as it is closely related to the endeavor of comprehending literary works that can yield various interpretative angles (Sofaer, 1999). Moreover, the subject of this study is *Heartstopper*

Season 1, which was originally released on Netflix in 2022. This study aims on the analysis of discrimination against LGBTQ+ teenagers within same-sex school settings. Despite the availability of Season 2 in 2023, Season 1 was chosen as the primary object of analysis due to its early recognition as one of the popular Netflix series.

In addition, there are several steps that need to be taken by researchers, starting from collecting data, analyzing the data, and concluding the results of the analysis. The sequence of steps can be explained as follows: firstly, the complete watching and re-watching of *Heartstopper* Season 1 was undertaken to identify LGBTQ+ characters and gain a comprehensive understanding of the series' narrative. While re-watching the series, data collection also began to be carried out by means of meticulous note-taking of the dialogues, pictures, or related information of the events, with a focus on capturing the behaviors and actions of the characters portrayed in the series. The data that were collected was then filtered and grouped in accordance to the objective of the study to narrow down the scope of analysis as well as make it easier in the analysis process. Subsequently, the third step came into the analysis process which focused on the in-depth analysis of discrimination directed towards LGBTQ+ characters. To develop the arguments and obtain insights from the analysis, the fourth step entailed the collection of supporting resources that pertained to LGBTQ+ characteristics and issues related to discrimination against them. These additional resources were employed to substantiate the research findings. In the final step of the research, conclusion of the analysis was done by a thorough review and verification process. They were conducted to refine and streamline the analysis as well as eliminate any extraneous or unnecessary data.

After the culmination of these systematic steps, the research analysis was executed with the support of empirical data and relevant theoretical frameworks. This multifaceted approach enabled the examination of the factors contributing to the occurrence of discrimination, encompassing various aspects such as character attributes, movie editing, and dialogues, to discern the underlying reasons behind such discrimination.:

### **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

After Several aspects of LGBTQ+ characters were analyzed, shedding light on the underlying reasons for societal resistance towards them. The characteristics were derived from both the visual elements present in the film and the dialogues within the narrative. Subsequently, with reference to the categorized data, several findings emerged concerning the issue of discrimination. These findings encompass the oppression faced by black lesbian characters, instances of bullying targeting gay characters within the context of same-sex schools, and the discrimination encountered

by gay characters due to the prevailing toxic masculinity paradigm depicted in Heartstopper Season 1. The subsequent subsections provide a detailed exposition of each facet of discrimination, providing a comprehensive understanding of these complex issues within the narrative.

### **Black Lesbian: The oppression after coming out**

Individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community often grapple with the process of coming out, a pivotal stage in their journey. Coming out involves the acknowledgment and acceptance of one's sexual identity, be it as homosexual, which can contribute to heightened self-esteem and support psychological adjustment to a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other sexual orientation (Kelly, 2001; Coleman, 2022). Beyond internal acceptance, coming out also entails the act of openly disclosing one's sexual identity to others and to society at large (Kelly, 2001; Coleman, 2022). Subsequent to coming out with their sexual orientation, LGBTQ+ individuals frequently contend with various challenging situations stemming from their immediate surroundings and broader societal contexts (Yusmi, 2021). In the United States, it is common for individuals to undergo the coming-out process during their teenage years (Yusmi, 2021). Moreover, individuals who successfully come out are often those who progress through the five stages of coming out: awareness, integration, acceptance, commitment, and integration (Yusmi, 2021). Building upon these definitions, this study seeks to identify and analyze the stage of coming out experienced by one lesbian character, Tara Jones, within the narrative of Heartstopper Season 1.

Tara Jones, a black lesbian character, has recently undergone the process of coming out as a lesbian. She has not only embraced her identity as a lesbian but has also progressed through the five stages commonly associated with this journey. This transformative process is notably evident in the data, particularly at the 3-minute and 30-second mark in episode 6. The scene in which Tara publicly discloses her sexual orientation by sharing a photograph with her girlfriend on social media holds significant influence in signifying the stage of her coming out. Her boldness in openly expressing her identity and sharing it with society underscores her determination. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, she recognizes the necessity of readiness for actions that can result in substantial consequences. Tara Jones received negative responses from her society. Although not everyone responds negatively, many people do not expect she is a lesbian and thus give her negative responses. Some of the data also show that she got bullied in min 3:30 ep 6 as one of the consequences. The data illustrates that she made her coming out status public through social media by sharing a photograph with her girlfriend.



Picture 1. Heartstopper S1 EP 6 (3:33)

The scene above captures her coming out stage and the offences she has to take. The data is shown by the movie editing technique showing people's comment on Tara's posting. Some comments say that it was such a waste for her to be a lesbian or people did not expect that she is a lesbian. Subbing Tara as equal as trash and derogating her choice to come out are the discriminative acts thrown by the netizens to Tara. People cannot appreciate her choice by giving such grave comments, leading to her insecurity as a black lesbian.

Furthermore, Tara's disappointment after reading some of the comments is clearly shown in the picture above. This type of action makes Tara feel insecure and shy about being bullied, and indeed it is part of cyberbullying. What is shown here is not only discriminating act against people with deviant sexual orientation, but also an act of cyberbullying that usually happens among teenagers (Pappas, 2015). As a black lesbian teenager, Tara becomes particularly vulnerable to bullying. The primary reason behind the bullying she endures is twofold. Firstly, she is a black individual and a popular figure among teenagers. Secondly, people did not anticipate her identifying as a lesbian, primarily due to her feminine demeanor, which does not conform to stereotypes associated with lesbian individuals. However, it is imperative to strengthen the argument regarding the presence of feminine characteristics in lesbians. Such characteristics are indeed observable and can be identified as one of the distinguishing traits within homosexual couples (Sedgwick, 1999). Consequently, while Tara may exhibit feminine behavior and appearance, she unequivocally identifies as a lesbian. Moreover, black people are quite prone to cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2020). The reason why Tara as a black lesbian character received such a negative comment on social media was

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because people did not expect her as a lesbian because she is feminine and black people are prone to receiving cyberbullying. Through that, Tara experiences double discrimination because she is black and a lesbian.

Other than just cyberbullying, Tara Jones received verbal bullying from her friends at school. She goes to a same-sex school, which means all of her friends are girls. In this situation, people assume that Tara is weird for being a lesbian in a same-sex school and people say bad words due to her choice of coming out as a lesbian.

Girls in School: She’s so gross.

Girls in School: Lesbians are so disgusting.

Tara: What are their problems? (Heartstopper S1, 2022, ep 6 5:13)

Girls in School: Don’t look at her, you’ll catch the lesbian disease

(Heartstopper S1, 2022, ep 6 20:44)

The data depicted above highlights the bullying that Tara must endure as a consequence of her lesbian identity. Notably, this bullying appears to be directed solely at Tara. Despite being a black lesbian, she is susceptible to facing direct verbal bullying, even though she is regarded as attractive and popular in her school. However, in the context of a same-sex school, where most girls typically harbor attractions toward boys, the negative perceptions of Tara being a lesbian are notably absent. Unlike the broader societal attitude, her fellow students in the same-sex school do not view her as a "waste" for her sexual orientation. Furthermore, Tara experiences the stereotype of being associated with a sexual disease, a common misconception held by many people. While this form of bullying is directed at Tara, it does not extend to her partner, Darcy. Moreover, many forms of discrimination that are typically not considered in discussions of oppression were reported at a relatively high rate among Black same-gender loving women (Wilson et al., 2011). Hence, the discrimination against black lesbians is quite high among discrimination cases in general. In Netflix’s *Heartstopper* 2022 season 1, the high rate of discrimination towards black lesbian seems to be juxtaposed when being compared to another white lesbian character in the series Darcy Olsson. The two lesbian characters are portrayed differently in relation to their coming out stages. Although Darcy’s coming out is not narrated in the series, Darcy as a lesbian seems not to be problematic, neither does she receive much hatred by the school environment. On the other hand, Tara has to severely face the consequence of coming out, that is being bullied and discriminated. At this point, the black lesbian in Netflix’s *Heartstopper* 2022 season 1 has vividly portrayed the experience of double-discrimination for being a Black



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lesbian. The main cause of such discrimination is thus far because of the racial aspect of Tara who is a Black student in the school.

### **Gay Bullying: Discrimination at School**

Beyond the confines of their homes, schools serve as the primary institutions for education, socialization, and the provision of services to young individuals. However, schools can present challenges for students, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Unfortunately, they frequently prove to be particularly hostile environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. This hostility arises, in part, from the absence of policies and practices that affirm and support LGBT youth, as well as a failure to effectively implement existing protections. Consequently, LGBT students across the nation continue to experience the issues of bullying, exclusion, and discrimination within the school setting. These challenges not only jeopardize their physical and psychological well-being but also hinder their educational opportunities and advancement. Moreover, within the context of *Heartstopper* Season 1, there is a character named Charlie Spring, a gay teenager who attends a same-sex school. The narrative depicts him as experiencing discrimination at his school, further highlighting the pervasive nature of such issues.



Picture 2. *Heartstopper* S1 EP 5 (4:40)

The data above provides a clear depiction of the experience endured by Charlie and his friends. They were subjected to bullying where paper balls were thrown at them due to being perceived as nerds. Furthermore, Charlie's sexual orientation as a gay individual appeared to intensify the intention of his peers to engage in bullying behavior, as evidenced in a specific instance at 4-minute and 40-second mark in episode 5. This sub-chapter centers on examining the discrimination directed towards Charlie specifically

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due to his identity as a gay individual. In the series, the prevailing attitude among most students in Charlie's school perceives being gay as unconventional or unusual. They associate being gay with the potential to tarnish their own societal reputation. The negative image that a gay may bring to school may become the reason why Ben keeps concealing his being gay. He is narrated to be really scared of getting caught with his friends because he needs to keep his reputation. The dialogue below illustrates the situation:

Ben: You're clearly just afraid of getting caught.

Charlie: Why would i be scared of getting caught? Everyone in school knows im gay. You're the one who scared of getting caught. (Heartstopper S1, 2022, ep 1 19::32)

On the contrary, all people in Charlie's school know that he is gay and there is a scene about Charlie's bad memories of being bullied by other students. This shown in minutes 00:33 Ep 2 through a movie edit added with some animation.



Picture 3. Heartstopper S1 EP 2 (0:33)

The memories have likely left a lasting imprint on Charlie's mind, as bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth often leads to severe and occasionally life-threatening consequences (Earnshaw et al., 2016). The events that transpired in Charlie's life have left him with distressing memories that are difficult to erase. The somber scenes depicted above serve as poignant evidence of the profound misery stemming from the discrimination that Charlie has endured.

Furthermore, Charlie does not come from an ordinary high school, but he also attends a same-sex high school. In such same-sex school environments, being homosexual is often regarded as a taboo, especially since a majority of the students typically identify as heterosexual. Interestingly, research indicates that students who attend same-sex schools actually report significantly higher levels of past same-sex sexual experiences compared to those in coeducational schools (Li et al., 2018). However, *Heartstopper* Season 1 introduces a narrative twist by depicting a character who only begins to

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discover his sexuality at the 10-minute and 20-second mark in episode 6, despite the presumed prevalence of same-sex sexuality within the same-sex school context.

Tara: Don't feel like you have to come out to anyone before you are ready.

Nick: Oh, Yeah

(Heartstopper S1, 2022, ep 6 10::32)

LGBT youth generally experience more bullying than non-LGBT youth (Earnshaw et al., 2016). Hence, the possibility of Charlie receiving bully from his friends is still higher than his straight nerd friends. While same-sex schools have reported significantly higher levels of LGBTQ+ students, this series shows that Charlie got bullied because he is attending a society that upholds strong masculinity and sees gay as someone who has a lower dignity. In minutes 08:20 EP 7, another character says to Charlie about what it feels like to be gay while laughing and his friends are also laughing at Charlie. Charlie's school environment is not conducive to supporting LGBTQ+ individuals, and being openly gay in a same-sex school can feel like a form of emotional and psychological self-harm. This notion is further underscored by a scene at the 33-second mark in episode 2, which includes animation edits. In this scene, words and narratives insinuate that Charlie is somehow responsible for the bullying he faces due to his homosexuality within his school environment.

### **Toxic Masculinity: Rejection Gays in Society**

According to Sedgwick (1980), in homosexual couple, there is often an inherent differentiation between the more feminine and masculine roles within such relationships. Building upon the previous sub-chapter's analysis, Charlie's experience takes place within a same-sex high school environment where homosexuality is viewed as unconventional. Notably, this school is predominantly male and strongly adheres to traditional masculinity values. Charlie, however, shares a unique bond with Nick, the leader of the Rugby team. Students who join the rugby team are often stereotyped as embodying the macho man image. In Western society, the concept of a macho man has become common, representing masculine stereotypes of independence, ruggedness, and strength (McDonogh, 2011; Lips, 2020). Given Charlie's close association with Nick, people readily perceive a stark contrast in characteristics between Charlie's more feminine traits and Nick's overtly masculine ones. Furthermore, when Charlie is invited to join the Rugby team, skepticism arises due to his homosexuality. People make assumptions based on his appearance, contending that he may not be physically strong enough for the sport because he is slender and is perceived as weak due to his sexual orientation (see Minutes 15:31 in Episode 1).

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Boy 1: Charlie Spring though?

Boy 2: Isn't he is year 8?

Boy 3: No, Year 10

Boy 2: He's like well skinny though

Boy 1: can he even play? I'm sure he's a nice guy, but we actually want dece.

Boy 4: Does he even like sports? everybody knows he's gay

[Boys laughing]

(Heartstopper S1, 2022, ep 6 10::32)

Toxic masculinity is a concept defined as the social repression stemming from a patriarchal culture, which shapes male gender constructs (Rahmadhansyah, 2021). Charlie, as a gay individual with a slight build and a gentle demeanor, stands in stark contrast to the stereotypical masculine ideal characterized by strength and ruggedness (McDonogh, 2011; Lips, 2020). Several instances of toxic masculinity are discernible in the data, one of which occurs at the 15-minute and 37-second mark in Episode 1, where fellow students express doubt about Charlie's suitability for the Rugby team due to his appearance. Additionally, other data points provide further insight into the manifestation of toxic masculinity. At the 3-minute and 11-second mark in Episode 7, Nick's friends remark that Charlie acts shy, likening him to a girl. Furthermore, at the 8-minute and 20-second mark in Episode 7, Nick's friend suggests that Charlie will not fit into Nick's group of friends because he departs early and is picked up by his father. These instances highlight the manifestation of toxic masculinity within the narrative.



Picture 4. Heartstopper S1 EP 7 (3:11)

The data above illustrates the rejection directed towards gay individuals due to perceived deviations from traditional masculinity norms. These occurrences highlight the prevalence of discrimination and bias in the series, where individuals who do not conform to conventional masculine ideals often face rejection and exclusion. In Charlie's

all-male school environment, he stands out as less masculine compared to his peers. The school culture places significant emphasis on masculinity, viewing it as a fundamental aspect of manhood, and often associates it with being a gentleman. All-male schools, as suggested by Sophie (2013), tend to perpetuate "macho male cultures." These cultures are known to promote heterosexist attitudes and can impede students' socialization. In line with Sophie's assertion, it becomes apparent that, beyond merely disregarding non-conforming gender expressions, the dominant masculine culture within these schools also fosters heterosexist attitudes. Consequently, as a gay individual with a more feminine demeanor, Charlie encounters rejection within the school society, particularly from Nick's group of friends. His rejection appears to be a manifestation of the school's adherence to the prevailing macho male culture and the accompanying heterosexist biases it engenders.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

In the context of the discrimination analyzed in this research, several factors contribute to the discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ characters in high school society. Firstly, race plays a significant role in the discrimination, influenced by societal expectations and stereotypes. These preconceived notions about race and sexual orientation can lead to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, the choice of attending same-sex schools increases the likelihood of experiencing same-sex relationships among teenagers (Li et al., 2018). However, in same-sex schools, being gay is often viewed as unconventional, leading to bullying of gay individuals. Toxic masculinity further exacerbates this discrimination, as same-sex schools tend to promote macho and masculine ideals, which may not align with the identity of LGBTQ+ individuals like Charlie. In conclusion, this research sheds light on the complex factors contributing to discrimination against LGBTQ+ characters in high school settings. It underscores the importance of challenging discriminatory attitudes and expectations within society. Discrimination can have profound negative impacts on the victims, and it is imperative to strive for a more inclusive and accepting society that embraces diversity in all its forms.

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#### **DECLARATION**

**Author contribution:** The first author is fully responsible for the process of the research, the data analysis, and the write-up of the manuscript. The second and the third authors are responsible for finding the resources for the research. The fourth and fifth authors are responsible for the layout of the data presented in the manuscript.

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