

Arcadia University

Out and Proud:

The Significance of JoJo Siwa's Coming Out and Why Queer Representation in
Children's Media is Important

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It has only been in recent years that society has become accepting enough for many queer celebrities to come out to the public. For actors, musicians, and other influencers in the public eye, coming out can be risky since there are still strong voices against the LGBTQ+ community and can result in bad press and loss of fans which therefore lead to losses in work and profits. Coming out is even more unheard of in the realm of children's entertainers and influencers. JoJo Siwa was a trailblazer for queer children's entertainers. Siwa's coming out and continuing to proudly display her queer identity will have a positive effect not only on her fans but also the LGBTQ+ community as a whole because it will help spread inclusivity and acceptance, will normalize queerness, and paves the way for other influencers to be themselves, even if it loses fans.

JoJo Siwa being unapologetically herself will teach her young fans that people are different, and being different is not only okay, but celebrated. Until now, young queer kids had very little, if any, representation in the media or celebrities that are openly queer. Most media and media personas present as heterosexual or are labelled heterosexual. The lack of representation furthers the idea to children that heterosexuality is the norm. In a CNN article discussing the significance of Siwa's coming out, Scottie Andrew notes, "There's no precedent for what JoJo did -- no star of her caliber, at her age, whose audience is made up of mostly elementary schoolers, has come out so publicly. And JoJo, with her unflappable joy, is an example unlike any LGBTQ young people have had" (Andrew). JoJo Siwa is teaching kids that it's okay to be "different" or to go against the status quo. It's also teaching them to accept that other people may be different from them, and that's okay too.

Siwa didn't want to make a big fuss about expressing her queer identity. "I never wanted [my coming out] to be a big deal,' she adds. But it was: Never before has someone with such a young fan base identified publicly as LGBTQ" (Sheeler). Though she may have not wanted it to be a 'big deal', it represented a big step forward in the children's entertainment industry in becoming more accepting and diverse. And her attitude and happiness towards being publicly queer is inspiring and will drive further change. "Performing has always made me super happy," she adds. "But for the first time, personally, I am like, whoa, happiness. I am so proud to be me." (Sheeler). She has been very outspoken how she is the happiest she has ever been, and how amazing her girlfriend is. Her joy and the difference seen in her presence is a clear sign to kids that it *is* better to be open and yourself rather than hide.

It's good for children to be exposed to different kinds of people. Having children's media be white-washed and heteronormative does not reflect the society we live in and does not prepare children for the world they will grow into. Scottie Andrew quotes Traci Gillig saying,

“JoJo's pride in her identity and her confidence in shrugging off negative responses indicates that her social media presence will foster a sense of supportive community for LGBTQ youth,' said Traci Gillig, an assistant professor of communication at Washington State University who studies the impacts of LGBTQ+ representation on young people. 'She's one more voice -- and a big one -- communicating to young LGBTQ people that they are loved'” (Andrew).

Many people claim that children don't understand things like queerness and therefore it should be left out of children's media, but that's only because it's not taught. Children are more accepting than people think because they are observing and internalizing the things they see and experience to inform their worldview. They are still learning. They

don't have preconceived notions; those are ingrained into them. So, if children are exposed to more diverse and accepting media and influencers, then they will grow up to reflect those values.

If kids grow up following an influencer who is openly and unapologetically queer, then kids will understand that being queer is normal and okay. If it's not treated as something that is taboo, then children will learn that being queer is just as natural as being straight and won't see one as more 'normal' than the other. This will reduce the struggle children have when coming to terms with their own queerness. For children who are queer, people like JoJo Siwa will be someone these children can see themselves in. There's power in seeing yourself reflected in the media. It means that the media is accepting that identity as normal part of society, and as something that is okay and good to talk about.

Having more blatantly queer children's media and influencers, like Siwa, will help children understand if they begin questioning their own sexuality. Instead of struggling to figure out their identity and whether or not it's normal and acceptable, they can find kinship with Siwa and learn from her. Siwa recognizes this, "Also at the GLAAD Media Awards, Siwa said, "I think it's really cool now that kids all around the world who look up to me can now see that loving who you want to love is totally awesome" (Garner). She is becoming a queer role model for kids. She is showing you can love whoever you want, regardless of gender, and it's normal and acceptable and even good. "If you want to fall in love with a girl, if you want to fall in love with a boy, if you want to fall with somebody who is a they, them or who is non-binary, that is incredible,' she continued.

'Love is awesome. You can be in love with whoever you want to be in love with, and it should be celebrated. And amazingly, now today in the world, it is'" (Garner). JoJo Siwa highlights that the world is more accepting than it's ever been when it comes to the LGBTQ+ community and wants to encourage her fans and the rest of society to live authentically and without the fear of judgement.

The main argument against queer children's media and openly queer children's entertainers/influencers is that it will cause children to turn away from heterosexuality and 'become' queer. This is a detrimental notion in two ways. First, media does not "turn" children (or viewers of any age) gay or straight. It only informs what they know about the LGBTQ+ community so that if they are queer then they don't feel lost and confused when figuring it out. Likewise, showing a queer child only straight media, pretending the LGBTQ+ community doesn't exist, or treating queerness as something wrong will not turn them straight. It will only cause them to suppress their queerness and may cause mental health struggles as they grapple to figure out who they are and whether or not this makes them wrong or if they will be accepted. Secondly, this sentiment implies that queerness is something bad. It isn't. Queerness is natural, normal, and should not be a part of oneself that people feel the need to hide or suppress. Suppression will not make queerness go away, it will only cause feeling of invalidation, loneliness, and can lead to mental illnesses like depression and anxiety.

JoJo Siwa is ready to combat the taboo around coming out and claims that coming out does not have to be a scary endeavor anymore. Highlighting the importance of support from accepting communities, she says, "I think coming out has this stigma around it, that it's a really, really, really scary thing," she said. "It's not anymore. There's

so many accepting and loving people out there. Of course people are gonna say it's not normal, but it's your normal” (Andrew). Siwa seems to imply that even though people may try to invalidate people who come out, especially who come out publicly, but no one’s opinion can change what people feel and know to be true.

Siwa’s coming out validates the feelings many children have when figuring out their own queerness. “Kids who know they're LGBTQ when they're young aren't always believed by the adults in their lives, and their experiences are often discounted, said Lori Duron, an advocate for LGBTQ youth and the mother of a gay, nonbinary child” (Andrew). As highlighted in this quote, many children aren’t believed when they come out at a younger age. They are often told they are too young to know and that they do not understand what they are saying. However, nobody says this to straight children when they develop childhood crushes on children of the opposite sex. With someone like Siwa in the media for children to look to, she will not only validate the feelings of these young queer kids, but perhaps also show parents that being queer is not only an identity that belongs to teenagers and adults. Children should be believed and supported if they come out at a young age. If they change how they identify once presented with more information and experience, then they should be accepted and supported then too. But it should not be assumed that if a child claims to be queer, that they are mistaken and will later realize they are heterosexual. Telling a child that they aren’t something that they believe and feel themselves to be will only confuse them and cause negative feelings around their sense of self.

JoJo Siwa is one of the first celebrities mainly popular among children and who produces children’s media to come out as queer. Her attitude, the support from her

community, and her continued success may inspire other influencers and celebrities to live as their true and authentic selves on and off the camera. Siwa came out with relatively positive reactions. There were angry parents, of course, but the media reception was mostly accepting. This may encourage other queer influencers, whether they are children's influencers or not, to be more transparent about their identity, which will saturate the media with more queer people. The more diverse the media is, the more accepting society will be.

Coming out is a very emotional and personal thing, and no one should be forced to do it. But one of the main concerns that celebrities have is that they will lose their following. This is a valid fear, as influencers and media personalities make their living off of their fans, however Siwa said it perfectly in an interview with Jimmy Fallon, "But if I lost everything I created because of being myself and because of loving who I want to love, I don't want it," she told Fallon. "That's not what I want if I can't love who I want to love." (Haylock). In this statement, JoJo Siwa highlights that her success and the support from her following would not feel authentic if it was based off a false version of herself. Perhaps this is a stance more celebrities should begin to embrace, that their truly loyal fans will accept and support celebrities and influencers for being unapologetically themselves. If a fan is angry about an aspect of an influencer's identity, then they are not a true fan and should find someone else to follow. No one should have to hide themselves just to appease their following.

Siwa embodies this idea of authenticity and the positive attitude she is known for has shone through her entire coming out experience. Of course, she did receive hateful and negative responses, but she did not appear publicly to let it affect her. A *US Weekly*

article discusses one negative comment she got on a social media post, and Siwa's response to it. "Siwa received a hateful response from a parent. "My daughter will never watch you again," the individual commented on her video post. In a response captured by Comments by Celebs, the 17-year-old influencer replied, 'Okay!'" (Jackson). This response shows Siwa letting the comment roll off her back and not affecting her online presence. That's not to say that she wasn't affected by the negative comment, but she handled them maturely, acknowledging them

In an interview with *People Magazine*, Siwa elaborated on coming out and the aftermath, and how it affected her personally. "Ever connected to her fans, she Googled herself. Then she read the thousands of comments. 'I never should have done that. I was thinking that all the comments were going to be nice and supportive, and they weren't,' she says. 'A lot of them were, 'I'm never buying your merch again. My daughter's never watching you again.' I couldn't sleep for three days' (Sheeler). Though being LGBTQ+ is becoming more widely accepted, there are still a lot of people who are prejudiced, especially when it comes to queer presence being found in children's entertainment. "But Siwa found clarity: "My thing is, I don't want people to watch my videos or buy my merchandise if they aren't going to support not only me, but the LGBTQ community" (Sheeler). Though she responded so upbeat to hateful comments on her Instagram, that's not to say they didn't affect her. Having anyone say anything that is hateful towards you is a hard thing to deal with. And with coming out so publicly, unfortunately, it is inevitable that some people will feel the need to publicly voice negative and hateful opinions. However, she handled the situation with as much optimism as her on stage/ on camera presence shows. And her conclusion that she

doesn't want support from people who don't support the queer community is a great role model for other queer influencers. Queer celebrities should not feel the need to appeal to people who don't support that part of their identity. It will only spread further acceptance and intolerance for hate.

The important thing is her true supporters, and her community will accept all parts of her identity and recognize that she is the same person she always was, now more is shown to the public. Nothing about her has changed, she just became comfortable enough to disclose her sexuality. She seems to understand that not everyone will approve and that she might lose some followers, but she gains a public acceptance into a community which will work to continuously lift her up. She also gets the peace of mind knowing that the people who support all parts of her and the LGBTQ+ community are the ones who will remain loyal in their following. This attitude ought to be an example of how other celebrities may be able to show their authentic selves and know that their true fans will support them even more for being themselves.

In a time when queer representation is becoming more common and more diverse, it is still severely lacking in children's media and often still treated as a subject not to be discussed around children. JoJo Siwa's coming out as queer will help teach children that being queer is normal, that there are lots of different people in the world and that different is good, and may also inspire more celebrities and influencers to come out and proudly show all aspects of their identity. JoJo Siwa being an openly queer children's icon is a huge step in the right direction in creating a more accepting and diverse society by showing children that being yourself is good and should be celebrated.

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