

The multiple facets of homophobia in the graphic novel

Heartstopper, vol. 1

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Abstract: The British graphic novel *Heartstopper Vol. 1* (2016) narrates the coming-of-age story of Charlie and Nick in their pursuit of finding their own identities. It is illustrated and written by Alice May Oseman. During their journeys, they must face many challenges such as isolation and homophobia. According to Borrillo (2010), homophobia is a multi-faceted phenomenon related to societal isolation that deserves extensive scientific research. However, there is few research about homophobia in graphic novels (Rivas, 2021; Allen, 2022; Schauer, 2022). Therefore, this study aims to identify and investigate the multiple facets of homophobia in *Heartstopper Vol. 1* (2016). A deeper investigation has unearthed 4 different types of homophobias: cognitive, general, specific, and irrational. These various homophobic acts have directly influenced these characters' freedom and well-being.

Keywords: *Heartstopper Vol.1*; Graphic novel. Homophobia.

Resumo: A história em quadrinhos britânica *Heartstopper Vol. 1* (2016) narra a história de amadurecimento de Charlie e Nick em sua busca por encontrar as suas próprias identidades. É escrito e ilustrado por Alice May Oseman. Durante as suas jornadas, eles devem enfrentar muitos desafios, como o isolamento e a homofobia. Segundo Borrillo (2010), a homofobia é um fenômeno multifacetado relacionado ao isolamento social que merece extensa pesquisa científica. No entanto, há poucas pesquisas sobre homofobia em romances gráficos (Rivas, 2021; Allen, 2022; Schauer, 2022). Portanto, este estudo tem como objetivo identificar e investigar as múltiplas facetas da homofobia em *Heartstopper Vol. 1* (2016). Uma investigação mais profunda revelou 4 tipos diferentes de homofobia: cognitiva, geral, específica e irracional. Esses vários atos homofóbicos influenciaram diretamente a liberdade e o bem-estar desses personagens.

Palavras-chave: *Heartstopper Vol. 1*. Romance gráfico. Homofobia.

Introduction

The graphic novel series *Heartstopper*' (2016-2023) is a sequential narrative produced by the English cartoonist and illustrator Alice May Oseman. This series is divided into five volumes and tell various episodic stories about the relationship of Charles Spring (Charlie) and Nicholas Nelson (Nick) at the Truham Grammar School for Boys. The incredible success of *Heartstopper* (2016-2023) has increased exponentially since its release on Tumblr as well as on other Comic Books platforms such as Tapas and Webtoon. The series has 123M views so far, and 6,2M likes just on Tapas. Although its author, Alice May Oseman, has great success on the internet, she has always dreamed of publishing the series of *Heartstopper* as a physical graphic novel. For this reason, the first volume of *Heartstopper* is self-published with

the help of her readers, who raised £58,925 on the Kickstarter platform. A year later, the Publisher House Hachette Children's Group launched *Heartstopper*, Vol. 1 (2016).

The *Heartstopper*, Vol. 1 (2016) has been recognized with relevant Sequential Arts awards such as The Children's Illustrated Book of the Year and The Waterstones Book of The Year. Its plot encompasses multiple social themes related to the coming-of-age narratives, which span from overcoming bullying to understanding their own sexualities. At first, Oseman's readers are presented with the story of Nick and Charlie. The character of Charlie is suffering homophobia and Nick tries to help him amicably. The topic of homophobia permeates throughout the *Heartstopper* series. Although this topic appears frequently in popular narrations, it has received little attention in the scientific academia. The few publications are found in the *Applied or Textual Linguistics* (RIVAS, 2021), Schauer (SCHAUER, 2022), and (ALLEN, 2022).

In fact, homophobia is a quite complex phenomenon that can be found in various collective consciousnesses and manifested into multiple discriminative forms. For these reasons, this research aims to identify and analyze the different types of homophobias portrayed through the many Sequential Arts elements in the graphic novel *Heartstopper* Vol. 1. Therefore, we organized the research into three sections. In the first section, we will introduce a brief history of the LGBTQIAPN+ movements, along with the theory of the multi-faceted homophobia. In the second section, we will cast light upon the main Sequential Arts features such as the balloons and the panels. At last, in the third section, we shall explore the artistic representations of homophobia and propose a sequential analysis of *Heartstopper*, Vol. 1 (2016).

The facets of homophobia

The concept of homophobia has assumed multiple meanings throughout history. All in all, homophobia entails the fear of or prejudice against homosexuals. However, its concept is much more complex and profound. According to Lyonga (2021), despite its limitation, the term homophobia makes a remarkable contribution to homosexual activism, since it has drawn a lot of attention to various struggles who homosexuals must face daily.

Homosexuals have suffered out of pure hate for centuries. When it comes to the British context, Ackroyd (2018) points out that the early histories portray homosexuality as something of perversion with terrible consequences. The first British act against gay people

dates to 1533. During the reign of Henry VIII, an identified homosexual should be targeted and persecuted. This law established the death penalty and only in 1861, this death penalty was abolished and then converted to a minimum of 10 years imprisonment.

There is a huge contrast between the Pagan and the Judaic-Christian traditions regarding the understanding of homosexual relationships. For Borrillo (2010), the Pagan cultures accept more the differences. In contrast, the Judaic-Christian traditions perceive them as immoral and sinful. These traditions have contributed to a great length of hostility toward homosexuals. As Ackroyd (2018) notes, most people persecuted were men. In fact, lesbians were never explicitly targeted by the British government.

Terribly seen, the punishments against homosexuals were not only long imprisonment. Still in compliance with Ackroyd (2018), castration and tagging were also used as forms of sentences. Gradually, a change has taken place. According to the Museum of London (2021), the last case of the death sentence for homosexuality occurred in 1835. Subsequently, the decriminalization of homosexuality only happened with the Sexual Offences Act in 1967. Five years later, London hosted its first Pride Parade.

The cultural change of homosexuality to homosexualism has occurred relatively slowly. The World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) only removed the term homosexuality from the international classification of diseases in 1973. According to Marjanovic (2023), drag queens paved the way for the LGBTQIAPN+ rebellions against police oppression, such as the Stonewall Inn event in 1969. Many risings have subverted the concept of homosexuality into homosexualism.

Nevertheless, the concept of homophobia is still very negative and has influenced many people to date. For Weinberg (1972), homophobia is firstly referred to as a religiously based fear of being closed in a setting with a homosexual. As a result, it creates barriers for homosexuals to participate in social activities. This leads to social exclusion and mistreatment since heterosexual people fear “losing” the thing they fight for, ergo home and family. Additionally, Shin (2019) pinpoints that homosexualism is often perceived as an “inferior” type of sexuality, which reinforces the idea of patriarchy.

The definition of homophobia has opened the door to the academic discussion on prejudice against homosexuals, as it removes the problem from the homosexual individual and places it on people who do not tolerate those who do not fit the heterosexual norm (Herek, 2004). According to Borrillo (2010), homophobia can manifest itself in four different levels, which are called: 1) cognitive, 2) general, 3) irrational, and 4) specific.

The cognitive homophobia highlights the differences present in human sexualities and questions the dualism homo/hetero. For Borrillo (2010), the cognitive level of homophobia is marked by the discourse of tolerance. However, it does not lead to activism for LGBTQIAPN+ rights. On the contrary, no one is moved by the fact that homosexuals do not have the same rights as heterosexuals. The cognitive homophobia has its origins in the cultural production of the Judaic-Christian since this society propagates the idea that homosexuality is wrong. These propagations usually occur through the popular media, which generates prejudice against all manifestations of affection among gay people. For this reason, many LGBTQIAPN+ members usually prefer to stay in the closet. Moreover, Benschoff (2006) advocates that being in the closet can be very harmful, which might engender self-disgust and self-hatred. The cognitive homophobia can also be denominated internalized homophobia.

In turn, the general homophobia refers to the unfounded hostilities towards homosexuals and it is based on popular misconceptions about being attracted to the same sex. Conforming to Borrillo (2010), patriarchal societies use homophobia as a gender vigilance device. His statement is in consonance with Foucault's contemporary tenets about sexuality. For Foucault, the current sexual discourse is focused on defining people's sexual perversions. He adds that there is a sense of pleasure to those who have power to label others as perverts. Still for Borrillo (2010), the general homophobia constantly reminds individuals of their "correct gender" and questions the identity of those who present "traits" of homosexuality.

Subsequently, the irrational homophobia underscores the frequent acts of violence against homosexuals. This type of violence is always groundless and consubstantiated through mixed feelings of fear and disgust. In other words, the irrational homophobia can be described as the constant manifestations of people's phobic emotions toward homosexuals. Interestingly to notice, these phobias entail having or involving an extreme and/or illogical fear of or aversion to any gay affective attitude. Although Borrillo (2010) considers this type of homophobia quite limited, it is also the most dangerous, because it can trigger people's childhood traumas and/or current individual conflicts.

Finally, the specific homophobia can be characterized as a form of bigotry directed at specific individuals whose sexuality is not heterosexual. It is a very broad term and can affect any person, regardless of their sexual orientation. As Borrillo (2010) defends, the academia must consider the various differentiations of the terminologies related to LGBTQIAPN+ phobias. For instance, the gayphobia comprises specificities that are different from the lesbophobia. Black trans women usually suffer much more than white transmen. There is an

intersectionality that must be considered. Otherwise, many types of violence against the LGBTQIAPN+ communities can be easily erased. Pursuant to Benschoff (2006), both the general and the specific can be understood as structured forms of homophobia as well.

The main elements of the Sequential Arts

The Sequential Arts encompass a variety of literary genres such as the comic books, the graphic novels, and the webcomics. Although they differ from each other, they also have many similar characteristics. According to Eisner (1985), the Sequential Arts are artistic and literary form that can combine a plethora of images and words to tell a certain story. These combinations are not aleatory, but they are deployed in a specific order with the view of building up an organic process of creativity. All in all, the Sequential Arts may present many structural features. In relation to the comic books, their basic elements are usually the balloons, the captions, the gutters, and the panels.

The balloons are spaces that contain the character's speech and thoughts. The tail of the balloon points directly to the character, which allows the reader to understand who is speaking or what someone is thinking (Kukkonen, 2013). Conforming to Eisner (1985), the shape of the balloons and the lettering are responsible for conveying meaning and the singularity of the character's emotions. Balloons with an explosion effect may symbolize yelling, while wavy balloons may embody weak speeches. Furthermore, the dotted lines which subscribe to a balloon can be used for displaying whispers, whilst cloudy shapes may design different types of thoughts.

The caption boxes are widely utilized in comic books to indicate the narrator's voice. As Rifkind (2019) pinpoints, the captions or narrative boxes can correspond to film voice-overs since both aim to narrate the story through an unseen narrator. Additionally, Rifkind (2019) states that captions are specifically written inside rectangular shapes, usually on the top or bottom of the panel. In turn, Cabero (2021) believes that these same captions may be applied to deliver extra information about one's characterization or plotting.

The gutter can be defined as the gaps between panels. Although some authors refer to the gutter as an "empty space", the cartoonist McCloud (1994) defends that the gutters increase the magic and the mystery of the comic books' storytelling. This may occur because the reader is invited (un)consciously to interpret between these "empty spaces". Still for McCloud (1994), most of the comic book's action is happening silently and unseen between

each panel. Thusly, as stated by McCloud (1994), the gutter is not simply an “empty space”, but a space full of meanings and experiences.

The panels can be easily recognized by their common rectangular borders and shapes that encapsulate the various diegetic conflicts related to the sequential storytelling. Pursuant to Cabero (2021), the panels are the basic units of significance found in any comic book. With that in mind, they may guide the reader’s attentive focus into a specific part of the narration. Besides, for Eisner (1985), panels can be defined as an individual frame and/or single drawing. These individual frames are carefully posited in a multiple-panel sequence within the comic strips. In this way, they can be seen as essential tools used to represent arrangement, cadence, breadth, depth, rhythm, and even time in the sequential plotting. In contrast, many panels in one singular page compose 1 frame.

The multiple facets of homophobia in the graphic novel *Heartstopper*, Vol. 1

The British graphic novel series *Heartstopper* is a current LGBTQIAPN+ coming-of-age sequential series, which has been created and drawn by the English cartoonist Alice May Oseman. Her first publication is the novel *Solitaire* in 2014. However, her notoriety only comes with the self-publication of the first volume of *Heartstopper* in 2016 via the Hachette Children's Group Press. The chief plot of *Heartstopper*, Vol. 1 (2016) centers around the upcoming amorous relationship between the two protagonists, Charlie Spring and Nick Nelson, as they meet and fall in love. This series is a spin-off of Oseman's novel *Solitaire* (2014) where these characters had already appeared. Initially, Nick notices that the rugby team lacks one player because people seem to be more interested in soccer. Then, Nick asks Charlie if he was willing to join the rugby team. However, Charlie does not know how to play rugby. For this reason, Nick promises to teach Charlie how to play it and acknowledge his running skills. However, Charlie is a quite flamboyant teenager, which raises many questions in the rugby team.

Frame 1 - Thoughts on the new rugby player



Source: OSEMAN, 2016¹

The rugby players do not see Charlie as an equal. Although they recognize Charlie as a good person, his teammates insist on distancing themselves from him and do not want him on the team, due to his sexuality. According to Borrillo (2010), cognitive homophobia aims to distinguish people based on their sexualities, and it uses tolerant discourse that does not evoke changes in the systematic oppression of LGBTQIAPN+ people. Thus, the balloon “*Does he even like sports? Everyone knows he’s gay*” can be understood as a clear display of cognitive homophobia, since this rugby player does not want to have Charlie as a teammate, because he believes Charlie’s possible homosexuality may deter him from playing well.

The rugby team seems to agree that Charlie’s sexual orientation may prevent him from enjoying masculine activities such as sports. Most of their commentaries focus on Charlie’s feasible homosexual features: “[...] *he’s a fucking stick, he’s popular and he’s gay*”. As Borrillo (2010) notes, general homophobia uses a gender vigilance device that verifies if people reject the “natural” attributes of their genders. Therefore, the first frame can also be comprehended as signs of general homophobia, since Charlie’s teammates think he deliberately rejects his masculinity, based on their solely patriarchal misconceptions of gender.

The hostility of the rugby team towards Charlie is also depicted in frame 1 through his facial expressions and various gutters. As highlighted by Eisner (1985), the cartoonist may apply the gutters to emphasize the meaning between the interstitial spaces. In other words, the narrative silence can develop the plot as well. Having said that, the “empty spaces” among

¹ Episode 1-7 <https://tapas.io/episode/511105>

Nick's countenance may indicate different types of homophobias, especially the ones considered irrational, due to their baseless fears. These silences are intensified by Nick's expressions of worriedness and sadness present in and outside the speech balloons. Although Charlie accepts to be part of the rugby team, the various homophobias against him do not stop. Unfortunately, they are only deepened.

The first rugby match takes place in the Truham Grammar School for Boys, just after Charlie joins the team. Since Charlie is solely a backup player, he spends most of his time texting his friend Tao Xu. Charlie tells Tao that he thinks Nick likes him, simply based on Nick's constant impassionate attitude toward him. Their affections grow stronger after their winning against the Visitors, which leads to a celebration. The second frame unfolds Nick's friends' conversation² about how Nick and Charlie seem to be very close. Nick's friends comment on how Nick seems to have a crush on Charlie because they show a public demonstration of affection by touching each other's faces and giving hugs to one another. The conversation then reveals each friend's speculation about Nick's sexual orientation.

In the primary set of balloons, Christian states that Nick is not gay by using a tag question "*But Nick's not gay, is he?*", which can be understood as Nick's supposed rejection of homosexuality. In turn, Otis's speech in the balloon "*He doesn't look gay. And didn't he have a crush on that girl Tara Jones?*" indicates that Otis perceives gay people by their looks and behavior, and, consequently, he views Nick as a person who is not deviant in comparison to the gender norm, since Nick is into "masculine" things such as rugby and girls. This may be a representation of the general homophobia. As stated by Borrillo (2010), general homophobia is quite common in patriarchal societies, because it is used as a gender vigilance device to alert people about negative traits such as femininity and homosexuality. That is, they can control other people's lives by reassuring the "natural" attributes of the dominant gender, i.e., the masculine one. When Otis accentuates Nick's allegedly manhood traits, he foregrounds this trait as acceptable, normal, and superior.

² From left to right: Christian, Sai, and Otis.

Frame 2 - Nick's sexual orientation mystery



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Source: OSEMAN, 2017³

Moreover, the facial expression and the homophobic speech inside Otis' balloon can express how this character (un)consciously might feel about his friend's sexuality. According to McCloud (2006), the human face can assume different forms that indicate their emotional mindsets and physical states. He also pinpoints how disappointment is an intermediary emotion, resultant of sadness and surprise. Therefore, Otis' general homophobia can be depicted through the characterization of his falling and raising eyebrows subsequently. This is even augmented by his mouth-dropping. In contrast, the homophobic acts are temporarily deterred when Miss Singh, the physical education teacher, enters the frame. For Anggito & Sartono (2022), tolerance plays an essential role in reducing conflicts, and comics can be used for humanitarian purposes such as mutual respect. Thusly, the character of Miss Singh casts light on the importance of accepting people's differences by telling her students to not speculate on people's sexuality. Her innuendos are fundamental to discourage her students to

³ Episode 2-13 <https://tapas.io/episode/719893>

judge people's sexual orientations based on their physical appearances and raise awareness about the complexities of human sexualities.

The numerous homophobic acts against Charlie can be identified in other moments of the *Heartstopper*, Vol. 1 narrative. At first, Charlie is in a hidden gay relationship with Benjamin Hope, also called Ben, but he believes his feelings are unrequited. Most of this unrequited feeling is related to Ben's being in the closet while Charlie wants to be an openly gay teenager. Conforming to Benshoff (2006), being in the closet may result in a plethora of dangers. Among these dangers, he pinpoints self-disgust and self-hatred. When homosexuals remain in the closet, they usually end up associating their sexuality with immorality and madness. This is a type of internalized homophobia. Moreover, they share a feeling of non-belongness, which can create attitudes of contempt against any open LGBTQIAPN+ member. Subsequently, Ben does not accept their breakup and begins harassing Charlie, compromising his mental and physical well-being.

In the meantime, Nick perceives that Charlie has been suffering in high school. In the frame 3, Oseman (2016) depicts Nick's memory of Charlie being treated badly by Ben and other classmates due to Charlie's possible homosexuality. The primary panel shows two smiling boys approaching an unhappy Charlie, then Nick's appalled facial reaction and many balloons symbolizing gossip. The gossip appears in the shape of balloons that are fading into the background while their words are accentuated. As a result, Charlie seems ashamed about and defenseless to the terrible things that are being darted toward him.

Frame 3 - Nick's memory about Charlie's suffering



Source: OSEMAN, 2016⁴

The Truham Grammar School boys' speech unveils their various unsound opinions against Charlie's possible homosexuality. These fears can be identified in practically every balloon of frame 3 such as "Ew don't touch him", and "so gross". These messages portray these boys' irrational fears of contracting Charlie's homosexuality as if this is a type of disease. For Borrillo (2010), irrational homophobia is expressed by disgust and unjustified emotions toward homosexuals. Without any explanations and/or motives, they throw at Charlie pejorative terms like "faggot" and "gaylore". In fact, these terms are homophobic slurs that are intended to remind Charlie of his effeminacy. Interestingly to notice, people's singular homophobic fears are frequently materialized in small groups. Therefore, collectively, they become horrendous acts of general homophobia as well.

The speeches inside the balloons of frame 3 are not solely words from Nick's remembrances. As McCloud (1994) notes, humans' perception of comic book reality needs faith, since it is built on fragments that they experience through their senses. Technically, this is called closure. Although the boys saying homophobic things to Charlie do not appear in Nick's memory, the readers may commit closure, because they can associate these balloons with the other students' speeches. Moreover, the readers can even relive their homophobic

⁴ Episode 2-1 <https://tapas.io/episode/587761>

past experiences, both as perpetrators and/or victims. In line with Eisner (1985)'s tenets, every sequential panel must be comprehended as the cartoonists' singular viewpoints of the world, i.e., each panel is an artistic representation of people's reality. This can trigger a multitude of emotions in their readers. Having said that, the gutters between each panel in frame 3 might remind Oseman's readers of their own homophobic beliefs, discourses, and even prejudices. Hazardously, people's cognitive and irrational homophobias can convert into something more structured such as the general and the specific forms. As Benshoff (2006) defends, structured homophobia is more dangerous, because it is much more difficult to change, as it is already crystallized in the collective consciousness.

One of the main events in *Heartstopper*, Vol. 1 (2016) takes place on Harry's birthday, who is the chief bully among the Truham Grammar School boys. While Nick and Charlie chat with each other, Harry interrupts them to introduce Tara Jones to Nick. She is a lesbian character whose sexual orientation is often invalidated because some people perceive her girlfriend as only a classmate, which is why few people know about her sexual orientation. As a direct result, Charlie feels extremely insecure, and he leaves the party. On talking to Tara, Nick realizes that Charlie is gone. Therefore, Nick decides to find Charlie in the crowd. He asks all his friends if they have seen Charlie. However, they have not. In contrast, Nick's friends start questioning him about the reasons why he is friends with Charlie.

Frame 4 - Questioning Nick and Charlie's Friendship



Source: OSEMAN, 2016

The birthday party of Harry can be considered a turning point in his friendship with Nick. Through a series of inappropriate questions in frame 4: "*Why do you even hang out with him?*" and "*But why?*", Harry implies that he does not accept being around people with

possible different sexualities. According to Borrillo (2010), the cognitive homophobia highlights the heterosexual insensitivity to the shortage of homosexuals' rights. In any moment of his birthday party, Harry displays any sign of welcoming Charlie's presence. In fact, Harry tries to distance everybody else from Charlie by pinpointing his allegedly effeminate traits. He goes on to indicate that Nick is friends with Charlie out of pity.

Additionally, the frame 4 illustrates Harry's various suspicions about Nick and Charlie's romantic relationship. Conforming to McCloud (2006), the suspicious face is recognizable by some key features such as the tilted head, the narrow side eye, and the furrowed brow. In relation to Harry's facial expressions, they seem to be combined with a disgusted countenance, because of his mouth-dropping. As Borrillo (2010) notes, the irrational homophobia is also manifested through feelings of insecurity and self-doubt. The cartoonist Oseman may exaggerate Harry's facial reactions to infer he questions his own sexual orientation and may even be a homosexual as well.

Final Considerations

The sequential narrative of *Heartstopper* Vol. 1 portrays multiple facets of homophobia: cognitive, general, irrational, and specific (Borrillo, 2010). These portrayals appear throughout the plot; however, we identify chiefly in three very distinctive moments. The representations of the cognitive and the general homophobias are quite broad in the frames from the rugby team. The irrational homophobia is quite illustrative in the various affective acts between Charlie and Nick. In turn, the specific homophobic attitudes are thrown toward Charlie's mere presence. Interestingly to notice, all these narrative representations of homophobia are based on fearful, illogical, and unempathetic beliefs as well as discourses.

In contrast, this present study has found three major limitations that can be approached in future research. Our analytical objective was upon the two protagonists: Charlie and Nick. Nevertheless, most of the multiple facets of homophobia were identified in Charlie's characterization. Moreover, the graphic novel *Heartstopper* Vol. 1 has many relevant supporting characters such as Elle and Tao. They display more complex LGBTQIAPN+ phobic intersectionality. We could not tackle their own discriminative problems whatsoever. We sincerely advise future researchers to focus more on these themes through a more intersectional lens.

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