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Article

Masking, Legibility and Neuronormativity: Neuroqueer Representation in *Heartbreak High*

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Abstract

‘Neuroqueer’ scholarship has explored how neurodivergence and queerness shape one another, as well as the practices of resisting neuronormativity and cisheteronormativity. While autistic representation has grown more visible on contemporary television, scholarship identifies similar problems with representation: stereotypes, gaps in authenticity and a lack of intersectionality. Through *Heartbreak High*, this article argues that Quinni’s representation matters. The show represents masking as a shared technology of normativity across disability and sexuality. Using neuroqueer theory, critical autism studies and research on camouflaging and stigma, this article develops the concept of neuroqueer legibility, covering the processes through which a character comes to be legible as both autistic and queer and the risks attendant to this legibility. Analysis of *Heartbreak High* shows that the series diverts responsibility for interpretation away from the individual and the individual’s deficit. Through Quinni’s disclosure and her deteriorating relationship with Sasha, the series shifts focus towards relational misattunement and institutional discipline.

Keywords: neuroqueer, neurodiversity, autism, queer, representation, masking, intersectionality, television

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Introduction

Autistic characters have become more visible on television. However, scholars continue to argue that increasing visibility is no guarantee of representational quality. Fictional representations can offer some resistance to stigma. They can also reproduce deficit thinking, ‘flatten’ autistic experience, and use disability as a plot device rather than as a social reality (Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023). Studies of television and disability show that representation is a product of form: the inclusion of autistic characters is often conditional on their ability to fit within televisual narratives of productivity, romance and social competence (Aspler, Harding and Cascio, 2022).

Heartbreak High is a school-based television series set at Hartley High that concerns adolescent relationships, sexuality, peer dynamics and institutional life. This article foregrounds Quinni, an autistic queer student, and Sasha, her romantic interest, in episodes that stage self-naming, masking and relational conflict. Chloé Hayden’s lived experience as an autistic actor informs Quinni’s self-naming (Vrajlal, 2022). It is in Season 1, Episode 2, ‘Renaissance Titties’ that Quinni comes out as autistic and states that she is ‘good at masking’. Season 1, Episode 6, ‘Angeline’, complicates disclosure by showing recognition not as resolution, but as strain in Quinni and Sasha’s relationship.

Here, ‘neuroqueer’ offers a useful lens for understanding the intersection of autism and queerness. Stevens and Kirby (2025) define neuroqueer as a theoretical lens and a set of practices through which neurodivergent and queer lives resist normative demands. Similarly, neuroqueer theory is described by Barnett (2024) as a challenge to dominant ideas of sociability, gender, and the properly legible self.

This article contends that *Heartbreak High* is a useful case study because it depicts autistic and queer identity as a common problem of legibility. Specifically, the series frames masking as a strategy of navigating neuronormative and heteronormative expectations rather than as personal dishonesty or dysfunction, as with Quinni’s storyline in Season 1, Episode 2, ‘Renaissance Titties’ and Season 1, Episode 6, ‘Angeline’ (‘Renaissance Titties’, 2022a; ‘Angeline’, 2022b; Vrajlal, 2022; Netflix Tudum, 2024).

The article also addresses a larger question for neuroqueer scholarship: what should good representation look like? Following Kafer (2013), representation is valued not because it makes visible marginalised identity, but because it makes visible structures that make inclusion conditional.

Literature and Theoretical Framework

A neuroqueer reading cannot be based on purely individualising models of deficit. Contemporary scholarship on neurodiversity shows that pathologising accounts of autism are not neutral descriptions, but rather shape institutions, research priorities and everyday language in ways that demand conformity from autistic people (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). In response, neuroqueer theory identifies autism and queerness as part of common systems of normalisation, emphasising lived experience and opposition to normative expectations (Stevens and Kirby, 2025).

Mallipeddi and VanDaalen (2022) point out that autism cannot be fully understood outside of its relationship with race, gender, sex, and class. Nair, Farah and Boveda (2024) have criticised neurodiversity discourse for most often centring white Global North perspectives. While Crenshaw's (1989) foundational work on intersectionality still stands today, it demonstrates how social identities are structured through intersecting systems of power and therefore cannot be added together. Therefore, when analysing representations of autism in media, we need to look at not just whether the autistic person is visible in their depiction, but also whose life is represented as 'normal' and whose life is marginalised due to structural inequalities.

Two further theories are critical: camouflaging and the Double Empathy Problem. Camouflaging refers to the methods autistic people use to disguise or compensate for their autistic traits in order to avoid stigma in social interactions (Cook et al., 2021). Studies demonstrate that camouflaging is impacted by societal expectations of acceptance as well as the consequences of disclosing one's autistic identity (Perry et al., 2022). The Double Empathy Problem provides a counterpoint to the deficit theory of autistic individuals, which holds that communication failures occur mutually and stem from asymmetrical communicative norms rather than from an individual's cognitive deficits (Milton, 2012). This is important for neuroqueer analysis, since the primary concern is not whether an autistic queer character meets the dominant culture's social expectations of success, but whether a particular text represents difficulties as problems for the individual, institutions, society, or all three.

This approach differentiates sympathy-based representation from representational critique. As Jones, Gordon and Mizzi (2023) argue, television often employs recognisable autistic stereotypes such as exceptional intelligence, social naivety, or emotional opacity. These stereotypes may seem positive, even if they limit what autism may represent. Instead of asking whether a text contains positive autistic stereotypes, a neuroqueer analysis focuses on how it distributes interpretive authority. Who explains whom? Whose version of events does the audience believe? Does a text portray differences as problems primarily for the individual or for institutions? Since both autism and queerness are typically subject to

outside interpretation and demands for self-legitimation, this question is particularly pertinent whenever they coexist.

Approach and Corpus

The article uses qualitative textual analysis, bringing together close reading of characterisation, narrative structure, setting, performance, visual framing and selected formal features, with ideas from neuroqueer theory and critical autism studies. The corpus is *Heartbreak High*, Season 1, Episode 2, ‘Renaissance Titties’ and Episode 6, ‘Angeline’, as these episodes stage disclosure, masking, and subsequent relational strain (‘Renaissance Titties’, 2022a; ‘Angeline’, 2022b; Vrajlal, 2022; Netflix Tudum, 2024).

Instead of treating the episodes as exemplars, the analysis examines how the performance, character interaction, setting, narrative sequencing and dialogue configure autistic queer legibility as private, relational, and institutional. The article also discusses, where relevant, how the organisation of looking, listening, response, and spatial exposure in the scene makes disclosure a formal event rather than just a spoken statement.

Neuroqueer Legibility and Masking

One of the main reasons *Heartbreak High* does this is that it explicitly identifies masking instead of implying that Autism exists in the absence of a stated connection. Quinni’s date with Sasha, in Season 1, Episode 2, ‘Renaissance Titties’ is defined by both sensory and social factors before Quinni discloses her autism. After being surrounded by noise and people and feeling over-stimulated by them, Quinni withdraws into a restroom with Darren where she can better self-regulate. She subsequently tells Sasha about her autism and states ‘I’m good at masking’ (‘Renaissance Titties,’ 2022a; Vrajlal, 2022). The way the scene was staged is very important because the disclosure comes from embodied discomfort, spatially withdrawing from a group of people and attempting to repair relationships rather than some distant explanation. The bathroom scene foregrounds Quinni’s embodied response; its relative enclosure, following the preceding overcrowded social scene, creates a movement from public overstimulation to a more controlled environment. Quinni’s later disclosure is therefore prepared as a negotiated process rather than simply as a plot device. Darren’s participation also matters because it mediates regulation rather than staging Quinni outside social context. The sequence shows autistic communication emerging through setting, performance and response: Quinni pauses, sits still and speaks slowly, while Darren adjusts his communicative pace. Legibility is therefore established through relational attention rather than solely through Quinni’s speech.

Quinni's self-naming becomes a performance of relational risk. For the scene to produce recognition, Sasha must listen, interpret and respond to the disclosure. Autistic characters are often coded but not named. This representational practice can enhance stereotypes while denying autistic self-definition. Scholarship on media representation shows that using identification can reduce ambiguity; however, its value depends on whether the text supports understanding or creates an explanatory spectacle (Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023).

Across this sequence, 'masking' serves as a technology of legibility. Quinni is attempting to present herself as readable as possible as a partner, friend and student within a neuronormative space. In a romantic context, Quinni masks through perceived norms of romance, such as timing, responsiveness, and emotional performance, to create a sense of intimacy. The transition from a crowded public place to withdrawing to the bathroom to explain what was happening provides masking a spatial and temporal structure: Quinni's body registers pressure prior to language, providing an account of that pressure.

Camouflage literature portrays masking as exhausting identity labour, prompted by stigma (Cook et al., 2021), as well as a neuroqueer strategy for negotiating recognisability within a socially constructed relationship of intimacy based upon normative notions of recognition (Stevens and Kirby, 2025).

While the show depicts unmasking/disclosure as neither simply nor necessarily an emancipatory endpoint, Season 1, Episode 6, 'Angeline', illustrates how Quinni's plan to attend a book signing relies on routine and predictability. Meanwhile, Sasha consistently disrupts this routine with competing social demands, such as going for gelato, conversing with someone Quinni has not met, and attending Amerie's party ('Angeline', 2022b; Netflix Tudum, 2024; Netflix, 2026). Misattunement is illustrated through conflicting temporal structures: Quinni's need for scheduling and recovery time is set against Sasha's preference for spontaneity, producing conflict through rhythm, pacing and performance rather than dialogue alone. Recognising Quinni's needs is difficult not only because of the spoken disagreements but also because of differences in pace and performance. In the book-signing sequence, Quinni's stillness contrasts with Sasha's outward-facing social energy, making discomfort visible through bodily composition rather than exposition. Cuts between interactions interrupt Quinni's anticipated route through the event, so the scene's form mirrors the loss of predictability that Sasha fails to recognise as an access need. Although Quinni may describe her experiences to others, they must still adapt to those descriptions. Literature regarding neuroqueering warns against viewing disclosure as always safe or preferable, and literature on stigma notes that autistic

individuals often face penalisation both for concealing and for revealing differences (Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2020; Stevens and Kirby, 2025).

Minority stress research helps clarify this point. Botha and Frost (2020) show that harm experienced by autistic people is produced not by autism itself, but by stigmatising environments that generate chronic vigilance, concealment and strain. Thus, when we view Quinni's masking as an adaptation to these conditions, we are invited to consider the link between affective difficulty and structural pressure, as well as the neuroqueer significance of the series.

The double empathy problem makes clear what is at issue with Quinni's masking. In a deficit model, Quinni would be treated as the source of communication failure. In a relational model, however, communication failure arises from mismatched expectations and unequal authority in interpreting each other's actions. Across the selected episodes, *Heartbreak High* moves towards this relational model by showing that social difficulty does not reside solely in the autistic subject but develops within relationships that privilege one mode of legibility over another (Milton, Gurbuz and López, 2022).

Schooling and Institutional Normativity

The school setting intensifies the argument, as it is in this space that normativity is organised and enforced. As Barnett (2024) describes, neuronormativity is enacted by the institutions that regulate legitimate behaviour, embodiment and relationality. Hartley High fulfils that institutional function by making sociability, compliance and stable self-presentation seem normal. Similarly, Strand (2017) argues that neurodiversity and intersectionality need to be considered together because institutions distribute recognition unevenly across bodies and identities. Representation scholarship often presents autistic inclusion as successful assimilation into these norms, while the institution itself remains unexamined (Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023).

Heartbreak High partly defies this pattern. Hartley High mediates Quinni's relationship arc; the pressures surrounding disclosure, romance and acceptable conduct are staged through school routines, peer gatherings, and adolescent social visibility ('Renaissance Titties', 2022a; 'Angeline', 2022b). The school is a social space where intimacy is observed, interpreted and regulated by peer expectations. Hartley High's formal importance lies in how private negotiation becomes publicly legible. Quinni's communication, affect and romantic needs are read through a culture organised around sociability, flexibility and appropriate conduct. From a neuroqueer perspective, autism and queerness are theorised as part of dominant scripts of normality (Stevens and Kirby, 2025). An autistic queer student, therefore,

encounters multiple systems of legibility that may render self-knowledge unreliable or excessive (Mallipeddi and VanDaalen, 2022).

The school setting demonstrates why neuroqueer legibility is political, not just personal. Schools distinguish between behaviour that is seen as mature, appropriate and socially competent and behaviour that is seen as disruptive or excessive. Quinni's need for self-regulation within those boundaries clarifies that inclusion can depend on self-management rather than institutional accommodation.

An intersectional qualification is still needed. Neurodiversity scholarship has been criticised for centring white, Global North assumptions, and media representations have historically favoured a narrow range of autistic characters (Nair, Farah and Boveda, 2024; Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023). *Heartbreak High* expands neuroqueer representation by explicitly tying autism, queerness and masking together, but it does not, on its own, solve the broader exclusions that characterise autistic visibility. Thus, it is important not as a total solution, but as a case that helps clarify the standards by which future neuroqueer presentations can be judged.

Discussion

Heartbreak High makes the politics of neuroqueer legibility available for analysis by showing how Quinni's masking is produced through sensory pressure, relational expectation and institutional space ('Renaissance Titties', 2022a; 'Angeline', 2022b; Stevens and Kirby, 2025). The series locates misunderstanding in relationships and institutions as well as in the autistic individual, offering a stronger form of representation than models of inclusion that reward conformity.

These pressures matter beyond a single programme because representation can still reward only those forms of difference that remain manageable, familiar and socially legible. Scholarship on autism representation warns that sympathetic depictions can be absorbed into neoliberal narratives of self-management and resilience (Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023). Neuroqueer theory resists that reduction by insisting that recognition is structured by power and that 'acceptance' without institutional change is limited (Stevens and Kirby, 2025). *Heartbreak High* does not entirely escape these tensions. However, the series provides a framework for thinking about autistic queer life as relational, political, and shaped by the demand to be readable.

Neuroqueer representation should therefore be assessed by whether it exposes the institutions and norms that produce misrecognition. On that basis, *Heartbreak High* makes a meaningful contribution: the series presents masking as a negotiated response to unequal social conditions and shows that

apparent personal difficulties can be problems of normative design. Strong neuroqueer representation requires this shift from individual deficit to structural and relational critique.

Conclusion

Future studies on neuroqueer representation should focus on how texts can redistribute authority, refocus misunderstandings, and resist treating marginalised identities as an attractive commodity for ‘diversity’, in addition to analysing inclusion measures. The suggested standards are high; however, it is this higher demand that provides the basis for neuroqueer criticism’s strength. Representation is therefore an issue of design: of spaces, expectations, temporal structures and interpretive norms, rather than solely about individuals’ characteristics.

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