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Institutional Homophobia and Unclaimed Queer Trauma in Orange Is the New Black: A Multimodal Analysis through Butler's Performativity and Caruth's Trauma Theory

AARADHANA SATISH PANIKKAR
Vellore Institute of Technology University
YADAMALA SREENIVASULU
yadamala.sreenivasulu@vit.ac.in

Vellore Institute of Technology University

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Abstract

This study examines the television program Orange Is the New Black (OITNB), which has been one of the most influential programs for representing LGBTQ+ people inside U.S. prisons. The program consistently portrays queerness during confinement. Although there are many examples of the growth of queer visibility in streaming TV content, few researchers have explored how popular streaming texts represent the interconnectedness of institutionalised homophobic violence, carceral violence, and psychological trauma, especially through the lens of queer interpretative practices and identity regulation. In response to this research gap, this study will use a qualitative multimodal methodology, employing critical discourse analysis, visual semiotics, and thematic coding. Ten episodes from seasons one to seven were purposefully sampled for close analysis using multiple modalities. Specifically, the analysis focused on several characters who are also central figures in the show, such as Sophia Burset, Big Boo, Poussey Washington, and Piper Chapman. The findings of this study indicate that there are five primary themes portrayed throughout the ten episodes analysed: institutionalised violence, medical/psychological abuse, religious-based homophobia, gender non-conforming identity expressions, and coping and resistance strategies. OITNB portrays queer individuals experiencing individual forms of trauma due to medical negligence, physical isolation, religious condemnation, and administrative violence, while illustrating queer agency through acts of solidarity and humour, as well as affirmations of queer identity. Utilising Judith Butler's theories related to gender performativity and heteronormativity along with Cathy Caruth's theory related to trauma as an "unclaimed" experience, this study illustrates how OITNB creates institutionalised suffering as a visual/narratable phenomenon through the use of the trauma narrative. This study expands our understanding of the representation of trauma in cultural-psychological terms and provides new insights into identity regulation and symbolic survival in carceral-mediated contexts.

1. Introduction

The last ten years have shown incredible growth in the number of LGBTQ+ individuals portrayed on mainstream TV, primarily because of streaming platforms like Netflix. This increased representation has made LGBTQ+ identities and relationships more visible than ever. Unfortunately, many of these portrayals remain limited to individualised portrayals of identity and romance and rarely consistently focus on the systemic and psychological aspects of queer suffering in institutional environments.

Of all the programs that have been developed since then, Orange is the New Black (OITNB, 2013–2019), stands out because of its commitment to portraying a large group of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters embedded in the U.S. prison system. By placing queer narratives within the confines of the carceral institution, OITNB extends beyond mere tokenism and represents the daily regulation of queer bodies and the creation of trauma through institutionalised homophobia and transphobia (Ford, 2020).

This research was designed to explore the psycho-cultural meanings behind these representations. Rather than simply punishing, carceral institutions also regulate gender expression, restrict access to one's body, and create multiple layers of trauma through physical and emotional abuse at the hands of institutional violence, medical negligence, religious condemnation, and social isolation (Adams & Emmerich, 2021). Past studies examining the representation of queerness on streaming television have explored queerness in the context of imprisonment. However, none have provided a sustained multimodal queer theoretical trauma-focused exploration of how popular screen texts depict the ways in which carceral institutions regulate queer bodies and produce unacknowledged traumatic experiences.

To address this gap, this study conducted a qualitative multimodal examination of ten purposively selected episodes from seasons 1–7 of OITNB. In addition to analyzing the broader themes across episodes, it specifically analyzed several of the main characters that were central to queer narrative throughout the show including Sophia Burset, Big Boo, Poussey Washington, and Piper Chapman. Using Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity and heteronormativity and Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as an unclaimed experience, this study examined how the series constructed queer suffering, regulated identity, and created opportunities for symbolic survival on screen (Caprioglio, 2021).

The study is guided by four research questions: (1) In what ways is institutional and systemic homophobia depicted in OITNB, and what are the implications for queer people's lives? (2) How do queer characters perceive, deal with, and react to physical and psychological trauma in prison settings? (3) Can Butler and Caruth's work help us better understand the layered experiences of violence, resistance, and survival experienced by queer people in prisons? (4) To what extent does the series mirror or critique the actual carceral experiences of LGBTQ+ people?

The analysis will also contribute to the development of a cultural-psychological understanding of how popular media shape societal knowledge about trauma, institutional power, and queer resilience.

2. Literature Review

The increasing presence of LGBTQ+ representation on TV since 2018 can be attributed to changing cultural attitudes toward inclusion and the growing influence of streaming platforms. With regards to this movement, Netflix has led the way in terms of producing content which showcases diversity within sexuality and gender (Soriano, 2024; Higueras-Ruiz, 2025; Fraccari & Kerrigan, 2024).

2.1 Queer TV and Streaming Representation

As noted previously, there are many ways in which streaming platforms have contributed to an increase in both the quantity and visibility of queer characters on television. In addition, according to GLAAD's annual survey of LGBTQ+ representation on television, Netflix continues to lead all other networks in terms of the sheer number of LGBTQ+ characters featured in its programming (GLAAD, 2023; Fraccari & Kerrigan, 2024). While these numbers demonstrate a positive trend toward greater inclusion and visibility, most researchers agree that there remains much room for improvement in the deep exploration of systemic oppression and trauma related to queerness (Worthen, 2022; Cook, 2018; Higueras-Ruiz, 2025).

2.2 OITNB Scholarship

Scholars have engaged with Orange Is the New Black from a variety of theoretical frameworks and interdisciplinary perspectives because of the show's unique ability to represent queer lives in prison. Much of this research focuses on the show's use of an intersectional critique of the prison-industrial complex (Ruderman-Looff, 2019); how the show explores whiteness and viewer pleasure (Thorsteinson, 2025); and how the show provides a feminist Foucauldian perspective on subjectification and disability (Ford, 2022). Researchers have also examined audience engagement with the show, focusing on its impact the show had on prison reform awareness (Human Rights Campaign, 2023; Annati, 2020).

2.3 Queer/Trans Carcerality

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that LGBTQ+ individuals—particularly those who identify as transgender—are disproportionately incarcerated at higher rates than cisgender heterosexuals. Furthermore, once incarcerated, they are subjected to an enhanced risk of physical and emotional harm via administrative violence (e.g. denial of medical care consistent with their self-identified gender, solitary confinement, violence against them) (Mitchell et al., 2025; Spade, 2011; Donohue et al., 2021; Peck, 2022; Vogler, 2025; National Center for Transgender Equality, 2018). The authors highlight how institutional policies perpetuate societal homophobia/transphobia within carceral settings.

2.4 Trauma Representation in Media

Media scholars argue that the effects of chronic institutional abuse and stigma create long-term psychological effects such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), dissociative identity disorders, and internalised homophobia (Menhinick & Sanders, 2023; Caprioglio, 2021). A common analytical tool used in examining media depictions of traumatic experiences is Cathy Caruth's concept of "unclaimed experience" (Caruth, 1996/2022). This concept is typically utilised to understand belated or fragmented depictions of traumatic events in screen narratives (Van Den Berg, 2024; Henry, 2023).

2.5 Methodological Studies on Multimodal Television Analysis

In recent years, research has increasingly emphasised multimodal methodologies for analysing screen media. This approach integrates various aspects of visual semiotics, sound design, and narrative structure (Rose, 2016; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Thorsteinson, 2025; Zottola, 2022; Soriano, 2024). Such methodologies are particularly useful for analysing the representations of marginalised groups and trauma (Higueras-Ruiz, 2025).

Although each strand represents important research contributions toward filling gaps in our understanding of queer representation in screen media, significant gaps exist among these areas of study. As stated earlier, research primarily exists independently, and few studies have attempted to provide a comprehensive, scene-by-scene multimodal analysis of queer trauma and institutionalised homophobia using an integrated Butlerian and Caruthian theoretical framework. The current study aims to address this gap through a theoretically grounded multimodal analysis of how OITNB constructs queer suffering and identity regulation, while illustrating how queer subjects survive symbolically in a carceral environment.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is based on two interrelated theories that explore how Orange Is the New Black visually portrays queer trauma and homophobia within a correctional system. The theories used are Judith Butler's queer theory and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory.

3.1 Butler’s Performativity, the Heterosexual Matrix, and Regulation

A central tenet to understanding OITNB is Judith Butler's concept of gender performance, particularly her idea that "gender" is not an inherent or essential aspect of our being; rather, it is a series of performances we perform to be recognised as male or female. These performances are guided by heteronormative matrices. The heteronormative matrix refers to a grid of intelligibility that understands only those bodies that align themselves with binary sex/gender and compulsory heterosexuality as intelligible and acceptable. Those whose bodies and/or identities do not fall into this matrix have their bodies/identities rendered unintelligible and are therefore subject to discipline and regulation.

Given that OITNB depicts a carceral space where there is a total institution, the prison itself can enforce the heteronormative matrix through physical policies such as restrictions on clothing, housing assignments, medical treatment, and body image. Therefore, non-heteronormative performances (i.e. wearing prison uniforms, mis-gendering someone, and denying hormone replacement therapy) become sites of both enforcement and identity erasure in the prison setting.

3.2 Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience, Belatedness, Repetition, and Narrative Disruption

This project complements Butler’s work by utilising Cathy Caruth's (1996 / 2022) theoretical formulation of trauma as an unclaimed experience. According to Caruth, because it is so intense, trauma is not entirely experienced when first encountered; it returns in a delayed manner through repetitive actions, flashback episodes, and intrusive memories. The return of trauma can disrupt a linear narrative and a coherent sense of self.

In OITNB, characters endure multiple layers of institutional and personal traumas (e.g. solitary confinement, medical negligence, and/or being condemned for their sexual orientation), which may manifest years later as psychological manifestations (e.g. hypervigilence, disconnection from one's body or emotions, fragmented memory), and these are often visually represented using imagery such as silences, close-up shots, and/or flashbacks.

3.3 Theory-Application Matrix

The following is a theory-application matrix showing how each of the primary theories examined will be used with respect to different types of evidence in the research analysis:

Theoretical Concept	Key Application in Analysis	Screen Evidence
Butler: Performativity & Regulation	Gender as repeated acts enforced by norms	Prison uniforms, misgendering, HRT denial
Butler: Heterosexual Matrix & Intelligibility	Bodies rendered livable or unintelligible	Solitary confinement, housing policies
Caruth: Unclaimed Experience & Belatedness	Trauma not fully processed at the time of occurrence	Flashbacks, dissociation
Caruth: Repetition & Narrative Disruption	Trauma returning intrusively, disrupting coherence	Silence, close-ups, intrusive memory
Butler + Caruth Integration	Failed performances producing unclaimed trauma	Collective protest, subversive humor

This comprehensive theoretical model provides a way to precisely read how OITNB demonstrates control over queer bodily functions and creates unclaimed traumatic experiences on television.

4. Research Methodology

This study utilised a hermeneutic exploratory qualitative research design that integrated critical discourse analysis (CDA) with multimodal visual-textual analysis. The research design is theory-driven and draws upon Judith Butler's (1990/2020) ideas about performativity, the heterosexual matrix, and regulation, and Cathy Caruth's (1996/2022) definitions of unclaimed experience, belatedness, repetition, and narrative interruption.

4.1 Research Design and Data Collection

The data collected consisted of all seven seasons (a total of ninety-one episodes) of the television show Orange Is the New Black. Ten episodes were purposefully selected from this corpus to undergo extensive multimodal analyses. Each episode was watched at least three times: once to understand the overall story line, again to gather information on specific content related to dialogue and visual elements, and a third time to conduct in-depth coding. All of these viewings have taken place using high-definition streaming services. Official subtitles were used to obtain full transcripts of the dialogue for each episode which were then cross-checked against the corresponding episodes. Specific details related to the visual aspects (camera angle, lighting, framing, colour palette, mise-en-scène, clothing, spatial positioning) of each scene were recorded through detailed observational notes made while viewing the episode and through screenshots where necessary for use in reflexive analyses.

4.2 Episode Selection and Corpus

The selection of episodes was based on four criteria: (1) notable representation of queer characters within an episode; (2) depiction of physical or emotional violence resulting from institutions; (3) scenes representing significant plot developments related to traumatic experiences or acts of resistance; and (4) social/cultural significance and academic relevance. The final corpus is presented as follows:

Season/Episode	Episode Title	Focal Characters	Key Scenes	Reason for Selection	Primary Theme(s)	Theoretical Lens
S1E3	Lesbian Request Denied	Piper, Pennsatucky	Chapel scenes	Religious condemnation & early conflict	Religious Homophobia	Heterosexual matrix, moral regulation
S2E4	A Whole Other Hole	Sophia	Medical exam & bobblehead scene	HRT denial & medical abuse	Medical & Psychological Abuse	Regulation, unclaimed experience
S3E9	Where My Dreidel At?	Sophia	Solitary confinement	Administrative violence & isolation	Institutional Violence	Intelligibility, belated trauma
S4E12	The Animals	Poussey, Taystee	Death during protest	Intersectional violence & martyrdom	Institutional Violence	Unclaimed experience, repetition
S5E1	The Big House	Multiple (Riot)	Hand-holding and chanting	Collecive resistance	Coping and Resistance	Subversive performativity
S5E8	The Tightening	Big Boo	Butch identity assertion	Gender nonconformity	Gender nonconformity	Performativity & regulation
S6E2	Sh*tstorm Coming	Piper, Suzanne	Microaggressions & misgendering	Psychological abuse	Medical & Psychological Abuse	Narrative disruption
S6E12	The Book of Mary	Sophia	Post-solitary return	Long-term trauma effects	Medical & Psychological Abuse	Belatedness
S7E3	The Trick is to Keep Breathing	Taystee	Activism & grief processing	Trauma-to-agency transformation	Coping and Resistance	Repetition & meaning-making
S7E13	Here's Where We Get Off	Multiple	Final reflections & solidarity	Series resolution & symbolic survival	Coping and Resistance	Integration of performativity & trauma

4.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four iterative stages using a single coder (the researcher) with strong reflexivity:

1. **Thematic Coding**: Deductive codes from Butler and Caruth were combined with emergent inductive codes. A codebook was developed iteratively for this purpose.
2. **Close Multimodal Viewing**: Line-by-line and frame-by-frame analysis of dialogue, visual semiotics, sound, and spatial elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2016).
3. **Intra-coder Consistency Checking**: The researcher recoded the same segments after a two-week interval to ensure consistency, followed by refinement.
4. **Theory Application**: Findings were systematically mapped to theoretical concepts.

Each decision was entered into a reflexive research journal to maintain transparency and trustworthiness (Alsawayfa, 2025). Due to being a single-investigator interpretative study, no intercoder reliability statistic will be reported; instead, emphasis will be placed on the researchers' transparency regarding their methods.

Utilising this method allows for a clear traceability of how OITNB visually represents queer trauma and institutionalised homophobic behaviour in relation to each individual scene.

5. Analysis

5.1 Institutional Violence

Institutional violence was found to be the most common theme, which appeared to occur in two ways through physical force (as well as) non-physical methods of enforcement of heteronormative expectations of behavior.

During season three, episode nine ("Where My Dreidel At?"),, after an altercation involving Sophia Burset, she is put into solitary confinement "for her own safety". During this scene, Sophia sits alone against the wall in a cold, barren room. She is trapped within the walls of the cell, using extremely tight framing to emphasise isolation. Bright white-blue fluorescent lights cast deep shadows on her skin, while the sound design consists almost entirely of quietness, except for soft sounds of far away footfalls and Sophia's heavy breathing. This combination of visuals and sound design illustrates administrative violence and protective isolation. Using Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix, this example demonstrates how regulatory structures produce ontological harm by rendering Sophia's body unintelligible and dangerous because of its trans status (Mieszkowski, 2023).

In season four, episode twelve ("The Animals"), this type of visual strategy reaches new heights when Poussey Washington dies peacefully during a protest. The camera captures her body from directly above and uses a very long angle shot, creating distance and making her seem less human. Her body is pressed against a table by multiple guards. As her body lies still, the sound level drops dramatically and is replaced with muted voices and a single beat of what seems to be a heartbeat before everything fades away completely. This time in the show was coded as intersectional institutional lethality. Combining Butler's heterosexual matrix with Caruth's unclaimed experience, the view from above and the lack of audible noise create a situation where Poussey's queer black body is disposable, resulting in traumatic experiences that are left unclaimed for those who survived, and highlighting how institutions that have power over people can and do erase their ability to live as they want (Thomas, 2021).

5.2 Medical and Psychological Abuse

Medical and psychological abuse are overarching layers of injury. It occurs through treatment refusal and identity loss. ("A Whole Other Hole"), season two episode four, Sophia Burset has a confrontation with the doctor over her arbitrary reduction in hormones. The camera provides a tight shot of her facial expressions of frustration, anger, and resignation against the sterile white medical room and harsh overhead lighting, along with sound design that is very limited, providing only clipped dialogue and a faint humming of fluorescent light. The scene depicts medical gatekeeping and administrative violence against the trans body. According to Butler, this shows the regulation of gendered embodiment. Similarly, according to Caruth, this shows denial of care, producing unclaimed trauma through bodily destabilisation and identity erasure, where later flashbacks show the long-term disruption of her pre-incarceration transition (Sieh, 2017).

This dynamic can also be seen in how Piper Chapman repeatedly encounters being misgendered or invalidated on her bisexuality by authority figures. In several instances, a tight medium shot isolates her within the frame with a cold colour grade and little background noise. These microaggressions and emotional manipulations are depicted as psychological abuse that dismantles queer subjectivities (Tran et al, 2022). Visual and auditory confinement demonstrates Caruth's idea of narrative disruption and hypervigilance. Heteronormative expectations create chronic, unclaimed trauma that compounds over time.

5.3 Religious Homophobia

In Season 1, Episode 3 ("Lesbian Request Denied"), religious homophobia is demonstrated through the example of Pennsatucky's aggressive proselytising in the prison chapel using the "fire and brimstone" style of biblical rhetoric to state that homosexuality is a sin. The warm golden light used in this scene to illuminate both Pennsatucky and the cross iconography, along with the increasing volume of the gospel music below her words, create a sense of urgency and contrast with the tighter frame used to show Piper, who looks visibly uncomfortable (Morales & Menéndez-Menéndez, 2022).

This scene illustrates how religious condemnation can be emotionally abusive. According to Butler, religion uses its discourse to create a heterosexual matrix which makes binary gender appear normal and unnaturalizes queer desire. The visual/auditory contrast also illustrates how the institution (in this case, the prison) uses coercion to enforce its will on those incarcerated based on their sexual orientation.

Recurring chapel scenes throughout the series continue to reflect this theme. The tight framing of queer characters in these scenes creates a sense of isolation from the rest of the group (Panda et al., 2026). During these scenes, there is a layered sound design where soft homosexual slurs can be heard under the music sung by the choir. These moments represent the institutional complicity in religious homophobia. Using Caruth's perspective, the repeated invalidation of one's morality results in belated shame and dissociation, thus illustrating how religion can provide additional avenues of enforcement to those already experiencing violence.

5.4 Gender Nonconformity

Gender nonconformity is both regulated and serves as a major source of resistance. In season 5, Big Boo does not accept wearing a feminine prison attire for the group interaction. The low-angle shots highlight her assertive postures, crossing of her arms, and her look directly at you. Her "BUTCH" tattoo is also highly visible. Isolating her unapologetic voice from the other sounds provides an additional layer of subversion. This scene represents a subversive gender performance. Using Butler's performativity and regulation concepts, we illustrate how repeated "failures" demonstrate the instability of the heteronormative matrix, which transforms institutional deviance into a political claim of intelligibility.

The arc of Sophia Burset exemplifies another instance. In season two, episode four, Sophia Burset styles her hair and puts on makeup in a common area after recently being denied hormone replacement therapy (HRT). A medium close-up shot captures Sophia Burset's intentional, determined actions in soft light that juxtaposes the severe prison conditions. An additional illustration of the labour required for everyday transgendered performativity within constraints, combined with Butler's heterosexual matrix and Caruth's unclaimed experience, shows the violence in regulating the transgendered body and the emotional costs of holding onto identity, yet still quietly asserting individual agency and building community (Carpenter, 2020).

5.5 Coping and Resistance

Coping and resistance transform the narrative of victimisation into queer agency and collective empowerment. Often employing dark humor in moments of high tension, Big Boo is a frequent example of this. In one such moment, a medium shot depicts her with confidence standing tall while declaring "I got me and my big mouth and that's all I need." She uses an assertively loud tone to cut through the tension. The above quote exemplifies the use of individual, subversive humour. Through Butler's performativity and Caruth's ability to make trauma legible, humour functions as a repeated action (repetition) used to counteract or disrupt power structures and aid in processing/claiming traumatic events which are otherwise considered unclaimed (Davies & Illott, 2018).

The peak of collective resistance occurred during the Season Five riots. A wide shot displays a group of inmates, hand in hand, chanting in unison. The warmth of the lighting, along with the openness of the composition, contrasts with the previous tightly framed scenes with cold tones. The sound evolves from individual voices to a collective one. The coding of this sequence demonstrates communal solidarity and trauma processing. By integrating Caruth's repetition and narrative integration with Butler's resignification, the visual and auditory transition from solitary confinement to collective presence signifies the conversion of previously unclaimed trauma into shared agency and politically resistant actions.

These scene-level interpretations illustrate how the OITNB illustrates both the creation of queer trauma and symbolic survival through multimodal methods.

6. Discussion

This research adds to three related areas by providing a sustained multimodal approach to how *Orange Is the New Black* uses television style to show how queer trauma and institutionalised homophobic violence are shown, told, and made political using television as a medium.

6.1 Contribution to Queer Television Studies

This research expands upon queer television studies because it shows that long-form streaming dramas are able to go past being visible about queer bodies and identities into how the body is regulated through the media. Using Butler's work on performativity, the heterosexual matrix, and regulation, this research analyzes OITNB with regard to costuming, framing, gestural bodily movements, and spatial arrangement (that is, Big Boo's boldness in her posture or the ritualistic grooming habits of Sophia) to demonstrate the constant struggle that occurs each day when an individual has to negotiate between institutionalised control and their own subversive presentation. This provides a strong model for future scholars who want to examine how television creates queer subjectivities, not as abstract identities but as performances of queer subjectivity under material constraints and punishment.

This approach aligns with the concept of unhappy affects, which highlights the interplay of trauma and performance in shaping queer identities within constrained environments (Morrigan, 2017). This interplay reveals how media representations can perpetuate trauma while simultaneously offering avenues for resistance and self-expression within the LGBTQ community, particularly in the context of OITNBs narrative framework (Symes, 2017).

6.2 Contribution to Trauma Representation Studies

The study adds to the body of knowledge on trauma representation through application of Caruth's theory of unclaimed experience, belatedness, repetition, and narrative disruption as it relates to the creation of audio-visual media. By showing that the TV format itself can create traumatic effects (i.e. close-ups and use of cool lighting to visually represent feelings of being isolated or trapped), (use of) strategic silence, and strategically placed flashbacks demonstrate that a person has been subjected to an event they have yet to process, and (the transition from) cooler, tighter shots to warmer, wider shots indicates that the individual is now able to share their traumatic experiences with others. This study represents a model for analysing how screen media convert personal, unclaimed suffering into publicly identifiable testimony, providing new insight into the aesthetic and affective mediation of psychological experience in television.

This approach not only enhances our understanding of trauma representation in television but also highlights the importance of visual and narrative techniques in shaping audience engagement with psychological themes (Sharp & Donnelly, 2025). Ultimately, this research underscores the potential of television as a medium for exploring complex psychological narratives, offering a deeper connection between viewers and the characters' emotional journeys (Yang, 2025).

6.3 Contribution to Carceral Media Studies & Cultural Psychology

This is an analysis of the intersection of carceral media studies and cultural psychology, specifically focusing on how popular TV can function as a major site for creating meaning regarding institutionalised violence and queer forms of resistance. This research employs Butlerian and Caruthian perspectives to demonstrate that the show provides ways to make the psychological experience of administrative violence (such as solitary confinement, denial of hormone replacement therapy, and religiously based condemnation) into a form of "legible" or understandable experience, yet at the same time depicts the collective resistance of the prisoners as a reparative act which creates meanings. The study also argues that these depictions are culturally significant because they create a collective memory of trauma, evoke public sympathy for those who have been traumatised by institutions, and provide possible symbolic survival strategies for those who may be subjected to further traumatic experiences. These depictions contribute to a larger cultural dialogue surrounding punishment, humanity, dignity, and the possibility of human agency within extreme structural constraints.

By highlighting the complexities of female prisoners' narratives, shows like *Orange Is the New Black* foster a deeper understanding of the injustices within the American carceral system (Shoemaker, 2017). This cultural dialogue challenges

stereotypes and promotes empathy for marginalised voices. Through its portrayal of diverse experiences, the series encourages viewers to critically engage with the systemic issues surrounding incarceration and the lived realities of women prisoners (Grebenkov, 2022).

Overall, this research represents a shift from descriptive analyses of themes in television programming toward a detailed examination of the visual strategies that make institutionalised queer trauma both psychologically intelligible and politically effective. Additionally, it illustrates the ability of popular media to link individual psychological experiences to critical evaluations of structures and institutions, thus providing useful knowledge for researchers in cultural psychology, trauma studies, and carceral criticism.

7. Conclusion

Orange Is the New Black has become an important cultural text which extends the representations of queer trauma and institutionally based homophobic discrimination to mainstream television. As such, Orange Is the New Black creates a unique focus on LGBTQ+ characters in relation to the U.S. prison systems, thereby expanding beyond mere diversity by providing a long-term examination of the relationships between violence created within prisons (carceral) and intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, and race.

This research used a theoretically based qualitative multimodal analysis method based on Judith Butler's queer theory and Cathy Caruth's trauma studies to understand how Orange Is the New Black develops queer suffering, identity formation, and symbolic survival on screen.

The findings indicate that Orange Is the New Black portrays institutional and systemic forms of homophobic oppression and their significant impact on queers. It illustrates how queer characters perceive, process, and react to both physical and psychological trauma while developing from victimisation to empowerment through humour, community support, and collective resistance. The application of Butler's concepts of performativity and heteronormativity, along with Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience, effectively illustrates how queer characters create and challenge gender expectations while processing fragmentary and disorganised traumatic experiences.

For the most part, Orange Is the New Black represents documented patterns of incarceration among LGBTQ+ individuals; however, there are instances where the creators of the program use artistic licence to create dramatic effect.

Psychologically and culturally, Orange Is the New Black carries a high degree of importance. By making evident the control over queer bodies and the belated repetition of institutional trauma, the program promotes collective empathetic responses to carceral suffering and creates a shared public memory regarding this type of suffering. Additionally, Orange Is the New Black takes individual, non-claimed experiences and makes them a form of shared testimony to invite viewers to consider the psychological consequences of administrative violence and the creative ways in which queer subjects make meaning of their experiences. Therefore, Orange Is the New Black adds to the larger cultural knowledge about trauma, identity, and survival.

8. Limitations

The study that examined queer trauma and institutionalised homophobia through the lens of Orange Is the New Black has several important limitations. First, the qualitative analysis was based on a sample of only ten episodes, primarily from Seasons 1–5 of the series. Therefore, additional themes or characters may be developed in later seasons (Thorsteinson, 2025). Second, because this study was conducted using an interpretative qualitative methodology, the results reflect some degree of the researcher's subjective interpretation. However, the use of systematic coding and maintaining a reflexive journal during the research process helped to increase the transparency and trustworthiness of the interpretations made by the researcher (Alsawayfa, 2025). Third, because this study focused solely on the textual and visual components of the show and did not collect audience reaction data, the results cannot account for how audiences interpret representations of incarceration in relation to sexual orientation (Annati, 2020; Symes, 2022). Fourth, this study did not provide primary voice

accounts from incarcerated LGBTQ+ individuals' perspectives. Therefore, while this study can make claims regarding representational accuracy, these claims should be considered with caution (Donohue et al., 2021; Vogler, 2025). Finally, since the study focuses exclusively on U.S. carceral systems, the results are limited to their applicability in other cultural contexts.

Although these limitations will help frame potential areas for future research, they do not detract from the contributions of this study.

9. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research that builds upon this study has several possibilities. Audience reception studies utilising both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are needed to determine the extent to which viewers perceive the representations of queer trauma presented by OITNB and whether or not those perceptions contribute to an increased awareness of LGBTQ+ issues and incarceration (Annati, 2020; Fraccari & Kerrigan, 2024). A comparative analysis of OITNB with other prison-based television shows is also recommended to place OITNB in an international context (Ford, 2022). Studies that incorporate an intersectional perspective and utilise Crenshaw's framework will provide additional insights into how race, class, and disability interact with queerness (Thorsteinson, 2025; Ruderman-Looff, 2019). Additionally, longitudinal research may explore the long-term effects of OITNB on both culture and policy. The representation of trauma in OITNB through both an ethics lens and experimental designs focused on its educational potential will allow scholars to establish further credibility within the discipline (Henry, 2023; Soriano, 2024).

Declarations

Ethics statement

This article does not include studies involving human participants conducted by the authors. The analysis is based on publicly available filmic texts. No identifiable private user data were collected or analysed. Where public digital circulation is mentioned, it is discussed only at an aggregate and contextual level.

Competing interests

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Author Contribution

A.P and Y.S wrote the manuscript text. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

Data availability

This study analyses publicly available film texts and publicly visible contextual platform information. No private, restricted, or participant-generated dataset was created for this article. Any reference to digital circulation is treated as contextual evidence rather than as a systematically sampled audience dataset.

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