

Female Machop, Male Lopunny, and Bearded Dragon Gym Leaders Who May Like it Rough: Identitarian Openness in *Pokémon*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper's aim is to present the *Pokémon* (Game Freak 1996-present) franchise as a space of identitarian semantic openness where gender, sexuality, and sex are portrayed as intentionally lacking concreteness in most of the representations of its Pokémon and named human characters such as key trainers, gym leaders, Elite 4 members, and regional champions. To do so, we will analyze *Pokémon*, focusing primarily on the video games, as a set of cultural texts that have portrayed as disconnected identity traits such as gender, sex, and sexuality which have historically and uncritically been considered irremediably connected (Butler 1990). As such, and despite some notable exceptions where the sex of Pokémon such as Gallade, Salazzle or Froslax is linked to normative forms of representing gender, the connection between identity traits seems to be absent or does not matter. This identitarian absence and irrelevance will be thoroughly analyzed as an enabler of ideologically semantic gaps that, both when left open but also when filled, possess critical potential. Ultimately, what this paper will prove is that there is an expansive identitarian potential in the franchise that exists, precisely, because of *Pokémon's* semantic openness and lack of concreteness.

This semantic openness is expressed in the franchise in multiple ways: first, through the presence of creatures and characters who are gendered but whose sexuality is absent—such as the hypermasculine Drayden, Bruno, or Drake and Pokémon whose gendered appearance does not correlate with any readable sexuality; second, through human characters whose gender resists easy categorization— such as Bugsy—and Pokémon that look like genderless objects, like Klefki; and lastly, through instances where sex does not match normative forms of representing gender, of which many

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examples exist: such as Machop, Conkeldurr, and Incineroar, who look masculinely muscular regardless of their sex; male and female Lopunny and Gardevoir, who could be described as looking normatively feminine; and gender-queer—and fabulous—creatures and characters such as Meowscarada, Quaquaval, Rika, Juan, or Wallace. In all of these instances, the franchise ensures that there remains an identitarian semantic openness where the disconnections between and absences of identity traits can be filled in multiple ways. And, while the strategy of identitarian openness and absence is quite common—Sanrio literally eliminates Hello Kitty’s mouth so that she can mean both nothing and anything (McVeigh 2000) while Nintendo largely removes Link’s and Mario’s ability to speak (Belmonte Ávila 2024; Collins 2013)—*Pokémon* uses an identitarian mélange that allows many players to insert themselves in generative, oftentimes queer, expressive ways.

To understand these insertions, this paper will look at convergent ways in which *Pokémon* fans express their identities around the franchise. The examples that we will discuss will be extracted from social media—Twitter, Bluesky, and Instagram mainly—and will be discussed for their potential to generate identitarian meanings. Our intent will not be to fix in place what *Pokémon* means, but to instead celebrate the myriad ways fans make sense of the franchise and themselves as something enabled and indirectly promoted through semantic openness. And, while all fandom fills in and expands the gaps of cultural texts, we will show how *Pokémon*’s specific ways of doing—while also not doing—gender, sex, and sexuality invite identitarian insertions, readings, and rewritings through expansions that are unique to this franchise.

This paper will significantly expand the work on identity representation in *Pokémon* done by scholars such as Jason Bainbridge (2014) and Yumiko Kamise and Kana Suzuki (2024), which do not take semantic openness into account and miss the true generative potential the franchise possesses. When looking at *Pokémon* outside the games, we will also consider the work of scholars that have studied the connection between fan communities (Herro, Li and Davis 2018; Willett 2004), the anime (Kocik 2020; Matheson-Mowers 2021), and the capacity of the franchise to shape identities. Similarly, to properly frame the semantic openness and lack of connectedness between identity traits, this paper will be informed by research on gender/sex fluidity and trans identities (Stryker 2017), on ways of gendering and sexing the body (Fausto-Sterling 2000), on the tension between dominant and frail masculinities (Connell 2005), and on ways society has historically managed sexuality as something that may be present through its absence (Foucault 1978). By building on existing bibliography and analyzing how identities have been historically portrayed in the franchise, this paper will show how *Pokémon* creates unique identitarian semantic gaps that fans fill in and expand in ways that are specific to these cultural texts. The Pokédex of semantic and identitarian gaps and openness that *Pokémon* has generated over the years will be thoroughly categorized in this paper.

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