

From Misrepresentation to Milestones: An Investigation of LGBTQ Character Development in Two Primetime Situation Comedies

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Abstract

While gay and lesbian content has increased in the media, there are still visible differences in the non-heterosexual content when compared to heterosexual content in the media. Prior to 1998, there were relatively little or no roles for gay characters in film and television. Further, it was uncommon for gays and lesbians to be positively represented in the media. In the last decade, the representation and the roles for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people have changed tremendously. The current textual analysis of prime-time sitcoms is intended to identify the growth and development of scripted content for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) characters in comedies known to have reoccurring LGBTQ characters. Specifically, this analysis evaluates the verbal messages related to the general dialogue, sexual comments, romantic comments, and general humor of characters in 20 episodes of two NBC sitcoms from the 2017 season. Implications of the media effect on audiences in which the character's intersectionality is acknowledged and unpacked using humor are discussed.

Keywords: LGBTQ, textual analysis, media, sitcoms, representation, sexuality, television

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1. Introduction

Over the last ten years, the television industry has provided viewers with a broader presentation of gay relationships and gay characters in leading roles. Considering previous productions of TV and film, the portrayal of gay characters was not originally met with respect or support. Some of the dialogue over negative representation of homosexuality has focused on how such portrayals marginalize and silence queer people and that prior to the past decade, viewers being exposed to gay interaction through television was not accepted. (Queer Representation, nd). While the nation has gone from the belief that homosexuality is an illness to advocacy, the expression of sexuality and identity of LGBTQ characters is still a complex and researchable phenomenon in the media enterprise.

Today, viewers can see the portrayal of gay couples in movies, popular TV shows, soap operas, and even in professional sports and politics. The media appears to have become supportive of gay presentation in comparison to how these characters have been portrayed in the past, thus it is worthy of investigating the factors responsible for the new attitudes and whether the LGBTQ community has made milestones with regard to the representation of this group in primetime programming.

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Shows like *Will and Grace* (which returned with the original cast in 2017) and *Glee* are notable for changing the attitudes about homosexuality (NPR, 2012). According to Jones and Gelb (2008): “It has always been a struggle for television networks to take notice and try and connect homosexuals with a heterosexual audience...”

The number of shows with leading or recurring gay characters has grown from 16 in the 1997-1998 season (all programming) to 29 in the 2000-2001 season. These numbers represent a marked increase but are still small comparatively with all characters each season (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007).

This may be attributed to the fact that viewers did not consider gay relationships as entertainment. Gay relationships have become more acceptable in prime-time viewing as the movement and current political climate has made members of the LGBTQ community a part of our cultural fabric. The media has turned into the educator and advocate for the gay community. It can be assumed that the more people watch gays and lesbians in mainstream media, the more individuals outside of this community are able to learn, and as a result, people become less prejudice of those who are gay or lesbian or those who have other sexual identities (NPR, 2012). A more theoretical belief about this attitude may be grounded in social cognitive theory. As Bandura states (2001), one important way in which television influences viewers is by providing second-hand experiences on which to model beliefs, attitudes, and behavior when real-life experiences are limited. Relying on television for relevant scripts that solidify the identities of members of the LGBTQ community positions the media to be a significant source of information about the identity of groups that may otherwise go unknown.

There has been significant research on LGBTQ representation in the media however, this research is significant in that it investigates how a current understanding of LGBTQ identity in mainstream media will be reflected. This community, often viewed as an ‘invisible minority’ is one that has been directly impacted by mainstream media representation in that the construct for which most people outside of that community use to understand LGBTQ representation often comes from the media. According to Gudeluna (2012) earlier studies focused on the erasure of gay and lesbian identity or the embracing of popular Hollywood stereotypes and tropes as a means of understanding this invisible minority, and while gays and lesbians have witnessed a positive cultural shift and increased visibility, there is still the need to erase some of the popular and stereotypical narratives. The most challenging aspect of homosexuality in the media falls in the category of representation and whether this representation is positive or negative (Queer Representation, nd).

In earlier programming, LGBTQ characters lacked complex character development and from the 1890s to the 1930s homosexuality was often presented as an object of ridicule or as a comedic trope in which gay characters and comments about gay sexuality appeared for comic value. Gays were primarily a point of amusement and most story-lines, in which men portraying feminine characters were not taken seriously as that was the societal norm (Queer Representation, nd). The realism of the LGBTQ community was rarely captured in television however, as the LGBTQ social movement advanced, including but not limited to the passage of legislation that would allow gay and lesbian marriage equality, and the drafting of the first openly gay football player into the National Football League (NFL), so too did the character development.

According to Media Smart (nd), members of the LGBTQ community have made strides in both media portrayal and involvement in media production. Gays and lesbians have become major media influencers. The likes of David Geffen, co-founder of DreamWorks SKG; award-winning producer/director, Lee Daniels, Rich Ross, former studio chair of Disney; and Elton John, Grammy and Academy Award winning artist, all of whom are openly gay have helped to advance the cause and bring attention to the representation issues of the LGBTQ community. In a recent analysis of prime-time network programming there is also indication of changes in former trends. Calzo and Ward (2009) found that 7.5% of the dramas and comedies in 2001 contained gay and lesbian characters and the significance of LGBTQ characters in leading roles include gays and lesbians raising families (e.g. *Modern Family*, *The Fosters*), all of which allow for a different perception of gays and lesbians. The portrayal of non-traditional families in current programming is significant as six million people have LGBT parents but in contrast the number of gay married couples on screen still remain relatively low (Coparents.com, 2018).

Table 1: GLAAD Where We Are on TV (Ten years of data)

	2008-2009 ²	2017-2018 ³
Sexual Orientation of LGBTQ Characters on Broadcast Networks	11% Lesbians (4) 66% Gay (23) 14% Bisexual Females (5) 3% Bisexual Males (1) 6% Straight (2)	24% Lesbians (21) 47% Gay (40) 26% Bisexual+ (22) 1% Straight (1) 2% Sexual Orientation Undetermined (2)
Sexual Orientation of LGBTQ Characters on Cable Networks	36% Lesbians (33) 51% Gay (46) 8% Bisexual Females (7) 2% Bisexual Males (2) 2% Straight (2)	27% Lesbians (47) 42% Gay (72) 28% Bisexual+ (48) 2% Straight (3) 1% Asexual (1) 2% Sexual Orientation Undetermined (3)
Sexual Orientation of LGBTQ Characters on Streaming Services		36% Lesbians (25) 24% Gay (17) 33% Bisexual+ (23) 6% Straight (4) 1% Asexual (1) 1% Sexual Orientation Undetermined (1)
Race and Ethnicity of LGBTQ Characters on Broadcast Networks	73% White (26) 9% Black (3) 3% Asian-Pacific Islanders (1) 9% Latino/as (3) 3% Biracial (1)	62% White (53) 20% Black (17) 4% Asian-Pacific Islanders (3) 9% Latino/as (8) 4% Multiracial or Other (3)
Race and Ethnicity of LGBTQ Characters on Cable Networks	82% White (74) 5% Black (65) 7% Asian-Pacific Islanders (6) 4% Latino/as (4) 2% Other (2)	64% White (110) 10% Black (18) 4% Asian-Pacific Islanders (6) 9% Latino/as (16) 12% Multiracial or Other (20)
Race and Ethnicity of LGBTQ Characters on Streaming Services		77% White (54) 7% Black (5) 10% Latino/as (7) 6% Asian-Pacific Islanders (4)

In looking at data gathered over the last 10 years by the **Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation** (GLAAD) to analyze diversity of primetime series, cable network programming was representative of the most significant increase in the percentage of LGBTQ characters on scripted broadcast series since the inception of the study in 2006; reporting a 6.4% increase of just over 1.5 percentage points from the previous year's 4.8% (43 of 895). In looking at the data from 2008 and 2017, there was an increase from 43 scripted characters to 58 members of the LGBT community on the 2017 schedule. Gays and lesbians were represented unequally in the 2017 report; 47% - gay characters and 24% - lesbian, however these numbers indicate greater representation than presented in Clark's first stage of non-representation in TV programming (see Table 2). Bisexual and transgendered characters still represent lower numbers in the analyzed content, which suggests that these individuals are still considered more controversial, even in the situation. The data from the 2008-2009 and the 2017-2018 GLAAD *Where We Are on TV* Reports yielded the following significant findings:

- While gay males consistently have the highest representation on all three providers/networks, the number of gay males decreased across all three provider/network sets during the 2017-2018 programming season
- Minority groups (Latino/as, and Asian-Pacific Islanders) continue to be underrepresented with less than 10% of characters across all three providers/networks
- Broadcast networks are the most racially diverse with regard to LGBTQ character scripting

²Glaad. (2008). Where we are on TV. [Online] Available: http://glaad.org/files/WWAT/WWAT_GLAAD_2008-2009.pdf

³Glaad. (2018). Where we are on TV. [Online] Available: <https://www.glaad.org/wherewearontv17>

- Sexual orientation for lesbians saw the most significant casting increases with four scripted characters in 2008-2009 to 21 characters during the 2017-2018 season on broadcast networks and an increase from 33 to 47 characters on cable networks

While substantial progress has been made, there are still areas in which representation is lacking, thus the importance of the current research. Leading roles, the casting of transgendered characters, and dated plot lines further impact the growth and development of LGBTQ characters and story lines. Additionally, debate over whether this is just a passing cultural phenomenon in a controversial programming market and whether Hollywood should be getting a metaphoric pat on the back remains. What is known is that the presences of LGBTQ characters reduces prejudice among viewers and contributes to an attitude shift and that milestones in LGBTQ programming should be grounded in portraying the complex and multidimensional lives of those characters and not a misguided understanding of an underrepresented population (Calzo and Ward, 2009).

The theoretical foundation for this research is based on Clark and Berry’s four stages of media representation for minority groups (1969): non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. While this model was specifically developed to study African American and Indian media representation, it provides utility for studying the lesbian, gay and queer community. Description of Clark’s stages and their implications:

Table 2: Clark and Berry’s Four Stages of Media Representation for Minority Groups

Stage One: Non- recognition	In Clarks’ first stage, there is an outright exclusion from the media.
Stage Two: Ridicule	This is the stage in which the aforementioned groups are show on television however as objects of derisive humor. They are lampooned and humiliated, which is ostensibly an improvement over being utterly ignored. A certain set of minority characters are portrayed as stupid, silly, lazy, irrational, or simply laughable. Ridicule, the use of degrading and derogatory stereotypes, then, is primarily intended for the reassurance of the dominant group and to assuage the guilt of its more reluctant participants. Ridicule serves to dehumanize or infantilize subjugated peoples—not so much as a psychological weapon to demoralize them or as a way of controlling them.
Stage Three: Regulation	At this stage, minority groups are represented however in limited and/or socially acceptable roles. In these roles, minorities must, at least symbolically, serve as enforcers—or, as Clark called them, Regulators: thus being cast as police officers, soldiers, public-school teachers, administrators, and government functionaries.
Stage Four: Respect	The fourth and presumably final stage, respect, occurs when the minority group in question ceases to be portrayed differently from the dominant group. Members of the minority groups are portrayed in both positive and negative roles, and lead what can be perceived to be ‘normal’ lives, including having families, interacting with children and having romantic relationships.

According to Clark and Berry (1969) what gets communicated through the media are values that are placed on particular social groups; groups that get identified by either positive portrayal, denied recognition or respect. This becomes problematic as the media is a primary source for knowledge and information, thus when certain groups go without recognition or respect via mainstream media, the standard in society is to devalue these groups. Clark and Berry further assert that marginalized groups are the ones most often hurt by this unbalanced representation, including gays, lesbians, and minorities, often becoming the platform from which many people actual learn about these groups through fictional portrayals (Raley & Lucas, 2006).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media Theory: Attitude, Influence and Change

Historically, media theories have suggested that the media (both print and visual) has the ability to influence attitude formation. Most models posit the audience as passive consumers of content, and based on positioning of ads or content, audiences have little control over avoiding or resisting the impact of the message. This makes it easy for the media to pass messages and direct viewer’s thoughts and or actions. The Internet and the cultural shift in which consumers are able to guide content and provide feedback has created a media environment in which the public has a role in determining meanings, messages and other discourse.

This is particularly relevant to the LGBT community as they have often utilized visual media to increase visibility and representation and has been a long-standing tool for activism. Visibility for members of the LGBT community has always been considered important; dating back to the Stonewall riots which marked the beginning of the gay and lesbian movement in the late 60s. Gay and lesbian activists turned to the media to shed light on discrimination and visual media continues to be a resource for the LGBT community. There is the belief that media exposure has had a positive effect on the attitudes of the heterosexual population. Further, increased portrayal of members of the LGBT community helps to bridge the gap between stereotypical heterosexual perceptions of the gay and lesbian community and their reality (Levina, Waldo & Fitzgerald, 2016).

2.2 The 'Funcomfortable' Humor and the LGBTQ Community

Members of the LGBTQ community were not shown on television until the early 1960s as previous production codes prohibited these individuals from being shown on screen. Those characters that were seen on the big screen often took on stereotypical roles; the funny clown, flaming queers, fairies, queens, mental patients, criminals, or victims of violence (Raley & Lucas, 2006). The cross-dressing comedy genre has long been a staple of Hollywood without being perceived as controversial (e.g. Mrs. Doubtfire, White Chicks, Tootsie, and Bosom Buddies). The heteronormativity that is often reflected in Hollywood is often the framework for scripting LGBTQ characters in which the constructs of family (forms of intimacy, marriage, domestic roles, etc.) becomes the LGBTQ storyline have proven to be more fruitful as these portrayals seem to normalize those LGBTQ principle characters making them more relatable to heterosexual audiences. The 'rules' for representing homosexuality (and the LGBTQ community) on television have changed; specifically in the context of comedic roles, which by the late 90s to early 2000s where programming with these characters were garnering more advertising dollars and show sponsorship (Byrd, 2014). Additionally, with increased advocacy for the transgendered community so too comes more criticism of programming that casts cross-dressing actors as laughable characters (Penney, 2015).

The 'funcomfortable' humor technique, coined as a means of describing the humor as seen in the family comedy *Transparent* featuring Jeffrey Tambor as Mort Pfefferman who transitions from male to female, has long been exemplified in television programming where there are gay and lesbian characters (Moss, 2017). There is a tendency for humor derived from gay relationships to fill a space in which characters are off putting, buffoonish, or queer-friendly in which most punch lines seek a greater LGBTQ subtext that connects with either the LGBTQ subculture or the real world. The characterization of gays and lesbians is often viewed as less controversial in comedic roles and the positioning of these characters become a more acceptable context in which LGBTQ characters are scripted in a manner that is welcomed by heterosexual viewers. While gay character development has gone from Billy Crystal's Jodie on the ABC sitcom *Soap* (1977 to 1981) in which demeaning references to his character including fruit, sissy, homo and pansy, were used by family members on the show to the first major gay character with NBC's *Will and Grace* (1998 - 2006) in which Will's character was able to offer a different model for homosexuality (although sometimes criticized for upholding some traditional comedy conventions) and the homonormative discourse is present in more programming, there is still a dominant heteronormative structure for television programming (Byrd, 2014).

2.3 Exposure and Equity

Exposure and equality are growing in importance as the media landscape presents an opportunity to affect how the general population views members of the LGBTQ community. Additionally, infrequent positive media portrayals of homosexuality has a significant influence on the beliefs of heterosexual viewers. Television's depiction of gay characters may play a role in creating, reinforcing, or altering heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay individuals.

Empirical data support the premise that heterosexual audiences' perception of gays and lesbians is impacted by television contact and makes them more sensitive to the issues faced by these members of our community (Bond & Compton, 2015). According to Clum (2000) exposure and equity are significant in the media as other forms of expression tend to convey the gay experience as more of a social problem rather than realism and much of what we see is scripted by the dominant culture.

When we acknowledge the important of media exposure and influence in relation to the aforementioned statement by Clum, we cannot ignore the way in which the media is directly connected to how viewers model beliefs, attitudes and behavior that are scripted in their own lives. Reliance on television programming for information related to everything from politics to sexuality provide contextual scripts and information that some viewers may not get anywhere else. To this end, scripted television characters in the LGBTQ community serve as models for behavior that may not be experienced personally by the viewer but become the barometer by which members of the LGBT community and their identities are judged in a mainstream, social context (Gross, 1991).

One of the most prominent organizations working to shape the media narrative of the LGBTQ community is the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). For the past 12 years GLAAD has conducted research to track the representation and progression in the media. GLAAD supports the need to look at the scope of equity and exposure from the perspective of noting the diversity in the characters and the need for there to be more diverse and intricate roles for members of the LGBTQ community. According to GLAAD it is important to engage in a dialogue that helps to change the culture. In 2007, the first Network Responsibility Index was published by GLAAD as a means of evaluating the quality, quantity and diversity of LGBTQ images on television and still serves as a road map to insuring inclusiveness in TV programming (GLAAD, 2018). As a means of advancing the narratives of this community, it is important to make sure that these characters do not get killed off or compromised for the sake of straight characters as this sends a message about the worth of these characters (Sidahmed, 2016). According to Rothenberg (2007) the media has the overarching power to stereotype groups, thus contributing to self-image of viewers. Without emphasis on exposure and equity, this cultural group may suffer from bias or a one-sided perspective.

2.4 The Negative Portrayal of the LGBTQ Community

Negative portrayals of members of the LGBTQ community can be discussed from various ideological perspectives. Most often, the portrayal is either reinforcing stereotypical beliefs or reinforcing the patriarchal, heterosexual underpinnings of the media. One of the underlying causes of negative or stereotypical casting centers on the fact that some storylines are viewed as threatening to heterosexual audiences (i.e. storyline that include but are not limited to, kissing, sexuality, intimacy) (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Casting gay and lesbian characters in these roles would then violate the common and comfortable stereotypes often associated with these characters. It is often easier to generalize complex information by simplifying it; hence the association of stereotypes with members of the LGBTQ community. These stereotypes make it easier to classify groups, however the danger rests in the overgeneralization that comes along with stereotypical thinking. When these stereotypes come from a superior group, often referenced as the ‘cultural elites’, those representations tend to segregate or dehumanize other groups with lower cultural standings (Tagudina, 2012). Therefore, the compromise between the homophobic world in which an irrational fear of the LGBTQ community still exists and the liberal media viewing population are supporting roles which allow for some level of inclusion of LGBTQ characters while keeping the primary focus on heterosexual lead characters.

A second critique of the portrayal of LGBTQ characters focuses on sole depictions. These sole depictions of gay and lesbians present a skewed view of what gay and lesbians are actually like. Individuals who have these views as their only point of reference tend to be ill-informed and believe that the characters on television mirror real life. For younger viewers this can be more problematic, especially for those young viewers who are struggling with their own sexual identity. They may pattern themselves after characters not realizing that they may not be portrayed fairly and free of stereotypes. Responsibility for these depictions lie with Hollywood executives and casting directors who often fail to provide both representation of, and employment to, members of marginalized communities. Over the past few years, the industry has been criticized for not truly embracing queer media or diluting gay source material to make content more palatable for straight audiences; all contributing to the negative portrayal of gay actors (Kirst, 2017).

2.5 The Whitening of the LGBTQ Landscape

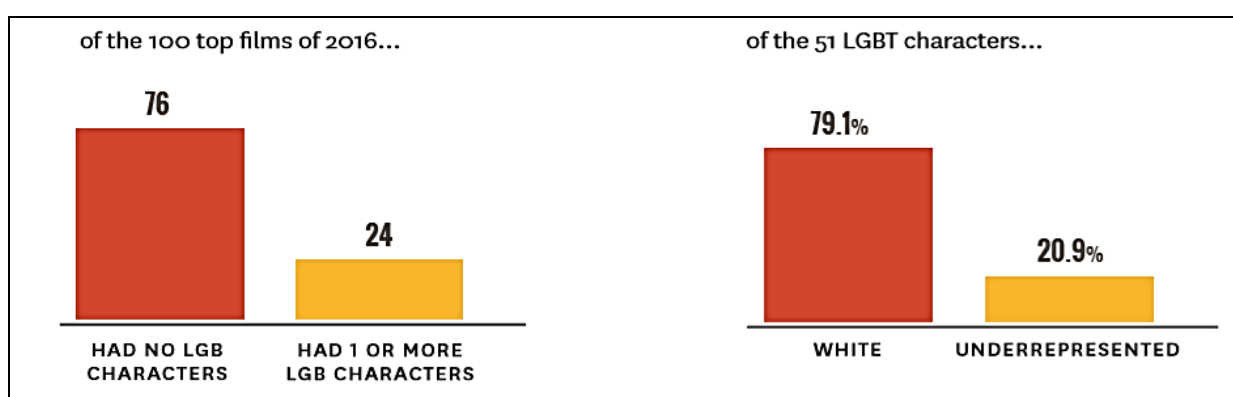
Equitable and appropriate representation on television is a constant struggle. While strides have made with regard to storylines (in the past, gay characters were killed off, or embody troupes or cliché roles), what advocates now find in the development of characters is an overwhelming high number of white males. According to a 2017 GLAAD study, racial diversity amongst primetime broadcast networks dropped two percent and on cable and streaming services, 64 percent and 77 percent of LGBTQ characters counted, respectively, were white. Additionally, the findings reported that about half of all LGBTQ characters on TV are gay men – generally speaking, casting that has maintained the status quo (Gutowitz, 2017). Another criticism of mainstream media is the fact that Hollywood, while it seemingly has embraced ‘queer’ content, there is a failure to cast gay actors in these roles. Instead, straight white male actors are casted to play gay characters. For example in *Brokeback Mountain* and *Moonlight*, both award-winning films that told stories of gay lead characters using straight actors (Queercents, 2018). The chronology of heterosexual white males who have played gay characters has a 25 year history (Kirst, 2017):

- In 1994, Tom Hanks won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of a gay man who is an AIDS patient in *Philadelphia*.

- In 2004, Charlize Theron won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of notorious serial killer Aileen Wuornos – who was a lesbian – in *Monster*.
- In 2006, Phillip Seymour Hoffman won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of gay screenwriter, novelist, and playwright, Truman Capote, in *Capote*.
- In 2009, Sean Penn won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of iconic gay rights activist, Harvey Milk, in *Milk*.

In a 2017 study by the Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative respondents reported that they believe casting directors found white males to be more marketable, thus leading to an epidemic of invisibility in film. The same study revealed that out of the 100 films of 2016 reviewed 76 had no LGBT characters and 24 had one or more. Of the 51 LGBTQ characters, 79.1% were white leaving 20.9% of the population underrepresented (Smith et al, 2017).

Figure 1: LGBT Characters are Left behind in Film, USC Annenberg Media, Diversity and Social Change Initiative Study⁴



The research also revealed that out of the top 100 films of 2016 that could be evaluated for LGBTQ content, the majority of the characters were gay males ($n=36$ or 70.6%). The increase in gay males on screen from 2015 has been consistent, however there have been no meaningful changes for lesbian or bisexual characters (Smith et al, 2017).

2.6 Homophobic Reinforcement

In order to understand homophobic reinforcement, one must first understand how these biases are normalized. The socially accepted norm is to view homosexuality as negative and to place more value on heterosexism which is connected to positive value systems.

Thus, as the dominant cultural assignment, heterosexism functions as the ideal dramatic prop to garner social approval and demonstrate the acceptance of masculine values (Franklin, 2014). Viewing homosexuality as non-normative behavior also contributes to homophobic reinforcement. Heteronormative constructs render members of the LGBTQ community invisible in the mainstream and while there have been changes in representation some networks, movie producers, and production houses are still heavily criticized for delivering a problematic narrative that is strongly heteronormative.

In addition to this dominant cultural view, a lack of intergroup contact often contributes to homophobic reinforcement. The assumption is that if there is increased intergroup contact, there is a reduction in stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. When we apply this theory to homophobic reinforcement in a media context, the assumption becomes centered on how the visualization of this intergroup contact can increase positive attitudes towards LGBTQ characters on screen. When this interaction is seen as vicarious, viewers can learn from televised characters representing these distinct groups and this interaction can influence attitudes; however when this does not happen the frequency and quality of LGBTQ depiction on television remains marginal (Bond, 2015).

The literature review captures the theoretical and social assumption of the development of gay characters and the barriers to which some of these characters (and their character development) experience.

⁴ Smith, S.L., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Gilling, T., Lee, C. and DeLuca, D. (2014). Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race, & LGBT Status from 2007 to 2014. [Online] Available: http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inequality_in_700_popular_films_8215_final_for_posting.pdf

LGBTQ character development has helped programs move beyond the traditional archetype of acceptable characters to a more diverse presentation of these actors with broad cultural implications. While character development is evident, what is equally important is a continued focus on moving away from the dominant cultural view of the LGBTQ community and fair and equitable representation that pushes for a more diverse and complex portrayal of the LGBTQ community.

3. Methodology

3.1 Textual Analysis

In the past, traditional content analysis has been challenged by limitations directly related to a researcher's ability to thematized and designate quantifiable categories. By utilizing textual analysis of LGBT programming and focusing on conversation and intertextuality, studies can produce a more significant understanding of how viewers may be influenced through the scripting of LGBTQ characters on screen. Often, the visual message of these characters serve a layered purpose and studying a range of features from nonverbal communication (eye contact and touch), to more interpretive aspects including word and language analysis gives context to how this genre of programming shapes and frames meaning or affirms the dominant ideology associated with the LGBTQ community. According to Gray and Lotz (2012), by operationalizing a textual analysis, one not only studies the aesthetics of programming but examines those texts in relationship to the dominant ideology and its impact on culture and takes into consideration several interrelated factors including; audiences, producers, and the historical context of that body of work. This study contextualizes LGBTQ content by doing a textual analysis of two re-booted comedies (*Will and Grace the Revival* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, which was cancelled by Fox and later picked up by NBC) as a means of examining the shift in LGBTQ programming.

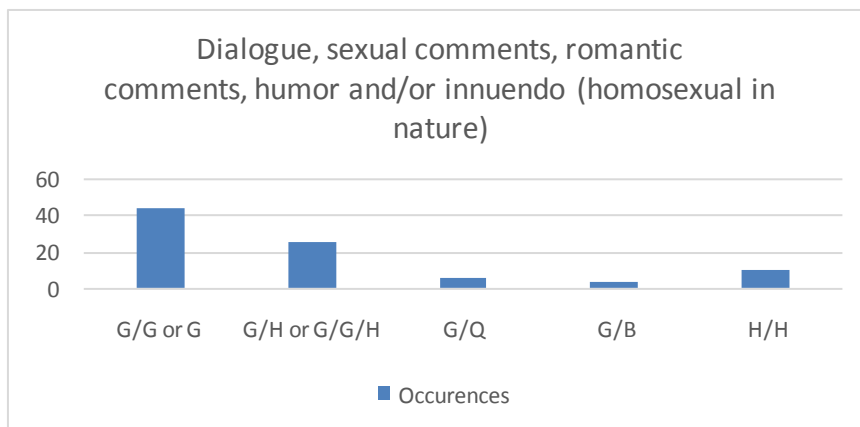
4. Data Analysis and Discussion

With regard to the textual analysis of *Will and Grace the Revival* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, the unique positioning of the two programs as a part of the Thursday line-up on NBC highlight what much of the research on gay humor draws on as the categorization of why and how gay humor is used. In the analysis of these 20 episodes there is humor that perpetuates often criticized stereotypes, self-denigrating sexual humor, and humor that targets members of the LGBTQ community in a manner that prods, mocks or satirizes those individuals. Many of the lead characters are scripted in such a way that they tend to actualize prevailing beliefs about gays or lesbians; including mannerisms/flamboyance and sexual prowess. However, this brand of humor becomes more acceptable as members outside of this group (e.g. heterosexual) are not conveying the humor. It is the gay character that delivers this brand of humor in a way as not to assimilate, but as a means of taking ownership of their attitudes and behaviors in front of a mass audience. The result is a media effect on audiences in which the character's intersectionality is acknowledge and unpacked using humor. The character coding scheme for the data is as follows:

- o G – gay character
- o L – lesbian character
- o B – bisexual
- o T – transgendered
- o H – heterosexual
- o A – Ambiguous
- o Q – Questioning

In the *Will and Grace* data sets, a proportionate number of humor/jokes with gay themes were either told by a gay or lesbian character. There were a total of n=44 scripted occurrences coded as G/G/ or G, n=25 occurrences coded as G/H or G/G/H, n5 coded as G/Q, n3 coded as G/B and n=10 coded as H/H.

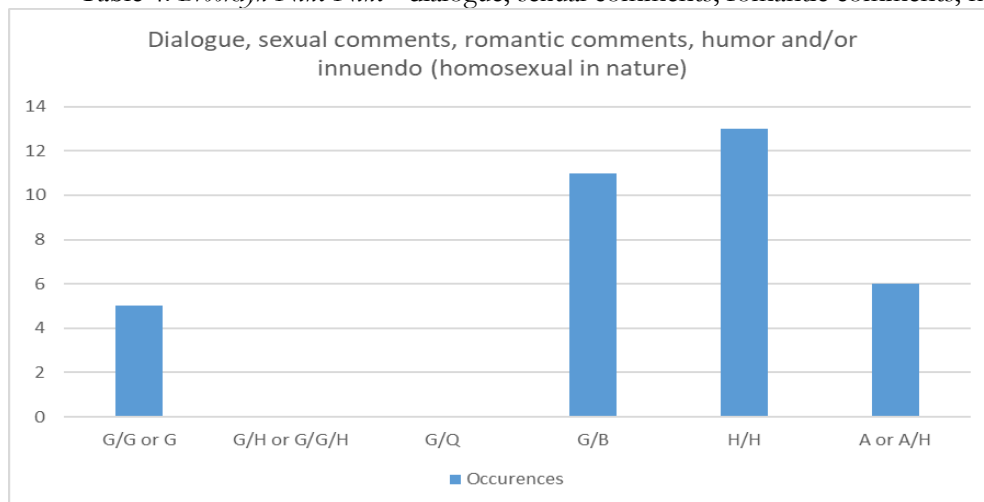
Table 3: *Will and Grace* - dialogue, sexual comments, romantic comments, humor



According to Clark, the characters are in the representation stage in where they represent themselves through humor. Additionally, there may be the assumption that the writers feel more comfortable scripting dialogue in which members of the LGBTQ community are in control of the humor directed at other members of the LGBTQ community as it may be perceived as insensitive if the humor were to come from a straight character. However, other scholars have posited that the use of gays or lesbians to deliver jokes/humor about themselves may suggest that these characters are in the ridicule stage of representation as writers of these comedies believe it to be more socially acceptable to have gay and lesbian characters ridicule themselves than for other characters to make fun of them (Raley and Lucas, 2006).

In the *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* data set there were 13 scripted occurrences of heterosexual comedic dialogue that referenced sex, sexuality, or mentioned the orientation of the gay character. The scripted occurrences were as follows: n=5 G/G or G, n=11 G/B, n=13 H/H and n=6 coded as A or H/A.

Table 4: *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* - dialogue, sexual comments, romantic comments, humor

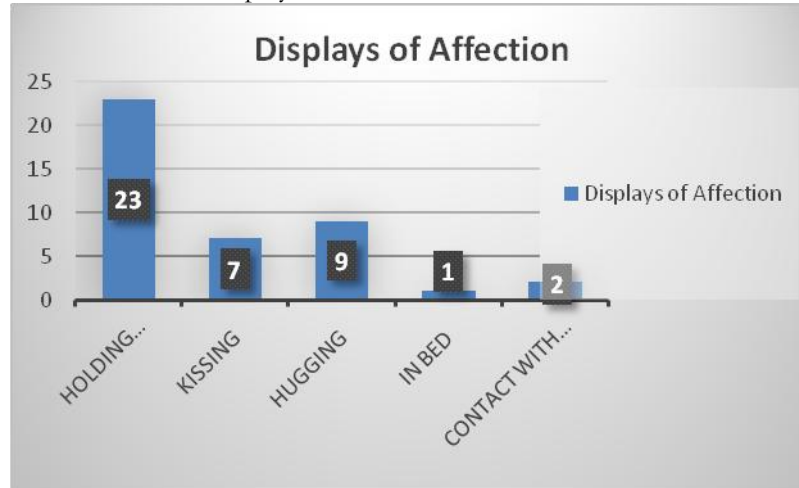


This data counters Clark’s stages of media representation, however, this may contextualize the ‘cop culture’ and messaging around homosexuality in such a hyper-masculine, heterosexual environment where those beliefs are reinforced by its members. The episodes presented in this study show the flux of members of both the dominant police culture and the LGBTQ community navigating the normative white, heterosexual male definition of the prototypical “cop” and how both parties either negotiate their membership within the organization or their acceptance of other members who do not share the dominant status (Burke, 1994). In *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, season (S) 5 episodes (E) 9 and 10, we see the intentional scripting of a storyline that involves the revelation of a bisexual character who had long displayed queer vibe. During these two episodes, much of the dialogue centered on a sensitivity to the character and concern for how the family would receive the news. According to Clark stages of media representation, this character (Officer Rosa Diaz played by Stephanie Beatriz) enters stages three and four across the span of these two episodes.

Additionally, the character is indicative of stage three in that she represents a minority group in the regulator role, being cast as a police officers – serving as a symbolic enforcer. By the end of episode four, not only does the character find acceptance from her family, but there is support from colleagues who are members of the dominant heterosexual police culture.

With regard to displays of affection, there are stark differences between the two situation comedies. One is predicated on looking at the relationships and lives of the principal gay characters and their heterosexual friends, while the other show has a storyline in which the dynamics of a police precinct and its diversity, challenges, and intersectionality are at play.

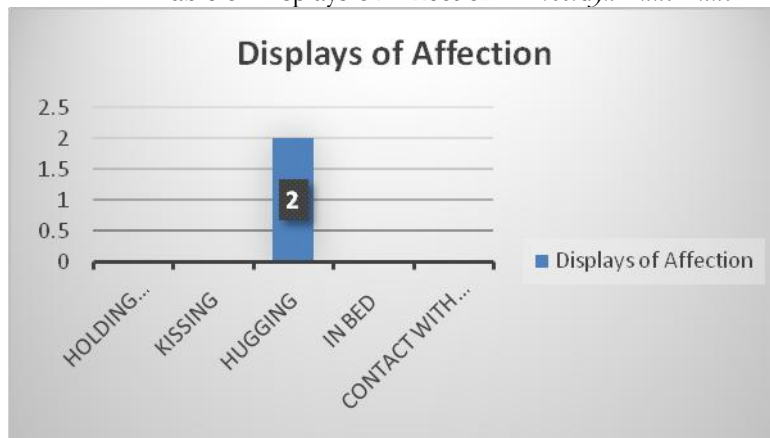
Table 5: Displays of Affection - *Will and Grace*



In the *Will and Grace* analysis, there were 41 occurrences of holding hands/arms/touching, kissing, and hugging. And while there were no occurrences of same-sex characters in bed, there was one occurrence of two males in a bathroom stall (S1-E10). This may be attributed to the fact that public displays of affection between two people of the same gender were not previously socially acceptable (Raley and Lucas, 2006).

The lack of displays of affection in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* can also be attributed to the nature of programming in which the emphasis is not necessarily relational but situational and deeply rooted in the storylines of police officers and detectives. Further, one may assert that with the growing visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual transgendered and queer police serving in prominent roles including senior supervisors, police chiefs, and mainline police officers and the sharing of law enforcement experiences by these sworn officers that police culture has become more accepting and valuing of members who identify as part of the LGBTQ community. Police officers can function openly within a police structure that is primarily heterosexual and are more able to integrate that into their own lives (Couto, 2018). In the *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* episodes in which the cast addresses bisexuality, members of the scripted drama show their support and transparency of their fellow office as she reveals her bisexuality.

Table 6: Displays of Affection – *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*



5. Conclusion

There have been positive strides in terms of scripting and casting of LGBTQ characters. The meaningful presence in mainstream media can be attributed to the fact that the political and social landscape has changed significantly and that the visual culture has become an acceptable platform in which to display and discuss diversity in gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual orientations. Additionally, outspoken celebrities who identify as part of the LGBTQ community have made a substantial impact on their audience despite their sexual orientation. Television has become a platform around which viewers are not only entertained but educated about a once marginalized group in society. Additionally, the tone, type of humor, and displays of intimacy have shifted and are representative of a more accepting culture and storylines that realistically portrays healthy, loving relationships between members of the LGBTQ community.

The media landscape's past omission of LGBTQ storylines or the negative portrayal of the few that existed has had historical significance; to the point at which the nuances of these relationship are far from taboo. There are however, members of the LGBTQ community that still go underrepresented and the use of stereotypical tropes continue to impact these groups; specifically transgendered and bisexual characters. Additionally, females are still represented on screen with less frequency than males, which suggests that work needs to be done around media literacy and the diversity that rests within the LGBTQ community.

While there were other ways to analyze programming (cable networks and streaming service providers) this research looked specifically at two situation comedies on one specific broadcast network. While this may be a limitation of the current study, future endeavors can and should include an analysis of various networks and media platforms, as many of them provide a more liberal representation of members of the LGBTQ community and adhere to a different set of programming content regulations (as per the Federal Communications Commission) that impact everything including on camera behavior, language, drug use, etc., as well as research that focuses on the growing representation of non-binary and fluid characters. A continued effort to show all characters that are casts as members of the LGBTQ community without a focus on the sexual nature of their relationships makes it possible to tackle sensitive issues and helps to change the American idea of the LGBTQ community. As representational progress continues, future indicators will look at the industry's accountability towards diversity and improving the depiction of LGBTQ characters and storylines as an effort to reduce misrepresentation and create pathways in which LGBTQ programming milestones can continue.

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