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## A content analysis of LGBT representation on broadcast and streaming television

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A Content Analysis of LGBT Representation on Broadcast and Streaming Television

Carson Cook

Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Communication

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**Abstract**

This content analysis of nine television shows from the 2016-2017 season across broadcast and streaming platforms seeks to understand the representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters. The study updates a content analysis published in 2006 by Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas that studied the 2001 television season. This study aims to understand how the representation of LGBT characters on television has changed since 2001, how representation of bisexual and transgender characters differs from homosexual characters, and how representation on streaming platforms differs from broadcast shows. The findings suggest that representation of bisexual and transgender characters has increased since 2001 and that LGBT characters are portrayed making displays of affection more than was seen in 2001. The analysis also shows that representation of bisexual and transgender characters still lags behind lesbians and gay men in some ways and that overall there is more LGBT representation on streaming platforms than on broadcast television.

## 1. Introduction

In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage as the union between a man and a woman. Eight years later, Massachusetts became the first state in America to allow same-sex marriage. By 2011, more Americans supported same-sex marriage than opposed it, according to Pew Research studies (“Changing Attitudes on Gay Marriage.”). In 2015, through the Supreme Court’s ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges*, same-sex marriage was legalized nationally. Undeniably, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT<sup>1</sup>) community in America has made great strides toward acceptance over the past two decades. Many have tried to understand and explain how LGBT rights came to be accepted so rapidly, relative to other civil rights movements, and some have credited mass media. When asked about same-sex marriage in a *Meet the Press* interview, then-Vice President Joe Biden said, “I think *Will & Grace* probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody's ever done so far,” (Adam). Indeed, research suggests a correlation between acceptance of same sex marriage and LGBT representation in mainstream entertainment media, particularly prime-time television (See eg. Bond and Compton, Bond-Raacke et al., Calzo, Moroni, Schiappa et al.). Research also shows media representation can have a positive effect on members of the LGBT community, especially among adolescents, by providing role models and a sense of community (See e.g. Bond, Gomillion).

This study will examine the following questions: How has the representation of the LGBT population on television changed over time? To what degree do depictions of LGBT

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1. For the purposes of this paper the abbreviation LGBT had been used in lieu of others such as LGBTQ+ or LGBTQIA, because the study specifically looked at Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender characters. However, it is worth acknowledging that the composition of the queer community has historically been fluid and included many who do not strictly fit underneath the LGBT identities.

characters on scripted American television utilise stereotypes? How does the representation of bisexual and transgender characters differ from the representation of lesbians and gay men? How does broadcast television differ from online streaming platforms with regard to LGBT representation?

This paper is a continuation of Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas's study, "Stereotype or Success? Prime-Time Television's Portrayals of Gay Male, Lesbian, and Bisexual Characters," which analyzed the representation of homosexual television characters in the Fall 2001 television season. The purpose of my research is to evaluate how representation of bisexual and transgender characters has changed since Raley and Lucas's study and how it differs from representation of lesbians and gay men. Additionally, Raley and Lucas's study only considered shows on broadcast networks. In the past decade, online streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon have begun creating original content. My study will address how LGBT representation on broadcast television, meaning the networks ABC, CBS, The CW, Fox, and NBC, differs from online streaming platforms.

## **2. A History of LGBT Representation on TV**

The Hollywood Production Code, in effect from 1930 to 1968, and the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters, used from 1952 to 1983, both indirectly prohibited depictions of homosexuality (Raley 23). Early depictions of homosexuals were mostly child molesters, victims of violence, or drag queens (Raley 23). In the 1970s and 80s, some shows began to show gay characters in a more positive light, but always for a single episode, not as a recurring character (Netzley 969). In these occurrences, the character's homosexuality was presented as

the problem of the episode, rather than just an aspect of that character, and the story was contextualized primarily by how it affected the lives of the heterosexual characters (Dow 129).

In 1997, *Ellen* became the first show to have a gay main character, Ellen Morgan, portrayed by Ellen DeGeneres (Fisher 171). Bonny J. Dow said “that DeGeneres’s coming-out narrative, in both its ‘real’ and fictionalized forms, has had a profound effect on public discourse can hardly be questioned” (123). Dow conducted a case study on *Ellen* and the media coverage of her coming-out. Dow shows how “the DeGeneres/Morgan revelations were touted by mainstream media as evidence of progress: in (always presumed to be heterosexual) Americans’ tolerance for representation of homosexuals” (Dow 128). Following *Ellen*, there was a rise of shows that featured regular and recurring gay characters, such as *Will & Grace*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *Spin City*, *ER*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Dow 124, Fisher 171, Netzley 969). Although these characters still often fell into stereotypes, the late 1990s marked the beginning of meaningful LGBT representation.

Since 2005, GLAAD, an LGBT advocacy organization focused on media representation, has published an annual “Where We Are on TV” report. GLAAD’s research shows a rise in representation from 10 LGB regular characters (no transgender characters) or 1.4% of characters on broadcast primetime shows in the 2005-2006 season, to 58 LGBT regular characters, 6.4%, in 2017-2018 (See Figure 1). In the latest season of broadcast programming, in addition to the 58 regular characters, 28 recurring characters were identified as LGBT (GLAAD “Where We Are on TV” 4). On cable, there were 103 regular LGBT characters and 70 recurring, and on Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix there were 51 series regulars and 19 recurring LGBT characters (GLAAD

“Where We Are on TV” 4). However, GLAAD notes these characters are often portrayed with harmful stereotypes, and remain underrepresented.

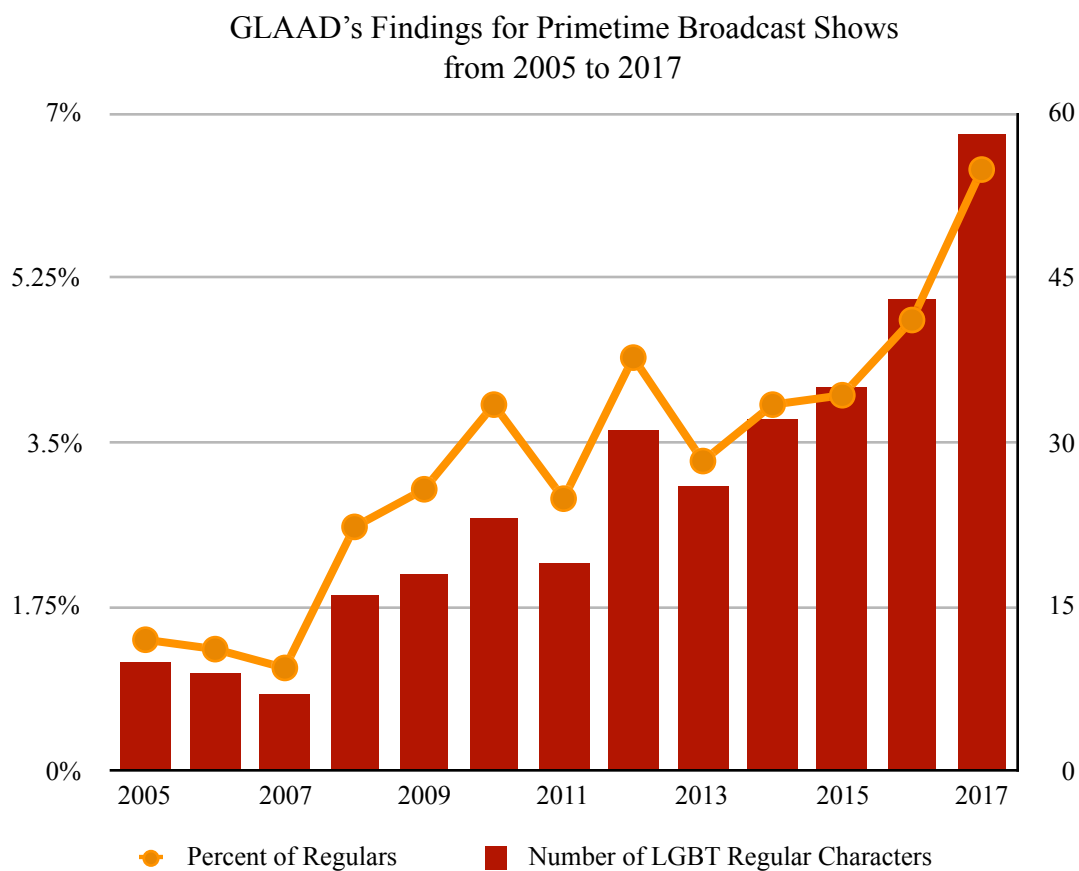


Figure 1. GLAAD’s “Where We Are on TV” report shows growth in both the number and percentage of LGBT regular characters on broadcast, primetime television.



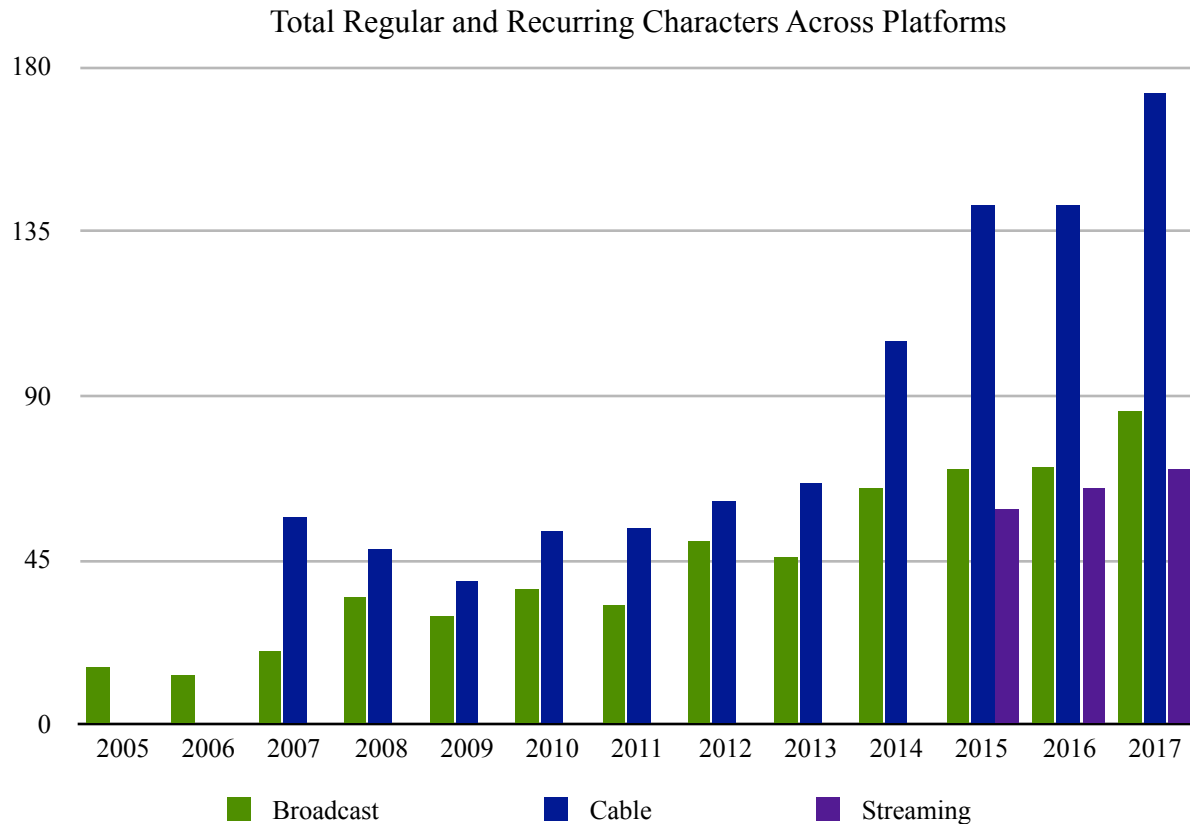


Figure 2. GLAAD’s “Where We Are on TV” report shows growth in the number of LGBT characters on broadcast, cable, and streaming shows.

### 2.1 Why LGBT Representation Matters

The importance of LGBT representation on television is twofold. First, exposure to LGBT characters through the media can affect how the general, mostly straight population views the LGBT community and related public policy issues. Secondly, media representation can have a positive effect on members of the LGBT community, especially among adolescents.

In 2002, Schiappa et al. conducted a survey with 245 undergraduate students on viewership of *Will & Grace* and attitudes toward gay men. Among respondents who reported watching the show “every once in a while” or more often, 81% agreed that “the show is an important step forward in television situation comedies because it features gay men in major

roles” (Schiappa 27). Furthermore, 60% of viewers said the show encouraged them to think positively about homosexuals (Schiappa 27). Additionally, 71% of *Will & Grace* viewers disagreed with the statement that “heterosexual relationships are the only ‘normal’ sexual relationships,” as opposed to 45% of non-viewers (Schiappa 28).

More broadly, Calzo et al. surveyed 1,761 undergraduate students (62.7% female, age 17 to 27) with regard to media exposure and attitudes toward homosexuality from 2000 to 2002 (280, 286). Viewing movies, primetime situational comedies and drama, music videos, and popular culture magazines were significantly correlated with accepting attitudes toward homosexuality (Calzo 289). Among men and people with high religiosity, the positive associations between media exposure and attitudes toward homosexuality were more pronounced (Calzo 292 -93). Calzo et al. state that “the pattern of correlations presents strong evidence of mainstreaming effect of media use on [attitudes of acceptance towards homosexuality]” (293).

These studies do not show causation and cannot determine exactly to what extent television representation changed people’s minds about LGBT issues. For example, Schiappa’s study could not show if audiences became more pro-gay after watching *Will & Grace*, or if already tolerant people were more likely to tune in. However, these studies suggest that as representation grows and relies less on stereotypes, audiences’ prejudices can fall away more easily. Changing attitudes toward the LGBT community can also affect public policy positions on issues such as same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, non-discrimination protections, bathroom bills, or a transgender military ban.

In addition to the correlation between LGBT representation on television and attitudes of the general, mostly straight, public, LGBT characters can have a profound effect on individual

members of the LGBT community. In surveys of LGBT individuals conducted in 2005 and 2006 by Sarah Gomillion and Traci Giuliano, participants frequently listed television characters as influential to their self-realization, coming-out process, and comfort with their identity (336). Some of the LGBT people surveyed said they viewed these characters as role models (Gomillion 336). For some respondents, LGBT characters in the media were a source of pride, and for others a source of comfort (Gomillion 343). Participants also expressed a desire to see more “normal” or “realistic” portrayals of queer characters, more portrayals of LGBT characters in families, and more positive portrayals in general (Gomillion 337). They also reported that stereotypical representation made them feel excluded from society and limited in their identity expression (Gomillion 343).

In another study which surveyed adolescents across the country, Bradley Bond found that more media exposure correlated feelings less sad, dejected, and depressed. In other words, exposure to positive portrayals of LGBT characters in the media could lessen feelings that lead LGBT youth to contemplate suicide (Bond). LGBT youth are nearly five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (CDC). Considering this prevalence of depression and suicide among LGBT youth, portrayals of queer characters take on new significance. Positive portrayals of LGBT characters on television could have a significant effect not only on the general public, but also a profound effect on LGBT individuals.

### **3. A Literature Review of Previous Content Analysis Studies**

The number of LGBT characters on television in the United States has increased dramatically in the past two decades from essentially nonexistent to hundreds across broadcast,

cable, and online streaming. The type of representation has also changed, as demonstrated by content analysis studies conducted throughout the early 21st century. These studies have mostly focused on the frequency of comments or jokes made about sexual orientation as well as the depiction of sexual situations involving gay characters as metrics of to what degree gay characters are stereotyped or represented fairly.

Gregory Fouts and Rebecca Inch conducted an analysis of twenty-two sitcoms on broadcast and cable shows from the Fall 2000 television season. Of the 125 central characters examined, 2% were identified as homosexual (Fouts and Inch 40). All of the homosexual characters identified were male, two of the gay characters were white, and one was black (Fouts and Inch 40). Each of these characters made significantly more comments about their sexual orientation than heterosexual characters, which Fouts and Inch argue “reinforces common stereotypes that emphasize differences rather than similarities between homosexual and heterosexual individuals (41).” While gay characters made more comments about their sexuality, they were much less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be portrayed having sexual encounters (Fouts and Inch 42). Fouts and Inch’s 2000 study overall found an under-representation and lack of diversity in gay characters.

Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas provide a picture of LGBT representation in their article “Stereotype or Success,” an analysis of nine prime-time, broadcast shows from the 2001-2002 season with recurring gay characters. Transgender representation was not discussed, and bisexual characters were seemingly nonexistent (Raley 28). The study focused to what degree lesbian and gay characters were represented with negative stereotypes, were the butt of a joke, interacted with children, and made physical displays of affection. Raley and Lucas observed 22 displays of

affection exhibited by gay characters, not necessarily with a partner or someone of the same gender: eight hugs, four “shown in bed together, no sex implied,” four holding hands, and four kisses (30). Heterosexual characters had 123 displays of affection: 54 kisses, 49 hugs, 15 holding hands, and 5 “shown in bed together, sex implied” (Raley 30). The differences in representations of physical intimacy shows that as of 2001, gay characters were still portrayed in regulated roles. However, Raley and Lucas observed no significant difference in interactions with children between straight and gay characters, “which can be seen as a major advancement over past stereotypical images of gay males and lesbians as dangerous child molesters” (31). Raley and Lucas’s study shows both the advancements LGBT representation had made by 2001 and the problems that persisted.

Building on Raley and Lucas's observation of the lack of physical intimacy shown with gay characters, Fisher et al. conducted a quantitative content analysis that looked at nearly 3,000 programs from both the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 TV seasons with regard to LGBT representation, especially sexual content. In the first year, out of 1,276 episodes, 7.0% depicted same-sex sexual behavior while 11.4% discussed LGBT issues. The following season, out of 1,439 episodes 7.8 % depicted sexual behavior and 12.9% depicted discussion (178). Overall representation increased from 14.5% to 17.4% of episodes, which is slightly statistically significant (Fisher 177). This study, in correlation with Raley and Lucas’s shows that gay characters were still being represented distinctly differently from heterosexual characters as of 2003.

Sara Baker Netzley conducted a similar content analysis on the 2005-2006 season. The 2005-2006 season had 16 gay characters in lead or recurring roles on broadcast shows, while

cable had 25 gay or bisexual characters (Netzley 969). Netzley studied 98 episodes of 28 different shows across broadcast, basic cable, and subscription cable (Netzley 975). In the shows Netzley observed, 49.9% of the characters were heterosexual, 5.6% were homosexual, 1.9% were bisexual, and the remaining 43.1% had unknown sexualities. Unlike Fisher et al.'s study, Netzley found that in the 2005-2006 season gay characters were more likely to be depicted in sexual situations than straight characters; 43.8% of gay characters had sexual encounters compared to 16.8% of straight characters (Netzley 976). Netzley concludes, "overall, it appears that gay characters on television are being allowed to pursue sex to a degree that they were not able to in earlier television seasons" (981). However, others have criticized television for hypersexualizing or fetishizing queer characters (See eg. Brownworth, Forster). This article also gives examples of how gay characters had personalities and storylines that go beyond their sexual orientation (Netzley 982). Netzley says, "*The L Word*, for example, showed lesbians, but rather than focusing on debates about the rightness or wrongness of their lifestyle, it focused on them living their lives," (981). Comparing Netzley's work with earlier studies seems to indicate a shift occurred between the 2002-2003 season and the 2005-2006 season as television producers showed or implied more sexual content with gay characters than in the past. Overall, throughout the early 2000s, representation of gay characters moved away from stereotypes and toward more complex characters.

Previous content analysis studies have either found no bisexual representation or grouped homosexual and bisexual representation together. Netzley justified this by stating that prejudice and discrimination experienced by gays and bisexuals is similar and that straight people rarely distinguish between the two when forming opinions (Netzley 974). However,

research suggests that the heterosexual population views bisexuals more harshly than homosexuals and that bisexuals face additional discrimination from within the lesbian and gay community (See e.g. Herek, Israel and Mohr, Johnson, Matsuda et al.). Bisexual people are more likely to face discrimination in the workplace, more likely to suffer mental illness, more likely to attempt or contemplate suicide, and more likely to be victims of sexual or domestic violence than gay men and lesbians (Movement Advancement Project). Researchers that do study media portrayals of bisexuality find they are often hyper-sexualized, portrayed as immoral and untrustworthy, and often have their identities erased (See e.g. Alexander, Johnson, Meyer, Pramaggiore). Therefore, research in this field should investigate the distinction between gay and lesbian representation and bisexual representation.

Previous content analyzes have also failed to investigate transgender representations. This is not surprising, considering that transgender recurring and main characters have only begun to appear in the past few years (See e.g. Capuzza and Spencer, McInroy and Craig, Sandercock). According to GLAAD's "Where We Are on TV" report, there were seventeen regular or recurring transgender characters on broadcast, cable, and streaming in the 2016 season (26). More research is needed on this new wave of representation.

Previous content analysis studies have looked either exclusively at broadcast shows or at broadcast and cable shows, but little research has studied representation in the original content produced by online streaming platforms, such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. Previous research has shown representation differs between broadcast and cable channels, which could be explained by the difference in regulation or advertiser pressure (See e.g. Fisher, Netzley). This suggests there could also be a difference in representation between broadcast and streaming

platforms. GLAAD's by-the-numbers report suggests that there is more LGBT representation on streaming platforms, 51 series regulars and 19 recurring characters, compared to 58 and 28 on broadcast ("Where We Are on TV" 4). This study will go beyond the numbers and quantifiably examine the differences between broadcast and streaming platforms.

### *3.1 Clark's Stages of Representation*

In 1969, Cedric Clark outlined his theory on the representation of racial minorities. He proposed that because of the commercial nature of the medium of television, T.V. content will reflect the status quo social structure, and those at the bottom will be represented in one of three stages: non-recognition, ridicule, or regulation (18). Non-recognition describes when a group is simply not represented in the media (Clark 19). The second stage is when the minority group is included only in the context of a joke (Clark 19). Clark argues the the function of this stage is two-fold: "The group that is being ridiculed feels that is better, at least, than being ignored. Concurrently, by having a ridicule group to laugh at, members of the dominant culture feel a boost to their self esteem (19)." Clark gives the example of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans portrayed as lazy and dirty (19).

When minority groups react to the ridicule, either through organized protest or violence, the media moves from ridicule to regulation. This is perhaps the hardest stage of representation to understand. In the regulation stage, minority groups are portrayed as only existing on the "right" or normal stage of society (Clark 21). For example, when Clark was writing, nearly every black character had an occupation somehow related to law and order, most commonly detectives (20). The fourth and final stage of representation, to Clark, is respect. Though Clark argues that



European immigrant groups have preceded to this stage, he is doubtful as to whether non-white minority groups ever will (21).

Though Clark initially developed the four stages with ethnic and racial minorities, particularly black Americans, in mind, his stages have been applied by other scholars to various oppressed groups (See eg. Fitzgerald). We have already seen LGBT characters follow this pattern to some extent. Under the Hays code, LGBT characters existed only through implication and metaphor; they were in the non-recognition stage. When gay characters started to appear, they were mostly portrayed in terms of flamboyant stereotypes, the ridicule stage. GLAAD was founded in 1985 to protest defamatory coverage of the AIDS epidemic, and later began to advocate for better LGBT representation more broadly. As Clark predicted, minority groups eventually protested their ridicule-based representation and pressured television producers to improve representation. Thus, minority groups enter the regulation stage. One of the reasons the regulation stage is hard to define is that, unlike non-recognition and ridicule, regulation can look different for different minorities. For blacks, who have stereotypically been associated with crime, violence, and barbarism, black characters were regulated into roles of law and order. However, the regulation stage for LGBT characters is different, because they are seen as threatening marriage, family, and social order, not law and order. For LGBT characters the regulation stage looked like traditional gender roles, the nuclear family, and de-sexualization.

#### **4. Methods**

Raley and Lucas analyzed five episodes of nine prime-time, broadcast shows (27). To model their research, this study analyzed five episodes of four broadcast shows and three

streaming shows. Raley and Lucas's study used a weekly, LGBT-oriented TV guide, *The Lavender Tube*, to identify primetime TV shows with known gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters (27). As *The Lavender Tube* is no longer produced, the publications "Where We Are on TV" and "Network Responsibility Index" produced by GLAAD were used to identify shows for this study. By using publications designed to highlight shows with queer representation, both Raley and Lucas's study and my own narrowed our samples to shows that already had known LGBT characters. To choose nine shows from the dozens listed in GLAAD's reports, series were chosen based on a number of factors. First, the sample includes shows from a variety of genres: political thrillers, workplace comedies, light-hearted family dramas, and science fiction. Secondly, each of the shows chosen had more than one season. Because writers often struggle to find the voice of the show for the first few episodes, studying shows in their second or later seasons yields a better picture of what the show is actually like. Finally, the shows were chosen from each major streaming platform and several different networks. The final list of shows studied includes:

- Brooklyn Nine Nine (Fox)
- Difficult People (Hulu)
- How to Get Away with Murder (ABC)
- Jane the Virgin (The CW)
- Orange is the New Black (Netflix)
- The 100 (The CW)
- Transparent (Amazon Prime)

For each show, five episodes of the 2016-2017 season were studied. Borrowing the standards of the Emmy awards, shows were considered part of the season if they aired between June 2016 and May 2017. Furthermore, for the broadcast shows to be considered primetime, the program must have aired between 6 p.m. and 2 a.m. Raley and Lucas pre-recorded the episodes in their analysis as they aired, but for this study online streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and network websites were used to access the episodes. Only the content of each individual episode was coded, meaning “previously on” sequences, next week promos, and title sequences were not included.

Each character that a) appeared on-screen; b) was named; and c) spoke dialogue at some point in the five analyzed episodes was counted. For each counted character, their gender, race/ethnicity, profession, sexual orientation, and notable romantic/sexual partners were noted. For race, if the race of the character was not mentioned, the race of the actor was used, and if that could not be found, the race was guessed based on the character’s appearance. If the character’s profession was not obvious within the context of the episodes, then no profession was recorded. If the character’s sexual orientation was not stated by characters within the show, that information was determined by their romantic/sexual behavior, including dating, kissing, and sexual encounters. If male characters only had male partners, they were coded as gay. If female characters only had female partners, they were as a lesbian. If characters (of any gender) had partners of multiple genders, they were coded as bisexual. If characters exclusively had partners of the opposite sex, they were coded as straight, and if characters never had any partners they would be coded as “assumed straight,” for in a heteronormative world characters are typically assumed straight until proven otherwise. Where information about previous romantic/sexual

partners was not obvious within the episodes analyzed, online summaries and reviews of the show were used to provide more information.

Raley and Lucas coded their shows for the number of jokes with homosexual themes; physical displays of affection with another character, such as holding hands, hugging/embracing, kissing, shown in bed together with no implication of sex, shown in bed together with implication of sex, and other occasions where sex was implied; and whether the character interacted with children (28). To compare change over time, these codes were replicated. GLAAD has identified “associations with self-destructive behavior” and victimization as recurring problems with depiction of LGBT characters (“Where We Are on TV”) Therefore, instances of drug abuse, self-harm, and violence were also measured. Clear definitions for these codes were written and tested on shows not included in the sample before beginning the official coding.

#### *4.1 Operational Definitions*

##### **Jokes with Gay/Queer Themes**

A character makes a statement or action intended to be humorous, either to other characters or the audience, that relies on gay or queer themes. This can include, but is not limited to, straight characters implying they are gay, gay characters implying they are straight, alluding to stereotypes about LGBT people, or wordplay involving LGBT language. This does not include derogatory statements intended to offend or statements of fact (eg. coming out).

##### **Interacting with a Child**

By Raley and Lucas's definition: "To be coded as interacting with children, the character could touch, speak to or about a child who was present in the scene, or look at a child where a child is anyone perceived to be younger than an adolescent (less than 13 years old)"(28).

### **Drug Use**

A character is visibly depicted intentionally smoking tobacco or marijuana, or using any illegal drug. This does not including taking drugs for medicinal purposes or legal drugs (e.g. alcohol) or a character unwillingly or unknowingly being forced to take a drug.

### **Self Harm**

The audience is made aware, either through visual depiction or reference, that a character intentionally did or contemplated physical harm to themselves, such as cutting, ingesting toxins, or attempting suicide.

### **Victim of Violence**

A character is shown suffering or having recently suffered physical injury as the result of another character's action. This includes rape or any kind of sexual violence and homicide. For this study's purposes, it does not include verbal threats, emotional abuse, neglect, or accidents. This does not include slapstick or cartoonish violence with no sign of injury (eg. bruising, bleeding, broken bones) after the incident itself.

### **Holding Hands**

A character is visibly depicted holding another's hand to show affection or comfort. This does not necessarily have to be romantic, but does not include hand shaking as a formal greeting or high-fives.

### **Hug or Embrace**

A visible depiction of a character wrapping one or both arms around another character or group of characters, caressing the other character, leaning on the other character, or holding another character, to show affection or comfort.

### **Kiss**

A visible depiction of a character making contact with another character with their lips for any length of time, including forehead, cheek, and hand kisses.

### **Shown in Bed Together, no Sex Implied**

Two or more characters are visibly depicted sitting or lying on the same bed, without any implication of sex,. often having a conversation, possibly watching a movie or another relaxing activity.

### **Shown in Bed Together, Sex Implied**

Characters are visibly depicted in such a way that implies they are having sex, sex is imminent, or sex recently occurred. This is often done through nudity, dialogue, or heavy kissing.

### **Other Sex Implied**

The audience is informed characters had sex, are having sex, or immediately intend to have sex, without visible depiction, through dialogue or through or visual cues.

## **5. Results**

In the thirty-five episodes analyzed (seven shows of five episodes each) there was a total of 271 named, on-screen, speaking characters (See Figure 3). Fourteen characters were gay, fourteen were lesbians, thirteen were bisexual (one man and twelve women), and nine characters

were transgender (seven female, one male, and one non-binary). Forty-eight, or 17.71% of the characters were LGBT. This high percentage is likely because the shows were chosen specifically for their inclusion of LGBT characters and is not representative of all TV shows. For comparison, GLAAD found 6.4% of characters across all scripted, broadcast, primetime shows were LGBT (“Where We Are on TV”). Furthermore, the percentage of LGBT characters in this sample is higher than most estimates of the percentage of LGBT adults in the United States; estimates suggest between 5 to 10% of the U.S. population is bisexual or homosexual (Steinmetz). Additionally, about 3.3% of the characters in this study were transgender, ten times more than the general population, which is estimated to be between 0.1 and 0.3% (Flores et al.). Of the shows in this study, *Transparent* had the highest percent of LGBT characters, 34.21%, and the highest number of transgender characters, seven.

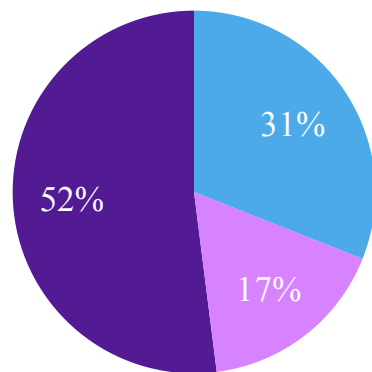
	Straight	Gay	Lesbian	Bisexual	Trans	LGBT	Total
<b>Brooklyn Nine Nine</b>	22	1	0	2	0	3	25
<b>Difficult People</b>	24	8	0	0	1	9	33
<b>How to Get Away with Murder</b>	33	2	1	1	0	4	37
<b>Jane the Virgin</b>	31	0	1	1	0	2	33
<b>Orange is the New Black</b>	62	1	6	6	1	13*	75*
<b>The 100</b>	26	2	1	1	0	4	30
<b>Transparent</b>	25	0	5	2	7	13*	38*
<b>Total</b>	223	14	14	13	9	48*	271*

Figure 3: Number of named, on-screen, speaking characters by show and sexual orientation/gender identity.

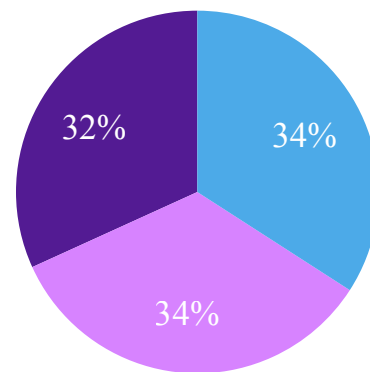
\**Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent* each had one character that was both a lesbian and transgender, which is why the total characters does not equal the sum of the row.

Although the overall percentage of LGBT characters is high in this sample, bisexuals are underrepresented. Bisexual people compose the majority of the LGBT community (Movement Advancement Project). Approximately 5.5% of women and 2% of men identify as bisexual, and the percentage of people that experience attraction to multiple genders or have had sexual experience with multiple genders but do not identify as bisexual is even higher (Movement Advancement Project). However only 13 characters, 4.80% of total characters and 27.08% of the LGBT characters were bisexual (See Figure 4). Furthermore, many transgender people fall under the bisexual spectrum. According to one survey, 23% of transgender people identify as bisexual and another 20% identify as queer. However, all the transgender characters observed in this study were either heterosexual or lesbians.

LGB Population in America



LGB Characters on TV



● Gay ● Lesbian ● Bisexual

Figure 4: The distribution of lesbian, gay, and bisexual TV characters in this sample does not reflect the actual population, leaving bisexuals underrepresented.



In the sample of shows analyzed, there were very few instances of drug abuse and self harm, not enough to draw statically significant conclusions about discrepancies between straight and LGBT characters. There were slightly more incidences of violence, though this varied greatly by show. For example, there was only one incidence of violence in *Difficult People*, but thirteen incidents in *Orange is the New Black*. Using a chi-squared test to compare the percentage of incidents of violence where LGBT characters were a victim with the percentage of LGBT characters in the sample, the difference was not statistically significant. Therefore, with this sample, one can not conclude that LGBT characters were victimized significantly more or less than straight characters. Similarly, with 115 incidents of interacting with a child, 10.43% were by LGBT characters, not significantly different from the proportion of LGBT characters in the sample. However, 11 out of the 12 occurrences of a LGBT character interacting with a child were in the show

*Transparent*. If the show is removed from the sample entirely, 1 out of 93 (13.94%) of

<b>Hand-Holding</b>			
	<b>Same-sex</b>	<b>Opposite-sex</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Romantic/Sexual</b>	7	16	23
<b>Friends/Family</b>	16	8	24
<b>Total</b>	23	24	47
<b>Hug/Embrace</b>			
	<b>Same-sex</b>	<b>Opposite-sex</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Romantic/Sexual</b>	19	30	49
<b>Friends/Family</b>	58	62	120
<b>Total</b>	77	92	169
<b>Kiss</b>			
	<b>Same-sex</b>	<b>Opposite-sex</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Romantic/Sexual</b>	11	73	84
<b>Friends/Family</b>	10	9	19
<b>Total</b>	21	82	103
<b>Sex</b>			
	<b>Same-sex</b>	<b>Opposite-sex</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Romantic/Sexual</b>	7	29	36

interactions with children were by LGBT characters, which is significantly less than the percentage of LGBT characters in the sample ( $p=0.0003$ ).

	Jokes with Queer Themes	Interacts with Child	Drug Abuse	Self Harm	Victim of Violence
<b>Total</b>	73	115	5	4	40
<b>By LGBT Characters</b>	41	12	2	1	5
<b>Percent by LGBT</b>	56.16%	10.43%	40%	25%	12.5%
<b>Significance</b>	$\chi^2=44.206$ $p<0.0001$	$\chi^2=3.252$ $p=0.0714$	$\chi^2=1.639$ $p=0.2005$	$\chi^2=0.143$ $p=0.7058$	$\chi^2=0.667$ $p=0.4141$

Figure 5: Comparing incidents of jokes with queer themes, interaction with children, drug abuse, self harms, and being a victim of violence.

Another area where there was a significant difference between the straight and LGBT characters was jokes with queer themes. Out of 73 incidents, 56.16% of jokes were made by LGBT characters. In other words, LGBT characters were disproportionately likely to be poking fun at themselves than to be the target of ridicule by a straight character, although incidents of both occurred.

### 5.1 Displays of Affection

In addition to the types of incidents described above, each time characters made a display of affection was recorded. In total, there were 52 incidents of hand holding, 170 hugs or embraces, 104 kisses, 17 times characters were shown in bed together with no sex implied, 22 times characters were shown in bed together with sex implied, and 14 times sex was otherwise implied (See Figure 7). These incidents were not necessarily between romantic couples, and often were between friends or family members (See Figure 6). Holding hands occurred about

Figure 6: Comparing same-sex and opposite-sex displays of affection, and displays of affection between romantic couples and friends or family.

equally between same-sex and opposite sex pairs, but hugs, kisses, and sex between opposite-sex pairs were more likely than between same-sex pairs. Hand-holding between opposite-sex pairs was mostly between romantic partners, but hand-holding between same-sex couples was mostly between friends or family members. Likewise, kisses between opposite-sex pairs were mostly between romantic partners, but kisses between same-sex pairs were about equally romantic or familial.

	Holding Hands	Hug/Embrace	Kiss	In Bed, No Sex Implied	In Bed, Sex Implied	Other Sex Implied
<b>Total*</b>	52	170	104	17	22	14
<b>By LGBT Characters</b>	31	88	40	12	8	8
<b>Percent by LGBT*</b>	29.81%	25.88%	19.23%	35.29%	18.18%	28.57%
<b>Significance</b>	$\chi^2=4.032$ $p=0.0446$	$\chi^2=4.214$ $p=0.0401$	$\chi^2=0.117$ $p=0.7327$	$\chi^2=3.234$ $p=0.0721$	$\chi^2=0.003$ $p=0.9558$	$\chi^2=1.049$ $p=0.3057$

Figure 7: Percent of various displays of affection made by LGBT characters.

\*Each display of affection had two participants. For example, if a straight character held hands with a gay character that would count as one incident for both straight characters and gay characters. Therefore, for the purposes of calculating the percent by LGBT, the total number was multiplied by two.

In the shows observed, LGBT characters did not kiss or have sex significantly more or less than would have been expected given the population of characters. This is a change from past studies which found characters tended to be either hyper-sexualized (e.g. Netzley) or sterilised (eg. Raley, Fisher). There was a  $p<0.05$  statistically significant difference between the percent of hand-holding and hugs/embraces performed by LGBT characters compared to the proportion of LGBT characters in the sample. That is LGBT characters were holding hands and hugging more than would be expected given the number of LGBT characters in the sample. As

noted above, most hugging and most same-sex hand holding was between friends and family and not romantic partners.

### *5.2 How has the representation of the LGBT population on TV changed over time?*

The proportion of gay and lesbian characters in Raley and Lucas's 2001 study was about the same as the proportion of gay and lesbian characters in this study (See Figure 8). However, Raley and Lucas observed no bisexual or transgender characters in the 2001 television season, while this study found 13 bisexual and 9 transgender characters in the 2016-2017 season respectively. Using a chi-squared test, the proportion of LGBT characters in the sample did not change significantly between the two studies. This is possibly because both studies intentionally sought shows with LGBT representation. Other studies have shown that the number of LGBT characters on TV overall has increased since 2001 ("Where We Are on TV").

In both studies, more than half of the jokes with queer themes were made by LGBT characters, but there were fewer jokes made overall in the 2016-2017 sample. The percentage of displays of affection made by LGBT characters in the 2016-2017 season was significantly more than the rate observed in Raley and Lucas's study. In the more recent season, 24.34% of displays of affection were by LGBT characters, compared to 7.59% in 2001. Similarly, a significantly higher percentage of kisses were by LGBT characters in 2016-2017 (19.23%) compared to the 2001 season (3.45%). For the other individual types of displays of affection, the difference was not statistically significant.

		2001 (Raley and Lucas)	2016-2017	Significance of Difference
<b>Characters</b>	Number of Characters	62	271	
	Gay Male	4	14	$\chi^2=0.163$ , $p=0.6868$
	Lesbian	5	14	$\chi^2=0.786$ , $p=0.3755$
	Bisexual	0	13	$\chi^2=3.086$ , $p=0.0790$
	Transgender	0	9	$\chi^2=2.11$ , $p=0.1464$
	Total LGBT	9	48	$\chi^2=0.362$ , $p=0.5473$
<b>Jokes with Queer Themes</b>	Total	84	73	$\chi^2=1.416$ $p=0.2341$
	By LGBT	55	41	
	Percent by LGBT	65.47%	56.16%	
<b>Displays of Affection*</b>	Total	145	376	<b><math>\chi^2=18.539</math></b> <b><math>p&lt;0.0001</math></b>
	By LGBT	22	183	
	Percent by LGBT	7.59%	24.34%	
<b>Holding Hands*</b>	Total	19	52	$\chi^2=2.746$ $p=0.0975$
	By LGBT	4	31	
	Percent by LGBT	10.53%	29.81%	
<b>Hug/Embrace*</b>	Total	23	170	$\chi^2=0.778$ $p=0.3779$
	By LGBT	8	88	
	Percent by LGBT	17.39%	25.88%	
<b>Kiss*</b>	Total	58	104	<b><math>\chi^2=7.851</math></b> <b><math>p=0.0051</math></b>
	By LGBT	4	40	
	Percent by LGBT	3.45%	19.23%	
<b>In Bed, Sex Implied*</b>	Total	5	22	$\chi^2=1.028$ $p=0.3107$
	By LGBT	0	8	
	Percent by LGBT	0%	18.18%	

Figure 8: Comparing 2001 television season as analyzed by Raley and Lucas to 2016-2017 season as observed by this study.

\*For the purposes of calculating the percent by LGBT, the total number was multiplied by two as each interaction involved two characters.

*5.3 How does the representation of bisexual and transgender characters differ from the representation of lesbians and gay men?*

Raley and Lucas found no representation of bisexual and transgender characters in their study of the 2001 television season, and several other studies indicate representation of bisexual and transgender characters may lag behind representation of homosexual characters, both gay men and lesbians. As discussed above, in the sample, there were 28 homosexual characters, and 13 bisexual characters, meaning bisexual characters were underrepresented relative to the real LGBT population in America.

Of the jokes with queer themes, 56.16% were made by LGBT characters, significantly more than would be expected given the ratio of LGBT characters to straight characters in the population. When gay men and lesbians are separated from bisexual and transgender characters, homosexuals made 43.84% of the jokes with queer themes, which is also significantly more than expected. However, the proportion of jokes made by bisexual and transgender characters is not significantly more or less than expected. The percentage of interactions with children by homosexual characters was significantly less than the percentage of homosexual characters in the population while the results for bisexual and transgender characters were not statistically significant.

With all of the displays of affection combined, the percentage of displays made by homosexual and transgender characters was not significantly more or less than expected, but the amount of displays of affection performed by bisexual characters was significantly more than the proportion of bisexual characters in the sample. The proportion of kisses made by gay characters was not significantly more than expected, nor was the proportion for bisexual and transgender

characters. The representations of sex were not significantly more or less than expected for any group.

In conclusion, gay characters make jokes about their sexuality more than one would expect given the number of gay characters in the sample, and interact with children less than expected, while bisexual and transgender characters perform about as expected in each of those categories. Bisexual characters perform significantly more displays of affection than expected, while homosexual and transgender characters display affection about as much as expected. Given the small sample of transgender characters, it was not surprising that there were no statistically significant differences between the population and the codes.

	Total	Homosexual	Bisexual	Transgender
Characters	271	28	13	9
		10.33%	4.80%	3.32%
Jokes with Queer Themes	73	32	6	3
		43.84%	8.22%	4.11%
		$\chi^2=44.709$ $p<0.0001$	$\chi^2=1.285$ $p=0.2570$	$\chi^2=0.013$ $p=0.9100$
Interacts with Childs	115	4	7	4
		3.48%	6.09%	3.48%
		$\chi^2=4.973$ $p=0.0257$	$\chi^2=0.273$ $p=0.6016$	$\chi^2=0.001$ $p=0.9799$
Displays of Affection*	376	97	81	31
		12.90%	10.77%	1.20%
		$\chi^2=0.995$ $p=0.3186$	$\chi^2=7.388$ $p=0.0066$	$\chi^2=0.319$ $p=0.5720$

	Total	Homosexual	Bisexual	Transgender
Kiss*	104	23	14	8
		11.06%	6.73%	3.85%
		$\chi^2=0.042$ p=0.8374	$\chi^2=0.553$ p=0.4572	$\chi^2=0.006$ p=0.9368
Sex*	36	9	7	0
		12.50%	9.72%	0.00%
		$\chi^2=0.157$ p= 0.6917	$\chi^2=1.507$ p= 0.2196	$\chi^2=1.176$ p=0.2781

Figure 9: Comparing the representation of homosexual characters (combining gay men and lesbians) with bisexual and transgender characters.

\*For the purposes of calculating the percent the total number was multiplied by two.

#### 5.4 How does broadcast television differ from online streaming platforms with regard to LGBT representation?

The representation of LGBT characters on streaming platforms was significantly different from broadcast platforms by nearly every metric. Though the two platforms had an equivalent percentage of bisexual characters, the shows on streaming platforms had a higher percentage of homosexual characters, transgender characters, and LGBT characters overall. The shows on streaming platforms had fewer jokes with queer themes, but a larger percentage of them were made by LGBT characters. LGBT characters interacted with children more on streaming shows (again, almost all these interactions were from the show *Transparent*). On streaming shows, a higher percentage of the displays of affection were made by LGBT characters, and LGBT characters had a high percentage of kisses and sex scenes.



		Broadcast	Streaming	Significance of Difference
<b>Characters</b>	Number of Characters	125	146	
	Homosexual	8	20	$\chi^2=3.858$ , $p=0.0495$
	Bisexual	5	8	$\chi^2=0.322$ , $p=0.5707$
	Transgender	0	9	$\chi^2=7.941$ , $p=0.0048$
	Total LGBT	13	35	$\chi^2=8.48$ , $p=0.0036$
<b>Jokes with Queer Themes</b>	Total	46	27	$\chi^2=8.019$ $p=0.0046$
	By LGBT	20	21	
	Percent by LGBT	43.48%	77.78%	
<b>Interaction with Child</b>	Total	80	35	$\chi^2=23.522$ $p<0.0001$
	By LGBT	1	11	
	Percent by LGBT	1.25%	31.43%	
<b>Displays of Affection*</b>	Total	243	136	$\chi^2=60.852$ $p<0.0001$
	By LGBT	57	130	
	Percent by LGBT	11.73%	47.79%	
<b>Kiss*</b>	Total	80	24	$\chi^2=16.366$ $p=0.0001$
	By LGBT	17	23	
	Percent by LGBT	10.63%	47.92%	
<b>Sex*</b>	Total	29	7	$\chi^2=2.082$ $p=0.1490$
	By LGBT	10	6	
	Percent by LGBT	17.24%	42.86%	

Figure 9: Comparing the representation of LGBT characters on broadcast shows compared to streaming platforms.

\*For the purposes of calculating the percent the total number was multiplied by two.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Understanding Broadcast versus Streaming

Among the most important findings of this study was the significant difference between broadcast shows and streaming shows. That there was more representation of LGBT characters

on streaming platforms could be contributed to a number of factors. One, broadcast shows are reliant on advertisers, while streaming services are largely funded by subscribers. Any show too far outside the mainstream on a broadcast show runs the risk of upsetting and alienating advertisers. Streaming services operate similarly to premium cable networks, like HBO and Showtime. The subscription model allows platforms to target niche audiences, while broadcast shows try to appeal to a wide audience across ages, location, and political demographics. Streaming and premium cable shows may even target the LGBT community. Another difference between broadcast and streaming shows is that broadcast shows are subject to stricter regulations from the Federal Communication Commission. Broadcast shows are not permitted to show content that is considered “indecent” except for between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. (FCC). The FCC’s vague definition of indecent, and the long-held taboo against depicting homosexual material on film and television, may cause some network producers to shy away from LGBT content.

### *6.2 Jokes at whose expense?*

In total, there were seventy-three jokes with queer themes across the sample. Fifty-six percent were made by LGBT characters and forty-four percent were made by homosexual characters. The category of jokes with queer themes encompassed a wide variety of jokes, made by a wide variety of characters, sometimes humorous to the audience and sometimes humorous to the characters of the show. Some of the jokes were made by straight characters poking fun at the LGBT characters by referring to derogatory stereotypes. For example, in one episode of *How to Get Away with Murder*, Asher, a straight man, referred to a gay man as a “him-bo,” “queen,” and “Brokeback” (“Always Bet Black”). However, other jokes were made by gay characters at the straight characters expense. On *Brooklyn Nine Nine*, a running joke was that when Captain

Raymond Holt, a gay man, goes undercover as a straight man, he hyper-sexualizes women and demonstrates what he sees as the worst traits of heterosexuality (“Coral Palms Pt.1,” “Coral Palms Pt.2). Other times, the jokes made by straight characters intended to be humorous to the other characters fall flat. On one episode of *Transparent*, a straight woman said that she always confuses “LGBT” and “BLT” and jokingly advocated for sandwich rights, but no one laughed (“When the Battle is Over”). The joke to the audience is not actually the joke she is making, but the awkwardness that arises from the situation.

Another notable moment from *Brooklyn Nine Nine* was when Holt and Jake, a gay man and a straight man, staged a kiss to trick a sheriff into letting them escape. Placing a straight character in a situation where he or she must kiss a person of the same gender or otherwise act gay is not a new joke. However, this particular situation was unique because the target of the joke was the sheriff’s homophobia. Staging the kiss allowed Holt and Jake to escape and go on to save the day. As they trapped the sheriff in his own cell, Holt declared, “It’s 2016, man. This is on you.” The sheriff was portrayed as outdated and idiotic. Like the scene in *Transparent*, the characters who are insensitive or intolerant of the LGBT characters are portrayed in a negative light. Though the number of jokes made may not have changed significantly since 2001, the tone of the jokes in many cases has.

### 6.3 *The B Word*

The forty-four percent of jokes with queer themes were made by homosexual characters compared to just eight percent made by bisexual characters is representative of a larger difference between the way homosexual and bisexual characters are allowed to embrace their identity. For the purposes of this study, characters were coded as bisexual if at any point they

were shown or discussed being in a romantic or sexual relationship with a person of the same sex and a person of another sex. This was intentionally a wide definition of bisexual. Only one character in this sample actually used the word bisexual to describe herself, Sarah Pfefferman from *Transparent*. In some cases, characters actively avoided using the word. For example, in one scene in *How to Get Away with Murder*, Annalise Keating, who has had multiple male partners, was at a bar with her ex-girlfriend Eve, and they were being hitting on by men (“Always Bet Black”). The conversation was:

Man in bar: Just to be clear, you are or are not gay?

Eve: I’m gay, she’s . . .

Annalise: It’s complicated.

Research shows there are significant portions of the population that demonstrate bisexual behavior, which is what this study used to identify bisexuality, without using the word “bisexual” to describe themselves. While about 2% of men and 5.5% of women identify as bisexual, around 8% of men and 20% of women said they were attracted to more than one sex and 3% of men and 13% of women have reported having same-sex sexual contact (Movement Advancement Project). By both standards, bisexual characters remain underrepresented on television. While gay and lesbian characters do not shy away from their identity, discussing their sexuality and making jokes about it, the bisexual identity is still shrouded in terms of “it’s complicated” or represented by characters who only use sexuality as a way to manipulate people, like the crime lord Sin Rostro on *Jane the Virgin*.

#### *6.4 Applying Clark's Stages of Representation*

Clark identified four stages of representation for minority groups: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect; however, one minority group may be in multiple stages at one time on different platforms. There were transgender characters in each of the streaming shows analyzed, but none on the broadcast shows, so for broadcast television, transgender people are largely in the non-representation stage. On streaming platforms, some representations might be considered ridicule. Lola on *Difficult People*, for example, has few noticeable character traits other than being transgender and making crazy statements. Others are in the regulation stage moving toward respect. Bisexual characters are also between the ridicule and regulation stage, as most bisexual characters still fall into common stereotypes of being confused or manipulative. The shift in the tone of jokes from making fun of gay characters to making fun of homophobic characters indicates gay characters have mostly moved past the ridicule stage. The lack of interaction with children and certain types of physical displays of affection indicates most gay characters are in the regulation stage; however, some are moving toward respect.

#### *6.5 Study Limitations*

The implications of this study are limited by the small sample of shows analyzed. The study only observed five episodes of nine shows. Cable shows, reality television, news media, daytime programming, and children's shows were all completely excluded from the sample. Future research should explore LGBT representation on other types of programming. Comparing broadcast and streaming platforms could be particularly insightful. Another limitation of this study was that shows with LGBT characters were intentionally chosen. This allowed more analysis of portrayals of LGBT characters, but was not as accurately representative of television

as a whole. There are still many television shows with no LGBT characters at all. Another weakness of the study was that there were few examples of drug abuse, self-harm, or violence in the sample, and no statistically significant conclusions could be drawn about differences between straight and LGBT characters in these instances. Future studies may need to alter the definition of these codes or purposely select a sample of shows known for more drugs and violence. Future studies could also further examine the differences between representation of gay men and lesbians, particularly differences in displays of affection between men and between women.

## **7. Conclusions**

The LGBT community has made countless strides toward mainstream acceptance since 2001, both on screen and off. Overall, representation of LGBT people has improved since 2001 by the presence of more characters, notably bisexual and transgender characters which were nonexistent in 2001, by a shift in the tone of jokes, and by allowing LGBT characters to make more displays of affection. That the proportion of LGBT characters in the sample of shows studied did not significantly increase between 2001 and 2016 indicates that although the number of shows with LGBT characters has increased since 2001, LGBT characters still make up about the same percentage of characters on those shows. However, new streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, which cater to niche audiences, can produce shows with high numbers of LGBT characters. The streaming shows observed in this study had significantly more LGBT representation, and LGBT characters on streaming shows made more displays of affection.

Overall, LGBT characters are permitted to make displays of affection more than was seen in 2001. LGBT characters are no longer sterilised, without any storylines involving their love life. Though some critics have suggested that LGBT characters are more likely to engage in self-destructive behavior and be the victims of violence, this small sample of shows did not find the rates of drug abuse, self harm, or victimization to be statistically significant.

However, some of the old stereotypes and negative tropes regarding LGBT characters linger. While representation of lesbians and gay men is strong, bisexual and transgender people remain underrepresented, especially bisexual and transgender men. Bisexual and transgender characters are also less likely to joke about or discuss their identity than homosexual characters.

Another area of LGBT representation that needs improvement to be equal to heterosexual representation is interaction with children. Nearly all of the instances of an LGBT character interacting with children came from the show *Transparent*. Removing the show from the sample, the amount of interaction LGBT characters had with children is significantly less than should be expected. This suggests old anxieties about LGBT people and pedophilia may linger.

Bisexual and transgender representation is still lagging behind the representation of gay men and lesbians, and homosexual characters are still influenced by old, harmful tropes. The strides made toward equality by the LGBT community in the past two decades are remarkable. But true equality has not been achieved and will not be achieved until LGBT characters can be found across all forms of television, treated with respect and reflecting the diversity of the community.

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